

Up from the Ground: Blogging the Farm and Farming the Blog

By

C2010
Jen Humphrey

Submitted to the graduate degree program in English and the
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of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.

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About

Most web logs, or blogs, have an “about” tab or section to give the reader a brief synopsis of the writer’s intentions. For example, this is the about that I wrote when I created [Up from the Ground](http://upfromtheground.wordpress.com/) (http://upfromtheground.wordpress.com/) in May 2009:

Up From the Ground is where I explore life as a wannabe Kansas farmer (vegetables, livestock and home canning included). Competing with this much romanticized return-to-the-land agrarian life is my interest in technology and especially its effect on communication. The two are far from mutually exclusive.

Up From the Ground also is a place for experimentation for my thesis in creative writing at the University of Kansas. Over time, it may become the thesis itself!

The about section helps the reader navigate a form that flows backwards through time. In the blog form, the most recent information is immediately visible on screen, and older posts are archived beneath. The reader may be disoriented by the subjects, people and places in the top-most post that are known to the author. Likely these were introduced weeks or months before, but for the new reader are unfamiliar.

In the context of this thesis, the about also explains structure. The reader will not find an introduction to blogging in this text but will notice that several posts in the March heading address the reasons underlying the choice of a blog form for creative writing. Posts are organized into “chapters” that correspond with the months of posts. The volume of writing varies from one month to the next, from March 2010 backwards to May 2009.

The blog's entries have been reproduced to be as close to the original blog as possible. They have not been edited or condensed except for copyright consideration; they appear as they did at the time they were written. Comments that followed each post also are included. Links may break over time, but as of this writing they are active and will provide the reader with additional information.

To provide additional context, and gesture more generally to the functionality of the home page, below are two screen shots of the homepage as it existed in April 2010. I have listed above them links to blog's categories of writing; the reader may also want to explore them directly from the blog.

Categories:

[blogging \(45\)](#)

[communication \(8\)](#)

[family \(8\)](#)

[farm life \(61\)](#)

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[random observations \(14\)](#)

[the business of farming \(7\)](#)

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up from the ground

at the intersection of communication and farm life

April 8,
2010

the big day

Posted by jenh under [farm life](#)

[6] Comments



I just left the chickenhouse, the sound of peeping fading behind closed doors as I walked away. I'm tempted to go there again, sit on the floor, and watch those shuffle-hop-waddle creatures for a few minutes.

I was a wreck with nerves! We had last minute preparations this morning that I rushed through. The mailman was due in three hours, then two, then one, maybe now? We put the brooders on blocks off the floor, set up the heat lamps, spread

the bedding and filled the new mason jar-top waterers. Then we checked the temperatures in the boxes (90 degrees and rising) and went to the truck to haul a large trashcan filled with 170 pounds of grain. We used a dolly to ferry it across the soggy marsh the yard has become after days of rain.

Then the phone rang. The post office. The chicks had arrived, and would I please come pick them up?

At the post office, the staff had put the box on the counter. We could hear them the moment we entered the doorway. The employee who asked if they were ours cooed at them and told them goodbye. "I've been talking to them," he said. "Must be working too much."

The large box emitted sharp chirps the whole way home.

In the chickenhouse, we carefully opened the carton and picked up each tiny day-old bird. With one hand we held each one firmly and with the other gently pressed its beak into the water. Fifty-four times in a row, the same quick motion. Twenty-four hours on the road makes a little bird thirsty, and we wanted them to know where to get started.

Then we watched them, ooood and awed. New life at the farm.



About the Site:

at the intersection of communication and farm life

Links

- [Blog Herald](#)
- [Blog of Myself](#)
- [Cold Antler Farm](#)
- [David Pogue's tech blog](#)
- [Dispatches from the Funky Butte Ranch](#)
- [Food Person](#)
- [Schott's Vocab](#)
- [The crunchy chicken](#)
- [the ethicurean](#)

Pages

- About
- » [The Cast of Characters](#)
- Essays
- » [Discovering Mrs. Kuester](#)
- » [Diving into the Excess](#)
- » [Spurning Irma and Martha](#)
- » [The Good List](#)
- » [Undertaking at Dawn](#)



April 6,
2010

Mystery Goat

Posted by jenh under [farm life](#) | Tags: [goats](#), [pregnancy](#) |

[Leave a Comment](#)

Goat One-twenty-eight is one of the head-scratchers — a member of the herd who likes to be petted. She isn't forceful about her desires, however. She has a plodding gait that exudes an air of constant relaxation, as though she knows she can take as much time as she would like to slide up to me, lower her head, and expect a rub behind the ears.

This attitude suits her pregnancy, too. We've been waiting for her to kid since the end of January.

At that time, One-twenty-eight looked as big as any of the other does. One by one, they each kidded and we led them away to their private stalls. One-twenty-eight stayed alone in the manger. When she still had not delivered after three weeks, we decided to return her to the herd with all the other does and the 13 kids. I have wondered if perhaps her portly figure was merely a sign of reaching into the food trough too often. I affectionately have called her Fatty Goat, but she ignores the teasing and eats the same as the other does.

This morning, as I do every day, I watched her waddle up to the hay to get her share. She stopped to relieve herself, slowly easing the back half of her body to the ground. Her udder brushed the straw covered floor. Surely, I thought, this week she will kid.

We don't know what happened. I've speculated that she lost a kid early in the season and got pregnant again later. Or she might have had her turn for a romantic evening with Cash much later than the other ladies.

She's the Mystery Goat, and she's going to keep me guessing.



March 31,
2010

1: Blogging the farm, and farming the blog

Posted by jenh under [blogging](#), [farm life](#), [writing](#) | Tags: [farming](#), [history](#), [MFA thesis](#), [writing](#) |

[Leave a Comment](#)

Categories:

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[communication](#) (8)
[family](#) (8)
[farm life](#) (61)
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Further, in an effort to provide additional context, I include here the [Cast of Characters](#) from the home page:

The cast of characters for this blog are those related most to posts. I use character in the most broad sense – objects and places can deserve that title as much as people.

Jess. Words that I might choose in this paragraph to describe Jess will fail to capture who she is; she will be better served by the blog posts of the next several months. We met our freshman year of college. A year or so later there followed a period of flirtations through the mail and hundreds of miles of separation, a subject much romanticized by old friends. She is a master of the kitchen, has learned how to drive and till the garden with a tractor, and cares deeply about the future of the farm. She is practical about daydreams. She holds herself to perfection but doesn't stay beat up long when she fails to achieve something just shy of that level. And she's been my partner for [16 years](#).

The farm, more formally known as Red Tractor Farm. Jess and I moved to the farm in May 2008, when we bought the family farmhouse and three acres from her parents. Its name hails from the cherry-red antique Farmall tractors John restored during his retirement.

Physically, our little parcel of farm is enveloped by 80 acres of pasture and row crop lands and bordered by a blacktop road. The road ferries people like me on morning and evening

work commutes, recreation seekers to two area lakes, biking enthusiasts who brave the cars, and farmers who bring everyone to a near stop as they putter by on tractors and combines. The farm is situated in a Kansas river valley such that if I were to stand in the garden all day, I could watch the entire arc of the sun, from its rise over the tree-covered ridge in the east to scalloped lower back of the opposite ridge in the west.

Emotionally, the farm is a sense of place that keeps me grounded. It includes the history of four previous generations that have farmed there, and the stories that connect all of them and now us to its barn, houses, fields, pastures and surrounding neighbors. It is the place where we are building our small sustainable vegetable and goat farm business, so it is also bears the weight and the airy light of future plans.

John. John is as much a character in his absence as he was in life. Though the farm had been in his wife's family, he was the one to create a labyrinth of hand-welded gates, fences and chutes for the goats. He knew how to take apart machines and rebuild them bolt by bolt. He was also particular, sometimes downright gruff, about how we were to work alongside him. He imposed rules about tools, how to use them, where to put them back and in what condition.

He died unexpectedly in December 2008, leaving a gaping hole in the knowledge of how to run and manage the farm. Jess often says he is everywhere, because we are surrounded by his work – leftover farm implements we have no idea how to use, entire refrigerators of old paint and chemicals, weeds creeping into the driveway that he would spray (but we

will not), and the little fixes and solutions he had for various challenges at the farm. He was known as Big John, and one of the things that impressed me about him was that over the course of my relationship with Jess, he gradually changed to accept it, and even went so far as to introduce us together at community gatherings. He became bigger.

The menagerie. This word, which can mean a collection of wild animals put on display, is a favorite that I use in an inverse manner to describe the animals in our midst; they are a tame group, and they are an attractive tourism destination to friends and family. At present, we have 9 adult nanny goats that we will breed in the fall, four bucklings that live apart from the nannies in the barnyard, a 5-month-old steer, two tame barn cats and a handsome Great Pyrenees, Scoop, who guards them all. In the house are the geriatric members of the group, our housedog, Millie, and our indoor cat, Pesto. These animals bind us to a routine, and most days I don't notice it as an obligation. The daily feedings and head-counts are a way of punctuating morning and night and let us know that we are needed at the farm for animals' survival.

Me. My name is Jen Humphrey. What I do in my waking hours has more often than not defined me the most, so I'll offer that I hold a full-time communications job at a local university and squeeze in full-time farm work and social play time everywhere I can around it. That could mean that I'm an overachiever, except that I periodically fail to—what's that phrase from childhood? Ah, "apply," as in I sometimes don't apply myself to the tasks at hand. I'm trying to change that, in part, through this blog. It's a place to play with ideas about my agrarian life amid a great love of technology and its influence on

communication, and it may well be my graduate thesis in creative writing, if I allow it to flourish.



March 2010

1: Process: Blogging the farm, and farming the blog

Posted by jenh under blogging, farm life, writing

Tags: farming, history, MFA thesis, writing

To go forward, I look back. It's a circular, reflective process. By blogging about the farm, I'm farming the blog: learning, creating, cultivating.

We studied our successes and failures of last year to develop our growing plan for this year. If I am intimidated by the arrival of chicks at the farm next week, I realize I neutered male goats in January, a major step up from walking the dog around the block, no? Less than two years ago I lived in town and my greatest concern on Saturday mornings was deciding where to get coffee and groceries.

We study the past of farming, too. We consider the diversity that farms used to have, with garden plots, several kinds of livestock, ponds, pastures and trees. Those farmers managed to make a living without many of the harsh pesticides, herbicides and antibiotics that upset the balance of the land or the animal. We want this for our future, too. I want eggs to taste creamy rich golden

the way they do when chickens peck in the grass. I will eat meat knowing that it roamed in the pasture only days before, with the company of other animals and plenty of food and space.

In writing, I re-read what I have written a day ago, a month and years ago. I see awkward phrases. I cringe at ostentatious and gaudy words that stick out from the page. Then, here and there, I discover a gem, too.

I joy in what is good, and vow to learn from the rest. Improvement is impossible without recognizing where I began, and how I have arrived at the present.

2: Art; why blog an MFA

March 30, 2010 at 5:19 p.m.

Posted by jenh under blogging, writing

Tags: blog, MFA, essay, creative writing

I did the essay. For about eight years I studied its form and history. I wrote about 20 of them, each about 10-15 pages long. Then I workshopped the buggers until I couldn't stand creative writing workshops anymore. In the course of those years, I never wrote an essay that wasn't for an assignment. That stands out to me now, as this blog-thesis project draws to a close, because I looked forward to blogging in a way I never had with essays. I'm hooked.

Essays are taught in creative writing programs nationwide alongside the short story, the novel, the play and the poem. The blog, to my knowledge, is not often taught as a place to explore the techniques of the essay, or fiction or poetry, for that matter, but it should be. It's a frame that can adopt each of those forms, from serialized fiction to poetic verse to lengthy inner monologues.

But is it *art*, Joe Harrington asked.

It's a tough question for me to answer. Bloggers – bloggarts? – have much in common with the essayists, even those credited with creating the form. Early essayists such as Sir Francis Bacon pioneered the “fresh interest in the ordinary bustle of living,” essayist Lydia Fakundiny said. This included “people getting sick, deluding themselves, having friends, behaving like fools or like sharks, finding others (or themselves) unbearable at times, growing old, acting up and all the rest, often in the most baffling combinations.”

