

## What Humans Can Learn From How Animals Find Their Way Home

### In the News

This week, journalist Kathryn Schulz told the astonishing tale of how a cat named Billy managed to find his way back to his previous home a few weeks after he escaped from his carrier during his owner's move to a different residence.

Many animals have similar navigational skills that scientists have sought to explain for years. Migrating birds, mammals, insects and other creatures somehow know where to go to find food, to breed, and to escape from danger, throughout their lifespan.

The means of movement varies from one species to another: Some swim, some fly, some walk across land or water; some hitch a ride on other species; some jump or swing from one tree to another, others curl up in a ball and roll downhill; some slide down a snow bank on their bellies, others use air currents to buoy them to their destination. Some journeys span hundreds or thousands of miles in a single year, some rise thousands of feet in elevation, some occur over a period of years. Some species accurately navigate to their destinations even when they have never been there before.

While technology has improved our ability to track the movement of various species, science has yet to crack all the mysteries of how these creatures do what they do. How do animals stay on course in their journeys at all hours of the day and night, whatever the weather, without instruments or training, at such high levels? How do they measure time, space and distance so precisely?

The abilities vary, and include magnetoreception (the ability to sense Earth's magnetic field with a kind of built-in biological compass), the position of the sun and stars, the sight, sound and smell of landmarks, variations in temperature, gravity, wind and ocean currents, counting steps or flaps of wings, infrasound (low-frequency sound waves), a sense of time, and good memory.

In [\*Nature's Compass\*](#), biologist James Gould and popular science writer Carol Gould outline several common navigational strategies used by various species: "taxis (instinctively moving directly toward or directly away from a given cue ... ); piloting (heading toward landmarks); compass orientation (maintaining a constant bearing in one direction); vector navigation (stringing together a sequence of compass orientations ... ); and dead reckoning (calculating a location based on bearing, speed, and how much time has elapsed since leaving a prior location)." Most creatures have more than one navigational strategy, because different conditions call for different tools.

The ability to find one's way through an ever-changing environment to a particular location is essential for the survival of every species that moves.

In his book, [\*From Here to There: The Art and Science of Finding and Losing Our Way\*](#), journalist Michael Bond observed that as humans developed physical tools such as compasses, maps and sextants to aid in navigation, we began to rely less on memory or observation of the world around us. David Barrie, author of [\*Supernavigators: Exploring the Wonders of How Animals Find Their Way\*](#), said that "GPS [the global-positioning system] ... is an astonishing technological achievement, but our increasing and exclusive reliance on it is turning us into kind of navigational idiots."

In addition, as humans have modified our surroundings through urbanization, increasingly traveling in vehicles rather than on foot, and limiting the extent and type of exploration children are allowed to do, our collective ability to successfully find our way through unfamiliar territory without artificial aids has declined significantly.

Schulz noted that the activities of humans, who are arguably "the worst navigators on the planet," can destroy or disrupt migratory routes and breeding grounds, and confuse or hamper the navigational abilities of various species.

"Most animals can adapt to even drastic environmental change, if it happens gradually," she says. But due to the accelerated pace of change and declining space available to other species because of human population growth and activity, more creatures struggle just to survive, let alone thrive.

As we gain understanding of the migration patterns of various species, Schulz hopes that we can make small but meaningful changes in human behavior, to give other creatures with whom we share the planet a fighting chance to find their way home.

More on this story can be found at these links:

[Why Animals Don't Get Lost. \*The New Yorker\*](#)

[David Barrie Explores the Science Behind How Animals Find Their Way in 'Supernavigators.' \*NPR\*](#)

[Nature's Compass: The Mystery of Animal Navigation. \*Princeton Press\*](#)

[How a 5-Ounce Bird Stores 10,000 Maps in Its Head. \*National Geographic\*](#)

['A World on the Wing: The Global Odyssey of Migratory Birds.' \*Scott Weidensaul\*](#)

## **Applying the News Story**

Animals use multiple different strategies -- magnetic awareness, stars at night, etc., to steer home. Just as there are several kinds of intelligence, there seem to be different spiritual intelligences as well.

People may also use different strategies in their spiritual journeys. Some people are grounded in the Word as their homing device. Others intuit God's presence. For some prayer is difficult, while for others, talking with God is not just as natural as breathing, it is breathing.

Those who would seek a spiritual, eternal home not made with hands face many challenges along the way. But God provides many tools to assist us in our faith journey. In this lesson, we seek to sharpen our spiritual navigational senses and make course corrections as necessary, to follow the way of Christ to the home he has gone to prepare for us.

