

On the Wings of the Wind:
Learning to Fly



by Toby Herbst



Running Fast And Heading South

Glad you could join me for another exciting adventure, we are going to be learning to fly. Sit back and buckle up, we are headed south at 90 Mph along the Rio Grande. We will make a few stops along the way. First, will be an ancient shrine, next a funky old graveyard, and lastly to the Bosque Del Apache, where the descendants of Dinosaurs fill the sky.

I have been listening to a lot of Moody Blues lately, so that is the sort of music playing in my head. Today's themes will deal with such heady subjects as life and death, Animism in the Western World, Ancestors, The Awareness of the Rhythms of Life on this Ancient Planet, and Learning to Fly or Soaring with Birds. Relax and get comfortable because here we go!!!!!!

The Shrine

Once it had been a home for the gods of its' people. It sits at a point where the river makes a bend to the west before continuing inevitably south. The opening of the shrine faces east to the rising of the sun. The sun that brings the light and warmth of a new day.

For the last four hundred years the shrine has been empty. The gods it once held were destroyed by cruel and brutal zealots, Conquistadors who killed in the name of the God who was against killing. The irony is beyond belief. Still the light of the rising sun floods into the empty circular house of the gods, bringing the promise of a new day.



Petroglyphs

These glyphs are connected with the shrine. The first glyph is certainly a crane or a heron, so closely associated with the river below the glyphs. On top of the rock are some doodles, bi-valve wing like arrangements and some tracks. I think these are Cougar tracks because of the lack of claws indicated. Cougars, like all felines, have retractable claws.

On a lower side of the rock (see pg. 8) are some stepped cloud or mountain designs and on the left side of the panel is a very frightening skeletal bird. In a deep crevice of the rock (see pg.7) are split hoof prints followed by paw prints with clearly shown claws - most likely a wolf, but possibly a bear. Meaning? I don't know, but hunting and killing, life and

death seem to be the theme.

On one of the more hidden faces of this group of boulders is another set of petroglyphs, which are a little harder to make out and interpret. (see pg. 9) There appears to be two cloud/mountain shaped altars. Then there are a series of rectangle shapes with rows of dots above them. The rectangle with the dots mid-center appears to be the neck of an opened-mouth horned serpent in profile, but perhaps I am reading too much into this image. Further right is another clawed paw and a round mask. The mask has hash marks coming out of the eyes, possibly representing lightning. Very powerful.

▼ Crane or Heron Petroglyph, Piro Culture, Circa A.D. 1400

▶ Split Hoof and Wolf(?) tracks

▼ Doodles and Cougar Tracks





▲ Skeletal Bird, Clouds, Mountains, Stepped Altars (?)



▶ Profile of horned serpent (?), round mask with lighting emanating from the eyes



When the music is over turn out the lights...The Doors

When I saw this funky old graveyard in a little Spanish village on the banks of the Rio Grande, I was struck by two things.

The first thing I noticed were the abandoned chairs by a grave (*see pg. 12*). It was like there had been a fiesta the day before, complete with food and music celebrating the life of the deceased; and at the end of the celebration, everyone just got up and left. No one turned out the lights, so I guess the dead just keep on partying. If you look closely at the shrine on the deceased's grave

you can see how elaborate it is and how much they must be missed. It has a life size angel, putti with trumpets, lights, candle sconces, plastic flowers, even a bird house. At another grave site someone has even left a hat on the chair to shade and cool visitors.

The second thing I noticed was that on the far side of the graveyard is a model church or house. Is this a church or house for the dead, or is this a place for God to dwell when he comes to judge and resurrect the dead?



▲ Model Church: A house for God or for the dead?

▼ Guitar Grave / Shrine





Turn out the lights...

Ancestors and Animism In The Western World

I recently read a book entitled, "Braiding Sweet Grass." It is by a Botanist of Potawatomi ancestry, who was discussing the differences between Native American thought processes and approaches to the Natural World versus Western Scientific concepts and approaches. One of her conclusions is that Modern Western Society is devoid of animism, seeing a life force, energy, or spirit in inanimate objects such as rocks, and weather as well as living things such as trees, animals, and plants, in short the whole of the Natural World. I thought about this for a while and though to a great extent the author is probably right, there are very notable exceptions, including myself, my wife, my parents and many of my friends. No one needed to teach me that a great old tree had a spirit and was sacred, I just knew it. I knew that certain rock formations had an energy and projected that energy, some good, some bad.

