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LITTLE RED'S CHICKEN SHED

As I write this, Little Red Harvey, my convalescing chicken, is taking an afternoon snooze in a patch of March sunlight, her beak tucked under her sparsely feathered wing. I got very sleepy watching her. A napping chicken, I've discovered, is a powerful soporific.

After seventeen days of living in an extra-large dog crate here in the house, she was relocated yesterday afternoon to *Little Red's Chicken Shed*, a rehabilitation institute of sorts. For ten days she couldn't even use her legs; she did a weird sort of scooting crab-walk to get around. Now she can walk, but she tends to step on her own feet. I'm pleased that she hardly ever tips over anymore, but she still hasn't quite remastered using her wings to fly up to a perch.

The new chicken annex, which is right next door to the regular-size chicken coop, came into being because we are getting ready to go out of town for a few days. For the life of me I could not figure out how to explain to our three-part relay team of house sitters that they'd be caring for two cats, two dogs, eighteen busy chickens and oh, by the way, there's a wounded chicken in a crate next to the woodstove who needs to be taken outside for physical therapy every afternoon.



I spent two-and-a-half days building this miniature chicken coop out of scrap lumber. *Little Red's Chicken Shed* has a small outdoor pen, a chicken-sized door that opens by wire and pulley



from outside, a round screen window, a roost/nesting shelf, a hinged panel on the back that allows me to reach inside to

do maintenance and Little Red to come out to play in the afternoons, and a little tiny calendar on the wall so she can count the days it takes to heal and grow back her feathers. She has a nice crop of quarter-inch stubble coming in, which is a great relief. I found it tremendously disconcerting to be rendering care to a chicken whose back looked a little too much like the plucked poultry I like to roast with rosemary and garlic.



The most sophisticated computer program in the world, I realized this morning, could not impress me more than the complex DNA instructions according to which Little Red's cells are crafting these exquisite, intricate feathers to replace what was so swiftly and thoughtlessly purloined by a dog.



I have been trying a few social experiments, but Little Red is just not ready to be reintegrated into the flock yet. This is the first time I have really seen the dark side of chickens. With her puncture wounds, missing feathers and lameness, Little Red is practically wearing a *Peck Me* sign on her back. The other chickens just will not leave her in peace when she's this vulnerable; they go into attack mode. Much as I am dismayed by their uncivil behavior, I must accept that it's simply part of the instinctive pecking order system and the survival of the fittest. Little Red, by the rest of the flock's standards, is not very fit at present.

Without my intervention, she would almost certainly not be alive, so there's little doubt I've messed with the natural order of things. I still do not know if I have done her any favors by my acts of mercy. Now she's much more acclimated to humans, dogs and cats, which may not be to her best advantage. The dogs enjoyed sleeping with their noses up by the door of her crate while she sat just inside and pecked at vegetables. The cats crawled all over the crate and tried to stick their paws in the vents. She seemed to enjoy being with us, interjecting little comments from time to time, staying up late and watching us play cards in the evening.

Chances are, now that Little Red has a place of her own, I miss her more than she misses me, which is much the same dynamic as when your kid goes off to college. She appeared to be pleased with her Chicken Shed. I designed it to mirror in miniature the features of the big coop in which she grew up, so she'd know where to go and what to do. Sure enough, just after sunset last night, she went inside. This morning, the minute I opened the door, she walked proudly down her little ramp.

As for me, I found myself missing her this afternoon as I was vacuuming up seeds and feathers by the woodstove. Have I ever mentioned that we clean our house with a 12-

gallon shop vac? At first I thought this was a little strange, but now it makes a great deal of sense. Life on a ranch tends to be, well, *chunky*. Feathers, fur, grass, seeds, pebbles, mud, all species of dung (or dung of all species), you name it, it ends up in the house. Anyway, I was cleaning house when I got to thinking about Little Red and missing her. I went out to sit on an old milk crate next to her pen in the warm sunlight. I talked sweetly to her, a mix of Chicknese and English (which I guess would be Chicklish), telling her I'd been thinking of her fondly, which is exactly when she hunkered down in the opposite corner of the pen, tucked her beak under her wing and promptly fell asleep.