### **The Big Questions**

1. What amazes you most about the ability of many species to navigate their way home?
2. On what or whom do you rely when you need to find the way to your destination? Do you know other people who track their way using other methods? What can we learn from the variety of navigational tools available?
3. What challenges might make it hard for people who feel they have lost their way in life to discover or rediscover a pathway to meaning and hope?
4. What does it mean to "come home to God"? What internal and external spiritual homing devices function to help lost humans "come home" to God?
5. How can the church best assist people who are journeying to find their way home to God?

### **Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope**

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

#### **Psalm 84:1-4, 10**

*How lovely is your dwelling place,*

*O LORD of hosts!*

*My soul longs, indeed it faints*

*for the courts of the LORD;*

*my heart and my flesh sing for joy*

*to the living God.*

*Even the sparrow finds a home,*

*and the swallow a nest for herself,*

*where she may lay her young,*

*at your altars, O LORD of hosts,*

*my King and my God.*

*Happy are those who live in your house,*

*ever singing your praise. ...*

*For a day in your courts is better*

*than a thousand elsewhere.*

*I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God*

*than live in the tents of wickedness. (For context, read 84:1-12.)*

The psalmist reflects on his love for the house of God. There, even the humblest sparrow can find a home, and the mother swallow a place to make a nest for herself and her offspring. If even these are welcome in God's house, how much more can humans be assured that they will find a welcome in the place where God dwells!

New Testament theology teaches us that God's people are the house God is building (1 Corinthians 3:9, 16-17; 2 Corinthians 6:16; Ephesians 2:21). The house of God is not made of wood, stones or other physical materials, but of "living stones" (1 Peter 2:4-5), the people of God.

**Questions:** How welcoming do you think people in your community would say your congregation is? Can everyone find a home in your midst? How do you know?

Are there people whom you really would rather not welcome into your congregation? What kind of people, if any, would you hesitate to invite in with open arms? Why would you be concerned about them?

What, if anything, would need to happen in order for your church to be perceived as a more welcoming place where people in the community could feel at home?

### **Matthew 2:9-10, 12**

*When [the magi] had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ... And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road. (For context, read 2:1-12.)*

After Jesus was born, Magi from the east came to Judea to worship him and give him gifts. They set out from home, guided by a star, but stopped in Jerusalem, perhaps thinking it would be logical for a prince to be born in a palace, or at least in the capital city. They received additional instructions about how to find the child from a ruthless, cruel, deceptive despot and his advisors.

The variety of navigational tools available to the Magi rivals those guiding some species in the news article today. The men observed signs in nature, but also received information from humans, at least one of whom was not particularly interested in aiding them in their search. Yet God could even use an evil man to guide the Magi to their destination. Indirectly, they also received guidance through the scriptures, to which Herod's counselors referred to answer the questions the Magi asked.

As the Magi prepared to return home, they received new guidance through a dream, so that they could avoid the danger Herod represented. We presume that by taking a detour, they were able to make their way home safely.

**Questions:** What are some of the navigational tools God has made available to you in your own life, that have guided you in your search for God?

While we would not routinely recommend seeking spiritual direction from evil people, what can we learn from the encounter of the Magi with King Herod about how God may guide us?

**Matthew 18:12-14**

*[Jesus said,] "What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost."* (No context needed.)

**1 Peter 2:25**

*For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.* (For context, read 2:24-25.)

The theme of lost sheep is found in several places in the Bible. Sometimes, the sheep go astray through their own inattention to their shepherd and guardian of their souls, because they listen to other voices instead of to the voice of their shepherd (John 10:4-8), because their leaders have abused and neglected them (Ezekiel 34:1-10) and led them astray, and they have forgotten their fold, because they have been pursued by predators (Jeremiah 50:6-7, 17).

Peter writes that the recipients of his letter had been going astray like sheep, but at some point they returned to their shepherd (identified in John 10 as Jesus and in Psalm 23 as the LORD). So they took action.

On the other hand, Jesus describes a situation in which a shepherd has to go out in search of his lost sheep that has strayed away from the flock. In that case, it is the shepherd who took action.

In Ezekiel 34:11-16, God promised to search for his lost sheep, to round up the strays, bind up the injured, strengthen the weak, feed them with justice, and rescue them from all the places where they had been scattered "on a day of clouds and thick darkness." It is likely that this refers to the scattering of the Israelites into foreign lands where they had been taken as exiles. God pledged to return them to their own land.

We can also interpret God's search for his lost sheep more broadly. It is not only the people of Israel who went astray. All humanity has strayed from God and God's path at one time or another. God's plan all along has been to seek all his lost sheep, to restore them to his flock, and to shepherd us as one flock together.

**Questions:** When, if ever, have you thought of yourself as having strayed away from God? How did it happen? Were you inattentive to the voice of God, did you listen to other voices instead of to the voice of Jesus, did religious leaders abuse, or neglect you and lead you astray, were you pursued by predators, did you forget that you had a home in God's fold?