Nearly any type of blog brings this personal approach to observation. A political blog comments upon the achievements and faults of politicians, a family blogger writes of the comedy of childrearing, an artist blogs about his struggle to bring meaning to the statistics of consumer culture. They attempt to put a personal focus on common or uncommon experiences for the purpose of sharing or conversing about those observations with others, creating a sense of community in humankind.

Unlike a printed, bound, static essay, however, the blog *lives*. It creates a community by directly engaging the reader/viewer/listener in the conversation. Through comments following a blog post, people in that blog's readership or community can respond to the writer, pushing her to reconsider her point. A reader may also affirm the universal nature of the writer's observations. There can be a back-and-forth to the conversation, the very essence of an essay to begin with.

I ditched the essay for the blog because I finally found a form that could be short or long, carry on a conversation indefinitely or never bring up a topic again. It was the perfect medium to test character development (fiction techniques), narrative and tension (essay techniques) and could handle an experiment or two (poetry). It cultivated an audience. It became written performance.

When I started this project, I was afraid to write anything that was not a narrative. Then there were lists. One-line entries. Randomness. Poems.

But is it art?

Art often takes an existing form or object or view and inverts it somehow – makes you see it in a new way. So, what does this blog do differently than another? How does one novel stand out against another? By itself? What makes it art-ful/full of art? What makes it worth of a master's degree in creative writing?

The answer, for me, lies in *connection*. I have achieved some level of art if the writing engaged you, made you look at your food or your choices or your relationships differently than if you hadn't read it. It's that connection forged between humans that gives art meaning, and meaning to our lives.

[3: Everything happens at once](#)

March 29, 2010 at 1:31 p.m.

Posted by jenh under farm life

Tags: dirt, gardening

I want to sprinkle nails in the neighbors' driveway. I take the high road. Other neighbors restore

my faith in Well Behaved People. The tractor broke. The first week of 70 degrees every day arrives. I wish I was outside playing in the dirt. Is the dog going to be sick from eating a whole chicken carcass she stole from the trash? Meetings are scheduled three nights out of five. The lawnmower leaks a dark inky pool in the shop. The grass grows. The thesis is due.

Sunlight: a salve for stress.

4: Analytics

March 28, 2010 at 11:05 a.m.

Posted by jenh under random observations

Tags: WordPress analytics

Most number of visits: January 7 post, [Snowbows and snowdrifts](#), with 78.

Month with the most visitors: January, with 570 views. It's all about the goats – serialized drama with the mamas.

Number of views from May 27, 2009 to March 26, 2010: 2,473

Number of posts: 121

Number of comments: 207

Number of times I've used the word crazy, as in we are or I am: 3

Number of times I've used the words "not easy": 2

Number of times I've used the word goat in a sentence, title or caption: 114

Post with the most comments, so far: [Classify that writing](#), with 10. Coming in second, with 8 responses each, are [Grow enough to share](#) and [Goats versus Farmers](#)

Personal favorite of the comments: Joe Harrington, responding to [blog lit post](#): "Risk averse??!"

This from the person who is doing a BLOG as her MFA thesis? While holding a responsible full-time job AND running a farm in rural Kansas with her lover??? Maybe that's so much of the landscape that you don't see it any more, but to me, that does NOT say "risk averse." Excelsior!

[5: A Wrinkle in Time](#)

March 27, 2010 at 2:01 p.m.

Posted by jenh under blogging, random observations

Tags: blogging, MFA, time

When I began writing the [31 days of blogtastic fun](#), the idea was to have a post a day. Illness and the work of the farm have intervened, delaying writing by a day or two. But I'm still committed to the idea, so sometimes I put up three posts for three days all at once, as I'm doing today. This completely defeats the nature of a blog, which usually provides one morsel of writing at a time.

Time has been central to this blog – both thematically and in form. The plan has always been to conclude at some point and turn it in. More recently, I've decided I don't want it to sit frozen, dormant in the house of WordPress, so I'll keep writing. Perhaps on a new blog for Red Tractor Farm, or maybe here.

WordPress allows me to decide what the date of a post is to be in the present, past or future, so I can alter time. This blog also has a bug I never fixed that assigns time to comments and sometimes posts that I know weren't written at 3 a.m. I've noticed this repeatedly over the past several days I have copied each post into an enormous word document that will become the pdf I turn in for the thesis.

I keep asking myself what I am losing by converting from the online form to a form intended for print. I want to preserve as much of the active functions of the blog as I can, so I'm including links back here for every post, and links out to the information I connected to in the text before.

The comments that have appeared here up to Tuesday, March 30, 2010 are included with each post, but the final pdf will of course lack the ability for people to comment any more, unless they go to the blog.

I think the main thing that I lose in the conversion is readability. The elegance of columns and the ease of connecting to the rest of the blog disappear. Maybe someone in a far-off university who is researching blogging in 10 years will come across the thesis and skip the pdf in favor of reading it online.

The irony, of course, is that what started as an online medium will be converted to PDF for submission, to be accessible online through a thesis and dissertation database. Ha.

All this hoop-jumping for The Institution makes me woozy. Or it's the lack of sleep.

6: Community creation sensation

March 26, 2010 at 10:45 a.m.

Posted by jenh under blogging, farm life, food, writing

Tags: blogging, drama, performance, theater

2 comments

My daydream for the farm is for it to be a place that fosters community. This has everything to do with choosing blogging as a form for an MFA thesis, too.

A farm inherently has drama. Here we draw fear, uncertainty and hope in the same breath. The farm gives so much to us but takes enormous energy and dedication. There's the anticipation of new animals being born here, the wonder of food growing from seed and of course the people who strive – and sometimes fail – to make a farm successful. It's naturally a place of life, and of death.

Some farms bring these tenets of farm life to light by offering [workshops and classes](#) on butchering, compost creation, organic gardening, shearing wool and home-canning vegetables. Sharing the work of the farm [lifts the veil](#). It makes food a more intimate experience. It expands the community of people who know how food travels from farm to fork.

One of the attractions to providing such experiences is to make the farm more than the physical buildings or the land. They build connections and create a sense of place. I'm anxious to get there, but I know we are still farming newbies and probably years away from offering much more than tours of the goat pens for friends.

Blogging the farm provides a similar intimate experience for the people who follow along. The posts peek in on the theater of farm life. As more people follow the arc of a story, they become invested in its outcome as individuals, but also with fellow readers. Reading and commenting on the blog becomes a shared experience. It creates community among people who will likely never meet.

So, where does this take us? Drama...theater...performance...audience...community. Blogging makes writing into a performance act before an audience. For a moment of a post or months of writings, the audience is participating in the same experience. Some do so at a distance, while others want more direct involvement.

The opportunity to write in front of a (participatory) audience is one of the chief reasons I chose this form over writing a collection of essays for my MFA. Perhaps a failing of this blog project is that I haven't cultivated that community enough – yet.



Responses to [6: Community creation sensation](#)

March 30, 2010 at 2:28 am

Noel Rasor says:

Thank you for inviting your readers into your daydream of the farm-as-community. It's a vision that feels warm and spacious. As someone who knows you well enough from various pieces of our work and social lives to call you friend but not so well as to not feel

that inviting myself/my family out to the farm is an imposition (did that make sense? point: I don't want to impose), this is encouraging and exciting.

While I can't wait to get to see you and support your labors at the Farmers' Market, I'm invigorated by the possibility of getting to see, hear, and, importantly, do more. As the blog and the farm go forward, I'd love to be part of the extended community you reach out to for your barn-raising, so to speak. I so enjoy your company and believe in the work you and Jess are doing out there. I believe I may speak for more than a few of your many readers (thanks for sharing the analytics!) when I say this: don't hesitate to put the word out on this very handy tool when you need help or would simply enjoy company and a little assistance.

If your Midwestern selves are anything like my Midwestern self, you'll be hesitant to ask. But for those of us who don't spend our evenings and weekends weeding by the acre, cleaning out barns, or gathering row after row of veggies, those acts maintain some bit of mystique. And if I can contribute in some small way to your making a go of it, I'd be thrilled (and I believe I can volunteer Rob for tractor advice or a quick fix whenever you need it).

And I feel a bit giddy with glee for you that you'll be finishing the thesis in just a few days!

March 30, 2010 at 6:11 p.m.
jenh says:

Thanks, Noel. I've enjoyed our blog conversations. Let's make it a goal to have some community building conversations in person, too! You and your family are welcome at the farm anytime. -J

7: The good, the bad and the ugly

March 25, 2010 at 9:56 p.m.

Posted by jenh under blogging

Tags: blogging, editing, MFA

4 comments

The drive to edit text flows in my veins. I'm one of those people who are tempted to deface grocery store signs offering me "fresh" seafood (I'm a little concerned the grocer is out to poison me). I blame my high school English teacher, who wielded a black permanent (possessive) marker against a "Violators Will Be Towed at Owners Expense" sign installed in the parking lot outside her classroom.

Please don't think that I'm perfect in my pursuit of grammar and spelling excellence. I study my writing to catch mistakes but I often miss them. This makes the title of editor into an albatross hanging from my neck. I prefer the grammar geek lifestyle over perfectionism.

I've been asked if I'm ever tempted to edit posts on this blog once I've hit publish. The short answer is no. Most of the time I don't tweak a post once it's been up for a few minutes. There are some minor exceptions. If I notice a typo or a very awkward phrase, I'll edit those out.

I edit excessively before I post, though. Working on changing that. I need more spontaneity in my life.

My answer matters for this blog-thesis project. I have allegiance to the record I've created. It would be deceitful to take out a post or a line because I later determined it wasn't up to the quality I wanted. If you read it in September as one version, I want it to read the same in January or a year from now. It's too easy to strike text in an electronic medium.

Moreover, it's important to this project that people see more of the learning process, not just the end product. That's more true to the spirit of a blog as a record. If I had written, rewritten and polished a collection of essays for my MFA, you would only know that final point of my creative process. I want you to see the experiments along with the staid and true. I'm sharing all of the writing – funny-looking warts, cliches, random misspellings, and all.

4 responses to [7: The good, the bad and the ugly](#)

March 28, 2010 at 2:13 p.m.

Jules Shores Says:

More spontaneity in your life. If a person writes their, there or they're and the subject is personally relative I still get it. Good thing there's not a little bubble above everyone's head while they're talking. I try to never judge a person on their grammar. There is always a gist to what one wants to say.

March 28, 2010 at 7:27 p.m.

jenh Says:

Oh, absolutely. It's not about maligning a person's character for a grammar flub; it's more about raging against the decline of standards in Professional Contexts...but at the same time, I like the idea of flexibility in language. I appreciate its fluidity over time. Otherwise, English wouldn't have its wonderful mish-mash of rules.

March 28, 2010 at 2:41 p.m.

Joe Harrington says:

I try to never (sorry! – never to) judge a person on their grammar. Unfortunately, a lot of people do, including employers. So I feel compelled to show students what “proper” or “received” grammar and punctuation looks like (I'm talking upper-middle-class suburban kids, along with everyone else). This book is fun – and even comes with stick-on commas and apostrophes for unpunctuated signs:

<http://www.amazon.com/Eats-Shoots-Leaves-Tolerance-Punctuation/dp/1592400876>

We're in the post-orthographic age, too, which doesn't bother me, terrible speller that I am – and I'm a fan of reading pre-orthographic-era texts.

March 28, 2010 at 7:23 p.m.

jenh says:

We are in such an age, yes. I see lots of messages that look like they are written in another language. I am compelled to spell out everything in text messages – what's the point of a qwerty keyboard if you don't?

I've read Eat Shoots Leaves, but I didn't realize there was a version with stickers! How fun.

I find the more that I edit, the less I recognize errors. They become a part of you.

8: Countdowns

Posted by jenh under farm life

Tags: chickens, chicks, countdowns, time, Tractor Supply Co.

6 comments

Two days ago, I woke up at 5 a.m. and before I could reach for my glasses I sat up with this thought: I don't know how to catch a chicken. How do you pick them up? I have two weeks to learn.

