

© 2005, Marva L. Weigelt

These words are a gift from the land and from the Divine. Please feel free to share them with others as you see fit.

O, HOW THE MIGHTY HAVE FALLEN

For over a year now I have been a Student of the Chicken Mysteries. I have attempted to learn a smattering of Chickenesse as a Second Language. I have absorbed a great deal of new information about chicken behavior simply by watching my flock. I have investigated the complexity of chicken eyelids and chicken sleep habits. I have engaged in chicken nursing and rehabilitation efforts. I have intermittently been pressed into service as a reluctant chicken undertaker. No matter how much I learn, I am still well aware that there is at least twice as much I do not know.

In the last couple of months, several of my chickens have gotten broody. It has been beyond me to explain to any of them that the eggs upon which they are so single-mindedly sitting have absolutely zero potential of hatching, since we do not possess the other half of the equation, a rooster. Who am I to argue with instinct? One chicken in particular, one of the elegant black-trimmed white Brahmas with feathered slippers on their feet, the Gandhi sisters, has become a world-class nest-sitter. Nothing, maybe even a henhouse fire, could force her out of the nesting box, even if she was panting with thirst or faint with hunger. The powerful nurturing instinct dictates that a broody hen will get off the nest but once a day to eat, drink and perform her toilet.



After several weeks of such behavior, Miss Gandhi's comb started to lose a little of its lustrous red color. I worried that this fruitless activity was a hazard to her health. I began taking her off the nest in the evenings and forcing her to go outside to play with the others. To say she resisted is an understatement. When she heard me coming to get her, she'd commence to express her disgruntlement in very fowl language that I cannot repeat here for fear of offending (nor, truthfully, can I spell what she said). She fluffed up her feathers to an extent that gave the impression of an immense feathered monster—the yeti of the Midwest, the Abominable Chicken Woman. When I grabbed hold of her firmly and began to back her out, she clutched to the lip of the nest with all her feathered toes and held on like the anchor on a tug-of-war team. Finally, after prying her loose, I'd take her out the back door and deposit her on the grass. I learned very quickly to close the little hatch door on the front of the coop before performing these stressful maneuvers; the first time out she ran around the chicken house and was back inside before you could say Henny Penny.

Spending all day cramped up in a rather small nest designed for a short-term stay began to take its toll. When I set Broody down in the grass each evening, she had to spend a few moments collecting herself and stretching out the kinks in her legs. Then, like a ball issuing from a cannon, she'd explode across the yard in a cacophony of cackles and begin two hours of relentless harassment. This hen could have written the chicken edition of *How to Win by Intimidation*. She stood to full height and flapped her wings in everybody's face, including mine. She'd confront me as I sat peaceably in my lawn chair and make a great show of sharpening her beak in a menacing manner.

She'd peck absolutely anyone who crossed her path, just because they happened to be on the same cruel planet with her.

Thus did the peaceful evenings of clucking and pecking in the lengthening shadows of the day degrade into a sort of torture, a teeth-gritted endurance contest. Broody Gandhi did consent to take the occasional dust bath and scratch about in the grass, but approximately every seven minutes she'd make a great squawking show of running to the henhouse door and expressing her extreme incredulity that no one had yet had the good grace to open it for her. Eventually I'd give in, just to have a half hour of P & Q with the others. *Phew*, we collectively thought when she had gone back to her nest.



I did feel sorry for her trying to cram herself into such a small space. There was always a great racket every time she went in and started hurling herself at the row of boxes until she achieved the correct trajectory and fluffed and folded herself into position, a big round peg in a small square hole. I even built a new set of much larger nesting boxes to go on top of the smaller ones, thinking that at least she'd have a little room to stretch. Did she use them? No. And in fact, her girth by comparison to the dimensions of the nest became a problem for other reasons: she began inadvertently crushing eggs. Now, mind you, by this time in her biological cycle she was no longer actually laying any eggs of her own, she was hopping up on any nest in which other chickens had laid their daily eggs. Often when I put her out for the evening she sported a yolk-yellow vest, which, after a dust bath, took on the appearance of Cinderella before the fairy godmother showed up to replace her sooty rags with a fancy ball gown. The formerly white-feathered Miss Gandhi was, quite frankly, an unsightly and pitiful-looking mess. One evening when I set her down in the grass I happened to notice, with a great deal of mirth, that a whole brown egg had adhered itself to the gluey yolk of another egg she had smeared across her front. When she geared up for her daily triumphal entry and charged off squawking and running with an egg for a breastplate, I nearly wet my drawers. After about ten feet of jostling, the egg dropped to the ground, unharmed. One of my customers may very well have eaten that comical egg for breakfast one morning, having no idea why all day thereafter she or he felt like laughing at the slightest little thing.

One day Broody abruptly ceased her brooding. She came out in the morning for her daily ration of chicken treats and was one of the first out of the gate in the evenings for free-range recess. I was greatly relieved. Her comb brightened up considerably and her demeanor returned to that of the gentle giant I recalled from the pre-broody days. She graciously allowed me to pet her several times. Life in the hen yard was back to normal.

