

## Eulogy for God's Pearls

by Donne Hayden

On one unforgettable morning at my parents' house in New Mexico, my daughter and I shared a remarkable experience. Their house perched atop a high rounded ridge on the Great Plains as they rise to the foothills of the Manzano Mountains. There, the sky is a huge blue bowl turned upside down over you. Looking north, you can see the *Sangre de Cristo* Mountains a hundred miles away near Santa Fe. South you see flat-topped mesas thirty or so miles away. And east, the plains stretch over two hundred miles all the way into Texas. With nothing to stop it, the wind blows constantly—sand in the summer and snow in the winter. Days when the wind doesn't blow are rare and wonderful gifts.

On this particular spring morning, it was unusually still and quiet, so we all sat out on the porch, drinking coffee and enjoying the early sunlight with no wind. Gradually we became aware of a distant *whooshing* sound. *Whoosh . . . Whoosh . . . WHOOSH . . .* The rhythmical sound grew louder—clearly something was approaching. None of us had ever heard such a sound. A little unnerved—we listened and waited. After a while, in the southeast against the high blue sky, flying toward us we made out what E.B. White called “a wedge of geese,” comprising literally hundreds of wild geese. The *whooshing* sound came from the rhythmic flapping in unison of hundreds of individual pairs of wings. As they flew over the house it sounded like the pumping of some great heart.

We watched, awed and speechless, moved by the power of this experience. My daughter captured something of the feeling in these lines from a poem she wrote:

God dropped a pearl necklace  
on His smooth blue floor.  
Like pearls rolling and sliding above my head,  
a million geese  
migrating over New Mexico . . .

I've been thinking about geese this week, partly because of the crash of U.S. Airways Flight 1549. Mostly, the story has been uplifting—a heroic pilot who managed to land the airplane on the Hudson River, and all 155 passengers and crew survived. The only casualties were several dozen wild Canada<sup>1</sup> geese sucked into the jet engines, causing the plane to lose power and go down.<sup>2</sup>

This week I heard an NPR reporter refer to the remains of the Canada geese as “snarge” and lightheartedly explain it as “the bird goo that is wiped off an aircraft after it hits a bird.”<sup>3</sup> Wild geese are magnificent, and to hear their deaths reduced to a funny-sounding word bothered me. Where is our reverence for life? All life, not just human life. Where is our reverence for creation? In fact, where is our reverence for anything? We spend so much of our time in environments we create and control, we have lost touch with the natural world and forgotten how to be reverent, how to experience awe for forces in Nature and other things greater than ourselves, and yes, something awe-inspiring about wild geese is deserving of our reverence.<sup>4</sup>

I realize that most people have no experience with wild geese except in human-dominated environments like parks where they leave messes that make walking a bit unpleasant, or on runways where they are very much in the way. In the wild, in their *own* environment, however, far from jet engines and runways, wild geese elicit deep respect and reverence from people who encounter them. In their behavior we find models for our own and discover we can learn much from wild geese. For instance, here are some “Lessons from Geese” from a man who spent time observing them (this is all over the Internet, so some of you may have seen it). It was originally written by a man

named Milton Olson and published on a website called appropriately “Love Canada Geese.”

**FACT 1:** As each goose flaps its wings, it creates an "uplift" for the birds that follow. By flying in a "V" formation, the whole flock adds 71% greater flying range than if each bird flew alone.

**LESSON:** People who share a common direction and sense of community can get where they are going quicker and easier because they are traveling on the thrust of one another.

**FACT 2:** When a goose falls out of formation, it suddenly feels the drag and resistance of flying alone. It quickly moves back into formation to take advantage of the lifting power of the bird immediately in front of it.

**LESSON:** If we have as much sense as a goose, we stay in formation with those headed where we want to go. We are willing to accept their help and give our help to others.

**FACT 3:** When the lead goose tires, it rotates back into the formation and another goose flies to the point position.

**LESSON:** It pays to take turns doing the hard tasks and sharing leadership. As with geese, people are interdependent on each other's skills, capabilities and unique arrangements of gifts, talents or resources.

**FACT 4:** The geese flying in formation honk to encourage those up front to keep up their speed.

**LESSON:** We need to make sure our honking is encouraging. In groups where there is encouragement, the production is much greater. The power of encouragement is the quality of honking we seek.

**FACT 5:** When a goose gets sick, wounded or shot down, two geese drop out of formation and follow it down to help and protect it. They stay with it until it dies or is able to fly again. Then, they launch out with another formation or catch up with the flock.

