

2004 Collected Tallgrass Tales

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First Impressions

The Wisdom of Cycles

The air is literally soupy with fertility this morning, as if spring arrived during the night and freighted the very air with seeds and the medium in which they can grow. I can almost hear things sprouting out on the prairie.

Not all efforts aimed at regeneration in this season of growth will be successful at reaching their targets, as I am quickly learning, whether I want to or not.

Yesterday there was a funeral for the red heifer who was too young and small to deliver her big calf last Sunday. The vet pulled the calf anyway, and though it was too late to save the calf, a Caesarean-section might have saved Red 62. The might-have-beens are also moot. Jane finally had to shoot her on Thursday night.

Yesterday we went down and pulled her body to a little drywash so she'd be out of sight of the neighbor's drive. The alfalfa that Jane had put in her makeshift pen became, in Jane's words, the funeral dinner for her closest friends. "They'll come to see her after we move her," said Jane, "and then they'll eat the jello and the casseroles." Sure enough, the three cows and their two new calves came by to view the body. We stood around and thought our own thoughts about Red 62 and her untimely passing. I felt we were all uncommonly close.

The mothers and calves came to stand within a few feet of us and the body. Amongst us, in that moment, Red 62 was so large a presence in sheer physicality, even while being severely diminished. One might be able to brush off the death of a smaller animal like a squirrel or a packrat, but a dead cow is no small matter and cannot be ignored. And, too, I think her untapped potential as the mother of many calves was part of the significance of the loss. Her shrunken bag

was particularly poignant, and I thought of the milk she'd made to feed her calf. More weight to the loss. I made myself go behind the truck and unhook her hind legs from the chain we used to pull her. I wanted to touch her, to make contact with the spiritless body, a little dance with my own demons.

The little red heifer will feed the coyotes and the bugs and ultimately the land on which she herself fed. This will be a giving back and a deposit in the bank of the grass that will rise to continue supporting life.

For many years I have been interested in natural cycles and their inherent wisdom. This new life of mine—in which the veil between nature and everyday life has been torn away—offers me a prime seat on the action, which I'm not altogether certain I am ready to accept. I may appreciate the necessity of cycles, but I still cry.

Metaphorical Possibility

Nursing a tree-fire in a bog is not the easiest or most rewarding task, but for a Sunday morning, the pace is about right. I started this fire in a pile of downed trees last night at dusk-going-on-dead-dark and I found the total loss of my bearings to be a splendid metaphor for my life right now. Most of the time I can only see my immediate surroundings, and even they are relatively unfamiliar. There is no navigational point other than my own center, which is constantly shifting. Shadows and light play tricks on the imagination; small things can loom very large, while at the same time, substantial things escape notice.

The act of burning unwanted, invasive trees in order to heal the prairie also takes on symbolic significance at this juncture in my life. Never before have I drawn such firm lines between what will be burned and what will be allowed to remain. Perhaps this is a gift of middle age.

Working in a spring-fed seep is a good metaphor too. In the dark, the difference between solid ground and shoe-sucking muck is impossible to see in advance—but if my shoes are tightly tied and I keep advancing forward with confidence, I eventually get back to solid ground.

Finding my way home across the trackless prairie to the house played to metaphorical possibility as well. I've always eventually found my way home, even when *home* was a definition in flux.

Sacred Booming Ground

I felt like a nine-year-old kid leaving on a trip early this morning. We set the alarm clock, got up and brewed plenty of coffee, made a few slices of peanut butter toast to tide us over, and took off in the truck as the very first light was touching the horizon and the sky was still filled with stars.

We rode the ridges around the ranch, stopping from time to time to roll down the windows, turn off the engine, and listen for a distinctive moaning sound, like the tones a fledgling ten-person jug band might produce. What we were in search of was a prairie chicken booming ground, also known as a courtship ground or lek, which is usually on a fairly high spot with low groundcover at its center and taller escape cover nearby.

Imagine an outdoor singles club for birds in which the males must sing and dance so the females can choose a mate. This is the annual spring mating display of the Greater Prairie Chicken, a secretive, sensitive prairie grouse that is in danger of disappearing as more of the tallgrass prairie is lost to development. The prairie chicken population is a gauge of prairie health; unlike many other species, they do not adapt well to the presence of humans and our *improvements* to the landscape.

Frankly, these chickens are a picky species. Dancing males require short grass for their sexual display. Nesting females need grass tall enough to hide a football. The new brood must have a particular mix of short and tall grass for food and protection from predators. In short, they need diversity of habitat, what I have heard referred to as *a shifting mosaic*. As a rule, prairie chickens avoid buildings, trees, towers and power lines from which predators can spot them and attack the vulnerable ground-nesting birds with startling speed. Their natural enemies include coyotes, raccoons, foxes, hawks and owls. A significant number of birds are also killed in

collisions with fences and power lines. And despite their declining numbers, there is still a hunting season for Greater Prairie Chickens in Kansas.

We scared up a few chickens in one pasture, seven in all. They hurtled skyward as if shot out of a grass cannon and then leveled out in a low, erratic flight pattern—beat, beat, glide, beat, beat, beat, glide—an unpredictability that is their only protection against predators, including humans with guns in the fall. Jane was the first to hear the primitive booming sound off to the east. Our excitement when she actually spotted a group of dancing males in our northernmost pasture was hard to contain.

I pulled the truck as close as I could reasonably get so we could watch through binoculars as the prairie chickens inflated bright yellow air sacs on their necks, erected the pinnae or ear feathers on the tops of their heads, performed flutter-jumps, and rapidly stamped their feet. Even at that distance we could hear their humorous cackles, raucous caws, and the haunting booming sound. Inflation and release of the air in the pouches on the sides of their necks is what produces this unique sound. Once you've heard it, you never forget.

Those twelve dancing birds were a glorious sight to behold, and gave me a feeling of incredible richness, better than any amount of money on the bank, as if we had received the coveted Prairie Chicken Seal of Approval, signifying that our part of the prairie has retained its integrity. Greater Prairie Chickens are known to use the same general area for courtship year after year. How ancient is this species? For how many years, I wonder, have they been returning to this place as a haven? And what can we do to keep this sacred ground safe for their rituals?

Setting the World on Fire

I'd heard about it, but I still could never have imagined the feeling. Me, sitting on the passenger side of the off-road vehicle, handed a box of wooden matches by Jane on a breezy afternoon, driving slowly through the dry grass, with only one simple, two-step command to follow...a pyromaniac's dream, "Light 'em and drop 'em." Zigzagging back and forth across the hills, I'm so absorbed in the rhythms of lighting one match after another, I have no idea of what I've created behind me. "Look," says Jane, "look at what you've done." And I look back to see acres and acres of prairie on fire. Wow! I did that.

The thrill of it...the freedom of it...the feeling of breaking all the rules without fear of punishment. Incredible. Part of the freedom and delight came from the fact that it was a completely worry-free burn. All of the margins had already been burnt last week, so there was no fear that the fire would go out of control. Strike and drop, strike and drop. Set the prairie on fire.

After three days of laboriously tending tree-fires, it was like sheer play to light the grasses on fire and just watch them burn at will, an expression of randomness and whimsy. I've never experienced anything like it before in my life.

Fire is so primitive, so raw, so consuming. We spend all our lives being taught how to handle fire with care, with control, with caution. Throwing caution—and matches—to the wind was like breaking every rule and knowing I wouldn't get in trouble.

I am now the veteran of about 1,300 acres of pasture burning, each experience a bit different, with a new subtlety to learn with each burn. I walked a lot of miles and dropped many lit matches along the way. Plenty of folks out here "string" fire with a device that hooks to their off-road vehicles and dispenses a mix of gasoline and fire in a neat line. We prefer the subtler approach, which is less apt to create a fire that can't be controlled and also plays nicely to our theory about the importance of randomness in supporting diversity.

Perhaps the most dramatic portion of my Introduction to Pasture Burning was the last burn of the day—and of the season—yesterday about 5 o’clock. The twenty-acre patch in the McDowell House Quarter had a good load of dry grass for fuel. I walked the west edge to string the fire guard, since the winds were out of the east. Jane came along behind me with the bucket of wet sheets, just in case, but the green all along the draw provided a natural border for stopping the fire without intervention.

Once I got to the east side of the pasture, I checked with Jane by radio before stringing fire along that side. “You’ll start a headfire,” she said, “but that’ll be kind of fun.” And indeed it was. The wind pushed the fire through the dry thatch with a throaty roar, and the two lines of fire from west and east met dramatically at the top of a rise—fire fighting fire—and created miniature tornados of smoke and ash. It was an awe-inspiring sight to behold.

All my life I’ve dreamed of setting the world on fire.

Sunset Symphony

The hills were a saturated sienna brindled with bits of green this morning. The frogs and meadowlarks seemed extraordinarily happy about the rain. The phoebe in the truckery was evidently spending the rainy morning in bed.

I'll spare you my semi-annual rant on daylight savings, but I will say that what time it is has even less meaning than ever here in this earth-based life in which light means everything and time counts for very, very little of consequence, save coordinating our schedules with the rest of civilization.

This life so appeals to me, in which daily routine is rarely daily or routine. Each day brings a different sequence of familiar, but not predictable activities that change with the season, need, and sometimes just whim. I like this life.

This has been an incredibly full and busy week, my first real taste of intense physical labor and long workdays. When we left the ranch for eight or so hours yesterday to run errands in Cottonwood Falls, Strong City and Emporia, Jane noted that it was only Friday and we had already worked a good sixty-hour week. Work follows weather out here, and we kept busy from sunup to sundown on the days that were hospitable. Yesterday was rainy and so is today, a wonderful gift to the recently-burned hills, which will utilize every nourishing drop in order to achieve the dramatic transformation from stark black to velvet green.

The rain is a gift in another way as well; it brings a shift in the rhythm of work, allowing us to linger a little longer over coffee and find chores to do in the house. This life fits me loosely and comfortably, like my new overalls after their third or fourth washing.

When the clouds cleared off in the evening, Emma and I sat outside the west door of the house and *listened* to the sunset. Well, we *watched* the sunset, but there was so much music, it felt like a concert or a movie of sunset with a soundtrack. Sparrows were calling back and forth,

cheer-cheer-cheerily and off in the distance the redwing blackbirds were singing, *Marva Lee-Marva Lee*, and the occasional meadowlark piped up with one of the fifty or so songs in its amazing repertoire.

On the other side of the house as I write this, looking out the east door, the nearly full moon is rising in hazy gold, a hue as rich and soothing as the songs of the birds marking vespers.

Pleasant Occupations

After years of servitude to a desk, a computer and deadlines, I am enchanted by the variety of tasks that end up on my to-do list these days.

Jane set me down one afternoon in the apparent middle of nowhere, with instructions to walk a little over a mile back to the road and count all the fenceposts along the way. The unit of measure between fenceposts is known as a rod, and there are 330 rods to a mile. I was well-equipped with cold water, my little moleskin notebook, peanut butter crackers and toilet paper. It was a beautiful day for a hike, and the irrepressible kid in me invented little songs to make the counting fun. Of course, I couldn't resist my usual habit of scanning the ground for interesting treasures. I have had to severely curb the urge to pick up rocks in the Flint Hills because there are so many beautiful ones. I did, however, pick up a very nice, totally intact box turtle shell and eight different kinds of wildflowers that were blooming, only a couple of which I knew by name. In all, there were 397 fenceposts on my route, which equals 1.2 miles.

Another fine job was moving three heifers and two calves from one pasture to another. My job was to sit on the back of the feed truck and shake the bag of *cow candy*, a compressed, stogy-shaped snack the cows apparently adore. As Jane drove the truck, I shook the bag and occasionally shouted *WOO-EE*, which you really have to hear in person, as it is quite impossible to spell clearly. I am by no means a professional cow-caller as yet, but there is only one way to learn. The cows humored me by following enthusiastically, even breaking into the occasional gallop, with a few kicked-up heels for good measure. And why not—it was a beautiful spring day!

In the afternoon I strapped on my pack and binoculars and went for a ramble down in the south part of the McDowell. The old McDowell Ranch features many fine examples of dry-stone corrals, which are still standing over a hundred years after they were built. The walls are like a

museum of all the different kinds of rock in the Flint Hills. I also hiked along Thurman Creek and was ridiculously happy that my waterproof boots are really waterproof.

I find it perfectly amazing and wonderful that I now have at my disposal thousands of acres on which to hike and explore to my heart's content, and the chances of running into anyone else along the way are slim to none. I love my new office—the tallgrass prairie—with no walls and the big blue sky for a ceiling. It will take years of wandering to catalog all the natural wonders on this expanse of land.

I think about all the years I've been drawn to the land, healed and soothed by rocks and streams, walking with soft step and open eyes. All of my life I have searched for secret little places in which I could find solace and solitude. The ones to which I returned repeatedly are still quite clear in my mind, they were so very rare and precious. As early as the first grade I learned about trespassing, when Gerry Waters showed me the “shortcut” between Pleasant View Drive, our dead-end road, and Sunny Ridge Elementary School. How many times since then have I known the mixed thrill and trepidation of trespass? It was nearly always beyond my ability to ignore the call of a certain alluring patch of ground—there was so much I wanted to see.

I cannot adequately capture the extent of my delight now at the prospect of all these acres at my disposal, with blanket permission to walk every square foot of it, if I so desire. I am overcome by the sheer plenty of it all. Here on this ranch, as I said to Jane, are hundreds of places like the few I found and loved over the years. I scarcely can comprehend this level of abundance.

I feel like I've been given the keys to a kingdom that is plenty big enough to keep me pleasantly occupied for the rest of my life. My heart fills up with infinite joy at all of these blessings piled one atop the other and spilling over onto the ground.

A Lot of Bull

Yesterday I noticed that Oscar, the new Red Angus bull, was out of water in his stock tank, so I climbed the fence at the pens and started the water running. The last time I'd done this chore, he'd maintained a healthy distance between us. Yesterday, probably because he was thirsty, he ambled straight toward me. I wasn't sure whether a wiser person might get the heck over the fence with haste, but I followed the instinct to stay and talk...about the weather, the nice cool water I was giving him, the pretty cows up on the hill, whatever I could think of that might interest and sooth him.

Oscar, who weighs just this side of a ton, put his massive nose up to my shoe and gave it a couple hearty sniffs and a slobber for good measure. I kept talking, perhaps just a wee bit nervously. I remembered what Jane likes to say about the thin line between confidence and naiveté (a diplomatic word for foolishness) when it comes to handling animals who are big enough to kill you. I looked over my shoulder to gauge the distance to the fence and plot a plan of escape. Basically, I realized in short order, if Oscar made a sudden choice to charge me, I was flat out of distance, time and luck.

As if to reassure me of his good intentions, Oscar snuffled my pant leg from ankle to knee, a bovine how-de-do. Apparently satisfied with my responses to his overtures, he stepped back to look me in the eye, gave a little huff (of approval or thanks, I assume) and thus sealed some sort of an understanding. I'm not sure, but I think we've just started a relationship.

Rural Life

I've lived so long in the wary city, the pace and values of rural life strike me with particular force. Yesterday we had a number of errands to run, the first of which was to go by the Chase County Sheriff's office in Cottonwood Falls for a vehicle inspection for my truck so I can get a Kansas tag.

As I walked up to the front door, a woman sitting in a car rolled down her window and said, "Ma'am, one of my boys noticed that your rear tire is very low." I said *thanks* and went on my way, thinking how unlikely such helpfulness would have been in the city. According to Linda in the sheriff's office, who was also helpful and friendly, the officer who needed to inspect my truck was out on a traffic stop and would be in before long. By the time I got back out to the parking lot to give Jane the news and check my tire, it was totally flat. While I rummaged in the back for the jack, along came a Chase County administrator, who Jane introduced as Jay. Apprised of my plight, he quickly offered to get a bubble of air from the shop to fill my tire enough to buoy me the few blocks over to Cottonwood Falls' only full-service gas station.

Dieker's, a classic corner service station catty-corner from the Courthouse, has oil-soaked wooden floors, odds and ends of candy and beef jerky and soda, and very friendly employees. A young man immediately came out and jacked up the truck, removed the tire, and had it fixed in less than twenty minutes. During that time Jane and I perused the local auction notices and chatted with the other employees about how they were closing at noon because last year on Good Friday there just wasn't enough business to bother staying open. When we went out to the truck, we ran into Pat, the Presbyterian minister who helped with burning on Wednesday.

We got back to the sheriff's office in plenty of time, and the inspection, conducted by Officer Jody, a cordial, open-faced fellow who commented on how it was probably a bit quieter out in the Matfield Green vicinity than in Kansas City, turned out to be only a verification that

the VIN on the truck and the title matched and had not been tampered with in any way. Years in the city have trained me to anticipate suspicion from officers of the law and rudeness from civil servants of all sorts. I have been repeatedly surprised, and pleasantly so, by this rural world in which integrity and helpfulness seem to still be watchwords of society. Not long ago, as I prepared to leave the ranch for Kansas City, I referred to my departure as *heading back to civilization*. Jane was quick to set me straight. *Excuse me, but what exactly is civilized about the city?*

Everywhere I go out here it helps, of course, that I am associated with Jane, who seems to know everybody in the county. I trade on her name with no shame whatsoever; it's my secret password. She's introduced me at all of the places where she has accounts, so that if I go to the gas station in Cottonwood Falls, the grocery store or feed store in Strong City, or Blue Stem Farm & Supply in Emporia, I can simply charge ranch expenses by signing the ticket.

I did have to go all the way to *The Mall* in Emporia (it really is the only mall in Emporia) to get my driver's license, as the Chase County Courthouse is not equipped to do that. Although I still don't have my tags (the courthouse was closed on Good Friday), I do have my Kansas driver's license and am registered to vote. Since I'm already receiving my mail here, I feel like I'm just one step short of being a full-fledged resident of Chase County, Kansas.

Prairie Spring

When the earth's clock strikes April,
she dons the sheerest of slips,
so gauzy and pale as to merely suggest
the color green.

The delicate fabric settles with
a silken sigh over her breasts and hips,
every curve a different nuance of green,
dappled with tiny hints of white,
yellow and violet that can only be
seen if you're close enough to
reach out and touch her.

She behaves as if she has all the
time in the world to ready herself:
stretching with delicious slowness in
the warm light of the going-down sun,
she languorously leans back and allows the
wind to arrange her hair;
she leans down to slip on her stockings,
which are a bolder shade of green and
which do honor to the arched foot and
the strong calf and the dimpled knee.

It's nearly May before she reaches
with lazy sensuality for the
vivid velvet of her dress.

By subtle increments she slides it
down over her sharp-boned white shoulders,
and it drops slow as the outgoing tide of
the ancient inland sea, down past the
softer planes and angles of waist and thigh.

This shocking gown is green beyond all reason,
it covers the pale, dainty slip with a
color so saturated and electric as to
cause an unusual sort of temporary blindness:
you think there has never been such a green,
that there has never been any other
color but green, and that there is absolutely
no one else at the Spring Ball but she.

Midwifing the Day

When I got up at 5 o'clock the stars were shining brightly with no moon for competition. Out here it is easy to see from whence cometh the *milk* in Milky Way. The stars were clotted thick as cream against the black sky. Off to the southeast a bank of full-bodied clouds was so close to the ground I felt I could almost lasso and haul it down to earth. But there was no need; the clouds came down of their own accord during the next two hours, settling in amongst the low valleys between the hills like a down comforter.

When Emma and I got on the four-wheeler to go check Red 60, our little red heifer who is about to calve, we zipped through the clouds as if we were in a tiny flying machine instead of on the ground. Red 60 was fine for the moment, but she's a first-calf heifer and awfully small and young to have her first. She may very well need us to midwife.

The birds were in full chorus down at the McDowell this morning, and Oscar the bull was peacefully munching grass in the clouds, a fine sight. The beauty of the day struck me like a clapper on a big brassy bell and my heart was filled with an exuberance so grand and glorious, I almost needed to cry out with joy lest my body burst open from trying to contain the feeling. Emma evidently felt it too, and she came leaping through the dewy grass and ran at me full tilt. I wondered if that was what flowers felt too, just before they busted into bloom.

Now the sun burns off the blanket of clouds and the hills are revealed to be even greener than they were the day before. Here comes the sun from behind the clouds and the whole world has that busting-open look to it, of fertility and fecundity, of a flower about to bloom, an egg about to crack open, the whole earth about to give birth to a new day, and just by being in attendance, I midwife the day.

