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DANCING AS IF LIFE DEPENDED ON IT

Back in March, one of our favorite cowboys—I'll call him Slim—contacted us by cell phone every morning for almost a week.

"Hello, Marva? This is Slim. Hey, there's a prairie-chicken dancing all by hisself up here on the county line," he announced on the first day. "You oughta come see him."

"Hello. This is the damndest thing I've ever seen," he reported the following morning. "I'm sittin' here lookin' straight at him; he's stompin' and callin' on the road right up next to my truck."

By the third day, Slim stopped bothering with a preamble and started launching straight into the day's report. "This crazy s.o.b. ain't afraid of nothin'," he declared with admiration when I picked up the phone. "He just flew straight at my truck and landed on the roof; he's sitting up there right now. I don't believe his elevator goes all the way to the top floor, if you know what I mean. I think he'd fly in the damn window if it was rolled down."

"Have you seen this lunatic chicken yet?" he asked when the sun was still partially obscured by the horizon the following morning. "You really need to get over here and see this with your own eyes. I've never seen anything like it in my whole damn life."

Slim described in detail, down to the last cattle guard and tree row, how to locate the bird. "You'll find him right in that area, even if the cattle are there, I guaran-damn-tee it."

As promised, the lone greater prairie-chicken—*Tympanuchus cupido pinnatus*—ran through his traditional male courtship song and dance routines in a touching, but vaguely disquieting solo performance. Slim's reports had been accurate—the bird wasn't particularly wary of cattle, vehicles or even people. This too was oddly troubling.

"Have you seen him yet?" Slim seemed relieved the next morning when I could finally confirm that the prairie-chicken was not a tall tale or hallucination, as if somehow he worried that the bird might not be real unless someone else could see it too. "Ain't he a sight? I can't hardly believe he just dances next to the road where anyone could see him. Don't you think maybe there's something wrong with him?"

I didn't know what to think, and so I found myself drawn back to the spot on another morning while Jane was out in our viewing blind with guests who had come to witness the more conventional version of the prairie-chicken dance—multiple males booming, sparring and dancing for dominance, hopping and hoping to impress the hens who arrived from time to time to choose the best mate.

The light was excellent that morning and I sat in the truck and took numerous pictures of the prairie-chicken's antics. After awhile, I became irresistibly curious about what he'd do if I removed



the barrier between us. I stepped out and squatted down near the back of the truck with my camera poised. At first he paced around nervously and maintained a safe distance—clearly aware of my presence—and then evidently made a decision. He sidled over and commenced to shyly court me, gradually increasing our proximity until less than two feet separated me from my two-pound wild swain. The unexpected intimacy was thrilling and I took advantage of the opportunity to study him, as indeed, a hen in my place would do.

His plumage appeared bright and healthy, his comb and neck patch vibrantly colored, and his eyes clear and alert. His singing voice was deep and certain, his dancing graceful. I got the distinct impression the assessment process was mutual and that after a few minutes he must have concluded his efforts were wasted on such a big and featherless galoot as me. My photographs from that morning show a clear progression from shyness to direct engagement and

courtship, to a waning romantic interest, until finally he turned and walked away.

As I drove home, I pondered the evidence. By every measure I use to evaluate the health of my own domestic chicken flock, this prairie-chicken certainly seemed to be in top condition. Why, then, had the normal boundaries between human and wild bird blurred? The expected response of avians to human intrusion—with the exception of females who stay to defend a nest—is to fly off. Why wasn't he more wary?



Something else nagged me as I mentally reviewed the issues, an odd undercurrent of sadness that kept percolating to the surface, bumping up against my pragmatic analysis of the situation. When I finally figured it out, I nearly wept. This is how it would be, I realized in stark, astonished grief, if there were only one prairie-chicken left on the earth. He would return by instinct to a traditional booming ground where his kind had danced for thousands of years. He would sing and strut, snap his tail feathers and inflate his brilliant, Spanish-orange air sac. He would erect his feathery head-dress and cleave the early morning stillness with the heart-rending sound of one piper piping. Although there would be no females left to respond to his impassioned overture, he would dance as if his life and the future of his race depended upon it, defending his territory against any encroachment. Even cars and trucks. Even humans, as it turns out.

After I shared the details of my close encounter the next time Slim phoned, he couldn't wait to try it himself. That evening I received the most excited call to date. Slim was wound up, as Jane would say, *like an eight-day clock*.

The story came out in a torrent, punctuated by colorful epithets and sustained in duration by rhetorical repetition of the most salient details in a tone that was two parts awe to one part hysteria. "We decided to get out of the truck and my brother started walking towards him and that bird flew right up at him and you should have seen that boy run! Can you believe that? So then I walked up to that crazy sonofabitch and he jumped right up on me and started flogging my leg."

When I could finally wedge in an edgewise comment, I said, "Slim, I'm starting to wonder if that chicken can tell the difference between the male and female of our species, because he danced for me, but he sparred with you guys."

I'd heard of this before, particularly of captive female birds flirting with their male keepers, but I'd never read evidence of it happening in the wild. Sure enough, when Jane went out to see him, the prairie-chicken appeared to realize that she was not a potential rival against whom he needed to defend his territory, although he seemed to have benefited from his experience with me and did not waste much effort romancing her.

