THE GOOSE THAT ESCAPED LAKE'S ICY GRASP

Aesop's Fables are allegories from ancient Greece in which animals often stand in for humans. Had these stories been gathered farther north, they might have included one about a solitary goose frozen into a pond. To "The Hare and the Tortoise" and "The Fox and the Grapes," I would add the following semi-true story in which patience and determination gave a sentient creature a second chance at life, literally from the grip of winter. Nature has so much to teach us, if only we pay attention.

Remember that amazingly cold night last December? The still blue air gave way to a lavender sunset, then to an obsidian blackness sprinkled with stars. The trees snapped, crackled and popped in the woods behind my house. The deer skipped breakfast during the wee hours. Later that morning, my son and I ran an errand to the University of Connecticut campus. As we curved around Mirror Lake, we saw a single goose apparently resting on the frozen surface of the pond. Of course, geese don't sit solo, especially on ice. They're hopelessly gregarious, and feel secure only on liquid water.

This one woke up to the nightmare of finding itself locked into the ice. Its body had become the filling of a sandwich between two media, the ultra-cold air above and freezing water below. Some carnivorous land creature, perhaps a coyote, could have walked up and eaten the top half. Some kind of fish or snapping turtle could have gotten the bottom half. The goose was still there after we finished our errand. Where it presumably remained for most of the day. I called the town animal control officer, who paid a visit but found nothing amiss.

The next morning I walked to work as usual. The goose was gone . . . or so I thought. But when I left the sidewalk to satisfy my curiosity, lo and behold, there it was, resting on the cold ground, facing the steady north wind. When I walked toward it, it waddled away. When I rushed a few steps to see if it could fly, it ran and flapped normally, though never became airborne. Instead, it stopped and hunkered down, eyeing me warily.

That's when I noticed signs of what looked like a heroic struggle. Extending between the place where the goose had been trapped and open water near the drain was a series of dark patches of refrozen water spaced the length of a goose's neck. Surrounding the patches were scattered fragments of ice. Apparently, the goose waited for the ice to thin after the warmth of day, hammered and wiggled itself free, made another hole in the direction of freedom, dragged itself into that hole and then repeated the process about a dozen times until it was liberated. For some reason, perhaps the ice attached to its body or torpid leg muscles, the goose was unable to hoist itself onto the smooth sheet of ice or move along it.

Though this may not be the correct interpretation, I can think of no other explanation for the features I saw. Nor could the national bird expert I consulted. But rather than thinking of story as true, I prefer to think of it as a fable, with me as the only witness.

The next day, the goose was gone. I searched in vain. I saw no sign of a blood meal. My goose guess is that the exhausted creature simply waited to regain its strength before flying away.

Shortly after this sequence of events, I went back and re-read a book I own called "Solitary Goose," by Sydney Landon Plum, a colleague who teaches creative nonfiction for the English Department. Her lovely meditation was inspired by a different lonely goose on a different nearby pond, one whose injury forced it to remain permanently.
What's the moral of this fable? There are many. Humans have an inexplicable bond with animals. None of us wants to be truly alone. Security can quickly change to danger. Patience and determination can get us through every ice-hard winter. Warmth liberates.