Conversational Arts

I've always had a very active dialogue with nature and with animals. I've conducted extensive discussions with cats and dogs, had conversations with insects and chats with rocks. This practice has never seemed strange, and was often infinitely more soothing and satisfying than communicating with humans. Now that the number of human conversations I have each day are drastically reduced, these other dialogues have increased exponentially.

Certainly I have many more occasions to talk with cows. This has been quite enjoyable. They are very good listeners, but occasionally pipe up with a well-timed comment or two. When I led fifty or so cows down from the McDowell to the Eastman pens for sorting, I talked rather a lot to the lead cows who were making my job so much easier. I mentioned to the Watusi, who was trotting along right next to the four-wheeler, that I'd very much appreciate it if she did not shake her head *yes* or *no* while traveling in such close proximity. I told her I loved her proud horns, but that I'd prefer to admire them from a distance. I always say hello to the proud Zebu and the mischievous Brahman, both from India, the fierce Watusi from Africa and the gentle Tarentaise from France. Who knew these hills would be host to a daily meeting of the United Nations of cows?

Anyway, after I'd successfully led my parade of cows up and down the hills, across the stream and through the woods to the pens, I was inspired to bow and offer the greeting, *Namasté, the divinity in me greets the divinity in thee*, for certainly that was the case.

I expect I will soon have a conversation with a snake or two. I saw my very first Massasauga rattlesnake the other day. They are quite common out here, but shy of human contact. I don't expect to have any close relationships with snakes, but I would very much like to have a respectful understanding. As Jane says, they were here first, and I honor their right to

inhabit the prairie in peace. I won't talk too terribly much, but I will at least say *thank you* whenever we pass each other amiably.

I have always talked with birds and tried to learn their languages. I have been fairly successful in getting cardinals and catbirds to converse with me, and blue jays are often willing to engage in a little repartee. There is a particularly verbal bird out here on the prairie, the upland sandpiper, that sounds like it's giving you a very appreciative wolf-whistle learned from hanging around construction sites. I was sitting outside the west door watching the sun go down one evening, experimenting with talking to the sandpipers. First of all, I said in English, "I think you're beautiful, too," and then I returned the whistle, attempting to match the precise pitch and duration of the call. I was very excited when the birds began to answer me every time I called. I could hardly wait to tell Jane of my success. As I got up and turned to go in the house, she was standing just inside the door behind me looking smug. "I was wondering how long it was going to take you to catch on," she said. I guess I'm not the only one who is learning to speak bird.

Stars and Rocks

I recall quite clearly that my two favorite elective classes outside my major in college were astronomy and geology. I have now arrived in a place of many stars and many rocks. I am very happy. The stars I admire from a distance. The rocks are another matter. I am in the middle of a geology project that is also a landscaping project. For years I have referred to this kind of activity as *rearranging God's furniture*. This morning, for example, Emma and I took the feed truck to check on the red heifer, and we could not resist driving around a little in search of rocks. I picked up about ten or twelve and brought them home. They are becoming a border along the walkway to the house. I have in mind to display as many different types of Flint Hills rocks as I can find.

It is only incidentally a pun to say that all these rocks ground me. They truly do. The rich geologic history of this tallgrass prairie is a narrative written in stone. The ancient inland sea is not very difficult to imagine; I have stood on a high point here to look out over the hills and seen the sea instead, the gentle undulation of the grasses a spark for my imagination. I flew on a little trip through geologic time and saw how those rich waters built these hills and how the wind burnished them. The sea still tells its story; its marine creatures and plants are writ in stone like the Ten Commandments.

No Fences

From where I sit on ancient earth taking staples out of a hedge fencepost older than I am, hearing only the susurrus of the wind punctuated by bird calls, I can see the ceaseless traffic on the turnpike in the distance. I have not seen or spoken to another soul in over two hours, yet the traffic goes by, a parallel universe of which I am not a part. I would far rather go my own way at my own pace than follow in a line of traffic going somewhere other than here.

Storm clouds are hanging low in the expansive prairie sky this morning. The wideness of the sky out here makes my heart open wide. There is room here for all of me, especially the wild, uncivilized parts that I used to button and zip up each day before I went out into the world. I have been working this week on removing fences—restoring open range. As I drop the strands of barbed wire to the ground, I appreciate the metaphor for what is happening in my life. No fences.

The external mirrors for the internal condition also include keys and locks, or rather, their absence. The doors to the house are never locked (Jane says she probably couldn't find the house keys to save her life). Keys to vehicles are left in the ignition. I simply do not carry keys; everything is open and accessible. I had a terrible time holding onto my keys when we went to the city yesterday.

All my adult life I have carried keys—house, car, business—and felt slightly more important and responsible the more keys I carried. Now I carry no keys at all, and I feel neither important nor unimportant, just incredibly light and free.

A Calf is Born

Yesterday I learned all the different categories of heifers: calf, replacement, first-calf, feeder, fat. We've been keeping an eye on two first-calf heifers for the last two weeks, and yesterday afternoon we got a call from T.W. (*tee-dub-ya*), who leases pasture from Jane, alerting us that our Brahman first-calf heifer was in labor down at the Eastman pens. I have been waiting for two months to witness this miraculous act. Last time a calf was born I was stuck in a snarl of traffic on the freeway in Kansas City and missed a picture-perfect birth in which the heifer was thoughtful enough to go into labor within easy view of the fence.

This event was even better because we've been keeping the heifer in the pens and checking her a couple times a day. We threw on our coats on a cloudy, drizzly afternoon, grabbed the camera, and headed to the bovine maternity ward. The last time I saw a calf born was over thirty years ago and certainly not at this close range. Two little hooves, legs and a nose were poking out of the birth canal when we arrived, a normal presentation. I'd just studied up on normal and abnormal presentations the other day when Jane went to Emporia and left me in charge of ob/gyn, with me praying that neither of the heifers would actually give birth while I was alone on the watch.

It was not hard to see when she was having a contraction. She got up and turned and then lay down on the ground, her side giving a giant heave as we stood in the cheering section and urged her on. This contraction pushed out the rest of the head and neck of the little dark calf with white markings.

In the same pen were two Brahman replacement heifers who'd been napping together when we arrived. They ambled curiously over to see what was going on, and could not resist giving a sniff and a lick to the newest arrival, even though he was only half born. These girls we refer to as the *auntie cows*.

While the mother-in-the-making rested between contractions, we could see the calf begin to breathe on its own, its pink tongue poking out as it tested the air of the strange new world into which it was in the process of arriving. We were riveted. One more contraction and the longest part of the body was out. Here the process crawled to a standstill as the weary heifer rested on her side, breathing heavily. Jane explained that if she'd just stand up, the calf would practically fall the rest of the way out. Finally, Jane stepped in to assist in the final step of getting the back hips and legs out. After her gloves slipped off the slick little legs, she looped a rope around them and gave it some oomph. Out slid the rest of the calf, a little bull, who was quite alert and immediately lifted his head.

In a few moments his mother got to her feet and stepped back a few yards to stand beside the other heifers and look at the new calf as if to say, *Where did that come from?* The maternal instinct is stronger in some first-calf heifers than others, and it took mom a little while to take to her motherly duties. The little bull, after a good cleaning, turns out to be variegated shades of cocoa brown with an endearing swatch of white across his forehead.

Picking Up Chicks

More new creations! Yesterday morning we went to Strong City to pick up chicks...three-day-old chickens at the feed store, that is. We picked out four each of four different breeds: Black Australorpe, Light Brahma, New Hampshire, and Cinnamon Queens. It's hard to believe that these tiny birds will someday be laying eggs for us.

We've spent the last twenty-four hours trying to keep the chicks warm, dry, well-fed and watered. They are quite comical in their explorations of their very small world, which is a big box filled with wood shavings and kept toasty with a heat lamp. We had the chicks out in the chicken coop in their big cardboard box until yesterday evening when the light blew out because of a leak in the roof. The weather has been very windy and rainy, so we brought the box of fuzz balls into the gray water room last night just to be on the safe side.

There are so many potential obstacles between these wee chicks and their future as productive members of the ranch family. Amongst their potential predators are our very own dogs and cats, not to mention snakes, coyotes, hawks, owls, disease and weather.

I feel like a nervous first-time mother.

A Midwife is Born

Last night at 5:45 pm I thought of our little Red Angus heifer. Dinner was in the oven and almost ready when I suddenly felt an urgency to go down to the barn, even though the weather was quite inhospitable.

Sure enough, when I got there I could see hooves poking out, so I raced back to the house, flung open the door and shouted, “We’re having a baby!”

Jane, the old pro, suggested we go ahead and eat our dinner, to give the heifer a chance to progress on her own. When we went back at 6:30 or so, we were well-armed with veterinary sleeves, obstetric chains, and a mechanical calf puller, just in case.

The wind was blowing dark clouds full of rain across the landscape and the road was sodden and slick with mud. By contrast, the barn seemed snug and cheery, warm and dry, scented sweetly with alfalfa. Unfortunately, little Red 60 had made no progress. I was about to become a midwife.

Our first task was to slip a halter over the heifer’s head so we could secure her in the small space. This task was a minor rodeo event, but very important. A well-timed kick or a break for the gate could be tough on the midwives.

Jane invited me to join her in donning the veterinary sleeves, examination gloves that extend up to the shoulder. Tentatively I slid my hand past the protruding hoof and leg to feel the second foreleg and then the calf’s warm nose and head. Assured that the calf was in position for pulling, Jane secured the small obstetric chains as far up on the calf’s legs as possible, to avoid breaking a leg or hoof. Each of us held one chain and pulled in tandem on the legs, in a slightly downward direction. With a bit more leg showing, and a little nose, we saw the calf’s tongue move, and Jane said, “This calf is alive and I believe we can pull it!”

We got set to attach the puller to the chains. A wide brace on the puller is set into position across the cow's hips, below the birth canal, and the chains are attached to a long ratcheting mechanism that alternately pulls one leg and then the other. My job was to set the brace while Jane hooked the chains, and then to keep the far end of the puller in a downward-slanting position and move with the heifer as she shifted, which she soon did, from standing up to laying on her side, a better position for what we were attempting. The birthing moved swiftly then, and before long we had a slick little Red Angus bull in the world.

The description of mechanics does not do justice to the magic and intimacy of the experience. Assisting in the delivery of a new life brought a sting of joyful tears to my eyes. We quickly removed the equipment and freed mama from the harness. She immediately turned to the first task of motherhood, briskly licking her new calf from head to tail.

Jane and I sat on upturned buckets, eating a dark chocolate bar with raspberries I happened to have in my pocket, and watching the classic, pastoral scene. "This is the best show in town," I said, and a few moments later: "Right now, nothing else in the world seems of much consequence." And Jane agreed—even though she's done this many times, it is still an enrapturing experience.

By 8 o'clock the calf, after several rather comical failed attempts, was standing on spindly, trembling new legs and searching for nourishment. Instinct is powerful and mysterious to behold. Mama nudged and licked and guided him until he took his first tiny, tentative suckle and then settled into noisy and lusty guzzling.

When I turned out the light and shut the barn door to go back out into the rain, I carried my joy with me like a glowing lantern into the cloudy night.

Defining Abundance

Today is May Day—the traditional marking of full Spring and flowers a-plenty, the abundance of the earth. This morning I made a May Day bouquet of wild prairie flowers and gave thanks for the bounty and beauty given freely by the land.

I've been thinking a great deal in the last couple of days about my growing consciousness of resources and how I use them. Living off the grid and being dependent on sun and wind for electricity, on the rain for water, on cattle and grass for a living, changes the way I think.

I like the way Jane put it last night: “We do not have unlimited resources, but most of the time we have abundance.” I like this perspective. In the modern world, especially in the American culture, I think we've come to equate abundance with not having to think at all about running out of something. There is no sense of moderation or stewardship, we are simply consumers calculating what we can afford.

Each morning on the ranch there are two important questions to ask: How much electricity do we have? What is the forecast for sun and wind? The answers dictate how many light switches we flip and how many electrical appliances we use during the day. This is not a hardship or even an inconvenience; it is simply a clear awareness of the direct correlation between supply and demand, weather and energy.

A digital display by the back door tells us exactly how much power we have at the moment. The cistern, which pumps water from the well once a day, contains a graduated pole that indicates how much water is available. A digital weather station in the window gives readings on wind speed, indoor and outdoor temperature, relative air pressure and humidity. All of these data enable conscious, responsible use of resources.

I used to think, as I reached to adjust the thermostat, of what I could afford. How expensive was gas or electricity? How much money did I have? Now I think quite differently: What can the sun and wind afford today?

I wonder what the world would be like, how attitudes would change, if everyone were as aware of what is reasonably available for their use. What if the earth had read-outs on available resources so we each knew the impact we were having on the supply? We are all stewards, whether we take the responsibility seriously or not. There will come a point at which it will not matter how much money we have to spend on what we want and need; the bottom line will be what the earth has left to give.

This life I'm learning to live requires cultivation of other simple awarenesses. All of the household water we pour down the sink, the tub, the shower, and the washing machine drain—called *gray* water after use—is cycled through a lava rock, sand, prairie dirt and living plant filtration system before being released back out to the land from whence it came. When I think about the lush, beautiful plants in the gray water greenhouse and the life-sustaining grasses out on the land, I think twice about what I put down the drain.

Our trash gets sorted for recycling. I begin thinking about the things I buy and how they're packaged. Can they be reused or recycled? Are they friendly to the earth? There is still weightier emphasis on *convenient* and *disposable* in the marketing world than there is on *recyclable*. And why not? Most people have weekly trash service that carts away what they don't want anymore. Not so out here. This lifestyle is much more akin to the *pack it in, pack it out* ethic of camping in wilderness areas. I have no choice but to confront my trash. To care about recycling requires a connection to and understanding of cycles...the food chain, the web of life, the direct consequences of how we choose to live. What if every single item we sent to the landfill required that we sign it like we would a check, to be debited from our Earth account?

All of our food waste here gets composted, including human waste. We have a composting toilet that requires only a few handfuls of sawdust a day and a little weekly and monthly maintenance. It's a bit challenging for most people to think romantically or poetically about what remains after our bodies utilize the nutrients in food and drink, but for a land-loving poet like myself, the equation is simple and philosophical: we are composed of earthy elements; everything we eat is from the earth; what we do not use can, with a little care, be safely returned to the earth. I grew up in a very sanitary, arm's-length, flush-oriented world. *And away go troubles down the drain.* It's where most of us live. There's something profound about staying around to take responsibility for the ultimate destination of your own crap!

Barn Swallows

Grace, cooperation, patience, purpose—these are the words that best describe the barn swallows who are crafting their nests on the side of the house. They take turns politely swooping in on the brisk prairie winds to cling to the wall for a few moments, bracing themselves with their delicately forked tails just long enough to strategically place a small bit of mud and straw on the vertical surface.

There is great care and precision in the way each tiny component is placed, and I marvel at how the blueprint must be etched into each bird's genetic memory, passed down on a strand of DNA, just as the route to Mexico is coded into each generation of monarch butterflies. I wonder if the patience I see exhibited here is native as well—it takes days and days for the nest to take shape.

How many humans could cheerily accept the task of building an abode with only what they could carry in their mouths, and flying against the wind to do so? Each nest, according to my *Birds of Kansas Field Guide*, takes up to a thousand beak-loads of mud.

* * *

A few more words about barn swallows: now I'm questioning my assumption that swallows are born with architectural know-how. It has become increasingly apparent that the project has a construction supervisor who has quite a lot to say about how things are done.

Now that it's warm enough to have windows open much of the time, I'm often awakened before sunrise by this particular bird's morning instructions to the crew. Actually, it's very hard to keep from laughing. The shrill speech calls to mind human lectures punctuated at regular intervals with the phrase "and one more thing...." From the tone and pacing I gather other bits: "You expect to get any work done? It's nearly 6:15—daylight's burning! And you—yes, you!

Does this look like a day camp? No, it's a construction site, so let's quite horsing around and start moving some mud. Move it, move it, move it."

Yesterday's rain made the swallows' work a great deal easier. We watched with interest as each bird in turn flew out to the grass for a bit of vegetation and then stopped by a patch of bare earth for a dab of mud. For days the nest looked like somebody had been spitting chewing tobacco at the side of the house for sport. Now I can see a graceful roundedness begin to take shape, and the nest is deep enough that it can actually be sat upon.

What a wonder are the ways of nature, the so-specific and marvelous gifts of individual species. Each tiny detail is its own miracle. I could no more build a house with mouthfuls of mud than the barn swallows could use this computer. Ain't diversity grand?

Arias on the Prairie

One morning last week the day was unfolding in full spring glory—crisp edge to the air, crystal-cut azure sky, warm sun. We were out with the truck and trailer on a mission: to haul five-year-old bales of Indian Grass (from the very same batch Jane used to build the house) and spread them out in a dry wash to encourage regrowth and prevent erosion.

Getting the bales to the draw, however, was taking a ridiculously long time—bales kept bouncing off the trailer whenever we hit a bump, which became kind of funny after awhile, even though I was the one who had to keep jumping out of the truck to reload the errant hay.

The point of this recounting is not really what we were doing, but the soundtrack that accompanied the work. Jane had the truck's radio tuned to a public radio station and I was bucking bales on a pristine tallgrass morning to strains of opera wafting across the prairie.

I must forgive myself for the long-held stereotype of ranchers and farmers driving in pickups and listening exclusively to twangy, beer-soaked, heart-broke country music. Why not opera? The music elevated the experience, lifted me up above a narrow-minded assumption, and made my heart soar with joy.

Back in the City

Spring in the leafy city—it's so very disconcerting being back in the metropolis, hearing a different chorus of birds and other morning sounds, most notably the hum of city life. I never used to notice the traffic sounds and the steady thrum of the built environment, which is strong evidence that a fair amount of desensitization is required in order to live in the midst of urban density.

One is allotted only a modest patch of sky between buildings and trees here in the city; seeing the horizon is out of the question from where I sit this morning (out on the ranch I can watch thunderstorms in three states). My chest doesn't heave open to allow my heart to rise up and greet the morning like it does out on the prairie. Jane used to mention a certain point on the freeway, south of the city, at which she ceased breathing deeply when driving into the metropolitan grid, and at which she could once again expand her lungs to full capacity on the way back out. Now I know what she meant.

All of these industrious morning sounds are still familiar, but I find I miss the ebullient bellowing of cows locating their calves, the joyous song of meadowlarks, the soft, dependable interjections of bobwhites.

This city is still easily navigable, but it is clearly no longer my heart's home. My inner compass points southwest and I will follow it as soon as I am able.

Chickens and Freedom

Our chickens are now fully feathered, although they still peep and cheep rather than cluck. We removed their small enclosure this week so they have the run of the whole chicken coop. One morning I went in to check them and found that they, a week or more after learning how to jump up on their boundary board to roost, had rather belatedly discovered that nothing held them back from freedom on the other side. They simply had to step off the edge.

Now we've set up a 240 square foot pen for them outside. I spent most of yesterday enclosing the top of the pen with chicken wire to protect my chicklets from becoming a snack for a hawk or other predator. Now their little door into the big world is open, with a ramp down to the grass, and so far no one has availed herself of this larger definition of the world. I've spent a bit of time watching the *door to freedom*, hoping to be there when the first chicken broke through the invisible barrier of fear.

Jane, master of incisive plainspeak, commented this morning: "Doesn't this remind you of humans? We'd rather sit in a dark little room in our own poop than step past our fears into all that's available on the other side."

One by one the birds take turns parading past the door—some with the courage to poke their necks out into the sunlight—then they each turn tail and go back into the darkness. I have new insight into why *chicken* is a synonym for *afraid*.

Cow Society Report

The huge, rust-red and white Zebu—I named her Noblesse, Blesse for short—had her calf yesterday. We’ve been watching her closely for ten days or so because she lost her first calf last year and is therefore *at risk*. She’s my personal favorite—she has such a proud and elegant bearing and wise eyes—a living embodiment of *sacred cow*. Her calf is a Brahman-Zebu cross—pure white with a light bronze face—and he is as big as the other ten-day-old calves, big-boned and long-eared like his mom. No wonder Blesse had such a hard time with labor and delivery last year!

Our other most exotic cow, the Watusi, just had her calf last week, also a Brahman cross. I’m afraid I must now wait quite a long time before answering the challenge made by one of my friends in Kansas City. She dared me to hang a feather boa on the Watusi and take her picture. The fact that the Watusi has horns that are each over 2 feet long is what makes this a true challenge. The fact that Watusi are incredibly protective of their young is what makes the boa a really bad idea until January or February of next year.