Amid all this countdown to blog project completion, thesis defense and graduation are those of the farm. Dreaming of digging in dirt, I counted down the days left in winter (though winter had other plans). The gap in days between now and the first date of the farmers market is narrowing.

Somewhere in a hatchery in Iowa, there are 52 eggs incubating that will hatch on April 7. Almost immediately afterward they will be put into two boxes and shipped to me in Kansas. I'll stay home from work that day to take the box from the postman to the brooder, and then the new chapter begins.

Today we went to a Tractor Supply Co. in another city to buy chicken house supplies. (I've been searching online and ultimately decided to go to a brick-and-mortar store to save on shipping.) The high-pitched peeping of chicks lured me to the back of the store. Dozens of the little ones were housed in livestock tanks on the floor. They are mesmerizing! Nearby were the feeders, waterers, crushed oyster shells, pine shavings, heat bulbs and other materials we needed.

Excitement and panic are competing for the top emotion of the moment. With goats, we started by watching and participating in their care alongside my father-in-law. Our herd began with 10

goats. With chickens, I'm starting with five times that number because I want us to be able to sell organic eggs next spring. We're learning as we go, on our own.

I'm beginning to think that I must be crazy to plunge in like this. I have all kinds of unanswered questions. To answer them I am devouring information in books and in forums on feeding, care, fences, pasture raising.

I've learned that options for picking up chickens include fishing nets, chicken hooks, grain bribery and stealthy stalking.

Fourteen days to go.

6 responses to [8: Countdowns](#)

March 25, 2010 at 6:26 p.m.
Elaine Fellenstein says:

I get e-mails from Mother earth news and Grit.
they have this up and running now. Thought of you Mama Peep.
<http://www.communitychickens.com/>

March 25, 2010 at 6:32 p.m.
Elaine Fellenstein says:

<http://www.omlet.us/guide/guide.php?view=Chickens&cat=Chicken Care&sub=handling>

March 25, 2010 at 6:34 p.m.
Elaine Fellenstein says:

You will have to click on care and go to handling. sounds so simple, right?

March 25, 2010 at 7:25 p.m.
jenh says:

This is great! Thanks, Elaine. You always have so many helpful web site and blog suggestions.

March 28, 2010 at 2:40 p.m.

Jules Shores says:

Have you seen *The Natural History of Chickens*? It's a PBS documentary. My sister, Irene, always has a dozen or more chickens and call her crazy, but she goes out to the chicken coop/yard every day and behaves like a chicken. They seem to love it and come to her beckoning call. Of course I reap the wonderful pleasure of a dozen fresh brown, green, cream or white eggs every week or so. Did you know that the color of an egg is the same color as the chickens ear?

March 28, 2010 at 7:29 p.m.

jenh says:

I've heard of the documentary, but I haven't seen it. I'd love to see your sister doing that!

9: Thinking backwards

March 23, 2010 at 10:22 a.m.

Posted by jenh under blogging

Tags: blogging, chronology, thumb novels, time

Backwards (get to the end, now!): [The video](#). Simple and elegant. Imagine how it wouldn't work if you removed a line. How it plays with expectation.

The video was embedded in a post on [likefire](#), the successor to [backstory](#).

Sidetracked: [Salon explains](#) *keitai shosetsu*, the thumb novel. It's the story told via text on a phone. The new serial fiction! (Okay, new to me. Quality varies, of course.)

Backstory (thinking backwards, still!), a now dormant blog about writing, featured a [penultimate conversation](#) about how the Internet is killing storytelling. It was inspired by the [Times essay](#) of the same name. We read, think, create in snipits. Syllables.

And how I landed at Backstory? [A list](#) of 100 creative writing related blogs that I found in a Google search for “creative writing and blogs.”

I’m thinking in reverse chronology often right now. How did we get here? I click through link to link to link when researching online, and wonder, what led me to this page — where is the subject I started with? Door after door opens.

This blog will be reproduced as a document reading backwards – that’s how we read blogs, usually. You’re sent a link. It takes you to the most recent post. You skim backwards, through time. There can be an unsettling sense of constantly playing catch-up to the context of events or people previously mentioned in past posts.

10: Classify that writing

March 22, 2010 at 11:30 a.m.

Posted by jenh under blogging, farm life

Tags: Baumans, blogs, eggs

10 comments

Every week we buy eggs from a farm family who sells them to our local food co-op. Tucked into each box is a short jewel that sets the eggs apart from other products: a four or five-line update about their farm or its practices. The story is photocopied, cut into strips and put into the egg cartons.

Last week instead of a narrative about the arrival of new chicks or the antics of a turkey was a statement about the movement to pay a farmer the worth of what a farmer raises. “Thank you for no longer seeing food as a cost, but as the treasure it is,” the last line of the message read.

The weekly writing from the Bauman family is marvelous marketing. It's a blog as well, though one written without the Internet. The Baumans are Old German Baptist Brethren. They reject some forms of technology, including television and computers. They also raise their chickens the old fashioned way – on pasture instead of in a windowless chicken shed with giant fans.

Can a blog be a blog if it isn't on the Internet?

Responses to [10: Classify that writing](#)

March 24, 2010 at 1:31 p.m.

Becca says:

First of all, I, too am a fan of the Bauman's eggs and the little slip of paper in the carton. And second, I had never thought of it... but I would be willing to call their weekly message a blog. I don't have a concrete definition that I'm basing this on; the content and the length and the tone just feel blog-y. Maybe it's like porn — you know it when you see it?

March 25, 2010 at 10:04 a.m.

jenh says:

Becca, that's a funny way to look at it! Defining blog beyond web+log — as Stephen Johnson referred to — is something I've been interested in throughout this project. It's a fluid form bound, in theory, by where it appears (online) and the size of the box in which you write. But even that doesn't restrict what is called a blog, because people have started calling Twitter posts microblogging.

March 24, 2010 at 4:21 p.m.

stephenjjohnson says:

“Can a blog be a blog if it isn't on the Internet?”

Since “blog” is a contraction of “web log”, wouldn't it just be a “log”? Strictly, what you are describing is a circular letter, which of course has a much longer history.

I suppose a blog is a kind of circular letter but with a hugely expanded audience.

March 25, 2010 at 10:15 a.m.

jenh says:

I've never heard the term "circular letter," Stephen, but I looked it up. After I waded through examples in business, credit/banking, insurance and the Revolutionary War, I understood the reference. Perhaps the blog takes advantage of technology to make the circular letter more feasible.

March 24, 2010 at 8:23 p.m.

Janet says:

I once talked to Rosanna Bauman about publishing her "egg slips" in book form—and she was already thinking about doing so on her own. Last time I saw her she had moved ahead with it, but I don't know if she published it or not. She wanted to expand on the notes, to provide a little of the story behind the story. By the way, I don't believe they reject computers, but they may say no to the Internet.

March 25, 2010 at 10:19 a.m.

jenh says:

Thanks, Janet. I've thought before that those would make a good book, accompanied by photos from their farm. I hope she follows through. As for the computers reference, that was based on an old newspaper article, but I know that some use computers, especially for presentations at conferences. Jess and I attended a couple of Powerpoint presentations led by Rosanna, for example.

March 25, 2010 at 4:13 a.m.

Susan M. Schultz says:

I think that must be an egglog not a weblog!

March 25, 2010 at 10:19 a.m.

jenh says:

Thanks, Susan:)

March 25, 2010 at 7:38 p.m.

Susan M. Schultz says:

And actually, according to the "weblog" = "blog" rule, it should be a "glog." You can't believe how much time I've devoted to thinking about this, Jen!

March 28, 2010 at 2:43 p.m.

joe harrington says:

Is this an egglog or gorge-ic?

11: On the first day of spring

March 21, 2010 at 4:24 p.m.

Posted by jenh under farm life

Tags: first day of spring, snow, winter

3 comments



My imaginary headlines shout

These 8 inches of snow are the

Last blast

Final chapter

Ultimate gasp

The end

Surprise!

Of winter

Responses to 11: On the first day of spring

March 22, 2010 at 1:18 p.m.

Elaine Fellenstein says:

I so hope your imaginary headline is correct.

March 28, 2010 at 2:25 p.m.

Joe Harrington says:

. . . those are headlines about your *thesis*!

So . . . is that a *snow wave*?? . . .

March 28, 2010 at 7:35 p.m.
jenh says:

Hadn't thought of those as thesis headlines! But they work for that, yes:)

12: If this wasn't a blog-as-thesis

March 20, 2010 at 11:21 a.m.

Posted by jenh under blogging

Tags: blogging, creative writing workshop, MFA thesis

1 comment

It would be much more about the farm, and rarely about blogging.

You wouldn't find a defense or a discussion of blogs as art.

I doubt that I would have organically written any poetry. I never consciously wrote a poem until this project. I don't know why. Fear, I suppose. No occasion to write and share one.

What, me, worry?

Because there was a goal, I focused on the quality of the writing. A blog by me otherwise might have been just another personal blog like so much blogging drek out there. It has those moments, too.

I used only my own photography and never copied-with-attribution art from another article. (The database for theses requires the author to have copyright over all images.)

I would have tried harder to cultivate an audience. A two-subject focus – writing about blogging

and farming – is harder to pitch than a single subject.

I would not have sought out other well-written blogs nor blogs dedicated to good writing, and I'm still finding them. I wish I had been reading the [brevity blog](#) all along (tag line: write hard, write smart.)

And if this weren't a blog-as-thesis, I might have stopped writing. I've never had better motivation to sit in front of a blank screen on a regular basis and write. And learn! I've participated in my own education more in these past eight months than I did in eight years of creative writing workshops.

One response to [12: If this wasn't a blog-as-thesis](#)

March 28, 2010 at 2:24 p.m.
Joe Harrington says:

Brevity (the journal that keeps that blog) is pretty good, too. Check it out:
<http://www.creativenonfiction.org/brevity/>

[13: What I would do differently](#)

March 19, 2010 at 8:16 p.m.
Posted by jenh under blogging
Tags: blogging, photography
2 comments



Marta's face tilted up at anyone coming out of the hospital who had a visitor nametag. *Very beautiful. The highest quality.* She held up pieces of color: handwoven table runners, placemats, handbags and headscarves. *You only buy from me, promise?*

From a distance of 30 feet away, I snapped photo after photo of this woman, who had a daily ritual to follow me and most every volunteer from hotel to hospital in Antigua, Guatemala. Through the LCD screen I watched her target two dentistry students who emerged from their volunteer shift, an afternoon of pulling rotten teeth. The women sat down cross-legged against the heavy wooden doors of the hospital and gamely pawed through Marta's wares. The electronic shutter clicked: Marta cajoling the women to buy more. Her head back mid-belly laugh, white teeth exposed in a broad smile. Her children shyly leaning around the doorframe.

When I look at the series of images of Marta from four years ago – this one is on the wall above the stairs at home – I see the beginnings of my digital photography obsession.

It was the same year I bought my first digital camera. The images are among the thousands of photos I have accumulated since then of travels, farm life, downtown events, stormy weather, sunrises, family, friends and work.

When I started this blog, I thought that I would explore the interplay between image and text. It's one of the great advantages of this medium to effortlessly combine the two. I pictured photo carousels and photo essays, maybe even some that would interact with the essays I had written over the past several years.

Ultimately I didn't take this blog experiment in that direction, and it's one of several ways that the blog would be different if it were only a personal blog and not a blog-as-thesis. It's part of the contrivance of the project.

2 responses to [13: What I would do differently](#)

March 28, 2010 at 2:21 pm
Joe Harrington says:

when I look at that image of Marta, I wonder how much money she makes in a year

March 28, 2010 at 7:38 p.m.
jenh says:

Exactly. That's one of the many fascinations I have with the series of images. She's wearing traditional dress, but unlike some of the women trying to sell wares she is manicured and bejeweled. She also speaks English well enough to make a lot of sales from people who would otherwise be intimidated to make a purchase.

[14: Times Topics Gluttony](#)

March 18, 2010 at 8:23 p.m.