Five days later I was dismayed to find this proud hen quite indisposed in the chicken house. She appeared to have lost the use of her legs and was sprawled out awkwardly with her feet in a most unlikely position. I tried to stand her up, but she flopped back down, throwing her wing out to balance herself. I moved her to a quiet place in the corner and brought her food and water, thinking that perhaps she was not long for this world. While I died multiple deaths during the course of the day, she lived on. Every so often—okay, every thirty-three minutes—I went with dread to check on her condition. At each interval she had scooted herself into a slightly different place in the henhouse, and each time there was at least one other chicken watching her with concern, sometimes a whole circle gathered around her with looks of anxiety.

When Jane came home after a day off the ranch, she strongly suggested that we move Miss Gandhi to separate quarters in Little Red's now-vacant Chicken Shed, the official infirmary. Jane was naturally concerned that the other chickens would pick on the Gandhi in her vulnerable state. Only when she expressed this concern did I realize how curious it was that they had been so respectful all day; no one laid a beak on her, at least while I was looking. Removed to her new quarters, my lame chicken was amazingly bright-eyed and content, despite her inability to walk, and she readily accepted the chunks of cheese and sweet potato I offered. She made little noises of contentment. Within half an hour she had scooted herself out the door, down the ramp and into her private pen.

The evening had a bit of a pall over it, a strangeness that nagged at the edges of my consciousness. After sunset, it became clear that I was not the only one feeling a bit out of sorts. Fifteen minutes after they would normally have been inside elbowing one another for favorite roosting positions, my chickens were standing about in the twilight, clustered outside the pen looking bewildered. As the evening grew darker, I gently shooed them into the pen and shut the gate. Still they stood around like new students without a teacher, which, I finally puzzled out, was not far off the mark.



Based on her dictatorial behavior in the chicken yard, I had earlier wondered if perhaps Broody Gandhi was the boss, the matriarch, the top of the pecking order. Then again, my interfering with her brooding plan was ample provocation for such pissy behavior. If you're not a chicken, the subtleties of the pecking order are a bit difficult to sort out—it would take some pretty close study for a human to determine where everyone fits in the order—but the chickens understand it perfectly well. I had filed my observation quite far back in the recesses of my

brain, and only had cause to retrieve it that night when the girls were behaving so strangely. If they had indeed lost their leader, then this not only explained their indecision and confusion, but also the way in which they had clustered around her so worriedly earlier in the day. So great was their respect for her position, I suspected, that they dared not peck at her even in her weakened state.

This is not readily explained by anything I've ever read about pecking order, which is, as the term implies, a simple top-down hierarchy in which the boss may peck any chicken below her in the order, but none of them may peck back. Each chicken down the roster has progressively fewer chickens to peck and more chances to be pecked upon until you get to the very bottom of the chain of command, the poor chicken who can be pecked by everyone, but is not allowed to peck anyone else. This order can be upset by any number of things, as I myself have witnessed by pulling Little Red out of the flock long enough to gain a little maturity, or when I introduced Mark's four chickens to the flock. An injury or illness can also quickly move a chicken down the ladder. I have read some positively gruesome stories of chicken vengeance, of top chickens falling from grace and ending up dead by fratricide.

No, what I had witnessed could not be explained by a simplistic view of pecking order. There was something else involved, an element of true leadership, the suggestion of a more complex relationship, that Miss Gandhi brought to the role of matriarch. Without her, the rest of the chickens were suddenly unsure of themselves, uncertain of what to do next without her signal. Even

a decision as simple as going to bed when it got dark was unexpectedly baffling. As another telling factor, I noticed that the chickens I had gotten from Mark did not suffer from the same confusion. All of them had already put themselves to bed. They came from a different background and did not seem to be impacted by the shift in the leadership dynamic. My original flock, on the other hand, had been together since they were fuzz balls, and I wondered if Miss Gandhi had been a leader since the early days, the first to try new things and show the others what to do.

My single great chicken rehabilitation success to date had been with Little Red, the lowest chicken in the pecking order. Now I was being called upon to provide medical services to the bird at the top of the heap. I felt as if I had been summoned to serve as a physician to the President or the Queen. Jane said, "or maybe the Prime Minister; doesn't she remind you of Maggie Thatcher?" Thereafter she was known as Maggie Gandhi.

I am not, by any means, a skilled diagnostician of chicken maladies and diseases. I have found very helpful information posted on the Internet by other backyard chicken fanciers and various state extension agencies. After the first round of research I decided I'd prefer to proceed as if Maggie had a case of scaly leg mites rather than the other most likely alternative: fowl cholera. The Virginia Cooperative Extension suggested soaking the bird's legs in an oil or cream to suffocate the mites. Since the article was not any more specific than that, I reasoned that a food-grade oil was a safe choice. I procured a quantity of canola oil and liberally doused Maggie's legs. Something seemed missing, and then I realized with a start that I was thinking of the kosher salt, freshly ground pepper, garlic and rosemary specified by one of my favorite roast chicken recipes. We are all of us, every day, walking thin lines between dueling realities, truths, values and standards. We are skilled tightrope walkers who must sometimes advance straight ahead, looking neither to right nor left for fear of losing our delicate balance. This is especially true on a ranch or a farm.

