

This reflection appeared first in *The Church World*, the diocesan weekly of Maine.

[<<Hub](#)

© copyright 2003 by S. Margaret Dorgan, DCM

THE LOONS ARE CALLING

As a young novice in my Carmelite monastery, I was told that God is teaching all of us all the time. Each day, we are presented with a different lesson, and when the light leaves the sky, it is worthwhile to assign a brief stretch of minutes to think about the new wisdom that was offered. What did God want to say in the hours just passed? If I wasn't paying attention then, let me think about it now.

I lived with nuns whose actions and reactions conveyed what holiness is all about. They were wonderful human teachers and they let me know that many others instruct us too. All of God's creatures have a word to say concerning their Creator. If we are really alert, we find in them messengers who want to convey something in their own unique way.

I find good communicators in Maine loons. O you, loons, you have something to tell me about your Maker. Listen! Listen! The cry of a loon! When ice breaks up, loons on the nearby ocean become aware of spring and plan their return to the small safe world of our lakes and ponds. Aouou! Aouou! Clear and piercing, their sound cuts through the nighttime quiet.

Maine has the largest population of loons in northeastern America. Here are beautiful birds who come more inland as the days grow longer and are happy to stay through autumn. We delight in their arrival and put their image on some special license plates. (Yes, they do contend with the chickadees and lobsters for a showing there.) People admire loon carvings, and hang a picture of them on the wall. Images of those sharp black beaks and cross-hatched black and white bodies show up on bumper stickers, shoulder bags, summer shirts, and much more.

In loons, the Lord of creation takes us back to an early evolutionary order of birds. Ornithologists date their origin at 60 million years ago. With skills for adjusting to evolving conditions, loons have persevered almost unchanged. So there is the first lesson I have to learn. Change doesn't have to mean loss. I'm called to use my resources whenever I need to adapt to any new set of circumstances. What are You asking me to deal with, Lord, and what will I gain from this particular struggle?

Coastal loons may look like ducks but are really more closely related to penguins and albatrosses. A fairly large bird of about eleven pounds with body length near 28 inches, its wings measure approximately 50 inches from tip to tip. These wings are more solid than most flying species. They find their meals in Maine's abundant waters. "The eyes of all look hopefully to You, and You give them their food in due season" (Ps 147:15). Loons move awkwardly on solid ground because their legs are somewhat back on their bodies. Not being land walkers, they need to beach themselves at the water's edge when

injured or ill, and wait there for healing. I tell myself to remember that “The Lord is good to all and compassionate toward all His works” (Ps 147:9).

Because loons don’t have the hollow bones that make flying easy for most birds, they need a long runway in taking flight. But solid bones enable them to dive to depths of 100 feet. Their bright red eyes can peer into water and see what is in those liquid depths as far below as 15 feet. Whatever is in my makeup, let me consider it not a disadvantage but as something I can use to see more clearly and to dive more deeply into the reality God gives me.

A constructed wooden raft, anchored a few feet from shore, can offer loons protection from many land predators during their month-long nesting vigil. To complete a nest, they take hold of available material nearby. They have no need to fly a distance to find it. God, let me realize that what is before me in my everyday schedule is to be employed for greater holiness. I look closely and weigh it to see how I can be helped spiritually through whatever is provided in this here-and-now.

Each loon parent takes turns keeping one, two, or even three large eggs warm and dry. Onlookers can watch them from high ground. But hostile observers may show up too: a hovering osprey or an eagle overhead, eager to snatch an egg or even an infant bird. Preparation for eggs and the work of bringing chicks to life involve close collaboration. Males and females build the nest and guard their next generation, a truly cooperative undertaking. In this I see how helping one another is needed for every advance in life. Let me recognize in my brothers and sisters what they add to my efforts. And remind me, Lord, to acknowledge their aid with grateful thanks at every opportunity.

Do the loons in their variety of calls express affection or gratitude? We cannot tell. Yet we hear them sing back and forth during the night when one is taking its turn alone on the nest. And we’ve observed mother and father, right after hatching occurs, paddle alongside their chick for an hour or more in our small bay, and let it ride upon their backs. There has to be joy then because whichever parent has been last on the nest would be very hungry.

Loons sometimes sound a piping whistle. What they are saying is their own secret. We praise God for them when we see them return year after year, nesting and raising their young. The final line in the Book of Psalms summarizes our delight in the multiplicity of wonders provided by all the winged creatures in Maine. “Let everything that has breath praise the Lord! Alleluia.” (Ps 150: 6). Hear that loon call. Aouou! Aouou!

Sister Margaret Dorgan, DCM