I understand a great deal more about cow society, cow culture, and cow community after working closely with them for a few months. As often happens with increased knowledge and understanding, there is a correlative increase in appreciation and respect. Longfellow’s reference in the *Psalm of Life* to *dumb, driven cattle* does a terrible disservice to the species, especially cows. To be clear about my use of the term cows, *cattle* refers collectively to the species; *cow* and *bull* describe the sexually mature female and male; in calves, *heifer* and *bull* are gender identification; however, a *bull* who’s been relieved of his testicles instantly becomes a *steer*. There are many other subtleties to the nomenclature, but these are some of the basics.

So, as I was saying, I personally don’t think of cows as dumb or driven. Longfellow’s reference, however, is a bit more understandable if he’d watched a hundred yearlings, either

heifer or steer, being pushed through a loading chute just before he wrote the *Psalm of Life*. Yearlings out in the pasture have an uncanny resemblance to human teenagers in large groups, and the Group Intelligence Quotient can be ascertained by taking the highest single I.Q. and dividing it by the total number of either teenagers or yearlings. One yearling can have a really stupid idea and twenty-five others will cheerfully copy the behavior. If you've ever had a slumber party for teens at your house, you probably recognize some parallels.

In a cow-calf operation like we have here at the ranch, however, there is very little that would evoke either *dumb* or *driven*. Placid, yes. Contented, certainly. But I would also add: curious, nurturing, patient, communicative and cooperative.

Jane, only slightly tongue in cheek, often notes her desire to write a book entitled, "Women Who Run With the Cows" and also likes to say that "it takes a whole herd to raise a calf." I have seen this with my own eyes. There are clearly *auntie cows* without calves of their own who are in attendance at births, graduations, celebrations and funerals. There are also *daycare cows* who serve on a mysterious rotating schedule as supervisors and caretakers of calves whose mothers have gone off to graze for a bit. Whenever I see one of these pastoral clusters, I want to take a picture: one to three cows will be babysitting up to a dozen calves. Oftentimes all of the calves will be curled up cozily on the grass while one cow stands facing them. You cannot convince me that they are not having Story Time.

I saw a daycare group that surprised me today. It demonstrated flexibility and integration, which is not always evident when two herds have been put in the same pasture as they have here this spring. A neighboring rancher who rents pasture from Jane recently turned out a herd of sale barn gummets and their calves in the McDowell with our herd. *Gummer* is a not particularly delicate term for an old cow who has very little left by way of teeth. After raising their calves, they are destined for the livestock market, probably as *canners and cutters*, another less than delicate term for older cows that won't sell as higher quality beef. I get a little sad for the old

gals because I know that these are their last calves and this is the last sweet springtime of their lives. On the other hand, there's little I like better than a beef roast. I'm still coming to terms with this cognitive and emotional dissonance between my love of beef on the hoof and beef on my plate.

Anyway, I was checking cows yesterday when I happened upon a daycare group supervised by Blesse the Zebu from our herd, who was watching a group of calves for the gummer gals. This is really kind of unusual, especially because there were no other members of our herd anywhere around, only kindly Blesse and her new calf, volunteering for duty in an adopted cow community. Talk about civic engagement. I love that cow.

There's little doubt in my mind that cows have emotions: pleasure, outright joy, frustration, anger, fear, love, and grief. The most compelling demonstration of the latter is that a cow whose calf has died will wear a circle in the grass down to bare dirt pacing around and around her calf's body. Early on, Jane gave me an article to read on Cow Psychology. It wasn't about how to do therapy on a troubled cow, but rather, how to understand what cows can see, how they think and react, and what makes them balk or bolt.

Cow communication is also an interesting field of study. There's nothing quite so plaintive as a calf calling for its mother, or so urgent as the bellow of a cow who's lost track of her calf in the course of her daily ruminations. When calves are weaned, both cows and calves will call across the fence until they're hoarse. It's enough to break your heart. The most tender and dear form of cow communication is between a mother and her newborn calf. Jane thinks *the cattle are lowing* in *Away in a Manger* describes this sound a mother makes, so sweet and soft, starting low in the chest and belly, and gently resonating in the throat.

Calves respond with little sounds of their own, soft little *emms* and *umms* and *ommms*, like embryonic moos. I have yet to discover exactly what cue a mother gives to her calf when I

get too close in the pasture, but it's easy to tell when she's given the signal; her calf gets up and follows closely at her side, away from perceived danger.

There is a great deal of nonverbal communication between cows as well, a variety of licks, nudges, kicks, head-butts and even caresses. Cows are actually quite delicate and coordinated when they need to be. I've seen a huge cow scratch an itch under her eye with her hind foot. I expected her to poke herself in the eye and promptly tip over, but the maneuver was as gracefully executed as a dancer's plié.

Gift from the Permian Sea

Back in April I fell in love with a rock. It seemed a modest enough desire to want that rock close to the house. The weathered gray limestone was pocked with mysterious caves and tunnels, with grasses and wildflowers growing in a few of its pockets. One of the hollowed-out basins on the top of the rock was as big as a soup bowl, ringed inside by the story of rains that have come and gone. Jane fell in love with that rock, too, and we've taken several visitors out to see *Marva's rock*.

A few days ago we began to consider how to get it back to the house. The rock wasn't terribly big—thirty inches long, eighteen inches wide and about a foot tall. Obviously it was too big to move by hand, but we have a lot of tools at our disposal. We took the one-ton feed truck out to the site; it has hydraulic arms with enough muscle to move a 1,500 pound hay bale. The rock budged just a little, but still clung to the earth like a tooth with very healthy roots.

We dug around the rock with a sharp shovel, loosening the tenacious network of roots that made sodbusters weep when they first tried to break the land in the 1800s. The root systems of prairie grasses and forbs go down as far as sixteen feet into the ground. According to my grassland bible, *Pasture and Range Plants*, "It is almost impossible to imagine the enormous tonnage of root material hidden away in the soil of a bluestem range. Detail weight checks show 6,000 to 7,000 pounds per acre of plant material in the first six inches of soil under excellent bluestem grassland." This is difficult to fathom, but trying to chop through it with a shovel helps to bring the message home. Still, digging down six inches or so did little to loosen the rock.

I went back the next day with my shovel and dug even more, seeking the outer limits of the rock. I found a spine of rock below the surface that added another foot to the rock's length. It was impossible to gauge the full extent of the undertaking, but by then we were thoroughly engaged in the challenge. Yesterday we went back with a John Deere tractor and tried lifting it

with the enormous hydraulic-driven bucket on the front of the tractor. The front wheels of the John Deere popped a foot off the ground. It was becoming obvious that our rock might well bear comparison to an iceberg, seven-eighths of which is typically below the surface of the water. Turns out I was not too far off in drawing this parallel.

At the controls of the tractor, Jane jockeyed the rock a little at a time while I shouted encouragement. The rock was moving, but then again, so was the surface of the ground two feet out from the rock. We stopped and dug by hand for awhile, loosening more roots, and then leaned the tractor into the task once again. Finally the earth gave a heave and a pop and reluctantly gave up the rock into our possession, and Lord have mercy, it was huge and wondrous to behold. We wrapped a chain around its tapered middle and hooked the chain to the top of the bucket on the tractor. Jane drove gingerly home across the pasture with that beautiful rock dangling in the air.

I measured the rock when we got home. According to my calculations, nearly three-quarters of it's bulk had been underground, and every little cleft below the surface was jammed full of rich, black prairie earth and thousands of roots. "Wow! This rock must be thousands of years old," said Jane as we stood and admired our new sculpture. "More like millions," said I, just before running into the house to reread an article I'd found on Kansas geology.

I have in my office a picture that purports to show what you might have seen if you could have gone snorkeling in the Permian Sea that once covered most of Kansas for millions of years. I have been deeply drawn to the idea of this sea and the chapters of its story left to be read in the language of rocks and soil. I just have a very hard time wrapping my head around the numbers.

The Permian Period was the last in the Paleozoic Era—just before the dinosaurs—and most of the rocks near the surface in the Flint Hills were created during the almost 42 million years the Permian Sea rose and fell, leaving layers of rich sediment that would become the limestone, shale and chert (also known as *flint*, which, when partnered with steel, gives birth to

fire) that form our hills. It's also worth noting that all of this occurred 248-290 million years ago. How am I supposed to run this data through the little tiny computer in my head? The morning weather report will be on in fifteen minutes—how can I even conceive of 290 million years?

To further boggle the brain, seas covered Kansas long before that; 545 million years ago Kansas was perhaps as dry as it is now, but for about 300 million years it was mostly under shallow seas, rich with marine plants and creatures, salts, sand, silt and clay. Alternating with changes in climate that caused the seas to rise and fall, violent uplift occurred from time to time. Many of the Permian-age rocks we find in the Flint Hills are at odd angles, vertical rather than horizontal to the surface, like little white gravestones clustered along the brows of the hills. I believe that our rock is an example of this powerful shifting and heaving of the earth. "Our rock," I was dazzled to report to Jane, "is probably at least 250 million years old."

Our rock may be big, but its age is an even bigger matter to contemplate. It makes me feel extraordinarily small and temporary. "What is man, that thou art mindful of him?" is a perennially pertinent question posed by the Psalmist and echoed by St. Paul. More contemporary contemplators upon the divinity in all nature asked companion questions. In the late 1800s John Muir asked, "Why should man value himself as more than a small part of the one great unit of creation?" In 1923 Aldo Leopold queried, "Was the earth made for man's use or has man merely the privilege of temporarily possessing an earth made for other and inscrutable purposes?" Leopold also said, "It just occurs to me, however, in answer to the scientists, that God started his show a good many million years before he had any men for audience...and it is just barely possible that God himself likes to hear birds sing and see flowers grow." Muir, after his first view from the rim of Yosemite Valley in 1869 wrote this:

When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find that it is bound fast, by a thousand invisible cords that cannot be broken, to everything in the universe. I fancy I can hear a heart beating in every crystal, in every grain of sand and see a wise plan in the making and shaping and placing of every one of them. All seems to be dancing in time to divine music.

Some of that music, it seems to me, was written when our rock was young, and even now all of creation is woven in glorious interdependence just as tightly as the prairie roots that bound our rock to the earth for hundreds of millions of years before I came along to dance my small bit in the universal show. A little less hubris and a little more humility does not threaten the stability of my faith. “A little lower than the angels” is too high for me; I’d be quite content to possess the same divine significance as the rocks and roots of the prairie.

Preserving the Wild Things

At this time of year it does little good to put several of our reference books back on the shelf; one of us will undoubtedly pull them back out tomorrow. *Tallgrass Prairie Wildflowers*, *Birds of Kansas Field Guide*, *A Guide to the Great Snakes of Kansas*, these all end up on the kitchen counter, the coffee table or the desk. Binoculars and a camera are also close at hand. The prairie is a busy, busy place in the spring and it's a fulltime job to keep up with everything that's a-blooming and a-borning.

The other day we sat down and completed an inventory of all the birds we've seen or heard this spring and came up with a list of thirty-eight. We've seen bullsnakes (also known as gopher snakes), common kingsnakes, and a Massasauga, the smallest Kansas rattlesnake.¹ We've spotted deer, coyotes, bobcats, skunks, packrats, mice, cottontails and jackrabbits.

I have found it impossible to keep track of the wildflowers, they are so incredibly profuse. Pasque Flower, Blue Toadflax, Blue Wild Indigo, Prairie Ragwort, Fringed Puccoon—the list of what we see and learn each day goes on and on. My sprinting mind, always at work on some little puzzle or another, has begun coping with the excess of wildflower data by fixating on those that would make good aliases, cartoon characters or vaudeville stage names. Here are a few of my personal favorites: Daisy Fleabane, Virginia Spiderwort, Meadow Parsnip, Scurfy Pea, Sneezewort Aster, Rose Vervain.

These are our precious wild things on a bit of holy ground in the Flint Hills of Kansas.

Just this week we received a draft document prepared by some concerned citizens who've been leading the fight to save the Flint Hills from becoming home to industrial-scale wind energy development. You might wonder why we'd be opposed to development of renewable energy. We're not. We just don't want hundreds of 400-foot-tall wind turbines in the middle of

¹ A word of reassurance for those of you who care about my well-being, and also for those of you who like me enough (or Jane or the Flint Hills) to come out for a visit, according to *A Guide to the Great Snakes of Kansas*, "Death from snakebite in the wild is a rarity; there has been only one fatality from that cause in Kansas since 1950." Jane has never been bitten in her 25 years on this land. Emma the dog has been bitten twice and lived to tell about it; Jane no longer rushes her to the vet for expensive anti-venom, she just gives her some Benadryl.

such an environmentally significant area. The blades on the industrial turbines are as long as the tower for our little residential-scale wind generator is tall. The amount of concrete it takes to secure a 400 foot tower brings to mind Joni Mitchell's *they paved paradise and put up a parking lot*. Here's a paragraph from the document that helps put the significance of my new home and work into perspective:

North America's native grassland is some of the most diminished and threatened ecosystem in the world. More than 96% of the original Tallgrass Prairie in North America has been lost (Dr. David Hartnett, KSU). No other major North American ecosystem has been as severely impacted. Nearly two-thirds of the continent's surviving Tallgrass Prairie resides within the Flint Hills. This unique landscape is still relatively unspoiled by the pressures of modern development and is worthy of meaningful preservation.

I like what Peter Forbes says in *The Great Remembering: Further thoughts on land, soul and society* (2001), a book that everyone who loves the land ought to run right out and buy:

In too many places, this culture of ours has planed away the rough edges to give us a world that has become soft, similar, and unspectacular. When we have little sense of where we are, we also have little sense of who we are. If both land and people lose what is most unique and irreplaceable about themselves, all of us risk being homeless.

Soft, similar, and unspectacular strikes me as a nearly perfect description of newer suburban subdivisions with their off-the-rack floor plans and standardized palette of bleached-out browns and grays. And here's a scary statistic from Peter Forbes: *American countryside is being transformed by sprawl at 365 acres per hour*. At that rate, it would take less than 11 hours to decimate the Homestead Ranch, a heaven-crammed bit of earth upon which we hope to preserve as many rough edges as we can.

I think I'll go out and sit on a 250 million year old rock to put all this into perspective.

Microcosm in Balance

A New Art

I need a new art to augment my writing, something capable of capturing things too big for words: rain, wind, lightning, floods, birth, death, the constant movement of energy. I need a giant drum to beat or an oversized canvas and paints. I need a full orchestra to conduct or hands that know how to sculpt things on the scale of Mt. Rushmore.

Failing that, I wish I had a black box in my head, a tiny flight recorder that could be removed each day and downloaded, so there would be some manageable way to track my trajectory through these remarkable days.

I am consumed and subsumed, stymied and flummoxed. On many days I find myself uncharacteristically speechless.

This landscape is far too grand for the meager art I bring to all that begs to be given expression.

Chickens with Built-In Timers

I get asked about my chickens fairly often. Seems most people like chickens and have a grandma or a neighbor who used to raise them. Lots of people ask if we have a rooster. We don't. A rooster is unnecessary to the getting of nice brown eggs; he is only essential to producing future generations of chickens. Roosters are famous for having a built-in timer (not to be confused with a pop-up timer, which is an entirely different matter), for crowing loudly at predictable times of day. Chickens, it seems, are every bit as reliable, just not in a noisy way.

Here's how I know. At the advice of Kathy at K & K Feed in Strong City, I have begun letting my chickens out of their pen for about an hour-and-a-half in the evening. "Throw 'em out a little wheat and you can train 'em to do about anything," she advised. Perhaps I should get a little tiny piano and some percussion instruments.

I started letting the girls out at about 7:30 pm. I'd throw a little wheat on the ground outside the pen and say *chick-chick-chick* like my Grandma Pauline used to do. Pretty soon I didn't even have to throw any treats, I just opened the gate and they came running out to feast on grasshoppers, gnats, mosquitoes, and the luscious little seeds on grasses. When I wanted them to go back inside, I'd walk toward them and say *shoo-shoo-shoo* and they'd grumble, but they did consent to be herded in a fashion. One night I was out fairly late doing chores. When I got home I noticed the chickens had put themselves to bed on their own. I started paying closer attention. At 7:30 they all gather round the gate waiting to be let out. How do they know? I check for little tiny wristwatches. If I leave them alone, they have a grand time until a silent alarm goes off at about 9 o'clock and they all run into the chicken house. This amazes me.

My chickens are growing up. All sixteen of them now speak fluent adult chicken. There is one with such a deep-chested cluck, it sounds like a dog barking. They are practicing their flying. I imagine it's about like the early days at Kitty Hawk; they run like the dickens to propel

themselves about a foot off the ground and then careen madly forward through the air about three or four feet, cackling all the way, with a loud “BOCK” upon landing.

Just last week we graduated from chick-sized feeding and watering devices to higher-capacity equipment. I also rigged up a cable system that allows me to open and close their little chicken door without going into the pen or the chicken house. One of these days, though, I’ll have to check the chicken house every day, as soon as these girls start laying eggs, which could be any minute now. When I do, my new muck-boots will come in very handy. Chickens are prolific poopers and they are not the least bit particular about where they do so.

The chickens are quite comfortable with me. They’re interactive and responsive. During the heat of the day they tend to stay in the chicken house, but if I open the gate to throw them some watermelon rinds, green bean tips, mushy cherries or other delectables, they come running out with great enthusiasm. Every morning I count to sixteen, making sure my girls have come to no harm. At night I like to listen in at the window after they’ve put themselves to bed. It sounds like a cabin at girl’s camp: jostling, gossiping, kvetching, shushing, saying goodnight.

At the Old Ball Game

If you're looking for the heart in the Heart of America, the youth summer baseball league in Kansas will get you there. We've been following the Chase County 12-and-under boy's team all summer because Jane's nephew Jim is on the team. Bring your portable chair, your cooler, your pistachios and Bing cherries, whatever's in season. Or buy some popcorn and a Coke at the concession stand. Find a spot in the close-clipped grass, visit with people you know and some you don't know yet. Watch the big orange sun slide lazily down toward the western horizon. Root-root-root for the home team. Win or lose, you're proud and filled with an inexpressible gladness. Gather with family and friends after the game to celebrate a birthday with homemade ice cream and brownies in the stone picnic pavilion.

This is summertime in rural America at its very best.

Regular season is over now and Jim was good enough to make it onto the Cottonwood Valley team, made up of former rivals from Chase County, Marion and Hillsboro—the cream of the crop. This weekend they played, along with teams from Lyons, Moundridge, Hesston, Council Grove and Newton in the Cal Ripken District 4 Tournament in Peabody, population 1,384. Tonight our boys play Council Grove for the championship.

What is it about a city park on a summer evening with a baseball game as centerpiece? If only it were possible to bottle that mysterious mixture of hope, pride, nostalgia and camaraderie! Each game begins with a recitation of The Sportsmanship Code of the Babe Ruth League and the national anthem belted out by a 7th grade girl from Peabody who obviously loves both her country and country music.

There's a timelessness about the park and the game itself, about the sweaty, earnest, eager boys of summer. It could easily be 1970, 1960, 1950 and you could be anywhere in small-town America. Every hour the train goes by, blowing its resonant whistle at crossings. Children

race barefoot after foul balls, for each one is worth 25 cents. The announcer punctuates the play-by-play with trivia questions: Who invented baseball? *Alexander Joy Cartwright*. Who was the original Louisville Slugger? *Pete Browning*. What's the only game in which Babe Ruth did not play? *A night game*. Each correct answer is worth a tournament t-shirt, a corndog or an order of nachos from Sharon's Rollin' Kitchen (*Have Food, Will Travel*), an old travel trailer serving up a variety of treats, none of them priced over \$3.50: brisket, German sausage, Polish sausage, hotdogs, corndogs, funnel cake, ice cream sundaes, root beer floats.

This is the heart of America and it is most assuredly still beating.

Tangled Up in the Devil's Rope

We tried to save the life of a deer this June, but we failed. She was a nursing doe. Somewhere out there in the tall grass or the trees was a motherless fawn we did not find, and I have been struggling to make sense of all the layers of significance in this particular saga.

If the tallgrass prairie was still like it used to be 200 years ago, which is part of the vision that fuels our work out here, I would not be writing this story. Three main components of the tale would not have converged in 1804, for this is a unique tragedy of civilizing influences. Allow me to take the long way around to the rest of the story, kind of *the foot bone's connected to the ankle bone* route to the heart of the matter.

