

Congregation of coots

by [Eugene H. Peterson](#) in the [October 28, 1998](#) issue

My study, where I read and write and pray, is set on a cliff overlooking a mountain lake. Each morning I sit at my window and watch the lake fill up with light. It is a quiet place and spacious. A mountain chickadee and red-breasted nuthatch show up most mornings, embroidering the silence with their chatter. On a recent morning I had Psalm 16 open in my lap, puzzling in a desultory way over an odd Hebrew phrase I had never noticed before.

Then I was distracted by a noise down on the lake. Coots, about 80 of them, dropped out of the air and noisily splashed down into the water before me. In 30 some years of birdwatching I have never paid much attention to coots. They have never seemed worthy of attention. American coots, also called mud hens, are stubby, awkward little water birds, sooty black with a touch of white at their bills. And dimwitted. Flighty and silly. The boobs of the bird kingdom.

It is mid-autumn and these coots have been showing up most mornings for the last couple of weeks. I assumed at first that they were gathering in preparation for winter migration, but as the temperatures steadily drop they show no signs of leaving. Migration is a complex operation requiring extraordinary navigational abilities; maybe they don't yet have the hang of it.

Most birds, and especially water birds, are graceful, with elegant lines. They live orderly lives, both swimming and flying in precise formation. There always seems to be a leader. But coots are badly proportioned, bad-mannered and badly designed for their environment-their feet, instead of being properly webbed, are like chicken feet. They jerk this way and that, no order or design to either their bodies or movements.

As I watched, the odd Hebrew phrase (Ps. 16:4a) nagged me. The phrase is conventionally translated as "Those who choose another god / multiply their sorrows." But the grammar is awkward. "Choose" is literally "run" or "rush." There is no object of the verb. The modifier "other" or "another" doesn't modify anything. Translators supply "gods" because "other gods" is a phrase that frequently occurs in the Hebrew Bible.

Expanding on the sparse clues given by the text, one might reasonably come up with something like "Those who are running around, here and there, trying to get, well, whatever (in the way of gods), multiply their troubles." I get a sense of frantic hurrying to get the latest in gods: "There is so much out there, so much good, so much I want to get in on. I don't want to miss out on any god thing-there are so many spiritual possibilities."

The awkwardness of the phrase, both grammatically and spiritually, is an intrusion into this psalm-prayer that is otherwise characterized by a smooth, integrated serenity. The first line of Psalm 16 is "I say to the LORD, you are my lord; I have no good apart from thee." Which is to say, "I've looked over all the god products offered up by our culture and made my choice. I'm not in the market for gods or goddesses any more."

The awkward phrase nagged at me like a pebble in a well-fitted and comfortable shoe, or a burr that attaches itself to a silk blouse.

Just then the coots let out a collective quack and noisily piled together, congealing into an undifferentiated mass of feathers. I knew what was happening, for I had been watching a daily performance of this drama all week long: the eagle had arrived. Every day at about the same time our resident bald eagle comes to harass the coots. He makes three or four soaring turns in the air and then dives. The coots are thrown into a panic. They seem to operate on the premise that the eagle won't be able to pick out one from a mob of coots, so if they huddle tightly together they are safe. I have never seen the eagle pick one off-his visits are apparently recreational; he just has fun scaring coots. After 15 minutes or so, he flies off down the lake.

As soon as the eagle crisis is past the coots fall apart and each one is again doing its own thing. The psalm phrase, "Those who run around looking for whatever god suits them for the moment," has just been illustrated for me: coots. Aimless, clueless, pointless until trouble arrives, and then a sudden rush to approximate community. A congregation of coots.

I amuse myself with noticing analogies with Christian congregations of which I have been a part: everyone pretty much doing his or her own thing until there is a crisis-danger, challenge, drama. As long as the crisis exists there is a semblance of community-a serious huddling in prayer or consultation. But as soon as the crisis is over it is every Christian for himself, herself, functioning under the stimulus of whim

and impulse. It didn't take long before I noticed myself in that congregation of coots.

This kind of thing happens a lot, this marvelous weave of scriptural word and everyday events that God provides for our living and learning and loving. Writers of scripture present us with a world that is organically alive, all the parts interconnected, and we keep being startled into wakefulness by the connections. Libraries and lexicons are important for the exegesis of scripture, but so are coots and geese.

Yes, geese. For we also have a family of seven Canadian geese on the water who appear to be oblivious to all this commotion. They swim in perfect formation-poised and disdainful of the eagle and his foolery, indifferent to the coots and their chaos. The geese put Psalm 16 on slow-motion display in their easy and graceful glide through the water: they are always relaxed and in line behind their leader, secure in unhurried dignity.

I love having the contemplative geese in the neighborhood. But the coots make me feel at home.