

from One Native Life

by Richard Wagonese

A Raven Tale

MY PEOPLE TELL a story about a raven who dreamed of eagles.

It seems a young raven grew fascinated with the majestic flight of those great warrior birds. To this young raven, eagles were immaculate creations. When he looked at the stubbornness of his own wings, he was dissatisfied. When he examined the sooty black of his feathers, he felt ugly and ill-defined. He wanted more than anything to soar and to feel the admiration of his fellow ravens. Every day he watched the eagles drift over the pine tree where he sat, and every day he dreamed of being an eagle.

One day this young raven began to practise soaring. He leapt from his perch in the pine tree and held his wings out straight and aimed for the highest branch of a neighbouring tree. It wasn't that far, but he wavered in the air. Still, he made it. The young raven felt huge.

Every day after that he flapped to a private part of the forest to practise. He disappeared, alone, to work on increasing his strength and his range. He got stronger. He grew better able to hold the air in his short black feathers. His flights began to feel long and elegant. He could bank

and turn and spiral in weightless glides across the roof of his forest world. But it wasn't enough. He needed to be seen.

So one day, when he was sitting in a clutch of his fellow ravens, the young raven took off. While they watched he flapped higher and higher. They called to him to come back, but he climbed and climbed until he was a small black dot in the sky. Then he began to soar.

He held out his stubby wings and felt the currents of the air. As he banked into a lazy spiral, he could see his family and friends below flapping about in excitement. No raven had ever soared before. No raven had ever come close to being an eagle. He felt incredible pride, and he banked even more steeply to show off his new-found power.

But raven wings are not meant for soaring, and he tired quickly. Far above the ground he fought hard to hold the air. He trembled. He wavered. He shook. He grew fearful. The world began to spin. The long spiral became a crazy spin. His friends watched in horror as the young raven dropped like a stone from the sky.

Well, lucky for him, he crashed into the highest branches of his favourite pine tree. The heavy limbs broke his fall as he tumbled through them. Finally, he landed with a thud on the ground at the pine tree's roots. He was bedraggled and dazed, missing a lot of feathers, but he was alive.

Later, he told a wise old raven about his adventure. He told her how he'd dreamed of being an eagle and had been

dissatisfied with his lot in life as a raven. She listened, then sat for a long while considering his words.

We're all born with gifts. That's what she told him, finally. As the eagle is blessed, so too are the ravens. That's the truth of the world. The trick is to seek out your own gifts, make use of them and learn to soar in that way.

That young raven paid attention to the Old One's words. He stayed closer to the ground after that and began to accept himself as a raven. He discovered many marvelous things, developed exciting skills and abilities. As he grew he passed those on to younger ravens. But he never forgot the lesson in his dreams of eagles.

That's why, to this day, when you watch a raven fly you will see it flap, flap and then soar.

WHEN I HEARD that story for the first time, I thought it was a charming little folk tale. It called to mind campfires, sparkly-eyed children, dark nights, a hand drum and the drone of an old storyteller's voice. I didn't realize it was an appropriate and timely teaching.

It was the early 1980s, and I was trying hard to make it in radio. I worked as a newscaster on the old CKO All News network in Calgary. I spent all my spare time listening to the other radio newscasters, and every night I practised trying to sound like them, bringing their ebullient, professional timbre into my own delivery.

I got good, but every newscast was a huge effort.

Trying to sound like those I admired made reading the news twice the work. When I got a job with CBC Radio a year or so later, my trainer listened to me a while, then told me to quit working so hard. Just be myself, she advised. I'd read better and sound more genuine.

Well, she was right. We had a successful program on CBC. I went on to work at a few major market stations and eventually became a program director at one of the first native stations in the country. All by being myself and using my own gifts.

That's the trick of it in this life. There are a million shiny things around us, and it's easy to get distracted. Drink it all in, but make it your own. Find your own chunk of the sky, then flap, flap, soar. Flap, flap, soar.