Posted by jenh under blogging

Tags: blogging, BlogHer, feministing, mommyblogging, New York Times

Blogging "research" galore*

A 2009 study by BlogHer, iVillage and Compass Partners [found that](#) 23 million women read, write or comment on blogs weekly. (I've been under a rock and didn't know [BlogHer](#) existed.)

Seriously?" "I wish we could go back to where blogging was five years ago, when it was just about the writing and the connecting and none of the free stuff and the vacations and the swag bags," said Ms. Smokler, of ScaryMommy.com." – [article on mommyblogging bootcamp](#).

In addition to mommyblogs as a phenomenon, there are [warblogs](#), [foodblogs](#), [econblogs](#), [student blogs](#) as recruitment tools, [recession blogs](#) and [real estate blogs](#). Blogs are reflections of our cultural obsessions with conflict, comfort, gossip, products and reality TV.

[Going down in flames.](#)

[Life after death of a blogger.](#)

[The “Tom Sawyer” approach](#) to blogging content (and blogs into books).

“ ‘I think talking is as casual as blogging, and sometimes writing can be as casual as talking. My informal writing style is a political choice, because I want feminism to be more accessible.’ ” – [interview](#) with blogger Jessica Valenti of [feministing](#).

And finally, an article on [blogs left to die](#): “According to a 2008 survey by Technorati, which runs a search engine for blogs, only 7.4 million out of the 133 million blogs the company tracks had been updated in the past 120 days. That translates to 95 percent of blogs being essentially abandoned, left to lie fallow on the Web, where they become public remnants of a dream — or at least an ambition — unfulfilled.”

*Disclaimer: When overwhelmed by google results, I like to get a quick pulse of ideas from the New York Times’ Times Topics. It’s a content aggregator from all of the paper’s bloggers, reporters, columnists and editors. Sadly, keywords blogging and farm came up with zilch. I’ll have to do my own research on that.

15: coming face to face with the food on your plate

March 17, 2010 at 4:03 p.m.

Posted by jenh under farm life, food

Tags: farming, food, goats, slaughter

When I put a styrofoam and cellophane package of meat into my cart at the grocery store, I am purchasing an illusion. I'm still in transition from mirage to reality — I do still pick up factory meat at the store sometimes. Change isn't always immediate.

We took a step closer to change, though, when Jess took two of our wethers to a processor northwest of the farm to be butchered today. We've always known that this was the plan for these two goats, which we purchased last April. They will be food for the summer and winter. Another member of the group died in November, and the fourth of the group, a runt, will be given to another farmer for weed control.

We fed those goats by bottle when they arrived at the farm. We watched them run in the pasture and we saw them escape. And escape again, and again. They were a wiley duo. When you raise animals this intimately, you get to know their quirks.

It's not easy to take animals to slaughter. It shouldn't be. As a human, you are making the decision to consume an animal that you raised, and you understand that you have the power to make that decision.

16: Truth; names have been changed to protect your identity

March 16, 2010 at 1:28 p.m.

Posted by jenh under blogging

Tags: blogging, memoir, truth

Pick up a memoir and look in the introduction. There — see it? It's the disclaimer. *Characters have been combined and events have been condensed. These are my memories; I am the teller of my own story. Certain episodes are imaginative recreation. To protect the privacy of others, names have been changed and characters conflated. Etc.*

When I read a memoir, I know that even without a disclaimer not everything I read will be capital T-Truth. No one can remember with photographic detail a conversation with his brother about divorce when the two boys were under the age of 8. I'd rather read a good story than sign on for something that is only the verifiable truth. True stories — life — is messy in its non-linear, hyper depths of development.

We look at memoir differently than the novel. The novel is supposed to be fiction. (Never mind that it may be based on or spring from real events in the author's life). Memoir is put on a pedestal closer to sunny truth.

Where, then, on this truth o meter, do we put blogs? Blogs usually don't have disclaimers, except perhaps a casual reference in the About. If the names have been changed, you may not know it. In fact, all identities, including the author's, maybe hidden or falsified. I'm referring of course to the anonymous blog. There's the workplace blogger who disses coworkers or bosses or the mother corporation. You can easily find the unknown member of a residential complex, trailer court, neighborhood or sorority who catalogues the personalities of her neighbors. There are political bloggers and entertainment bloggers who do not want their identity known in order to keep their

story tips coming. In short, I think it is generally accepted as a tenant of the form that blogs may or may not be close to true, and it's up to the reader to decide whether that matters. Instead of buyer beware, it's reader beware.

I chose to write this blog under my own name, and after more careful consideration, use the names of a few people around me as part of the narratives of farm life. I think I thought that this gave the blog authenticity over an anonymous blog. That doesn't mean, however, that every story I tell is exactly the way it happened. How boring that would be!

17: We're in!

March 15, 2010 at 6:27 pm

Posted by jenh under the business of farming

Tags: chicken feed, Downtown Lawrence Farmers Market, tomatoes

4 comments



We learned tonight that we have been admitted as members of the [Lawrence Farmers Market](#) and I am soooo excited. And nervous.

We've registered the business name — Red Tractor Farm, LLC.

I've talked chicken feed with Lee at [Soaring Eagle](#), and we'll pick up organic grain for the birds

on Saturday. They arrive two and a half weeks later.

Jess has started the tomato seeds. I'm shooting for 400 plants this year.

Things are happening fast now!

4 responses to [17: We're in!](#)

March 16, 2010 at 3:51 p.m.

Elaine Fellenstein says:

Way to go! Will look forward to seeing you there. Are you going to have eggs for sale? Mom and I love buying farm fresh.

March 16, 2010 at 4:44 p.m.

jenh says:

Thanks, Elaine! We won't have eggs until mid to late fall, depending on how our little chicks age. But yes, goat meat and eggs should be available eventually.

March 17, 2010 at 5:33 p.m.

Kim Anspach says:

Brad thinks I am more excited about this than you. This news has pretty much made my week. I am having visions of myself selling and schmoozing with patrons. I am very good at counting back change, no calculator required.

March 17, 2010 at 6:38 p.m.

jenh says:

There will be times when one of us has a conflict, or we need to go out of town. Ample opportunities to help, I'm sure. Be excited all you want to!

[18: Goat hugs \(oof\)](#)

March 14, 2010 at 5:42 p.m.

Posted by jenh under farm life

Tags: hoof trimming, kids, nannies

It's Sunday, the day we seem to dedicate to chores we've put off for too long. The January day

when we [traded football maneuvers](#) with the goats to get them to move to new quarters was a Sunday, for example. Today's goal: trim goat hooves.

Unlike cattle, goats need to have their hooves trimmed every few months — at least every six — or their hooves go elvish. They get pointy and can curl at the front like elf shoes. I have seen goats that walk on their front knees because their hooves have grown too long to walk comfortably on them.

We spent about five hours ushering one nanny at a time through a squeeze chute onto a platform, weighing her, then working on her feet. Jess did all the trimming, which is the hard part. I performed all the hugging. Yes, hugging: even though a nanny's head is caught between bars (where she can munch on grain treats supplied steadily by a friend) she still might thrash around or kick. It helps to wrap my arms around her and lean into her broadside.

Now all the nannies have had their pedicures, the kids and their mothers have all been weighed and everyone has been moved out of the barn to the largest paddock. No tackles were required.

19: Harmonize this post

March 13, 2010 at 9:13 pm

Posted by jenh under blogging

Tags: blogging, Han Han, legitimizing blogging

When Chinese censors block content, they call it harmonizing content. Doesn't that sound friendly?

That's the extra tidbit I found in [this](#) New York Times article. The point of mentioning it in this

blog is that the article's subject, writer and race car driver (what a combo) Han Han, is one popular writer:

“Since he began blogging in 2006, Mr. Han has been delivering increasingly caustic attacks on China's leadership and the policies he contends are creating misery for those unlucky enough to lack a powerful government post. With more than 300 million hits to his blog, he may be the most popular living writer in the world.”

A new standard – not how many books you have in print (by the way, he's got 14 titles to his name) – but the number of visitors to your blog.

I wish I could find his site translated into English.

20: Searching for a double-crosser in the T-post syndicate

March 12, 2010 at 2:50 p.m.

Posted by jenh under random observations

Tags: conspiracy, fencing, t-posts

I am convinced there is a T-Post Syndicate.

Somewhere there's an enormous warehouse stacked floor to rafters with pallets of 6-foot metal “T-posts,” the standard fence post used by farmers and gardeners nationwide. There's a cliché, poorly lit, smoky room in the back of the warehouse, its only furniture a table and mismatched chairs. Eight men and one woman (there's always one in these scenes, isn't there? And she'll double-cross them later) sit around the table. But they're not playing cards. They have laptops and they're manipulating markets. They're conspiring. They set the prices on web sites like [Costco](#) and [Orscheln's](#). *Never let the price go down*, they snicker.

Okay, so maybe it's not exactly like that. It feels like it, though. We need to purchase about 100 posts, minimum, to fix our fence line and for our tomato cages. They cost \$4.50 each. If you can buy in bulk, you can find them for \$4 each. I have looked everywhere, from farm supply to fencing companies. Everyone has them about the same price.

Always on the lookout for used things, I regularly look for T-posts on auction sites. Rarely do they appear. Craigslist only carries pleas from those looking for them: Looking to buy used T-posts for less than than \$4 each, a Craigslister said last night. And it wasn't me!

Augering holes for hedge posts doesn't sound like something I'd like to do for the 75 yards of fence line we need to fix, and it's not practical for tomatoes (unless I'd like my tomatoes to look like they grow on trees). So I'm searching, still. Do let me know if you see any.

Oh, and if you know that woman in the back room of the warehouse, ask her to steal a pallet of posts for me. Thanks.

21: Responsibility; an interruptive thought process

March 11, 2010 at 4:36 p.m.

Posted by jenh under work

Tags: bronchitis, Millie, work ethic

When the alarm goes off in the morning, I know that the goats and the calf don't care what my state of mind is or how I'm feeling. They want fresh hay and new water. Millie the housedog won't wait for me if I linger half in, half out of sleep. She'll just pee on the floor, a consequence of old age.

I'm held accountable by the agreement I made with these animals. They provide for us and we for them.

On this, the third day of a severe cold which had morphed into Officially Diagnosed Big-Bronchitis, I did not want to get up. Whenever I moved, my lungs lurched for air, resulting in a wracking cough that felt like it originated somewhere near my right big toe. [Said illness also made me stop my daily posting ritual, and instead write them all in one day over about 12 hours. I could think, but I couldn't write.]

Responsibility tugged harder and won. I pulled on my trusty muck boots, and mashed the hood of my heavy coat over my head. Millie and I stepped into a morning of steady cold rain.

—Ah, but that's not it, is it? Who cares about all that. I think I started writing this out of wonderment. Why work so hard? What is the value of it? I've worked so hard this week that my body has given out and said, Stop.

I ask myself this a lot. I don't have to work this hard. I could still live in town in a ranch house within walking distance of stores and downtown life. I could have stayed at a job that was easy, predictable, and would have gone on into the future as it had for the previous 8 years. I could have left myself with much more free time and better finances if I hadn't returned to school in 2000. And for that matter, I could have turned in a collection of essays for my master's degree instead of embarking on learning an entirely different form in my final year of education.

Simply, I think, I get off on pushing myself. It's so intimidating to reach beyond what I think I am capable of, but I do it all the time. I don't want to be bored.

22: Ease of use

March 10, 2010 at 5:18 a.m.

Posted by jenh under blogging, writing

Tags: blogging, creativity, Earthway, Jack White, Stan Herd

1 Comment

Does technology that helps people in their creative pursuits make the creative process too easy?

I recently watched the film, "It Might Get Loud," which is a homage to electric guitar, told through interviews with three talented artists: The Edge, Jimmy Page and Jack White. At the beginning of the film, White talks about the music of the 80s. Musicians at the time were obsessed with technology, trying for days on end to perfect an electronic snare drum sound, he said. In short, the technology distracted. "Technology is a big destroyer of emotion and truth. Sure, it'll get you there faster...But that's the disease we need to fight in any creative field — ease of use."

