

BIRDS OF A FEATHER

by Carol Schulz

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We owe much of our calendar and rhythm of life to the ancients. They were the ones who first watched the night sky, saw patterns in the stars and associated the stars with events in their lives. Life was given to these patterns by naming and giving history to the groups of stars. The tradition of storytelling has carried these histories down to today. Even today people watch the sky as a signal to plant, harvest or worship.

The beginnings date back to the Greeks who used the moon as a calendar. Many of their problems were solved by the Hellenistic Alexandrians who used the stars to regulate their calendar, and later passed their manuscripts to the Arabs. Later the Romans added their touch giving us today's calendar---more or less. This explains the mingling of Arabic names for stars with Greek and Roman mythology.

The Milky Way is seen as the pathway to heaven in many cultures. Picture it as a bridge providing a pathway for souls. According to the Navajo it was formed by Coyote. First man and first woman had been working on a blanket chiseling quartz rocks and putting the bits in the heavens to make stars. When they were finished they left the dust on the blanket. Coyote grabbed the blanket by the corners and slung the dust into the sky where it became the Milky Way. The Ciowa saw it as the backbone of the sky. The Pawnee believed it was the glue holding the sky together. The Chinese believed it was a sky bridge made by overlapping the wings of crows. This bridge enabled two lovers to meet annually before the rains came and washed away the bridge.

While Ursa Major and Ursa Minor are not birds, they are two of the most recognizable constellations in the sky. The story goes that Hera, the wife of Zeus, was very jealous of Callisto the huntress. To solve the problem Hera changed her into a bear terrified of man and beast. One day her son Arcas while hunting in the forest came across the bear. Callisto was so happy to see her son that she ran toward him. Thinking he was being attacked by a bear Arcas drew back his bow to kill the bear. Zeus acted quickly and changed Arcas in to a bear. Next is the part that is hard to believe. In the sky both bears have long tails. This happened because Zeus grabbed both bears by their tails and stretched the tails as he threw them into the sky. Hera had the last laugh and moved them to the pole region of the sky so that they would never rest and never catch each other.

These patterns of stars are recognized by many cultures. The French named them the Saucepan. To the English they are the Plough. The Micmac tribe see the four bowl stars as the four feet of the bear. In India they were the Seven Rishi or wise men.

As the Milky Way passes overhead the Navigator's Triangle rules the evenings with Lyra, Aquila, and Cygnus. The lyre was invented by Mercury and was passed through Apollo to his son Orpheus. His music even tamed wild beasts. Orpheus used his talent to cast a spell over Pluto to gain the release of his wife Eurydice. Pluto warned Orpheus not to look back till the Earth's surface was reached. Curiosity took over and Orpheus' wife was returned to the underworld. This was not the end of the story. Orpheus continued to wander and play his lyre. Orpheus remained true to his wife. This did not set well with a group of young women. Yes, there were groupies even then. They killed Orpheus and threw his lyre into the river. Zeus sent a bird to retrieve it then placed the lyre in the heavens. The star Vega represents the bird who did Zeus's bidding.

The second group in the Summer Triangle centers on another son of Apollo's. This headstrong young man named Phaeton was bragging to impress his friend Cygnus. Phaeton boasted to his friend that he could drive Apollo's chariot. This was the chariot that carried the sun across the sky. Phaeton was not

equal to the task and the chariot zigzagged across the sky burning the citizenry one moment and freezing them the next. This required desperate action and Zeus used his infamous lightning bolt to kill the young Phaeton. His body fell into the river Eridanus. Cygnus dove into the river over and over to find the body of his friend. Zeus changed Cygnus into a swan to enable him to dive more easily. Finally when Cygnus was exhausted Zeus placed Cygnus in the heavens.

The final constellation of the group is Aquila. The eagle was the favorite messenger bird of Zeus. His most difficult task was to fly back to Olympus with Ganymede on his back. Ganymede became the cup bearer to the Gods. Zeus often rewarded his favorites with posterity. The faithful Aquila was given a place in the heavens with a long cast of characters from the rich imagination of ancient people.

It is humbling to remember that the early people who wove these magical stories looked at the same stars that we see tonight. These people mapped the night sky for us and gave meaning to its rhythms. Most of these groupings, while the names are changed, are recognized by cultures around the globe. In the stars we are provided one of the most consistent histories from early civilizations.

Sources: *365 Starry Nights* by Chet Raymo, StarLab, and *Archeoastronomer*, Griffith Observatory