Were you conscious of God seeking you, the way a shepherd seeks a lost sheep? What did it take for you to return to God? Or if you have not yet done so, what is stopping you from returning to the fold?

## **Luke 15:17-20**

*[Jesus said,] "But when [the younger son] came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."' So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him."* (For context, read 15:11-24.)

In the first two parables in Luke 15:1-10 (the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin), it is the shepherd who searches for the lost sheep, and the woman who searches for the lost coin. The sheep doesn't initiate the search, nor does the coin cry out from its hiding place, "Here I am!" The activity is with the searchers, not with the animal or object that is lost.

It is commonly understood that the shepherd and the woman in these two parables are metaphors for God, who searches for lost people until he finds them.

But with the third parable (the Lost Son), the father (another metaphor for God) allows his son to make choices for himself, even when they are not the choices he knows would be best for him. So when the son squanders all his inheritance the father had worked so hard to create, the son begins to feel the pinch of need as he had never felt it before.

As Jesus tells the story, it's not obvious that the father is actively searching for his son. That doesn't mean the father didn't care about his boy. But he respected his son's freedom to choose his path in life, even if it hurt him to watch his son's descent into feelings of worthlessness (v. 19).

But recalling his father's generous dealings with his employees, the prodigal decided to head back home. Even though the father didn't send out a search party, the memory of his kind character drew the son back to his embrace.

"No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me," Jesus said. Jesus called his disciples, but they still had to respond and follow him.

**Questions:** What is our homing device for our faith path, and who controls it? Whose responsibility is it to find and return home something or someone that is lost?

## **For Further Discussion**

1. Reflect on this:

In *Dangerous Wonder: The Adventure of Childlike Faith*, youth ministry specialist Michael Yaconelli described playing Hide-and-Seek with his young sons. Sometimes the game was just about the boys finding their father.

Other times, Mike added another dimension. They would play in the dark, and just before the boys discovered his hiding place, Mike would leap out and scream like a monster, scaring the boys. Except they were in on the joke, and after enjoying a moment of panic, they reminded themselves that the monster was actually their dad. Then they stopped running away,

turned around, and attacked Mike.

"God is complicated," Mike wrote. "His footprints are not easy to see in the dust and dirt of the real world's trail. And when we are lost in the forest, we want to find God's tracks. When it's dark and we're stuck in a boat during a gale, we don't want dark, indistinguishable shapes roaming around on the water. We get frightened when we lose track of God. We get terrified when we are not sure what God is doing.

"But here is the good news. Remember my two sons ? Remember when they came to the bedroom and knew I was hiding in the darkness? They could have turned on the light, *but they didn't!* As terrified as they were of the 'monster' lurking in the dark, ... intuitively they knew Daddy was in there, too. One of the glorious complications of God is his ability to reveal himself in the unrevealable. God is not lost when we are. God is waiting for us even in the darkness!"

2. There's an old story a farmer tells about how cows end up on the road. They nibble on a tuft of grass in the middle of a field, grazing from one delicious clump to another, and before they realize it, they have drifted to the grass next to the fence. We all know that grass is greener on the other side of the pasture, and when the cows discover a weak post in the fence, it doesn't take much to push through to the other side, nibbling as they go. "Cows don't intend to get lost," the farmer explained, "they *just nibble their way to lostness!*"

Can people "nibble their way to lostness"? Have you ever done so? How might that happen? What needs to happen so cows won't do so? What needs to happen to keep people from "nibbling their way to lostness"?

3. In her book, *Speaking of Faith: Why Religion Matters -- and How to Talk About It*, journalist Krista Tippett wrote: "The geneticist Lyndon Eaves tells me that the spirituality of the scientist is akin to that of a mystic: it's a constant endeavor to discern truth while staying open to everything you do not yet, cannot yet, know. It is to live boldly and assertively with the discoveries you have made, all the while anticipating better discoveries to come. It is a life, in that sense, marked by an enlivening, creative humility."

Elsewhere in her book, Tippett quotes physician Rachel Naomi Remen, who said: "I think science defines life in its own way, but life is larger than science. Life is filled with mystery, courage, heroism, and love -- all these things that we can witness but not measure or even understand, but they make our lives valuable anyway."

Given that there will always be more we do not understand, no matter how much knowledge we gain, how do you react to the mysteries of life?

## **Responding to the News**

Consider what "homing strategies" are operative in your life that help you move toward God. Do some of those strategies need sharpening? Are there some non-operational strategies that need to be activated? How can your group or church aid in this endeavor?

**Prayer** suggested by Psalm 119:175-176

Shepherd of our souls, when we go astray like lost sheep, do not leave us to our own devices, but seek us out, that we may return to the safety of your fold and live to serve and praise you. Amen.