This was long before the "New Age" hokum. My experiences were much more subtle and real...and in New Jersey of all places. This was in the late 1950s and early 60s, and

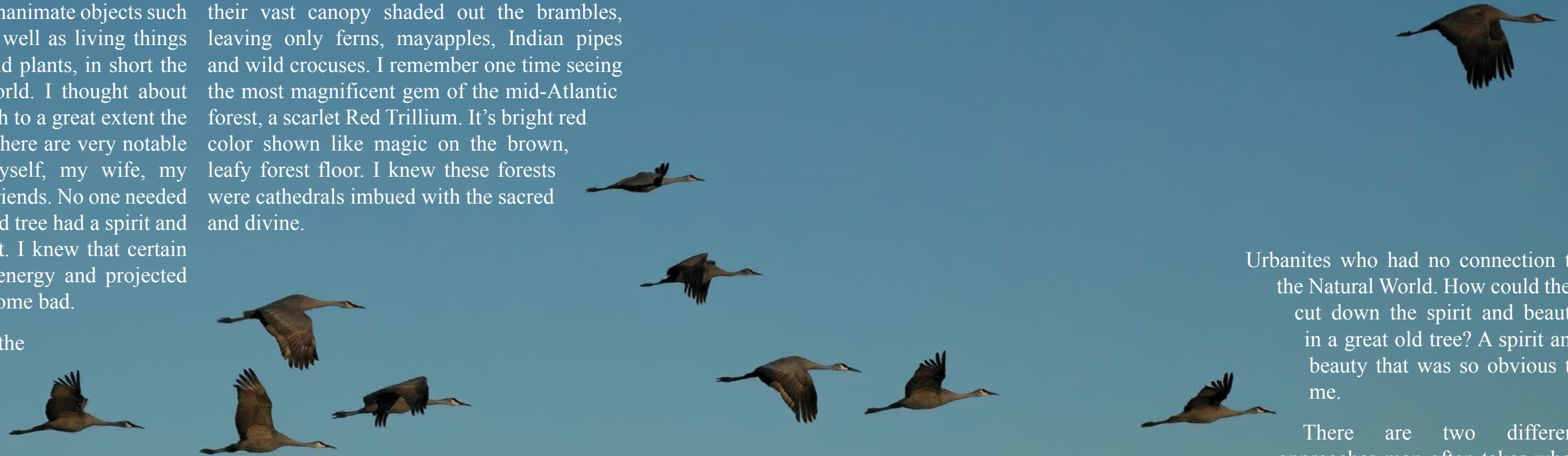
small pockets of woods had grown back from abandoned farm land and pasture. These were woods of second growth forest that were now 100 to 200 years old, with oaks, hickories, beeches, maples and tulip trees whose trunks were from 2 to 3 feet in diameter. These older forests were silent and majestic. One could easily walk through their leafy floors because their vast canopy shaded out the brambles, leaving only ferns, mayapples, Indian pipes and wild crocuses. I remember one time seeing the most magnificent gem of the mid-Atlantic forest, a scarlet Red Trillium. Its bright red color shown like magic on the brown, leafy forest floor. I knew these forests were cathedrals imbued with the sacred and divine.

Much of modern Western Science begins in the 18th and early 19th century with divinity students, ministers and priests studying the natural world in order to understand the wonders and glories of God's Creations. These early studies clearly show the connection in Western thinking between nature and the divine and the belief that nature is imbued with the divine.

I remember each time one of my little pockets of woods was destroyed for development, I thought how Godless these people were. Who can be so disconnected from nature to kill and cut down one of these majestic trees. I knew they must be

Urbanites who had no connection to the Natural World. How could they cut down the spirit and beauty in a great old tree? A spirit and beauty that was so obvious to me.

There are two different approaches man often takes when visiting the natural world. There are those who move as part of the natural landscape, becoming it, appreciating it, learning from it and trying to understand it. Then there are those who move over it, not stopping, not looking, not understanding or respecting it. They see the natural world as nothing more than a challenge, something to conquer. I have to admit that going fast to get between point A and B on a dirt bike has to be exhilarating and fun but unless you make stops along the way you are missing a lot of the beauty and complexity of nature and the landscape. I'm sure there are some people who combine the two approaches to varying degrees.