First of all, the tallgrass prairie 200 years ago had very few, if any, white-tailed deer. They're here in significant numbers now. Why are there so many woodland citizens in a grassland? This is a dangerous question because it has a long and complicated answer. I'll try to be brief, but forgive me, I've been thinking about this for almost a month. In a nutshell, we have deer on our grasslands because the prairie has been gradually becoming more like a woodland, not because of a natural evolution, but as a result of human intervention.

The presence of trees on the prairie is due in part to a couple of pivotal pieces of early legislation—The Homestead Act and the Timber Culture Act—both of which focused on cultivation of plants not native to the prairie.

The Homestead Act was passed by Congress during the Lincoln administration in 1862 and took effect January 1, 1863. In a somewhat subtle irony, this is the same day the Emancipation Proclamation became effective, granting freedom to people we never had the right to enslave on the very day we systematically began to put into bondage land that was never truly ours to own. I may appear to digress, but in truth, everything is connected. But back to the legislation, in brief, the Act declared that any citizen (and this included the slaves who were now

theoretically free) or intended citizen could claim 160 acres—one quarter square mile, also known as a quarter section—of surveyed government land. Claimants were charged with the responsibility to *improve* the plot with a dwelling and cultivated crops. After five years, if the original filer was still on the land, it was his or her property, free and clear.

The Timber Culture Act, introduced ten years later by a Senator from Nebraska, was another law that encouraged *civilization* of what had once been referred to as The Great American Desert. If a settler planted forty acres of timber (reduced to ten acres in 1878) and fostered their growth for ten years, the individual was entitled to that quarter section of land. The Act also permitted homesteaders who occupied their land for three years, with one acre of trees under cultivation for two of those three years, to receive a patent to the land. The law was eventually repealed in 1882; it was a little too easy for land speculators to take advantage of its intentions.

Considering the fact that most of the pioneers came here from places in which trees were abundant, they were more than happy to plant them on the range for windbreaks and shade, for firewood and fenceposts, and to make the treeless prairie seem just a little more like home. This brings up a question: why have we historically been so eager to make the places we go look as much as possible like the places from which we came?

Planting trees on the prairie has only recently come to light as a bad idea. Russian olive, black locust, honey locust, Osage orange (known locally as *hedge*), Eastern red cedar, blackjack oak—these trees are the legacy of The Homestead and Timber Culture acts. Although it is rare to see a tree from an original claim, the sons and daughters of those trees have been carried down through the years by wind, water and birds. The seedlings seek and find their fortune along creeks, in abandoned fields, or in poorly-managed pasture. Once established, locust and hedge in particular are stubborn and persistent. If you cut down either one and fail to treat the stump with a herbicide, it will promptly sprout a dozen shoots with which to replace itself.

Other efforts to accomplish dominion over these wild, windy, rocky grasslands—cultivation of extractive crops and fencing the open range, for example—were equally presumptuous and ultimately damaging to a complex and delicate system. “We can never know,” wrote George Perkins Marsh in 1965, “how wide a circle of disturbance we produce in the harmonies of nature when we throw the smallest pebble into the ocean of organic life.”

The Homestead Range Renewal Initiative (HRRI) we are undertaking here on the ranch is driven by the vision of returning our small section of the prairie to its original treeless state. There are a great many trees between us and this vision, a fact that has given me much to consider. The truth is, I am a lover of trees. I have planted trees, climbed them, sheltered often in their shade, and yes, hugged trees on numerous occasions. Just the other day, working cattle in the full-on sun of a July afternoon, I would gladly have given about anything for a tree to shade the pens I shared with a bunch of hot-bodied, uncooperative cows. This blunt wisdom from Randy Rodgers, a wildlife biologist from Hays, has helped me begin the monumental task of letting go of the trees:

...it is as much an act of redemption for us to kill trees that invade our prairies as it is for others to plant trees in a forest clear cut. It is not for us on the plains to grow second-rate versions of the great deciduous forests of the east or the conifer forests of the west. Our responsibility is to guard our precious remaining prairies for ourselves and our children, for spectacular prairie chickens and tiny grasshopper sparrows, and for the other people and creatures of the Earth.

So, gathering the threads of my story so far—deer and the trees that provide them with suitable habitat—I highlight a third thread, sort of the villain of the tale. I already mentioned this element briefly as one of humanity’s tools for dominion over wide-open spaces: fences.

Nine patents were issued between 1868 and 1874 for various improvements on what ultimately became known as barbed wire. This invention has been credited with affecting political, social, and economic practices throughout the region, ranking with the rifle, six-shooter, telegraph, windmill, and locomotive as the primary tools that tamed this part of the country. According to one source:

The widespread use of barbed wire changed life on the Great Plains dramatically and permanently. Land and water once open to all was fenced off by ranchers and homesteaders with predictable results. Cattlemen, increasingly cut off from what they regarded as common-use resources...first filed land-use petitions and then waged fierce range wars against the property-owning farmers. Gradually, there was a discernible shift in who controlled the land and thus wielded the superior power. Living patterns of nomadic Native Americans were radically altered as well. Further squeezed from lands they had always used, they began calling barbed wire "the Devil's rope."²

The Devil's rope is ubiquitous now. It has been used everywhere from farms to ranches to prisons to concentration camps. For our part, we'd like to get rid of as much barbed wire on this ranch as we can. So far this year we've removed nearly a mile and a half of fence.

Altogether, if you calculate the length for all five strands of wire on a fence, we've taken down 2,285 rods, or about seven miles of wire.

So, if you'll permit me one last frantic knitting session to pull all the strands together, or to connect the foot bone to the ankle bone to the leg bone, I'll at last get around to telling you the actual story of the deer, which is heartbreaking and troubling at an even deeper level for all this connectivity.

Because the white pioneers came west with the intent to break the wild prairie before it broke them, they cultivated the land and planted trees and otherwise exercised dominion, with blessing and subsidization by the U.S. government. The crops and trees reduced the quantity and vigor of the native vegetation, but provided inroads for wildlife like the deer. Trees and deer are opportunistic and adaptable; prairie chickens and Henslow's sparrows are not. The land, seized from a common pool of resources used with reverence and thrift by indigenous peoples long before any European explorers ever landed, was surveyed and platted and claimed and fenced with the Devil's rope. Those fences created thousands of tiny monarchies in which cattle were each king's highest priority, and so the predators of cattle, such as wolves, which were also the predators of deer, were systematically extirpated. The system of natural checks and balances that had functioned perfectly well for thousands of years was fatally disrupted. And the doe we tried

² <http://inventors.about.com>

to save, innocent of anything but natural cravings and wanderings and a failure to heed “No Trespassing” signs, got caught in the middle.

Here’s what happened. Susan and Anne had just left here on a Sunday afternoon, heading back home to Comanche County, hauling two horses and a mule, a wet tent and soggy sleeping bags. The weekend had been busy and full of people here on the ranch for Jane’s birthday. We were all weary, and Susan and Anne had a four-hour drive ahead of them. I had just untied my shoes and was about to stretch out on the bed for a long-anticipated afternoon nap when the phone rang. Susan’s voice on the other end had that mixed quality of calm and urgency that marks a person adept at responding to crisis. “Bring wire pliers. There’s a deer caught in the fence just past the McDowell.”

Emergencies are a part of life to which I have become quite adept at responding usefully. I don’t dither; I’m swift and decisive. Without even bothering to tie my shoes, I grabbed some tools and jumped in the Polaris. The trip from here to there only takes about five minutes, but it seemed like I had hours of time to imagine the different ways in which a deer could be trapped in barbed wire.

“Turn on your best animal karma,” said Susan, as I arrived and hastily handed her one of the two pair of wire pliers I’d brought with me. “I’ll take one side and you get the other; we’ll have to be careful because she’ll probably kick and flail when we start cutting her loose.”

“I have good animal karma,” I assured her, “but let me tie my shoes first.” I crouched down to secure my laces, studying the unfortunate position into which the doe had gotten herself. All four of her legs were tangled in the barbed wire and she was hanging upside down, bringing to mind an animal trussed and hung from a spit for cooking. She had clearly been there for quite some time. The worn-down patch of mud and grass under her back told the story of her frantic struggle to free herself over long hours, perhaps even overnight.

A story often benefits from a little good-news-bad-news tension, and in this case both the good and bad news lay in one fact: the doe did not kick and flail. This was good because Susan and I suffered no injuries. This was bad because it meant the deer was in deep shock. She was still breathing, but quickly and shallowly, her pulse racing irregularly. Her amazingly slim and fragile-looking legs were terribly gouged and bloodied by the barbs. Susan, a veteran of horse, cattle and mule doctoring over many years on her ranch, knew enough to move each limb to check for breaks. More good news. Each positive sign fostered a correlative increase in our hope that there was something we could do. “Look,” said Susan, touching the doe’s tight bag, “she’s nursing. There’s a fawn out here somewhere.”

We also had a second opinion from a nurse who works at the prison down by El Dorado. She and her husband and son had been driving by when Susan and Anne stopped. They pulled over too, waiting to see if there was anything they could do to help. The instant community that forms around a crisis is one of the more beautiful things about the human experience. As we were assessing the doe’s condition, another passerby had stopped as well, a tool-pusher on an off-shore oil rig who does a little work for us on the ranch from time to time. He could not resist making several joking references to “venison” and “dinner” during the next hour, but in fairness, he was also the only person who called the next morning to inquire about the doe.

I hate to make any generalizations about gender-based responses to trouble of this nature, but without any formal assignment of responsibility, the two men and the young boy began to discuss the matter of fixing the fence we’d cut while the women considered how to move the deer out of the sun down by a little creek, how to replenish the doe’s fluids, how to dress her wounds, and where her fawn might be. Everybody mobilized to do what they could. Anne supplied a big piece of plastic sheeting we could use to transport the deer across the pasture. The nurse contributed her bottle of drinking water. Susan got her horse first-aid kit out of the trailer. I ran home to mix up a bag of electrolytes and grab a fence stretcher. The men went to find some

wire to mend the fence. Before long, Jane and Sherry came down from the house to see if there was anything they could offer by way of help or encouragement.

Finally, after Susan had managed to coax a considerable quantity of water and electrolytes down the deer's throat with a syringe, encouraging her with soft words and by gently stroking her neck to make her swallow, and after dressing her wounds with a clear liquid that dries to form a transparent bandage, there was little else we could do. We were so invested by that time, however, that we were reluctant to leave without some sign that our efforts had made a difference.

I'd noticed that one side of the deer's face and neck were encrusted in mud from her struggle on the ground; her eye looked dry and abraded. Having nothing else constructive to do, I took the bandanna off my head and went down to the creek to soak it in water. The opportunity for such intimacy with a wild creature was unprecedented in my experience. I gently washed her eyelashes and face and bathed her throat and neck with the cool cloth, going back and forth to the creek for fresh water. It's the kind of thing a mother does when there's nothing else to do. By then her breathing had slowed and deepened to a more normal rate and, wonder of wonders, she actually lifted her head for a moment.

When we all parted ways, the doe's band of Good Samaritans was reasonably hopeful. I promised to come back and check on her in a few hours. Susan stopped on her way to the truck. "You just know there's always a lesson in something like this," she mused, "but when a bunch of people show up, you never know if it's for you or someone else." I drove home wondering if it wasn't possible that there were lessons for all of us. At the very least, it reminded me of the timelessness of these 400-year-old lines from *The Merchant of Venice*:

The quality of mercy is not strain'd,
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath: it is twice bless'd:
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.

Sherry and I went back to check at sunset. We were encouraged that the doe was still breathing and had evidently moved just a little from the position in which we'd left her. I said a little prayer and left some meat scraps down the road, in hopes the coyotes would accept it as an offering and leave the deer in peace.

Early the next morning I went back by myself to check on her. You already know how the story ends. I gave it away in the very beginning. Still, I have to finish the tale.

I could tell the minute I saw her that her spirit had vacated her body and I felt very sad and deeply disappointed, as if someone had let me down, played a dirty trick. Still, I tried to be philosophical: she looked peaceful, the coyotes had not disturbed her, we did our best. I went home and looked up the significance of Deer Medicine and found that deer teaches about the *power of gentleness*, that I should seek the *gentleness of spirit that heals all wounds*.

This is lovely and admirable, but for a week I watched the vultures disassembling the deer in the very spot where we'd tried so hard to keep her alive. And I could not, of course, help thinking that her abandoned fawn would be a small feast for them soon. Then the rains came, flooding the creek, and eventually I could not see anything left of the doe. Nevertheless, I think of her every time I pass that bend in the road.

Since then, we've lost two calves and had a neighbor's bull die in our pasture. The damn vultures have been everywhere. Their presence is haunting; it is inseparable from an awareness of death.

The primary definition of *resurrect* is "to raise from the dead." But there's a second meaning that makes more sense out here: "to bring to view, attention, or use again." In all of my pondering and historical research and writing here, tracing the connections between land and people, trees and deer, barbed wire fence and the taming of wild places, I have resurrected the deer, brought her to your attention, used her again to illuminate several interesting points.

The vultures have resurrected her as well, used her again to sustain themselves. Eventually, through the complex and imponderable cycles of nature, she will live again in the soil that feeds the grass that absorbs carbon dioxide and stores carbon to feed itself. And that grass, if we do not interfere with our plows and pesticides, will return, season after season, a renewable resource that sustains the cattle that provide us with burgers and pot roasts and steaks.

If we had the time, I could keep on calling this circle-dance of death and resurrection all night long. No living thing is exempt from the cycle. We feed and are fed upon. And everything, whether we comprehend it or not, is connected.

News on the Ground

This is my news: ten calves were born, two calves died; the ironweed, compass plant and wooly verbena are in bloom; the doe died; Little Cedar Creek flooded on the 4th of July; a magnificent Black Angus bull died; another nestful of barn swallows is fledged; the amount of available light is incrementally decreasing each day; it will soon be time to cut the Eastern Gamma grass again and put Oscar the Red Angus bull out with the Simmons Herd. This is news on the ground.

I made a conscious decision a number of years ago to stop reading newspapers and watching or listening to the news, effectively becoming what I've heard referred to as a *media celibate*. My current idea of hell is to be stuck in the television display area of an electronics store with every TV tuned to a different cable news station featuring endlessly scrolling digital bulletins and 24-hour-a-day reports.

I don't feel particularly defensive about this stance, but I do have a few things to say by way of explanation. News weighs heavily on my spirit. Apparently senseless tragedies happen all the time. For 25 years I lived in the urban core of Kansas City, a city rated by the FBI in 2001 as the third most unsafe city in America (behind St. Louis and Atlanta) based on the most reported crimes per 1,000 people. I'm a sensitive person; it was just too much.

News is also, in my opinion, only marginally useful for keeping in touch with "reality." It is weighted toward tragedy and loss, rarely balanced with an equal amount of joy and success. I've found that the weekly *Chase County Leader-News* does a better job with balance than what I was used to in *The Kansas City Star*. I've compromised my celibacy to read the local paper's homey notes on who visited whom, the report from the Senior Citizens' Center, Student of the Week Awards and other more encouraging words.

News mobilizes emotions that rarely produce meaningful individual action in the lives of ordinary citizens. Fear and fretting are not particularly productive. News is what enables terrorists to more effectively terrorize us. News may also, I'm afraid, be responsible for a creeping desensitization that causes people to underreact to critical occurrences in daily life, closer to home. Not just news, but television in general, inundates and inures us. I rarely watch television. The stream of information is too much, too fast, too insidious for my comfort. Here are a couple of alarming bits of information:

The average person can recognize 1,000 corporate logos but can't recognize ten plants and animals native to his or her local ground.³

Before a child enters first grade science class...[s/he] will have soaked in thirty thousand advertisements. The time our teenagers spend absorbing ads is more than their total stay in high school.⁴

I used to think, as I had been taught at home and in school, that keeping abreast of current events gave me an edge, made me a socially-conscious citizen. Now I'm in favor of honing a different edge, one that allows me to keep my heart open and tender, my eyes sharp and observant, my spirit awake and aware, so I can react fully and instinctively to the news on the ground.

³ Peter Forbes. *The Great Remembering: Further thoughts on land, soul, and society*. The Trust for Public Land, 2001.

⁴ Brian Swimme. *Hidden Heart of the Cosmos*, Orbis Books, 1996.

Balance

I grew up in a remarkably egalitarian household, but did not escape a consciousness of how gender, race, education, occupation, religion, politics, geography and economics are organized into a gigantic, invisible matrix that serves to divide and differentiate. Even though I knew as a child that my mother's work in keeping our home was essential to us, I could scarcely help assigning more weight to my father's work as a college professor. Even though I've long understood that it takes all of us to make the world go round, I still felt better about working in an office than working in a factory. I believed that the work the president of the company did was more important than mine. I deferred to colleagues with more education, even when I had more experience.

Everywhere in human society there are hierarchies, whether subtle or explicit, that assign value to what we do, where we live, who we are. This is the system; money is the driver. Intellectually, I have resisted getting caught up in the machine; emotionally, I have already been chewed up and spit out many times.

Coming to live and work on the ranch has been a great relief, very refreshing. I feel as if I have stepped outside the system, pushed backwards through the tide of "progress" to return to a land-based way of life. I am one generation removed from agrarian roots on the North Dakota prairie. I notice that the principles I see in action here on the ranch are the same ones I saw as a child on my grandparents' farm. It is a microcosm in balance, in which all work is essential.

On the ranch, there is no such thing as busywork or women's work or grunt work. Education is not preferred over experience, nor intellect over common sense. The person who stays home to cook the noon meal is providing a service of equal value to those who are out in the pens working cattle. The person driving the tractor has no more prestige than the one wielding a pair of wire pliers to repair fence. And because home life and work life are not

separated by certain hours of the day or geographical distance between the two, it all just becomes life, a gentle rhythm dictated by season, weather, light and the demands of the day.

I no longer watch the clock. I consult the calendar as little as possible. Those measurements of time are no longer essential. I look, instead, to what I can accomplish today between sunrise and sunset. Today. Now. What lovely places to live.

I must admit, there are some differentials in compensation for my work here. It's not that I get paid overtime for working evenings or weekends, it's that I am sometimes rewarded differently. For example, for working after 8 pm, I am sometimes rewarded, because of the lovely undulations of these hills, with four sunsets in one evening. You may not find much money in my checking account, but in a special savings account I have a stunning balance: four sunsets; three redwing blackbirds on a wire, silhouetted in the soft evening light; two blue herons languidly fishing in a cool pond; one goldfinch plundering a thistle blossom.

I am wealthy beyond my wildest expectations.

Eggstatic

Sitting in front of me as I write is a little woven basket containing three lovely brown eggs. One of them is still warm from the chicken. I could not be more proud if I'd laid them myself. I could not be happier if the basket contained a million dollar check from the lottery commission. If there were a practical way to frame an egg, I would certainly do so with the very first one I found in the nesting box.

There's no other word for it, I was *eggstatic*. I congratulated the entire flock. I held the perfect brown oval up for all the girls to see. It was not a miniature facsimile of a real egg, which is what I'd been led to expect from their early efforts. No, it was a perfectly acceptable Grade A Medium egg. I shouted with jubilation. I asked who had laid it and all sixteen chickens said "ME!" I was so noisy in my exuberance that Jane could hear me in the house. I posed with the egg and the chickens to have my picture taken. What a grand occasion!

Consider the marvels: it has only been 108 days since the chicken who laid these eggs came out of an egg herself; 105 days ago I met her for the first time and she was small enough to fit in the palm of my hand, utterly dependent upon me for survival. This egg-laying seems precocious, almost impossible, and in fact she-who-laid-the-egg is something of a prodigy, having delivered her first egg at fifteen weeks of age when production typically begins five weeks later.

Since it takes twenty-four hours or more for a chicken to make an egg, there are probably two or three hens responsible for these three eggs. I'm guessing my early layers are the Penzey sisters, two of whom were early to mature, the first with sporty red combs wobbling brightly on the tops of their heads. They're the most adventurous members of the flock and also the most apt to come right up to me and give a friendly peck on the shoe.

