

The Lone Goose

“How do these geese know when to fly to the sun? Who tells them the seasons? How do we, humans, know when it is time to move on? As with the migrant birds, so surely with us, there is a voice within, if only we would listen to it, that tells us so certainly when to go forth into the unknown.”

— Elisabeth Kubler-Ross

By William Allen Baltz

My older brother Steve had sixty-five cents in his pocket when rescuers found him on 7th Avenue in Park Slope, Brooklyn. I stood in the chapel of the Methodist Hospital in Brooklyn staring at the coins—four dimes and five nickels, including one buffalo and one Indian head—arranged on a bronze plaque mounted on the wall as one enters the chapel, a memorial to my brother. I read the words on the plaque:

Remembering 135 Victims of
The Aircraft Disaster
Brooklyn, N.Y. December 16, 1960
“Our Tribute to A Brave Little Boy”

I wondered how my mother and father, heartbroken and grieving beyond comprehension, could compose such words or conceive the remarkably touching idea of mounting Steve’s coins on a plaque, at once gripping, beautiful and deeply poignant in its simplicity. My mother and father eventually came to grips with the tragedy; but it continued to haunt me, growing more vexing with time.

After 54 years, I decided to visit his memorial and the place where his plane tore off the tops of buildings as it crashed—the repaired bricks still visible—turning 7th Avenue and Sterling Place in Brooklyn into a fiery scene of horror.

Steve was 11 years old at the time. His trip from our home in Wilmette, a northern suburb of Chicago, to New York had been delayed and my father put him on a plane—for some unknown reason changing Steve’s original flight itinerary—to join my mother and sister who had gone ahead to visit my grandparents in Yonkers for holiday festivities before



returning home for Christmas. Busy with work, my father stayed home with me.

Standing at the exact location where Steve’s broken body came to rest, I looked back and forth between a black and white newspaper photo of him taken at the time—his bloody and burned-blackened face peering through a crowd—and the spot as it is today.

I left New York by train, as my parents had, on my way to Michigan where I would stay a few days at my cabin and then drive home to Chicago. I find long distance train travel medicinal. Perhaps my father was able to slow his pace and, as far as possible, tame his mind, as I did, by watching small towns, farms and wetlands glide past while the rhythm of the rolling wheels carried me away into a timeless realm of forgotten memories. My mind meandered across the decades, thinking not only of lost loved ones, but of the mysterious nature of life itself—chance, fate, timing—the things I have known and felt and lived for which I have no language; unnamable and tongueless things evoked by a shuttered factory, a misty bog, the steeple of a small country church, and the long, haunting sound of the train’s horn.

Later in the evening, I enjoyed a leisurely meal in the dining car with two people I had met in Penn Station waiting for the train. Naomi, an attractive woman in her early forties with long sandy blond hair tied back, was on her way to Mississippi to see her mother. She had broad shoulders, wore no make-up and spoke with a countrified southern accent. John, a young software engineer on his way home to Missouri, was taking the train to Chicago after bad weather cancelled his flight. Well groomed and

attired in a brown suit with a white shirt and dark tie, he seemed like a throwback to the glory days of train riding when people dressed up to ride the rails. John was huge and jovial, with a permanent grin on his chubby face, and I pictured him more as an affable salesman than a technician with large corporate clients in Manhattan.

Our waiter, a genuinely happy fellow who reminded me of the actor James Earl Jones, carried all the numerous dishes required for our meal balancing them confidently on his long arms and huge palms, moving with ease as the train rocked and lurched ahead. With a deep, melodious voice he called off each order as he set the plates in front of us, an act that seemed to add to his joy. We feasted on thick New York steaks and our waiter returned with several small bottles of red wine. “Dinner in the diner, nothing could be finer,” he sang gleefully. “You know what they say, folks, it’s all about the journey,” he said grinning broadly. “Yes siree, it’s all about the journey.” I watched his big leathery hands, with fleshy palms and ivory nails glide gracefully across the table, and felt relaxed and at ease as one feels among friends.

Naomi related that for the past several years she had worked on cargo ships traveling to Africa, Europe and Asia. Her job was physically demanding and this partially explained her strong, muscular build and confident demeanor. She was plainspoken, unencumbered by life’s trials or trivialities, smart with a keen homespun wit and possessed an honest, earthy quality, like the rich fertile soil of her home in Mississippi delta country. Naomi said she enjoyed her job; it paid well and she had been to places “most folks where I come have never heard of.” After catching up with friends and family in Greenwood, she was headed to Montana to work on a ranch.

“If you enjoyed your job, why did you leave?” I asked.

“Time to move on,” she replied without hesitation. “I’ve got a mind to live self-sufficient, find a place where I can grow and hunt what I eat.” She then showed me a photograph of a Winchester rifle and hunting gear she had purchased on a previous trip home.

Later, as I drifted asleep to sound of the clicking wheels, I thought of Naomi’s self-assured response and my own contentment hurtling through the dark and lonely country. I pondered the strange paradox, as Thomas Wolfe wrote, that perhaps we Americans are fixed and certain only in movement. Is this true?

