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CALL OF THE WILD

This morning, about half an hour before sunrise, I perched on a concrete block next to the chicken house with one eye on my chickens eating their scratch and the other on the eastern horizon in the charming act of blushing. Far off in the distance I heard the call of a Canada goose and looked up to see a mini-V of just four geese flying toward us from the northeast.

"Here come your wild cousins," I said to the girls. As the tiny formation drew closer, one of the honkers honked again, much louder this time. In complete synchrony, as if from a collective consciousness, the chickens stretched their necks to full length, a posture of total alertness, and began to sing in unison, a high-pitched trilling I'd never heard from them before. The sound was like a choir of Spanish-speaking sopranos stuck on a rolled "R." They kept it up for ten or twenty seconds, and the longer it continued, the more wild and unearthly it sounded to me.

Neither the posture nor the song seemed characterized by a sense of alarm, but rather by a heightened awareness, a reflexive response to the call of the wild. I imagined it was something like the inchoate feeling I sometimes get when I remember something I didn't know I knew, something seemingly ancient. The wild geese called and the chickens were compelled to answer from a store of primitive memory that preceded their domestication.

How far back in time might this primitive connection go? I happen to have an inside track on this information, since my sister LaDeana Hillier was an overall coordinator and

lead author of several articles recently published in *Nature* (December 2004) by the International Chicken Genome Sequencing Consortium. The chicken has the honor of being the first agricultural animal to have its genome sequenced. I told my hens this fact and they seemed quite excited.

My youngest sister and I have quite a number of things in common, one of which is chickens. We do, however, often represent opposite ends of the spectrum of interest and expertise on those commonalities, and this is but one example: while I know quite a lot about raising fifteen chickens and selling eggs by the dozen, LaDeana has intimate knowledge about the approximately one billion base pairs (about one-third as many as humans have) and the estimated 20,000-23,000 genes (roughly the same as humans) in the draft genome sequence of the Red Jungle Fowl (*Gallus gallus*), the nearest wild ancestor of my chickens (*Gallus domesticus*). While I'm certain my sister would also do quite well at raising chickens, I would undoubtedly be at a total loss to sequence a genome. Forgive a moment of pride as I also mention that she was in the critical path, as Director of Informatics at the Washington University Genome Sequencing Center, of successfully unraveling the human genome as well.

For the purposes of putting together more of the DNA puzzle, the chicken was the next logical genome to sequence. The chicken, I was proud to read, "is an important model organism that bridges the evolutionary gap between mammals and other vertebrates."

Because of my sister, I was probably one of the only laypersons in the world to read, on

the very first day the articles were available on the *Nature* website, *Sequence and comparative analysis of the chicken genome provide unique perspectives on vertebrate evolution* and *A genetic variation map for chicken with 2.8 million single-nucleotide polymorphisms*.

It's hard to say whether I read these articles because (a) I love my sister; (b) I love chickens; or (c) I love knowing weird stuff. I guess the answer would have to be (d) all of the above. But anyway, I learned a few things that may offer insight into why my chickens called to the wild geese.

Modern-day chickens and wild geese are now of two separate orders (*Galliformes*, land fowl, and *Anseriformes*, water fowl), but this split did not occur until approximately 90 million years ago. How deep in the brain do such evolutionary memories reside? When my chickens heard the geese, did they tap into a foggy fragment of 90 million year old instinct? Did they remember when they could fly for longer than 13 seconds and actually look kind of graceful doing so?

The earliest bird fossils found to date are *Archaeopteryx* from the Jurassic period, approximately 150 million years ago. Farther back, fifty million or so years after all this limestone was laid down out here by the Permian Sea, my chickens and their wild goose cousins, along with all modern birds, had as a common ancestor the theropod dinosaurs. By the way, this ought to settle an age-old dispute. Reptiles were laying eggs a darn long time before chickens appeared and the first chicken probably came from an egg laid by a bird that was not quite a chicken. Obviously, the egg came first.

I'm guessing that most folks won't have too hard a time imagining that all birds are descendants of dinosaurs. It might be a little harder for some to get comfortable with the theory that my chickens and I (and you too)

share a common ancestor from way back when (more than 310 million years ago), probably a primitive reptile. The main wrench I see this throwing in some people's gears is that, if all the world's creatures (including us) did not literally appear nearly simultaneously somewhere around Eden, the whole "subdue and have dominion" directive kind of topples over under its own egocentric weight.