Who are the Penzey sisters? I have named each of my four breeds in family groups—the sisters Penzey, Harvey, Holiday and Gandhi. The *Penzey sisters*, named after our favorite spice store, are the Cinnamon Queens who are a cross between a Silver-Laced Wyandotte hen and a New Hampshire or Rhode Island Red rooster (called a sex-link, this is one of several crosses that produce male and female chicks of different colors so they're easy to tell apart, which is otherwise an extremely challenging task). The *Harvey sisters* are New Hampshires and were named after my ancestress, Isabella Harvey Mansur (the fiery daughter of Lord Harvey of Limerick), who was among the founders of the town of Temple, New Hampshire. The *Holiday sisters* are Black Australorpes (black and proud from head to toe, with iridescent feathers that would do justice to a fine Sunday-go-to-meeting hat) and were christened in honor of jazz and blues singer, Billie Holiday. The *Gandhi sisters* are regal Light Brahma chickens, a showy white with black accents and elegant little white feather slippers on their feet; they were named after Mahatma Gandhi.

But back to some amazing facts. Inside of a hen there is an absolutely marvelous production facility in which water, grains, grasses, fruit and vegetable scraps and, yes, insects are converted into the incredible edible egg. The physical facility consists of a single ovary, a funnel-shaped infundibulum and a two-foot-long oviduct. The egg begins as only a yolk (without a punch line yet), with the egg white, shell membrane and shell gradually accreting during the long trip down the oviduct. Finally, the egg color pigment is added at the end of the process, at which point the hen gets the urge to hop up in her little nesting box for a spell, and *voila!* an egg pops out, accompanied by a raucous announcement, the classic *buck-buck-buck-bu-CAWK!* Now that I know this process has begun, I find myself looking at the chickens differently. Is there a yolk about to drop into the infundibulum (what a great word)? Is a finished egg about to get that final coat of lovely brown?

I have a friend who thinks the egg is nature's most perfect food. Customs officials have confiscated hard-boiled eggs from her purse and pockets on trips outside the U.S. Think about it: eggs come in their own carrying case; they have a shelf life of well over a month; a single egg contains about 6 grams of protein as well as Vitamins A and C, calcium and iron; and there are thousands of uses for eggs, from the simple over-easy or hard-boiled egg to complex soufflés, sauces and baked goods.

This versatility is at the root of my current dilemma: how should I do justice to these first hard-worked-for and much-celebrated eggs, these eggs that represent 105 days of watering, feeding, pen-building, language lessons and other forms of nurture? In which of the many possible ways ought these eggs to be prepared?

My first vision consists of a small skillet, a generous dollop of grass-fed, sweet cream butter bubbling gently at its well-seasoned center. I picture the egg ceremoniously cracked, hear the sizzle as egg meets butter...a little salt, a dusting of freshly-ground pepper, the deft dance of the spatula for one quick turn...perhaps a perfectly-browned slice of toast with butter to soak up all the goodness. And a blessing, yes, certainly, a giving of thanks for a most marvelous act of creation, food for the body and nourishment for the soul.

In the end, our first homegrown egg was used to make a batch of Aunt Dorothea's coffee cake on a cool and rainy morning. The egg had a diminutive double yolk, as did all but one of the next five eggs, which were incorporated into a batch of what Jane refers to as my "Get-Thee-Behind-Me-Satan Potato Salad." I attribute the double yolks to factory start-up issues. I'm guessing it takes a little time to fine-tune the production process.

Capturing the Essence

I've always loved the art of canning and preserving since I first learned at my foremothers' apron-strings. Vegetables, fruit, pickles, relish, sauerkraut, jams and jellies—all of them were lovely, an investment in the future, a hedge against harder times, thrift in the midst of abundance.

I adored the mixture of messy and methodical, the eye-pleasing gratification of rows and rows of jars transformed from empty to full, from clear to colorful. I loved all the aromas, the merry sound of bubbling pots, the steam, and even the sweat. There was something so soothing and grounding about women working together in the kitchen. I wished for a way of bottling that energy and camaraderie, the warmth and commonality of purpose, to savor later in the winters of my childhood when I was lonesome and my grandmothers were far away.

Years later I carried on the tradition of canning and preserving in my own kitchen. I acquired the requisite blue and white speckled enamel canning kettle, cases of jars, a Ball Blue Book. My specialty was condiments—chutneys, mustards and marmalades. I even attempted a batch of watermelon pickles once, but could not coax them into tasting like the ones that either of my grandmas used to make. I liked to wear an apron when I canned. Some folks who know me will tell you that I'm fond of giving public service announcements on aprons, something like this:

Save the apron! Aprons are more than just a practical garment for protecting your clothes while you cook. They are folk art, a form of personal creative expression, precious heirlooms. My grandmother liked lavender gingham and silver-threaded bric-a-brac trim. My mother had "everyday" aprons and "Sunday" aprons. I have aprons from each of them in my possession; they are touchstones. Aprons are a legacy that ties us to loving traditions in the kitchen, to the women who came before us and those who will come after us. Aprons...make them, wear them, and pass them on.

I gave some version of this speech at the annual Motherless Daughters Day Circle of Remembrance in Kansas City a couple of years ago. A woman in the circle began waving both her arms for my attention. When I handed her the microphone, she was laughing and crying

simultaneously. She told the story of how she'd been at a loss to know what to do with herself during the long hours in the hospital by her dying mother's bedside, until one day she recalled how her mom's kitchen had been the center of the family's universe, how no one ever left without some homespun gift in hand: fresh vegetables, a jar of pickles or jelly, a homemade apron. This enterprising young woman went to the fabric store and bought yards of colorful cloth, spools of thread and jars of fabric paint. From then on, until her mother died, she spent many hours lovingly stitching aprons for each of her sisters, cousins and her mother's closest friends. Each apron had a poignant trademark; she dipped the palms of her mom's hands in paint and applied her handprints on either side of each apron's waistband, so that the wearer would have a sense of unseen arms around her each time she wore it.

This is the kind of rich legacy into which I tap when I get out my apron, my canning kettle, and my wooden spoons. There's something almost magical about the art of capturing and preserving the essence of summer's abundance and lining up the jars in the pantry. Every time I walk by the rows of jelly, relish and tomatoes, I feel safe and slightly smug.

Here's an inventory of what we've "put up" (my grandma's term) so far this year:

| | |
|----------------------|------------------------------|
| 6 half-pints | Hot pepper jelly |
| 14 pints | Bread & butter pickle relish |
| 5 pints | All-purpose tomato sauce |
| 14 pints 2 quarts | Italian-style tomato sauce |
| 26 quarts | Crushed tomatoes |

All told, we processed about 80 pounds of tomatoes in one form or another; we did not give a dime for a good share of the tomatoes, nor did we grow them ourselves. Ditto the cucumbers, absolutely free of charge. The explanation for all this largesse is captured in a term I've come to appreciate since I've been living out here: *social capital*. Social capital is a concept that has largely fallen prey to individualism and capitalism. Rarely seen these days outside of rural communities, it is built on a natural system of need, resources, generosity, hospitality, a

sense of obligation, long-term relationships, and cooperation within community. It is close kin of karma and the Golden Rule. Here's how it has worked this summer: over the years Jane has been very generous with her land, opening it to local people for camping, hunting and fishing. She's been active in the county, supportive of community endeavors. She has loaned equipment and volunteered her labor and expertise. In return, she has a very fat social account, capital that can readily be redeemed for tomatoes, cucumbers, fresh fish, firewood, the loan of a trailer big enough to haul a chicken house down the road, or assistance with any project she'd care to dream up.

“Ordinary men and women,” writes Joseph V. Hickey, “will have to join forces...to shift the pendulum away from individualism and toward the communal values that, though still part of the American ethos, have steadily grown fainter.” Success is so often measured in economic terms, with profit as the bottom line. The value of social capital is harder for us to see these days. If you need a reminder, I invite you to come and look at our pantry shelves.

A Moveable Feast

I have a folding camp chair by the back door; it is our one nod to anything remotely resembling lawn furniture. I like to keep it handy and move it from view to view, from sunrise to moonrise, from cows to chickens, from flowers to grasses. There is always a sumptuous banquet table at which to pull up my chair at any given moment.

In the evenings I like to sit in the last of the day's light and read a book or just ruminate while my chickens enjoy their hour or two of free-range feasting. I am flattered beyond all reason by how genuinely the chickens seem to enjoy my company. No matter where I put my chair for the evening, they will come by to visit. One of the Harvey sisters has taken a special liking to me. After a few preliminary pecks on my shoe and my pants, she likes to hop right up on the arm of my chair so we can literally see eye to eye, our faces less than a foot apart.

Chicken vision is a very interesting system. With eyes on the sides of their heads, chickens can see much more of the world at one time than we can see; they can almost see behind themselves. On the other hand, their forward vision is incomplete; they can never see an object with both eyes at once. So, the nearly ceaseless bobbing of a chicken's head is essential to building a three-dimensional picture. This is fascinating, but also just a bit disconcerting when Miss Harvey comes to sit in intimate range. I often get the feeling that I should be bobbing my head too, lest she think I'm not as interested in her as she is in me.

The chickens put themselves to bed earlier these days, at almost exactly the same time as it becomes too dark for me to read outdoors. Like theirs, my energy and sleep cycles are incrementally adjusting to the amount of available light. What a harmonious way to live!

Traditional poultry management technique suggests that in order to keep up egg production in the winter months I should begin supplementing sunlight with artificial light, but why? I'm not running a chicken sweatshop here, and I myself am ever more inclined to follow

my body's natural turning toward torpor in the low-light months. For heaven's sake, when it gets too dark to read or work by natural light, I say we take a tip from the chickens and start getting ready for bed. So what if our production volume goes down a little! I like what David Grand says about the human tendency to overcomplicate matters:

Reptiles function well with their reptilian brains. Mammals adapt well to their environments with their reptilian and mammalian brains. We human beings, with the addition of our thinking brains, have lost much of our animal instinct, complicating our relationship with our bodies. In other words, our greatest asset as people is also our greatest deficit as members of the animal kingdom.

Fertilizer for Thought

And speaking of our complicated relationships with our bodies, humans are the only animals who don't naturally return their most valuable composting materials to the soil from which they extract their food. Cows do, chickens, too. Why have we made *sanitation* into such a complex and counter-productive system?

Americans each year collectively produce roughly 1.4 billion pounds of nitrogen, 456 million pounds of potassium and 194 million pounds of phosphorous, perfectly good potential fertilizer that is flushed away into perfectly good drinking water. Yikes!

According to *The Composting Toilet System Book*, the average citizen flushes away 6,263 gallons of drinking water each year. An additional 10,000 gallons of water per person goes down the shower, tub or sink drain. Throw in the water usage for agriculture and industry (depending on which source you read, it takes from 39,000 to 100,000 gallons to produce a car), and the average annual per capita water use in the United States translates to 188 gallons per person per day. I will not even attempt to quantify the costs of sewage treatment in our country.

Here's my favorite, thought-provoking water fact: *most of the world's people must walk at least 3 hours to fetch water*. How would we do things differently if we had to walk 3 hours to haul the water we use? Can we bear to remain complacent once we have been awakened?

I feel called to share these facts and questions because my own consciousness has been raised exponentially as I've begun to live more gently and intentionally upon our planet.

What you grow with this "fertilizer for thought" is entirely up to you.

Citizens of the World

Our barn swallows (*Hirundo rustica*) are gone. Just yesterday I enjoyed watching them careening energetically on a brisk breeze. I noticed their absence keenly this morning. I missed their aerial ballet, the non-stop inter-flock communication that provided such pleasant background music.

Barn swallows fly about 600 miles a day on their trip to warmer climes; the round trip can be as much as 14,000 miles. Does anyone else find this astounding? They fly only during daylight hours and eat as they go (in-flight snacks, of a sort). My rough calculations indicate that these sparrow-sized birds are flying at least 40 miles an hour. They only fly a maximum of 100 feet off the ground, following coastlines and rivers. Can you imagine the view? The barn swallows are on their way to South America: Brazil, Bolivia, Argentina. *Bon voyage!*

Our dickcissels (*Spiza Americana*) appear to have gone south as well. They don't make as long a trip, only as far as Venezuela. Unlike the barn swallows, the dickcissels make their migrations predominantly at night, as do most songbirds. As they navigate they give short buzzy flight calls to maintain contact with one another in their night passage. Is there some kind of an air traffic control system for migrating birds? Are there flight plans, flight numbers, estimated times of arrival?

Now that I'm in a migratory frame of mind, I realize that the upland sandpipers (*Bartramia longicauda*) have vacated the prairie, too. When did they leave? How could I not have noticed? I discovered that they too winter in South America from southern Brazil to south-central Argentina. I wonder if they ever run into any barn swallows down there and say, "Hey, you look familiar. Do you summer on the Homestead Ranch?" Here's the most unusual fact I found: during migration, twenty to thirty snails of the genus *Physa* are often found clinging to

feathers under the wings of upland sandpipers, hitchhiking great distances they would never be able to cover under their own steam. Nature is rife with such cooperative arrangements.

The scissor-tailed flycatcher (*Tyrannus forficatus*), one of our favorite prairie birds, will likely hang around until late October or even mid-November. The scissor-tail is one of the earliest birds to arrive each spring and the latest to leave in the fall. During flight the bird opens and closes its “scissors,” which are long enough to account for up to nine inches of the bird’s total eleven- to fifteen-inch length. The male is famous for his spring “sky dance,” a dare-devil display of soaring, zigzagging and plummeting. The scissor-tail migrates at night and spends winters in the southern half of Florida and the Florida Keys, in south Texas, Mexico and Central America.

All this migration calls my attention to the changing of the seasons, to the sweeping, intricate patterns in nature that are all too easy to miss and so incredibly rich when I bother to investigate. My research has been captivating, but still, it’s awfully quiet here today. The sky is a blue-washed canvas with a stark absence of wings. Somewhere else, south of here, the air is teeming with birds, citizens of the world without need of a passport or map. The divine engineering of instinct surpasses any technology that humans can devise. All facts and figures aside, the mysteries retain their power to keep me in thrall.

Rest in Peace

I don't want to write about this as much as you probably won't want to hear about it. Let me begin by saying this: the grief that accompanies loss is in direct proportion to the investment in relationship. I have allowed myself, as you well know, to become very attached to my chickens. I've shamelessly anthropomorphized them, giving them credit for feelings and thoughts that they probably do not have, feelings that rightly belong to me. When a neighbor's dog did as instinct demanded one evening, which was to chase and swiftly kill one of the Penzey sisters, I wept profusely. I'm not ashamed to say this: I am tender of heart. I gave her a proper burial on the side of a hill with a fine view of the grass she loved. I gave her a headstone and a bouquet of wild prairie flowers. I apologized. I grieved the loss.

The underlying issues are thorny and fraught with paradox. I eat chicken, so why was it so hard to have my chicken die? One answer is that it's because she was a laying hen, not a broiler or a fryer. What this really means is that I made a different quality of emotional investment than I would have otherwise, and therefore had different expectations of the return. I gave her a name; she gave me her eggs. I fed her; she greeted me cheerily every morning and pecked my shoe in the evening. We had an understanding, a trust between us, and it was my responsibility to keep her safe from harm. Another answer is that her death was unexpected, untimely. I could not lightly brush off the loss of her potential. She was, I believe, my shining star, the layer of my very first egg.

I read recently that the term "animal husbandry" (which was replaced by "animal science" when productivity became the overarching goal of agriculture) derived from the Old Norse phrase "hus/bond," meaning *bonded to the household*. The term described an "ancient symbiotic contract" between humans and domestic animals, a beneficial interdependency in which humans had a sacred responsibility for the care of animals. Industrialized confinement

agriculture has all but done away with this lovely concept. There are still some of us who honor it.

Here's one last window of understanding into my grief. If you remember *The Little Prince* you will recall the early interactions between the fox and the prince. With my poetic license in hand, I'll adapt the text to my setting:

"I cannot play with you," the chicken said. "I am not tamed."

"What does that mean—'tame'?"

"It is an act too long neglected," said the chicken. "It means to establish ties."

"'To establish ties'?"

"Just that," said the chicken. "To me, you are still nothing more than a middle-aged woman who is just like a hundred thousand other middle-aged women. And I have no need of you. And you, on your part, have no need of me. To you, I am nothing more than a chicken like a hundred thousand other chickens. But if you tame me, then we shall need each other. To me, you will be unique in all the world. To you, I shall be unique in all the world..."

Rest in peace, my dear, unique Penzey.

Learn by Going

God bless the ground! I shall walk softly there,
And learn by going where I have to go.
Theodore Roethke

I went to the grass today to see what it might teach me. I went to listen. I took a notebook and a pen, tools befitting such a venerable teacher and classroom.

Without grass, what voice would the wind have on these treeless hills? The grass is a gracious liaison. It whispers the wind's news in soft sibilants:

sow your seeds

seasons

cycles

summer's passing

listen

The grass, of course, is perfectly capable of speaking for itself, but the true voices of the grasses are deep in the ground. You must press yourself close to the earth and put your ear to the soil where the roots disappear down and down, five feet, even ten feet. At the surface you cannot begin to penetrate the secrets of the tall grass. You will hear murmurs and chants that sound ancient as the rocks with which the grass roots twine.

Andropogon gerardi

Andropogon scoparius

Panicum virgatum

Sorghastrum nutans

Tripsacum dactyloides

Bouteloua curtipendula

I can't fool some of you, of course. These chants are the Latin names for some of my favorite grasses:

Big Bluestem

Little Bluestem

Switchgrass

Indiangrass

Eastern Gamagrass

Sideoats Grama

Even though I don't really hear the grasses saying their Latin names underground, I still think it makes a nice little Gloria Patri for the grasses, which would not be complete without:

Sicut erat in principio, et nunc, et semper, et in saecula saeculorum. Amen.

As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

There is an almost holy, eternal quality about the flora of the tallgrass prairie. These grasses and forbs are perennials that survive and even thrive on fire, ice and flood. If left in peace they faithfully return year after year, century after century.

This summer has been extraordinary. At least once a month Jane has said to me, "Take a good look. We'll likely never see the prairie like this again." According to her recollection, it has been nearly twenty-five years since the prairie has seen such a perfect growing season.

The height of tall grass is dictated by the amount of available moisture. This June and July, according to National Weather Service data from 1895-2004, were the fifteenth and ninth wettest on record in Kansas. There are places on this ranch where the Big Bluestem is close to nine feet tall. I have never been witness to such glorious excess.

Big Bluestem, pride of the prairie, is a redhead with impeccable posture. She bends from the waist, a courtesy of grass. Her muted scarlet seedheads are in careful plaits, newly braided; they will loosen soon enough and release their seeds.

Indiangrass is a dancer sassily tossing her amber tresses this way and that. There is a sparkle all around her in the afternoon light, delicate golden filaments hanging all a-tremble from the seedheads, incandescent. The slightest breeze releases them, tiny bits of yellow ticker tape in the prairie parade. I come home covered in them; they cling to my shoelaces, my shirt, my pants. I feel organic and fecund. I am growing roots.

The last flowers of the season are in stiff competition with the tall grass for available sunlight. Few are shorter than a foot; many are four to five feet tall. Colors flash and wink, spill and undulate: brilliant red of cardinal flower; warm yellows of sunflower, goldenrod, gumweed, compassplant; showy lavenders and violets of gayfeather, blazing star, aster and gentian; subtler whites of woolly croton, snow on the mountain and gaura.

“Grass tall enough to hide a football” is one of our goals, for this is the kind of protection required by vulnerable ground-nesting birds, especially the prairie chicken. This year the grass is tall enough to hide a jackrabbit, an old black dog, a middle-aged woman.

So much is going on amongst the grasses. There seem to be hidden villages, invisible industries, mysterious errands being run, cryptic messages sent across thousands of acres through a lively network of roots.

I come to the grass to listen. I am but one citizen in this Republic of Grass and I have so much to learn.

Great Nature has another thing to do
To you and me; so take the lively air,
And, lovely, learn by going where to go.

Theodore Roethke

The Prairie

How sweetly she surrenders her
seed at your slightest touch—
lush, extravagant, yielding—
but you will not, even if you
lay with her every night for the
rest of your life and listen to
her talking in her sleep, likely
ever uncover all of her secrets.

How knowingly she seems to use
the light to best advantage—
alternately revealing and concealing
ample curve and cleavage—
and yet, no matter how passionately
you seek nor how deeply you penetrate
nor how fiercely you dedicate yourself
to the art of love, there will still be
hidden hollows that will never fall under
your gaze or know the touch of your hand.

In her presence you will sometimes feel
fertile and robust, capable of anything,
part of everything.
At other times you will feel impossibly small
and of little consequence, a minor
note in a grand symphony that came
before you and will continue after you and
does not need you in order to be beautiful.

