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CHICKEN CELEBRATION

Today is the chickens' birthday and I had a very busy day on the ranch. I was forced to leave the making of their birthday cake until the very last minute. Luckily, our neighbor Mary contributed leftover breakfast cereal and some fruit and vegetable scraps. Since I had no time to look for a birthday cake recipe, I simply had to wing it. Chicken pun intended. I assembled a few other choice ingredients and prepared the festive fare. Here is the recipe, in case you ever have to cater a chicken birthday party:

Quick & Easy

No-Bake Four-Layer Birthday Cake

Servings: 18 Prep Time: 5 minutes

- 4 C. assorted breakfast cereal, crushed
- 3 C. assorted fruit and vegetable scraps (green bean tips, potato peels, apples, asparagus, wilted greens)
- 1 C. fancy scratch
- ½ C. grated cheddar cheese

Layer ingredients in 9 X 13 pan. Serve.

Believe it or not, I actually scrounged up eighteen cake plates, although they didn't all match. I skipped the crepe paper and napkins on account of the wind. I doubted that the chickens would know the difference.



At about six o'clock I lined the plates up in the yard and served the cake. This generated a considerable amount of interest from the birthday girls, who were eagerly waiting to be let out for the party. When I shouted *Happy Birthday* and opened the gate, the first few

moments were much like those at any party; nobody quite knew what to do or how to act. Right from the start, the tableware proved problematic. No one wanted to be the first to start eating, which is not normally an issue



amongst the poultry crowd. Just as some of us are stymied by the dilemma of which fork to use at a fancy

dinner, the chickens faced their own challenge: with the exception of Little Red, not a one had never eaten from a plate before. The guests milled around and commented on the lovely presentation. They mingled in little conversational groupings. The extroverts kept taking one step forward and one step back, giving the impression of a somewhat disorganized chicken line dance.

Finally, one of the Penzeys broke the ice by taking a first tentative bite. The others stood by and watched with curious anxiety. Her



second bite was a delectable potato peel; she exited the party at a high rate of speed, pursued by five other chickens who coveted her spud. Meanwhile, seventeen full plates of cake sat neglected. Jane, our official chicken birthday photographer, lifted one quizzical eyebrow from behind her camera. Of what exactly, she was clearly wondering, was she supposed to be taking pictures. The chase scene? The plates at which no one was eating?

"This," I said, in oblique answer to Jane's unspoken question, "is one of the weirdest things I've ever done." And then I rolled on the ground and laughed until my belly ached.

One by one the savviest chickens began to figure out that the long line of strange and brightly colored disks contained the sorts of edible treasures with which Miss Penzey was running around the yard. The birthday honorees began to cluster around the food, sampling cake and keeping a sharp eye out to make sure there wasn't a choicer serving on the plates to left and right. There were a few party poopers, but not in the traditional sense of the term.

The festivities were finally in full swing.

Jane was busy snapping pictures and I was congratulating myself on a successful party when the inevitable happened: someone stepped on the edge of a plate, the plate started to tip, and the chicken flew straight up in the air with a raucous squawk. As a

general rule, chickens are a jumpy bunch, and the self-preservation code dictates that you fly first and ask questions later. So it was that when Miss Holiday catapulted off her plate, all the other happy cake-eaters instantly overreacted in a frenzy of feet, feathers, squawks and cackles—a real hullabaloo—which brought the party to a screeching halt, literally. At least no one was fussing about who was responsible for the dry-cleaning bill.



I finally relinquished my dream for a civilized chicken birthday party and began dumping cake straight onto the ground and gathering up the plates. Then, of course, the real party began.

If there's any advice to be offered for the success of future chicken birthday parties, I suppose it would be this: *let them eat cake, but skip the china.*

I guess I'd better go wash dishes. At least I had enough sense not to put out any forks.

Another One for the Record Books

Just the other day I got another gargantuan egg from someone in the chicken house. It is beyond me how a relatively small chicken can lay an egg this big. The record-breaking egg was 3 inches tall, weighed 4 ounces, and was 6-3/4 inches in circumference.

I took it to Kansas City and showed it around to all the people who buy eggs from me. "With this," I said, "you get a one-omelet egg instead of a one-egg omelet."

If you'll hold on just a minute I'll go see what's inside...

Sure enough, it has two eggs packed into one shell. How efficient!



ANNIVERSARY OF MY OVERALLS

This is indeed a time of celebration. The chickens had a birthday and my overalls and I had an anniversary. One year has passed since I purchased the first of three pair of Key Imperial bib overalls, the *Aristocrat of Overalls*.

This is not to say that I have never owned overalls before. Quite the contrary. I have been an aficionado of these durable, comfortable, practical, multi-pocketed britches since I was twelve and got my first pair of Big Smith railroad-stripped overalls in Bemidji, Minnesota, 1971.