One value remains clear: whether healthy or ailing, alive or dead, any body in my care deserves to be treated with dignity. With that in mind, I also undertook another very important chicken nursing task, that of washing my incapacitated hen's rearmost feathers. Just as a bedridden human needs assistance of this sort, a chicken who cannot stand up to relieve herself is soon in an uncomfortable state. With a jug of warm water and some paper towels, I made the best of a messy chore.

Later in the afternoon I found an Internet discussion group on the very topic of scaly leg mites. One person swore by pine tar, another suggested crankcase oil. A very confidence-inspiring person who showed fancy breeds sang the praises of Campho-Phenique, while several announced good results from Vicks Vapo-Rub. Linseed oil and Vaseline were also suggested. Good heavens!

Intuitively I understood the rationale of using something containing camphor or eucalyptus to encourage the mites to vacate the premises, and since Vicks is a sworn-by family remedy that my medicine cabinet is never without, I decided to give it a try. Out on the grass in the shade, I massaged Vicks into Maggie's legs and toes. Fondly I recalled my father rubbing the soothing liniment onto my chest and neck when I was a small child beset by a cold. Whether or not Vicks is medicinally effective, I can attest to the value of healing touch; I always felt better after my dad had performed the ritual laying on of greasy hands. I hoped my hen might receive the same benefit. She was sweetly patient with my ministrations, as I have so often seen animals be when they are sick or injured, as if at some level they understand that you are trying to help. She pecked at grass and savored a few bites of apple I'd cut up for her. She cooed softly in response each time I spoke to her, explaining what I was doing.

Over the next few days I did everything I could think of to make Maggie more comfortable. I added a screen to Little Red's Rehab Shed so that she could enjoy the benefit of a cool breeze. I built a portable summer house out of spare window screens and duct tape so that she could safely enjoy a bit of shade out in the grass without harassment by chickens or dogs. I realized her grace period had expired when one of the Penzeys walked right up to her the other evening, planted her foot firmly on Maggie's neck and would, I'm sure, have pecked the already-vanquished ruler to bits had I not intervened. O, how the mighty have fallen. On the third day I bathed her derriere again and applied Campho-Phenique to her extremities, hedging my Vicks bet.

We sat together out in the yard several times a day. "Maggie, Maggie, Maggie," I'd say as a prelude to conversation. Like many two-syllable names, there's something soothing about saying hers three times in descending tones, the equivalent of a sigh, as I eased myself down into my lawn chair in the shade for a little rest and a visit. Mostly she'd answer my queries or respond to my comments in soft monosyllables: *yes...well...oh*. Occasionally I could swear she said *thank you* or *don't worry*.

For those of you who know my passion for my chickens, it goes without saying that I *did* worry. When I wasn't worrying, I was busy being optimistic and having faith, with the occasional pragmatic consideration given to the Big What If: what if she's not any better after a week or ten days? *Blessed are the merciful* is an admirable mark for which to aim, but from a practical standpoint, the mercy killing methods available to me were few and not, in my opinion, particularly merciful. I gave serious consideration to calling our local small animal veterinarian and asking if he'd be willing to put a chicken to sleep by the same method used for cats and dogs. I realized this option had a high likelihood of making me the laughingstock of the county for years to come, but the alternative was unthinkable. My axe was not sharp enough and my nerves were more like Silly Putty than steel.

In the end, Maggie spared me an anguished decision. The weather turned unseasonably hot and windy. I moved her from shade to shade during the course of each day, but by the ninth day of her incapacitation, she began to visibly turn inward, away from the outward motion of life. Like the old ones who knew that their journey was nearing its end and so left the tribe and went away to lean against a favorite tree or rock to quietly await death's arrival, so Maggie shuttered her eyes and appeared to put herself at a distance. She would still say *yes* when I spoke her name, but she spent more time at rest and shunned the water and food I offered. All day yesterday she did not move from one corner in her house, and I elected to respect her wishes. Sometime just before sunset she took her leave without fanfare. From what I could tell, her passage was peaceful.

I have every reason to believe that her flock sensed the matriarch's quiet departure. After that very first evening when they'd seemed so lost without their leader, the hens appeared to return to a normal order under new leadership. I never again saw any signs of confusion and indecision, until last night. As I waited for them to go to roost before I made my one-person funeral procession down to the Beedle bone yard, the chickens once again seemed unnaturally subdued. They lingered just outside the pen in uncharacteristic stillness—no last-minute scratching and pecking, none of the usual pre-bedtime commentary. Frankly, it was uncanny the way the chickens' demeanor matched my own mood of quiet grief.

By dusk Prime Minister Maggie Gandhi lay in state under a cedar tree, tucked into an embrace of gnarled roots, draped with a bunting of yellow, white and purple prairie flowers. I marked the four directions over her body with fragrant cedar and wished her the good journey.

FINDING MY PLACE

Right from the start I was warned—a matter-of-fact caution, without malice—that since I hadn't been born in Chase County, I'd never quite fit in. Like a piece in one of those cheaply mass-produced jigsaw puzzles that does not snap satisfyingly into place, my otherness is destined to make me stick out just enough to be noticed. Even people who've lived here for fifty years or more but once-upon-a-time came here from *somewhere else* are fated to bear the minor burden of this stigma. There's something to be said for the kind of stability and continuity that creates such a close-knit community, a phenomenon most prevalent in small towns in rural America, but on the wane even there. Jane, like a number of other local residents, can describe herself as a fourth-generation Chase County rancher; her mother's side of the family arrived in this area when it was still Kansas Territory. I, on the other hand, have grown up to be a poster child for the mobile age. When asked where I'm from originally, the simplest answer is *all over the place*.