And yet you will persist in loving her,
you will allow her to burn and chafe you,
to break open your heart with both
joy and sorrow. You will want to give her
something in return for all she has given you,
an act of devotion, no matter that
you are not her only lover.

As she has done for you, you cover
her in seed and perpetuate her wildness and
honor the secrets you know.

You have been called, wooed, chosen—
and you have answered, pledging your
fidelity, your skin, your bone, your blood.

What you have offered her
is enough.

What If Everyone Waved?

Waving is one of the very first social niceties we ever learn, often before we know how to talk. A wave is such a friendly gesture, a warm and gracious acknowledgement. *You are not invisible; I notice you.* I have seen young children in grocery stores and airports who've figured out that it's possible to wave while not disobeying the *don't talk to strangers* rule. I like this friendly rebellion.

The wave is still in vogue in most parts of rural America, especially on the two-lane highways and dirt roads. I've been paying attention to the unspoken rules. It appears that each person has their own version of the wave: one to four fingers lifted from the steering wheel; a hand raised to the brim of a hat; the full-handed, arm-included wave usually reserved for people you're certain you know. It also seems that folks have an individually-defined territory in which they are inclined to wave. I follow Jane's lead; we wave at anyone between here and Strong City, a twenty-five-mile stretch. For the most part, people tend to wave back, which is quite rewarding.

Here's my proposal: what if everyone waved? You'd only be responsible for initiating the wave if you're on your home ground, however you define it. In the city, this might be as small as a city block or as big as a neighborhood. Elsewhere, you are simply responsible for waving back at whoever waves at you.

Everywhere you go, you'd be acknowledged. *You are not invisible; I notice you.* Just imagine it!

Chicken Tricks

The other night I was sitting outside watching my chickens cavort in the grass. I was slouched in my camp chair with my legs crossed exactly the way I was taught not to, the ankle of one foot resting on the knee of my other leg. This unladylike posture, it turns out, makes an excellent perch for a chicken. Friendly Miss Harvey, who usually hops up on the arm of my chair, chose instead to jump up on the bridge I'd built with my leg. She stood looking curiously at me for a minute or two and then took another thirty seconds to shine her beak on the leg of my overalls. No sooner had she hopped down when one of the Gandhi sisters came over and untied my right shoe. While I leaned down to retie it, she turned her attention to untying my left shoe.

Perhaps I should be giving more serious consideration to tracking down a little, chicken-sized piano after all.

Going With the Season

Chickens Do the Darndest Things

If a chicken stands with her back to a 25 mile an hour wind, her tail and rump feathers billow up like a Victorian-era dress over soft petticoats and downy bloomers. I'm amazed that a chicken can stay planted firmly in place during high winds. With less than five pounds of ballast and legs roughly the diameter of crayons, why doesn't she just tip over or set sail for the Canadian border on a day like today?

Ten or so chickens with their backs to the wind call to mind some kind of unintentional little (pardon the pun) peep show, marginally immodest, prompting the urge to tap them each discreetly on the shoulder and say, "Beg pardon, ma'am, but your slip is showing."

I am thinking of recording my chickens and distributing a relaxation tape. On his last visit out here my father recalled a pleasant memory from his childhood on the farm: after the big noon meal it was customary to take a short rest, just 20 or 30 minutes, before going back to the fields; on fine days my dad liked to rest amongst the chamomile blossoms and drift off to sleep to the gentle chittering and twittering, gabbling and babbling, honking and cronking of contented chickens.

Many people who come here to visit mention their fondness for the sounds my chickens make. *Soothing* is a word that comes up with fair frequency. There is not a shred of doubt in my mind that my chickens are extraordinarily happy and that they have the gift of making other people happy too, most especially me. I've prepared a little label to affix to the cartons of eggs I now sell for \$2.50:

HOMESTEAD RANCH

Fresh Brown Eggs

Laid by the happiest chickens in Kansas

One morning I heard a rather astonishing improvisation on the classic *buck-buck-buck-bu-CAWK* theme of a chicken who has just laid an egg. What caught my ear was a distinctly jazzy or bluesy riff, a catchy little shift in syncopation. And she didn't just sing it once. No, this chicken was proud and loud, blating out her new song long enough for me to catch Jane's attention and double-check my perceptions. Sure as the world, that hen was singing something like this: *buck-buck-BUCK-a-bucka-buck-CAWK*. Jokingly I surmised that it must be one of the Holiday sisters, since they're named after a famous blues singer. Imagine my surprise when I looked out to the chicken pen and saw that it was indeed one of my soulful black hens who'd taken the *I Just Laid an Egg Anthem* to jaunty new heights. She's never done it again. I guess it must just have been a particularly beautiful day and an especially lovely egg that called forth such exuberance.

Perhaps it was this same chicken—I know it was one of the Holidays—who caused me a great deal of consternation recently. Darkness had slipped up on me as it is wont to do at this time of year, and I had neglected to collect eggs before the girls went to bed. With flashlight in hand I threaded my way through the hazardous course of chickens in various states of relaxation and slumber in the henhouse. One chicken, however, was evidently wide awake, for she took the opportunity, while I was poking about in the nests, to swiftly exit out the door and into the night.

It is no simple matter, as you might imagine, to find a black chicken in the dark. With my basket of eggs in one hand and my flashlight in the other, I went in search of Miss Holiday. No sooner had I caught a brief glimpse of her bright red comb wobbling through the night than she turned and darted off in an unexpected direction. *Aha!* I thought, *I need only to zig when she zags*, which worked remarkably well, only I came late to the realization of exactly how handicapped I was (not to mention ludicrous) running around in the dark to catch the errant chicken with both of my hands full. I deposited the basket of eggs in a safe location and pursued the truant, only then realizing that I could not possibly hold onto my flashlight and catch her at

the same time. Catching a chicken is definitely a two-handed job. However, when I set down my flashlight, I of course could no longer see the chicken (nor could I later find my flashlight).

It was not funny at the time, but it certainly seems so now. Thanks to a chicken's love of routine, she eventually obliged me by stopping at the gate through which I customarily let them in and out into the yard. I asserted my authority, which means I flat out intimidated her into dropping into the flat crouch that is a chicken's feeble attempt to blend into her surroundings, an instinct that actually makes her more rather than less vulnerable to predators. I leaned down and picked her up, only then realizing that I needed an extra hand to open the gate. She consented, with a fair amount of kvetching, to being somewhat ineptly tucked under my left arm for a moment while I maneuvered open the gate and deposited her inside with a grateful sigh.

Where did she think she was going, I wonder? Maybe down to the Dewdrop Inn to sing the blues.

One last bit of chicken lore. This has surely got to be a little-known fact: chickens snore. Yes, they do. One evening, long after chicken bedtime, I stood by the window of the chicken house, as I sometimes like to do, listening to the dear little noises they make. I guess I'd never listened so far into their sleep cycle before. There it was, a sweet little trilling sound, like a cross between a toddler blowing bubbles into her milk and the music that ice-cold sparkling cider makes when you pour it into a delicate crystal glass. That's the best I can do. Just trust me, chickens snore. It's one of the sweetest sounds I've ever heard.

Our Neighbors

As our bird neighbors go south for the winter, our bullsnake neighbors, John and Leona Bull, get ready to move back into their winter accommodations, a flexible black drain hose that goes under the east side of the house. We discovered them as they began going out into the sun this spring. Bullsnakes lay from 3 to 22 eggs per clutch. I had hoped to be present when the newest members of the Bull household made their first foray out into the world, but my timing was off. Jane was markedly less interested in meeting the family or knowing how big it actually was.

The bullsnake is a powerful constrictor, harmless to humans, and variously known around the country as pine snake (in the east), bullsnake (in the midwest) and gopher snake (in the west). The bullsnake is the largest snake in Kansas, and also the most economically beneficial, since the bulk of its diet consists of rodents. In addition to eating mice, bullsnakes are fond of pocket gophers, rabbits, ground squirrels, birds and bird eggs.

John and Leona Bull were real people, neighbors of my grandparents in northern Minnesota near the tiny town of Blackduck. John was a retired blacksmith who still did a little welding and smithing in his spare time. Leona made excellent sugar cookies. The Bulls were quite tolerant of 12-year-old Marva traipsing across their property and pestering them with questions. That is what I recall about them, their tolerance and friendliness, which is why, when a friend suggested that naming the snakes might favorably tip the balance in Jane's somewhat uneasy relationship with them, I thought of John and Leona.

John and Leona Bull of Minnesota are long dead and gone, but the snake John Bull came to call at our back door the other night when I was coming home. He actually looked quite neighborly, with his body curved comfortably along the sill and his head craned upward so as to

peer through the glass inquiringly. *Yoo-hoo! Anybody home?* I wondered, with my usual penchant for anthropomorphism, if he had come to borrow an egg or a cup of mice.

I have to admire the industry and ingenuity of some of our other neighbors, too (well, I don't have to, but I do). A concrete block left in the yard with a piece of lumber across it becomes a nursery for a little mother mouse, with feed sack scraps and bits of bailing twine for a bed. Another mouse was a recent squatter in the bottom of my self-watering herb planter by the back door. He made a quick and damp escape when I hauled over the hose and began unwittingly filling his apartment with water. I wished him well in his new location, even though that might be in my truck, where he will no doubt go in search of stray cashews, raisins and Kleenex.

The Eastern Woodrat, locally known as a packrat, is a solitary creature who builds elaborate castles of sticks and anything else it can get its paws on. The typical packrat abode is surprisingly neat, orderly, and architecturally sound, with separate areas for food storage and bathroom facilities. Packrats also have a fondness for chewing through colorful wires, which makes them rather expensive neighbors, especially if they stake a claim under the hood of your vehicle.

We were purring along quite nicely in our six-wheel Polaris the other day when the engine suddenly lost power and died. When we opened the hood, a tiny mouse jumped out and went skittering away, but there was little doubt that a packrat had also been tinkering, and had done a rather clever job of partially severing a number of vital connections, gauged just right to leave us in the lurch. I could almost hear him *tee-hee-hee-ing* as I trudged back to the house to get the truck.

One packrat set up housekeeping in the heater vent of our neighbor's Jeep last winter and took numerous rides around the county and beyond before he was discovered and evicted. Another packrat found a way in through the vent of the big battery box for our solar and wind system; he had laboriously hauled in five or so pounds of "cow candy" and broken up some

Styrofoam to make a cozy mattress. I admired his planning and diligence, but signed him up for the packrat relocation program nonetheless. He had also, of course, been tinkering with the battery connections.

Yesterday we went out to winterize our two pump houses and found a packrat penthouse between the tin roof and the insulation on one of them. On a sunny winter day it would likely be the warmest packrat abode in the county. As I pulled down the sagging insulation I was amazed at the quantity of sticks, leaves, grasses, walnuts and seeds that came tumbling down. There were at least three snake skins, too, which made me wish I knew the rest of that story. Jane saw the packrat peeking out from a corner, watching me undo all his or her careful labor. Packrats are actually quite endearing in appearance, dapper and diminutive, nothing like the nasty, omnivorous Norwegian rats we all know and loathe, at least by reputation. Packrats are gentle vegetarians who keep to themselves and practice tolerance. I felt badly when we took a break to come back to our cozy home and eat a succulent roast beef with baked potatoes and peas. After all, I'd just left someone homeless. I wondered aloud to Jane if we'd go back and find the packrat trundling tiny suitcases across the pasture, off in search of a place in which to start over once again.

Contrasts

Speaking of starting over, for over half my life I lived ten feet from my next door neighbor, a block from a convenience store, and less than a mile from grocery, drug and hardware stores. Restaurants of every description were close at hand, as were people; the county in which I lived was home to over 655,000 people.

Now I live over a mile from the nearest neighbor, eight miles from a paved road, and twenty-five miles from the grocery and hardware stores. The nearest drug store is forty miles away. The county has only one franchise restaurant, a Pizza Hut, which is twenty-five miles from here. Chase County's total population is 3,030. At any time of year, humans are outnumbered by cattle twenty-five to one. In the summer months, that ratio jumps to something like fifty to one.

Where I used to live, the population density was just over 1,000 people per square mile. That's about enough human beings to touch hands and stretch across that square mile. Here in Chase County the population density is just under four people per square mile; in other words, we don't quite have enough warm bodies to hold down the four corners of that square mile. On the ranch we have less than one person per square mile, or, to look at it another way, each person has two square miles.

In case you're like me and are interested in such things, the tiny country of Monaco (three-quarters of a square mile) is the most densely populated country in the world, with almost 43,000 people per square mile. Manhattan (and I don't mean Manhattan, Kansas, which is fondly referred to out here as *The Little Apple*), to give an example of true urban density, has 65,000 people per square mile. Mongolia is the least densely populated country, with only 4.3 people per square mile. If you're paying attention, you've just noticed that Mongolia is more densely populated than Chase County, Kansas. Our least densely populated states are Alaska (1.1), Wyoming (5.1), Montana (6.2) and North Dakota (9.3).

The population density of the planet (excluding uninhabited Antarctica) is 114 people per square mile, but this is misleading. About 90% of the earth's people live on 10% of the land.

Why? Why do the majority of us tend to cluster?

Jane and I put our heads together and came up with these lists. I'm sure there's more to the story, but this is what we see:

Why people cluster

| | |
|--------------------------|-----------------|
| Safety | Infrastructure |
| Support/social contact | Culture |
| Access to goods/services | Diversity |
| Employment/economics | Habit/tradition |

Why we like living in the Republic of Grass

| | |
|---------------------------|----------------------------|
| Sense of freedom | Slower pace of life |
| Intimacy with nature | The culture of agriculture |
| Peace, quiet & solitude | Undeveloped land |
| Simplicity/sustainability | Open spaces/great views |

I have read that part of the rationale for offering free land through the Homestead Act back in the 1860s was to relieve overcrowding in eastern cities. Did it work? Of the pioneers who headed west, how many gave up and turned back? Of the later generations descended from the early pioneers who settled the Great Plains, how many remained on the farm or the ranch? How many can afford to stay now? The latest statistic I've heard is that over 75% of American families still managing to hang on in the business of agriculture have at least one member working an outside job to make a go of it. Unless your land is already paid off, says Jane, you'd be hard pressed to make a living on cattle and grass. The math just doesn't work.

What have we accomplished with our efficiency and our technology? Are we eating the bear, or is the bear eating us? What does our *progress* say about our values?

Demographics tell an interesting story. A county with less than seven people per square mile is considered a "frontier" county:

...hundreds of counties in the American West still have less than a sparse 6 persons per square mile. Many have less than 2.

The frontier never came close to disappearing, and in fact has expanded in recent years. Most of this frontier expansion is in the Great Plains. Kansas actually has more land in frontier counties than it did in 1890.⁵

I think aesthetics must be part of the explanation for why we still have so much unpopulated open space out in the middle of our country. When people have enough income to afford to live wherever they choose or to invest in a little getaway property, it's not likely to be in Kansas, North Dakota or Wyoming. There's a decided preference for oceans, lakes, trees, mountains—what are conventionally thought of as dramatic landscapes. This can create its own set of problems. One of our friends who lives in the San Juan Islands of Washington State felt called to start the Lopez Community Land Trust because the rising property values and cost of living impelled by wealthy vacation property buyers made it impossible for those born and raised on the island to afford to live there any longer. The case is similar in other popular vacation destinations like Martha's Vineyard. In Big Sky Country, Ted Turner and a growing number of folks in the entertainment business have driven the cost of the most desirable undeveloped land in Montana up to \$10,000 an acre. The more people who want the land, the higher the perceived value. By contrast, an acre of the best bluestem grazing land in the country, right here in Chase County, sells for about \$640.

I find this interesting, that even in our choice of getaways we tend to cluster. I've often noticed that campers arriving in fairly empty state parks tend to camp right next to occupied sites. Why? Perhaps only a born introvert and die-hard lover of solitude wonders about things like this.

I'm reminded of the day I was boarding a train bound from St. Louis to Kansas City about five years ago and noticed that while everyone in the queue was heading into a nearly full

⁵ Great Plains Restoration Council website, http://www.gprc.org/Bufalo_Commons.html

car, the one in the opposite direction was completely empty. I veered off from the stream of passengers to the vacant car and ended up having the whole thing to myself. When the conductor came through to take my ticket, he asked me this: “What’s the deal with you? Everyone else takes a right, but you take a left.” It was an impertinent, but intriguing question; I had no idea how to answer him. I still don’t.

I remember when I was six years old and my family was searching for a home in Nampa, Idaho. One of my father’s criteria was that the house be far enough away from neighbors that he could step out the back door and ululate without disturbing anyone (if you don’t know what *ululate* means, I’m certain my father would want you to look it up in the dictionary). As a consequence, we bought a home on a dead-end road in a semi-rural area. If I rode my bike “around the block” it was a two-mile undertaking. My school was a country school with two grades in each room. I guess I come honestly by my love of open spaces.

Since moving out here I’ve taken my dad’s definition of adequate elbow room a step further; I don’t ever again want to live anywhere that I can’t towel off after a long soak in a very hot tub and step outside in my birthday suit to count stars while my body temperature goes back down to 98.6. I’m mighty grateful that there’s still frontier country with plenty of space for people like me.

Hospitality

hos•pi•ta•ble **1** : given to generous and cordial reception of guests **2** : promising or suggesting generous and cordial welcome **3** : offering a pleasant or sustaining environment

I have arrived, after a lengthy journey, at the conclusion that hospitality is one part heart to one part practiced art. I'm not sure hospitality is genetic, but certainly it can be said to run in the family. From various influences I have stored away indelible images and sound- and scent-triggered memories: a well-appointed kitchen with outsized pots and pans; a lavishly-laden table; the heart-lifting scent of food that assails the senses on the threshold of the back door; the sweet note a chair leg hits when it scrapes the kitchen floor on its way to the table; the familiar tune of lids ringing on pots and cutlery on plates; the gracious interplay of lamplight and twilight on a winter's evening, with the inviting aroma of brewing coffee wrapped like a soft shawl around the sweetly-scented shoulders of an apple crisp being kept warm in the oven.

When I moved out here to the ranch in April, I was under the mistaken impression that I would have days on end of solitude. The reality is that we have had more company here in the last seven months than I did in my previous five years in the city. There is something about the prairie, about this hay bale house, about who we are and what we're doing, that mysteriously draws people. And despite my relative inexperience, I find I have an untapped aptitude for hospitality, and also a sense of its practice as a sacred charge, a calling. I have also concluded that the hospitality most genuine and therefore pleasurable to both give and receive is that which springs from a daily practice. In other words, the hospitality we extend to you when you visit ought not to be markedly different from the hospitality we practice when we're here alone.

How many of us, when eating alone, eat hurriedly, eat standing up between the counter and the refrigerator, eat without embellishment or even consciousness?

I highly recommend that at least once in your life you take the time to honor yourself with a meal that takes you hours to prepare. You are the only guest. By all means, you must set a beautiful place for yourself at the table. Cut flowers are well worth the price, especially in winter. Eat in a leisurely manner so as to savor the time and love you have invested. Notice how hard it is at first to accept such largesse from yourself. Then, next time you cook for your family or friends, look inside your heart to see if something has changed. Note how the face of hospitality has altered now that you have granted yourself a new status as both host and guest, worthy of the best you have to offer.

I have found the hard way that the tiniest pinch of resentment can overpower all the other flavors in an elaborate meal, while a similarly modest quantity of love and devotion can elevate the most humble fare to heights of elegance. For the first time in my life I am beginning to grasp how critical harmony is to hospitality. I have long understood the role of harmony in cooking: flavors, textures and colors must strike just the right note in relationship to one another. What I had not quite absorbed was the fact that all of that attention to the details of cookery will still produce a jangling dissonance if the angle of your heart is at odds with the work of your hands.

At last I have come to the time in my life and the place in the world in which I have been graced with the perfect studio for practicing the art of hospitality. Some of this perfection I must attribute to the familiar food values of an agriculture-based lifestyle. This I remember from my childhood visits to the farm in North Dakota. From time to time over the years I have been overtaken by a sudden acute pang, a yearning for my grandmother's kitchen, the place that no longer exists except in wistful recollection.