Maybe she was bored with me. Maybe the sound of my voice is like a lullaby to her. Maybe she was just plumb tuckered. No matter the reason, Little Red seems pretty darn happy with her Chicken Shed, which pleases me enormously.

CHICKEN NEWS FLASH

Thanks to Liz, one of my readers in New Jersey, I bring you news of the Omlet Eglu, a high-tech,



small-scale chicken coop that's all the rage in England (it comes with two chickens). As far as I know, the Eglu is not yet available in the U.S., but I imagine it will be here before long. Intended for urban dwellers who like fresh eggs, the design is rather ingenious. Here's what I read on Omlet's website:

Give your chickens the best! The eglu is a coop for the 21st century, featuring spacious open plan living for 2 medium size chickens or 3 bantams, it is a stylish and practical addition to any garden. Designed to be comfortable for the chickens and effortless for you, the eglu makes keeping chickens rewarding and fun.

<http://www.omlet.co.uk/>

THE KANSAS ZEPHYR

What is a zephyr? For one thing, it's a beautiful word. Very romantic-sounding. Poetic. Not to mention a great Scrabble play. Webster's definition is a *breeze from the west* or a *gentle breeze*. Either way, breeze is the operative noun, a *light gentle wind*.

Kansas zephyr? This seems a flaming non sequitur. The wind is out of the west today, and if this is a zephyr, you'll find me down in the fraidy-hole if a real wind comes up. Empty fifty-gallon drums are bouncing across the yard, my chickens are plastered up against the east side of the pen, and anything that weighs less than five pounds and is not nailed down is already on its way to Missouri.

Zephyrus, the root of zephyr, was the Greek god of the west wind:

Sea-born, aerial, blowing from the west,
sweet breezes, who give to wearied labour rest.
-Orphic Hymn 81 to Zephyrus

This good-natured side of Zephyrus's personality is obviously the origin of the *gentle breeze* definition. But as anyone who's studied Greek mythology knows, there just weren't any one-hundred-percent sweethearts in the Greek pantheon. I had to dig a little deeper, but I eventually found the dirt: this wind god was also stormy and blustery, given to wild, swift blasts and loud roaring, not to mention some shenanigans when he teamed up with his cohort from the north, Boreas:

...and they with immortal clamour rose up, and
swept the clouds in confusion before them.
They came with a sudden blast upon the sea,
and the waves rose under the whistling wind.
-*Iliad*



Zephyr may ring a bell if you're a railroad buff. The Chicago Burlington & Quincy Railroad named the first of its nine streamlined,

"shovelnose" trains the *Pioneer Zephyr* in 1934. When the Zephyr set a speed record between Denver and Chicago that year, it was nicknamed *The Silver Streak*. The god of the west wind's namesake averaged 78 miles per hour on that trip. That is no gentle breeze.

The highest wind I've ever experienced out here on the prairie is 67 miles per hour, which is just 7 miles per hour less than the lower end of a Class 1 (weak) hurricane. Is it any wonder that inventive pioneers took a stab at developing a wind-powered prairie schooner? The trouble is, the winds on the Great Plains are variable, and the next day's gusts might blow you right back from whence you came.

I have run across the term *Kansas zephyr* more than once in my historical reading. While the west wind blew today, I thought it would be a fun topic to investigate. The term does, by the way, refer to the wind and not a train, but is a Kansas zephyr a gentle breeze or a roaring blast?

The answer is, it depends. Kansans seem to have incorporated the full range of Zephyrus's moods into their definition.

William G. Cutler's 1883 *History of the State of Kansas* refers gushingly to *summers soothed by the everlasting Kansas zephyr*. In addition to staying true to Webster's sense of the word, this gooey quotation also reflects Cutler's desire to paint a flattering portrait of Kansas. As far as I can tell, it was no less windy in Kansas in the 1880s than it is now.

