

# Voices: THE ART AND SCIENCE OF PSYCHOTHERAPY

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## Precious, the Crow

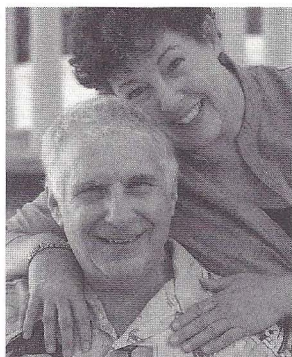
Peter R. Breggin

*Peter Breggin writes: "When I published this article in 1987, my wife Ginger and I had been together for three years. You can see the profound impact she was already having on me in encouraging my spirituality and my growing desire to treasure life in all its manifestations. We have now been together for more than twenty-five years, and during this time we have become partners in nearly everything we do. After becoming an award-winning photographer and an outstanding student, Ginger decided to work with me in my reform work. We have authored books together, including the best-selling Talking Back to Prozac, and she built my original reform organization into a success. Recently Ginger and I formed a new organization devoted to replacing psychiatric diagnoses and drugs with more caring and effective approaches ([www.empathictherapy.org](http://www.empathictherapy.org)). We want to empower professionals and laypersons alike to live more principled, loving and happy lives. We look forward to making new friends and colleagues at our annual meeting in Syracuse, New York on April 8-10, 2011."*

ANIMALS HAVE ALWAYS MEANT A GREAT DEAL TO ME, but I was unprepared for what a giant impact the little baby crow would have upon all of us—even on my patients.

Since we had met and married 3 years earlier, my wife, Ginger, and I had been drawing precious beings around us. First, my 9-year-old son, Ben, came to live with us. Then her 7-year-old daughter, Aly, made us a truly blended family. Along the way, we added two cockatiels, a hamster, a dwarf lop-eared bunny, goldfish (of course), and my son's 6-inch African millipede. All but the fish and millipede had the run of the house.

From the start I could see that Ginger had a magical way with animals. My elderly Shetland Sheepdog, Ted, now 16 years old, had been suffering from arthritis and cataracts, not to mention loneliness, in the large old frame house that made up my home and psychiatric office. But his health improved remarkably on Ginger's entrance into our lives. He perked up, seemed not to limp so much, and as several of my patients noticed, his eyes no longer looked quite so cloudy.



PETER BREGGIN IS A PSYCHIATRIST in private practice in Ithaca, New York, where he treats individuals, couples and families with children. He offers drug-free therapy and has a subspecialty in helping people safely withdraw from psychiatric medications. He is the author of dozens of scientific articles and more than twenty books, most recently *Brain-Disabling Treatments in Psychiatry*, Second Edition (2008), *Medication Madness: The Role of Psychiatric Drugs in Cases of Violence, Suicide and Crime* (2008), and *Wow, I'm an American! How to Live Like Our Nation's Heroic Founders* (2009). He teaches in the Department of Counseling at SUNY Oswego. For the past eight years he and his wife Ginger have enjoyed living on beautiful Cayuga Lake in the Finger Lakes Region of Central New York. [www.breggin.com](http://www.breggin.com).

Being the psychiatrist and something of a scientist, I took all this with a grain of salt. I wasn't prepared for the idea that my wife might be St. Francis reincarnate, not any more than I anticipated the effect animals would increasingly have on my own life.

Christmas of our first year together Ginger bought me a buff and brown little lop-eared bunny whom I named Chocolate Mousse. Mousse or Moose as we call him turned out to be anything but a charmer. He was too frightened to be touched, never approached anyone in a friendly fashion, and if picked up would go into a spasm. He would twist so badly out of shape when held that if he fell from our hands, he would actually land on the ground in the same fixed contortion, usually crashing onto the side of his neck.

On a couple of occasions, when picked up for routine cleaning of his hutch, he became so frantic that he scratched Ginger very badly. One day his claws tore through her blouse and cut her breast, and I announced that I had given up on my Christmas present. I asked Ginger to find another home for him.