Jane's family on her mother's side, the Nortons, have been in Chase County since 1858.

When I moved here after twenty-five years in a metropolitan melting pot wherein transience was the norm and virtually everyone was originally from elsewhere, these warnings did not alarm me unduly. *Fitting in* has quite a different meaning and value now than it did in the first half of my life. I recognize that the longing for belonging can only partially be satiated by people.

This wisdom notwithstanding, I have tried to remember the names of persons to whom I've been introduced and listened carefully to Jane's descriptions and stories of people in the community. These feature-length sagas inevitably end up sounding something like the Biblical begats or the words to the song *I'm My Own Grandpa*...her mother is a sister to my father's cousin's husband, you know, the one whose mother is the daughter of old Doc So-and-So who was a County Commissioner. This works pretty well for me, as long as I can keep up with drawing the branches of the family tree in my head. Reading parts of the four volumes of Chase County historical sketches has also supplemented this relationship-based way of keeping track of who's who.

This approach isn't foolproof. One day I told Arlene that Darwin's daughter had been over to bring back the bull that had gotten into our pasture. Only after I'd gotten halfway home did I slap myself upside the head as I suddenly remembered that Arlene and Darwin used to be married to one another and that the daughter to whom I'd referred as Darwin's was also Arlene's, the woman to whom I had been speaking.

Further complication arises over the fact that June and Easter are popular men's names here, to which I was oppositely accustomed, and some people, most notably Jess Dean, are always referred to by both first and last name spoken in rapid succession, so that I had somehow suffered under the mistaken assumption for nearly a year that Jess Dean was a woman named Justine (right up until the time I met Justine's wife, Kathy Dean, and started to smell the coffee). Then there's the complication that while Dean is Jess Dean's last name, Paul Dean is a Stephenson who is always referred to by both first and middle name, which is really more of the local norm. Did I mention nicknames? In the fine, but confusing western tradition, countians have evidently long been fond of pet names that are not helpful in indicating gender, nor, if they refer to a physical characteristic or a long-ago exploit, are they necessarily currently meaningful: Brownie, Bubba, Cobby, Pinky, Shorty, Slim, Toots, Whiney, Windy.

I have never staked my sense of personal significance upon anyone remembering my name, but I must admit it's extremely gratifying when someone does. After only a year in the community, being called by name is still a distinct pleasure. Even when it gets garbled in the local paper, as happened last winter when I was referred to in black and white print as *Mara Whittle*, at least I know I'm not invisible. Just the other night at a baseball game in Cottonwood Falls, I counted six different people who greeted me by name, and many others from whom I received a wave or a nod of recognition, indicating that I have gradually become, if not a name yet, at least a familiar face.

The one place in which I am better known than most is the Hitchin' Post in Matfield Green, our local bar and grill. In order to support the town's only remaining business, we have committed to eating there once a week if our schedule permits. This is where I can go if I want to be greeted by name when I come in the door. I have always liked the feeling of being *a regular*. They no longer ask what I'd like to drink; they know I like a Pepsi and a glass of water with my cheeseburger. When I overheard that Susan and Kenny wanted to change a few things on the menu, I volunteered to create new menus and jazz them up a bit. Then I was shyly asked if it wouldn't be too much trouble to make business cards, too. One day I got a call when they needed signs for the front and back doors of the roadhouse, and later when they wanted some flyers to post in Strong City. My charge for the work was a free dinner, which I have not yet bothered to collect. In the mean time they have given me a free Pepsi, a jar of homemade hot sauce and a fresh-baked loaf of sourdough bread. These are my first deposits and withdrawals upon my own local social capital account.

In my experience, however, there is much more to cultivating a sense of place than knowing the current inhabitants of the locale or being accepted by them. My journey into the deeper ground of history has given me another route to the feeling of connection to roots. I daresay I know more history and anecdote about the now-ghostly town of Thurman, Kansas than anyone else in these parts, including Jane. By establishing an intimacy with the history, geology, flora and fauna of these hills, I stake my claim to citizenship. It does not matter to me that no one in my kinship line has ever hailed from Kansas. The archetypal stories of the refugee, adventurer or pioneer can be set against any backdrop at all. With minor allowances for differences in climate and topography, my great grandparents' story could just as easily be set in Kansas, Nebraska or Iowa as North Dakota.

In lieu of accrued personal history in this place, which will grow by layers in its own sweet, sedimentary time, I borrow from the past. Research into the lives of former inhabitants of the land provides access to the stories that might have passed down to me if I had been a Chase County native.

When I did this very thing for my 1908-built house in Kansas City, I ended up with a list of two dozen owners and over a hundred former residents. From the city directory I was able to glean the occupations of the many people who had lived and breathed within those four walls across the years, so that an entry in my

SENSE OF PLACE

If you don't know *where* you are, you don't know *who* you are.