I found a delightful collection of old Kansas newspaper clippings that highlight the stormy side of Zephyrus's personality (compiled in 1946 by well-known Kansas historian James C. Malin). As I read these snippets, I kept thinking that it's a damn pity our newspaper reporters and editors no longer write with such a flair for colorful irony and humor:

Spring is now upon us and we are visited occasionally with one of those sweet, gentle, brow-cooling zephyrs for which this country has become so famous. Those of our new comers who have lost their domestic animals and fowls need not be alarmed, as the chances are that such stock will be blown back by the next wind.

(Wichita *Eagle*, March 6, 1873)

Last Sunday [February 20] the Kansas zephyr was again abroad in the land, and a reasonable quantity of the dry and dusty land was abroad in the zephyr. The Kansas zephyrs are a promiscuous and pleasant thing, they are. Real estate takes its biggest rise during these times.

(Newton *Kansan*, February 24, 1876)

Talk about the gentle zephyrs of Kansas wafting sweet perfume from unseen flowers and all that sort of thing, but the wafting on Tuesday last was "all in your eye." Whew! how the dust did blow. It filled our ears, until we thought ourselves the possessor of more real estate than anyone in town; it got into our flaxen locks and our head seemed an acre of dirt and pain; it filled our eyes, and winking became a hazardous undertaking not to be thought of, and the dusky shades of night found us staring wildly into space; we inhaled it copiously, and our rebellious proboscis sneezed dissent; we gulped it down gritting our teeth the while, and at evening we realized fully, as we caught sight of our dusty face in the mirror, "Dust thou art," etc.

(Manhattan *Mercury*, April 18, 1876)

All of these stories are from February, March and April, which is when the Kansas zephyr is in top form. You'd be well-advised to have a stampede strap on your hat and keep it fastened in the spring, as a story from the county south of ours makes clear:

It was a habit with his father to carry his money (bills) under the sweat band of his hat, and one day while he had quite a considerable amount of money thus concealed in a light straw hat, a playful Kansas zephyr blew his hat off, and so far

away that neither the hat nor the money has been heard of according to last reports.

(*History of Butler County, Kansas*, 1916)

I do not get the impression that *Kansas zephyr* refers only to a wind out of the west. As best I can tell, Kansas zephyr is an all-purpose term to describe the wind, any wind from any direction, anywhere in Kansas—from a soft summer breeze that caresses the back of your sweaty red neck to an all-out blow that takes the roof off your chicken house. The term is apparently, however, no longer in vogue; it has been gone with the wind for close to a hundred years. What a shame. If Frank Baum had transported Dorothy and Toto to Oz in a Kansas zephyr instead of a cyclone, I'm sure the phrase would still be popular, at least on t-shirts.

The memorable Kansas winds and the stories about them would do Zephyrus proud, for indeed, they have taken on mythical proportions and will undoubtedly continue to do so as time passes, no matter what name the wind is called:

Zephyrs are our strong point—they lift ten pound boulders and two year old mule colts off the ground—the squawking flocks overhead may be geese, may be jackasses.

(Wichita *Eagle*, April 26, 1872)

A ROOM WITH A MOO

There's no two ways about it, I miss having cows in the yard. They've been fenced out since last July, for some very good reasons.

For one, there are sixteen guy wires holding our 84-foot wind turbine tower in place. Cows are known for scratching themselves on fence posts, rocks, trees, anything that will enable them to access the itch. The guy wires would serve that purpose very nicely, but one or two cows self-administering a vigorous massage are theoretically enough to bring the tower down. Rural electric companies have figured

this one out; the guy wires on power poles in pastures have razor-sharp barbs on them.

Another good reason to cordon off the cows is that we simply couldn't leave bales of alfalfa on the truck or a sack of cow candy in the truckery without the cows finding the stash. Cows can detect odors up to five miles away. I don't know if this matters, but they can also hear higher and lower frequencies than humans, like maybe the sound of a feed sack being set down. Who knows? But I swear, every time I left an open bag of cow candy (more properly known as Purina Breeder Chow) in the truckery, the cows found it. The Watusi and her daughter Winifred were the worst offenders. Winifred figured out how to break in. She'd stick her head under the door and raise it up enough to get inside. I've seen this with my own eyes and marveled at her ingenuity.