When I came out of my office a couple of hours later, I found Ginger sitting cross-legged on the living-room floor with Moose sitting a few feet away staring intently up at her. I thought immediately of a guru with her most devoted disciple.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"I'm talking with Moose," she said, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. "I'm getting mental image pictures from him that he was abused by a little



boy about Ben's age and so he's terrified of being here. I'm telling him we love him very much and want to make this a very safe place for him."

The rabbit, for all I could see, seemed to be listening intently. I'd never seen him sit quietly before in the middle of a room, especially with someone a few feet away from him. His big eyes were saucer size.

She addressed herself to the rabbit, clearly concluding what had been a somewhat lengthy conversation.

"Moose," she said, "it won't be enough for us to love you. You've got to reach out and love us as well."

She looked at Moose knowingly as the rabbit got up, walked hippity-hop over to me, and put himself at my feet with his face flat to the rug. He wanted to be petted.

Since then Moose has become an integral part of our family, roaming freely all day in the house, often snuggling up to our poor harassed old dog, who would whine and complain like a bitch with too many pups at her teats. Once he tried to sniff nose to beak with Sydney the cockatiel and received a peck for his efforts. Occasionally he would sit in our laps like a puppy.

Eventually Moose joined my psychiatric practice. Because of his habit of dropping pellets hither and yon, I had tried to keep him out of my office which attaches directly to the house. One day I was beginning the first few minutes of an opening interview with a new patient, when my patient's eyes popped wide. I followed his startled glance and discovered that Moose had just come hopping out from behind my chair. My patient, it turned out, was delighted and charmed, and the session got off on a good footing.

Somehow Moose got the idea my office was the one place he couldn't grace with his pellets, and he spends much of every day under my desk. Several times a week, he'll come out to visit with me and my patients, always a patient who especially loves animals. How Moose knows how a person feels about animals is beyond me—but he's always right. When especially comfortable, he'll jump in my lap and keep us company for 10 or 15 minutes. The effect is always spiritually uplifting for me and my client. And of course if I'm seeing a family with children, Moose becomes a real partner—a regular therapy assistant. I start the sessions with him.

From all this you can see that I wasn't so surprised when Ginger told me one day that she'd "communicated with a crow."

"I was walking Ted this morning and a crow was chattering, the way they do, from high up in a tree. I stopped for a while to let him get used to me and I began to talk with him. Then he leaned forward and folded out one wing toward me, the way the cockatiels do, and he bowed. Then he flew away."

Ginger's always seeing special meanings in her relations with animals, and I took this as of no particular import. Perhaps crows, as intelligent as they seem to be, could acknowledge a human the way a cockatiel or parrot might. I'd never heard of it... but then I'd never heard of anyone curing a rabbit with spiritual counseling. Nor had I heard of a rabbit becoming a spiritual counselor.

A week later the tree cutters were clearing away an enormous tree from our backyard. It had been leaning on the garage, cracking its old timbers, and it had to go before a summer storm would use it as a lever to cave in the structure. The large nest of twigs high up beyond human reach was probably an abandoned squirrel's nest.

But several hours later, with the cutting still in progress, we found three dead baby crows in a pile beside the garage. The 50-foot fall had killed them instantly. They looked to be about one week old — nearly naked with plump pink bodies already the size of sparrows, huge beaks, and even larger feet.

A couple of hours later, the foreman, a nice-looking hefty blond man in his 30s, approached me with the large nest of woven twigs in his hands. Inside was a barely alive infant crow.

More accustomed to holding a steamy chain saw than a baby bird, I'm sure, he nonetheless seemed at ease with the tender creature in his hands.

"We found this one beside the nest on the other side of the garage," he explained. "He must have been cushioned by the nest during the fall, and that saved his life."

We looked at the helpless, stunned little bird.

"Will you take him?" he asked hopefully.

"You bet I will!"