**LESSON:** If we have as much sense as geese, we will stand by each other in difficult times as well as when we are strong.<sup>5</sup>

Geese are also models of commitment and devotion as mates. Knowing that geese mate for life, I wonder about the geese who survived their encounter with Flight 1549, those who lost a mate that day. Humans are not the only creatures who grieve; somewhere the mates of those killed are solitary and grieving. One of the most beautiful love stories I have read is *Wild Goose, Brother Goose* by Mel Ellis, an account based on

the true story of a wild Canada goose who mated with a “captive” Canada goose on a Wisconsin farm. Here is the beginning of the love story—

He came out of a tumultuous sky into a captive flock of his own kind, and while waiting out the storm among manmade ponds on which floated earthbound geese, took one of them as his mate. When the skies cleared and his wild flock lifted, he went with them, and when she did not follow, he came back clamoring for her to lift, ride the wind, come with him to a far northern delta to build her nest.

She ran along the dike, wings flailing, but the right one had been pinioned, and the long feathers furnishing the ultimate thrust were lost in the operation.

Until dark, and even after, he winged low over her, back and forth, clamoring. Then, when it was obvious she wasn't going to follow, he put out his webs, braked with his wings and surfed along the water to settle alongside where she sat.

They spent the night together, but the next morning he rose again to the clamoring of a passing flock, and insisting that she follow, went down the sky until even she, with an eye for scanning horizons and an ear for hearing worms walk, could no longer see or hear him.<sup>6</sup>

The story goes on—she waits for him. Other ganders present themselves to her as possible mates, but she rejects them all and does not rejoin the flock. Ellis describes it this way:

But she kept an eye on the sky, because it is not in the ways of Canada geese to take love lightly. If there was to be any frivolity . . . let it be among the mallard ducks which flirted shamelessly, accumulating wives and stealing hens one from the other with much fighting and raucous quacking.

The Canada geese were monogamous. They courted with quiet dignity, and unlike the flighty ducks, the gander remained with the goose, protecting her on the nest and protecting the goslings even after they were flight-borne and until they went off to form alliances of their own.<sup>7</sup>

Eventually, the wild gander comes back and, against all his own survival instincts, stays with his mate. He learns to eat the corn men scatter for him, though he never comes close when they are near. Each day, the gander and the goose swim together in the pond and wander on the banks, always staying as far away from people as they can. Eventually, fearing the two geese might try *walking* away, the humans put the goose in a pen at night. Each evening, after the men pen up the goose and when they are gone, the gander flies down and settles into the pen with his mate. He stays with her until

eventually they hatch out four goslings together. A few months later, when a dog kills the goose, the gander takes his four daughters and joins a wild flock flying north.

Their behavior sure looks like love and devotion. Even if you dismiss this as anthropomorphic thinking, i.e., putting human feelings onto an animal, how else do we explain the *behavior* of these two geese? Instinct? Is the goose's instinct to commit to her mate is stronger than her instinct to procreate? Is the gander's instinct to commit to his mate is stronger than his instinct to avoid danger and survive? Their actions are the acts of love and devotion and to me, actions speak louder than words.

Something mystical about wild geese evokes wonder in us. If you have never seen geese in the wild, you may not understand how they can be so awe-inspiring for humans. If you *do* ever see them, away from civilization where they show their true nature, I believe you too will be awed by them. For those of us who find "that of God" in Nature and in all creatures, wild geese are our brothers and sisters, messengers of divine grace and power, and worthy of our reverence.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup>Birding expert Lisa Shea, quoted in “Canadian Geese,” Jan. 12, 2004, *Languagehat.com* website, <http://www.languagehat.com/archives/001076.php>

The vast majority of English speaking people call the goose that is large and has a black head—*Branta canadensis*—a Canadian Goose. However, its original name was a CANADA Goose.

Remember, the official name for any bird is its Latin name. So the "real" name for this creature is *Branta canadensis*. . . . over the years, the name has changed to be Canadian Goose in English. Just like people in the 1600s used to call pumpkins "*Pompions*" and call vegetables "potherbs", we have changed what we typically call the *Branta canadensis* to Canadian Goose.

<sup>2</sup> Keith Herbert, “Investigators: Canada Geese Caused Hudson River Crash,” *Newsday.com*, February 13, 2009, < [newsday.com/news/local/newyork/ny-nyplan136033704feb13,0,5666087.story](http://newsday.com/news/local/newyork/ny-nyplan136033704feb13,0,5666087.story) > “The remains of Canada geese were found inside the engines of Flight 1549, the plane that crash-landed in the Hudson River in January following a bird strike and loss of engine thrust, federal investigators said yesterday. . . . More than 25 samples of bird remains were found, but investigators can't say exactly how many geese were sucked into Flight 1549's engines.”

<sup>3</sup> “NTSB: Canada Geese Caused Hudson Splashdown,” *All Things Considered*, National Public Radio, February 12, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Woodruff, *Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue* (Oxford University Press US, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> “Lessons from Geese” by Milton Olson, adapted by Angeles Arrien, on the *LoveCanadaGeese* website, <http://www.poems.lovecanadageese.com/lessons.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Mel Ellis, *Wild Goose, Brother Goose* (Chicago: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), pages 13-14.

<sup>7</sup> Ellis, page 15.