To my mind, the sheer diversity resulting from millions of years of evolution argues for many different kinds of perfection in form and function rather than for a single, dominant species, namely us. For instance, one of the reasons the chicken genome sequence is only one-third the size of the mammalian is not because of less sophistication, but because it is more straightforward; it doesn't repeat so many stretches of sequence or save degraded copies of sequences. On the other hand, mice and humans seem to have split much more recently - only 75 million years ago - and the striking similarities in base pairs between the two make differentiation and analysis of functional elements extremely challenging. If anyone has a hard time accepting that we share a common ancestor with chickens, I'm guessing that a more recent family connection to mice might be an even stickier wicket to negotiate.

I am neither a scientist nor a theologian, just a casual observer who craves ever-larger boxes outside of which to think. So here is my two cents' worth: I don't see the mounting proof for evolution as a challenge to belief in a divine Creator. The intricacy of the evolutionary system bespeaks a wisdom (and perhaps even a whimsy) that is far more radical and amazing than the most dramatic creation stories that humans have written to explain how we got here. And I personally don't have a problem with sharing an ancestor with my chickens. Here are just a few of the reasons why, none of which are gleaned from so erudite a source as *Nature*:

Chickens are incredibly smart, as smart as mammals like cats, dogs and even primates. They navigate by the sun. A chicken is able to understand that recently hidden objects still exist, a talent that is beyond the capacity of small human children. Chickens show sophisticated social behavior; they form friendships and social hierarchies, recognize one another, love their young, and grieve the loss of close friends or family members. A mother hen will turn her eggs as many as five times an hour and cluck to her unborn chicks, who will chirp back to her and to one another from inside their shells.

A video produced by the Association for the Study of Animal Behavior shows chickens learning which bowls contain food by watching television, learning to peck a button three times in order to obtain food, and figuring out how to navigate a complex obstacle course in order to get to a nesting box. In 2002, the PBS documentary *The Natural History of the Chicken* revealed that "chickens love to watch television and have vision similar to humans. They also seem to enjoy all forms of music, especially classical." Another source mentioned that some chickens prefer classic rock music. *Different pickin's for different chickens.*

The language of chickens, known among us fanciers as *Chickenese*, is quite remarkable. Chickens have more than 30 distinct cries to communicate with one another, including separate alarm calls depending on whether a predator is traveling by land or sea. I realize that this fact may be a gunshot to the foot of my whole theory that my chickens were responding to the geese because of an ancient relationship. It's possible, of course, that they may have been giving a cry of alarm instead of singing a song of recognition, but frankly, I was there, and I don't think so.

Among the *Chickenese* phrases I have come to recognize are *hello* and *good morning*; *thank you*; *I laid that one and I'm so proud*;

water, please; open this darn gate; and here she comes! As I've told a number of people, in middle age I care a great deal less about whether or not people like me, but my heart just sings every single time I step out the door and look up to see fifteen chickens barreling toward me from all over the yard as fast as their little legs will carry them. It is my steadfast belief that they think of me as family; I can do no less than think the same of them.

IN FOUR LANGUAGES, NOT INCLUDING COWBOY

The Hitchin' Post is the only remaining place of business open in Matfield Green, Kansas, population 161 (which is blatantly misleading because it includes all of us in the outlying parts of zip code 66862). Even the Matfield Green post office closed over ten years ago, although not without a fight.

The Hitchin' Post was closed too for the better part of 2004 and the loss was deeply felt. There's no other place less than 15 miles in any direction where you can stop to wet your whistle, greet your neighbors and catch up on the local gossip. We were not alone in our gladness when the little roadhouse reopened under new ownership this fall. We vowed to do our part to keep it open by going in to eat at least once a week.