Our tough old cowboy, meanwhile, had developed quite an affection for the chicken, and his phone calls began to focus on the possibility of intervention. "Do you think maybe we oughta take that bird to where there's some other chickens? It wouldn't be hard to catch him; you could probably do it with a fishing net. I'm just worried the wrong person is gonna get him. He don't know enough to be afraid of nobody. Somebody's liable to kill him."

While I discouraged the idea of capturing the bird, I did lobby for keeping his location quiet. The last thing he needed was to get a write-up in the *Wichita Eagle*, complete with driving directions for the curious.

Despite our rural isolation, we live in the information age, so I was not totally surprised to receive the following email by a circuitous route (the message traveled some 331 miles around Kansas before arriving here) from Jane's sister, who received it from a neighbor, who had in turn received it from the Kingman County District Conservationist for the Natural Resources Conservation Service, who'd gotten it from the author, the District Conservationist in the Eureka Field Office near us:

Subject: Crazy Chicken

Had probably a once in a lifetime encounter today. Had this prairie-chicken try to take the truck! I was up in the middle of the hills and saw this character booming along the road on the passenger side. I stopped the truck and started taking pictures and here he came. He just walked back and forth, the whole length of the truck for several minutes, giving me an excellent opportunity for pics. He even pecked the tires a couple of times. Definitely a highlight of the day!

There was absolutely no question that the writer was describing our bird. After all, how many prairie-chickens—a species known for its secrecy and avoidance of human contact—could fit this description, right down to the word "crazy," which Slim had used repeatedly in his reports.

Can a prairie-chicken become mentally unstable? It seems more likely to me that his odd behavior was overcompensation for a perceived imbalance. Competition between males affirms the vigor of the community; dancing alone sets off a survival alarm.

Perhaps it is a bit of a leap—and an emotional one, at that—to see a lone prairie-chicken and jump to thoughts of *the last prairie-chicken on earth*, but in fact, as many as 50,000 species of flora and fauna a year—130 species per day—go extinct on our planet. Ironically, some of them in North America die out while waiting in the bureaucratic queue to get on our Endangered Species list, the fate of 42 out of 108 species declared extinct since the Act passed in 1973. This includes an extinct plant that provides an unintentionally wry comment from nature on the effectiveness of the program—the Hawaiian Haha.

Although our branch of the prairie chicken family is not yet a candidate for the Endangered Species list, greater prairie-chickens have disappeared over the last century and a half from Tennessee, Kentucky, Arkansas, Iowa and Michigan. Remnant populations in Wisconsin, Minnesota, North Dakota and Missouri are small and at great risk. Only Nebraska, Kansas, South Dakota, Colorado and Oklahoma (listed in order of estimated survivors) have populations with any stability.

By the most educated estimate I found, greater prairie-chicken numbers have declined by 80 percent in the last few decades, from about a million birds in the early 1970s to only 200,000 at the turn of the newest century. As 800,000 prairie-chickens did a vanishing act, the U.S. Census pulled 78 million more humans out of the statistical hat. In light of this, it's not difficult to understand why the primary reason for the greater prairie-chicken's rapid decline is loss of habitat—the same as for most disappearing species.

Given these statistics, it is no great stretch to imagine that this unique and irreplaceable bird—one of the signature species of America's grasslands—could be plentiful in my youth and extinct before I reach the end of my own life. I find the possibility shocking, perhaps more so than most because I



squatted two feet from this bird and shared a few moments of intense mutual regard, during which I came to understand profoundly that I was encroaching on his territory and not the other way around.

What difference will it make to our lives if *Tympanuchus cupido pinnatus* becomes extinct? Scalped out intellectually from the dynamic matrix in which it has survived for millennia, this species might not seem

to represent much of a loss. After all, the practical-minded reader could point out, few of us have seen or heard this bird and fewer still have ever eaten prairie-chicken—although many a pioneer gave heartfelt thanks over a life-saving plate of wild fried chicken.

The value of species diversity on the planet is not well understood or supported, largely because we haven't found a way to measure and quantify it. We tend to place value on individual species based on each one's assessed usefulness to us rather than on how a particular organism might interlock and interdepend in a complex system, or on how it might even be valuable for its own sake. I like the way the Center for Biological Diversity puts this into words:

We believe that the welfare of human beings is deeply linked to nature—to the existence in our world of a vast diversity of wild animals and plants. Because diversity has intrinsic value, and because its loss impoverishes society, we work to secure a future for all species, great and small.

The *intrinsic value of diversity* is probably more controversial in our culture than I realize. This is where the footing gets mushy, for it is a philosophical and ethical matter, rather than one that has been or can be scientifically or mathematically proven. Those of us who assume that biodiversity is of essential importance have probably not arrived at that conclusion through careful analysis, but because we've lived on the land, crawled in the grass, slogged the murky sloughs, turned over countless rocks and peered into many a wild eye. It's something you know with your belly and your heart, not your head or your spreadsheet.

I was telling Jane about an article I'd read from Stanford Law School called *People or Prairie Chickens: The Uncertain Search for Optimal Biodiversity*. The author suggested that the Endangered Species Act would be more effective if it included cost-benefit considerations. After listening thoughtfully to my summary of the paper's salient points, Jane casually dropped one of her rough-cut gems of insight into my lap. "I can tell you this—we ought to be damn glad the prairie-chickens aren't in a position to make that kind of decision about us."