To my regret, in the last ten or fifteen years, I've had little cause or opportunity to wear overalls. My delight then, a year ago, when I purchased my Key Imperials at Bluestem Farm & Ranch Supply in Emporia, was boundless.

Now this pair of faded denim bibs serves as a record of my first amazing year in the Flint Hills. The seams are worn, the fabric has been rendered a much paler blue by repeated washings, and the stains that defied the laundry detergent tell a story.



Here is a patch of tar from when my parents were visiting last spring and my dad and I installed a vent in the roof of the metal shed, the first father-daughter project we'd done in many a year. Down on the right leg is an oil-stain where I wiped my slippery hands repeatedly as we built the prairie chicken blind, soaking our old nails in motor oil to make them easier to pound into the ancient barn wood. This patch of soot-darkened diesel fuel is from my adventures in setting fire to huge piles of dead trees. And these faint outlines of manure stains from ankle to knee are witness to the vicissitudes of working cattle under muddy conditions. The

bib in particular is an archaeological record of the fabulous food I've enjoyed while sitting in my favorite recliner in front of the big round window: juicy burgers laden with homemade relish, salsa from homegrown tomatoes, strawberry-rhubarb pie, fresh beets swimming in sweet cream butter.

And speaking of butter, the fabric is now nearly just that soft, with a few small holes that tell a tale of barbed-wire fence crossings and brief encounters with rusty hooks and nails in the barn.

Many a morning I smile as I put on these battered, beloved overalls. I think back to all the mornings I struggled with the decision of what to wear to work: Did the clothing fit the season? Had I worn the outfit already that week? Would anyone notice? Now my biggest challenge is to decide which of my soft cotton shirts or sweatshirts is best for the day's likely weather and chores, and which of my

bandannas will be a good match with my shirt or my mood. The overalls are a given.

I have already worn out two pairs of leather gloves in my sojourn here. I doubt these overalls will make it to

our next anniversary in their present form, but they will have a second useful life as sturdy rags for this and that.

There is only one other Chase County woman I know of who's been seen wearing overalls other than the cute designer type. Some might say that it is spectacularly undignified for a middle-aged woman to attire herself regularly in such shapeless, homespun garb, but that's the beautiful thing about middle-age eccentricity: frankly, I don't care what anyone thinks of my drawers.

EVERYBIRD

I was painting bee boxes down at the metal shed yesterday when I heard a remarkable bird concert. The lively cantata went something like this: *fee-bee-fee-bee fee-bee, peter-peter-peter, what-cheer-cheer-cheer, pretty-pretty-pretty, dee-dee-dee, bob-white bob-white bob-white, sing-sing-merrily, cheer-up cheerily, chip-chip-chip* and so on. I grabbed a scrap of cardboard and a pencil and began writing down the names of birds whose calls I recognized: eastern phoebe, tufted titmouse, northern cardinal, northern bobwhite, eastern meadowlark, American robin, chipping sparrow. There were other birdsongs I could not so readily identify or transcribe: warbler, lark, and wren—blackbird, finch and oriole. The chorus contained nearly every cheep, peep, pip and chirrup you can imagine, and many a warble, whistle, tweet and twitter. When I stepped outside the shed I expected to find the branches of the old mulberry tree drooping with birds of all species.

What I saw instead was absolutely nothing; there was nary a feathered friend in sight. I strained my eyes and longed for my binoculars. I cupped my ear toward the source of the music and finally saw a single silvery-gray bird take flight, flashing its white wing patches and wagging its tail as it resettled on another branch and commenced to sing once more. Of course! *Mimus polyglottos*, the mimic of many languages—northern mockingbird—was single-handedly responsible for putting on the entire show.

These musical stylings, mind you, were not slapdash, second-rate, bargain basement knock-offs; they were nearly flawless imitations sung in rapid-fire succession.

The deeper implication of imitation as *the sincerest form of flattery*—especially in the case of such artful vocal impersonations—is that it attests to a very pure form of listening, enormous powers of observation,

acute curiosity and endless patience for perfecting the tiniest nuance.

The recording of a single mockingbird in Massachusetts, according to my Audubon Field Guide, yielded recognizable songs from thirty-six other birds. I have heard mockingbirds in the city who could imitate sirens, jackhammers, car alarms and the warning beeps of a delivery truck backing up to the loading dock.

Rather than pity a bird who has no call of its own other than a harsh *chack*, I deeply admire this cheerful troubadour for whom almost any song will do, who is fond of serenading for hours on moonlit nights in the spring, and who is at home anywhere from Florida to California, suburbia to farmland, city park to desert. The mockingbird



possesses no remarkable plumage, is average in size, and commonly found across the better

part of the U.S. This bird who lives on borrowed song is Everybird—common and yet unique, average but distinctive.

Come to think of it, all of my songs are borrowed too, and yet there is not nearly so much flattery suggested by my renditions as by those of the observant mockingbird.

