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The cardinal that kept banging into the author's window (Mary Navarre)



by Mary Navarre

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When the first signs of spring appeared outside my window in March, there also appeared a female cardinal in all her ruby-red glory. She introduced herself by flying against the window as if she were trying to get in the house.

Her behavior seemed odd to me, and it went on day after day. I began to worry that she would hurt herself, and, if she were preparing a nest, that she was wearing herself out with this bizarre behavior. Was she seeing her reflection and thinking a competitor was encroaching on her territory?

That made sense to me. First, I tried hanging sun-catchers in the window to break up the reflection. Next, I hung a tea towel over the window. Then I moved the potted plants around to see if that might help. I trimmed back the bush from which she launched. Nothing I tried made any difference.

She persisted in spending a good part of each day banging against the window. What was wrong with her? This behavior was not normal. The male cardinal looked on for a while and then left. Would she hurt herself? Was she neglecting her family? Why was she doing this? Was she just crazy, stupid, unhinged?

After several weeks of watching in dismay as this poor thing banged against the window, I asked myself what it was that she saw in the window. I got off my chair and went outside around the corner of the house and stood about where she perched. I looked in the window at about her eye level. There it was! A bright red cookie tin just visible at the bottom edge of the window — a red that was exactly the color of a cardinal. I finally saw what she saw from her vantage point.



Cardinal bird's perspective of the red tin inside the window (Mary Navarre)

I removed the tin. She stopped by once more, looked around, left, and has not repeated that behavior. Was this a coincidence or was the red tin really the cause of the odd behavior? Could birds really see color? I had always been told that most animals were colorblind. But the incident made me want to check.

An internet search revealed that, not only can birds see color, but they perceive many more colors than humans are able to see. In fact, they see colors in the ultraviolet spectrum that are invisible to the human eye. And I learned that cardinals

are among the birds that have the most acute sense of color.

Perspective! Until we get out to see what others see from where they stand (or perch), the problem will not be solved. . . and everyone will be worn out in futile efforts. Lady cardinal still visits the bird bath to splash around with her family, and I plant red geraniums just to remind me of another kind of bird's-eye view.

And then I began to think about perspective and "harmless" symbols that are offensive, like Confederate flags and statues, the names of sports teams that are demeaning to Native American peoples, and religious symbols and words that conjure and even perpetuate a history of suffering and oppression.

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Who gets to decide what goes and what stays? Who gets to move the red cookie tin? I was the bigger, stronger, more powerful one. I had control of the situation. I could have left the tin there and let the cardinal bang away. A cookie tin is easy to move and costs me nothing to do.

But what if it was something very important to my values? I thought of how annoyed I am every October when someone wants to borrow a religious habit to use as a Halloween costume. The request offends me, and I never oblige. Don't they see that this attire was considered sacred to us? Even though I have not worn one in decades, it still holds the memory of being sacred, and it still has value to me. So please do not wear it as a costume! But people still do. Halloween is over in one day, and that is that.

But what if it weren't over in a day? What if the things that offended or annoyed me were cast in stone? What if they mocked me every day for years and years and reminded me of the subjugation of my ancestors? What if they perpetrated stereotypes of my people whose culture and numbers were nearly annihilated? What if I were told to "get over it" by those who are bigger, stronger, wealthier or more powerful?

What if I saw a chance to remove what offends?

I tend the red geraniums and remember the cardinal's point of view. I vow to listen, really listen to others' perspectives, and perch on the branch that helps me see and understand. Will you join me?

[Sr. Mary Navarre, a Dominican Sister from Grand Rapids, Michigan, taught in parish schools in Michigan for 10 years, and then for 29 years at Aquinas College. Following a six-year term in leadership, she was appointed to complete the second volume of the history of the congregation. She also selected and annotated a compilation of poetry by a gifted writer of the community. Presently she is serving as the director of their community archives and is active in local and national efforts to safeguard all religious archives for future generations.]