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*Ravens vs. Chickens, or Birds vs. Farmer?*

We've had a mystery at our place this spring. We have a nice flock of chickens. Some of you met a couple of the girls at Christmastime when they helped us create a manger scene here in the sanctuary. So even with 15 hens, there are rarely eggs when we go to collect from the nests.

At first we figured maybe these chickens just aren't laying anymore and are over the hill. You know, closer to the stew pot than we thought. The second theory was that chicken eggs are pretty tasty to raccoons, weasels, foxes and other members of this web of existence of which we are merely a part.

I decided to experiment; to switch things up a little to see if an answer might emerge. I found that when I ventured to the coop more often there were more eggs. Hmm. I should mention here that we've got quite a security system out there after last summer's bear raids. She was interested in more than eggs! That bear wanted control over the source of the eggs! So now there are two rounds of electric fence (SuperMax, as my friend described it), a sturdy physical fence, three dogs that keep eyes, ears and noses on things, and the chicken pen abuts the house.

One day I went out to check on things and a hen was sitting on a nest. I was thrilled when I reached in and felt two eggs under her. She pecked at my hand. "Fine, Sweetie" I said. "I'll be back in a while when you're in a better mood". Upon my return, thinking I'd hit the jackpot and could harvest three eggs, I was shocked to find none. What the heck?

You can imagine that this has made me pretty curious. I've started to watch and to really listen perhaps a bit more in the Mary Oliver sense of the word. And I've noticed that high above the coop there's often a RAVEN watching from the pine boughs!! Ravens are big, with nearly a four foot wing-span, standing about 20 inches tall. The website, "allaboutbirds" gives this glorious description:

"The intriguing Common Raven has accompanied people around the Northern Hemisphere for centuries, following their wagons, sleds, sleighs, and hunting parties in hopes of a quick meal. Ravens are among the smartest of all birds, gaining a reputation for solving ever more complicated problems invented by ever more creative scientists. These big, sooty birds thrive among humans and in the back of beyond, stretching across the sky on easy, flowing wingbeats and filling the empty spaces with an echoing croak".

What a thrill, a feeling of not other- but deeper-worldliness, it is to see them swooping above our house, landing in our pines, hopping around pulling treats off of our compost pile, and now with the windows open, listening to them "quark" with each other.

Observing the wildlife around our house is a deep joy; an abiding and sustaining sense of connection, and I know that many of you know what I mean: the fox that silently jaunts by on its impossibly skinny legs every morning, the mourning doves cooing as they hunker down in the thick spruce at dusk, the coyotes yipping on the edge of the wetland at night. Listening and watching, opening the windows wide, to develop a keen awareness of what's happening out there, is one way of respecting that interdependent web of existence, of which we are deeply, a part.

Lawrence Kilham, physician and ornithologist, in his book "The American Crow and the Common Raven" states that "Crows, and with them I include ravens, seem as though by convergent evolution to have something in their psyches corresponding to something in our own". Convergent evolution. Nice.

I've watched the raven fly across the meadow with several smaller birds wheeling and diving. They seem to be chasing her away. A Google search tells me that ravens feed their young on the eggs and nestlings of other birds. So why not our chicken eggs? As I am writing this I hear the increasingly familiar raven call from the far side of the garden. Looking out with my binoculars I see two ravens in a tree watching the ground. When I follow their stare with my glasses I see a fox sauntering through the garden. Wow; thanks ravens.

Feeling connected to wildlife, a part of that wonderful world wide web (you know which one I'm talking about), is an antidepressant!!! Not to minimize how painful and complicated depression can be. . . It is. But listen to what 19<sup>th</sup> century nature crusader and conservationist John Muir wrote about feeling connected to wildlife. ". . . any glimpse into the life of an animal (he said) quickens our own and makes it so much the larger and better in every way".

I'm beginning to get a feel for ravens, definitely a holy experience. However they've eaten just about every egg for the last month!

So here's where it gets tricky.

Sometimes during these backyard shenanigans we, the humans, feel called to get involved. I want the eggs. They're mine! That's the whole reason we keep chickens. In discussing my situation with others, people have suggested the 22 caliber solution, and then hanging the body inside the coop as a warning to other ravens. This is also the most common response on the online chicken forums. It's a time-honored solution from many farmers' perspectives, and it gets a little easier to understand if that farmer is depending on the money she makes to pay the tax bill, so she can continue to provide a home and food for her family. What's a chicken farmer to do, caught in this interdependent web of all existence?

Bob Streeter, one of the managers of our own vibrant Tamworth Farmers' Market writes about his encounters with wildlife on his blog "The Farmer's Pencil" (check it out!) He says he wouldn't shoot a coyote that takes an interest in his chickens. In fact, he relishes many of his interactions with wildlife. But don't ask him about the fate of the groundhog that ate \$700 worth of broccoli last summer, or the porcupine who had a hankering for his raspberry bushes. So how do we know where to draw the line?

Everyone, if you've lived in this area long enough, has a story. I'm sure that many of you have had such holy encounters. Ben Kilham, son of Lawrence Kilham whom I quoted earlier, is an acclaimed bear researcher and writer, living in Lyme, New Hampshire. He speaks around the state from time to time about his life caring for and rehabilitating orphan bears.

Last time he came to Tamworth it was moving to see the powerful need by those in attendance to tell their stories of meetings with wildlife. The dour, generally soft-spoken crowd told their stories with great animation and shining eyes, each story betraying the feeling of a life made larger and better, as Muir described; of being touched by the mystery, of connection.

Let me share another story. This one's by Southwest artist and blogger Beth Surdut:

I was experiencing an "ohh, look, a tiny baby bunny" moment, when an impressively large gopher snake zoomed across the yard like a kid on a bike when the ice cream truck is in the neighborhood—head up, jaws wide open, and only one thing in mind. I know everybody's got to eat, but not in front of me. I have a hard time watching those nature TV specials where the antelope/bunny/mouse/cute thing gets chomped. So, I literally ran interference, yelling, "No you don't!" while chasing a five-foot long snake the size of my fist, whose earless body can transmit my vibrations through skin, muscle, and bone.

I don't want to send this beautifully patterned reptile--or any other-- to its next incarnation as a belt or shoes; but, since we all can't just get along, and these snakes can have a quarter-mile territory, I'd like it to move on. A challenge-- my yard is a snake's Eden with fresh-water stations, shade, baby birds, bunnies, ground squirrels, a variety of lizards to eat, and a human who doesn't want to kill snakes, just discourage them. . . . Eyeing the sharp end of a long-handled hoe, I considered my stance on live and let live. Yup, still not a murderer. The tiny bunny was nowhere in sight, so I did the only reasonable thing I could think of—I ran to get a very long stick and my camera.

According to UU blogger Bob Patrick, "while (having to care about everything all the time) . . . might feel heavy and burdensome, . . . (caring about everything all the time) might just also be" what we're here for; what we, as humans, need to do with our lives." CARE PAY ATTENTION. Patrick writes, "Open the windows and let our belonging to all things and all people come in. . ."

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE OPEN OURSELVES TO THE COMPLEXITIES OF THIS LIFE?

In closing, Mark Albee, husband of UUFES member Ingrid Albee, talks about the farmer's dilemma: He points out that every day we humans feed on God's creation, the natural world, so during those occasions when things go the other way, and creatures feed on our work, Mark figures it evens things out a little. It's Mother Nature putting her finger on the scales of justice.

To that I say, yes, I totally agree, Mark. But have you ever had ravens eat every egg your chickens lay?