



Now that I have been getting to know the prairie long enough for seasons and cycles to begin repeating themselves, I've been reflecting on how my life has changed since I left the city behind almost a year ago.

One benchmark that comes readily to mind is that I have not been sick for a single day out of the last twelve months. That, to me, is an incredibly revealing detail. Like many people, I used to have a cold or two each year and the occasional bout of stress-induced gastrointestinal upset or extreme fatigue leading to a forced collapse and marathon sleeping.

Conveniently, my body seemed to know when I had the time to get sick, often on a weekend, over the holidays or on vacation. *I can't afford to relax*, my father used to say, *I'll fall apart*. As a kid I was mystified by this statement; as an adult I came to understand it perfectly well.

Without hesitation I give liberal doses of fresh air, sunshine and physical activity partial credit for my health, *the condition of being sound in body, mind and spirit*. How easy it is to miss or dismiss the complex interconnections between these three essential elements of health when juggling obligations in a busy life. I am now in better physical condition than I have been in many years, but I'm also far more at peace with my work and my life. The synonyms for *healthy* ring true for me these days: *vigorous, robust, wholesome*.

I think being out of the virus loop helps as well. I no longer work in an office where stoic colleagues show up to share their coughs and sniffles. My trips into town are a week or even three apart, especially in the winter months. I simply don't have occasion to be in germ-ridden public places all that often.

My overall nutrition is better too: homegrown vegetables, grass-fed beef, organic chicken and pork, ranch-fresh eggs, and three squares a day.

But when I look at the whole picture of an illness-free year and my changes in lifestyle, I have to give one factor top billing: adequate sleep.

On average I used to get six hours of sleep on weeknights and eight on weekends, with an occasional nap thrown in to catch up. My alarm clock was vital to this scheme. I was never in a position to find out exactly how much sleep my body naturally needed, nor did I have the chance to see how that amount might change with the seasons.

In a relaxed, alarm-clock-free environment I am somewhat surprised to find that I regularly sleep for nine hours a night and sometimes ten in the low-light months. In summer this will drop back to seven or eight. These seasonally-shifting amounts correlate neatly with the dark hours in a day, which range from a high of thirteen or so at Winter Solstice to a low of not quite eight at Summer Solstice. I still don't get as much rest as my chickens, who use civil twilight to mark the ends and beginnings of their days, but I'm not very far behind.

The mathematically and logistically minor deposit of an average of just less than two hours of sleep per night to my well-being account during the course of the year pays sizable dividends: I now get nearly 60 more hours of sleep a month and over 700 more per year. And contrary to what I might once have thought about such sluggardly behavior, I don't feel like I'm sleeping the day or my life

away, even though I've snoozed through the equivalent of almost a month worth of extra hours. These sorts of calculations always flabbergast me. A person who gets eight hours of sleep a night is asleep for four months out of the year. Now I'm asleep for five months a year and I still manage to get a great deal accomplished.

Rarely do I ever say, as I used to quite frequently in the city, *there just aren't enough hours in the day*. Why is that?

I wonder if I've learned something essential from the grasses and wildflowers with whom I keep company. Plants naturally fit their growth patterns to the seasons and to the amount of light and darkness. They have adapted their cycles to day and night so that there are always exactly enough hours in the day. Without periodic darkness, many plants simply do not flower, which suggests that what goes on with plants at night is very important business. Why should my body be any different? I found this fact especially interesting: the normal growth of sensitive plants is seriously disturbed by strong light pollution in the city at night. This immediately calls to mind the couple of years during which my bedroom window was directly across the street from a liquor store that stayed open until three in the morning, advertising itself with an abundance of flashing lights that kept blinking in my dreams, even through thick curtains and closed eyelids. In the morning I felt what plants under a streetlight must feel, that I could not possibly summon up the energy to flower. My experience now is the opposite of that. All of this extra sleep is making it possible for me to burst into bloom almost every morning.

And here's another reason why there seem to be plenty of hours in the day, even though I'm sleeping more: time has softer, fuzzier edges out here. A workday is not defined by a fixed number of hours; it is quite elastic, stretching or shrinking to accommodate the tasks at hand. The morning lasts until I eat lunch, which has more to do with my body's clock than my wristwatch. Jane likes to specify that her estimates of how long a task or errand will take are measured in *ranch time*, which as far as I can see has an extra twenty minutes of grace for every hour. At first this was a challenging adjustment for me to make, coming here from a synchronized and digitally-accurate world, and arriving also with that built-in left-brain tendency to always have a pretty darn good idea of what time it is throughout the day. Now, however, I have become quite gifted at losing track of time, which I imagine is a good deal like having a prison sentence lifted. I have been pardoned; I am no longer doing time.

Much as I might feel I've just invented the wheel, this way of living is nothing new, of course. I'm simply reclaiming what my father left behind with his childhood on the farm. I'm somewhat unusual in being this near to my family's agricultural roots; most people are now at least four generations—eighty years—removed from the farm. I, for one, am exceedingly glad to have circled back.

All of these factors with which I credit my remarkably good health during the last year can be subsumed under the larger concept of *integrity*, a word whose original meaning has been somewhat obscured in common usage: *the condition of having no part or element taken away or wanting; undivided or unbroken state; material wholeness, completeness, entirety*. Integrity is a fraternal twin sister to *integration*, whose Latin root translates as *restoration to wholeness*.

*Restoration to wholeness* rather precisely hits the mark and brings me back around in a circle to *wholesome*, one of the synonyms for healthy. Integration and health seem to be, at least in my life, inseparable.

One of the best practical definitions I've ever heard for *integrity/integration* goes something like this: *what I think, what I feel, what I say, what I do and who I am all come from the same place.* Not since I was a spontaneous, curious, intrepid, candid, life-loving toddler have I come as close to living out this definition as I am right now.

I hardly ever clench my jaw or grit my teeth anymore. I draw breath from deep in my belly. I whistle and sing as I work. I worry far less about whether I have enough or do enough. I care very little about what other people think of me. I feel as if I've come fully awake after two decades of walking in my sleep.

I don't think it's just the agricultural lifestyle that's responsible for my restoration to wholeness. Lord knows there are plenty of disintegrated, joyless ranchers and farmers. I think it has more to do with the fact that I'm so well-suited to this way of living and have deliberately chosen to follow this path. As a result, devotion accompanies each task, large or small. *Do everything with devotion* is an excellent recipe for a harmonious life.

My days are composed of a mix of the routine and the unexpected, physical labor and intellectual engagement, analytical tasks and creative undertakings, work and leisure, people and solitude—in short, a dynamic of balance. And lest anyone think I have somehow attained pie in the sky, this balance also includes fair weather and foul, joy and sadness, hope and disappointment, confidence and fear, good days and bad.

What's changed, I think—what fundamentally alters my overall health and wholeness—is the fact that the connections between body, mind and spirit are strong and open. I move through difficult days and uncomfortable emotions with greater ease because I am able to let them move through me with very little resistance. I have less occasion to use the uniquely human, neocortical tools of denial and repression. I've learned quite a lot from my chickens—*Hail to thee, blithe spirit!*—who couldn't repress an emotion or hold a grudge if their next meal depended upon it.

A cumulative weight of anxiety has lifted, and with less to carry and nothing new allowed to accumulate, I walk with a lighter step. I move through the world differently, with an open-handed, open-hearted acceptance. For many years I perfected the art of holding out and holding back, thinking that the strength of those particular muscles was what civilized me. I have discovered that this same strength can be turned to the opposite task, a newly-muscular, graceful art of letting go. If this is uncivilized, then just let me go wild.