Ease of use. I'd argue differently. How many people say, "Someday I'd like to write a novel." Or what about those who have thought about writing, but were intimidated by getting started in the publishing world. How to find an agent. Or feared rejection of their ideas so they never started? Tools such as Blogger, LiveJournal and WordPress have upended those roadblocks by giving people a fast and simple way to get their writing in front of an audience (if they can find one). Plus there are [self publishing web sites](#) to help writers control their content, publish, get an ISBN and sell direct to the consumer. One can be creative with video content. Start a myspace page with

music. Etc.

Look at farming, too: setting aside the technology that makes farming faster, consider what allows us to be more creative. There are simple, refined tools such as [Earthways](#) and small tillers that allow me grow a greater variety of vegetables, including heirlooms and harder to find cultivars, in small spaces (and yes, in shorter amounts of time). What about a crop artist, such as [Stan Herd](#)? Technology that helps him envision a project and tractors to disk, plow and plant the earth certainly help him achieve his vision.

Maybe I'm grasping a little here, but technology can enable creativity by making it easier to achieve. Ease of use — at least in my blogging world — helps welcome all comers.

1 response to [22: Ease of use](#)

March 18, 2010 at 5:11 p.m.
joe harrington says:

Well, the acoustic guitar is technology. So is the cello, the viola, the cittern, the bouzouki, the sitar, the samasen – and all the other endless stringed instruments that people insist on continuing to invent. And yeah, they do make different sounds. Which makes for different kinds of music.

Too easy to create? I've dashed off a lot of lousy writing before I had a PC. Maybe too easy to *publish* . . .

[23: Digging the harvest](#)

March 9, 2010 at 4:57 p.m.
Posted by jenh under blogging, food
Tags: blogging, corn, harvest
4 comments



The life of this blog was in theory a year. The reality is 10 months, from Memorial Day to the last day of March, and even that isn't accurate. I didn't secure support for the project until I met with [Joe Harrington](#) in late July, which is about the time that regular posts began to occur. Thus the blog missed some of the best times of the year – harvesting food. Because the format of this blog is a time-specific contrivance, harvesting food is something to visit before it ends.

I'm a foodie at heart. It doesn't have to be fancy foodie-food to tempt me, either. I drool over chicken [roasted on a beer can](#) on the grill as much as I will over tapanade on [Wheatfields'](#) bread or the scent of [mirepoix](#) steaming up the kitchen. I am blessed to have a partner in this life who loves to cook.

I learned last summer, though, that eating food, while it has its pleasures, is preceded by the main event: proudly picking the food that we grew. It's from farm to fork, a popular phrase tossed around by the chef-foodie crowds. I can say to that pepper or that tomato, I knew you when you were merely a sprout.

It was sheer wonderment to pick corn last July. I had never grown a plant that would go from seed to 8 feet tall in 77 days. There was so much anticipation in picking it at the exact right moment. I

knew it was close when the deer and the raccoons began to rob me of the crop. Each ear pulled from the plant gave a satisfying squeaky crack as it separated from its parent. I said to myself as I harvested each ear, *There's another one!* Like it was a surprise to be given so much. They were so many treasures.

Off and on for two weeks, I would spend a couple of hours just past dawn in the corn rows, lost to anyone outside that area of the garden. I emerged covered in dew, corn silks, spider webs and mud. Grinning like I'd won the lottery, I'd haul my catch in tubs to the truck for transport. Then I'd clean up quickly at a friend's house, dress for work and begin the other part of my day, going from Garden Jen to Office Jen a la Superman to Clark Kent.

I was so surprised at the possibilities at harvest. Digging potatoes felt like discovering nuggets of gold in the ground. The beets smelled as tangy-sweet as the damp earth from which they came. Just-picked sugary peas exploded in flavor and memory, calling to mind picking sugar snap peas in Chicago as a child. We celebrated the first ripened tomatoes with a special dinner, even if they were just two little cherry tomatoes.

What do you look forward to the most, of food? Preparing it? Growing it? Eating it? They all satisfy such deep cravings.

4 responses to [23: Digging the harvest](#)

March 13, 2010 at 7:33 p.m.

Elaine Fellenstein says:

I'm growing some new, for me, things this year. Got some seed potatoes and thinking of trying the three sisters approach of corn, beans and squash. Now that the pine tree is gone

there is sunlight for tomatoes in the ground. Johnny's lured me with some different oriental greens seeds. I'm looking forward to standing out in the garden and stuffing things straight into my mouth.

March 13, 2010 at 8:15 p.m.
jenh says:

I love that – standing in the garden and eating. What's the three sisters' approach?

March 13, 2010 at 9:43 p.m.
Elaine Fellenstein says:

<http://www.reneesgarden.com/articles/3sisters.htm>

March 13, 2010 at 9:49 p.m.
Elaine Fellenstein says:

OOps that website didn't work. Just do a search for three sisters and you will find many articles about it. It is a native American system of corn planted in a small circle with beans planted around the corn to climb it and squash around both grow in ground.

<http://www.nativetech.org/cornhusk/threesisters.html>

24: print is dying

March 8, 2010 at 11:28 a.m.

Posted by jenh under blogging, writing

Tags: blogging, Craig Mod, printing industry

1 comment

Print is dying. Digital is surging. Everyone is confused. Good riddance.

These words from [Craig Mod](#) remind me of the simplicity of Michael Pollan's [directive](#): *Eat*

Food. Mostly Plants. Not too Much.

Mod, a book designer, describes the situation as one where for too long, the act of printing has been placed on a pedestal. Yet content is what is most important; the medium of publishing is not the issue. Content will always be king.

Going digital makes you rethink content's arrangement, however. For a device like the iPad, there are new ways of thinking about content. What if content wasn't limited to the standard two-page spread that we are accustomed to, and have been, for hundreds of years?

“In printed books, the two-page spread was our canvas. It's easy to think similarly about the iPad. Let's not. The canvas of the iPad must be considered in a way that acknowledges the physical boundaries of the device, while also embracing the effective limitlessness of space just beyond those edges. We're going to see new forms of storytelling emerge from this canvas. This is an opportunity to redefine modes of conversation between reader and content. And that's one hell of an opportunity if making content is your thing.”

I am in love. I am swooning at his words. He could make me want an iPad, if content were reinvented for that form.

Jump from the iPad to the blog. This idea of the fluidity of content is what attracts me to the blog form. Blogs do not rely on space or time. You can start anywhere. You can jump around. Through links, the blog encourages movement across the content and across the internet. Text goes from linear to hyper — all directions are possible, as is any amount of depth.

It's unsettling and wonderful to think about writing in this atmosphere. Will we someday look back at the two page spread as archaic?

1 response to [24: print is dying](#)

March 18, 2010 at 5:03 p.m.
joe harrington says:

“Blogs do not rely on space or time.” Well, they rely on them in different ways. They're all about time – as in, how many times a day do you post? can you think backwards in

time? will she keep blogging beyond April? guess what happened to me today?

And space, too – though obviously in a different way than the paper book. We talk about “scrolling” up or down the page for a reason: the computer screen works like a scroll – continuous (as opposed to the modular book page), but (like the book) with only one part visible at any given time. The same would go for scrolling horizontally on an iPad (moreso, in fact). The computer screen is a space. With a frame.

But you’re right on when you talk about the way the form shapes the content. “Content is king” (and different than and independent of form) is a very naive way of reading anything.

25: Chickenhouse Countdown

Posted by jenh under farm life, the business of farming

Tags: Americanas, Barred Rock, black sex link, buff orphingtons, chickenhouse, chickens, Wyandottes

1 comment

Last week I ordered the birds: 52 chicks will be delivered by US Postal Service mail the first week of April. Somewhere in an Iowa hatchery* are the eggs that will become 20 red sex link and 20 black sex link, so named because male and female can be identified by sex from the moment they hatch. Added to those brown egg layers are 4 barred rocks, 4 Americanas — they lay the blue and green eggs — 2 Buff Orphingtons and 2 silver lacewing Wyandottes.

It’s a chicken assortment. A few of the birds were ordered for friends, but I also want to experiment with how each breed tolerates the chickenhouse, the garden, predators and us.

I would still be merely dreaming of chickens if not for the help of a friend. He has the skills and the tools; I have an abundance of enthusiasm.

This week he brought home half of the brooder box that will serve as home for the little peeps for their first few days and weeks. It should have been someone’s kitchen cabinet – those birds will

be raised in luxury. I hope they'll appreciate that by producing amazing eggs about 9 months later.

*You simply must peruse the [hatchery web site](#). It makes my eyes bleed with all the web design no-nos:) But the staff members are friendly and the hatchery came recommended to me, so I'm trying them.

Response to [25: Chickenhouse Countdown](#)

March 9, 2010 at 10:17 p.m.
joe harrington says:

I still think someone should name a rock band "Buff Orphington and the Transylvania Naked-Necks."

So what about the goats?

[26: serial life](#)

March 6, 2010 at 2:02 a.m.
Posted by jenh under blogging, writing
Tags: blogs, Dickens, serials

Something else about blogging over essays: the serial life.

Serialized fiction helped bring the novel to the masses by making it affordable in chapters. You didn't have to buy the entire Dickens novel; you could buy it in pieces. Each section might begin with a little context and end with a cliffhanger.

Blogs perform this function, too. I have eagerly looked to the next post and the one after when a

blogger posts about an ongoing situation – losing a home, gearing up for a major challenge, learning and making mistakes, etc. I had this in mind when I wrote in January and February about the pending birth of the goats.

Blogs are the ultimate serial because they are so open-ended, and they can be read in most any order.

[27: Pondering the fate of old friends](#)

March 5, 2010 at 12:41 p.m.

Posted by jenh under blogging, writing

Tags: blogging, essays, writing

3 comments

I have a heap of old friends that I spent years developing. I haven't interacted with them in a few months or even years, though we spent intense periods of time together hashing out the details of life. Now I don't know what to do with them.

These are my paper friends – essays. You'll find a handful of them on this blog on the [home page](#), under “pages.” In them, I've written about the numbing sterility of working in an office building, the nature of being good, my mother's death, bees, marriage, dinner parties and dumpster diving, to name a few. When I download these pdfs and skim through them, I remember where I was when I wrote them. I discover patterns in my writing that should be obvious to me but get overlooked most of the time.

I also cringe. There's much more I would revise or edit out, given the time and a deadline.

When I started this blog-thesis project, one of my earlier ideas had been to riff on the essays for blog posts, and cross connect to them. I abandoned that, though, because my real writing interest was the farm.

This of course brings up the question, why a blog instead of essays?

Why? I like the instant publish-now-ness of blogging. There's infinite opportunities to revisit a subject. Blog posts can be as short or long as I like. A blog can have the same breadth or length or depth as an essay, but you get it over time, in little spoonfuls. Blogging allows me to mix media – photos and video — with the words easily. It cultivates an audience instantly (read! this! post!) and over time. The writer gets instant feedback. It's a real-time record that messes with the (expected?) chronology of narrative.

Sometimes it just stops.

2 responses to [27: Pondering the fate of old friends](#)

March 9, 2010 at 10:15 p.m.
joe harrington says:

Do you ever revise your old posts in new posts? Or change your mind about what you wrote before?

March 13, 2010 at 6:27 p.m.
jenh says:

Yes, I revise if I catch an error later. I'm sometimes in too much of a hurry and miss a typo. Generally speaking, I leave the writing alone, though. I've been to sites that have changed a post, and it makes me uneasy. Which version am I reading, I wonder. It's a holdover from an addiction to capital T truth print ideas, I suppose.

March 29, 2010 at 1:33 p.m.

jenh says:

As far as changing my mind about a post – I do that all the time. Sometimes I re-read something I wrote a few weeks or years ago and think, ugh, that is garbage. Reading my own writing is like listening to my voice in a phone’s voicemail system. *I really sound like that?*

28: Drinking in longer days

March 4, 2010 at 7:38 pm

Posted by jenh under random observations

Tags: daylight savings, goats, sunlight

4 comments

Gorgeous morning with clear, bright, you-can-feel-spring-coming sunlight. On my way into work I walked past several facilities employees power washing graffiti off a nearby building. The spray-painted message of “THEY DON’T GIVE A FUCK ABOUT YOU” was fading under intense pressure from the water. I know this sounds odd, but the whole scene – the sun, the freshly scrubbed bricks, the evidence of anger drizzling down a storm drain — let me know it would be a good day.

