

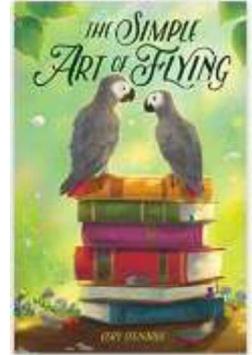
Feathered Armor

By Karen Graham

[Several folks requested copy of Karen Graham's message, presented for Womens' Sunday, April 11, 2021. Enjoy!]

Conversation with the next generation

I want to share a book recommendation with you. I found this book at a Barnes and Noble in Westminster the day after my dad passed away. When I was a kid, we owned two birds exactly like the birds on this cover. So, it felt like my Dad wanted me to buy it. Our birds were named Frostie and Ollie.



In this book, the birds are a brother and a sister named Alastair and Aggie. Alastair is the main character- and he's not a happy bird. He wants only to protect Aggie and fly away from the pet store with her, but he has 2 broken wings and can't figure out how to escape anyway. The biggest difference between Alastair and Aggie is that Alastair won't let anyone get close. He won't let the humans in his life love him. That's what he has to learn throughout the book-- once you get hurt, it's hard to let other people in. It's hard to trust again.

But Alastair is an amazing bird! He has so many talents and things to share. He just doesn't realize it. Do you see his beautiful feathers? I want you to imagine that you have beautiful feathers like Alastair. Those feathers stand for the amazing things that you have to offer. Your loved ones can see those feathers. But sometimes when others hurt us, we forget how to see our own feathers.



Let's share the birds you colored. I want you to tell us one of the colors on your parakeet and what that color stands for. Here's my bird. The pink wings on my parakeet stand for my skills as a teacher. My pink shows up best when I'm with my students.

Scripture

Matthew 6:25-34

The Message

25 "THEREFORE I TELL YOU, DO NOT WORRY ABOUT YOUR LIFE, WHAT YOU WILL EAT OR DRINK; OR ABOUT YOUR BODY, WHAT YOU WILL WEAR. IS NOT LIFE MORE THAN FOOD, AND THE BODY MORE THAN CLOTHES? **26** LOOK AT THE BIRDS OF THE AIR; THEY DO NOT SOW OR REAP OR STORE AWAY IN BARN, AND YET YOUR HEAVENLY FATHER FEEDS THEM. ARE YOU NOT MUCH MORE VALUABLE THAN THEY? **27** CAN ANY ONE OF YOU BY WORRYING ADD A SINGLE HOUR TO YOUR LIFE?"

28 "AND WHY DO YOU WORRY ABOUT CLOTHES? SEE HOW THE FLOWERS OF THE FIELD GROW. THEY DO NOT LABOR OR SPIN. **29** YET I TELL YOU THAT NOT EVEN SOLOMON IN ALL HIS SPLENDOR WAS DRESSED LIKE ONE OF THESE. **30** IF THAT IS HOW GOD CLOTHES THE GRASS OF THE FIELD, WHICH IS HERE TODAY AND TOMORROW IS THROWN INTO THE FIRE, WILL HE NOT MUCH MORE CLOTHE YOU—YOU OF LITTLE FAITH? **31** SO DO NOT WORRY, SAYING, 'WHAT SHALL WE EAT?' OR 'WHAT SHALL WE DRINK?' OR 'WHAT SHALL WE WEAR?' **32** FOR THE PAGANS RUN AFTER ALL THESE THINGS, AND YOUR HEAVENLY FATHER KNOWS THAT YOU NEED THEM. **33** BUT SEEK FIRST HIS KINGDOM AND HIS RIGHTEOUSNESS, AND ALL THESE THINGS WILL BE GIVEN TO YOU AS WELL. **34** THEREFORE DO NOT WORRY ABOUT TOMORROW, FOR TOMORROW WILL WORRY ABOUT ITSELF. EACH DAY HAS ENOUGH TROUBLE OF ITS OWN.

Feathered Armor

Birds are beautiful, aren't they? Majestic and powerful. Colorful. Unique. I know a lot about birds because I grew up with parents who owned more than their fair share of exotic parrots.

You see, at the age of 9, my parents decided to open a pet store and they started collecting birds-- exotic parrots like macaws, African greys, cockatoos. Mom and Dad loved them so much that many of the birds held 'mascot' status at the store. They weren't for sale, just for show. Most of them had learned to talk. Rosita, a yellow-naped amazon parrot spoke Spanish and sang and cried using an operatic voice that sounded like this: RRRRosita-- aye aye aye aye huh aye aye aye aye.

Visitors to our house were often quite enamored by our collection of talking birds. Frosty, my dad's feisty parrot, used to warn others by saying "Stand back, I'm a hawk!" and he would sing the song, "How much is that doggie in the window?"- eventually rewriting the song to say, "How much is that window?" Desiree barked like one of our dogs. And Poncho learned to say, "Are you OK?" after just hearing it spoken once by my mom after he fell into a bucket of water and Pinesol.

Are you OK? Each time I walked into the avery, that bird would ask me if I was OK. The truth was-- much of the time, I wasn't OK.

The time period just after my parents purchased the parrots, and while they owned the pet store, coincided with a difficult time for me socially as a child. I call that time.... Well... 5th grade. As today is Women's Sunday, I offer my story as a map for how our girls can become tomorrow's resilient, strong women. Here goes-

In fifth grade, I was the target of a group of bullies. I was lucky; it didn't last for years as it does for some. And unlike kids of today, there was no internet to humiliate me in cyberspace. By the time 6th grade started that fall, they had moved on to another target. Yet the pain stuck with me.

