The Bird Story
modified from the Grimm's Fairy Tales

Many years ago, back when the prairie was a sea of grass as far as the eye could see, and millions of buffalo still roamed wild and free; there lived a proud and noble race of people called the Lakota.

During the cold winters the different bands of the Lakota would go their separate ways to search for food in smaller, more efficient hunting parties. In the spring they would regroup along the banks of the Belle Fouche River in what is now western South Dakota, for a renewal ceremony called Kanasa-apousi, the Sacred Pipe Ceremony. It was a time for all the bands to put down their differences, talk of peace, share stories from the past winter, and see family and friends.

When the tribe came together they would always arrange their tipis in a tremendous circle. On the most eastern edge of this great circle would be the wisest and most respected elders of the tribe.

As it happens, their was in this gathering a very wise and powerful Chief, so wise it was said that there was no question that he could not answer. There was always a long line of people waiting to ask him for his advice.

As it also happens, there was a little boy and a little girl; cousins who had not seen each other for the entire winter. They were playing catch with a ball that they had made from the stomach of a buffalo and sharing stories of their winter. The subject of the wise, old Chief arose.

"You know they say that this Chief is so wise that their is no question that he cannot answer. If we can think of a question to trick the old man, we would look very smart among the rest of our tribe!" The two began to think of ways to outwit the Chief.

"Why don't ask him...no my grandmother could answer that one...or what if we ask him...no, my uncle could figure that out...What if we..."

And as the two were discussing their question, the little boy threw the ball over the girls head. It rolled down to the bank of the mighty river. The girl bent down to pick up the ball and as she did, she saw a tiny fluff of down. It was a killdeer's nest. Killdeer build their nests on gravel bars by pushing together a few stones in a circle. The girl scooped up one of the chics and looked closely at its fragile little body. And then the question popped in her head. She ran back to her cousin.

"Cousin, cousin, I have the question we can ask the wise, old Chief. We can hold this baby bird behind our back and we will ask him, is this bird dead or alive? If he says the bird is dead, we'll simply show him the live bird. If he says its alive, we can simply crush it in our hand and show him the dead bird. There is no way that he can get it right." The cousins ran off to the tipi as fast as they could.

Now when they arrived their was a long, long line to the tipi, as there always was. The children got into line, but since children weren't often in line, the adults allowed them to move up. Before they knew it, the children were at the door of the wise Chief.

"Enter my children." said the Chief. The cousins stepped inside. It took them a minute for their eyes to adjust to the light in the tipi. As their eyes adjusted they saw furs from animals they had only heard about, beautiful baskets and beadwork from far-away lands, and blankets woven in striking designs. The children realized that they were truly in the presence of a very wise and powerful man.

"My children, what is your question?" The children shuffled their feet.

The chief asked again, "My children, what is your question?"

The little girl spoke, "We have a bird behind our back. We want to know is it dead or alive?"

The chief spoke, "My children, look in to my eyes." for the chief knew that the eyes are the window to the soul.

The little girl spoke again, "We have a bird behind our back. Is it dead or alive?" There was a long pause.

Finally the chief spoke, "It is as you will." It is as you will? That was not the answer that the cousins had expected.

The chief rose, "My children, come with me." The children stepped outside the tipi with the great Chief.

"My people gather round. These children have brought to us a very valuable lesson. They bring us the life of this baby bird. They have in their hands the ability to let this bird grow and flourish and prosper. They also have the power to let this bird die and wither away. And so it is with all of Nature. We all have the ability to let Nature grow and flourish and prosper, each of us also has the power to let Nature die and wither away."

And so it is today. Each of us here has the power in our hands to let wildlife grow and flourish and prosper. Each of us also has the power to let it die and wither away. It all depends on you.