

Cormorant

This story deals with the issue of balancing 'culture' with the idea of necessary change. A male-dominant culture, in addition to humbug and payback, presents many difficulties in modern society and frequently leads to punishment.

Most birds think the cormorant is not very bright. Other water birds, ducks for example never have anything to do with them even though they live in the same country. Magpie Geese say cormorants are not worth thinking about even though they too live in the same area. Both call them shags and have sayings like 'sitting there like a shag on a rock'. It is horrible. But white cockatoos, who think they are the smartest and know everything, and never shut up about it are the worst. They should, if they are smart that is, know that the cormorants have been around much longer than any of the other birds, and had all of Arnhem Land and the Top End to themselves for centuries. Instead of laughing, they should stop all their noise and show some respect. They don't of course.

There's one bird that shows the cormorant respect, and that is the pelican. They don't talk about how much they know, or spend their time screeching and laughing, they just quietly go about their living as they were meant to. Sometimes in big mob, sometimes on their own, but mostly in small mob – working together and looking out for each other. Strong culture, been that way forever.

This is a story about a very strange event, not many people know about it, but I can tell you about it because I listened in when it happened. I was sitting on the deck of my boat just relaxing and enjoying the quietness when I heard voices, somebody talking. That was strange because the only other person around was Robyn and she was down below having a sleep. I had been watching a cormorant sitting on a dead branch coming out of the water, drying its wings it was. You would have seen them do that too, like this, mostly with a full belly of fish, that's why they're all wet. The pelican must have swum over quietly and started talking with the cormorant.

I missed the first part of the talk but when I listened carefully this is what the pelican said:

“We have just come back from way down south, we flew high and the wind swept us along nicely. Looking forward to some good fishing around here – there will be enough for your mob and our mob too. Down south there were hardly any fish so lots of fighting and people getting hurt. It’s good to be away from that. Do you travel far from here?” asked the pelican.

“Not usually. We find enough to eat around here, and besides we don’t have big wings like you, we get tired quickly”, said the cormorant.

The pelican listened, his big eyes taking in everything and adding it to what he already knew. That’s how they know so much, they listen and watch instead of chattering for the sake of it, like so many birds do. “I am curious about you sitting there with your wings out not going anywhere – not swimming, not diving, not flying – why do you do this?”

The cormorant thought it strange – he thought everyone knew their wings get wet and they need to dry out so they can fly. “Our feathers get wet when we dive for fish, so we need to dry them before we can fly again” he told the pelican.

The pelican looked puzzled but didn’t say anything.

“We have always done this, from the beginning of time when we were the first people on this land. It is part of our culture; part of who we are” said the cormorant, nodding his head as though he was agreeing with himself.

The pelican listened, but still looked puzzled. After a while he said: “Have you ever tried to fly with wet feathers?”

The cormorant's head was nodding sideways now, even before he heard the end of the sentence. "It's always been this way. The old people taught us this law, and we teach our little fellas too, it is the way it is meant to be".

"Yes, but have you tried to fly, instead of sitting there like that?" asked the pelican.

"No because we would crash. When our feathers are wet we can't fly, so we always dry them first. Just like this" said the cormorant.

"Well, I'm not a cormorant" said the pelican, "but I know a lot about feathers, wings and flying – long distances too without getting tired. I am sure if you just shook the water off and started to fly, your feathers would soon dry in the air, especially up here in the dry season."

The cormorant didn't know what to think. It was hard to argue with what the pelican had said, but it is also very hard to change an idea you thought could never be changed. Kinda like being caught between a rock and a hard place. He didn't know what to say either, but I don't think the pelican was waiting for an answer. He understood the challenge the cormorant faced would not be an easy one to deal with.

In the end, the cormorant didn't think much more, he just dived into the water, got himself thoroughly wet, swam a little on the surface, shook himself and without thinking anymore about it, just took off. Yes, a little shaky at first, but then the feeling of doing something he thought couldn't be done made it worth it. He flew past the pelican, and although you may never have seen it, I saw a pelican smile that day, somehow that big saggy pouch puckered up each side of the beak and watched as the cormorant did something he had never done before.

I heard later that the cormorant had a hard time making any of the other birds smile, especially cormorants. You would think they of all birds would welcome such an event, but they didn't. I mean they had never known anything else but the 'it's our culture' story, so they didn't want to change.

"It's been handed down from the beginning" they said. "It's in our stories, our dances, it's part of who we are" they cried, wishing the idea would just go away. Of course the idea didn't go away.

The cormorant said he loved to be part of the stories and dances too, and that none of that had changed, and slowly more and more cormorants saw how much better it was, not to feel they had to sit there because they had always done that. He became a leader, especially to younger ones who had wanted to change but weren't brave enough. To see them taking off whenever they wanted to was so much better than being held back by an idea that they thought could never be changed.

And that is why you hardly ever see a cormorant sitting on a dry branch now. They know they can fly, so they do.