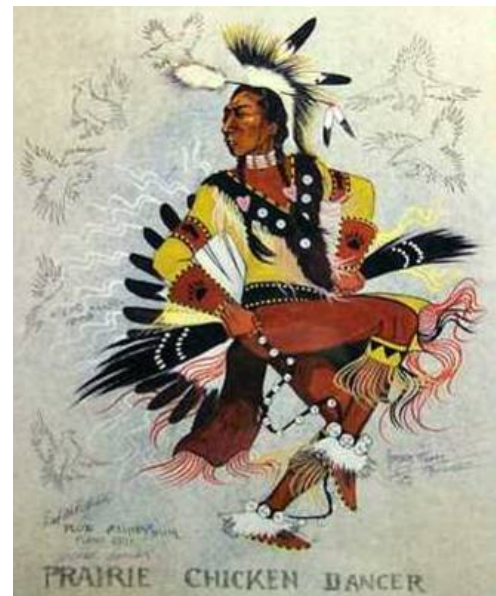
Or are they? *Kitokipaaskaan...Pihewisimowin...Katukatuk*. These are names for the prairie-chicken dance among the Blackfoot, Cree and Lakota. Each time they perform the sacred dance, members of the Prairie Chicken Society of the Siksika Nation are honoring an ancient agreement. Long ago, say the story keepers, a young man of their tribe went out hunting in the tall grass and saw these birds dancing early in the morning. He was hungry, so he killed one of the birds and brought it home to feed his family. That night the spirit of the dead prairie chicken came to him in a dream.

"Why did you kill me?" the bird asked the man.

"I needed to feed my family," the man replied honestly.

"I will teach you my dance," said the spirit of the prairie-chicken, "and you must teach your children and all of your people. If you will do this to honor me, I will spare your life, even though you have taken mine."

And so to this day, according to a longstanding pact, the welfare of humans and prairie-chickens intertwine in dances that culminate and celebrate the generous fertility and variety of life and the turning wheel of the seasons.



Painting by George Flett
www.spokaneoutdoors.com/prairie_chicken_dancer.htm

GRANDMOTHER TURTLE

If you asked me for the freshest news around here, I would not send you to the county newspaper office, but to Strong City Grocery, Clark's Farm & Home or Reyer's Country Store Feed & More. In these locations you will be served up the spiciest reports with a complimentary side order of half-baked speculation. If you have the leisure, it can be both instructive and entertaining to inquire about the same tidbit at each establishment and note the similarities, discrepancies and embellishments between versions. At least one detail of each telling will likely be true; at least one other will turn out to be only a distant second cousin twice removed from anything resembling fact.

If you requested instead a colorful yarn from antique threads spun by our finest local tale-knitters, I'd have to pause briefly to regret the passing of Whitt Laughridge, June Talkington and Easter Heathman, but I could still point you toward a first-rate rendering of local history. Generally my advice would be based on township: Betty Yeager for Bazaar, Pat Sauble in Cedar, Clara Jo Talkington at Matfield, and so on. No one appoints these story-keepers to their positions; they simply emerge when their gifts have ripened: a talent for listening, observing, remembering and, ultimately, for recapitulating with a certain amount of style.

Take Clara Jo for example. One day I asked her about a family I was researching. "I'm related to them, you know," she replied with an air of gleeful defiance, as if daring me to ask an impertinent question, and thereby also reinforcing the oft-repeated local caution to carefully mind your criticism in the county, as everyone is more or less related by blood, marriage or other affiliation to nearly everyone else. Having issued her obligatory warning, Clara Jo surprised me by promptly fixing her sights on a particular member of the family in question and opening fire. "Let me tell you," she began her salvo, "that man was a son of a bitch." Twenty or so minutes later, she was in the process of winding down, but only because she'd suddenly recalled where she was supposed to be going when I waylaid her with my question. If you're hungry for a good story and you don't mind it a little on the salty side, I suggest you stop by Matfield Green and track down Clara Jo.

If you're in search of even older perspectives, I'd consider granting you an audience with the artifact I found on the South Fork of the Cottonwood River this year. The stories this flint spear point might tell you could be as much as 5,000 years old, at least that's what the state archaeologist guessed when I sent photos to Topeka. To indicate a person or event of great antiquity, some storytellers around here use the phrase "when Jesus was a pup." This piece of worked Flint Hills' chert makes that seem not so very long ago.

Such boggling expanses of time are difficult for the mind to cross. Perhaps a bit of context will help: this point may well have been knapped before the first pyramid was constructed in Egypt (Pharaoh Djoser's Step Pyramid at Saqqara, circa 2630 BC). But for the fact that this piece was long ago abandoned in a flood plain, the likelihood of my ever encountering it was exceedingly low. Against the odds, I looked down and my eye picked it out from millions of other rocks, perched atop a gravel bar at the river's edge, as if an unseen hand had just reached through an anomalous fold in time and set the spear point there in plain sight for me to find.



I should also mention that my treasure, if it is indeed 5,000 or so years old, is itself a mere cultural teenager by comparison with some artifacts found in Kansas. Mammoth and camel bones discovered in proximity to ancient stone tools in northwestern Kansas a few years ago suggest that humans may have been here more than 12,000 years ago. Imagine the sagas those stones and bones could tell!

