

[SCENE]

The Pigeon Man of Lincoln Square

By Barbara Mahany
Tribune staff reporter

Except for his lips, you would think he was made out of stone, the man who sits, hours on end, on the red fire hydrant on Western Avenue, just north of Lawrence, pigeons by the dozens perched on him.

Pigeons on his head. Pigeons on his shoulders and right down his arms. Pigeons poised on each palm. Pigeons clinging to his chest. Pigeons on his thighs. Pigeons on his hips. Pigeons, of course, perched on each foot.

The pigeons peck and coo, occasionally flutter their wings. Sometimes even scatter. But not the man, the man is motionless. You might mistake him for a statue.

Joseph Zeman, 73, commonly known as the Pigeon Man of Lincoln Square, can sit for hours, barely flinching a muscle. Except for those lips.

He coos right back to the birds. He kisses them, right on their iridescent necks, flat on the point of their sharp little beaks. He nuzzles them, rubs his nose in their wings, the herringbone of feathers all black and charcoal and pewter and white. He calls them by name, his favorites, Whitey and Brownie. "Sure, sure," he coos, stroking them with his words. "There, there," he clucks.

He worries when one is missing in action. "Where you been? Where you been?" he asks when the prodigal pigeon finally flutters back. Like some kind of pigeon dentist, he tenderly plucks a feather that's stuck in a beak.

He loves them as though they're his best friends in the world, and pretty much that's what they are.

They wait, then swoop

"Soon as I take a seat, they want to be loved and kissed like a mama's baby," he says, taking a seat late one recent afternoon, as a raincloud of pigeons alights from a roof and hovers in for a landing. "Like I'm their father, and they're my child."

"See 'em waiting here now, they know I'm coming. They're waiting for me so they can say, 'Here I am, here I am, do what you want to do with me. We're not worried about you.' I just tell 'em all, 'You're my baby, you're my baby too.'"

Within seconds, it is getting hard to make out the man from under the pigeons. Drivers crane their necks. Truck drivers roll down their windows. Folks on the sidewalk sometimes slap \$5 or \$10 in his hand.

He keeps track, in a neat little ledger up in the attic where he lives a few blocks away, of how much he has collected. Three hundred dollars since the first of the year, he says proudly, all of it used to buy his pigeon supplies, the unpopped popcorn kernels

(the primo pigeon food, he calls it), the bags of white rice, the loaves of Deerfield Farms enriched white bread, the Maurice Lenell oatmeal cookies, the plain old birdseed that comes in 50-pound sacks, which he breaks down into zip-top plastic bags.

Old baby food jars he fills each morning and afternoon with rice or popcorn kernels, seven jars in all, each time he heads to the hydrant. Twice a day, at least, once in the morning, once late afternoon, you can darn near count on a pigeon-man sighting: Shuffling down Western Avenue, there's Zeman on his way to his hydrant, black canvas bag slung over his very stooped shoulders, suspenders holding up his navy blue janitor's pants that seem maybe a size or two too big.

"All my life I had so much backstabbing at home, real problems there. I got to love the animals more, so trustworthy. Fifty years, all I heard was 'Shut up, shut up.' I needed help at home 'cause I was handicapped. They took advantage of me. Epileptic fits since the day I was born."

"Because I had so much trouble at home, I learned not to say nothing, keep to myself, just so I can't be wrong anymore. So they came up to me [the pigeons]; I appreciated the friendship out of a bird more than a person. They're wordless. They come up with pure appreciation."

Building trust

After more than half a century with the birds, Zeman says, he has learned many a lesson. "Stay quiet all your life. Nothing but trust and honesty, low profile all the time, just like I'm another bird, sitting there. They sit on me all day and half into the night. That's where I got something about me that nobody else has."

Zeman, who's retired now, had a newsstand at LaSalle and Division Streets for 47 years. That's where he first got friendly with the pigeons.

"At my business, the pigeons came down on me. After six months, they took a chance on me. First No. 1, then when No. 2

sees it's OK, he gives it a try. Then comes No. 3. Every day, every day for six months, you gotta come out. Have something for 'em. Patience and time, little by little."

He moved up to the fire hydrant on Western Avenue after he sold the newsstand seven years ago. He comes every day if it's dry. He comes because he sees his sitting on the hydrant as the most important work he has ever done.

"I'm really advertising to the public how easy it is to be good without an attitude; it's just as easy to show decency as it is to hate today."

Sadly, he says, not everyone sees it that way.

"Some people hate me because of this," he says. "They say, 'Oh, they're disease carriers,' and all that. People that are fancy and don't want to deal with a dropping, they



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— Joseph Zeman, 73



Tribune photos by Bob Fila

Joseph Zeman visits with the pigeons at his post on Western Avenue. Some passersby cluck about hygiene, while others hand him money for birdseed.

come up to me with those remarks. They're jealous, jealous because the birds aren't afraid of me."

One of the people who say that is Sheila Magee, who lives not far from the hydrant where Zeman and the pigeons roost.

"He represents a huge danger to the neighborhood," she begins. "What we're talking about here are flying rodents, nothing less." Magee outlines the vile things she contends the pigeons are carrying into the neighborhood. She draws a vivid picture of how the birds feed off food strewn near sewers. The way she paints it, pigeons are Public Nuisance No. 1 when it comes to the health of the masses.

