

The Blue-Gray Bird

In the Text section “Above the Battleground” (T-23.IV), we find a clear reference to a dream Helen had years before the Course. This reference joins together the section and the dream, so that each one adds to the other.

The dream was one she had in 1940 when she was 31 years old. She titled it “The Blue-Gray Bird” and told it in the form of a story:

This story begins with the line, “Once upon a time there was a blue bird,” which is only partially true. It would be more accurate to say, “Once upon a time there was a bird who told everybody that he was a blue bird.” In point of fact, he was gray. Since this was perfectly obvious, people got the impression that the bird was somewhat confused, but this was not the case at all.

It seems that the bird lived at the time of the American Civil War, which was often called the war between the blues and the grays. The bird was inclined to be rather peaceful himself, and he found the war quite disturbing. He was especially concerned about the final outcome, but he had no way of predicting which side would win. And so he felt it would be safest to prepare for either eventuality.

“Being a gray bird,” he reasoned, “the best thing to do is to adopt the position of being blue. Then, if the grays win, they will say, ‘this bird is gray even though he insists that he is blue. As long as he is really gray, what difference does it make what he thinks he is? We will not hurt him.’ On the other hand, if the blues win, they will say, ‘this gray bird evidently believes that he is blue. As long as he thinks this, what difference does it make what he really is? We will not hurt him.’”

This position was somewhat difficult to maintain consistently over time, but it was not in itself an impossible one. But unfortunately, a number of complicating circumstances arose which made it increasingly untenable. In the first place, even though it might be useful in a future peace, it was of no service at all during the actual war, being actually quite irrelevant.

Meanwhile, the bird was living in a dry and rotting tree, entirely leafless from endless battles. The branches were broken, the roots were shriveled, and the trunk was tilting perilously. It was, however, the only tree left standing after so many years of war, so the bird did not know where else to go.

In order to maintain his equilibrium in the tree, the bird was compelled to lean increasingly in the opposite direction to compensate for the sagging of the branches. As time went on he became quite lopsided; so much so that he would no longer have been able to keep his balance in a straight tree, even if he ever managed to find one. This, however, did not concern him too much, since the chances of his finding a straight tree any more were rather remote.

What really bothered him were certain contradictory elements in the whole situation, which he found very difficult to reconcile. He recognized that when a bird is in difficulty, it flies away. Yet here was a bird who, in spite of very difficult living conditions, had not only failed to fly away, but had not even tried to do so. Being fairly rational as birds go, he could not escape the uncomfortable feeling that despite being depressing, the situation was also slightly ridiculous.

It was possible, he thought, that this obvious discrepancy in his bird behavior was due to the fact that he was unable to fly. But this, he felt, was not likely in a bird. Another possibility which occurred to him, and one which frightened him very badly, was that he was not really a bird at all. This, of course, would account for his not flying away. But it would also mean that nobody could seriously regard his basic problem as primarily a difficulty in color perception, which would leave him as poorly equipped to deal with peace as with war.

Perhaps fortunately, under the circumstances, he had to admit as a practical bird that managing to live through the war was probably the most he could handle. Armies from both sides kept appearing from nowhere, and smashing at each other under the tree. The blood-drenched ground shook under them, and the noise was ear-splitting. They were probably unaware of the bird and his tree, but the effects on both were devastating. Knowing that the tree could not possibly last much longer, it was probably pointless to worry about what would become of him in a hypothetical peace.¹

Helen is famous for being deeply torn between her spiritual nature and her earthly identity, and this dream captures that inner split with an almost Kafkaesque absurdity. The bird in the dream is hopelessly divided. He is not only committed to being both a blue bird and a gray bird, he is committed to staying on a field of battle between the blues and the grays. This commitment makes literally no sense. It makes his life both miserable and precarious when, being a bird, he could easily fly away and escape the whole thing. His allegiance to the split, in other words, is quite insane.

This dream captured Helen's mindset so aptly that Jesus refers to it in this passage early in the dictation of the Course in late 1965 (this is the version from the Notes):

The confusion of miracle-impulse with sexual-impulse is a major source of perceptual distortion, because it *induces* rather than straightens out the basic level-confusion which underlies all those who seek happiness with the instruments of the world. A desert is a desert is a desert. You can do anything you want in it, but you *cannot* change it from what it *is*. It still lacks water, which is why it *is* a desert.

The thing to do with a desert is to *leave*. (see T-1.43.12)

On the face of it, this passage may not seem to be a reference to that dream. But in the Urtext, Jesus inserts this parenthetical remark right be-

1. The version of the dream recorded here is from Helen's unpublished writings. A slightly abridged version can be found in *Absence from Felicity*, 21-22.

fore the final sentence: “Bring up that dream about the Bluebird.” Once he says this, you can understand why he does. Here he is talking about how Helen is attached to both miracle impulses (the impulse to extend love to another’s mind) and sexual impulses (the impulse to extend lust to another’s body) to the point of actually confusing the two. He says that by seeking “happiness with the instruments of the world”—i.e., bodies—she ties herself to the world. Yet on a mental/emotional level, the world is a desert, a place that is inhospitable to life. Rather than remaining tied to this desert, “the thing to do...is to *leave*.”