If you are intent on seeking yet more venerable and humbling tales that will put your own short stay on the planet into proportion, you must make an appointment to see Grandmother Turtle when she



emerges from hibernation next April, for she and her kin know some of the oldest stories. Her royal reptilian lineage goes back about 200 million years. Members of the Turtle Tribe have stood witness as global temperatures rose and fell, as seas advanced and receded, as meteors bombarded the planet, as the massive Pangaeon continent groaned, ground, heaved and gave birth to our Turtle Island. If you understand her language, Grandmother Turtle can teach you of the rise and fall of dinosaurs during the Mesozoic Era and of the later expansion and recession of mastodon, rhinoceros, woolly mammoth, camel, tiger, lion, saber-toothed cat, bear and bison here in this very place we now call Kansas. She can describe from legend the momentous arrival of the first two-legged creatures who were so shell-less and vulnerable that they covered themselves with the hides of beasts in order to survive on the shelterless plains.

Perhaps it is their remarkable longevity and hardiness that suit members of the Snapping Turtle Clan in particular to their emerging role as sentinels in the service of modern science. The eggs of common snapping turtles turn out to be excellent mirrors of the condition of waterways and wetlands in which their progenitors spent their time. If the water is polluted with pesticides, PCBs, dioxins or other toxic substances, those contaminants will show up in the turtle eggs, reflecting the mixtures of chemicals and their concentrations in the local habitat.



Each egg offers a tiny and stunningly accurate tale of the environment in which it was begotten.

So it is that Grandmother Turtle and her kin offer not only some of the oldest tales of life in the Flint Hills, but also a more precise account of current conditions than you're likely to get in the newspaper or even at the hardware store.

THE MESSENGERS

First it was birds. Everywhere I went in late August, I made note of the unusual frequency with which I saw a majestic red-tailed hawk popping up off a perch and taking to the air with ease.

On Tuesday four fat crows gave the impression of anticipating exactly what I intended to do next. Everywhere I went on the ranch, they appeared, flapping and cawing, cavorting with the south wind as if with an invisible toy. By early afternoon there were five crows. At sundown I counted six black silhouettes against a polished bronze sky, still tiddling with the thermals and calling to one another. I half expected to awaken the next morning to find a whole flock awaiting me in the yard.

Wednesday I patiently stalked a great egret for an hour in hopes of catching a good photo of the massive bird taking flight. When she finally abandoned fishing and took to the sky, I did not react quickly enough to capture the launch.



Friday I was heading east across the pasture when I happened to look up and notice a lone double-crested cormorant flying along on my left. After gradually pulling ahead, the bird circled around and returned to fly parallel with me. I thought it unusual to see the bird so far from water and alone, since the cormorant is a colony bird that sticks to the timber near water. I definitely had the odd feeling its presence in the uplands was for my benefit.

Sunday Jane and I were driving down the road in the all-terrain vehicle when we saw a great blue heron in the pasture just south of a pond. Repeatedly it ran a few lurching steps, launched briefly above the top of the grass and then set back down again, highly unusual behavior for a heron. Jane



wondered if it was injured, but I didn't think so; its wings and legs appeared to be functioning properly. The oddest detail, to my mind, was its unusual proximity to us; herons are solitary birds that prefer to avoid humans.

Later that evening, alone, I headed down to the barn to feed the horse. Without warning, the heron flew silently over my head from behind and shocked me by landing in the road directly in front of me,

walking a few steps and then once again executing with exaggerated slowness the same maneuver it had repeatedly demonstrated earlier: how to get its hulking self up into the air. The great blue messenger flew a short distance into the pasture and landed again, as if to ask, "Do you get it yet, or do I need to show you one more time?"

I finally got it.

To demonstrate my comprehension, I sat down the next morning to make a list of all the big, bulky ideas and projects that I have not yet begun, completed, blessed, empowered or otherwise given the energy or buoyancy to fly out of this house and into the sky of the world. I put them in order of the ease or practicality of accomplishment and then, the following day, focused my intentions and began flapping my metaphorical wings by opening a blank computer file.

One week later, the print proof of my first big bird—the *Spirit of the Flint Hills* calendar—came off the press at Kansas Graphics. Within 24 hours of initiating sales efforts, I'd pre-sold enough calendars to more than cover the expense of printing the first 500 copies, so the operation began to support itself immediately. Ten days after opening the blank computer file, I delivered the first one hundred calendars to vendors.

Just as I was pondering the prudence of expanding my print run to 1,000 copies, the next messenger appeared. One warm afternoon on the west side of our house, with my right eye shut and the left glued to the viewfinder of my camera, I took a step backward to adjust my position. *Good heavens*, I thought to myself, *I must have stepped on a cicada*, so I neatly pivoted on one foot while lifting the other to avoid further injury to the insect. I should explain that I have in recent years become what some might call ridiculously solicitous of other living creatures, even bugs. I call my chickens *sweetheart* and the cows *darling*; I may greet a bird as *little sister* or *little brother*; I shout *hello, dear!* to jackrabbits. I have gradually become that slightly wacky older broad who puts a towel over the side of the bathtub so a spider can escape or bows politely to a cricket before offering it a safe escort out of the house rather than condemn it to a slow death inside the vacuum cleaner, so naturally, I turned to see if the cicada had survived our encounter.

I don't know if the word *grandfather* came into my mind at that moment, or later. I do know that I experienced a surprising lack of alarm as I correctly identified the messenger whose common name in Ojibwa means "mouth of the river." Normally that's where you'd expect to find Grandfather Massasauga, closer to water, but this has been a moist year and even the upland springs are running. I don't know if I actually stepped on him or only came close, but at the instant I ascertained Grandfather's identity, I stood well within his twelve-inch strike zone. He never even coiled into a defensive position. Instead, he merely engaged in the classical practice for which snakes of his sort are named: he rattled and rattled and rattled, which sounded exactly like a stepped-on cicada.