If you've never been in the Hitchin' Post, you may have been in an establishment very like it somewhere in rural America. Up until about ten years ago, the restroom facilities were still located out back, *sans* flush. The parking lot is paved with a mosaic of crushed bottle caps, an unusual exhibit in an outdoor beer museum: *Customs of the Kansas Cowboy*. The one-room Hitchin' Post now sports indoor restrooms (small enough to prompt the old saying, *you have to leave the room to change your mind*), as well as a pool table and a bulletin board for auction notices, hand-written ads for this and that, and good cartoons.

In winter you might want to grab one of the tables nearest the old gas stove since *airtight* or *shipshape* would never be used in a sentence describing the building; her floors and walls slope and sag like the aging matron she is. Despite the drafts, the well-seasoned establishment retains the scented layers of pub civilization: stale hops, old smoke, pungent onions and pickles, and grease of varying vintage.

The Hitchin' Post does have a menu, but if you've been in there once, you don't really need it. If you're a vegetarian, you might want to just wait in the car and eat carrot sticks; this is beef country and I cannot promise you safe passage if you come in and ask for a meatless alternative. You can dependably get soft drinks or beer and burgers or chicken fingers with fries or onion rings on most any day of the week. Homegrown tomato slices for your cheeseburger are available in season. The rest of the year the Hitchin' Post does not even bother offering the dismal store-bought substitutes; they would be an insult to the excellent burgers. On Thursdays you have the option of Mexican food served up with homemade salsa from homegrown tomatoes. On Friday nights you can order a big rib-eye steak, which is accompanied by a colossal baked potato, an unadorned iceberg lettuce salad topped with any of several varieties of Shur-Fine brand salad dressings, and a slice of homemade bread. At unpredictable intervals, in the cooler months you can treat yourself to Kenny's crock-pot-aged, throat-eroding chili. The only dessert option is a Snicker's bar. Good food, no frills.

Speaking of Kenny, he's attached somehow to the new owner of the joint and spends a considerable amount of his time there. He's a retired rodeo cowboy and sometime welder of silhouettes of horses and cowboys, slightly-larger-than-life-size, which is also the size of stories he tells whether you ask for them or not. He's some kind of a tall tale and bad joke machine with a topical indexing system. As

Kenny himself says, "I've never forgotten a single story I've ever heard." Lord help us all. He also sings and plays guitar, of which he once said, after an unsolicited *a capella* rendition of "The Bonny Scotsman" sung right at our table, "I don't have talent, but I've got heart and I practice a lot." And it goes without saying that he remembers all the words.

The Hitchin' Post also offers other live musical performances beyond Kenny's impromptu serenades (some of which also include Kenny and/or Jess, Carole, Annie or whoever happens to drop by and can carry a tune), but all the offerings are of a similar ilk, which is to say, nothing highfalutin, just good tunes to set your boot to tapping.

Given all this, you can imagine the automatic skepticism with which we greeted Kenny's question on a Friday steak night in mid-December: "Will you be coming in tomorrow night for the opera singer?" First of all, I must confess, I could only guess that he meant "opry" singer, as in Grand Old Opry. Jane, who has actually organized a Symphony on the Prairie with 3,000 or so people attending right here on the ranch, might be expected to have a broader frame of reference for what types of entertainment actually fly out here in the Flint Hills. On the other hand, Kenny was in her class at school, so she's known him practically all her life and is well acquainted with his penchant for jokes. I can't remember exactly how we expressed our doubts about his veracity, but Kenny affected a wounded expression and grabbed a flyer from the bar. "Here," he said as he threw the sheet down with a flourish, "look at this, since you obviously don't believe me." Sure enough, "A Night of Classical Music with Markel R. Porter" was scheduled for Saturday night at the Hitchin' Post. It was as hard to imagine as it was impossible to pass up.

Generally speaking, when we're in for a meal we might see three other people who are not

employees, maybe five on a really good day. The next evening I counted over twenty shining faces when we walked in the door, with the crowd swelling to thirty by evening's end. There were printed programs on each table, a repertoire of songs in Italian, French, German and English. Four languages, not including cowboy.

Given the caliber of the evening's selections, Kenny's opening act, which was winding down as we found a table, seemed the ultimate in musical incongruity (his motto: *play only happy and funny songs, people are usually sad enough when they come in here*). Imagine short and bandy-legged Kenny on the "stage" with a guitar draped across his untucked plaid shirt, mustache slightly askew and hair to match, singing something like *Come After Breakfast, Bring Your Lunch, and Leave Before Supper* while a tall, striking woman in impeccable black velvet skirt and jacket stands waiting in the wings to launch into a 15th century Italian air, *Vittoria, nio core!*

Frankly, there were incongruities all over the room.