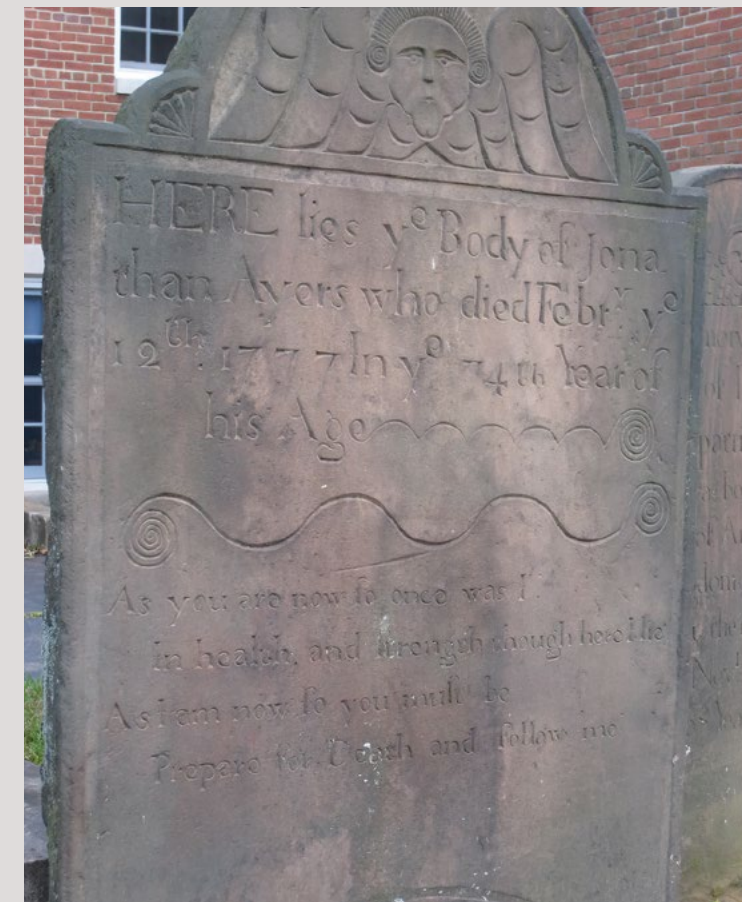


The Ayers Tree

Part of my family came to this land almost 400 years ago. They moved down to New Jersey some time in the late 17th Century. They settled in Basking Ridge where they farmed and milled and gave some of their land to the Presbyterian Ministry and built a kirk (church). Besides being Presbyterians, I think some my ancestors must still have retained a healthy dose of their pre-Christian beliefs, for they built the church next to a great White Oak. Many other European settlers might have feared the oak and cut it down.

This enormous oak (660 years old) was probably a “Sachem Tree.” Sachem is the Delaware word for chief and these venerable old spreading trees, (usually White Oaks) were used as places to convene under and discuss important matters such as treaties. The great Ayers Oak was already ancient when my ancestors arrived in Basking Ridge, and they must have recognized its sacredness for they are buried under it. Somewhere back in my ancestry there was a strong streak of animism.

Funny story, the first time I actually went in the old Basking Ridge cemetery I was about 17. I had just gotten my drivers license and a friend and I parked in the lower parking lot and fired up a bowl of Hash (it seems we had a lot of good Lebanese hash back then). Afterwards, we walked up along the side of the Church and there were my ancestors, buried everywhere, but one of the best preserved tomb stones was from my Great, Great, Great, Great, Great Grandfather, Jonathan Ayers. This is what was carved on the stone, “As you are now, So once was I, In health and strength, Though here I lie, As I am now, So you shall be, Prepare for Death and follow me.” Woowow did that make the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.



▲ The tombstone of Jonathan Ayers

▼ Becoming one with Nature or Part of the Tree



◀ The Great Ayers Oak in Basking Ridge, New Jersey

Exhilaration and Take Off, The Big Fly In Learning to Fly; Pink Floyd

We usually get to the Bosque Del Apache around 3:00 to 3:30, for the fly in. We paid our fee, uncorked our champagne, got out our binoculars and focused them, got out the bird books and slowly proceeded south. The first ponds are filled mostly with ducks, Mallards, Pintails, Wigeons, Shovelers, and Teals, wonderful colors. Swooping over the ponds are Harriers. Roosting in the trees are Red Tails, as well as Bald and Golden Eagles, all patiently waiting for the right opportunity.

The closer we get to sun set, the energy builds. Call it "The Quickening." It is palpable, you can feel it everywhere - more stirring, more movement, more honking, more cries - life is everywhere. I can feel it, an exhilaration, a euphoria, and I am becoming part of it. A yearning to become part of the life force, a yearning to fly, a release, total freedom. The ecstatic vision.



▲ Great Blue Heron

▼ Ducks of all shapes and sizes





Many years ago, in the Mountains of Puebla, Mexico, I remember seeing the Voladores, the Flyers. They were Nahautal speaking Indians and they climbed a great pole bound with ropes. On the top of the pole, 90 feet in the air, on a platform maybe a foot and a half in diameter stood a Shaman playing a little flute and beating a little drum while hopping/dancing from foot to foot. At the prescribed signal the Voladores, tied by their waist, pushed off and spiraled down around the pole, flying like birds. It was Pure Magic. I neglected to mention that the Shaman playing and dancing on the top of the pole has no ropes or supports and that he is intoxicated. Now that is balance!