She would be wrong, as a matter of fact. "Pigeons are not a public health hazard," proclaims Dr. Joel McCullough, medical director of environmental health for the Chicago Department of Public Health. There is a fungus, he says, that can be carried in pigeon droppings, but it has not been detected in Chicago as far back as anyone at the department can remember. "Nobody in public health is losing any sleep over pigeons."

And, in fact, Zeman is breaking no law. The city, according to the corporation counsel's office, has no ordinance prohibiting the feeding of pigeons. There is a general nuisance ordinance, but it is rarely if ever used for pigeon feeders.

The Chamber of Commerce in Lincoln Square does get an occasional complaint, and only a couple of weeks ago the office heard from Magee. But even the guy in charge of maintenance for JCDecaux, the

folks who tend to the city's bus shelters, has asked his guys to lay off Zeman and let him roost his pigeons in peace.

And Heidi Hurtado, who works in a dress shop right across Western Avenue, makes a point of peering out the window to take in the Zen of Zeman.

"Peace, he makes me feel at peace," she says. "It's joyful to see somebody so loving and caring to pigeons. A lot of people don't like pigeons. Through everything that's going on in the world right now, it's just nice to see a sight like that."

'On their own free will'

As the heat of another day drops away, Zeman is shuffling to his post from the bus stop a block away.

When asked if he has ever thought of simply taking the birds home, he answers: "I've thought of it. But they're outdoor birds, they're meant to be on their own free will. They'd die from grief."

"When they come up to me, it's got to be on their own free will, not being grabbed or grasped. That's what makes them so happy when you come back."

With that he slips off his shoulder bag and settles onto his hydrant, and the flock descends. He raises both arms, palms skyward, the veneration pose.

"Sure, sure. Yeah, yeah," he coos away as day turns to dusk. He won't leave his birds until the black cloak of midnight comes to wrap them in, safe until dawn, when Zeman, sure as the rising sun, will once again take on the pose of St. Francis of a city.

DIARY

Reason to steer clear of the DMV

Confronting a new driver's license picture is not easy. As I waited for mine, a woman said her picture made her look jaundiced. The employee replied that nearly everyone looks diseased or jaundiced. That was comforting.

My picture could have been accompanied by a caption like, "Ewww. How old is this yogurt?!" Airport security might look at this picture and send me through a special wandering procedure for people with chronically bad attitudes.

I tried to get another chance. The photographer told me I was out of luck until 2008, and the front desk employee sent me to a supervisor who said my picture couldn't be changed. After a few fumbling attempts to explain my distress, the supervisor relented. "OK, follow me. I'll take your picture."

He took one shot, then rotated the screen toward me. The caption for this one could have been, "No! You are not staying out until 3 a.m.!" He saw my hesitation and took another picture. A few minutes later, I had a renewed driver's license.

Later, my husband said it didn't look too bad. He studied the image and said, "You look like you've just been pulled over for speeding."

—Janet Thullen

Invited to a wedding party

Who needs the faux mitzvahs—Q got invited to a bona fide wedding. The Doylestown, Ohio, wedding of Kelley Abernathy and Brad Busson was the big occasion. Here, Schaumburg residents Jim and Judie Abernathy, proud father and stepmother of the bride, pose with the couple. Too cool.

Readers, you have a few more weeks to send in your vacation photos. E-mail them to Q@tribune.com and put "vacation photo" in the subject line, or snail mail them to Q section, Chicago Tribune, 5th Floor, 435 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, IL 60611. (Sorry, we can't return photos.)

Sniff, sniff. Sorry, we always cry at weddings.



It's uplifting: He's not heavy, he's my ...

My niece, whom I love dearly, is a typical teenager in that she usually has a smart remark for everything. She has a close relationship with my 4-year-old son and, despite her petite size, she has been known to carry him around for hours.

For her 15th birthday, my husband and I took her shopping in downtown Chicago. After hauling my son around for an admirable amount of

time, she said she was getting tired.

My husband said, "Well, if you hadn't had a child so young, you wouldn't be so tired of carrying him around."

Disapproving look on the faces of elderly passersby: amusing.

Complete inability of my niece to come up with a response: priceless.

—Audrey Ringer

Turnabout is fair pay, porter decides

After a two-week visit to Paris, I hired a taxi to take me to the airport in Nice for the return flight to the U.S. It was a long ride and somewhat costly—so I paid the cabdriver with my last remaining French money. After I said goodbye to the driver and her big dog in the front seat, I looked around for my luggage; it had vanished.

She had opened the trunk of the car, and I didn't notice while I was paying her.

I walked a few yards to the entrance of the small airline terminal building. My two bags were there, and the porter who had brought them inside pointed and asked me, in French, to pay him, for the portage.

I was a little taken aback—then I offered him some U.S. quarters and gestured that I had no more French money.

He started to argue—then realized that it was hopeless. He picked up the two suitcases and carried them back out to the curb.

—Phoebe Medow

Everyone has a story (or two or three). Care to share yours with Q Diary? You can reach us at dros@tribune.com. Include your daytime phone number so we can chat. We want details, details, details!