I was sad to say good-bye to John and Naomi, who told me to look her up some time. “You say you love the west, come on out,” she said giving me a farewell hug. In a strange way, I felt I had come to know them—lingering over a dinner of

steak and cheesecake on a westbound train—better than I knew many of my friends in Chicago. How easily and naturally we entered into each other’s lives, and how heartfelt the goodbyes. Leaving the train, I felt empty and lonely and as I walked past the dimly lit dining car, I thought of the jubilant waiter and wondered how many more people he would happily serve, people going somewhere to meet someone—moving, traveling, on their way to see family, visit old friends, or perhaps, as my parents did, return home to one less child.

Built in the 1940s, my cabin sits on a bluff overlooking a small, spring-fed lake, deep and clear. Always in need of some repair, it has, nonetheless, been a steadfast friend for many years. When I arrive weary, confused and troubled at my cabin’s doorstep it speaks to me: “Welcome again my friend, repair me and I shall repair you. I will do this by suspending time, slowing everything down to a complete standstill, so you may feel your pulse and know that you are alive, intimately and inextricable connected to all that has been, is now, and ever will be. For your time here will not be, as Faulkner wrote, “the same frantic steeplechase to nowhere everywhere” as it is in the city, which you have come to loathe.

“That which torments you will cease, and you will come to know that most wondrous of things: ‘the point of intersection of the timeless with time,’ as Eliot described it, for only the great poets can describe it. Here are your favorite books, and they are your friends, too. You will discover what Tolstoy meant when he said, ‘If you want to be happy, be.’ Enjoy the jeweled pears from your trees, plant your hands in the rich, loamy soil and gaze upon the waters from whence you came in the deep, fathomless bowels of time, and give thanks—not the everyday thanks for a cup of coffee or a postage stamp or even a paycheck—but for the great mystery that is and you of it. You now have time to think of this mystery, away from the madness of the city, away from the distractions and nonsense that fill your mind, turning it into a wild, discordant and unstoppable chatterbox. All that you seek that is genuine and true is here and, as your friend, I shall help you find it.”

Indeed, there are few things I enjoy more than sitting comfortably on my cabin deck—for hours on end, refreshment in hand—gazing out at the lake and all its splendors: Watching, studying, pondering and contemplating the multitude of critters flying, hopping, swimming and climbing—time fruitfully spent, a profound learning experience, as Thoreau would agree, and also a therapeutic one.

Always at the ready are my binoculars and hardcover copy of “Birds of North America,” gifts from my parents. In my youth I rarely read the book, but now kept it handy as a

matter of course. I relished the beautiful illustrations, even the sonograms that I never got the hang of using but studied anyway when I happily identified a bird in the shaggy bark hickory trees and giant oak off my deck, its trunk rising hugely and solidly from the embankment then splitting into long bony branches that arched over the water providing an ideal perch for a multitude of different birds and close-up views for me.

Last spring I watched in amazement as a pair of Baltimore Orioles used straw and fishing line to magically weave a nest at the very tip of the longest branch drooping downward from the oak tree. The nest hung over the water, an ingenious and secure pocket unreachable by anything but the Orioles. They raised their young, chasing away all birds that ventured near, and then departed, leaving the empty nest to swing in the breeze.

On the last day of my stay, I sat on my deck observing a massive number of Canada geese gather on the lake—more than I had ever seen before.

It was an unseasonably warm morning. Scattered splotches of red and yellow leaves clung tenuously to otherwise barren trees rimming the lake and thick on the distant hills. Not a single boat was on the water. In fact, I did not see anyone anywhere the entire time.

During the ensuing hours I watched as flocks of geese, flying just over the treetops, splashed down on the steely gray water, the same color as the brooding sky and the gloomy mist that hung in the trees. In the past, I had found their honking calls somewhat irksome, but now became attuned to the variations that signaled the arrival of each new family, which would peel off from the flock before touching down, then cluster together.

Gradually, a sizeable portion of the lake was richly populated with floating geese. I scanned the growing flock with my binoculars. Those in the shallows would turn upside down, thrusting their long black necks down into the frigid gray waters to feast on dwindling patches of dark green seaweed, while their tails, soft white with protruding black feathers, bobbed on the surface. Other families, ordered about and led by the calls of a gander, went ashore to clean their feathers and gorge on the grasses.

Geese follow the same route every year. My lake, with its large section of marshy reeds, and abundant food and cover, is an ideal place to rest and refuel. It is no doubt the birthplace for some; the holy spot that draws them back with a strange and inexplicable power. But for all it was time to fly to warmer lands, a long and arduous journey, guided in flight by magnetic fields, the position of the moon and sun and landmarks spied from above—exactly

how they do it is largely a mystery to humans.

They fly up to 65 miles a day, 16 hours of graceful flapping, thousands of feet high in a formation perfectly designed to conserve energy and maximize uplift, changing leadership positions but always striving onward, driven to their sacred roost. As I watched and studied the geese, enthralled by their rituals, I thought ever more deeply about the forces that propel them onward.