I knew Ginger, Ben, and Aly would be delighted. I also knew Ginger had successfully raised a baby robin when she was a child. The bird had actually gone on to live in their backyard for a while before joining a flock of robins.

"I'm glad," he said. "Most people get annoyed with me when I bring them a baby bird or animal from their trees. They just want me to get rid of them."

I'd been watching this man toil high up in the air in the cherry picker, dodging the falling roped limbs above the garage; my stereotypes of such a man hadn't allowed for this tenderness.

I took the crow into the house as Ginger arrived back from shopping.

While I returned to another hour with a patient, Ginger located a bird expert on the phone, and learned that raw hamburger and moist puppy food would make ideal foods. Yes, we had a chance, a slim one, of keeping the bird alive, and even making a pet of him. Crows, we were told, if raised young enough sometimes make wonderful pets. Sometimes they even learn to talk.

I was sure of it; I was going to have a friend who would be a crow. He would even talk with me. I already could imagine him greeting new patients in my waiting room: "Hello, welcome to the office." Maybe he would even do that little bow.

Over the next few days I'd hear many stories about crows who were raised by people or who befriended people. One of my clients knew a family who owned a gas station in West Virginia. One day a crow stopped to visit them and never left. He'd fly here and there, but always return by night. Sometimes he hung around on the gas pumps while customers came and went. Often he played with people — actually letting them handle him.

A pet-store owner told me of a friend who raised a crow. It would fly off during the day and return at night for food and to sleep in the house. This playful

character would visit the neighbors when they were picnicking and cause so much trouble stealing food and making a commotion that they would complain. Sometimes he'd abscond with the silverware before they even got the food out. One day the bird's owner heard a shot and found him dead.

I had hardly grown to know the crow and already I was an over-protective parent. I decided I'd never let him out of the house. Or I'd learn falconry and teach him to fly off and return to my arm. That way I could supervise him all the time.

Perhaps I was responding to the crow's needs—the way a mother responds to an especially vulnerable child. The bird was exhausted or injured. Even the untrained eye could see he was languid and nearly stuporous. We realized he had not only endured the incredible fall but also many hours of starvation.

After a few difficult forced feedings by pushing a finger deep into the gullet, he began to open his mouth cavernously for more. With a gurgling squawk he'd swallow the whole finger in search of the food. It was frightening to behold. And enormously gratifying to experience as the parent.

I was hooked. I became "Dad" in my own mind, and soon in the crow's as well. His feeding pattern, about once an hour, fit perfectly into my work pattern, the 50-minute hour. If I had a long family sessions, I'd excuse myself for the "baby" and give him his feeding on time. Pretty soon, if he heard my voice across the room, he'd squawk and open his mouth.

He seemed to grow in strength every day. His tail, at first a stubble of milky-colored pin feathers, developed a little black fuzz. His gaunt, haunted face — more the look of a predator than a scavenger—began to fill in with flesh. His eyes—my baby's eyes—took on a blue color. I teased my friends, "All my kids have blue or green eyes." It was true.

While I was raising my baby, my assistant and old friend, Carol Valentine, was bringing her 2-month old baby, Ilara, to work with her. I was by far the more worrisome of the parents. I was always picking mine up.

But it wasn't just me. Everybody noticed it. The baby crow, all 9 ounces of him, wanted to be picked up—as often as possible. Between feedings he would whimper until he was stroked or held. When picked up, he would settle deeply into my hand. One evening when his feedings seemed to be done, he wouldn't stop whimpering and settle down until I picked him up, tucked him into my shirt, and gently rocked him to sleep by walking about the room. It brought back many earlier memories with my real children.

Because he had to be fed at least once an hour, I took him everywhere with me, including to our weekend cabin, a 2-hour ride from our home. Ginger would drive and I would sit next to her with the bird in the giant nest in a box on my lap. Like any baby, the crow loved sleeping in the car. He was a perfect traveler.