I found our proximity riveting; I gazed at him as intently as he appeared to be studying me. I'd swear our eyes actually met. I'm not sure how I knew he was a messenger, but I did, without question. The substance of the message seemed to be this: *even though something potentially frightening may occur in the days to come (maybe along the lines of ordering a thousand calendars you don't know if you can sell), you will not be in real danger or come to any harm.*

This just goes to show you how two persons can have entirely different perceptions of the same experience, because while I was standing there marveling at my closeness to a rattlesnake, Jane, who a few seconds earlier had been helping me with the photography project, was suddenly talking to me through the window screen from *inside* the house. Jane is a pragmatist; if that snake was a messenger, this was his message: *I am a venomous snake and you better get out of my territory immediately!*

In retrospect, this seems kind of funny, but at the moment it was not cause for levity. Luckily, Jane and I respect one another's viewpoints when they differ. We appreciate and often benefit from our counter-pointing perspectives. She did not laugh at me for thinking Grandfather Massasauga was a messenger; I did not make fun of her for running away from a relatively shy, small snake. This mutual respect, however, does not preclude vigorous discussion or even peppery debate.

"Marva, honestly, you have never seen one of those things strike," Jane advised urgently from her position on the other side of a two-foot-thick wall, "they are like lightning."

"He's not even coiled up, and besides, only one person in Kansas has died from a venomous snake bite in the last half century," I countered, recalling this salient fact that I sometimes use to reassure ranch visitors from the city. "He doesn't even have enough venom to kill me."

For ten days we wrestled conceptually with Grandfather Massasauga, who meanwhile had apparently decided the rocky environs on the west side of the house suited him. I suspected he'd been nearby all along, minding his own business until his future became inextricably entangled with ours. Fossils of the Massasauga in Kansas date to the Pleistocene era, from 10,000 to 1.8 million years ago. Jane acknowledges that this hilltop has probably been hospitable to Grandfather and his forebears since long before she picked it out as a home site in 1999. This rational admission is complicated by fear and exacerbated by the fact that, in the summer of 2003, she'd had difficulties with rattlesnakes too near the house and three had died of unnatural causes.

That is exactly what I did not wish to happen to Grandfather Massasauga and so I lobbied for his life at regular intervals. Unfortunately, I had to go out of state for a meeting at the same time someone was coming to work on the exterior of the west porch.

I had been away for less than two hours when Jane informed me on the phone that Grandfather's future was precarious. All I could say was, "please...he will not harm anyone...he is a messenger," not caring in the least if I sounded irrational. Driving down the freeway, I was briefly overcome by fierce, hot tears of anger and grief. I felt terrible that so beautiful and gentle a being—my courier of fearlessness—would die because of fear. This time, I was the messenger, mentally telegraphing him urgent warnings: *Go now, Grandfather! Flee as fast as you can!*

That he chose to stay is a puzzle I fiddled with for weeks after his death. I am guaranteed not to forget him, as he has ever since been a resident in our freezer, waiting for me to learn how to skin and tan a rattlesnake so that Grandfather's spirit can continue to teach. This symbolic resurrection of my snake suggests part of his significance in art and lore: he stands for death and rebirth, initiation, healing, wisdom and creative energy.

Here's what I finally figured out: it was quite presumptuous of me to assume that I was the only person for whom Grandfather might have a message. I will never know what work he did with other humans in the last hours of his life, what fears he may have brought out into the light, what work he may yet do as this story reaches others.

As his message foretold, I have been a bit unnerved at times, but I have come to no harm. I have sold 80% of my calendars, paid off my printing bill and realized a modest profit. Grandfather was absolutely right, and I have the birds to thank for teaching me how to fly a big idea off my desk and into the sky.