-Wendell Berry

What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value.

-Y.F. Tuan

A sense of place results gradually and unconsciously from inhabiting a landscape over time, becoming familiar with its physical properties, accruing history within its confines.

-Kent Ryden

I cannot have a spiritual center without having a geographical one: I cannot live a grounded life without being grounded in *place*. In belonging to a landscape, one feels a rightness, an at-homeness, a knitting of self and world.

-Scott Russell Sanders

research notes might read: *1943-1947—John Adams, gambling house dealer, Rhoda Adams (wife) waitress at Wolferman's tea room.* Names are powerful talismans, magical keys that open doors into the house of the past.

One name in particular caught my eye, Billie Musgrave, a woman who had purchased the house at an auction on the courthouse steps during the Great Depression and who also, according to the city directory, had owned her own car dealership and later, a real estate business, both rather remarkable professional undertakings for a woman in that era. I called the Bill E. Musgrave I found in the current telephone listings, who turned out to be her grandson. He helpfully referred me to his father, also Bill E. Musgrave, who had actually lived in my house as a young man. He was delighted to share information about his rather colorful and entrepreneurial mother. I never got to meet the well-loved matriarch of the family, but I attended her funeral, which did not seem to strike the family as odd. The eulogies, by the way, were an unexpected vein of gold, revealing facets that I would not otherwise have been privileged to glimpse. I also corresponded extensively with her son, who sent me photos and clippings of interest about his mother and the house, and who even came with his wife to visit and shared vivid memories and stories. Ever after, I had tales to go with nearly every room of the house and the lively spirit of Billie Musgrave as a welcome inhabitant.

After Bill and his wife died within a few years of one another, I received a surprising phone call from his daughter, who was floundering in the wake of her losses and craving a connection with her family's past. "I know that you and my father corresponded about my grandmother and your house," she said. "Would you mind sending me copies of the information he sent you, so that I can tell my son more about his great grandmother?" How interesting that my own search for a sense of place should bear fruit to feed a similar need in someone with whom I shared no kinship ties and, in fact, no relationship other than the ineffable one I had called into being with the alchemy of my research.

I have been working the same kind of magic with the history of this land, speaking names that have not been uttered here in a century, visiting gravestones that have not been decorated in a score of years, sitting on the doorsteps of long-abandoned homesteads, blowing on the cooling embers of long-ago fires.

Names, dates, clippings and recollections are sticks of kindling that hold within themselves the capacity to fire the imagination. A handful of such sticks make a story that has the power to raise the dead and cast illumination backwards down the path of history, both personal and collective. On one hand, stories are intimately tied to place; on the other, the bathos and pathos of individual stories are so universal as to transcend the setting.

And so I transfuse the history of this place into my veins as if it were my own, and thus do I take my sustenance from the salty, hot, coursing lifeblood of it and grow robust on this fertile ground. The authenticity of my belonging depends not at all on how other people here may feel about me, or with the fact that I do not *belong by birth*, the strictly literal meaning of nativity. In how many places have I been reborn, renewed or reinvented in my life? Am I not native to them all? Each of us born onto the soil of the planet is rightful heir to a legacy, the privilege of planting our feet on a piece of ground—no matter how large or small, how permanent or temporary—and naming it *home*.

THE LAST FAMILY FARM

If you come to our place by way of the south road out of Matfield Green, you'll pass what Jane refers to as *the last family farm in America*. Granted, Charlie and Betty's place isn't really the last farm, but it's one of those hen's-teeth-scarce models of ingenuity and thrift—not to mention diversification—that make you wonder why anyone ever bought into corporate-scale farming and ranching.

Charlie and Betty call to mind Jack Sprat and his wife, not only because of their size differential, but also because they seem so balanced in their complementarity—well-equipped betwixt the two of them to lick any platter clean—still pulling together in the yoke like an oddly-matched but imminently compatible pair of Belgian draft horses, and this after sixty years of marriage. The tenor of their relationship is well-illustrated by a little story Betty told us when we bought some cucumbers, onions and squash from the back of her pickup truck in Strong City on Saturday morning. "That skunk has him some intelligence," she said of a frequent raider on her chicken house. "I shined a flashlight in the henhouse when I went to put the girls up the other night, and that stinker was already in there. So I went in the house to get the shotgun and I said to Charlie, 'Charlie, you're coming with me, because if I'm gonna smell like skunk, you're gonna smell like skunk.'" I didn't get the impression she needed Charlie to manage the firearm, only as a comrade. In case you wonder how the story ended, the skunk, as Betty pointed out once more, was intelligent. He was long gone before they got back. "I think he knew," said Betty, "that I was on my way to get a gun."

This colorful pair has farmed the same modest spread since about the end of World War II. On a quarter-section of flinty ground they raise a small cow-calf crop for cash and meat for the freezer, graze a cow or two for dairy products, raise chickens for eggs and meat, and grow a vegetable garden that is three or four times the square footage of their house. This latter detail is, I think, an excellent expression of rural values: the garden is bigger than the house because a body really doesn't need much room to eat and sleep and seldom is there time to do much sitting around, but the kitchen table needs something edible placed upon it three times a day all year long.