On one occasion, I decided to give the crow a bird's-eye view of what was passing by. I held him up to look out the window, and watched him focus on the landscape as it whizzed by. All went well for a few moments, when abruptly he squawked, loudly and frightfully, and began to tremble. I tried putting him back

in the nest, but he trembled until I put him in my lap against my body and held him firmly with two hands. He buried himself in the warmth of my body.

"He was shaking!" I told Ginger. "The last time he saw the world whipping by like that he was falling from the tree."

I marveled that the bird might still recall that trauma. I marveled still more that he trembled like a small human being until comforted with loving body contact. Of course none of this surprised Ginger who was enjoying my education into the wonders of small animals.

From early on I could tell that my baby had two distinct cries—one to be fed and one to be held. The whimpered plea for comfort must be universal; I recognized it immediately. When he wanted nothing but to be held, I would carry him about inside a sweat jacket. I felt like a marsupial mother. If I knew my patient loved animals, I might have the bird rest inside my jacket during sessions. Patients who could not talk about tenderness and vulnerability toward other humans found themselves exploring these feelings toward the crow.

Nearly everyone remarked on the bird's charisma—the way he seemed to reach you with his crystal blue eyes. I would show off how he would raise his chin for me to stroke him and how he would conform his little body to my hand or even to my belly inside my shirt or jacket.

I began to have feelings that I'd missed out with my own infant children. I'd never been regularly involved in feeding and diapering my kids; but here I was with the crow—in one end and out the other every hour on the hour. I'd keep little tissues nearby and could anticipate after his first few beakfuls how he would raise his little behind for me to catch his droppings.

As he looked stronger and stronger, and yet not quite strong enough, I wondered how women through the ages could have borne the pain of nursing sickly children who might not survive. It struck me as pretentious that I would even dare to compare my fears and my joys to that of a "real mother"; yet I felt the feelings.

I could sense my wife, Ginger, loving me in a new light—a light she'd never seen me in because I'd never quite been in it before. I in turn was growing more respectful of Ginger's deep commitment to animals and more convinced of her viewpoint that the size of the soul is not determined by the size or maturity of the brain.

One night Ginger's mother, Jean, suggested to her on the phone that the bird might be a starling or a grackle. I felt as offended as if she had suggested that my child really wasn't my own. It was all in fun—I love her mom very much—but it was with indignation that I took the 3-week-old's measurements.

Triumphantly I called Mom back.

"Jean Ross," I told her with mock severity, "You accused me of raising a starling or a grackle? How broad do you think its wingspread is?"

"Eight inches," she offered hesitantly.

"Eight inches?" I guffawed. "Try 14 inches."

She was genuinely amazed; or at least kind enough to make believe.



*Precious, the Crow, after Tom and Chip. ©2010 Mary de Wit*



“And how long do you think its legs are?”

Now she didn't dare guess.

“Seven inches,” I announced.

His feet in fact were nearly 2 inches in themselves. They curled up beneath him like helpless talons folded in a twisted fist. I'm now beginning to realize he might have had spinal damage.

“Maybe it's a hawk,” Jean announced.

Now that was respect! But I assured her my baby—as yet unnamed—was a crow.

My own birthday—number 50—arrived 4 days after I'd taken my crow's measurements. Ginger gave me a baby book for a present—complete with the appropriate place for measurements, first words, and so on. I noted the first time his cry sounded like a “caw” and the first time he tottered half-sitting on the edge of the nest. Family and friends had to put up with my endless doting over each new crow milestone.

But I still didn't have a name. I wouldn't get it picked until it was almost too late. The problem was I had so many feelings about him that it seemed as if one name couldn't possibly sum them all up.

He was fierce looking with a huge one-and-a-half inch beak. Gaunt as he was, he looked more the hawk than the crow. I wanted to call him Lady Hawk, after the movie that my wife loved. But Ginger warned me that both the bird and the people who knew him would need constant reminders of his gentle nature. To call him “hawk” would establish dangerous images in everyone's mind, including the crow's. We thought of calling him Baby Blue or just plain Baby.