SPEAKING OF SKY



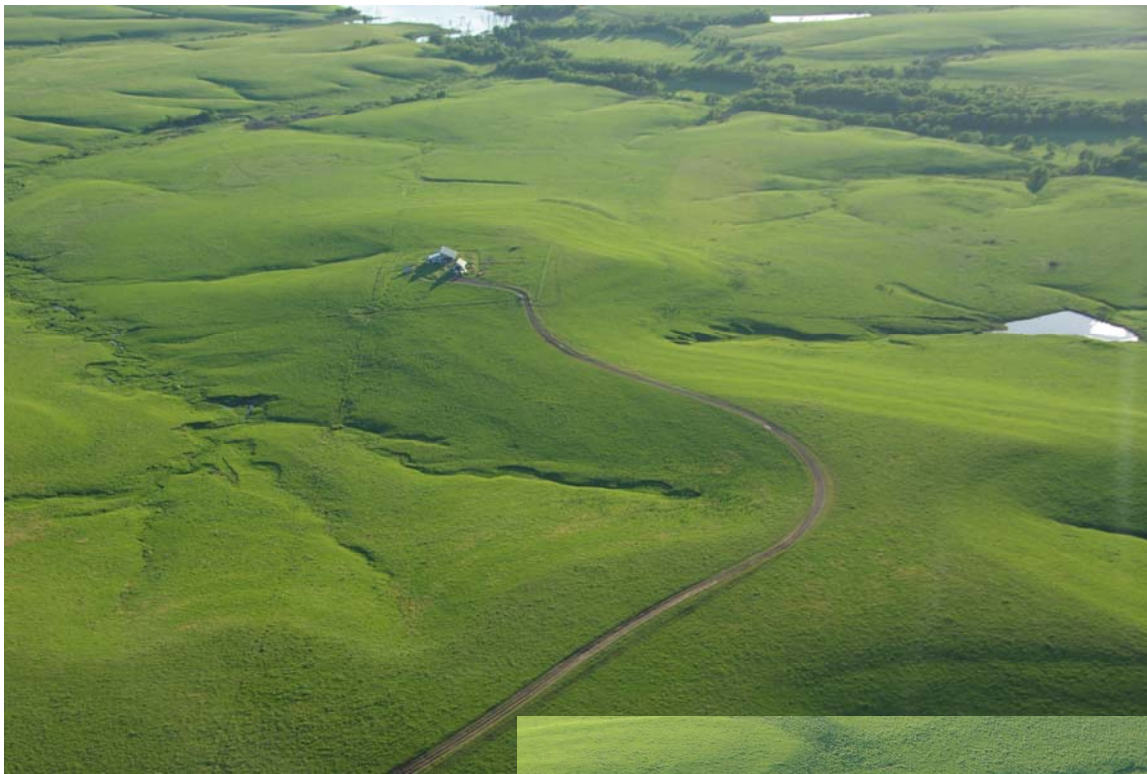
My awareness of our blissful isolation is perhaps never more acute than when that isolation is suddenly breached by an unexpected visitor. One balmy evening in June I heard the sound of a loud engine and stepped outside to investigate. Just west of the house, a parachute plane had landed.

The pilot, our rural mail carrier by day, casually offered me an evening ride in his outlandish flying machine. It looked like a three-wheeled motorcycle with an industrial-sized fan on the back and a huge rectangular parachute stretched out behind it on the ground.



He might just as well have volunteered to saddle me a unicorn, so magically outside of the frame of my normal expectations was his offer.

I never once thought to consider my safety or mortality; I thought only of this rare opportunity for an aerial perspective on the tallgrass prairie at the riotous peak of her spring fertility. I didn't stop to think about a failed engine or a flawed parachute, but if I had, this is what I would have said to myself as I strapped on my helmet and seatbelt: *What a way to go!*



After a lazy circle around our pastures, across the creeks and ponds, and high above our tiny house, the pilot cut back the engine and allowed us to gently freefall from about a thousand feet, suspended from the broad green and red parachute, wafting like a feather down to earth. We landed within a few feet of the spot from which we had taken off.

What a blessed life I lead!



CHICKEN BAILOUT PLAN

Before you jump to conclusions, let me assure you that extravagant executive bonuses will not be a concern; the Happiest Chicken CEO (fondly known as Big Mama, No Feathers or less respectfully as Mother Clucker) doesn't even get a salary, let alone an annual bonus. Transparency won't be a problem either; we will gladly open both the hen house and our books to anyone. Finally, we are pretty sure that toxic debt is not an issue either, but since we're not altogether certain what it is, we hate to make a promise we can't keep. Owing to the heat and humidity in Kansas, August in the coop can veer a little toward the toxic.

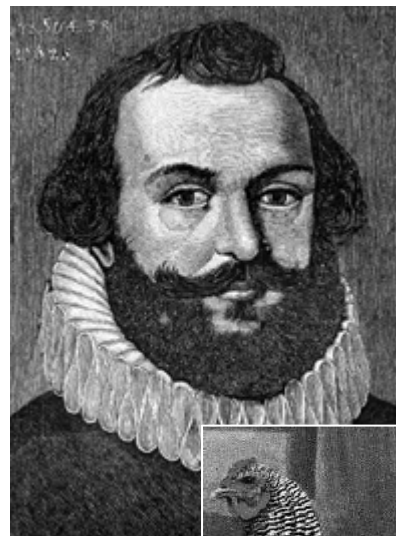
Please bear in mind that we are trying to avoid national publicity. Several of the most vociferous chicken groups—notably the proud and financially savvy P.A.R. (Poultry of the American Revolution), whose President, Parmentia Pilgrim, is a Barred Plymouth Rock supposedly in a direct line of descent

from the flock of Captain Myles Standish—have argued that the bailout needn't be a high-profile federal matter or even a state-level concern. Miss Pilgrim suggests that if every member of the labor force in Chase County kicked in about 13¢, we could promise a prompt recovery.

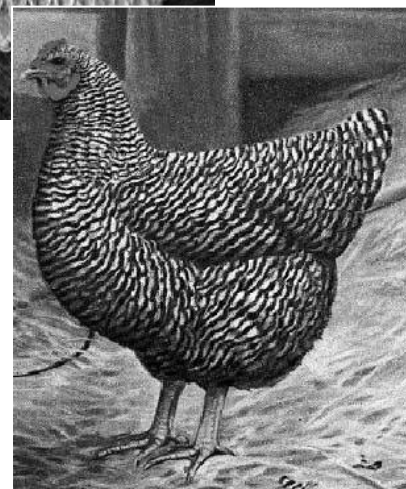
EXPENSES		
Item	Quantity	Annual Cost
Scratch grains	182.5 lbs	\$36.50
Chicken feed	2,851.0 lbs	\$741.26
Bedding	6 sacks	\$58.50
TOTAL		\$836.26
INCOME		
Item	Quantity	Annual Income
Eggs	300 dozen	*\$600.00
Fertilizer	A lot	\$0.00
Entertainment	Inestimable	Priceless
TOTAL		\$600.00
PROFIT/LOSS		
		-\$236.26

*Since we eat a good share of the eggs ourselves, part of this figure is an estimated value rather than an actual income. This is calculated at \$2 per dozen, which is more than we can get in the country and less than we can get in the city. Transportation costs to sell in the city have not been included.