These are the primary reasons for building a fence around the perimeter of our yard. There are other minor inconveniences that support the decision. A thousand-pound cow produces an average of ten tons of manure a year. Enough said. Cows also use their tongues to investigate things like parked cars and the windows of the house. One house sitter's car was particularly attractive for some reason. The cows liberally autographed it with their spit. Only later did the paint peel off wherever they'd licked the vehicle. Cows also don't care that Jane planted irises because she wanted to see them bloom. Iris foliage tastes good, which is all that matters to a bovine. Neither do cows give a fig that downspouts are only useful if they remain connected to the gutters nor that solar landscape lights were not built to withstand a curious calf's investigations.

Even after reminding myself of all these perfectly good reasons why we decided to fence out the cows last summer, I still miss having them close by. I miss watching the jaunty cow parade winding through the yard. I

miss seeing 200-pound calves interacting with 5-pound chickens. I miss looking up from my writing and being startled into laughter by a cow or calf staring fixedly at me through the back door. I miss waking up and seeing a big, horned face peering inquiringly through the bedroom window at daybreak. I miss the good old days when we used to have, as we're fond of saying, a room with a moo.



EAT A BEAUTIFUL EGG TODAY

At least my chickens still get to wander around the yard for a couple hours every evening. This has much the same effect on my spirit as seeing cows in the yard, only the chickens are not tall enough to look in the windows. They do follow me right up to the back door on occasion, and I'm certain they'd walk straight in if I'd hold the door open long enough. But Jane says no. No chickens in the house. She relented later and added *unless they wear diapers*. I don't see this happening. Jane did make an exception to this rule for Little Red, but she wasn't allowed to roam around.

I now sell ten or twelve dozen eggs a month and eat the rest. This gives me a sense of personal satisfaction and keeps the girls in chicken feed and scratch, with enough loose change left over (what used to be called *pin money*) to buy myself lunch when I'm in Kansas City. I like to think my eggs also make the world a slightly better place. My happy hens are laying happy eggs that make the people who eat them just a little happier than they might otherwise be.

There's something old-fashioned and wholesome about this trade; it has no middle-man, no sales tax, no fancy packaging, and no elaborate label claims. Egg label claims can be confusing. What's the difference between conventional, cage free, free run, free range, natural, and certified organic? There are official definitions for all of these things, but the terms are pretty slippery and occasionally quite misleading. *Free range*, for example, gives the impression that the chickens get to play outside in the grass like mine do, but in fact this does not guarantee that the hens who laid the eggs were in a pasture; they may be on bare dirt or concrete.

All of the egg cartons I use are recycled from people who save them for me, so I have the opportunity to see a lot of different marketing hogwash (or perhaps I should say *chickenwash*). I've noticed one carton label that claims *Brown Eggs from Cage Free Vegetarian Hens who are free to roam around the farm*. I'm sorry, I have personally seen what happens when a chicken spies a worm, a grasshopper or a mouse. As far as I know, these items of food are meat, not vegetables, and any chicken that's *free to roam around the farm* will undoubtedly partake of them.

If you really want help sorting out label claims, I can point you toward some helpful information. I do know that you're better off avoiding eggs from conventionally-raised chickens. The hens who lay these eggs are not happy, I promise you. They spend their entire lives in small wire cages with one to three other hens. They never get to run or fly or take a dust bath, three things that seem to give chickens an inordinate amount of pleasure. It's also highly likely that commercial layers are given feed containing a number of not-very-natural additives to compensate for the miserable conditions under which they're raised and to attempt to make their egg yolks look as bright and sunny as the ones from happier chickens.

And here's another concern: five years ago the FDA gave the go-ahead to irradiate eggs to kill harmful bacteria, even though the process zaps some of the egg's nutritional content. Scientists estimate that the likelihood of an egg being contaminated by *Salmonella* is five one-thousandths of one percent. At that rate, the average consumer can expect to encounter one such egg every 84 years. I'll take those odds rather than eat an irradiated egg, thank you very much. This, I might add, is a handy bit of information with which cookie-dough-eaters can reassure their loved ones.