Because we learned that crows can attack and even kill small birds and animals in the wild, we decided to adjust him quickly to the other animals. After all, he was already as big as the cockatiels and bigger than the hamster.

I put him on the floor with our now very loving lop-eared bunny. The crow was wholly unsteady on his feet. He actually sat on them, folded underneath, and tended to tip forward like a rocker. The rabbit—I have pictures as proof—came nose to beak with the crow, then dipped his head down and nuzzled under the bird's breast to prop him up. The crow in turn stretched out over the rabbit and effortfully snuggled into his rich fur. They remained like that for many minutes, the rabbit propping him up as necessary, the crow snuggling into him.

The crow would sleep on top of the rabbit while the rabbit lay by my side as I read or watched TV in the evening. Ted, our old gent of a dog, would be watching the whole affair with jealous almost mournful eyes. Defying his arthritis, he might sit up on the couch with his front paws “accidentally” landing right on top of the bird and rabbit. My wife would enter the room, look at her family on the couch, and melt into a happy smile.

It didn't go so well with the cockatiels.

We decided to put the crow in his box and nest between the cockatiel cages and next to their common perch where they spent much of the day. Petals, a white

dove-like female who is on loan from my daughter, Sharon, paid little attention. Sharon, like her stepmother, Ginger, is deeply touched by and deeply touches animals; but she had to leave her bird with us when she returned to college. Petals has no special affinity for me—I think she still misses Sharon—and had no particular reaction to the crow.

But Sydney, my son Ben's bird, has a special regard for me, and he became violently jealous. For several days, before I got my wits together, Sydney would bite anyone who came near him, including me. A couple of times he drew blood. I'd go through my usual routine with Ginger, making believe that such a small creature couldn't in fact be murderously jealous of my attention to the new bird.

With Ginger's urging, I realized I couldn't neglect Sydney for the new baby. As a parent and a psychiatrist, I should have known better; but the crow had been so absorbing. Now each night I'd have to hold Sydney in my hand for an hour or so—my way of relaxing before bed—while he tucked his head into my palm for petting or sat on my shoulder literally rubbing cheek to cheek with me.

Sydney's the sort of fellow who will stand on his tiptoes craning his neck to the sky just to get chucked under the chin for a few minutes. Sometimes he would lean down from his perch on my finger and roll his chest around in my palm, begging for more. Or he might tuck his head into a deep bow and push his forehead into my palm or between my fingers. It was several days before he could relax enough to sit on my foot at arm's length without having to climb as quickly as he could into more intimate contact.

It was now about the tenth day of the crow's stay with us, and he began to look weaker. In the midst of this, I had to go out of town to testify as an expert in a trial. I wanted to stay to care for the crow, but I doubted if the judge would hold up the trial because of my "illness in the family."

The day before I left, the crow got diarrhea and lost his appetite. When I tried to feed him, he would turn his head away. Being held was all that seemed to give him peace.

Ginger was also going away for several days with her daughter, while my son stayed with his mom. So my assistant, Carol, took the crow home with her. Fortunately she and her husband raise canaries and of course love animals.

When I returned, the crow seemed to be a little stronger. Carol attributed it to a special heat lamp. As if in greeting, the crow gaped his mouth at the sight of me. I was so happy to see him that I didn't stop to change out of my business suit or to put my things away. I reached high onto the upright piano to the familiar place where I kept his food, and gave him a big fingerful. He devoured one, and then another, and then another.

Then I noticed a sour smell.

The food had been sitting overnight on the piano from sometime before I had gone away. I'd given my sick crow rancid food. In 3 or 4 hours, the diarrhea returned. I called Carol at home and asked her to come in early the next day, a Friday, to take the crow to the small animal and bird specialist, Dr. Giebel. His

hospital was some distance into the country in Gaithersburg, Maryland. I'd be seeing patients all morning and didn't think I could cancel them. Besides, the bird didn't look deadly ill.

