

"Why Geese Fly Farther Than Eagles"

By Bob Stromberg © 1992

I'd never seen a bird so large, so near.
But, clearly ill, she landed here,
Indeed, nearly dead.
I fed her some and then said,
"You may stay here, if you choose."
And that's how she became "my" goose.

At least I said she was mine.
I suppose she was for a short time,
until she was stronger, when I set her free.
But for a while she stayed with me.

No eagle claw, hooked beak or furrowed brow.
Of these things she had no need,
for she was content
to fill herself on things among the weed,
and down around the small fish.
That's a dainty dish –
if you're a goose.

That is not to say, however,
and it would be wrong to think of her as weak,
not strong like the eagle.
For though the eagle is stronger in flight,
more fit for the kill,
my goose can fly farther and longer
than any eagle will.

Oh, I've heard much lofty talk
about the eagle, falcon and hawk.
And it's not my desire,
nor would I conspire, to pull those big birds down.
Who would dare?
For when I watch them flying so high up there,
sometimes but a solitary dot,
I can but gaze in wonder and utter,
"My, look at that!"

But, as I've implied,
whether in the trees or in the sky,

eagles, falcons and hawks are almost always alone,
or at most in two.
And that's what separates those birds
from my goose.

I suppose those in Iowa or Nebraska
would know it best,
for the sky is bigger
as you head toward the west.
But even as a lad nestled in the Alleghenies,
I looked forward, each fall, to seeing as many
as a thousand geese arrowing into view
over autumn ember elm and maple
and white birch, too.

One day, lying alone in the lawn on my back,
hearing only the sound of a distant train
on some far-off track,
I saw before my eyes,
ten thousand feet high or more,
a sight which to this day, I must say,
I've seen nothing like before.

The head goose,
the leader of the V,
suddenly veered out,
leaving a vacancy,
which was promptly filled by a bird behind.
The former leader then flew alongside
(the formation continued to grow wide),
and he found himself a spot at the back of the line.
They never missed a beat!

Well,
I was on my feet,
gaping mouth,
gazing south,
wondering what on earth I'd seen.
I told my friends.
They said, "So?"
I said, "'So!'
What do you mean, 'So'?
Have you ever seen anything like that before?

Mark?

Jay?

Paul?"

They said, "No, but don't be a bore;
Let's go to the park and play ball."
So we did.
And that was that.

Well, now I'm an adult,
and I'm very busy.
I suppose that's a part of being grown.
But the point is, I hardly ever have time alone.
Not least,
lying in the lawn looking for geese.
And if I do see some, it's more or less luck.
Or I'll see a goose, but it's really a duck.
I might glimpse one up high while I'm stuck in traffic.
And that's why I'm thankful for the National Geographic.
For it tells me what I now tell you.
And if you don't believe what I say is true,
Then you can go look it up.

What I witnessed that day as a child
has been going on with geese in the wild
since the very first autumn.
You see, their bodies are streamlined,
the neck like a spear,
slicing the wind,
breaking the air.
And from the ground it's impossible to see,
but their wings aren't flapping randomly.

When the head goose grabs the wind,
air is displaced,
which then rushes up to reclaim its space,
only to see the smiling face
of the bird flying behind,
whose wings just happen to be in the downward position –
a very dangerous condition,
which doesn't last for long,
Because the upward rush
gives them a push,
and they're right back up where they belong.

This goose then grabs the air again,
causing another upward wind,
which lifts the bird behind.
And so and so it goes on down the line.

So the head goose breaks the wind,
and all the rest are carried by him,
with very little effort, I've heard,
on the part of any one bird.
When the head goose has had enough,
he or she simply drops back
and depends on another bird for strength
when strength is what is lacked.

So that's how I found out
how the goose can fly from up north
to way down south and back again.
But she cannot do it alone, you see,
It's something that must be done in community.

These days it's a popular notion,
and people swell with emotion and pride
when they think of themselves on the eagle-side.
 Solitary,
 Self-sufficient,
 Strong.

But we are what we are.
That's something we cannot choose.
Though many would wish to be seen as an eagle,
I think God made most like the goose.

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