My greatest tormentor was a former friend. She enlisted others to bully me. Most often, they targeted my hair. We were studying Greek Mythology in school, and they likened me to Medusa, with the head of snakes, that would turn anyone who looked at her into stone.

Let that sink in for a moment- they were telling me that I was so hideous that just looking at me would turn *them* to stone. The message was that my mere existence made their existence less.

I was 10 when this started, and I was very confused. It all seemed so undeserved. I went to school without any protection, without any armor. I came home each night hurt and confused.

If I could go back and live it again, I would put on armor... but it would be an armor made of feathers, not steel.

In her book, [The Simple Art of Flying](#), Cory Leonardo's main character, an African Grey parrot named Alastair, mentions growing an armor of feathers in this way:

“You come into this world very cold and very naked. Your only job is to grow an armor of feathers and survive.

“Trust no one. Not even your mother. It’s a gerbil-eat-gerbil world, everyone clawing for a spot at the top of the food chain. A bird can’t get caught with his feathers pulled over his eyes. He’d better be sharpening his talons.”

Ah, poor Alastair. He’s a tormented bird. Soon after making this statement, he starts pulling out his own feathers. Birds, especially those in captivity, do this sometimes when they are under stress. They become “feather pickers”. Ironically, this behavior makes them even more vulnerable, not less.

In today’s scripture, we hear, from Matthew, a portion of Jesus’ sermon on the mount in which Jesus implores us to look at the birds. Those birds are perfect, just as they are. And God loves them, feeds them. The birds Jesus refers to are not picking at their own feathers... they proudly wear their armor of feathers. And that armor is ALL they need to thrive. They don’t need the right pair of jeans (in my day it was Levi’s 501 jeans from the boy’s department) or the right haircut (I never could pull off Farah Fawcett’s perfectly feathered hair- as my tormentors liked to remind me).

Matthew is telling me that all of that doesn’t matter. I am enough-- and my feathers, my talents, my heart, my soul- those are enough for the world.

With all of the zoom meetings I’ve been in lately, a lot of those insecurities have been popping up again. I see my face as it’s projected from my living room to others. Do I really look that old? That heavy? Ugh. And the ghosts of 5th grade remind me that my hair isn’t quite right-- especially since, until recently, I’ve been restricted from seeing my hairdresser.

But wearing armor made of feathers means that I project beauty, talents, gifts from God when I interact with others. And the feathers don’t impede my ability to see others... like a medieval helmet might. I can see the beauty in others. Their gifts. Their talents. Their struggles. Their heroism.

Look- I’ve been the teacher reminding kids to stand up for each other. Telling kids to be the upstander-- the one who bucks the peer pressure and to be kind to each other. All of that is important, but that’s NOT who I’m talking to today. Today, I’m talking to each of you that have heard those awful words directed at her. I’m talking to the young girls here today and those of us who have daughters, nieces, and granddaughters. And, I’m talking to those of us with sons, nephews, and grandsons, too.

If you haven’t been in schools lately, you should know that anti-bully education is a thing. But anti-bullying campaigns aren’t enough. We have to embrace who we are regardless of what we’re told. Girls, boys, kids, teens.... I’m here to tell you that you WILL experience negativity. You WILL be bullied. You WILL start to doubt yourself. My message is... don’t you believe it. Not even for a second.

As humans, unlike other animals, we tell ourselves stories. And we internalize the stories others tell us about us. And for awhile, when I heard that I wasn’t enough. I wasn’t pretty enough; I wasn’t ‘cool’ enough; I was excluded, forgotten, and tormented, I believed it. And the math told me that it was justified. It was me against a mob-- so they must be right... right? Wrong! I shouldn’t have gone to school without my armor.

One of my favorite authors and researchers is Brene Brown. She has written several books about vulnerability, shame, and bravery. She warns us that when we experience fear, we shouldn't armor up. Armor, she argues, severs our connections to each other. She cautions teachers about shaming children because when we do, children put on armor. And a child wearing armor can't learn. Can't thrive.

I don't disagree with Brene Brown. I just think that feathers can be a kind of armor-- one we can intentionally wear. It doesn't mean we won't feel pain... It just means we can move past the pain more quickly.

I won't give away the book, but Alastair eventually stops picking his own feathers. How? By embracing who is he. Alastair is a poet. He 'reads' poetry by eating books of poetry. He actually chews up the pages of books. He loves eating poetry almost as much as he loves eating cherries. And he writes poetry, too. He likes to write tributes to poets whose poetry he has eaten. Here's an example:

This is Just to Say- a tribute to the poem by William Carlos Williams

I have sampled
the cherries
you abandoned
on the table

the ones
I think you
intended
for a pie

Beg your pardon
they had pits
I left those
In the bowl

Ah, Alastair. Yes... leave those pits in the bowl. They're not doing us any good. And be proud of your talents, your gifts to the world.

With not one, but two broken wings, Alastair isn't likely to ever learn to fly in the traditional sense, but he does learn how to get out of the weeds and soar. Poetry is his armor of feathers.

What's yours?

Benediction:

As you go through this week, I would hope that you would wear your armor... so the bad stuff doesn't get in. But your armor should be made of feathers, not steel. Because feathers are beautiful and soft and magical. And so are you.