The presence of that yellow orb in the sky, combined with the earlier and earlier sunrises, makes me nearly bounce out of bed. Like someone flipped a switch on the way from February 28 to March 1. All clouds, all cold, all the time, and then SUN. I [learned yesterday](#) that for the past 14 years, this part of Kansas averages 28 days in December, January and February when the temperature reaches at least 50. This winter season, we have had that fortune a total of three times.

There’s a line of purple-pink hugging the valley’s horizon at 5:45. No flashlight needed. I distribute hay into two bins while humming some nonsensical rhyme picked up from the oldies

country station. I don't curse when the goats have fouled their water, though it's still too cold to run the hose. Instead, I ferry 16 gallons of water from the spigot in the yard to the barn. I like to watch the goats dart forward to take furtive sips of the icy liquid. Just as quickly they retreat into the gray light of the barnyard.

Instead of highs in the twenties and thirties, by the weekend the low temps are supposed to be in the forties. I think this calls for shorts and sandals.



Responses to [28: Drinking in longer days](#)

March 5, 2010 at 3:33 a.m.

Noel Rasor says:

This picture is stunning! I haven't been up early enough yet to catch the colors, but you make a good case for it being worthwhile.

I utterly love the phrase "the evidence of anger drizzling down a storm drain."

Reply

March 5, 2010 at 2:56 p.m.

jenh says:

Thanks, Noel. In truth, it's a photo from last year's winter/spring changeover, but gorgeous sunrises are plentiful at this time of year, once the clouds finally disappear more often. As for the graffiti, I kept thinking about how the rage the individual channeled into a spray can was meant to leave a mark, but it was so temporary. It was gone a few hours later, like the Shout Peace on the face of the

Oread. Hope your semester is going well. -jen

March 9, 2010 at 10:13 p.m.
joe harrington says:

Yes, a beautiful photo – and a beautiful pastoral sketch. But they still don't give a shit about you.

March 29, 2010 at 1:17 p.m.
jenh says:

Ha, ha. Or the Institution. Always watch out for They and Them.

29: Could you eat rabbit?

March 3, 2010 at 7:48 a.m.

Posted by jenh under food, the business of farming

Tags: food, New York Times, rabbit meat, urban farming

2 comments

The New York Times has an [article](#) today about the cuisine du jour, rabbit. They ran a similar article about a year ago on goat meat.

The article begins with a description of ways of dispatching with the mammal. Slit the throat, stun the head, break the neck. Not for the faint of heart. But for those who want to do small-scale or even urban farming, it's possible to raise rabbits for food. Or, as the article points out, eat rabbit dishes at fine New York restaurants.

Could you eat rabbit? The animal we associate with Disney?

My father hunts. He took great pleasure in teasing me as a child that we were having Thumper tonight. Or Bambi burgers if venison was on the menu. Cruel, perhaps, but he wanted me to understand what meat actually is – an animal. I could eat a hamburger that night if I preferred.

Looking back, it would have been more ethical to go with movie character food than feedlot food.

I haven't considered rabbit for Red Tractor Farm. I'm still thinking about how I will raise, and eventually kill, chickens, if I can be so brave to do so.

2 responses to [29: Could you eat rabbit?](#)

March 4, 2010 at 3:13 p.m.
Elaine Fellenstein says:

I was just reading about this subject last week on Dolly Freed's [Possum living](#) blog. She had some thought full things to say about it. I personally believe we need some meat in our diet. Humanely raised and killed has to be the way to go, whatever the meat.

March 5, 2010 at 3:00 p.m.
jenh Says:

Thanks for the possum living blog reference. I hadn't heard of that one – she writes well of the subject of the choices we make. I know people who can't bear to cut up a whole chicken, and would rather see it all packaged up. There's this complete disassociation with meat as an animal.

[30: The more I don't know](#)

March 2, 2010 at 3:29 pm
Posted by jenh under blogging, farm life
Tags: blogging, blogs into books, writing

At the beginning of this project, I could find few examples of blogs turned into books. Now I'm finding several books that began as blogs, a [blog turned into a book turned into a movie](#), and I've discovered that there's a how-to book about [turning blogging into a book](#). I'm finding new writers and thinking of ways I haven't experimented with this form yet. The more I read about blogging, the more I learn what I don't know about blogging.

The same is true of farming. It's an ever-widening universe.

The two subjects are on a collision course this month. We'll have our first plants in the ground by the end of the month, our first chickens shortly after that, and I'm still learning about crop rotation planning and what to feed the little peepers. A draft of my thesis, too, with all the writing and learning thus far, is also on the schedule for the end of the month. It feels like one of those word problems that confound you as a brain-twisting puzzle. You know, "two trains are departing at the same time, and one is traveling at 75 mph and the other at 63 kph..." Exhilarating and exasperating at the same time.

31 days of blogtastic fun

March 1, 2010 at 6:36 pm

Posted by jenh under blogging

Tags: blogging, narcissism, personal

Today begins 31 days of blogtastic fun – daily posts in the run-up to the wrap-up of this project (though the blog itself will live on). It's a blog about blogging about the farm, right? Or that's where I meant to end up. There's so much to explore in these final weeks.

Here's one: Is blogging an exercise in narcissism?

"What do you think a blog is?" wails the character Julie Powell in the film *Julie and Julia*. "It's a blog. It's me, me, me day after day."

It's the personal, though, that keeps people reading. We want to see the personality applied to the day to day. The singular perspective on politics, survival, raising four children, cake disasters, tulips, cancer or cooking. I think that's one reason traditional journalism suffers from lack of readership. Readers look for a connection to the person writing.

The journalism — the writing in general, actually, that I am most attracted to reading has the author in the story: *After we concluded the interview, I asked her why she focused on roses. She looked wryly at me and patted my hand.* See? The writer is there, in the story. And in the blog.

February 2010

[This is your brain, this is your brain on 4 a.m.](#)

February 24, 2010 at 11:45 a.m.

Posted by jenh under blogging

Tags: blogging, Boing Boing, civil eats, permalinks, Scott Rosenbloom

Remember those scare ads of the 80s and 90s that simplified drugs to frying eggs? Well, this isn't my brain on drugs, but this is my brain a bit fried. Or random, at least. And isn't that what blogging was, in the beginning?

As I try to keep this many balls in the air – web sites in development at work, this blog, pending travel, health, volunteering for the farmers' market, socialability, ordering chickens, finishing taxes, keeping the checkbook in the black – I am, as one might expect, fractured. It's not horrible, and I've done this kind of juggle before. It results in the occasional 4 a.m. thought process.

Today's is a mishmash of [Say Everything](#). Reading this history of blogging (which I've returned to periodically since [starting it](#) in August) is traipsing through my own awareness of the changes in media. It draws my attention to all kinds of things that I've forgotten or didn't realize the importance of at the time that I discovered them. Boing Boing, for one. The rise of political blogs (or, the politicization of blogging). The idea of the professional blogger, which Scott Rosenbloom

notes was, in the early days of blog experiments, “something like an insomniac narcoleptic or a pacifist murderer; the term nonsensically contradicted itself.”

And here’s one: imagine that the technology to point to a single page, a single blog post — permalinks — didn’t exist. Difficult, isn’t it? Early bloggers who linked to a post they wanted to draw attention to could only put the URL of the entire blog, and immediately or eventually the link became meaningless because the actual content was a page or two or ten below. If I want to point out (and I do) a children’s program whose motto is “broccoli is not boring!” happening in New York, I can give you the [exact post](#) on [civil eats](#), instead of directing you to the entire site to find it yourself (though the entire site does merit browsing!). So simple and yet there was a time when it wasn’t possible.

Internet detox

February 22, 2010 at 7:46 a.m.

Posted by jenh under blogging, communication, writing

Tags: February, ice, Internet, snow

2 comments

I planned to catch up on blogging and reading today, but an ice and snowstorm has intervened and cut off our internet access. I don’t realize how much I hop online until the connection disappears, taking with it newspapers, blogs, research, Craigslist, the weather radar and the vitriol and character of comment sections. It’s isolating. I suppose for a farmer of the past, it’s the way it’s always been.

It’s internet detox for the online dependent.

I call our internet access “country broadband.” It’s much faster than a dial-up connection, but slower than full cable internet connections available in town. Unfortunately, the connection periodically is susceptible to the vagaries of Kansas weather. The receiver on the north side of the house has a quarter of an inch of ice covering its face. I imagine the tower to the east, the one with the slow blinking red light, poking through the low gray clouds and covered in the same ice and sleet.

—A large branch from one of the trees in the yard just crashed to the ground. The ice is taking a toll on the natural world as well.

Gentle but insistent, the falling sleet clicks against the windows like birds pecking at seed. Inside the house, a different pecking: the tap-tap of computer keys.

[posted on 2-22, with the help of a functional Internet connection.]

Responses to [Internet detox](#)

February 25, 2010 at 12:42 a.m.
Joe Harrington says:

Uh, Jen, I hate to be a pedant, but ice is *part of* the natural world. But then so are we.

March 1, 2010 at 3:08 p.m.
jenh says:

That’s the trouble with blogs, isn’t it? You hit “post” and whatever silliness or drama or typo is splashed on the screen is there for the world to see. At least it’s not in permanent print:)

[Soil season](#)

February 19, 2010 at 10:42 am
Posted by jenh under farm life
Tags: dirt, February, light, plants
1 comment

I have a friend who started a tradition last year of a party to mark the end of what we think is the longest month of the year. We call it the Fuck February party. It's next week.

February has seemed even longer this year because of the dearth of sunlight. We've had an unusually wet winter courtesy of an El Nino pattern. It has helped push the jet stream into contorted positions that bring more moisture up from the south. There have been entire weeks of fog. This weekend it will bring us a winter storm with ice, sleet and up to five inches of snow expected.

The gray days are taking a toll on many people I know. They are afflicted by a surly streak. It's harder to get out of bed. Normal daily routines or tasks overwhelm. We take refuge in the fantasy worlds of television and reading.

Some people use light boxes to cheer them out of this seasonal depression. In our house, we use plain fluorescent bulbs suspended over sprouting trays of broccoli, cauliflower and cabbage. I go in that room and breathe in the earthy scent of damp soil.

Response to [Soil Season](#)

February 25, 2010 at 3:53 a.m.

Kim Anspach says:

We shall be celebrating February's demise this Saturday. This year we will hopefully have a 3 dimensional Teri and an interloper from Austin joining us. Until then I am dreaming of daffodils and hoping the hyacinth peaking up early is not too discouraged by the sub zero

wind chill.

Looks like a good start, Jess said

February 19, 2010 at 10:42 a.m.

Posted by jenh under food, the business of farming

Tags: growing, plants, Spring

2 comments

One heating mat

Six shelves

Eight sets of workbench lights

Twenty trays of soil packed into individual cells

Seventy-two cells of zefafino fennel

Ninety-six broccoli (Diplomat and Arcadia)

Ninety-six cauliflower (white, cheddar and violet)

One hundred sixty-eight cabbage (Gonzalez, Red, Caraflex and Green)

Two hundred sixteen cells of celeriac, the flavor cousin to celery

Responses to Looks like a good start

February 23, 2010 at 2:35 p.m.

Elaine Fellenstein says:

A good start indeed. I don't do indoors, have to wait till it warms enough outside for the cool season crops. I have my seed packets all lined up, ready to troop out into the garden.

February 24, 2010 at 11:08 a.m.

jenh says:

Thanks, Elaine. It's funny, you know— it doesn't matter which season it is, but at some point I am anxiously looking ahead the next one. In summer I'm looking forward to fall temperatures, leaves and holidays. There's always that anticipation of change and looking forward to it.