LOWLY, INDISPENSABLE CHIP-KICKER

Let's face it, there are plenty of jobs without much glamour or prestige—I've had a few myself—that are nonetheless essential. The Roto-Rooter technician comes to mind, and with good reason, since the topic here is waste products.

The pasture-burning season is now over for us, but I have not forgotten the lessons learned in my entry-level position as chip-kicker—yes, that's right—a dung-dribbling, pie-punting, turd-turning apprentice. Any other post on the team—burn strategist, field

marshal, fire-starter, tractor driver, sprayer operator—is more desirable and has greater perceived cachet, but none is more important than chip-kicker if you have in mind to burn one pasture or part of a pasture and not the grass that adjoins it.

There's a good reason why pioneers used dried buffalo pats as fuel for their campfires on the treeless plains; the darn things smolder and glow for a length of time that puts high-priced charcoal to shame. So it is with cow pies as well. Long after the grass has burned, the bovine briquets remain a fire hazard.

For a couple thousand acres I walked the fire line this year. Here's what I learned: wear sturdy boots, carry plenty of water, snacks and tissues (a hydration pack with extra pockets is great for this, although I'm certain the sporting goods manufacturers never foresaw this particular application of their product...the CamelBak® CrapMaster might be a good name), make peace with a slower pace, and for goodness' sake, show a little style.

The object of the exercise is to boot the torched turds well away from the unburned grass. Pelé might be appropriately invoked—either the volcano goddess or the famed soccer player, or both. Attempting to stomp or otherwise smother is a waste of motion and may



have unintended consequences, depending on the freshness of the deposit. The kick is the thing, the art, with just enough velocity and arc to achieve some distance, but not enough to cause a fiery explosion of cinders that the wind can blow back into your face, or worse, into the dry grass.

My former boss, Jim Scott, was fond of reminding us that nearly everything we did around the Applied Urban Research Institute

was an iterative process. We used to make fun of him: *let me repeat myself over and over again; it is an iterative process.* He was right, of course, and I'm not surprised to see this lesson recycling here on the ranch. Chip-kicking is nothing if not an iterative process; over and over again you must retrace your steps across the same ground until nothing is left smoldering.

An ideal arrangement, if you have enough volunteers, is to have a Chief Executive Chip-Kicker (CECK) on the front lines and an Assistant to the CECK, whose job is to follow behind and kick what the CECK misses, a hierarchy familiar to anyone in the corporate world. On the other hand, I like the solitude of working alone. Everyone on the team starts



out together, but it doesn't take long for the chip-kicker to be left far behind. On a breezy day, it only takes a

short while to set fire to a pasture, but the baking pies can simmer and flare for hours.

Lowly and unglamorous as this job may appear, it is utterly indispensable. Failure to give it one's best is not something that will go unnoticed for long: a shift in the wind, a dried pie and some tinder is all it takes to highlight one's shoddy performance. There is nothing that will make the heart leap more swiftly to the throat than to look back and see a raging fire where none should be.

Embedded rather deeply in my psyche is the ethic that *any job worth doing is worth doing well.* The world would be a better place, I think, if the lowliest jobs were approached in this manner and given the full respect they are due from the rest of us who are dependent upon them. Where would we be without our janitors, our drain uncloggers, our chip-kickers? And ask yourself this: why do we tip our hairdressers but not our garbage collectors?

MENDING THE LORD'S HANDKERCHIEF

"I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord," Walt Whitman once said of grass, "a scented gift and remembrancer designedly dropt, bearing the owner's name some way in the corners, that we may see and remark, and say *Whose?*"

Whose handkerchief is this, a 495,000-some-acre green and gold bandanna dropped on what came to be named Chase County, Kansas? The hankie has holes in it now—ripped by roads, torn by trees, frayed by the plow, snagged on barbed wire.



Jane's great-grandfather, Ezra Beedle, like other enterprising pioneers over a century ago, did his share to rend the Lord's handkerchief. He targeted the bottomland along Little Cedar Creek, the only acreage hereabouts that was at all likely to yield anything but a broken heart, and even then, the plenteous flint rock underlying a thin layer of arable soil was enough to break plowshares, backs and spirits long before it consented to produce corn.

Die mit traennen saehen, warden mit freuden ernten, reads one of my sod-busting great-grandmothers' epitaphs in an Old Leipzig, North Dakota cemetery: *sow in tears, harvest with joy*. Justina Sprenger and Ezra Beedle would have understood one another, I imagine, as would thousands of other pioneers who had intimate acquaintance with all the reasons one might likely be in tears by the time the prairie allowed itself to be sowed. Whether

or not you'd live long enough to *harvest with joy* was always in question.