There's no question that the pension plan is to blame for the bulk of our economic woes. The six most elderly chickens were born in 2004 and are now officially retired, living quite comfortably on the poultry version of Social Security and Medicare. I spent the first two years of nervous chicken-rearing trying to keep my small flock alive, and now that I've gained confidence and relaxed my vigilance considerably, these unproductive old farts refuse to expire gracefully of natural causes. I can already see the problem about to be compounded in the next generation of the flock, born in 2006. Normally, you can expect periodic mortality—a chickhood disease, a predator attack, a random chicken heart-attack—but no, I haven't lost a single bird out of the 2006 batch. These hens will become eligible for retirement sometime next year, at which point over half of my flock will be on the dole.



Captain Myles Standish & the Barred Plymouth Rock breed. Uncanny resemblance?



Then there's the strike. With absolutely no fanfare—no picket lines, no signs, no bullhorns, no written demands—all four of my working-age Ameraucanas abruptly ceased laying their blue-green eggs about two months ago. I have no explanation and no idea what they want.



Finally, I must bring up the unpleasant matter of the mix-up at the feed store this spring. I ordered two buff Brahmas to keep the Gandhi line going. The tiny yellow chicks with downy slippers on their feet arrived with punky purple stripes spray-painted on their heads, apparently to keep them sorted. The system failed. Instead of two full-sized Brahma hens, I ended up with a

matched pair of junior-sized, strutting, crowing bantam roosters. Elsewhere in Chase County (and I think I've figured out where), are the two big, beautiful Brahma hens I ordered. I'd love to work out a trade, but unfortunately (or fortunately, depending on how you look at it), one of the roosters died mysteriously this summer while we were away on vacation. The remaining rooster is called *Mister*, which is always italicized when you say it, as in "Listen here, *Mister*" and "Where do you think you're going, *Mister*?" I have absolutely nothing against him aside from the fact that he does not lay eggs—he is a handsome fellow with a reasonable disposition and only a few minor, over-compensatory Napoleonic tendencies.

When I mentioned the possibility of a bailout plan while I was at the Hitchin Post for a burger the other day, one fellow was quick to bring up a time-honored solution. "I can tell you what you need," he matter-of-factly informed me. "It's called the Chicken and Dumpling Plan."

I'll be honest; I've never been hungry enough to consider eating an animal I know by name. Call me a panty-waist or a candy-ass. Call me a city slicker cleverly camouflaged in Carhartt. If I have friends for dinner, it is safe to assume they will not be the main course.

The helpful gentleman at the Hitchin Post turned out to have another idea as well: feathers for fancy fly-tying. The right kind of exotic feathers are worth inordinate sums of money to hobbyists and sportsmen with inordinate amounts of disposable income. Unfortunately, there is not much of a market for the type of feather we happen to have on hand at present. If, however, I could successfully raise a Kori Bustard or a Great Argus Pheasant alongside my chickens, we'd cover all our expenses and actually turn a profit. One pair of matched secondary wing feathers from the Great Argus, for example, retails for \$90 to enthusiasts who enjoy tying Atlantic salmon flies either to cater to or engage in one of the most expensive habits on the planet. I found an extreme example of what this market will bear: a fishing fly—the centerpiece of which is a diamond-studded 14-karat gold hook—that sells for \$9,000.



Kori Bustard, Ardeotis kori. Burchell, Etosha National Park, Namibia. Photo by Winfried Bruenken, 2004.

Here's the problem: Kori Bustards are native to African grasslands and Great Argus Pheasants hail from the jungles of Borneo, Sumatra and Malay Peninsula. I'm not sure either species would do all that well in Kansas, especially in winter. Kori Bustards are among the so-called big bustards, the largest land birds that can still fly, sort of. They really prefer to walk or run, which they do the minute they notice a human being in the vicinity. I can already see how this could be a serious problem in our operation. In their favor, bustards are usually stately and silent, but when they do have something to communicate—like alarm when they spy

a human—they bark loudly. This would undoubtedly scare the ever-living you-know-what out of a chicken, which is only about one-eighth the size of a big bustard to start with. All in all, as you can readily see, this is not a very practical economic recovery plan. Still, I appreciate the creativity behind the suggestion.

Another bailout strategy suggests itself whenever chicken-coop-cleaning time arrives. Chickens produce prodigious quantities of...well...let's just call it fertilizer. I know that this waste material is valuable, because we use it to boost soil fertility in our vegetable gardens, but until I did a little research and found "Cockadoodle DOO" brand organic fertilizer, I had no idea it could be worth 75¢ a pound. Three hundred or so pounds of the stuff and we could be out of debt! I am a little concerned by Cockadoodle DOO's prominent label claim that the product is "safe for kids and pets." I can personally attest to the fact that chicken droppings are perfectly safe for pets, because for some unfathomable reason, both of our dogs hold them in high esteem as irresistible delicacies (in the winter months, we refer to them as poopsicles). As to kids, however, I'm afraid labeling really needs to be more explicit in these litigious times. We've gotten terribly accustomed to being told more about what not to do with a product than about its actual use, which is why you can scarcely see the deck of your new lawnmower for all the warning stickers.