All of these themes can be seen reflected in “The Blue-Gray Bird”: a figure symbolizing Helen being torn between two opposing sides, which then ties her to a hostile environment, which she instead should just leave. By bringing in her dream from twenty-five years before, Jesus shows that what he’s teaching her is not some bizarre new concept; it’s a message that has been knocking on her door for decades. Indeed, after telling her to look up the dream, he makes that very point: “Note that the essential content hasn’t changed.”

This brief reference to “The Blue-Gray Bird” closely foreshadows what we see in “Above the Battleground,” which was dictated in 1967. In this Text section, there is no overt reference to the dream, but the imagery is such a specific match that the connection is instantly recognizable:²

To be released from conflict means that it is over. The door is open; you have left the battleground. You have not lingered there in cowering hope that the battle will not return because the guns are stilled an instant and the fear that haunts the place of death is not apparent. There is no place of safety in a battleground. You can look down on it in safety from above and not be touched, but from within it you can find no safety. Not one tree left standing still will shelter you. (6:1-6)

Just as in “The Blue-Gray Bird,” we have Helen lingering on a battleground ravaged by repeated battles, pathetically hoping to find shelter in the “one

2. From here on, quotations from “Above the Battleground” will be cited by paragraph and sentence.

tree left standing” (her account of her dream says “the only tree left standing”), when she instead should rise above it, where the war cannot touch her.

So Jesus is clearly bringing her dream into this section. By doing so he effects a kind of fusion of both the dream and the section. The dream lends its vivid imagery to the section, and the section applies its sophisticated teaching to the dream. Out of the coming together of both, then, something new is produced. A particularly important message emerges for Helen’s life, one that we will try to elucidate now.

Helen is living on a battleground; she is to some degree locked in combat with all her brothers. She entered the war hoping to gain the spoils. As Jesus says, “Perhaps you think the battleground can offer something that you can win” (14:7). Yet the cost is so great that now she wants to call a truce. She chooses to retain her impulse to attack, for she still hopes to one day win the war. But at this point she is seeking a compromise. So she conceals her hatred behind a display of love, which she hopes will placate the enemy enough for him to agree to a ceasefire. This may seem like a solution, but is it really? Jesus observes, “No one compromises with an enemy but hates him still for what he kept from him. Mistake not truce for peace, nor compromise for the escape from conflict” (5:6-7).

Indeed, this “solution” puts Helen precisely in the situation of the blue-gray bird. Now we see that the bird’s split allegiance between the blues and the grays is really Helen’s split allegiance between love and attack. It’s an interpersonal issue: Helen can’t decide what to do with her brothers. Will she love them or murder them? This is what roots her to the battleground. This is why the bird can’t imagine leaving the tree. But, as Jesus notes, “There is no place of safety in a battleground” (6:4). The idea that a barren, rotting, tilting tree will provide real shelter is ludicrous.

This, however, only begins to capture the desperation of Helen’s situation. The section offers a penetrating analysis of the strategy of mixing love and attack. We think of love as meeting the needs of the other person, and attack as serving our own needs. Since most of us want to honor both sets of needs, we hang onto both love and attack. We creatively mix them together to create a hybrid of the two, and this hybrid becomes the primary means through which we relate to the world. Yet the hybrid tends to be made of the *content* of attack, while merely having the *form* of love. The section

captures this strange amalgam with stark images. It speaks of someone justifying “his savagery with smiles as he attacks” (2:1)—putting on a friendly smile to make his attack appear kind. And it speaks of giving someone a beautifully wrapped box with no gift inside: “The wrapping does not make the gift you give. An empty box, however beautiful and gently given, still contains nothing” (2:6-7).

The loving façade is designed, of course, to conceal our attacking intent from others. Yet, perhaps surprisingly, it is also designed to conceal our attack *from ourselves*. Our attack disturbs *us*, and we try to hide it even from our own eyes. For the truth is that attack does not serve our needs; it does not get us anything we really want. Instead, it leaves us with a heavy load of guilt on our shoulders, along with a constant fear of punishment:

Attack in any form is equally destructive. Its purpose does not change. Its sole intent is murder, and what *form* of murder serves to cover the massive guilt and frantic fear of punishment the murderer must feel? (1:3-5)

We are hoping that if we put a kindly face on our attacks, we ourselves will be blind to them, and thus manage to protect ourselves from their crushing burden of guilt. Yet Jesus says that this strategy utterly fails, for in the end we cannot avoid the real intent behind our actions:

He may deny he *is* a murderer, and justify his savagery with smiles as he attacks. Yet he will suffer, and will look on his intent in nightmares, where the smiles are gone and where the purpose rises to meet his horrified awareness and to pursue him still. For no one thinks of murder and escapes the guilt the thought entails. If the intent is death, what matter the form it takes? (2:1-4)

All we accomplish through this strategy is to conceal from ourselves the real source of our pain. We still feel the pain inherent in being an attacker; we just have no idea where it comes from. Jesus’ logic here is undeniable: “If it is true attack in any form will hurt you, and will do so just as much as in another form which you *do* recognize, then it must follow that you do not always recognize the source of pain” (1:2).