I'm very comfortable with the only label claim I make: *Laid by the happiest chickens in Kansas*. Someone might reasonably challenge this sweeping statement, but I don't think they could ever actually prove me wrong. There are other equally cute, goofy and irrefutable claims I could make, but most of the people who buy my eggs already know these things. For example, *laid by chickens who*:

- Have names
- Have birthday parties
- Are ethnically diverse
- Are deeply adored
- Are talked to by humans every day
- Are given fresh fruit and vegetables
- Do tricks
- Listen to music

On average, I probably eat an egg a day, maybe more. Eggs are the very best protein for the money; they have thirteen essential vitamins and minerals and a perfect mix of the amino acids that build tissues. The efficacy with which an egg's protein is used by the human body for growth is 93.7%, which comes in way ahead of milk (84.5%), fish (76%) and beef (74.3%).

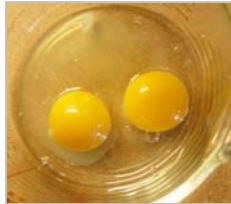
If you are still stuck in the mindset that has cast the egg in the role of Evil Cholesterol Villain since the 1960s, it's time to come into

the new century. A study by the Harvard School of Public Health found no relationship between egg consumption and cardiovascular health. There was no difference in risk between study participants who ate less than one egg a week and those who ate more than one egg a day. The American Heart Association has announced this, too, but I'm afraid there are many people who weren't paying attention, so LISTEN UP!



Eat a beautiful egg today. Eat without fear. Eat with reverence and awe. I don't know how they measure these things, but it's something to think about while you're

soaking a vitamin-packed yolk up with a piece of perfectly-browned, buttery toast, something to fixate on besides your cholesterol: a hen has to eat five ounces of food and drink ten ounces of water to make a single two-ounce egg. Thirty minutes after laying her egg and singing her jubilant aria of announcement, she starts making another egg. Ain't that amazing? So cheers! Eat your beautiful egg in good conscience and be light of heart.



INFLUENTIAL CHICKENS

My Aunt Betty and Uncle Harry up in Michigan like to read my stories aloud to one another in the evenings. I can almost hear them chuckling from here. Aunt Betty is also really good about sending the occasional encouraging note, which usually includes some interesting clippings. The note that came today contained an index card on which the two of them had brainstormed all the chicken-related terms and phrases they could come up with.

Chickens, who have been domesticated since about 600 BC and who came to the New World with Columbus on his second trip in

1493, have had a tremendous influence on our culture. Witness the fact that nearly any meat that is not chicken, beef, pork or lamb is described as tasting *kinda like chicken*, even rattlesnake.

Here's the list that Betty and Harry started and to which I added a few. If you can think of any others, please send them in!

Brooding
Chicken feed
Chicken out
Chicken scratchings
Chicken with its head cut off, <i>running around like a</i>
Chicken-hearted
Chickens, <i>don't count before they're hatched</i>
Chickens, <i>go to bed with, get up with</i>
Clucking about/clucking one's tongue
Cock of the walk
Cock-eyed
Cocky
Cracked up to be, <i>not all it's</i>
Crowing like a rooster
Do chickens have lips?
Egg on your face
Egg, <i>laid an</i>
Egging someone on
Eggs, <i>don't put all in one basket</i>
Eggshells, <i>walking on</i>
Feather, <i>as light as a</i>
Feather, <i>birds of a</i>
Feathers, <i>ruffled someone's</i>
Hard-boiled detective
Hatch a scheme or a plot
Hen, <i>like an old mother</i>
Hen, <i>mad as, madder than a wet</i>
Hen-pecked
Hen's teeth, <i>scarcer than</i>
Pecking order
Picked on
Roost, <i>come home to</i>
Shell, <i>come out of one's</i>
Which came first, the chicken or the egg?
Why did the chicken cross the road?

DAVE AND THE DOULAS

Dave is about to have her first calf. We noticed the signs the other day. Her bag is tight and full of milk. Her sides have expanded so much, she looks like a hairy scale model of a double-wide mobile home. There

are other signs that we describe with the adjectives *saggy* and *loose*, having to do with parts of her anatomy that are in the critical path of calf delivery.