I hope you'll forgive me for making light of a very serious topic. The Happiest Chickens in Kansas really have nothing to worry about by comparison with many individuals, families and communities right now. I was talking to my father on the phone the other day. Both he and my younger brother serve on the staff of a church in Michigan. I asked him how the auto industry crisis was affecting their congregation. "Well, it's an interesting irony that when finances are tight, giving to the church is one of the first expenditures to get cut," he told me, "and yet, when families find themselves in trouble, the church is one of the first places they turn for help."



Believe it or not, the guy I talked to at the Hitchin Post the other day has an idea for doing something about that too. And this, my friends, is an example of the kind of creativity that has gotten rural communities through many a difficult economic cycle. As we sat together congenially at the bar and our chicken conversation ran out of steam, he brought up a new topic. "You really ought to buy a couple tickets," he urged me, referring to \$5 raffle tickets for the chance to win a deer rifle worth \$800. When I protested that I didn't even hunt, he countered that if I won it, I could turn around and sell it. "Besides, it's for a worthy cause," he told me. "I'm donating all the money from the raffle to the church."

RADICAL GIVING

I credit Wendell Berry with helping me understand that I can exert as much influence by what I elect not to buy as by what I actually purchase. Here's how he explains it in *The Unsettling of America*:

A responsible consumer would be a critical consumer, would refuse to purchase the less good. And he would be a moderate consumer; he would know his needs and would not purchase what he did not need; he would sort among his needs and study to reduce them. These things, of course, have been often said, though in our time they have not been said very loudly and have not been much heeded. In our time the rule among consumers has been to spend money recklessly. People whose governing habit is the relinquishment of power, competence and responsibility, and whose characteristic suffering is the anxiety of futility, make excellent spenders. They are the ideal consumers. By inducing in them little panics of boredom, powerlessness, sexual failure, mortality, paranoia, they can be made to buy (or vote for) virtually anything that is "attractively packaged." The advertising industry is founded upon this principle.

For many years I was in the frantically cheerful throngs of Americans routinely overspending at Christmas, many of whom go into debt to buy gifts for friends and family. As sustainability rose steadily over the years to the top of my personal agenda, my gift giving proportionally shifted as well.

Two years ago, Jane and I scaled back by specifying that our gifts to one another could only be homemade. Last year I suggested a final, radical restructuring of how we interpreted and expressed the underlying spirit of the holiday season: the only gift we give one another is a personal letter. The topic of the letter is a reflection of the redemptive theme common to Solstice, Christmas, Hanukkah and Kwanzaa: how you have brought Light into my life this year. We liked the idea so well that we've decided to make it an annual tradition.

As you consider what gifts will best express your feelings for your family and friends, don't neglect the idea of engaging your family in working together on year-long gifts of love to help sustain our planet. Here are a few ideas:

Last-Minute Gift Ideas for your Mother (the Earth)

1. Get some cloth grocery carriers and vow to keep plastic grocery sacks out of your house.
2. Switch to non-toxic, biodegradable laundry detergent, household cleaning products, dishwashing liquid, hand & body soap and shampoo. We suggest brands like Seventh Generation laundry detergent, Mrs. Meyer's Clean Day line of soaps and cleansers, and Desert Essence or Avalon Organics beauty products.

3. Switch to lower-impact household paper products, such as the *Seventh Generation* brand of toilet tissue, napkins and paper towels. Our toilet paper package claims that if every household in the U.S. replaced just one 4-pack of 400 sheet virgin fiber bathroom tissue with 100% recycled ones, we could save: 1,450,000 trees; 3.7 million cubic feet of landfill space; and 523 million gallons of water; in addition to avoiding 89,000 pounds of chlorinated pollution.
4. Think with love and admiration of your frugal human mothers or grandmothers as you wash and reuse your plastic freezer & storage bags and aluminum foil. They'd be so proud of you!
5. Recycle your household's plastic, glass, aluminum, cardboard, paper, magazines and newspapers. Refuse to buy products in packaging that is not recyclable.
6. Replace incandescent bulbs with compact fluorescents. According to *Charity Guide's How to Make a Difference in 15 Minutes*, "If every household in the United States installed just one 15-watt compact fluorescent light bulb to replace one 60-watt incandescent light bulb, we could save enough energy to provide power to 1.5 million people."
7. Use rechargeable batteries, even though they can be frustrating. Each year Americans send 84,000 tons of alkaline batteries to the landfill, where mercury, cadmium and other toxins leach into the soil.
8. Grow some of your own vegetables or purchase locally grown food as much as possible. According to Wendell Berry, a household that prepare its own meals, especially if it also produces some or all of its own food, exercises an influence on the entire food industry and is "responsibly free" instead of "helplessly dependent."
9. Demand eggs from happy, free-range chickens and healthful meats from sustainably & humanely raised animals. If you want to be happy and healthy, it makes sense to eat food from happy and healthy animals.
10. Visit your Mother regularly. Direct contact with Nature (the wilder, the better) is not only good for your physical and mental well-being, but also highly likely to inspire and energize you to be a better steward of Earth's dwindling resources. Last month when I felt kind of cranky about sorting and loading recyclables to take to town, I transformed my attitude by reminding myself that I was doing it for my Mother.