Here on the ranch I find it again: a pantry lined with cans and jars; a freezer full of bacon, sausage, chickens, roasts, ribs, chops and steaks; sweet cream butter and fresh eggs; two leaves with which to expand the size of the dining-room table. These are the basics, the embodiment of what I've heard a southern chef refer to as *a gracious plenty*. It doesn't hurt to throw in a big old

prairie sky, ample quantities of fresh air, and a chore list as long as your leg. Even if you're just a ranch hand for a day or two, your appetite swells and your capacity expands. Bearing this in mind, other necessities include comfortable chairs in which to stretch out, a couch with a soft throw in case a catnap should come calling, and even a spare bedroom where a guest might wish to loosen a belt and undo the top button on the waistband, liberate feet from shoes, snuggle under an afghan and take an Olympic-sized nap on a rainy afternoon.

Hospitality is much more than offering food, it is also the art of providing comfort and a sense of ease and familiarity. It includes stacks of fluffy towels, magazines to read in the privy, a spare jacket to wear on an afternoon walk, a night-light to illuminate the path to the bathroom.

Food, though, is and always will be the foundation for hospitality. Here's a blessing that captures the essence:

We eat and are revived, and we give thanks to the lives that were ended to nourish our own. May we merit their sacrifice, and honor their sparks of holiness through our deeds of loving kindness. We give thanks to the Power that makes for meeting, for our table has been a place of dialogue and friendship. We give thanks to Life. May we never lose touch with the simple joy and wonder of sharing a meal.

Rabbi Rami M. Shapiro

I'm not sure there are all that many of us left in America, but we're a three-meal-a-day family, and that's what you'll get if you come to visit. Sausage or bacon with eggs or a big bowl of steel-cut oats with fruit and nuts is what you'll likely get for breakfast, along with as much coffee or tea as you can hold. The noon meal is usually dinner, not lunch, at which you can expect meat that has never sat upon a shelf in the store, and some kind of dessert that did not come out of a box. The evening meal, supper, will be lighter. Borrowing from the language of the ranch, we often *graze* in the evenings, which can take on the proportion of a church potluck if we get all of the leftovers out of the refrigerator and sample as we please.

I do not believe anyone has ever gone hungry from our table. We often have the leisure, as well, to stay long at the table with our guests, lingering over coffee or tea and meandering

without destination through a delightful labyrinth of conversation. This is the polar opposite of the business world's *power lunch*, and yet I wonder which of the two is more powerful.

Sometimes, I think, letting the dishes sit is part of hospitality, too. I'm still working on that part of the art.

Hospitality is a circle, a lovely merry-go-round, not in the sense of tit for tat according to the rules of social obligation, but in the unexpected ways that our hospitality comes back to us. One guest wove us placemats and sent back our empty canning jars with a different Penzey's spice in each one; her husband sent beautiful pictures he'd taken on the ranch. Other guests bring cheese and apples from Wisconsin, pork chops from Iowa, coffee and candy from California. Still other visitors keep us abreast of news in the outside world by sending clippings of interest from newspapers and magazines. Handwritten thank you notes, which are close to being put on the endangered species list, still appear with regularity in our mailbox.

I am reminded again of our new understanding of the true meaning of abundance and the ethics of enough. Abundance is *an ample quantity*, not an unlimited supply. In other words, abundance is enough, not more than enough. Intentionally aligning want more closely with need is *the ethics of enough*.⁶ My dear friend and soul brother Ralph once told me a little about his childhood in inner-city Los Angeles, about the sense of hospitality and abundance at the family's table. "I was a grownup before I realized we'd been poor," said Ralph incredulously, "I had no idea we were poor, because we always had enough."

This puts me in mind of a story from my own family. My Weigelt grandparents, Henry and Pauline, were subsistence farmers on the North Dakota prairie. They were never anywhere near wealthy by traditional definition, but their generosity was legendary. They were quick to invite guests home for a meal and always willing to give a dollar or even a fiver to someone in need, without expectation of repayment. When my grandfather died in 1995, I was blessed to be

⁶ A tip of the hat to philosopher Mortimer Adler

part of the necessary ritual of opening condolence cards and writing thank you notes. I was amazed to see the well-worn one-, five- and ten-dollar bills enclosed in the cards; the amounts seemed humble by the standards of the day. But when all the accounting was done, there was exactly enough money to cover what expenses remained above the limits of grandpa's funeral coverage. This is divine or poetic justice on an impressive scale. I have never forgotten.

In these fast-paced times wherein we find ourselves so deeply in need of meaningful connections and sacred obligations, the remembrance bolsters my faith and fuels my resolve to perpetually practice the timeless art of hospitality.

The Last Firefly

I just caught a glimpse of something I don't think I've ever laid eyes on before at this time of the year. Today is the twenty-second of October and I just saw, at 6:30 in the morning, what must surely be the last firefly of the season. He was collapsed in a patch of broom weed, weakly signaling like a flashlight in need of a new battery. I only noticed him because it was still dark outside; the yellow-green glow caught my eye. I wished we shared a language so that I could ask him if there was a message he wanted me to get to someone, his mother or his lover. Clearly he was dying.

I'm not sure why that little light struck me with such poignancy. Perhaps it was just so blatantly obvious a symbol for the end of life, how our light begins to change and flicker, how when we die it's the flame that departs, while the worn-out lantern remains behind.

A firefly's lifespan is one or two years at the most, which is cause for gratitude amongst those of us who get to stay longer. A firefly, I'm also grieved to report, gets to use that magical light for only 1-2 weeks of life and, naturally, it has to do with sex.

What I did not know was that fireflies, lightning bugs, glowworms or whatever you grew up calling them (they are actually beetles of the family *Lampyridae* and the order *Coleoptera*), exist on every continent except Antarctica, with about 1,900 species worldwide, 170 of which can be found in the U.S. and—here's what's really amazing—each species has a slightly different color of light and signal pattern. So, I suppose the chances of my knowing that one firefly's language were truly remote.

One researcher from K-State suggests that with a little patience and careful observation you can learn to speak *firefly*. Here's what you do: on a warm night in June or July, preferably following an afternoon rain, mimic the light pattern of your local species with a penlight and pretend to be either a male or a female firefly. If you're successful, the opposite sex from what

you're imitating will land on your hand and no doubt be infernally disappointed that you're a faker.

There's rather a lot to know about fireflies, and I won't burden you with all I've learned, but I can't resist sharing just a little more. The level of complexity invested in these insects strikes me as yet another evidence of the Creator's imponderably lavish attention to detail.

The light production capacity of the firefly is far more efficient than that of a typical incandescent bulb, in which only 10% of the energy generated is converted to light, while the rest is lost to heat. By contrast, the firefly is able to convert 96% of the energy directly to light.

Don't you find that amazing? I do. Here's how it works:

Photocytes (which literally means "light cells") located in the last one or two segments of the abdomen, are the "light factory" of the firefly body. The light is the result of a chemical reaction between oxygen, the protein ATP, and the substance *luciferin*. The enzyme *luciferase* catalyzes the reaction, initially producing a high energy molecule. In order for the reaction to stabilize, some of the excess energy must be emitted as light, which is then reflected by sheets of fine crystals within the photocytes. By regulating the flow of oxygen entering through air tubes on the abdomen, the insects can flash their signal.⁷

According to another source, most species of firefly are found in warm, humid areas of the world. In the United States, flashing fireflies are rarely found west of Kansas. In case you wondered, the state of Georgia boasts the most species of firefly, and Boone, North Carolina is the firefly capitol of the U.S.

One last note: An attorney in Houston noticed that the fireflies he remembered from years past were no longer present in significant numbers. If I ever need a lawyer, I'd think about hiring this guy, his website is so refreshingly eccentric. Among the buttons you can click are: Business Law, Wills & Probate, Starting a Business, Legal Alerts, Gardening, Fireflies, and Turtles. He began a campaign to bring fireflies back to Houston, or at least to find out why they'd left. Among the possible causes of their disappearance are pesticides and city lights. It's hard to gauge the outward-rippling impact of our godlike use of pesticides and herbicides on the earth.

⁷ Stephanie Bongiovanni, *Naturalist's Notes: Firefly Facts* (<http://www.normanbirdsantuary.org/>)

The mounting toll includes groundwater, insects, birds, mammals. As to the city lights, I can see how it would be kind of confusing to find a mate in a metropolitan area riddled with various colors of blinking lights. I can just hear the female firefly: *I see you, darling. Don't move an inch, you big hunk-a hunk-a burnin' love, I'm on my way...damn, another cell tower!*

Levity aside, and returning to the notion of ripples, it's hard to estimate the impact of that single firefly blinking his last feeble messages on a late October morning. I was prompted to ponder mortality. I was provoked to learn more about the intricacy of creation. I was inspired to weave these little strands into a wick for your illumination, and who knows what that might spark in turn. Because of this, I ask myself, isn't that little firefly still giving out a light of sorts?

Going With the Season

The first time I ever made intimate acquaintance with the Flint Hills was in early May of 2003. The prairie was so exquisite—the stored images still loop through my head, joined by the even more green and lush images from this May. I remember thinking at the time that the images of the prairie in spring could not be matched—so full of green promises and crystalline possibility—like a choir holding the first note of a cantata.

The prairie in fall has something entirely different to offer, another style of music altogether, perhaps the beginnings of a lullaby, sweet and golden—a song to sing the prairie to sleep for the winter.

The first day of chilly rain and wind arouses the instinct to preserve and store the harvest—to bring compotes and chutneys to a boil, to thumb through recipes for soups, stews and breads, to cut wood in neat lengths and stack it with devotion.

In like manner the packrats and squirrels answer a clear inner signal, an ancient instinct to store food for the winter. Other animals like the white-tail deer change their diets to the foods that are seasonally available. We recently attended a workshop that introduced the idea that animals possess *nutritional wisdom*. Indeed, on this first truly cold morning of the season, our cows and calves made a trip to the mineral supplement feeders and then paraded past the house as if to let us know that the minerals need replenishing. Their grazing patterns change with the season; they do not expend as much energy or travel as far in a day, they seek shelter down in the draws, out of the wind. As I have before, I also offer the fine example of my chickens. In winter their productivity goes down; as always, they go to sleep when it's dark and get up with the light.

Many birds, of course, outwit the season by flying south for the winter. That works, if you can afford it. Several types of insects die at this time of year, leaving behind their next generation in eggs that will carry on the family traditions when they emerge in the spring. I find

it interesting that patterns of human mortality follow a distinct seasonal pattern, with a maximum in winter and a minimum in summer. I have that sense, regarding the passing of the ill and elderly in winter, that death in the fallow season is somehow more appropriate. It's easier to imagine someone thinking, *what the heck, I'm tired...let someone else carry on.*

Other insects make it through the winter by hiding in a protected place away from the cold. Reptiles (like John and Leona Bull), amphibians, woodchucks, jumping mice and little brown bats enter a deep sleep-like state as body temperature, heart rate and respiration all take a steep drop.

Green becomes a rare color on the prairie as plants take the waning light and cooling temperatures as a signal to shut down their photosynthesis factories for the winter. Instinct demands that they allow their diminishing stores of energy to drop down to their roots, safely stowed below ground in wait for a more hospitable time.

Meanwhile, with thanks to industrialization and our dedication to the fiscal bottom line, we fiddle with our clocks, burn our lights a little longer each day, and frantically whip ourselves up to face the most demanding social season of the year. Does this make any sense at all?

It's not that we lack the wisdom of the plants and animals, it's that we choose to ignore what our bodies keep telling us so insistently in winter. Torpor is the sleep-like state into which many animals and insects descend during inhospitable times of low light and little food. Perhaps its definition sounds familiar: *sluggishness, dullness, languor, lassitude, stupor, numbness.*

The phenomenon of Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) was noted before 1845, according to the National Mental Health Association. Incidentally, or perhaps not, the incandescent lamp, that marvel that allows us to keep working after dark, was invented in 1841. SAD was not officially named until the early 1980s, but our grandmothers knew it as the winter blues or doldrums. Perhaps it's been around forever, but is becoming more rampant the more blatantly we dishonor our natural inclinations. Here's what the NMHA has to say:

As sunlight has affected the seasonal activities of animals (i.e., reproductive cycles and hibernation), SAD may be an effect of this seasonal light variation in humans. As seasons change, there is a shift in our “biological internal clocks” or circadian rhythm, due partly to these changes in sunlight patterns.

The next phrase in the explanation is a real humdinger; it deserves to stand alone:

This can cause our biological clocks to be out of step with our daily schedules.

Is it just me, or does anyone else think that the National Mental Health Association has this bassackwards? If anything is out of step, isn't it our schedules that are out of step with our biological clocks, and not the other way around?

I have a distinct advantage here, and I wave it like a big flag in hopes of catching anyone's attention. The culture of agriculture, a phrase I borrow from Jane, has always followed the patterns of the land and the seasons. Winter is a time to rest, a time to slowly digest and be nourished by the ideas that were devoured in haste during the busy growing season, a time to balance accounts and make plans for next year.

So, at this time of year we inventory the pantry and make a special trip to Emporia for the necessities: flour, sugar, cornmeal, beans, rice, pasta, and the inevitable cream of mushroom soup that works so well for casseroles and chops. We take the truck to Strong City and pick up extra mineral for the cattle. We insulate the pump houses and bring the portable herb planter into the house. Without even thinking about it, we find ourselves amassing stacks of books on topics that interest us.

There is something delicious about these preparations, a sweet promise soon to be kept: a winter afternoon with snow blowing fiercely at the windows, a pork loin roasting aromatically in the oven, a popping hedge fire in the woodstove, dogs and cats circled like little wagons round the fire, and me in my favorite recliner with a good book and a soft blanket.

This life in harmony with the seasons does not seem so strange. Even in the city I used to give myself permission to go to bed when the urge arose and a certain level of darkness arrived

in winter. Sometimes that meant I was in bed with my books and my journal, snugly under my flannel and down, as early as 6 or 7 pm. I have also long been an advocate for naps. Naps in summer are a blessing. Naps in winter are, in my opinion, life-saving.

The earliest forces to shape our brains and bodies were grounded firmly in the balance of light and dark and the rhythms of earth. The pace of technology, the flow of information, the demands of work, will not slow of their own accord. Wedged firmly in the back of our brains is a call to reason, the call of the seasons. Deep in our bodies is a repository of accumulated instinct that woos us back to the wisdom of the land.

No Word for Snow

We had our first snow of the season at the end of November, a frowsy-bloomy affair that started with rain, segued into sleet and ended with paltry quantities of wind-slicked snow. This was by no feat of poetic imagination an *I'll be home for Christmas* greeting-card-quality snow; it left the prairie half-dressed in tattered white pajamas.

Still, I was excited when I got up in the morning and looked out the window; this would be the first time my chickens had ever experienced snow. I was curious to see snow through the eyes of a chicken.

I had minor problems getting the little chicken hatchway open. The door had frozen to the frame and required a few strategic adjustments with a frequently-used ranching tool, my boot. The miniature gangplank that leads down from the door and out to the pen was also well-coated with icy snow, a suitable luge-track for the Chicken Winter Olympics. Little did they know.

My chickens are inclined to greet each morning with unbridled enthusiasm. There are sometimes a few stragglers and sleepyheads, but for the most part, the minute the little door is opened, at least ten of them jump up and come bundling out of the coop like eager summer camp kids at the first note of reveille or a tiny fire brigade when the alarm sounds.

In theory, poultry feet should provide snow-shoe-like traction. In fact, it all depends on the circumstances. The first chicken out the door made it halfway down the ramp before she registered the presence of the unfamiliar white stuff and successfully brought herself to an abrupt halt. The chickens behind her did not have the benefit of her unobstructed view and therefore also no presentiment of the need to stop their forward motion. Nor did the chicken in the lead have the luxury of brake lights. In short order I found myself the sole witness to a fifteen-chicken pileup in which the unfortunate chicken at the front of the chain reaction was forced by sheer gravity and momentum to reluctantly enter an impromptu ski-jumping event. Upon impact,

several other chickens simply bailed off the side of the icy ramp in great surprise and consternation. There was neither dignity nor grace in any of the jumps or landings. No one got hurt, but no one would have won any medals either.

The whole sequence was the shortest of short cartoons. All the action was over in less than a minute and abruptly there was not a chicken left in the yard; their morning treats went untouched on the ground. The entire flock retreated into the chicken house, presumably to invent a word for snow.

The Original Turkey

The confinement-reared, genetically-manipulated, broad-breasted, self-basting domestic turkey of our modern Thanksgiving dinners has very little in common with the wild turkey, *Meleagris gallopavo*. The wild turkey is the largest game bird in North America, related to pheasants, quail and grouse, and is as similar to the domestic bird of our acquaintance, says the National Wild Turkey Federation, “as an athlete is to a couch potato.”

Wild turkeys are sleek, alert and built for speed and survival. They are able to run at speeds of up to 12 mph and can launch into a running take-off that has them flying at 35 mph in a few seconds. Domestic turkeys, I’m sad to say, could not fly even if they had the space, which they certainly do not in the world of confinement rearing, nor could their heavy-breasted lumbering ever be mistaken for anything like running.

Hail to thee, *Meleagris gallopavo*, the majestic fowl whose traits, according to a letter Benjamin Franklin once wrote to his daughter, make it a more fitting national symbol than the bald eagle to represent the United States.

All this hoopla about the wild turkey is because that’s what we had for Thanksgiving dinner this year. The meal seemed more authentic, deeper in meaning and flavor, perhaps because the Pilgrims partook of wild turkey at the very first Thanksgiving, and perhaps also because Jane herself shot the big gobbler right here on the ranch. She loves her time among the creeks and trees, she treasures the peaceful hours of meditation, values the contest of wits that makes the wild turkey one of the most challenging species of wild game in the world to hunt or even photograph. In the alternative, the time spent pondering the price, size and quality differences between a Honeysuckle and a Butterball at the grocer’s freezer hardly qualifies as meditation.

Incidentally, wild turkeys were plentiful in Colonial times, but by the early 1900s we'd destroyed significant habitat and hunted the birds nearly to extinction. Thanks to restoration and conservation efforts, the turkey population is back up to about four million.

The difference between wild and domestic turkey, in my opinion, is like unto the contrast between a homegrown tomato and the hothouse, hydroponic variety, or what I like to refer to as a *fax tomato*—looks like a tomato, but tastes like it has been transmitted to you over the phone line, a digital tomato.

Wild turkey has an unexcelled depth and richness of flavor that lends itself to noteworthy gravy and memorable soup stock. Maybe it's my imagination, but there seem to be nuances of the acorns, seeds, and berries that make up the bird's wild diet. And as to the NWTF's *athlete vs. couch potato* comparison, there is ample muscle and very little fat on a wild turkey, which conspires to create a robust texture, a toothsome, a flavor worth chewing for. So lean was the bird that I did not need to defat either the pan drippings or the soup stock.

Granted, the wild turkey was the sole source of true Pilgrim authenticity for our meal. The remainder of the accompaniments were brought to the table by way of the supermarket. Out of curiosity, I checked to see what items might have been present during the original three-day Thanksgiving feast in 1621.

Just so you know, sweet potatoes, sweet corn, cranberry sauce, and pumpkin pie with whipped cream were probably not on the first menu. Anything you can think of to make from the following list of ingredients, however, very well may have been on the table 383 years ago:

| | | | | |
|---------------|------------------|-------------------|-----------------|-------------------|
| acorns | cod | gooseberries, dry | maple syrup | strawberries, dry |
| bass | corn meal | grapes, dry | misc. waterfowl | strawberry leaves |
| beans | crane | ground nuts | mussels | swan |
| blueberries | currants | herring | onions | venison |
| bluefish | raspberries, dry | hickory nuts | oysters | walnuts |
| brooklime | duck | Holland cheese | partridge | watercress |
| butter | eagles | honey | peas | wheat flour |
| carvel | eel | Indian corn | plums | wild turkey |
| cherries, dry | eggs | leeks | shad | yarrow |
| chestnuts | flax | liverwort | sorrel | |
| clams | goose | lobsters | squashes | |

In the course of my meandering research I discovered these charming notes from William Bradford on the first Thanksgiving, a rather inspiring variation on my recurring theme of the meaning of abundance:

They began now to gather in the small harvest they had, and to fit up their houses and dwellings against winter, being all well recovered in health and strength and had all things in good plenty. For as some were thus employed in affairs abroad, others were exercising in fishing, about cod and bass and other fish, of which they took good store, of which every family had their portion. All the summer there was no want; and now began to come in store of fowl, as winter approached, of which this place did abound when they came first. And besides waterfowl there was great store of wild turkeys, of which they took many, besides venison, etc. Besides they had about a peck of meal a week to a person, or now since harvest, Indian corn to that proportion. Which made many afterwards write so largely of their plenty here to their friends in England, which were not feigned but true reports.

