

*Longing to adopt,
striving to bond*

Wanting What I Have

BY MELISSA HART

A TYPICAL training session with Archimedes goes like this: I walk into our nature center's clinic and cut a chicken breast into chunks, drop them into a box strapped around my waist, pull on a leather glove, and walk down a path to a wood and wire enclosure. From his log in one corner, Archimedes opens his black beak and emits a sound like squeaking bicycle brakes. His yellow eyes register my box of chicken and my hand as I place a glistening pink bit on the Astro turf-swathed perch.

I step back and wait.

He ruffles his white feathers and rises, five foot wings outstretched, to settle on the perch. "Good work," I say. He plucks the meat from my fingers with his beak. He places one foot on my arm, then the other. I thread metal swivels through the leather jesses that encircle his legs like bracelets, then clip them to my glove. We step into the chill of a Oregon January day to greet a family visiting from France. They gaze open-mouthed at the bird. The man shifts his eyes to me.

"How did you come to work with owls?" he asks.

It's a long story, born of love for a man which expanded to a love of feathered creatures.

I volunteered as a cage cleaner for years at Eugene's Cascades Raptor Center before it occurred to me to train owls. Similar centers exist across the country. Volunteers treat birds of prey that have been hit by cars, tangled in barbed wire, or illegally raised by humans.

My husband discovered our center first—he'd been rehabilitating birds for two years when I met him. Jonathan introduced me to raptors, inspiring me to show up for a weekly four-hour shift spent scrubbing greenish poop from pet carriers and cages. When an enormous white owl arrived and took up residence in our clinic cage, he introduced me.

"Archimedes," Jonathan said. "A Snowy owl. He'll live here forever."

Sometimes, a raptor arrives at a rehabilitation center with permanent injuries, but demonstrates a calm demeanor. In those cases, the director can apply for a permit to keep the bird for educational programs. Archimedes was "imprinted"—he'd been raised by people, and thus became developmentally



Archimedes

disabled. Believing humans to be of its species, an imprinted raptor will fly down to picnickers in search of food. Perceiving a threat to its territory, it will attack unsuspecting hikers.

In the wilderness, an imprint is doomed.

Snowies can live in the wild for ten years, and in captivity for almost thirty. The heaviest owl in North America, they have two predators—wolves and humans. A Snowy owl guarding its nest on the tundra will launch its five-pound body toward threats to its precious eggs. “Once, a Snowy almost scalped an ornithologist in Canada,” Jonathan told me. “It flew up behind him and grabbed his hair, then gashed his head with its talons.”

He opened the cage door. I leapt

backward as Archimedes sailed out and landed on my sneaker. Astride my foot, he flapped his wings and barked. “What’s he doing?” I yelped.

Jonathan regarded the bird calmly. “Unfortunately, he sees your shoe as a potential mate.”

Jonathan saw *me* as a potential mate, and said as much. During our shifts at the center, we cleaned cages and talked about adopting a child from the foster-care system after we married. Having spent our courtship rescuing injured creatures, we felt compelled to reach out to a youngster in need of a safe home. “It’s a long, complicated process,” our social worker told us of the two-year procedure. “Stay busy.”

Planning our wedding distracted us from the wait. We married on the Center’s lawn, attended by volunteers with raptors on the glove. Archimedes was absent. The Snowy tolerated humans; when trainers put him on their arm, however, he flew off and hung from their glove, twisting and shrieking like a giant white bat.

“Most birds jump off and try to fly upward,” they explained to me, “then land back on your glove. But Snowies are ground-nesters. When they try to fly away, they head down.”

It’s possible that Archimedes lacked the muscles to right himself after attempting to fly off the glove. It’s possible he was pissed off at being asked to stand on someone’s arm. Whatever the reason, the trainers respected his

distress. They left off working with him, and provided him with an outdoor enclosure from which he could observe the world.