If you pull into Charlie and Betty's drive, you will see a neat line of pickup trucks and tractors, an unofficial museum of vintage vehicles not unlike what you can still find on older farms across rural America, with the notable difference that a number of these trucks and most of the tractors still run—different vehicles for whatever needs doing. If you do not find Charlie and Betty at home when you drop by, they are very likely down the road mowing and trimming the Matfield Green Cemetery or the old High Prairie Cemetery. But never fear, you are welcome to help yourself to a gallon of milk, a couple dozen eggs or fresh vegetables out of the refrigerator in the shed, just pay up and make your own change out of a coin-filled coffee can.

Their list of chores seems daunting: milking, feeding, collecting, butchering, plowing, mowing, repairing, planting, weeding, watering, harvesting, canning, pickling, and freezing. But Charlie and Betty, at ages 84 and 78, have worn patient grooves into their never-ending round of tasks, to which they apply themselves with diligence and alacrity. Just seeing them in the garden or the yard gives me an all's-right-with-the-world sense of contentment when I drive by.

I wish I could pick out a couple of latch-key kids from the city to live with Charlie and Betty every summer. Calling it a foreign exchange program would not be wide of the mark, so great would be the cultural differences. I'd pick kids whose only definition of a "chore" is managing to get their fast-food wrappers from the couch to the garbage can in the kitchen, kids who don't know how to use

fork, knife and spoon because all they ever eat is burgers and burritos, kids who are dulled to the marrow of their spirits by the rat-a-tat barrage of passive entertainment from television, video games and the Internet.

These kids would be a handful, that's for certain, but a few months of working in the yard and garden, milking the cow, feeding the chickens, collecting eggs, and eating three squares a day around a table full of good food and good will would change lives, I guarantee. They'd sleep the sleep of the righteously weary instead of sinking into the slack-jawed coma of the electronically over-stimulated. Where else, I wonder, would they ever have the opportunity to see a working farm and grow into a deep-seated, hands-on understanding of the food on their plates, eaten so close to the source? Where else, for that matter, would they get to see a working marriage, a true partnership with the kind of longevity that is tremendously reassuring in a world scattered with the debris of broken relationships? Where else might they learn to live to scale, to live robustly and joyously within modest means, by the work of their hands and the investment of their hearts?

It's a damn shame that values and manners do not appear to have kept up with the fast pace of progress in our cities. Kids grow up learning to look over their shoulders instead of straight into the eyes of the person in front of them. Compassion and altruism are rare virtues in a world where urban density breeds insularity instead of community. Among our youth I have seen a haughty sense of entitlement that is not underpinned by any sense of responsibility. Simplistic as it may seem, I think that chores are the missing link. How can the children of the cities be expected to develop pride in accomplishment and ownership when we ask so little of them?

There's a working ranch up in Montana that does this very thing for troubled teenage girls. For something like \$40,000 a year you can, as one woman so wryly put it, "give your daughter the kind of childhood your parents and grandparents had." A summer on the last family farm in America would fix a few broken wagons, too, and a darn sight more cheaply. Granted, there wouldn't be a licensed psychotherapist on staff, but I believe honest labor is the most effective form of therapy in such a program. Besides, after kids, grandkids and great-grandkids, how much more do Charlie and Betty need to know about what makes young people tick? Between the two of them they have, as law firms are fond of advertising, a hundred-and-sixty-two years of combined experience in the business of living.

"All the corn needs is about an inch of rain and two weeks of good, hot weather," said Betty the other day, and I realized how many years of cycles she has watched and how much wisdom she has gleaned from her intimacy with the land and the seasons. When Charlie and Betty are gone, all this—and so much more that cannot be named or counted—will likely die out with them, like a garden left untended.

LOOK ALIVE

I have a history of odd and memorable conversations with complete strangers, people who for some reason deem me worthy to receive their confidences. One of these was a campground host at Mark Twain State Park in Missouri who, in the course of selling me a bundle of firewood, also chose to share the details of her recent battle with cancer. "Last year at this time I had two lungs and now I only have one" was her startling opening gambit, apropos of absolutely nothing, except perhaps the simple burning urgency of her gratitude at being alive to tell the tale.

Perhaps I flatter myself that she hand-picked me to hear her story. It's entirely possible that every single camper who came to buy wood was also the recipient of this revelation, for she bore all the stigmas of a topic-hopping marathon talker, a skill with which I am quite familiar thanks to my maternal grandmother, whose nickname was Hurricane Norva. The woman's next subject, embarked upon without any semblance of a transition, was vultures. "Turkey vultures are kind of ugly up close," she remarked, "but they sure are graceful and beautiful when they're up in the air...you hardly ever see them flap their wings."

Not until recently, some six years down the road from this conversation, have I come to recognize the remarkable connection between the topic of mortality and the subject of turkey vultures. Now, every time I see a vulture skillfully surfing the thermals, lazily gliding on a convenient updraft, I feel grateful to be among the living, and I say as much to the passing bird, my fists upraised as I shout, "I'M ALIVE!" In other words, look elsewhere for your next meal.

