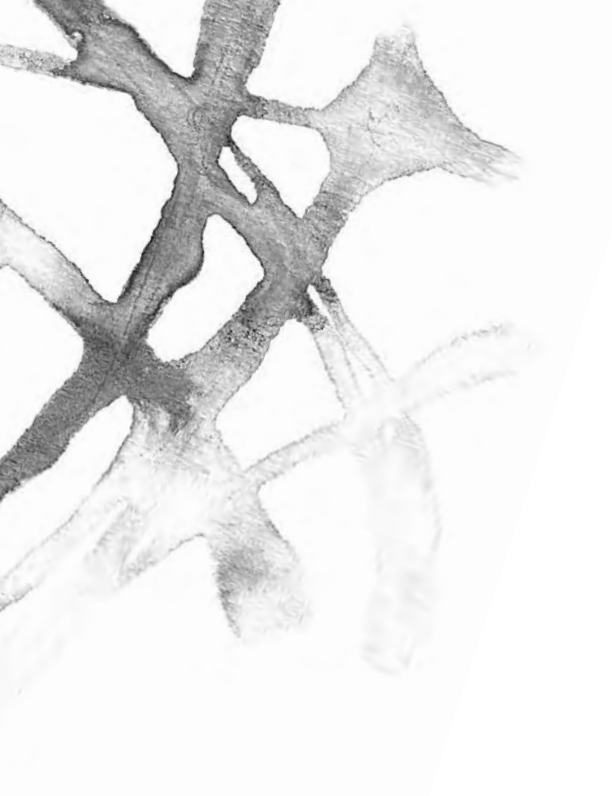


act of. devotion

A decade ago, some crows built a nest and reared their young at the edges of my garden. I have been thinking about those crows lately, as my oldest son prepares to leave home, testing the range and wingspan of my devotion. From the crows, I received a message of effort and dedication that has taken me years to sort out. Only now, as the purpose for my own dedication as a mother winds to an end, can I begin to see what the crows were teaching. The effort over many years was not, as it turns out, for me. It was for my son, who is in the process of leaving the nest where he has been fed, protected and loved for nearly two decades.

Crows always arrive from winter roosts sometime in February, following the light back as it rises. They assemble in large numbers, their strong black wings whisking the air as they sort out who will mate with whom, and where the nests will be. At the end of that particular winter ten years ago, I remarked especially on their return. Their black silhouettes carved sharply into the soft lace of late-winter snow. They were noisy, energetic and determined.



how do we surrender all of our efforts & actions to the divine?
eileen delehanty pearkes questions *isvara-pranidhanat*, in the 9th
of a 10-part series exploring the *yamas & niyamas*

illustration by aimée van drimmelen

In Sutra II.45, the yoga sage Patanjali introduces the fifth and final *niyama*, *Isvara-pranidhanat*. This is the Sanskrit term for devotion, or, as it is also translated, surrender to the Divine. Iyengar says it is the most subtle of all the *niyamas*, those daily practices that support the ever-evolving inner life of a yogi: cleanliness, contentment, austerity, self-study, and finally—surrender to a greater power. I have approached this last *niyama* slowly, and with considerable caution. For many Hindus, from whose culture springs the yoga that has mush-

roomed in popularity in the West, the thought of yoga being practised without this spiritual dimension is unfathomable. For many Westerners, the spiritual aspect remains persistently elusive.

The rearing of children is filled with opportunities to learn about surrender. Sometimes, the very best efforts of a parent result in a discouraging outcome: perhaps a ticket for speeding in a car without a seatbelt, or a failure at school, or misbehaviour on the playground. As my son has grown more and more independent, I have also caught myself

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wishing for a specific outcome. Over and over again along the way, I have had to surrender my own concept for his success. He will develop his own.

It was early April before I noticed the crows again, when a few began flying earnestly back and forth past my kitchen window, branches or sticks clutched in their beaks. I watched them disappear high into a blue spruce at the edge of the garden. For several days, I kept a close eye on the spruce tree. So intently, in fact, that I nearly missed the move by the crows to a cedar tree nearby. Crows are notoriously secretive about the location of their nests. Had the first nest been a phantom to distract predators, or was it simply a warm-up exercise?

I was easily drawn into the effort. The two crows traveled to and from the cedar tree almost without ceasing. I could see them on the ground, loosening a length of hops vine, or in the apple tree, tugging at a dead branch. One day, when I stepped from the house to work in the garden, I was startled by a crow overhead. *Caw-caw. Caw-caw.* It was only a few feet above me, positioned on a power line, in a direct sight line to the cedar tree. Its body pulsed with effort as it signaled my arrival in its space. *Caw-caw. Caw-caw.* From then on, I saw little movement in and out of the tree. The mother was hidden in the nest.

I practised the physical postures of yoga for several years before I began to see the divinity inherent in them, just as I performed the tasks of motherhood for years without understanding the surrender such efforts would eventually require. In *Light on Ashtanga Yoga*, B.K.S. Iyengar says of *Isvara-pranidhanat* that simply praising God is not enough. Devotion requires effort. In spiritual practice, this effort can take the form of prayer, or mantra, meditation or asanas. In motherhood, effort begins from birth and is fairly constant until the child gains independence. Iyengar's words are a reminder that effort itself, rather than any precise religious form that it takes, is the key to devotion.

Gradually, the disciplined aspects of practising asanas over and over again have helped me see the role that effort plays in a spiritual life, and understand how effort eventually leads, paradoxically, to surrender of effort. My Ashtanga teacher has recently helped me identify the forced nature of my exhaling breath. She has encouraged me to soften the exhale, to allow the breath to be surrendered more than pushed as it leaves my body. This small refinement of my practice has loosened my mind further, opening the door to surrender.

The sky seemed closer that afternoon ten years ago as I stepped away

from the sentinel crow and moved out into the garden. I registered the bird's focused gestures: watchful on the power line, whisking off to circle overhead, disappearing into the folds of the cedar tree. I spread compost on the strawberry plants and trimmed back raspberry canes. The wind picked up and a fresh rainstorm arrived. I watched the cedar dip and sway in the damp breeze. I worried about the safety of the nest, and the half-dozen or so eggs nestled in its curve.

In *Yoga Mala*, Sri K. Pattabhi Jois says that all of our actions must be carried out without desire for their fruit, that we should instead offer that fruit to the Divine. In my effort to accomplish a deep twist or a poised headstand, I have often been focused too much on self-concept and not enough on offering up the results. In my work as a mother, I have wished regularly over the years for some sort of public recognition, or a reassurance that I was doing a good job, that my work was admirable, or even commendable. But these sorts of rewards only feed the self-concept. And that is not part of the practice.

I was uncertain when the baby crows hatched, but I knew that they had when I noticed the insistent work of food-gathering, sometime in early May. The sentinel crow, by that time a familiar feature in the garden, was making numerous passes deep into the green folds of the