Early details of his life are murky. Case notes reveal his origin as a falconry bird, possibly used to hunt rabbits. But how did the falconer obtain a baby Snowy—illegal to buy in this country? Did he journey to the Arctic and scope out a mating pair, bidding his time until the male left to hunt and he could shroud himself in leather against the female who bludgeoned his body with her powerful wings as he slipped an egg into his pocket? Or was Archimedes hawked as a fledgling over an Internet falconry site for hundreds of dollars?

Either way, Archimedes got a bum deal. I hung out near his enclosure, observing how he looked at me when I entered with his evening chicken. After weeks, I no longer dropped his dinner and ran. Instead, I sang to him. “Mr. Archimedes,” I crooned to the tune of the Ella Fitzgerald classic, “Mr. Paganini.” *“Please play my rhapsody. And if you cannot play it, won’t you hoot it ...”*

I took classes in bird training at the center. “It’ll help me raise a child,” I told Jonathan. I learned to approach birds calmly, how to use bits of chicken to train them to step on my glove.

Likewise, our social worker tempted us with M&Ms as she reviewed our first potential daughter’s case notes with us. “This baby’s mother used methamphetamines and marijuana during her pregnancy,” she explained. “The child was born premature, unable to suck from a bottle. She still needs to be fed every two hours. She’ll have a learning disability . . .”

“We want to adopt this little girl,” I told my mother that night.

“Why?” she demanded.

“The foster care system’s a wilder-

ness,” I said, thinking of Archimedes. “We want to rescue her.”

But two months after we applied to adopt the baby, our social worker called. “I’m sorry,” she said. “The case worker gave the child to a family who’d been waiting longer.”

That summer, my sorrow boiled over. A three-month vacation stretched out interminably, devoid of anticipated trips to the park and the beach with my now-nonexistent daughter.

Sorrowfully, I listened to Jack Kornfield’s Buddhist psychology lec-

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tures. The Buddhists note that the wanting mind is not skillful. Kornfield spoke of his teacher from Thailand. “Why don’t you want what you have,” he quoted the monk, “and don’t want what you don’t have?”

What did I have? I slumped at my desk on a June morning and took stock. I had a nursery that might stand empty for another year. I had six months of classes on raptor training. I had an affinity, based on foot-sex, for a Snowy owl who didn’t recognize others of his species and so must live in a cage.

I dragged myself to the center and approached the director.

“I’d like to glove-train Archimedes,” I said.

A frown marred her serene face. “Why?”

Behind her in the clinic, a kestrel recovering from head trauma sounded its shrill call. I breathed in the diesel smell of skunk from a Great-horned owl rescued after its tangle with the pungent mammal.

“Archimedes seems lonely.”

I struggled to explain the pity I felt when I entered his enclosure each day. Other raptors snatched their food and ascended to a high perch. Archimedes gazed at me and honked a greeting. “Visitors want to see him on the glove,” I concluded vaguely. “He’s the *Harry Potter* bird.”

I didn’t add that I craved commitment to a project that would distract from the dread I felt as I flipped through the social worker’s binder and read profiles of children available for adoption.

Sexually abused before being put into foster care.

Victim of domestic violence; witnessed mother’s murder.

Born addicted to methamphetamine. Mother a prostitute, father a pimp.

I became accustomed to falling in love with photos of adoptable children, to reading their biographies and weighing what Jonathan and I might be able to handle.

We attended classes with titles like “Caring for the Sexually-Abused Child” and “Working with Incarcerated Parents,” lectures that left us shell-shocked at the crimes people perpetrate upon infants. We increased our volunteer hours at the raptor center.

Trainers don’t handle a resident raptor unless the bird shows interest in working. Archimedes tolerated my presence, but it was anyone’s guess as

to what he'd do when presented with my glove. I stepped into his enclosure in mid-June, unsure of how to proceed. With a stubbornness born of desperation, I stared at Archimedes—registered his round white head and two-inch talons. Somehow, I had to get him to a perch, onto my arm, and out to people eager to glimpse this rare visitor to the Northwest.