As a further insight into *sow in tears* and also, incidentally, a very brief history of the rise and fall of family farming, here are some statistics on the amount of labor and acreage required to produce 100 bushels of corn over the years, which may or may not take into account the rock-to-soil ratio of prairie ground, and almost certainly does not include a margin for the hours required to break the sod for the very first time. Nevertheless, these facts offer an interesting perspective:

Year	Labor-Hours	Acres	Equipment
1850	75-90	2.5	Walking plow, harrow, and hand planting
1890	35-40	2.5	2-bottom gang plow, disk and peg tooth harrow, and 2-row planter
1930	15-20	2.5	7-foot tandem disk, 4-section harrow, and 2-row planters, cultivators and pickers
1945	10-14	2.0	Tractor, 3-bottom plow, 10-foot tandem disk, 4-section harrow, 4-row planters and cultivators, and 2-row picker
1975	3.33	1.125	Tractor, 5-bottom plow, 20-foot tandem disk, planter, 20-foot herbicide applicator, 12-foot self-propelled combine, and trucks
1987	2.75	1.125	Tractor, 5-bottom plow, 25-foot tandem disk, planter, 25-foot herbicide applicator, 15-foot self-propelled combine, and trucks

Compiled from *A History of American Agriculture, 1776-1990*, <http://inventors.about.com/library/inventors/blfarm1.htm>

The trends are not at all hard to follow: more sophisticated and higher capacity equipment translates to less labor; the availability of bulk fertilizer and herbicide allows a higher yield out of fewer acres. If you think about it, this chart neatly demonstrates how jobs on the farm diminished as jobs in equipment factories and chemical plants increased. What have we wrought?

My heart goes out to the modern farmer. He or she is comfortably insulated in an air

conditioned tractor cab, listening to music or books-on-tape, yet those shoulders are no less weighted with worry and debt than the sweaty, dusty shoulders of the farmer of a hundred years ago, who was blessed with six or ten children to work with him in the fields, whistling and singing, making the best of a hard job, and looking forward to the moment when Ma would come over the hill bearing meat sandwiches on sturdy homemade bread, freshly-baked pie or cookies and cold water from the cistern for a little refreshment in the middle of a hot afternoon.

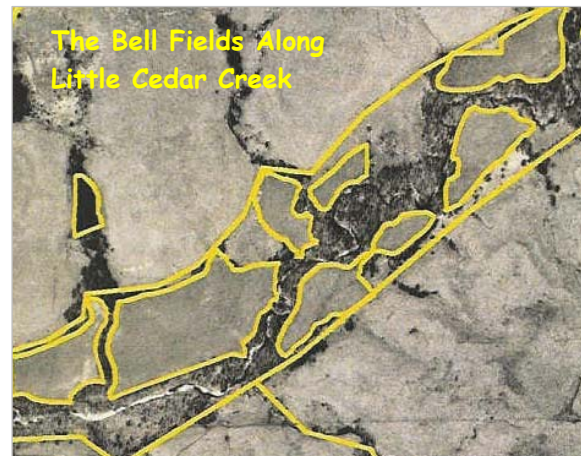
I wonder what happened to our sacred contract with the land when modern equipment relieved us of the need to ever be on our hands and knees in the dirt, the supplicant's pose.

All of this begs the question of why anyone thought it was a good idea to plant corn on the prairie in the first place. *Beat your swords into plowshares* was meant as a call to peace, but what is more violent than ripping through the fourteen to sixteen-foot roots of Dotted Gayfeather and Compassplant, or cleaving the six- to nine-foot deep root systems of Big Bluestem and Switchgrass?

We are realizing only in retrospect—over a hundred-and-fifty years later—that the Lord's handkerchief got dropped where it did for a perfectly good reason, *designedly dropt*, as Whitman said. The deeply-rooted native grasses are far more well-suited to the climate and the soil than are cultivated crops. Grass is hardy, drought-resistant and self-perpetuating. And it does not seem to mind in the least that it is growing on rocks.

Unfortunately, having realized this, we can't just say *oops* and let the land go back to grass. The Lord's handkerchief requires fairly extensive and expensive mending, and even after that investment, it is unlikely that the darning and patching will result in anything

the Lord might be likely to recognize from when it was first dropped.



When Jane bought this place in the late 1970s, she kept a number of small creek-bottom fields, about forty-six acres all told, in alfalfa and brome for more or less the same reason that families still cut the ham in half without knowing the practice started because great grandma didn't have a big enough pan for a whole ham—they are impelled by the force of habit and unquestioned tradition. After fighting the rocks, floods and droughts, not to mention the difficulty of getting equipment in and out of the small fields, she finally one day asked herself why she was putting so much into something that gave so little back for all the trouble.

Now these fields, some of which were originally plowed and planted by Great Grandpa Ezra, are known as *go-back ground*. This is a different kind of handkerchief—a white one of surrender that says "I give up. Let it go back to its wild nature."

Trouble is, this land has been half-tamed and is now neither good crop ground nor good prairie. These fields have been left to their own devices for some eight years without benefit of either plow or fire and are now liberally strewn with buck brush, locust saplings, red cedar starts, sumac, ironweed and broom weed, all warning flags of prairie in distress.