As Carol was leaving, I decided on the bird's name. "Tell Dr. Giebel his name is Precious. Precious, the Crow. Maybe that will encourage him to give Precious all the special care he deserves."

Dr. Giebel didn't need any encouragement. He took an immediate liking to this marvelous young creature and took it home with him for the weekend for forced feedings and constant attention.

With my entire family away and Carol off from work for the weekend, I was left alone to fret over my bird.

Dr. Giebel called me on Saturday. This man, whom I had not yet met, explained that his family loved Precious, and they were doing everything they could to help him. And Precious was definitely getting better.

On Sunday the doctor called me again. It was reassuring to hear him say that Precious was out on the patio with his family enjoying the day and eating heartily.

"Maybe I can pick him up on Monday?" I suggested.

"Maybe."

On Monday morning I was sitting at my desk preparing for my first client when the phone rang. As usual, my wife or Carol answered it. I thought nothing of it. A few minutes later Ginger came in and put her hand on my shoulder. I looked up at her. As so many before me have said, I "knew right away"—Precious was dead.

It had happened suddenly and there was no explaining it. I was learning that very few infant creatures can be nursed to health by human beings, especially after a serious trauma. But I also wondered, and will always, if my carelessness with the food hadn't cut off his recovery.

In the next few days I received condolences from friends, family, and patients alike. My daughters, Linda and Sharon, seemed to wholly understand how much the loss meant to me. Ben, age nine, and Aly, age seven, were probably a little too young to understand, but they were nice about it. They hadn't yet grown to love the crow.

Some of my clients cried, often more able to have their tender feelings toward Precious than toward a more threatening human being. I could easily understand that.

Ginger told me Precious had been a gift from God and that for some reason it was important that he live those 2 weeks and 2 days with us.

When I took the nest and a dozen photos to Aly's first grade "show and tell," I felt as if Precious would go on affecting people for a long time.

I was still in mourning when I received a letter from Dr. Giebel. It was written by him on vacation, scribbled in his own handwriting, and contained the most tender sentiments anyone had ever written to me:

Dear Dr. and Mrs. Breggin:

Just a short but sincere note of sympathy on the sudden loss of a short-lived but deep relationship with one of God's innocent creatures—Precious the Crow.

It isn't every day that I meet people like you who love their pets the way you love yours—but then, they aren't just animals—they are part of your family life.

You know, Precious depended on you for everything—food, shelter, love, medical care—and you never let him down—and when he was sick and trying to die, you brought him all the way out to us for help—and we tried—did we ever try! I was so upset Monday morning and then I still had to make that phone call! But, I knew that we gave him every possible chance for survival—it just wasn't to be.

I hope this incident doesn't discourage you from trying again, because without people like you, a lot more of God's creatures wouldn't be here, or at least living the quality of life they deserve.

Again, my sympathy.

Sincerely,  
Dr. Giebel

I've done a lot of things in my life and received my share of credit and acknowledgment; but I don't think I ever felt as appreciated as when I read that letter.

A few nights later I was working with a married couple trying to help them understand how much more they could have in life beyond their bickering, competing, and fighting. I talked, as I sometimes do, about the nature of love.

"Love is joy in the awareness of another person—or any living creature. Love helps us find joy in each other despite all the fears and hurts that keep us apart."

The husband, a successful professional man who was very afraid to let out his tender feelings, asked me if I could be more "concrete" about love. Could I give examples of what I meant? It was toward the end of a difficult 2-hour session filled with bitter feelings.

I told the husband and wife about the last days of Precious the Crow and then read them the note from Dr. Giebel. It was late at night, we were probably all getting too tired, and I wasn't sure how they would respond.

When I finished reading Dr. Giebel's note, there was a spiritual shining in both their eyes, and the husband, for the first time in our work, broke down and cried.

"I understand," he said, "I understand what you mean about love."

Precious the Crow continues to give his gift to us.

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You are born to one mother, but if you are lucky, you will have more than one. And among them all you will find most of what you need.

—Clarissa Pinkola Estes