This is one of those topics not likely to be broached in polite company, steeped as it is in death, decay and outright putrefaction. The six-or-so-pound turkey vulture is an extraordinarily efficient sanitation engineer, the ultimate recycler, a valuable undertaker without whose services we would be knee-deep in the odoriferous and disease-ridden carcasses of dead animals. That turkey vultures exist to fill this niche is witness to the genius of creation. Although they are considered a bird of prey, these birds are never a threat to living creatures; their dining pleasure focuses exclusively on the recently deceased. Nevertheless, turkey vultures are more discriminating than you might think. They like their meat fairly fresh, not too putrid, and possibly with a little salad of greens and berries on the side. And just as humans do, vultures distinctly prefer eating herbivores over carnivores, because vegetarians just plain taste better. Turkey vultures are also, incidentally, among the very few North American birds with a well-developed sense of smell, which seems a design detail of somewhat dubious value, since the odor of their next meal is hardly subtle.



If you've the stomach for it, the adaptive design of a turkey vulture is fascinating. If not, skip to the next paragraph. The reason this bird has a featherless, bare-naked, flaming-as-a-baboon's-butt head is to prevent accumulation of the bacteria-laden residues that a feathered head would collect in the course of harvesting tidbits from the interior of a decaying carcass. The excreta of the vulture is so acidic that it functions as a natural sanitizer; the birds deliberately defecate on their own feet and legs after standing on their dinners, which serves the dual purpose of killing microbes and promoting evaporative

cooling. Their stomachs contain digestive acids that kill virtually all bacteria and viruses, allowing them to derive their nourishment from meat that would otherwise be unfit for consumption. The single defense that turkey vultures have against attackers is extremely crude but effective: they

are able on command to regurgitate their last meal, which was pretty awful to begin with, but after partial digestion is vile beyond description and corrosive to boot. *Splat! Take that!*

For all this bird's useful and redeeming qualities as a member of the food chain (albeit at the lower end), for all its value to the natural world and, really, to the civilized world, it would seem that the poor turkey vulture has been given little by way of endearing qualities. If you were the designer,



wouldn't you think to give a dirty-job bird like the turkey vulture the melodious voice of a meadowlark, or the compensatory cuteness of a chickadee, even perhaps the eye-catching colors of a blue jay? Instead, the vulturous vocabulary consists of unattractive primordial hisses and grunts. The mottled brown-black birds roost in ominous groups among the trees or sit in sinister solitude on abandoned barns or cattle pens displaying their six-foot wingspans as they wait for the

sun to bake the dew and bacteria from their feathers. Frankly, they bear an uncomfortable resemblance to dark-suited funeral directors waiting for customers.

From all accounts on the ground, this bird has been seriously short-changed; it is merely serviceable rather than spectacular. But, oh, when it takes to the sky! Then you see the gift the Creator gave to this otherwise humble, homely bird. Once the morning air has warmed sufficiently, the turkey vulture launches upward in search of the perfect thermal, a pocket of warm air on the rise. Hang gliders would sell their souls to know all the secrets a turkey vulture knows about hitchhiking on a current of air. Once a vulture catches a wave, it relaxes into the grace of the sky, allowing itself to be carried upward in lazy circles, mounting to the crest of the thermal and then dramatically diving through thin air, losing altitude at speeds near 60 miles an hour without a single worried wag of the wing, until the bird captures yet another buoyant wave of warm air and begins the upward surge again. On a good day, a turkey vulture can ride the skies for over six hours straight without flapping its wings; it is one of the most skillful gliders in the world, migrating across continents with minimal expenditures of energy. While a group of vultures is called a *venue*, a venue of vultures skillfully circling on thermals is also referred to as a *kettle* for its resemblance to a see-through cauldron of swirling, percolating birds. There is absolutely no practical purpose to this sky-dancing—it has nothing to do with prospecting for vittles. It would seem that the gift of effortless flight has been given purely for pleasure, or perhaps, for perspective.



The turkey vulture's Latin name, *Cathartes aura*, roughly translates as *luminous purifier*. This nomenclature rather neatly unifies the vulture's dual nature as both earthy scavenger and graceful master of the sun-spangled skies, elevating it to the esteemed position it holds in ancient mythologies. In one creation story, the vulture once possessed a majestic crown of feathers, but sacrificed them forevermore by valiantly volunteering to fly up and push the sun farther away from earth in order to save the other animals from unbearable heat. The fox and opossum were the first two unsuccessful volunteers, which accounts for why the inside of a fox's mouth is black and an opossum has a hairless tail. To the Pueblo Indians, this bird's medicine was useful for grounding, purification and restoration of harmony. An old-timer will tell you that the annual return of the turkey vulture is a sign that crops are safe from a hard frost; the birds return when the warmth of the sun is sufficient to assure their buoyancy.

According to the Greeks, the vulture was a descendant of the griffin, a mythical beast symbolizing the dualities of good and evil, spirit and flesh, sky and earth. In Egyptian traditions, the vulture was a maternal symbol credited with the power to transform death into life, the keeper of the endless cycles of death and rebirth, the magical bird who could transubstantiate diseased and decaying matter into life-giving sustenance.