[respect fear awe thrill](#)

February 17, 2010 at 8:38 pm

Posted by jenh under farm life

Tags: coyotes, goats, nature

Here is something I've always meant to write about in an essay, but never felt like I had enough to say on the subject: the coyote. And yet a blog post is such short shrift for an animal that I have a complex relationship with.

The sound: yips and yowls descend from the surrounding ridges and trees, gallop in an invisible cloud across the pasture and bound past the road. It begins a farm or two away, with a watchful dog's bark and a coyote's report, then amplifies and gets louder, more animals chiming in.

Sometimes when I am walking Millie, the yips sound like they are so close that we might cross paths in the dark. I forget to breathe. It is not fear; it is awe. Awe at living in a warm house along a busy road yet so near to what is wild and uncontrolled.

Farm animals complicate my relationship with the coyote. The sound of the animal, once a comfortable reminder of the natural world, calls to mind the terrible spring when there wasn't yet a guard dog. We found young goats with mortal wounds in the pasture. Worse, sometimes we discovered only whatever the coyote left behind, masses of bones and fur. Jess' father, John, lost so many goats that year that we didn't count them.

Scoop helps even the odds. After dusk I hear the first howl begin, and I listen for his answer. If he sees their telling low tails swooping behind them in the grass, he bolts for the field to run them off. I am amazed at his speed.

We are seeing them during the daytime. Twice in two weeks. Why? Not enough food?

The young goats and their mothers are sheltered from the pasture in the barn and behind a battery of fences. They will remain there for another month or so, until the pasture begins to green. Then we will have to hope that Scoop and electric fences will be enough to keep coyotes looking for wild rabbits, mice and voles.

[Diaries:journals:memoirs:blogs](#)

February 11, 2010 at 12:00 p.m.

Posted by jenh under blogging, writing

Tags: blogs, diaries, history, journals, writing

A diary is to a blog as a ___ is to a ___.

This comparison, not yet completed, has been knocking about in my mind. Were this a diary of the farm, I wouldn't explain my thought process or help you picture the land, the animals or the people, at least not as overtly. A diary would be an accounting to myself.

When I think of diaries, I think of the private writing space of girls and women. Most such writings do not see the light of day. I see yellowed paper, delicate handwriting — and hardbound books with cheap plastic locks, or spiral notebooks and a kaleidoscope of doodles.

Memoir might have more in common with blogging. Memoir is held at arm's length. It is a distillation of personal events or events visited upon the person. This is how I came to be who I am, this is a history of my family. Blogs perform in this capacity as well, because the author is witness to an event and retelling the tale, or giving opinion of it, even if it is deeply personal.

But if memoir is a look back, blogging is in the moment. It is a record, usually a public one, of the writer, her circumstances, her place in history at that moment. This goes back to diaries and journals, chronicles of the now.

Is it all a matter of perspective and time?

Or a matter of form? One can write a personal blog and use technology to make it inaccessible to the outside world. More often, though, they are written with the intention of public consumption. They may be written with the audience in mind and explain what only the writer knows – the character of people mentioned, descriptions of places, the context of thought. The audience can reply to those writings, a key difference between my 19th century picture of a diarist at a desk penning the accounting of her days. She never expected you to read it.

Diary, journal, memoir, blog. They are variations on a theme; all are spokes extending from the word personal whirling through history.

[Finding inner peace at 5 a.m.](#)

February 9, 2010 at 12:15 p.m.

Posted by jenh under farm life

Tags: goat kids, goats

2 comments

It is dark save for the lingering glow of yesterday's inch of snowfall. Winds are out of the north and it is 15 degrees. And yet I am looking forward to bundling up to go out to the barn to see the goats.

I'm not sure how to explain this. It's not solely a cute factor. There's something more grounding than that.

You can stand at the edge of the pen and watch the now three-week-old kids romping from straw bale to barnyard door. Listen to them bray to find their mothers. Hear the rhythm of hay being chewed slowly over and over, dahh, dahh, dahh. You stare at them, and they stare back. They ignore you when you want their attention. And they sleep in ruffled piles on the floor.



Responses to [Finding inner peace at 5 a.m.](#)

February 9, 2010 at 3:11 p.m.
Noel Rasor says:

The image/poetry of the kids sleeping “in ruffled piles on the floor” has grabbed me, as has this whole post. There is something viscerally satisfying, though that's not the right word, about moments like what you describe here. There's the peacefulness of the landscape at that hour, the soul-calming-ness of seeing/hearing/feeling others at rest. But it's also, for me, a moment of feeling some assurance that I'm doing okay with my responsibilities for others—everyone is accounted for and apparently comfortable, with their needs and wants met. The world is okay, and my muddling through seems to be serving others well.

February 18, 2010 at 6:59 p.m.
Giselle Anatol Says:

although the only things i ever see at 5 o'clock in the morning are the insides of my eyelids, this post grabbed me as well. you made me want to be ignored by a baby goat.

This is not a status update

February 9, 2010 at 11:47 a.m.

Posted by jenh under blogging, communication

Tags: blogging, Pew Center, survey, writing

The great recorders of American culture over at the Pew Center have announced that blogging is for the [uncool oldsters](#).

In a [recent survey](#), they found that 14% of online teens say they blog, down from 28% of teen internet users in 2006. Meanwhile, every year since 2005 Pew has found that roughly one in 10 adults blog. But only the old people (those over the age of 30, for their purposes) have kept up with blogging or been the ones embracing it: while there has been a sharp decline in blogging by young adults, there's been a corresponding increase in blogging among older adults.

I'm always late to a trend.

Blogging by hand?

February 9, 2010 at 11:09 am

Posted by jenh under communication, writing

Tags: Anne Trubeck, blogging, handwriting

The obsolescence of handwriting has people wringing their hands.

Anne Trubeck wrote last fall (when I meant to comment about this) in [Miller-McCune](#) about her research about handwriting. In the article, she called for an end to the practice of teaching elementary students to write in cursive.

“The comments on my piece were hostile, insulting and vehemently opposed to my argument,” Trubeck wrote after the original article was cited on MSN.com. Hundreds of people stopped what they were doing to comment on the article’s call for an end to the teaching of handwriting.

In a blogging context: I would not consider starting a blog if I had to write by hand. I realize how silly that sounds; it’s an online medium. Suspend that for a moment and pretend we only have a mouse and a scanner – no keyboard. I would have quit right away because no one would be able to decipher my scrawl. It slants in different directions and is a hybrid mishmash of print and cursive. Writing by hand is slow and it makes my hand cramp.

Trubeck pointed out that people with poor handwriting will be judged for that in “standardized” testing that requires handwritten essay answers. The keyboard equalizes (grammar notwithstanding).

I kept journals throughout junior high school, high school and periodically as an undergraduate. These letters to myself, as I thought of them, helped me work through the congestion and drama of teenage thought. I hated writing them by hand because my thoughts raced ahead of what I was able to write.

This is, of course, a key difference between a blog and a journal or diary. The handwritten analysis of my days and the politics of the moment – the adolescent variety and the presidential – were meant for me, not a public audience. Conversely blogging is often communication sent outward. It is meant to be read. The author thrives on audience.

[Screaming chickens](#)

February 8, 2010 at 7:05 p.m.

Posted by jenh under food, the business of farming

Tags: advertising, chickens, industrial farming

In between watching the Saints' successes during the 2010 Superbowl last night I caught a few of the advertising spots. Every year, these are part marketing holy grail and part cultural phenomenon (see: there's an entire [Hulu channel](#) dedicated to Superbowl ads and voting for favorites).

Two of the ads were from Denny's restaurant and featured [screaming chickens](#).

The entire ad series promotes a free meal on Tuesday, Feb. 9. The joke is that chickens everywhere should run, screaming, because of the number of eggs that will be required to provide for the free breakfast at Denny's. Chickens are [warned to leave](#), to take a vacation, to do whatever it takes to hide from the demands of Denny's dining patrons.

With a tag line of, "It's a great day to be an American. Bad day to be a chicken," these advertisements are along the same lines as the Chick-fil-A ads. Those ads feature cows imploring viewers to "Eat Mor Chikin" – eat chicken at Chick-fil-A – to save the bovine masses from the slaughterhouse. (Note that the ads feature Holsteins, which are dairy cows, instead of meat cattle.)

Apparently, advertisers have found that making the food we eat cute and funny sells more product, or at least takes the sting away from consuming manufactured foods.

No backyard birds or free-rangers are providing Denny's their massive supply of eggs (though food giant McDonalds [has explored the idea](#)). Instead, birds that are [housed](#) in small "battery" cages stacked one above the other will lay the eggs for the restaurant's customers. Their beaks are mechanically cut. They never see the outdoors or scratch the ground.

So yes, the chickens are screaming, though maybe it should be consumers. If more people fumed about factory farming and refused to buy into it, it would become less profitable. Or so I daydream.

We order our chicks in about a month.

[The goal is balance](#)

February 4, 2010 at 6:52 p.m.

Posted by jenh under family, farm life, work

Tags: balance, Jess, Libra, work | ([edit this](#))

3 comments

I only read [astrological forecasts](#) to reinforce what I already believe or know. If the words don't fit, I ignore them. I'm not interested in meeting a new love interest today, though I should heed the advice to clean up my finances.

Jess and I are both Libras. Our birthdays are five days and a year apart. If I believe the stars, then, the scales of Libra must influence us. We strive for the even pace, for balance.

Not in the line up your Chakras kind of way. More in the live more sustainably, live harmoniously way. Live with minimal impact on resources, even if you only can make slow process toward the

goal. Also in the way that we treat each other. I can't recall being angry for more than a day. Life is easier to live without dragging out drama.

Is our ability to work toward the farm goals a gender issue? Do two women work toward a goal differently than husband and wife? I don't think so. There are lots of examples of male-female relationships that are also functional, progressive work relationships.

I do think that the coming months are going to be stressful and will test us. Adding new livestock, repairing fences, doubling our growing space, building a hoop house, trying to graduate — they do add up to a lot of decisions to make, and much time spent hashing out the details together.

Maybe the key is that we've grown up together – we met our first year of college and have watched each other through all the trials of college, career changes, aging, parents dying, goals changing. We shift but always come back to rest at the center. I am daily amazed that we have loved, cooked, grown, driven, studied, fought, raised, awoken, slept, repaired, cleaned, cried, drunk, laughed together for all this time. The goal to make this farm functional is a continuation.

Responses to [The goal is balance](#)

February 4, 2010 at 11:58 p.m.

Jess says:

Talk of the Nation, an NPR program that I listen to on KCUR, today addressed a new study by the Pew Institute that reported that more families have a woman earning more money than the man. A “sea change” in the dynamics of marriage. A complicated and nuanced discussion worth listening to.

I sometimes feel like we're isolated from such demographic research. We're not burdened by the ideas of gender roles in our relationship. Since both of us are women, neither of us

have felt as though it is our singular responsibility to earn money, raise children, take out the trash, cook the meals. Sure there is an anticipated butch/fem question, “Who is the man?” Which, as you may expect, is usually insulting. We try to live our lives as people. Depending on each others strengths. Compensating for our weaknesses. (We each have our own and they change.)

The conclusion of the NPR program was that the more flexible couples could be in their gender roles, and the agreement to create a family through a changing social environment, were the biggest factors in the success of the relationship. We’ll keep working. It’s a balance.

February 5, 2010 at 11:32 p.m.
Teri says:

Yay for Libras :) Time to restart the annual Libra Party, yes?

Honestly, as exciting as it is to be moving back and starting a new job, I’m equally excited to watch the evolution of your farm – in person. Part of that is watching how you work together – it’s always feels nice and steady, complementary and supportive. I like to call it good old fashioned hard working Midwestern values in action – tell it like it is, do your job, get it done, don’t bullshit. I need not tell you that that is very refreshing after my time in a place where such things are as rare as a unicorn.

February 20, 2010 at 4:18 a.m.
Susan M. Schultz says:

October 10. That’s me.

[How we work](#)

February 4, 2010 at 2:52 pm

Posted by jenh under family, work

Tags: Jess, relationships, work

Some people, even close friends, are astonished that it’s possible to be in a relationship with someone and work together, too. For them, working with a spouse or partner would be tricky or frustrating or lead to in-fighting. I’m not going to tell you that it’s easy or that Jess and I get along all the time and it’s always kindness and roses. While we have a good track record, farming has been, in a sense, starting over on our work relationship.

