

A message from a magpie, courtesy of Matt Bradley

by: [Logan Froerer](#) on March 23, 2012

Matt Bradley, my professor and mentor who died early last week, had a small magpie pin he'd wear to work with students at the Legislature. It was one of my favorite objects. I loved seeing it pinned to his shirt rather than the American flags or eagles everyone else had.



It fit him. Magpies represented his lifestyle of gathering people to work together and his background in folklore, in which he received his Ph.D. He even founded an activist group, the Magpie Collective.

The magpie is one of the folkloric trickster figures, such as coyotes or ravens that stole fire for humans in the Native American tradition. Magpies work together, combine their skills to benefit each other, and can even take on larger animals as a group such as eagles or dogs. It's an image at the root of how Matt taught me to view activism, community work and living a life connected to the people around us. It's how Matt himself lived. I thank him for forming that connection in my mind.

As a kid, I remember watching magpies steal dog food even when the dog was there to protect it. One magpie would swoop into the driveway. My dog Sam would run out and chase that bird, who would simply fly a short distance, begging for a chase. While that one had Sam distracted, two or three other magpies would sweep in, jump into the food barrel, grab as much as they could carry and fly off. Then they'd trade places.

Matt helped coordinate groups that worked together just like that. His guidance and example helped hundreds of students accomplish goals they might not have even tried, much less accomplished, without him. That included high school students at Mestizo Arts and Activism, in his classes at AMES or at the Legislature, and college students in his writing classes or the Social Justice Scholars. Other activists, legislators and teachers simply fed off his energy and devotion.

There's a lot of talented, devoted magpies flying around this city now, ready to continue his trickery just like he taught us.

But little did I know that Matt might still be using his images and folktales to talk to us.

Last Thursday morning, the first full day after I'd heard Matt died, I went to share the news with Cathy Miles, an educator at West High who had worked with Matt for nearly six years. It was a conversation I didn't have the words for. All I seemed able to do was blurt out the news.

Afterward, I headed to the hills above the Avenues to try to clear my mind. Looking at the budding leaves, I couldn't help but picture the garden Matt won't be planting this year. Or the jalapeno peppers and fresh eggs he won't bring to the Social Justice Scholars Retreat next fall.

But coming back through the final grove of scrub oak before I got back to the road, one lone magpie flew onto a branch not more than 15 feet in front of me.

I stopped.

The magpie jumped around to look directly at me.

We locked eyes for about five seconds. Then he flew over the hill and off to the west.

I saw a lot of magpies growing up. Not a single one ever did anything like that. Read into it however you like.

My first thought was that I had seen one of Matt's last messages. A last folktale, told through one of his favorite characters, telling us to keep flying on.

But then it hit me. His story's not even close to over. It never will be.

Archetypes and symbols such as the coyote or the magpie don't end with one telling. They recur in other stories and in other lives. They are reborn each time someone speaks about them or acts in their example. They embed themselves deep in our minds and structure how we live.

Matt's character is now being carried around by the students he's touched, by the people who got to work alongside him, and by his strong and beautiful family I was lucky enough to share a space with for two hours Friday and hear their stories.

It's a terrifying responsibility to carry forward the legacy and story of such a kind and hardworking man, of a trickster who would think it was funny to send a last message with a magpie.

Another piece of his story that will keep on living.

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