I had ample time to muse on these things over the better part of a week as I drove a tractor and mower round and round in these fields. One thing I can tell you, in the twelve-decade-long civil war between the farmers and the rocks, I can officially declare that the rocks won. I can also tell you that ten acres does not seem like much land when you're standing in the middle of half a million acres of prairie, but when you've made umpteen passes around a ten-acre field on the tractor, each acre begins to assume a much larger proportion.

Mowing is next to last in a series of steps taken over the course of a year to patch the Lord's handkerchief. Although it does not sit easy with me, the first steps required treating the existing vegetation with various powerful herbicides. The navigational reference point for mowing is *the kill line*, which defines the area within which all the vegetation has been chemically eradicated. There is something eerily post-nuclear and deeply disturbing about the way these fields look, but we were advised that this is the most expedient way to give the new native grass a fighting chance. Planting the grass with a no-till drill rented from the Natural Resources Conservation Service is the final step in restoration, unless you count praying for rain as a formal part of the process.

When I got back on a tractor for the first time in thirty or so years, wearing my overalls and my straw hat, it felt like a homecoming,



much more natural than sitting in a desk chair in front of a computer ever felt. The N-series Ford tractor upon which I learned to drive in North Dakota so many years ago is not very much different from the Ford I am driving this week. I come from a long line of laborers upon the earth—sowers

and reapers, walkers behind plows, drivers of horses and oxen, and more recently, operators of tractors. Whether it's genetic or not, I seem to instinctively understand the pace of farming. There is nothing fast about it and nothing to be gained by getting in a hurried frame of mind. As I mow, I am driving not very much faster than I can walk, which I've found is an optimal speed for thinking.

Truly, there is little to compare with driving a tractor for hours on a sunny day to make you want to give praise and thanks. In my opinion, it is better than a good prayer meeting. I can see how someone with a different disposition might find it a fertile time for fretting and fussing, but I don't know how it's possible to stay miserable for long while you're driving tractor, especially on a beautiful day. "I have an old pickup truck that shakes the hell out of me," Jane's grandpa Roy Beedle liked to say, "so why do I need to go to church?" He was joking, but there's something to what he said. Old trucks and tractors have a way of shaking the devilish blues right out of you, making room for a holy joy. It's still as true as it ever was, that *a merry heart doeth good like a medicine*, and I'm thinking that if more of us had merry hearts, we'd need fewer of the many medications I see advertised to alleviate heartburn and high blood pressure.

When I came home for lunch today, Jane said, "I can see we should have gotten you on a tractor much sooner." My contentment must have been etched quite clearly on my face.

But back to the Lord's handkerchief. I started thinking about the idea of *pure potential* a week ago when I met the Sharp Bros. Seed Co. driver in Cottonwood Falls to receive over five hundred pounds of Big Bluestem, Little Bluestem, Indiangrass, Sideoats Grama and Switchgrass. The scent of that native grass seed mixed in mesh bags and crammed into my Suburban was like a highly-distilled prairie perfume. I would gladly dab a little Essence of Prairie behind each ear

every day for the rest of my life if I could smell the way that seed did—so sweetly possible. These were identical to some of the fibers out of which the Lord's handkerchief was first woven, and I recognized immediately that I was in the presence of something sacred.

I started thinking about those millions of tiny seeds—my precious cargo—and how each one of them contained within its small self the complete instructions to make a complicated grass plant. Each seed is as alive as you or I, as one botanist put it, and is waiting only for the optimum conditions in which to unfurl its potential into perennial splendor. In my experience, nothing more powerfully represents potential than seed, unless it is a newborn baby, a little girl playing the violin or a young boy singing his heart out. These are things that make me weep, they are so pure and have the possibility to become so much.



I wonder how Ezra Beedle would have responded if someone told him back in 1882 that the seed from the native prairie grass he was working so hard to plow under would someday be worth something, that it could be harvested and sold, that just the seed to replant forty acres of fields would cost in the neighborhood of \$1,600.

I knew when I answered the call to be a steward of the prairie that I was taking on something very important, even though I wasn't completely clear on my underlying motivation. The answer came to me while I was driving the tractor yesterday, an answer like a little seed that suddenly sprouted, having lain dormant in anticipation of that very moment. The word that returned repeatedly to ride the tracks on my train of

thought was *atonement*. The root word, *onement*, I gleaned from the Oxford English Dictionary, is an archaic term that referred to harmony and wholeness, so that *at-onement* came to describe a state of unity. *Atone* literally means *to put at one* or *to be at one*, implying that something divided has been reunified. This fits beautifully, I realized, with the idea of the Lord's torn handkerchief.

That our ancestors were among those who ripped the handkerchief in the first place is what makes this reconciliation so very personal. This was my revelation on the tractor. And even though I am not making atonement on the same land my forebears sundered, I am nonetheless reweaving one small corner of a very large bandanna.