In my head I have been thinking, *Dave is great with child*, which makes me giggle. Dave, as I think I've mentioned before, has this unlikely masculine moniker because of the wagon

train outrider who performed a daring act of pasture acrobatics when Dave was a wee nameless calf who did not appear to be nursing properly. When Wagon Train Dave snatched the calf out of the pasture and jumped onto the back of the truck with her, her mom, Marcella, a large and protective cow, gave chase at surprising speed. *You didn't tell me she'd be out to eat my lunch*, Dave later said. Just as it is wise advice to never get between a bear and her cubs, so it is with cows and their calves, but the occasional foolhardy act is required.

Marcella, I am sad to say, died in a snow storm a year ago, at the relatively ancient cow age of eighteen years. Dave was her very last calf in a productive lifetime, and now it's up to Dave to carry on the family line.

I volunteered the other day to lure Dave out of a thousand-acre pasture and into a pen where we could keep an eye on her, in case she needs help with labor and delivery. She is a small heifer with a heavy load; it is entirely possible that she will need assistance unloading her burden.

I thought it would be a good idea for Dave to have some company in the maternity ward, so I picked two Brahman first-calf heifers to serve as *doulas*, a Greek term for a pregnancy, labor and delivery coach, sort of a pal and cheerleader combo. Jane and I will serve as midwives, if necessary, while the

doulas will offer companionship and support throughout Dave's confinement.

I had two good reasons for selecting these sweet, long-lashed, matched bookend Brahman heifers as doulas: (1) they performed this same function last year for another first-calf heifer; and (2) they may very well be going through their own first deliveries later this season.



With these decisions comes an extra set of chores everyday. I have to haul water and feed to the pens and drive down to

do an assessment every four hours or so, watching for signs. My periodic announcement, *I'm going to check on Dave and the doulas*, sounds a little like I'm the producer for a rock-and-roll band that's in the midst of cutting an album.

I may actually have an entire album's worth of material by the time Dave finally goes into labor. So far I've made up songs that can be sung to the tune of *Under the Boardwalk*, *You're Having My Baby*, *Do Lord and Louie*, *Louie*.

BEEWARE

Last Saturday Jane and I went into Cottonwood Falls to attend a Honey in the Hills workday. We have decided to become keepers of bees, and so we were at the high school with a number of other people on a warm, sunny morning, assembling our apiaries. The work was very satisfying. There was an industrious cacophony of pounding hammers, an occasional cry of pain, the lovely scents of pine and beeswax, and a general air of camaraderie and excitement.

In addition to our hive, we are now the proud owners of a protective hood, a smoker to calm the bees, and a hive scraping tool. In a few

weeks we will take possession of our bees. Our neighbor Mary, who shares my penchant for shoes, said *oh, good, Marva will probably need to get some new bee shoes*. I think that's a very good idea, perhaps something in black and yellow.

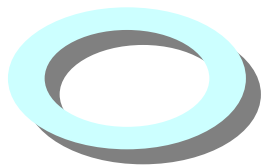
As we worked at gluing and nailing our bee boxes and frames, bees from the neighborhood began to congregate around us, attracted to the beeswax foundations in our frames. It was as good a time as any to begin learning how to relax around bees, which I can already tell you is not going to be easy. A bee landed on my cheek. I breathed very deeply while I thought gentle thoughts, counted to two and knocked the bee off with my hand. I'm sure I'll do better next time.

I do look forward to developing a different relationship with bees, learning all sorts of new and interesting things about both bees and myself, and especially to harvesting honey distilled from the nectar of all these fabulous prairie wildflowers. How sweet that will be.

In the mean time, I'm studying up on the fascinating language of beekeeping: virgin queens, nurse bees, drones, workers, swarms. The most captivating topic I've encountered so far is *reading the mood of the bees*, which is mostly done by listening. Perhaps with my experience as a chicken-whisperer, there is also hope that I may one day become a bee-whisperer.

Let's hope so.

FULL CIRCLE REFLECTIONS



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 under 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.