Then began the great exodus. It began when one family suddenly took to the air, rose quickly above the trees and vanished. Others followed and I discerned the telltale signs of an impending take off: a family would close ranks, line up single file, and depart in a burst of honking calls.

And so it was with one particular family as the flock departed in a rush of flapping wings, except that one goose in line rose, struggled in the air just above the surface, then fell back to the water. Honking in frustration, he swam to join a cluster of other geese. He tried once again to lift off, but only one wing flapped normally; the other moved spasmodically and then fell limp. It was broken.

More families began to depart, some heading north at first and then banking in a great arc around the lake turning south. Soon there was a massive upheaval, with hundreds of geese taking to the air.

But I was focused on the goose that remained behind. After the tumultuous departure of the flocks, the lake surface gradually smoothed and became glassy and deepened in its grayness as the sky darkened.

The lone goose attempted several more times to fly, each attempt less vigorous than the previous one with longer time between attempts, until he paddled around in a circle honking.

I watched him float on the water for some time. Suddenly, instantaneously, the temperature plummeted. A strong wind thrashed through the trees creating frothy white caps and the lone goose bobbed up and down on the choppy water.

Alone on the lake, he began to swim northwest and a misty rain forced me inside to get my jacket and put away my book, though I kept my binoculars. Outside, I had to wipe the lenses often to follow the goose as he made his way across the lake, which now appeared to me vast and menacing. He was headed to the reeds. I watched him, transfixed, as he swam for a long time.

Scientists, of course, tell us not to project our own thoughts and feelings onto such creatures. But that is precisely what I did. He swam undeterred, making his way to perhaps the place of his birth, compelled by those strange forces to return for the last time to that spot on the earth all his own. He struggled against the strong north winds and white caps, but never wavered, swimming to that intersection of time and eternity with resolution—and, it seemed, with courage—alone and unobserved except by me. I followed the lone goose with my binoculars as he crossed the lake until all I could see was a vague, ghostly spot bobbing on the water. Then, he vanished into the reeds, never to fly again.

The swirling mist turned to rain and then small pellets of hail began striking the deck. I remained gazing through my binoculars at the reeds until all light dissolved and I could not keep my hands steady from the shivering cold.

I went inside my cabin, removed my wet clothes and lay on my bed thinking I would rest for a while, then afterwards build a fire and prepare supper. In the darkness of my room, a terrible and overwhelming sadness engulfed me to the point where I could not move, except to close my eyes. My grief did not come from one particular thing, but from some vast, inexplicable totality. I heard the faint ticking of the kitchen clock, the rumbling thunder, and in the soothing warmth of the cabin fell quickly and deeply to sleep.

Just past dawn, I awoke to the sounds of geese honking in the distance, north of the cabin. I made a cup of hot tea and stepped outside onto the deck where I saw a family of geese dabbling near the shore. The storm had left the trees stripped of color but the sky was clear and the great migration continued.

In the chilly air, I stared at the reeds across the lake and thought of the lone goose. I cannot explain why but my fears and sadness subsided, drawn away, as though some unseen hand of reassurance had placed itself on my shoulder, and I was filled with a strange hope unknown to me before, a hope that seemed to well up from the earth's core and was drawn richly into my being from sacred springs deep, pure and as unfathomable as time itself.

And it came to me instantly, with conviction, just as those mysterious forces tell the geese precisely when it is time to fly onward. I heard a voice that cleared away all other thoughts and brought to attention my entire being:

“Do not waste time anymore. Ten thousand days have passed, one dissolving into the next unnoticed, unfelt, un-lived. You allowed the city to consume you and you allowed fear to steal away your dreams. Leave, the place of your birth for good. Not later, but now. Leave everything, all of it, behind, as you should have done long ago but did not listen to the wisdom of your own heart. The landmarks are there. Say your farewells, move on and watch for them.”

From where does this voice arise? Was it tuned in the original fires, the first light of Time that gave birth to the magnetic fields, and the rhythms of the sun and moon? Was it mine, and mine alone or part of that unnamable thing that I know and feel but for which I have no language?

I am not certain, but as I stood on my cabin deck looking across the water, the lake and reeds dissolved away and my mind fixed on the plaque I had seen in New York with sixty-five cents in coins clustered together—four dimes and five nickels. Yes, it was time to move on.

William Allen Baltz is an independent writer who resides in Three Rivers, MI. Recent essays of his include “A Little Brother Remembers,” published by the New York Times on the 50th anniversary of a mid-air plane collision over New York City in 1960 that killed his older brother Stephen; and “The Last Hunt,” outwardly an account of teaching a shelter-rescued springer spaniel how to hunt, but on a deeper level a meditation on the cultivation of human potential. He has also written about the experiences of combat veterans, including those coping with post-traumatic stress disorder through art, music and poetry. His stories can be read at www.williambaltz.com