Sin is a word often used in association with atonement and I don't in any way mean to imply that my great grandparents or Jane's committed anything amounting to a sin by cultivating the prairie. If anything, theirs was only a failure to ask some fundamental questions—not something towards which those earlier generations were much inclined, living as they did in a head-down, one-foot-in-front-of-the-other way, and with so few apparent options to boot—questions like: Why is this so hard? Why does the earth resist the plow? Why does the soil yield such abundant grass and such sparse corn? What will this look like in seven generations?

This is all we really have to offer now that's any different from what our great grandparents did: more questions and an eye toward the long haul, a focus on the renewable rather than the extractive, and a closer examination of what natural systems have to teach us about themselves.

No matter how we proceed, it is entirely possible that we're still operating under a faulty assumption. Until we are pointed in another direction, however, we put our hearts wholly into the undertaking and hope we're

asking the right questions. I must confess, it does make me nervous to be practicing my mending on what was once so fine and intricate a fabric.

I wouldn't blame you for wondering, as I did, why we're bothering to replant this handful of acres. Jane's answer took me by surprise. "We need to grow a good load of fuel so we can burn out those damn trees." She's referring to needing a stand of grass healthy enough to carry a fire that's sufficiently hot to knock back the opportunistic trees that have slowly walked up from the creek and over from the shelterbelts like a ragtag outfit of volunteer troops from the eastern forest regiment, sent here to divide and conquer. Periodic intense fire and drought are the only natural forces that prevent the Lord's handkerchief from becoming the Lord's paisley shirt or hound's-tooth jacket. In other words, the army of trees would already be in full occupation if not for fire and drought.

The tallgrass prairie, positioned on the eastern flank of our nation's grasslands, is closest to the forest and always vulnerable to invasion by it. Between forest and prairie is the real zone of unrest, the savannah, in



which a mix of tall grasses and trees are eternally in competition with one another. During periods of drought and fire, the grasses have the upper hand. During wet cycles, the trees make a comeback.

The Lord's handkerchief always did have a few trees—willows and cottonwoods along the creeks, green ash and American elm on lower slopes, and bur oaks above the streams, facing off against the grass—but nothing like what we have today. Patches of woodland that have escaped fire here in the Flint Hills have enlarged by 250 percent since the 1850s.

If early settlers had known that a single deciduous tree can suck up as much as a hundred gallons of water a day during the growing season, they might have thought twice about planting all those rows of trees, but of course, the Homestead and Timber Culture Acts offered incentives for the practice. Not that folks from the eastern U.S. forests or the woodlands of Europe needed much encouragement in that direction anyway; the lack of trees on the prairie was widely perceived as a deficiency that needed prompt correcting.

Planting trees here was like establishing a series of savannah outposts, little havens for the woody infiltrators. This was a bigger threat to prairie integrity in the tallgrass region than anywhere else, since it has the highest annual precipitation and is therefore most hospitable to the trees that were planted not only by the early settlers, but also by later generations.

After the prolonged drought of the 1930s killed off between fifty and sixty percent of all trees in Kansas and Nebraska and took an even higher toll in Texas and Oklahoma, you've got to wonder why nobody stopped to think *say, maybe trying to grow trees (or crops) out here isn't such a great idea*. Instead, a frenzy of tree-planting ensued, based on the notion that the rows of trees would prevent additional crop ground from blowing in the wind. This is the kind of pretzel logic needed to support the vain hope that two wrongs might possibly make a right despite what mama always said. Between 1935 and 1958, Americans and Canadians planted a total of 32,000 miles of windbreaks on their grasslands.

We're hoping that three lefts do make a right and that by methodically tracking backwards and reversing some of the processes that made significant alterations in the Lord's handkerchief we can begin to make amends: plant seeds, beat back the trees, take down

fences, and restore the prairie fabric as much as possible.

Naturally, there are limitations. This part of the prairie will never look exactly as it once did. We cannot eradicate the roads or take down the power lines. We will always be able to see the obtrusively light-studded service area on the turnpike from our house.

On the other hand, there are occasional windows that open into the past—brief moments when time appears to collapse—and these glimpses fuel our faith. Some after-



noons we can look up the hill and see the wagon train coming through the tall grass—across the pristine

green and gold bandanna—and imagine that nothing of the original pattern has yet been altered, that everything, just like the seeds we are planting, is pure possibility.

A pair of hawks came to visit us in the field one afternoon as I was mowing and Jane was sowing; they were majestic Northern Harriers. The birds stayed extraordinarily close to us for hours, allowing us to get within eight or ten feet of them. No doubt they were waiting to see what small mammals and snakes we might scare out of the brush with our tractors, but their proximity and vigilance struck me in another way altogether, inclined as I naturally am toward finding significance in the least little thing.