Isn't it remarkable that a "small harvest" can be followed by "good plenty" and a three-day feast? We did a little post-Thanksgiving figuring to calculate "plenty" in our own giving-of-thanks and discovered that our roughly 18-pound turkey was at the heart of 30 or more individual meals over 5 days, a small harvest providing good plenty.

I offer here as the figurative whipped cream on these holiday reflections a gracious excerpt from Edward Winslow's account of the first Thanksgiving, which he wrote in a letter dated December 12, 1621:

And although it be not always so plentiful as it was at this time with us, yet by the goodness of God, we are so far from want that we often wish you partakers of our plenty.

Open, Prairie!

Shoots, blossoms and seeds are symbolic of the prairie's most obvious opening, the growing season. But winter is a different kind of opening on the prairie. This land in the sleepy season allows itself to be accessed from new angles; it opens like a book, like a door, like a rusty treasure trunk.

The distractions and impediments of warmer months fall away: snakes slumber; bugs are snuggled in their rugs; the details of creek and glade are revealed as the trees disrobe; new paths become walkable as poison ivy and oak subside, as vines loosen their grip.

The citizenry shifts and diminishes: the summer-camp cattle are gone from the pastures; our stream of visitors slows to a trickle; the industrious breeding birds of summer give way to patient hawks and eagles, graceful ducks and geese, surprising bursts of quail and prairie chicken.

Changes in color are revelatory too. The spring and summer riot of hue and spectrum practically requires crowd control; it's sensory overload. Many people prefer that excess of sensation, but I posit that the difference between color in the warm and cool seasons is like that between a five-pound box of assorted fruit- and cream-filled chocolates and one slender bar of hand-crafted bittersweet Belgian chocolate.

I have pontificated at some great length to unfortunate souls who've dismissively commented that the winter landscape is "all one color." Nonsense! To truly see the nuance of color in the cold months requires a shift in focus and wavelength, a honing and whetting of the senses. Sample the evocative palette: raw and burnt umbers and siennas, ochres, Alizarin crimson, Tuscan red, Naples yellow, cobalt blue, ultramarine. *What you see is what you get* is not an apology, it's an invitation.

Green is not gone, it's just coquettish, playing hard to get. Behold the striking green of cress and moss tucked under a sheltered bank of the creek. Get down on your knees to witness the green intricacy of a tiny fern framed to advantage in a hollow of crystal-studded snow. Clamber up a cascade of Permian-sea limestone and tally the tones of vivid, tenacious lichens.

Emma and I go down to the creeks and ponds to search for treasure. She follows her nose to the freshest trail of rabbit, raccoon, coyote, or deer. Her exuberance is irrepressible; it expresses itself in huffings and snortings, bursts and bounds, leaps and lollops. She runs her figure eights and her big round Os, all roads leading to someplace wonderful, in her opinion, and eventually back to a bowl of dog food laced with gravy at journey's end.

I am more inclined toward gentle perambulation punctuated by frequent commas and semi-colons. I stop and stoop, pick up a tiny volume for study, put it back in its proper place in the prairie reference library or return it to whichever wind delivered it to me. To the north wind I give back the stunning black husks of wild indigo, the footloose prairie threeawn and tickle-grass. The burrs and seeds come home with me in socks and cuffs and pockets whether I like it or not.

The rocks I now tend to consult *in situ*, having carried more than my share home already this year and also having rubbed shoulders with a geologist, archaeologist, anthropologist (one person) this summer who pointed out gently that rocks lose much of their ability to speak cogently when removed from the setting in which you find them. The ever-so-educational scat of mouse, fox, coyote and deer I also leave in place for obvious reasons. Only the most elementary reckoning is required to reveal that these acres of winter prairie are far busier than they appear at first glance.

Mice, by the way, may seem to be a tiny, tiny topic in the naturalist's library, but good grief! they're ubiquitous. As soon as I focused on the wavelength of mouse droppings, I began to notice them all the time, everywhere. Most remarkable of all the mouse activity I've witnessed is

their consumption of a five-pound pumpkin by slow degrees. Evidently they work only at night, carving their weird Picasso jack-o-lantern and eating the pieces. This morning it was tipped over on its side; after roughly two weeks of work they have now eaten more than half of the pumpkin. Mice are clever, intrepid, indefatigable. These are the very qualities, of course, that also make them a bloody nuisance, but still, I can't help admiring them and noting their passage here and there: tracks in the snow, scat in the dog's bowl, a feather nest in an empty half-gallon jug in the chicken house, little nibble marks on the tips of cast-off deer antlers.

Antlers are one treasure that invariably make their way home with me. The same goes for the skulls, bones and teeth of nearly any animal, not to mention turtle shells, snake skins, feathers, abandoned bird nests, or an especially handsome beaver-sculpted log. I like to think of these exhibits as being on loan to us from the natural world, the long-term borrowing of which is part of the fulfillment of a calling to gently educate, to engender reverence, to continually make evident the intertwining of the mundane and the sacred.

Open, prairie! Open your gray-locked skies to permit glorious glimpses of the winter sun rising like scattered petals from a thousand bruised-red roses. Cut me a set of keys to all your hidden doors and draw me a map of the secret pathways of mouse and deer. Clear the mist from my eyes so that I may see the vivid variegation in grass and moss and stone.

Open, prairie! Open my heart and open my eyes. Open my stopped-up ears and my know-it-all mind. Teach me to see deeply.

Dance of Dark and Light

Light and dark, day and night, sun and moon, good and evil—these are ancient polarities, a never-ending source of dynamic tension that has perpetually given rise to explanations and celebrations. The nearing of the Winter Solstice leads me to a few thoughts on the wheel of the year, the ongoing dance of light and dark.

Of the many explanations for the origins of light and dark, it's hard to beat the Genesis creation story for brevity on the topic:

And God said, "Let there be light!" and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness.

As a kid, there were a few too many blanks in this story for my comfort and I remember pondering: *If it was dark, how did God see to turn the light on? Was there a light switch? Did he have to invent that first? Did God really make everything in six days? I've since come to a greater appreciation of the Biblical account's built-in latitude for question and interpretation, an appreciation that has its roots in one of my father's answers to me: *Who's to say a day in the creation story was 24 hours long? It could have been a million years.* This is the kind of conundrum upon which I love to ruminate interminably. And as you will no doubt notice if you haven't already, with age I have become no less persistent in seeking answers to my questions, *ad nauseam.**

Here's another explanation from the Haudenosaunee (Oneida Indian Nation) creation story:

Sky Woman was dropped down to the newly-formed, still-wet-clay Earth by her father, the Great Spirit. As she fell, a flock of swans flew up to meet her and allowed Sky Woman to float gently down to Earth on their backs. The twins to which she gave birth soon after her arrival were the firstborn, Good Spirit, and the younger, Evil Spirit. The latter caused his mother so much pain that she died giving birth to him.

In his grief the Good Spirit made honorable use of his mother's body: he took her head and hung it in the sky, and it became the Sun; from other parts of her body he fashioned the stars and moon; and what remained of Sky Woman he buried under the Earth so that living things may always find nourishment from the soil, Mother Earth.

When you come right down to it, the scientific facts seem scarcely less fanciful than our mystical explanations, and considerably harder to grasp. Most of us, I think, invent our own personal story of the universe, somewhere between science and spirit. Speaking for myself, despite all my learning, if I consult my subconscious, I find that I have a rather simplistic, imperial cosmology that features me on the top of a flat Earth magically suspended at the very center of the universe with the Sun (and all the other heavenly bodies and solar systems, for that matter) revolving around the Earth. That's just part of my skew; I also think of the Sun as being relatively small with respect to the Earth, and of the stars as not being in the sky during the daytime, just because I can't see them. Am I alone in this?

N. Scott Momaday points a finger at technology to explain my problem:

One effect of the technological revolution has been to uproot us from the soil. We have become disoriented, I believe; we have suffered a kind of psychic dislocation of ourselves in time and space. We may be perfectly sure of where we are in relation to the supermarket and the next coffee break, but I doubt that any of us knows where he is in relation to the stars and to the solstices. Our sense of the natural order has become dull and unreliable. [*The Man Made of Words*, 1997]

Provocative as this line of thinking may be, when the scientific facts are considered, my grandiosity may be as much a defense against vertigo as anything because, as I understand it, we are basically on a gigantic tilt-a-whirl in space. If I thought about this every day, I'd need Dramamine. The little ball upon which we live is spinning on its axis at about 1,040 miles per hour and must make an almost 25,000 mile rotation in order that we might enjoy sunrise on two consecutive mornings.

The Sun (a *middle-class star*, according to my reading), which is so essential to us and which plays so large a role in our creation stories, is basically a giant nuclear reactor with a surface temperature of 11,000° F and a core temperature of 27,000,000° F, numbers that boggle the mind of this cook who thinks of 500° F as an extremely hot oven that ought to be watched pretty closely. Really, it's easier for me to think of the Sun as Sky Woman's head, or Sol, or Apollo.

As if contemplation of our 1,000 mile per hour spinning speed were not enough to make me think seriously of keeping my seatbelt permanently fastened, another feature of this celestial tilt-a-whirl ride is that the Earth is also orbiting around the Sun at about 67,000 miles per hour (if we didn't go that fast, we'd fall into the Sun). No creation story I've read breathes a word about gravity, but it's as essential to life on Earth as light, water and breathable air.

But wait! there's more. Our whole solar system is on the move, too, at about 558,000 miles per hour around the Milky Way. Perhaps this fact helps put the size of the galaxy in perspective: even at this breakneck speed the trip takes roughly 240 million years. And in case you haven't had enough, the Virgo Cluster, of which our galaxy is a member, is moving at over a million miles per hour towards the constellation Hydra, also known as The Great Attractor.

Think of it, even when we believe we're sitting still, we are all of us space travelers.

To put these outrageous speeds into perspective, I tracked down a few records for comparison:

| | Speed |
|------------------------------------|---------------|
| Land speed record(Thrust SSC) | 763 mph |
| Earth rotating on its axis | 1,040 mph |
| Jet aircraft (Lockheed SR-71A) | 2,193 mph |
| Space shuttle Columbia on reentry | 17,000 mph |
| Manned vehicle (Apollo 10) | 24,790 mph |
| Interplanetary vehicle (Voyager I) | 38,600 mph |
| Earth orbiting the Sun | 67,000 mph |
| Manmade object (Helios 2) | 150,000 mph |
| Solar system orbiting Milky Way | 558,000 mph |
| Virgo Cluster moving toward Hydra | 1,332,000 mph |

To look at this another way, I found a fun calculator online that allowed me to figure how long it would take to explore the Universe at a speed with which I can relate and am comfortable, 70 mph (you can enter any number you like, just so long as you don't exceed the speed limit of 669,000,000 mph). If I started right now, I could expect to reach the moon sometime in late May or early June. I obviously didn't begin the trip early enough in my lifetime to make it to Mars before I die. Every other destination is clearly beyond my reach at 70 mph.

| Destination | E.T.A. at 70 mph |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------|
| Moon | 4.72 months |
| Mars | 79.5 years |
| Saturn | 1,290 years |
| Pluto | 5,840 years |
| Closest star to the Sun | 41.1 million years |
| Center of Milky Way Galaxy | 287 billion years |
| Edge of observable Universe | 143 million billion years |

<http://janus.astro.umd.edu/astro/distance/>

As to the relative sizes of Earth and Sun, in fact the Sun's diameter is about 109 times that of our planet; it would take 109 Earths lined up end-to-end to stretch across the face of the Sun; about 1,300,000 Earths would fit inside the Sun. And of course the stars are always there whether I can see them or not, but their pattern is constantly changing as our planet tilts and whirls.

Speaking of tilt, it's the tilt of the Earth's axis of rotation—the 23.4° offset of the axis from a direction perpendicular to the Earth's orbital plane (picture a leaning toy top)—that brings us our seasons. The solstices mark the two dates during the year on which the Earth's position in its orbit is such that its axis is most directly tilted either toward or away from the Sun. When it's Winter Solstice in the northern hemisphere, it's Summer Solstice in the southern. Halfway between the solstices, the Earth is neither tilted towards nor directly away from the Sun, and both hemispheres receive roughly equal amounts of sunlight. These are the vernal and autumnal equinoxes during which there are equal rights for day and night all over the planet.

There are about 3.4 million miles between our tank tops, shorts and sandals and our sweaters, hats and parkas in the northern hemisphere; that's the differential in the distance between Earth and the Sun in summer and winter. What's surprising is that, because of its egg-shaped rather than perfectly-round orbit, the Earth is actually 3.4 million miles *closer* to the Sun (perihelion) in *winter*, and farthest away in summer (aphelion). This may seem counterintuitive, but it's because of the tilt of the Earth's axis of rotation away from the Sun in winter that the Sun never gets very far above the horizon at this time of year. Averaged over the globe, sunlight

falling on Earth in January is about 7% more intense than it is in July, it just doesn't get high enough in the sky to warm us very well.

I helped myself understand this by sitting at my desk and pretending that my body in my executive tilt-and-swivel chair was the Earth and one of Jane's pith helmets on the coat tree was the Sun. When I leaned back in my chair to recreate the winter tilt of my axis, the pith helmet sun was much lower on the computer monitor horizon.

This is the sort of simple ciphering of the signs that helps to make sense of cycles and change, waxing and waning, death and rebirth. It's the kind of observation and calculation that made it possible for our far-distant ancestors, without benefit of all this scientific data, to craft hundreds of structures like Stonehenge and New Grange, sacred places that are accurately oriented to the solstices and the equinoxes. Many medieval Catholic churches were also built as solar observatories, since astronomy was needed to predict the date of Easter (mark the Vernal Equinox; the Sunday following the next full moon is Easter Sunday).

Without satellite, space travel or even a calculator, I can track the seasons, the solstices and equinoxes. All that's required is careful observation of the rising and setting points of the Sun over the course of a year, as I am doing with my simple Prairie Henge, a circle on the top of a hill, with stones to mark the Sun's position at each point in the wheel of the year. There are even simpler ways; Jane can tell you that when she stands at the kitchen sink doing dishes, she can watch the sunset framed in the west door at Summer Solstice and in the south round window at Winter Solstice.

All of the scientific facts do not, for me, demystify light and dark, day and night, sun and moon. If anything, they intensify my awe. Such speed! What wonders! I tremble in the presence of the *mysterium tremendum*.

Mystery and trembling, I imagine, lie at the root of the earliest Winter Solstice traditions. Imagine living without confidence that the Earth would turn back toward the Sun. Imagine

noticing that each day there was less light, that the sun was not rising very far above the horizon. Your life in the distant past would have been intimately tied to the land, your survival utterly dependent on what it could provide. Wouldn't you have been afraid that the waning light might disappear altogether, never to return? In the face of this fear, how might you have responded?

The Solstice traditions that come down to us through history provide some of the answers: the evergreen symbolized the promise of renewed fertility; holly, ivy and mistletoe were also associated with fertility; wassailing was a blessing of the apple trees to ensure their fruitfulness; bonfires in the field, candles in the window and a Yule Log in the hearth were emblematic of the Sun's promise to return. Some cultures prayed and conducted vigils; others threw feasts and celebrations. Still others took on the task of tracking the sun and making note of its cycles, building sacred structures that became reliable calendars. Over time Winter Solstice became a symbol of transformation, death, rebirth and promise: *the light will return; it is the Rebirth of the Sun.*

Fear in the face of a mystery may have been the initial impetus for Winter Solstice traditions, but it occurs to me that what has survived of Solstice through the centuries is not the fear of darkness and the unknown so much as the opportunity for renewed awareness of our role as co-creators and of a deep level of harmony with and participation in the cycles of nature. This consciousness of connectivity is something we are in danger of losing in our culture today, which is what I think Momaday means by our "psychic dislocation."

And speaking of connections, I am not the first to note that the Rebirth of the Sun and the Birthday of the Son are celebrated only a few days apart. Hanukkah, too, is about light, the Festival of Lights, and is tied to both the lunar and solar calendars.

There are a number of fascinating books that trace the history of our splendidly diverse December holidays and the ways in which they borrow and share traditions. In one, *The Winter Solstice: The Sacred Traditions of Christmas*, John Matthews enumerates a few of these:

...several of the more familiar customs originate in surprisingly different places and times. For example, the Yule Log, originating in pagan Scandinavia, once celebrated the turning of the magical year in a very different fashion from its use today. The Christmas Tree began life as the Solstice Evergreen...even the ancient carol, "The Holly and the Ivy," derives from a pre-Christian age when the Lord and Lady of the Greenwood were honored by the hanging of green garlands from the ridgepoles of houses.

Matthews also notes that Santa Claus, so closely associated with Christmas, has little to do with the birth of Christ. Nicholas was a medieval bishop who was troubled by the poverty in his parish and took to secretly leaving gifts in the shoes of his parishioners in the night, not only at Christmas but at other times of the year. It seems to me that the commercialization of Christmas is an unfortunate degradation of the altruistic origins of this tradition. I am gratified to see, however, that the pendulum appears to be swinging toward center with gift-giving options like Alternative Gifts International and The Heifer Project. St. Nicholas would surely approve.

Winter Solstice has not been a strong enough Western tradition to attract commercialization, which I personally think is a blessing. Jane inquired in a Hallmark store the other day, "Do you have any Solstice cards?" To which the clerk replied, "I don't even know what that is."

Whether we celebrate the Rebirth of the Sun, the Birth of the Son—Advent to Epiphany, the Festival of Lights, or the ancient "first fruit" celebrations of Kwanzaa, the sacredness of these traditions is in direct correlation to the reverence with which we invest them. They have in common the longing for light and enlightenment, a celebration of birth and transformation, the giving of thanks for the fulfillment of promises, the affirmation of our vital connections to one another in community.

I like what Earl W. Count has to say in his 1948 book, *4,000 Years of Christmas*, in which he likens our traditions to "the web in a loom:"

There are many weavers, who work into the pattern the experience of their lives. When one generation goes, another comes to take up the weft where it has been dropped. The pattern changes as the mind changes, yet never begins quite anew. At first, we are not sure that we discern the pattern, but at last we see that, unknown to the weavers themselves, something has taken shape before our eyes, and that they have made something very beautiful, something which compels our understanding.

Simple Gifts

I offer these to you, gifts of the season, precious treasures of the prairie:

An astonishing brown egg from one of my chickens. Let it represent the Cosmic Egg or the egg-shaped course of our planet around the sun. This egg is three inches tall, six-and-a-half inches in circumference, four generous ounces. It is far too large to fit in a carton. Crack it open and you will find two full-sized yolks like bright yellow suns.

The incomparable brightness of the Milky Way on a moonless night. This galaxy's stars number in the hundreds of billions, an extravagance beyond counting. For good measure I'll throw in a meteor shower. To unwrap this gift of illumination you must go into the darkest night without a light.

An Eastern Red Cedar tree cut in the ghost town of Thurman, Kansas. The cedar is sacred, an ancient tree of revelation. She is the great-great-granddaughter of trees planted by pioneers setting down roots on the prairie over a hundred years ago. Never mind that this is one of the invasive trees (also known 'round here as "damn trees") that threaten the health of the prairie; on this day she has been given a place of honor. She stands in our home this season as a symbol of fertility, of the legacy of generations, of the green that will return to all the hills in spring.

A prelude to sunrise. This is the exact color of promise, this palest vermilion that striates the horizon and fades upward to a shade of blue so washed out as to be almost white. This is a teaser, a hint of the colors to come in half an hour's time. Sit down and lean yourself against the east side of the chicken house. We'll wait for it here, the Sun, joined in our anticipatory vigil by fifteen chickens who are peacefully pecking at corn and seeds.

Shadows and light. On a December evening the Sun kisses the grass with the last of her beneficent light; the wind stirs the grass and sets it to shimmering with reflected fire. The

Sun's close companion is Shadow; they are inseparable. One complements the other; neither would be as beautiful alone.

A winter nap. Save this gift until you most need it, say, in the middle of an enervating business meeting or an over-stimulating holiday soiree. Slip away unnoticed. I have saved you a place on the couch next to the woodstove. Here is the softest down-filled blanket and a patchwork pillow. The cedar tree is at your head, a cup of spiced tea is near at hand. There's a cat for your feet, too, if you like. Slip off your shoes and settle in. I'll tuck the blanket under your chin and rest my hand on your head for a moment, a blessing. *Just rest,* I'll say. And you will.