Clara Jo Talkington and three other older women were occupying a booth for what appeared to be a regular Saturday Girl's Night Out that involved beer and burgers and lively conversation among the marginally hard of hearing. I didn't get the impression that the gals had come for the opera singing, nor did they let it get in the way of their good time. Every once in a while one of them would appear to notice that there was a concert in progress and shush one of her boisterous companions. A minute later the same woman would start talking loudly and excitedly herself. Thank heavens our opera singer had a microphone and was a good sport. You'd have to be sporting, I imagine, to agree to sing opera in the Hitchin' Post in the first place.

One large table contained a conspicuously well-dressed contingent that was enjoying a

meal and had plans to gather elsewhere after the concert for champagne and chocolate. At the risk of offending, I will point out that most of the people at that table have come to live here, as have I, from elsewhere. It is no secret that this particular group has a tendency toward missionary zeal in their urgency to bring culture to the county, so naturally they were positively full of glee about the opera singer. By contrast, the natives of this place are *live and let live* sorts who do not press the flip side of the issue; it matters not to them whether the newcomers know a damn thing about cattle and grass. Jane, who is a very cultured person and resents the implication that just because you live in the country means you need a dose of culture like an inoculation to prevent terminal stupidity, is fond of saying *there is absolutely nothing wrong with the culture of agriculture*.

But back to our night of opera at the Hitchin' Post.

Lined up along the bar were a few "regulars" who were clearly there for the ale rather than the arias. Despite their relative disinterest in the goings-on of "A Night of Classical Music," a few ears were lifted above beer-level for a perky rendition of *The Lass from the Low Countree*, which sounded a tiny bit more like what they were accustomed to hearing in the tavern. At least it was a little more accessible than, say, *Vergin tutto amor*. We also noticed that the occasion seemed to raise the local consciousness just a tad; the regulars took turns slipping outside for a cigarette rather than chain-smoking at the bar in usual fashion. No one asked them to do this, they just did it.

Two women from Cottonwood Falls, the head of the Chamber of Commerce and the owner of the Emma Chase Café, had dressed for the occasion in fancy ball gowns and elaborately feathered hats. They used extravagant gestures and fluttered their lashes and just generally put on airs. In lieu of opera glasses

they carried a pair of binoculars with which to see the musician, who was all of 15 feet from their table. They spoke with accents that wavered between British and French and not infrequently collapsed into the local twang. I must not fail to mention that they had also applied temporary tattoos to shoulders and other areas made available by their daring décolletage. Oh, and they wore tennis shoes under their gowns. Kansas women are innately practical; those two would never have made it across the bottle-cap parking lot in fancy shoes. I expect their feet were warm, but it was quite a chilly night and correlatively drafty in the Hitchin' Post. When asked if she wasn't a bit cold in her sleeveless gown, Sue of the Emma Chase replied with a hearty laugh, "Are you kidding? When you're this fat you don't get cold."

This very same woman is but one of a triumvirate of Susans who independently and altogether coincidentally run the three primary eating establishments in Chase County. Sue Smith runs the Emma Chase, Susan Smith is the owner of the Hitchin' Post, and Suzan Barnes is the proprietor of the Grand Central. I only bring this up because, remarkably, all three women were there that evening, a gesture of peace on earth and good will toward women, since under normal circumstances the three have little to do with one another except to compete for the finite number of hungry people in the county on any given day.

I can almost hear you saying *yes, yes, yes, this is all very interesting, but how did an opera singer end up at the Hitchin' Post?* I'm getting to that. It turns out that Markel R. Porter, who does have a lovely voice and a great deal of poise, is Susan Smith's sister. Markel is a senior Voice and Opera major at Pittsburg State University in Pittsburg, Kansas. I can't say what motivated her to take on the Hitchin' Post, but it's a story I wouldn't mind hearing. It doesn't seem quite plausible that the sisters were sitting around

one night and one says to the other, *Well, I own a bar and you sing opera, how's about us putting the two together?* I can't quite picture it, unless alcohol was lubricating the decision-making process.