Hawks, with their soaring flight and steep dives toward earth, are symbolic messengers between heaven and earth. These raptors take the long view and see the larger pattern, but they also have the acute vision to notice the tiniest detail on the ground. I began to

feel that they had been sent as handkerchief inspectors. I got the sense that their serenity and apparent fearlessness of our closeness was a sign that they approved of our work.

"This is not for the faint of heart," Jane remarked at the end of that grueling ten-hour day. In the course of five days we had four flat tires, ran out of gas, replaced three shear pins on the mower, had the mower seize up altogether on the last field, and other minor snafus. Meanwhile, we ate whatever we could scrounge up from the refrigerator and cupboards, piled our dirty dishes in precarious pyramids, left enough prairie soil in the bathtub to sprout seedlings, and collapsed into bed each evening in utter exhaustion.

Like Jacob, however, we are not shy of wrestling for a blessing when the need arises, rolling up our sleeves, putting our muscle and sweat into it, planting our feet firmly and saying *I ain't letting go, not until you bless me*. The hawks, I believe, came on that afternoon to announce that the blessing had been given.

Jane is down in the field sowing the last few bags of seed right now. I am not the least bit surprised that rain is predicted for tomorrow.

With providence, the Lord's name will still be legible on this corner of the handkerchief in another hundred years, and although we won't be here to see it, that is the ultimate blessing upon which we stake our faith and toward which we direct our labors in the grass.

SURPRISED BY BOYS

Boys will be boys is a well-worn phrase, a handy excuse, one that most of us have fallen back on at one time or another to explain away the inexplicable pursuits or behaviors of our impulsive teenage sons, our grown brothers with their expensive or dangerous hobbies, and maybe even our fathers who spend the winter tucked away in the garage

painstakingly building a complicated recumbent bicycle out of spare parts from the dump or delicately assembling intricate ships in bottles.

Boys will be boys is usually accompanied by shrugged shoulders, a sigh, or a tolerant smile. Unfortunately, the phrase's persistence over time and across generations is a glaring example of perpetuating a stereotype that offers only a measure to which a boy might live down rather than up.

A stereotype is literally a plate cast from a printing surface, a device used to reproduce multiple, exact copies of the same image. The problem with stereotyping in the figurative sense is that, like hats and gloves, one size rarely fits all. In fact, I sometimes wonder who, if anyone, a stereotype actually fits.

I myself don't readily fit any stereotypes I can think of, and I'm quite fond of smashing them wherever I find them. Sadly, they are a handy way to generalize about people and things for which we do not have (nor want to be bothered with gathering) more specific information. Worst of all, they are culturally-generated imprints, handed down to us in places that represent truth and authority: home, school and church. So, all this is to say that I too am guilty of stereotyping.

As an example, I wrote last year about the uncanny resemblance between yearling cattle and human teenagers, something about their lemming-like tendency to copy one another's bad behaviors. In part this observation was based on my own experience with both teenagers and yearlings, but it was also a descent into stereotyping, which is an insidious way of being dismissive.

When a nearby rancher recently put seventy yearling steers in with our cows and calves for the summer, my sweeping generalizations leapt out of the broom closet. To be fair, many of the steers' behaviors do indeed fit

the broad strokes of my broom: they are rambunctious, they harass the cows with their bumbling, instinct-driven sexual advances, and they tend to coalesce into large groups that stampede for no apparent reason. But in other remarkable ways these energetic teenage cattle have surprised me, which is what I feel is important to share with you.

I have made several references in past tales to the intriguing systems I've observed for daycare among cows and their calves. What first caught my attention one day last week was that a group of cattle in repose down by the watershed lake included several yearling steers who were bedded down in the grass, each with a small calf nestled beside him. The only thing I noted at the time about this configuration was that there appeared to be a rather sweet camaraderie between the teens and the infants. Still, it started a hairline crack in my stereotype.

The crack expanded and feathered outward earlier this week when I stood at a window with my binoculars and watched a coyote slinking along in the grass toward a pair of calves who were not being closely attended by their mothers. Suddenly a nearby steer lowered his head and ran full-tilt toward the predator, chasing him threateningly for a fair distance, with an unmistakable air of *good riddance and don't bother coming back*.

Yesterday I saw something that literally cracked the rest of my overgeneralizations right down the middle and cast yearling steers in an entirely new light. I was out checking cows and calves on the Polaris. One technique for getting cows and calves to pair up for proper associative identification is to approach calves who are by themselves and wait for the vigilant mothers to rush in protectively.