So Helen's problem goes beyond being stuck in an outer environment filled with conflict. She is also stuck in an *inner* environment pervaded by guilt and fear, while being clueless as to where these feelings come from. This actually gives new meaning to the symbolism of the tree. Right after saying "Not one tree left standing still will shelter you" (6:6), Jesus asks these pointed questions: "Think you the form that murder takes can offer safety? Can guilt be absent from a battlefield?" (7:1-2). Notice how this implies that "the form that murder takes" is the same thing as the "one tree left standing," for both are described as failing to offer the safety that we seek in them. This implies that the dead tree now symbolizes the phony smile, the nice façade with which Helen attempts to cover up her murderous intent. She hopes this flimsy covering will serve as a shield to protect her from her *own* attacks, but it's just like the rickety tree—it offers no protection whatsoever.

What is her way out? The answer in both her dream and the section is the same: to rise above the battleground. And since staying on the battleground stems from an interpersonal stance, rising above it is also an interpersonal decision. She needs to realize that being loving is not only for the sake of others. Rather, being loving is her own need—indeed, her *only* need. She thus needs to understand that any attack on her part, no matter how carefully disguised, is an attack on her own peace. As Jesus puts it: "This is your part: to realize that murder in *any* form is not your will" (11:1).

On a practical level, this first means learning to recognize her attacks, even the most artfully camouflaged ones. She can do this not by scrutinizing the outer forms, but by being very sensitive to her feelings: "Even in forms you do not recognize, the signs you know. There is a stab of pain, a twinge of guilt, and above all, a *loss of peace*" (12:4-5). Once she spots these signs, her job is then to "quickly choose a miracle instead of murder" (12:7)—choose to extend love rather than deal out death.

This decision to resolve her inner split in favor of love *is* the decision of the blue-gray bird to at last stretch out his wings and lift off from the tree. He no longer has any use for the battleground, and so he does not choose to be there. Rising above it, he will finally be safe from all its deafening violence. As he circles higher, the ground of battle will seem increasingly

remote and insignificant, as his world becomes instead the lofty sphere in which he now soars. He will forget about “the clash of forms” (11:10) as he turns his attention to basking in the endless sunshine of his Father’s love. In the light of this supreme joy, he will wonder how he could have wasted even a minute on that hopeless battlefield.

We have now seen the original dream as well as two references to it in the dictation of *A Course in Miracles*. This gives us a chance to step back and try to see exactly what Jesus is accomplishing with those references. What Helen’s original dream does is provide her with a memorable story, filled with vivid imagery, that depicts a key pattern of hers. The pattern is her propensity to be split between two opposing sides, which leaves her stuck in an inhospitable environment, which she instead could simply leave. The dream’s absurdity is a powerful communicator of the pattern’s manifest insanity.

Then in 1965, when Jesus begins dictating the Course to her, he references this dream during his teaching on confusing miracle impulses and sexual impulses. Then in 1967—our main focus here—he references the dream again while teaching about mixing love and attack. Each time he does, he brings the power of that story forward into his current teaching, using the dream as a kind of visual illustration of the point he is making. At the same time, his current teaching also flows backward into the dream, imbuing its enigmatic symbols with a rich and specific content. Trying to be both blue and gray becomes an interpersonal stance of trying to extend both love and lust, or both love and attack. The battleground becomes the conflict-ridden nature of this world, as well as the guilt-ridden condition of Helen’s mind. And the tree becomes Helen’s futile attempt to take cover behind a “loving” façade that will supposedly protect her from guilt. Thus, at the same time that his current teaching is strengthened by having the dream there as a kind of parable, the dream itself acquires a detailed, sophisticated, and genuinely practical meaning.

As a result, the dream becomes a refrain that runs through Helen’s life. Each time it reappears, the new teaching in which it is embedded, which may seem weird and irrelevant, is shown to be merely another chapter in the ongoing thread of guidance about this pattern of hers. Meanwhile,

this thread grows ever richer, as new colors are woven into it each time it returns. The presence of this continuing thread proves to Helen the compelling constancy of the messages she is receiving over the course of her life. And this constancy reminds her that she cannot avoid her pattern forever, that eventually she must face and rise above her attachment to the battleground.