I had read that Snowy owls sometimes venture south from their Arctic home. They depend on lemmings for food; an adult Snowy can eat up to 1,600 annually. When the lemming population declines, Snowies migrate to the lower forty-eight in search of sustenance.

They like to hang out at airports, I learned. They scan the wide flat terrain for mice. In 2006, a Eugene-area farmer noticed cars parked near his land. Bird-lovers trained binoculars on his warehouse, atop which sat a Snowy. "You can drive a pickup within fifty feet of him," the man told reporters. "It's kind of fun to see him."

Not fun for those who had spotted a dead Snowy by the side of I-5 near Portland the previous month. Another of the owls appeared near Coos Bay, only to be shot and killed. All the more reason to get Archimedes out on the glove as an ambassador for his species.

He chortled a welcome when I opened his enclosure door, and clacked his beak as I approached with chicken. I offered him a piece for allowing me to touch his jesses, another for flying to his perch. He placed a talon on my glove, and I jackpotted him with a slippery red liver.

After weeks of this, he finally stepped both feet onto my glove. He tolerated my lifting him into the air. But outside, he bated and hung and panted.

"It looks bad," volunteers told me.

"We know he's in training, but others see a bird upside down and screaming."

"He'll never trust me," I said to Jonathan. "How am I going to inspire a child to love me if I can't even bond with an owl?"

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My books spoke of a union between falconer and raptor, between trainer and animal. But Archimedes, who flew off my glove and hung ten times in as many minutes, shared no bond with me.

"Try scratching his head," Jonathan suggested one day. "Bonded birds preen one another."

I thought of Archimedes' talons, sharp enough to lacerate my hand. "He'll hurt me," I said.

My husband nodded. "On the other hand, he might love it."

That day, I returned Archimedes to his enclosure after a session in which he'd hung and twisted his jesses around his toes, forcing me to hold him down on the ground while I disentangled him. He flew to his perch and chirped admonishments.

Trembling, I reached to touch his head.

He let me. Not only could I rub the feathers at the top of his beak—he leaned into my hand and closed his eyes. Blinking back tears, I massaged the owl's eyelids for an hour.

Now, I deconstruct Archimedes' physique for visitors while he sits on my glove. I tell them about the lopsided ears that help owls pinpoint the

scrabble of lemmings under snow, of the air sacs within hollow bones which give them lightness and loft. At last, I stroke Archimedes' toes, talon-tipped and strong enough to break the neck of a rabbit, or my finger.

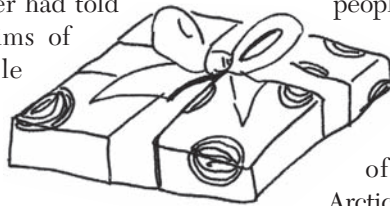
"How come he lets you touch him?" people ask.

"We're bonded," I explain.

I tell people—over the cacophony of clear-cutting and Arctic drilling debates—that the world needs owls. Without them, we'd be overrun by rodents. As well, we'd forgo a little beauty, a little mystery.

These days, I consider the biographies of babies bearing murky histories, the plight of injured birds, with a better understanding of how hope arrives in increments—we move toward it in small steps, so that one day, we might feel it warm and vital beneath our fingertips.

These days, I want what I have. For the rest, I step back and wait.



MELISSA HART teaches journalism at the University of Oregon. Her work has appeared in *The Washington Post*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *Orion*, and *High Country News*. She's the author of the forthcoming memoir *Chica*. Her website is melissahart.com.

My husband and I adopted nineteen-month-old Maia in August of 2008. The day after we brought our daughter home, we strapped her in a backpack and took her to the raptor center for our weekly shift. One of her first words was—predictably—"owl." She adores the birds. These days, it's more difficult to carve out time to work with Archimedes; still, I train him four days a week, and he never fails to teach me compassion and patience.