However unlikely the match between oeuvre and venue, I'd say it was a smashing success. Other folks must have thought so too. When we were in the Hitchin' Post for lunch last week, we told the owner how much we'd enjoyed the concert. "Well," said Susan, a woman of relatively few words, "I think she'll be back."

Occasionally I get asked what in the world possessed me to leave the city and move out to the middle of nowhere. I usually have more answers than the asker has time to hear. Now I'm looking forward to the next person who asks me why I moved to Chase County, Kansas so I can say *for the opera, of course*.

HAPPY NEW YEAR, NOW OR LATER

This is the last day of the Gregorian year and I'm pondering the nature of time and the devices for its keeping, namely, calendars.

The early Roman calendar had the good sense to begin the new year in March, around the time of the Vernal Equinox. I like the idea of the year starting with Spring. Of course, that calendar only had 10 months, which is why the months of September through December are Latin for 7 through 10. In like manner, July and August used to be *Quintilis* and *Sextilis* until they got renamed after the famous Caesars who messed around with the calendar, Julius and Augustus. One of the biggest problems with that first calendar was a pesky gap between December and March, a kind of *no-time zone* during the dead of winter when not much was happening in agriculture; no one kept track of that time until Numa Pompilius, second King of Rome, added January and February to the calendar. I wonder if we wouldn't do quite well without these months; we could just hibernate and

have no appointments to keep until the world got a little lighter and warmer.

The original calendar was lunar in basis, but soon got completely off track with the important solar events like the equinoxes and solstices. Julius Caesar's calendar reform of 46 B.C. followed hot on the heels of his conquest of Egypt. He was no doubt feeling a bit heady with power when he consulted his astronomer and decided to depart from the lunar cycle for timekeeping; they came up with a solar year of 365 days with twelve months of fixed length and one extra day a year every four years. Julius was in favor of starting the year on the Spring Equinox or the Winter Solstice, but since the Senate traditionally took office on January 1st and its members were quite adamant, Julius yielded, an early political compromise.

Politics and calendars go hand in hand. Julius Caesar's successor, Augustus, saw that the Julian calendar was woefully off track because the Official Calendar People had been mistakenly having leap years every three years instead of four. His solution in 10 B.C. was to stop having leap years altogether; they were not reinstated until 4 A.D. He also couldn't resist tampering with the number of days in each month and naming one month after himself, since Julius had appropriated July. His month, August, which previously had only 30 days, borrowed an extra day from February so that he would not be inferior to Julius.

There was still a big problem, since the Julian calendar did not reflect a true solar year. After about 131 years the calendar was off from the equinoxes and solstices by a day; as centuries accumulated, so did the margin of error, particularly with respect to the seasons and the date of Easter, which, by the 16th Century, was slipping into Summer. This was a cause for concern to the Roman Catholic Church (the number of months in which it was permissible to wear white shoes

was evidently getting shorter). The church's motivation in adjusting the calendar was to have Easter celebrated at the time that had been agreed upon at the First Council of Nicaea in 325.

The story of calendar reform is long and fraught with error and conflict. The calendar we now use is over 400 years old and is largely the doing of Pope Gregory XIII, who issued a papal bull to push through his ideas (*like a bull in a calendar shop*). Among the reforms that brought us our current Gregorian calendar in 1582 A.D. were the one-time omission of 10 days from that year (just to get things straightened out, one day it was Thursday, October 5 and the next day it was Friday, October 15...some people complained that time had been stolen from them); a change in the rule for leap years (a year which is divisible by 4 is a leap year unless it is divisible by 100 but not by 400); new rules for the determination of the date of Easter; and repositioning of the extra day in a leap year from the day before February 25th to the day following February 28th.

It may interest you to know that for quite some time, New Year's Day was celebrated in different countries, and sometimes by different groups in the same country, on either January 1, March 1, March 25 or December 25. Take your pick. The papal bull was mute on this matter, in fact, the ecclesiastical New Year used to coincide with Christmas Day until it was changed to January 1st by Pope Pius X, effective in 1911. Employees of businesses that give them the week between Christmas and New Year's off are probably pretty glad about this, otherwise it would be *Merry Christmas and Happy New Year*, then right back to the grindstone.