Two dark cinnamon-colored calves—a heifer and a bull—were resting in the grass with no other cattle in the immediate vicinity. I

parked my vehicle about twenty feet away and turned off the engine. The little bull stood up and looked me over uncertainly, trying to decide if he needed to take flight. The heifer just blinked at me sleepily and went back to napping. Off in the distance I heard a bellowing, not the usual declaration of an oncoming cow, but the latent-macho trumpeting of one of the yearlings. At first I figured he was just pumping his pals up for some kind of mischief, but then I noticed he was coming my way. He'd advance a little closer, then stop to moo urgently, so vociferously that he started to sound a little laryngitic. I began to understand something about his behavior. If he'd spoken English, I believe he would have been yelling at the top of his lungs: *Anybody! Somebody! Danger! Who is supposed to be watching these calves?*

When no one else in a position of authority came forward, he finally took matters into his own hooves. He trotted quickly and with great purpose down the hill toward the two calves. When he arrived on the scene, he told them both something in what amounted to a bovine whisper. He leaned down and nudged the napping heifer at her hind-quarters and neck until she got the message and stood up. And then he ushered them briskly away from me.

I was astonished.

I feel terrible about how grossly I've underestimated the yearling steers, and repentant too. This story is my humble reparation.

The whole matter has given me pause—as so many things do—for reflection.

What if, when we said *boys will be boys*, we meant that boys are sweet, nurturing, decisive and protective? Boys certainly can be all of these things, but it's not how we've pegged them. I have seen very touching relationships between teenage boys and babies or toddlers. So, what if we offered boys the opportunity to do daycare after

school? I wonder what kind of men we'd raise up then.

When I worked in the city on issues plaguing the urban core, we explored the idea that perhaps civic engagement was the key to offering our disenfranchised youth the opportunity to actively be part of the community. I think this is exactly what's occurring with the yearlings in their new cow community, and I must say, it seems to be a smashing success.

And I have to add, despite my chagrin at having gotten caught harboring such low expectations, I'm awfully glad to have been surprised by boys.

SEASON OF HOSPITALITY

The momentum of the entire living world changes in springtime. Every plant and animal gives the impression of standing on tiptoe, yearning upward and outward. The prairie's appearance literally changes overnight as the hardy flowers of spring pop into bloom. This year I'm trying to mark them down by the month in which they appear. This is April's lyrical list:

Cream wild indigo
False garlic
Fringed puccoon
Ground plum
Prairie blue-eyed grass
Prairie parsley
Prairie ragwort
Prairie trout lily
Prairie violet
Yellow star grass

Mother Nature has any number of pretty tricks up her billowing sleeves. Now you don't see it—now you do—now you don't. Her hand is far quicker than my eye at this time of year.

Right around the middle of April, hundreds of cattle trucks roll into the county like tour buses and drop off thousands of cattle at one

of the biggest open-air eateries in the country. In the course of only a few days, hundreds of thousands of acres go from being quietly empty to teeming with energy and activity. These young steers and heifers have been put here for a single purpose: to grow two pounds or so a day on nutritious native grass, clean water, fresh air and plenty of sunshine.

Swathed in carpets of richest green silk and festooned with white, yellow and lavender flowers, the Flint Hills announce that this is the season of hospitality.

We are obliged in some unspoken way, as I think I've said before, to co-host with the prairie. The energy of the season draws people here—all sorts, from many places. So far this year we've had visitors from Indiana, Iowa, Missouri, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin, and a host of folks from our own fair state. Already on the calendar in the next few months are guests from California, Idaho, Michigan and Oregon. *Who knew*, I am fond of saying, *that the middle of nowhere would turn out to be the center of everything*. This is a self-absorbed exaggeration, I realize, but it makes a point.

Just as an example, this morning I was in charge of single-handedly preparing breakfast for eight. I cooked a pound of sausage and two pounds of bacon. I mixed up a big pitcher of orange juice and made sure there was plenty of hot coffee and cream. And I made a double batch of pancakes, some



Future pancake eaters
at the blind

with chocolate chips and some without. The challenge was, my diners were out watching prairie chickens and I had no idea what time they would be ready to eat. A cell phone call from Jane was my signal to start flipping pancakes; everything else was ready to put on the table by then.

Here, in case you're interested, is the recipe for a regular-size batch of fabulous flapjacks:

AUNT KAY'S BUTTERMILK PANCAKES

1/4 c. melted butter
2 c. buttermilk
2 eggs, beaten

Mix the above ingredients well.

2 c. flour 1/2 tsp. salt
1/4 c. sugar 1 tsp. soda

Sift the dry ingredients together and then wire whisk the wet ingredients into the dry ingredients. Serve with butter and maple syrup.

I had intended to serve plenty of over-easy ranch-fresh eggs as a complement to the meal, but I got so busy making pancakes, I forgot. Instead, as an afterthought, I sent the guests home with their own cartons of eggs to eat later.

The prairie gives her nutritious grass and her incomparable sunshine, and I offer up my loving labor and the hens' nourishing eggs in this season of hospitality.

I'm already starting to prepare for guests who'll be here for dinner this evening.

Tomorrow we have visitors who want to tour our haybale house in the afternoon. Did I mention that this is a busy time of year?

Like the grasses and flowers, I stand on tiptoe in this season of growth and reach for the sun, my arms open wide to whatever—or whomever—comes next.

Not bad, for an introvert.