I don't expect my path will ever cross that of the one-lunged campground host again, but if it does, I will say *now I understand*. What I mean is that I understand how she could talk about cancer in one breath and turkey vultures in the next. Life on the ground, like the turkey vulture, can be downright ugly—it is so often overshadowed by haunting malignancies, diseases that corrupt the flesh, the maggot in the meat, the worm in the bud. But when I awaken alive each morning, there is good reason to give thanks. I spread my wings in salutation to the sun and await that gift from the lighter side of life, a little thermal of joy that tugs my spirit upward and invites me to rise into the grace of an aerial perspective.

GLADIOLA, THE 4-H CALF

The other day I sealed the first cattle deal of my life with a handshake. I initially had mixed feelings about selling my sweet little bottle calf, *Gladiola*, but the blow was softened by her destination: she was about to become a 4-H project for a blue-eyed, freckle-nosed, ten-year-old girl named Shelby, who will raise *Glady* up to cowhood over the next several years.

The 4-H organization, in case you didn't know, was begun over a hundred years ago to give young people the opportunity to learn more about agriculture through direct engagement. The familiar four-leaf clover emblazoned with aitches stands for *head, heart, hands* and *health*. It's kind of a shame, I think, that O.H. Benson's suggestion that the fourth aitch should stand for *hustle* was overridden in the early part of the last century.



I do think *Glady* will appreciate Shelby's scale, someone with whom she can see eye to eye, although before long the calf will outstrip the girl in the growth department, which is when *hustle* will come in handy for Shelby. Hustle, hold, hop and hope for the best.

Shelby's twin brother Colton already has his heifer calf, a Black Angus named *Babe*, so *Glady* will have a four-legged friend, too. All in all, I think this has the earmarks of a happy ending for my love story.



I'll be honest, misgiving and reluctance roiled in my belly the night the kids and their parents were scheduled to haul *Glady* to her new home, but the instant I laid eyes on the twins, I relaxed. These kids might have walked straight off of a 1949 *Saturday Evening Post* cover by Norman Rockwell. Shelby, I realized later, reminded me strikingly of Scout in the 1962 film version of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Words like *wholesome* and *sweet* came to mind as the twins contrapuntally regaled me with tales of Colton's calf *Babe* and the size of the swimming holes and crawdads in the creek on their ranch. I may have been the one selling the calf, but in the end it was Shelby and Colton who sold me on the utter rightness of my decision.

Loading *Glady* up for the ride home ended up being comical rather than sad. Colton and his mom deftly slipped a halter over the calf's nose while she was distracted by her evening bottle, but the rest of the show did not go quite so smoothly. The relatively short distance across the yard gave *Glady* plenty of opportunity to try a few of her rodeo tricks on Shelby. At least, I figured, they knew they were getting a lively little heifer. The family had arrived in an extended cab pickup truck, and the calf was loaded up in the back seat with the kids, standing up sideways alongside the bench seat for all the world as if she'd been going on pickup rides every day of her short life. As Shelby rested her hand reassuringly on *Glady's*





back, I realized that my love story might be ending, but Shelby's was just now starting at the *once upon a time*...

The trip they took was only about ten miles down the road, so I can still visit Gladiola if I get the urge. I may even end up with the option to buy her back when she's a full-fledged cow.

I will miss her. I will miss the way her twice-daily feedings circumscribed the beginnings

and endings of my days. I will miss her unmitigated gladness at seeing me come over the hill in the morning and evening. I will miss her milk-bubble smile and the comic expressiveness of her oversized ears, into which I trust she will one day grow.

Life might have started out a little bumpy for Miss Gladiola Brahma-Hereford of Thurman, Kansas, but I have a feeling it'll be a pretty smooth ride from now on.

RIPE MOMENT

This is the day. Tomorrow will be too late. The peach in the basket on the counter is ripe to bursting and yields easily to my knife. I carve it into bite-sized chunks in a bowl painted with sunflowers, creating a palette of vibrant yellows. The juice dribbles down my hands and tickles my wrists. Four generous dollops of softened ice cream stirred into the peaches and juice are the creamy coup de grace. I and my peach have died and gone to summertime heaven.

We are keeping a sharp eye on the wild plums down the road. The brilliantly red one I sampled the other day made the soft hairs on the back of my neck stand up in salute to the fruit's keen-edged tartness. Not quite...not yet, but any day now it will be time to pick the plums—teetering on tiptoe from the back of the flatbed truck to reach the ones at the top of the tree—to assemble jars, sugar and pectin for wild plum jelly. I say a little prayer, but still toy with the idea of putting up a big sign by the tree in case the county comes by to spray the ditches: SPARE THE PLUMS, PLEASE!



All the local gardeners whose tomatoes survived a late frost are hording the first of the harvest for themselves, slicing their Big Boys and Beefsteaks behind closed doors and drawn shades. Before long they will have eaten their fill and be willing to sell the surplus. For at least thirty days every year I get lost in fantasies of the first ripe tomato that will pass my lips. I mumble the litany of possible accompaniments—basalmic vinegar, fresh basil, fresh mozzarella, black olives, salt and pepper, bacon, lettuce, crisp toast, mayonnaise—a rosary for the holy tomato, *blessed art thou among fruits and vegetables*.

Ripeness, like joy, only comes in fleeting moments—at this time of year it's best to sleep light and keep your bib tucked under your chin so you don't miss any of the sweetness when it comes.