The new Gregorian calendar was adopted immediately upon the Pope's decree in the Catholic countries of Italy, Spain, Portugal and Poland. The rest of the Western world

followed, all in good time. Well, maybe not such good time for the British Empire, which dug in its heels for 170 years, by which time the Julian and Gregorian calendars were off by 11 days instead of 10. Wednesday, September 2 was followed immediately by Thursday, September 14 in 1752. Other heel-draggers included Republic of China (1912), Russia (1918), and Greece (1924). The majority of Eastern Orthodoxy did not accept the new calendar for liturgical purposes, regardless of the new civil date. I found a website for an Orthodox Church that had the following note in red: *If you want to join us for our Nativity service, you'll have to come on January 7, not December 25.*

I hope you're tired of this. I hope you're thinking, at least a little, that the keeping of time and calendars is a pain in the neck. The notion of time is a manmade construct. The Gregorian calendar - and any periodic calendar - has a problem when it comes to timescales of thousands of years. The calendar falls behind the seasons drastically over time because of variations in the speed of Earth's rotation due to changes in the gravitational force from other planets, the sun, and the moon's orbital inclination.

I could go on to explain the differences between and periodic changes in a *solar year* and a *tropical year*. I could explain a *synodic month* (from new moon to new moon), but its length changes over time as well.

My point, if I have one, is that a fixed and linear concept of time will never precisely fit what's really going on, which is wonderfully elastic and variable. Time seems to derive most of its usefulness from the way in which it enhances efficiency and productivity. What if we relied on synchronicity instead? I cannot tell you the number of times I've run into a friend in the grocery store or gotten a phone call from someone just as I've been thinking of that person and had something I wanted to discuss. Those serendipitous

conversations seem so much richer and fulfilling than the pre-arranged meetings on my calendar usually turn out to be.

We could also go back to the method that many early tribes used to mark time, but it would require us to pay closer attention to nature. We could gather and plant and celebrate and even record our history according to the sun and the moon once again. *I will see you again at the next new moon.* All of our feasts could be moveable, including our birthdays and anniversaries.

Calendars, date books and clocks have little to do with right now; they are a hindrance to living in the present. I tried to put a new battery in my watch last year and ended up breaking the whole works. Just for fun I printed out a little circle that said *NOW* and put it behind the crystal in my watch. Every time I consulted my wrist, which was more frequently than I'd care to admit, I was startled by the truth of what my watch told me. It awakened me to a different way of reckoning.

I was sitting on a very old slab of basalt in 1999 when I first shattered my own mind by comparing my sense of time with geologic time and wrote in my journal:

Now for some perspective on the two-hour hike of a 40-year-old woman on a 6-day vacation: the rocks I've climbed and the smooth black slab I'm sitting on as I write this are nearly 1-1/2 billion years old, the spawn of violent volcanic eruptions; 500 million years ago, these volcanic mountains were covered by inland seas; 250 million years ago, the seas receded.

As I try to take all this in, I have the sudden impulse to take off my watch and throw it in the river, so trite and seemingly inconsequential is the kind of time it keeps.

Granted, I've come to love throwing around these mind-blowing numbers in the millions

and billions of years and am glad that someone has been keeping track of time so that I can do so. But now that I've gotten it through my head that my lifetime is but the blink of an eye, I'd like to keep my eyes wide open during my stay and not look quite so often at my watch or the calendar.

If I were in charge of calendar reform, I'd be inclined to agree with Julius Caesar that the year should begin on either the Winter Solstice or the Vernal Equinox. I'd want a calendar that showed the phases of the moon on every day and just numbered the days consecutively from the beginning of the year to its end. The months, if we wanted to have them, would be lunar months and could be named after the old agricultural names, like Sap Moon Month and Seed Moon Month and Strawberry Moon Month. I am sure there are all kinds of hitches in this idea, but I like its potential for drawing us back toward the rhythms of the earth, the pull of the tides, the cycles of light.

Well, anyway, Happy New Year, now or later. I haven't quite made up my mind when I'll celebrate this year.

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