Peter Furst, an old professor and friend, once wrote about Huichol shamans leaping from boulder to boulder on huge precipices in the Sierras of Mexico. When asked what was the point of this dangerous display of balance and courage, they said they were "Flying." I think Man has looked at birds and, in his jealousy and envy, has always wanted to fly. It is part of our dreams, our deepest desires.



▲ The Voladores: The Shaman is dancing atop the pole, playing his flute and drum while the flyers prepare to launch.

Photo credit: SpyridoulaDellaPhotography, CC BY-SA 3.0 via Wikimedia Commons

◀ A late 17th century painting of Voladores performing at a Mexican wedding.

Photo credit: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

▶ Flying: This photo gives the reader an idea of how high up the Voladores are and the incredible danger involved in performing this ceremony. The Voladores are flying, but like all men they eventually have to descend from the realm of the gods.

Photo Credit: B.navez, CC BY-SA 3.0 via Wikimedia Commons





It is just before sunset by the time we have made our way back up to the northern end of the Bosque and the evening "Fly In" is in full swing. For a moment - just a moment - I defied gravity and joined the 25,000 Snow Geese and 10,000 Sandhill Cranes. I am ecstatic! I take off! I am flying.



Besides hot air balloons, it has been less than 120 years that man has made the dream of flight a reality. My Family has had some history with man's dream of flight, strangely enough both times it has involved war. Whenever I see a bird of prey soaring and diving overhead, I think of my Grandfather and Father, both Warriors of the Wind.

My Grandfather, Lorenz Kneedler Ayers, was a 1st Lieutenant in the 17th Aero Squadron, "The Great Snow Owl" United States Air Service in World War I. He was an observer, gunner and photographer, flying over the battlefields and trenches of France. I remember him firing off his Lewis machine gun (*with blanks*) for the 4th of July. His Lewis gun is now in the National Museum of the U.S. Air Force in Dayton, Ohio.



▲ 1st Lieutenant Lorenz Kneedler Ayers, 17th Aero Squadron, United States Air Service, 1917-1918

◀ A photo taken by my Grandfather over France in 1918. Below is a De Havilland DH-4, the same type of plane he is flying in overhead.

▼ Arming the guns on a De Havilland DH-4



▼ The Great Snow Owl, insignia of the 17th Aero Squadron



Sunset and Tail End Charlie

My Old Man flew P51 Mustangs in World War II. With a few notable exceptions such as the British Spitfire at 606 Mph, and the Messerschmitt ME 262 jet engine at 560 mph, the Mustang was one of the fastest planes in the World at that time. It had a 12-cylinder Packard Rolls Royce Merlin V-1650-7 engine that was capable of producing 1695 horsepower and flying at a speed of 440 miles per hour. It had a .50 caliber machine gun in its nose and four .20 caliber machine guns in the wings. At 19 and 20 years old, the pilots must have felt like gods.

As a kid, whenever I was late, my Dad would say, "You don't want to be 'Tail End Charlie'." That was the last guy to get in formation, and the most vulnerable to Enemy fire. I

pretty much always listened to my Dad and tried to never be "Tail End Charlie."

I can't help but think of that expression as these last Cranes fly in to bed down for the night. I can't help but to think of my Dad as he has bed down for his Eternal Rest. Maybe one of those cranes will do a barrel roll (Victory Roll) for a man who lived a good life and always tried to do the right thing.

► Insignia of the 384th Fighter Group

▼ My Dad flying, 1944-1945



▲ 1st Lieutenant Donald Frederick Herbst, sitting in the cockpit of his P-51 Mustang, 384th Fighter Group, VIII Fighter Command, 1944.



◆ Tail-end Charlies coming in for the night.





▲ Snow Geese fill the sky like stars in the heavens. For a fleeting moment, I am up there with them.

► "Milky Way Over White Pocket"
Photo by Steven Parmer

What if the urge to fly, the dream of flight, is embedded in our DNA? Maybe it is a primal memory from our earliest Primate ancestors as they leaped, swung and soared through the ancient forest canopy. What if we, as naked apes, were meant not just to fly and conquer the skies

of this planet? What if flight was just a stepping stone to venture out into the Stars? Is this dream of flight the catalyst meant to evolve us into the Cosmic Ape, the Star Voyager, spreading our seed out into the Universe? Something to think about...





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