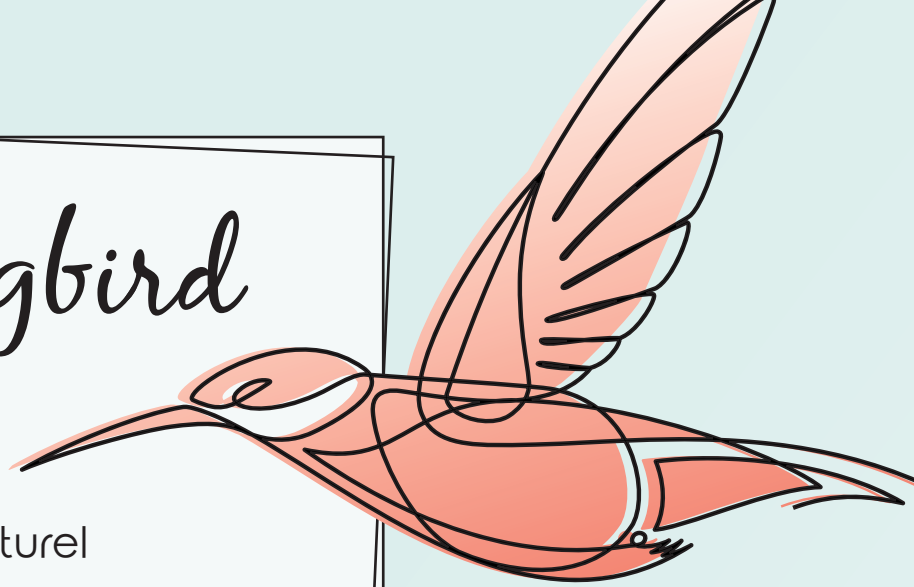


# Hummingbird Healing

By Amy Paturel



When a sign from a departed loved one becomes a little too much of a good thing, the true message surfaces once you dig a little deeper.

I rose at 6 a.m. on Father's Day. The morning was overcast, cool, and peaceful, yet the heaviness in the air felt like an anvil on my heart. I missed my dad.

I played back the past two years in my mind, the horror of watching Dad transform from a brilliant mathematician who could calculate complex algorithms in his head to a childlike dependent fumbling to find the word for *cantaloupe*.

The tightness in my chest stole my breath. As I walked outside, a hummingbird swooped down and danced in the honeysuckle that climbs the fence in my yard. The purple-bellied wonder was the first such bird I'd seen since May 14, the day my father passed away. When the bird danced around me—talking in a language I couldn't understand—I could almost feel my dad's hands resting on my shoulders. I felt ... peace. Throughout the day, I had a flurry of visits from the speedy gray-winged character. He seemed to be there to comfort me, to ease my pain and heartache.

Watching birds has never been my thing. I've always liked nature, but I'd never stood outside, camera in hand, waiting for a bird to appear so I could tiptoe softly toward him, firing off several shots with my Nikon. But when my dad died, I became a bird stalker.

## A Birder Is Born

Dad had a near-fatal car accident in 2013, the same year the *International Journal of Behavioral Medicine* published research done in Slovenia showing that people who have

near-death experiences (NDEs) become more tolerant of others, gain a greater appreciation of nature, and understand themselves better compared to those who didn't have an NDE. That's what happened to my dad. After his NDE, the one-time science geek began studying philosophy, writing poetry, and yes, watching birds—especially hummingbirds.

It started when he visited his neighbor Al, and the two of them watched hummingbirds sipping nectar from Al's feeders and fluttering around the backyard. Dad liked watching them play. "They're tireless in their pursuit of happiness," he told me.

*Just like him*, I thought.

The next day, Dad bought his first feeder. Two weeks later, he bought another. He hung them on each side of the patio and kept them filled with sugar water. He planted brightly colored flowers to attract the mystical creatures. He then sat at the patio table, book in hand, and watched them dance.

*Why didn't we watch those birds together? I wondered later. Why didn't I take more of an interest in them? In him?*

Four years after the accident, Dad got hit again—this time not by a speeding Camry but by heart failure. Doctors said surgery would give him another 10 years, maybe more. But three months later, an infection infiltrated his heart and his newly replaced valve began spewing bacteria up to his brain. He suffered a stroke on the right side of his brain. He had another, one month later, on the left.

As he lay in his hospital bed, listless and confused, I silently promised to watch those birds for him.

I slogged through my days, grieving for the person we lost in spirit, but whose decrepit body was still with us. My husband Brandon felt powerless. He couldn't fix

I felt ...  
peace.

any of it. Instead, he gave me something peaceful to focus on: my first hummingbird feeder.

Though my dad put up a heroic fight, living a full 16 months beyond doctors' projections, he died the day after Mother's Day. His wife and three daughters, all mothers, were by his side.

Moments after he took his last breath, we went outside to catch ours and watched awestruck as two hummingbirds danced in a nearby tree. After months confined to a bed, my dad seemed to be sending a message from the heavens. He was finally, blissfully free.

## An Obsession Takes Hold

In the weeks that followed, I became obsessed. I sat outside at every opportunity, trying to spot a hummingbird flitting in the trees. While my three sons fought, pots boiled on the stove, and a timer dinged to signal the end of a wash cycle, I simply peered out the kitchen window, searching. When I'd spot a hummingbird, I'd dash outside and chase the birds with my camera, trying to capture part of their show.

"This can't be healthy," I said to my husband.

"It's grief," he replied. "You're not getting drunk, lying in bed all day, or forgetting to pick up the kids from school. Babe, you're doing okay."

His words were like a permission slip to begin studying the animals in earnest. I spent hours searching the internet for facts and folklore. I learned grief researchers see hummingbirds as an intermediary between heaven and

earth. The birds' fluttering wings move in a pattern that resembles the infinity symbol, a nod to eternity.

I surrounded myself with the creatures, wearing hummingbird earrings and pendants, buying hummingbird greeting cards and paintings, and gifting feeders to everyone who carried me through my dad's dying days and afterward. Dozens of images and videos of hummingbirds clogged my iPhoto.

*My obsession is evidence of what? I wondered. That I was grieving? That I had some twisted, unsubstantiated belief that my dad somehow reincarnated into every hummingbird on earth?*

During my own tireless pursuit, I discovered a clear nectar that was so sweet we had a parade of birds on our patio every night—and we were refilling the feeder every two days.

"We're going to put them into a diabetic coma," my husband joked.

But a funny (or not so funny) thing happened when they started showing up in droves. I had four or five of them circling around the feeder at once, and I truly found myself getting annoyed.

It wasn't novel anymore—it wasn't a sign. It wasn't an exchange my dad orchestrated from the other side. It was just really sweet nectar, and we had unwittingly converted the birds into addicts. However, every time a hummingbird (or five) showed up at the feeder, one of my sons would let me know and I'd rush to the window to see if I could catch a glimpse.

The boys came up with elaborate theories about which hummingbirds just came for the nectar and which were my dad working his magic. "The ones that don't get afraid when we open the door and try to get close, those are the ones Grandpa sent," my son Brian declared.

If they were older, I might have wondered if they were mocking me, but I know my young boys' efforts were heartfelt. And while I couldn't muster the same certainty, I couldn't dismiss it either.

The birds? I want to believe my dad sent them, despite the lack of hard evidence. Believing in a connection between them and my dad serves as a sort of balm for the grief—not just for the man we lost, but also for the grandfather my sons will never truly know.

Even if they aren't a sign from beyond, hummingbirds have become a vehicle for bonding with my boys. Maybe that was the legacy my dad really wanted to share—not just a love of hummingbirds, but a way for us all to connect. 🌿