We have worked together in one capacity or another for more than 15 years. Restaurants employed us throughout the 1990s, in positions that varied from front of the house to back of the house, server to dishwasher, line cook to manager. At a pancake house that put me through school on the graveyard shift, we each had a stint in management, sometimes directly managing each other. Tensions rarely ran high, though maybe because there was a degree of flirting. Plus we were dealing with that weird, out-of-body punchiness caused by sleep deprivation and night shifts. We generally followed the Vegas rule that what happened at the restaurant stayed at the restaurant; tempers, disasters and crabbiness were left behind. Most of the time.

That worked well, Jess has asserted, because we were surrounded by structures: a time to clock in and out, and rules to work within or against. Bosses. Farming is different than that because we are constantly trying to get our footing on shifting ground. There's no higher authority than ourselves, so our individual work styles surface. I like to ask for help as soon as I sense my own ignorance. I want someone to show me how to do something. Jess prefers to figure out a process independently. Sometimes I want to plunge ahead with a project, but Jess would like to research more and avoid inevitable mistakes in the first place.

We each have the ghosts of our successes, failures and even those of the farm surrounding us. Jess' late father, [John](#), had a way of barking instructions that felt like a judgment. Periodically, though rarely, Jess exhibits similar behavior. My urge to worry and run for help exacerbates such situations. Before you know it we have a quick crescendo followed by apologies.

At the farm, we generally complement each other and fill in where the other leaves off. Jess might pick lettuce and basil for a delivery while I am on weed elimination patrol. I do more of the home canning but Jess cooks far more of our meals. We stand on each side of a fence line to set fire to the grass, moving in tandem down the line, each with a shovel and a watchful eye. We bounce ideas off of each other constantly.

Essentially, our method of operation follows a few principles: 1) there is no job that's beneath you to do. 2) Do your best and don't cut corners. 3) Don't stay mad.

January 2010

[blog farming](#)

January 29, 2010 at 6:11 pm

Posted by jenh under blogging, writing

Tags: blogging, farming, wordplay

power up

electricity is to blogging as sunlight is to gardening

my fingers the rake the hoe

tilling up and down the rows of keys

ideas as seeds

coaxed coddled and cared for

or eliminated like weeds

[A ringing needle in a haystack](#)

January 29, 2010 at 3:26 pm

Posted by jenh under random observations

Tags: disorganized, hay, phone

I am disorganized. It's not a crippling to my way of life. However, it makes some tasks take longer because there is a hunt-and-gather phase. This happens most often when I am trying to leave the house.

I have tried systems: purses, bags, pockets. None of these seems to help me keep track of the three things that I must always have with me in town, namely my keys (work set and home set), wallet and phone.

Last month I piled everything, including my laptop, into a black, shiny carry-all that my mom-in-law gave to me for Christmas. It has gold rings to link the handles to the main case; it's one of those oversized bags such as what I see sorority girls lugging about on campus or downtown. This is not me, but I like the bag for what it can hold in an organized fashion. There's a spot for the cell phone, a padded case for the computer, a wallet that keeps all my insurance and ID cards handy, and enough room to stash my lunch. The issue, it seems, is that it does not go with my attire. Wearing an abused tan Carhart farm chore coat into town to the feed store with that bag over my shoulder looks ridiculous. A collision between city girl and country girl. Farmer chic, we call it.

This fashion faux pas would be surmountable if I would keep everything in the bag, but I do not. The phone comes with me in my inner coat pocket to the barn, and I tote it upstairs for my morning alarm. I leave it on tables, desks or bookshelves, wherever I happened to finish a text or a conversation. This leads to several instances each week of using Jess' phone to call my phone. Heeeeere, phone. Heeeere, phone.

Yesterday I lost my phone better than usual. Calling it in the house did not yield the familiar ring. Nor did calling it in the truck, the last place I knew I used it. I searched with a flashlight under the rubble of papers and atlases and jumper cables. Nothing. Back inside the house, I finally had the sense to check the barn. I was in the bedroom near the baby/goat monitor. Called my phone and sure enough, over the monitor I hear a ring followed immediately by the wail of four or five goat kids.

I assumed I must have placed it on a ledge in the barn, but no. I called and called. Finally, I managed to unearth it from about 8 inches of packed alfalfa and hay. Must've fallen out of my pocket at feeding time.

Now the phone is tucked back into the Big Black Bag. I'm sure that won't last.

[Blogging versus essays, 2](#)

January 26, 2010 at 11:36 a.m.

Posted by jenh under blogging, writing

Tags: blogging, essays, time, writing

7 comments

I'm going to borrow a bit from [Andrew Sullivan](#) and chew slowly.

Blogging is a real-time account. It's what you think in that moment. Even if I edit a post before clicking "publish," the writing is a testament to the emotion, the thought process, the impulse to write at that moment in time. It is sudden. Instantaneous. Spontaneous.

Conversely, the essay is inherently reflexive. It looks back, observes, distills. The cultural critiques and political context in the essays of Joan Didion come to mind. The essay may say without being overt that *this is where I was, now I am here, and I'll tell you how I arrived at this point.*

We expect a narrative to move forward, for characters to be introduced, for tension to be resolved. We expect an ending or conclusion. However, blogging upends our ideas of narrative time and movement. It interjects. It leaves a subject but could return to it days or months or years later, the only context a link to a previous post. It does not end. It isn't tidy.

Blogging is a form, as Sullivan points out, where a reader knows the ending before the author does. Think about it: if you go back a few posts on this blog, you will see all the fretting about the impending birth of our goat kids at the farm. As author, writing each post, I don't yet know how the tension will break. Now it's a week or two later. The reader can go backwards from today and begin with the knowledge that there are 13 healthy goat kids.

This is one of many reasons that the final version of this experiment will move backward in time, beginning with the most recent post and reverting to the start of the blog. What will this show about process, about learning?

Responses to [Blogging vs. Essays 2](#)

January 27, 2010 at 12:56 a.m.

Teri says:

Quick thought is that I like the unpredictability of blogs (1) and what someone shares about their day to day life (2). These two qualities are not mutually exclusive by any

means – as you said, people’s lives are often messy and don’t follow a linear narrative. I like that.

I also prefer personal blogs to those devoted to a single topic, like politics or whatever. I read enough about things/objects/news as it is, I’d rather have a personal connection with a blog. The ones I frequent (or have been following for years, a decade in a few cases such as [mimismartypants](#)) feel like old friends, even though I’ve never met or interacted with the author. I like watching the story of a person’s life unfold as a function of what they choose to share with the world.

And of course, with your blog, there’s the added bonus of knowing you/Jess – I get to hear about what I’m missing so that definitely helps bridge the distance.

ps. More goats! Also, did you guys ever get the hoop house up before it got cold?

January 28, 2010 at 11:05 a.m.

jenh says:

Unpredictability can be good, though blogs that are completely random sometimes frustrate me. I think in my short time reading them that I like some form of consistency – the voice if nothing else. It’s amazing the relationships we form through reading about others online. There are cases where a blogger has been fictionalized, and is posting fiction – a dying teenager in Kansas. People grieved when she “died,” and many did not believe the fact that she never existed. The intimacy of following another person’s experiences is so intense that we develop a relationship with the writer.

As to your question – the hoop house isn’t up yet, but we’ve started on the chicken house. We burned a little more fence line yesterday, too. You would have enjoyed the flames. -J

January 28, 2010 at 2:45 p.m.

Teri says:

Here’s a question then for you: Do you ever worry about sharing too much? Obviously, you get to choose what you write about so have you drawn an implicit line between the personal/public? What topics are off limits? Relatedly, would you feel more comfortable posting stuff if your readers were strangers vs people who know you IRL?

I was thinking the other day about the baby goats and prepping the fence situation. Those little ones won’t know about the lack of electricity and are probably slippery enough to get out if put in the big pasture. I imagine that’s on the ever increasing to do list. Sign me up for helping when/if I become available.

January 28, 2010 at 5:08 p.m.
jenh says:

Yes! Oversharing is a concern, Teri. I've been trying to figure out where to draw the line, or whether to draw one at all. I was under the impression when I began that, while not anonymous, I would at least be under most people's radar. But to spread the word about this project, I had to "come out" as the writer of the blog. Ironic. I realized also that to write honestly, I had to expose other parts of my life. I'm still working on that.

January 28, 2010 at 9:18 p.m.
Susan M. Schultz says:

Nice to come back to the blog after a time away. I like the way you're farming your blog, even as you're blogging your farm. Or something!

January 29, 2010 at 3:04 p.m.
jenh says:

Oooh, farming the blog. I like that. Thanks for stopping by! I've been thinking of you as I've been reading Dementia Blog. I've decided the final version of this project will go in reverse chronological order, backwards through time, as your book does. Do you know of other blog-turned-book examples? Joe has probably asked you this before. -J

January 30, 2010 at 6:15 p.m.
Susan M. Schultz says:

Aloha Jen—glad you like the metaphor! No, I don't know of other book blogs, though I was told by a publisher who turned my book down that there are lots of books (so-called) and they don't sell well! Now, to think about reverse order farming!

[Blogging vs. Essays](#)

January 26, 2010 at 10:58 a.m.
Posted by jenh under blogging, writing
Tags: blogging, essays, writing
2 comments

I wrote and studied the essay form for years (see the essays pages to the right for examples). I remember an ah-ha moment: Essays sanctified the writing I pursued privately. They were marked by a voice — clear, strong and full of resonance. They were places to explore, to pull apart a

topic, to bring the disparate elements together. They offered flexibility. The writing could be bombastic or light-hearted, humorous or maudlin, but always personal. They were a platform to apply my lens to the generic world.

Notice the use of past tense? Unintentional, I assure you.

But at some point, I've got to grapple with why, after years of studying one form of writing, I vigorously pursued another. Why I think it is the better form of expression for me, right now.

What draws you to a blog? The brevity? The timing? It's an odd question, like asking what draws you to short stories or newspapers.

Responses to [Blogging vs. Essays](#)

January 27, 2010 at 3:48 a.m.
Noel Rasor says:

For me it's the immediacy that draws me to blogs—the fact that those words left the posters' fingers just a day or few hours or few minutes ago. For me it's getting a glimpse of a shared moment through someone else's eyes while I'm still aware of what the moment looked/looks like through mine.

January 28, 2010 at 10:53 a.m.
jenh says:

That intimacy and immediacy draw me in as well – whether it's the spontaneous, vocal posts that are [Nicole is Better](#) or the ups and downs and yearnings of [Cold Antler Farm](#). This is especially true when there's a major event and you want to see how others are experiencing it, such as the Haiti earthquake. I think that is one reason that news accounts are more and more often placing the reporter in the story and allowing them to comment on the experience – viewers/readers seek that personal experience.

[Now an Olympic Sport](#)

January 25, 2010 at 11:39 a.m.
Posted by jenh under farm life, random observations
Tags: farming, goat kids, worry

If worrying were a sport, farming would be its Olympics.

Weather. Money. Animal health and well-being. Maintenance. Time, and the lack of it.

This comes from high authority. I already excelled in the field, schooled at my mother's knee.

Worry is a fraying at the edges of an infinite cloth, the thread constantly tugged. It could make me sick or drive me crazy. I quit fiddling with that loose strand to repeat little mantras:

There's only so much you can do.

The weather cannot be changed.

Energy spent worrying is better applied to the task you worry about.

Nature does not rely on you.

Learn from beginner's mistakes.

It is reassuring that we now have 13 healthy goat kids, and all my worrying has had little to do with their survival.

[Do three snapshots negate the art in art blog? \(I'm no Warhol\)](#)

January 22, 2010 at 7:55 a.m.
Posted by jenh under farm life
Tags: art, kids, photography
2 comments



Responses to [Do three snapshots negate the art in art blog?](#)

January 20, 2010 at 8:14 pm e
Elaine Fellenstein says:

I'd say those kids are pretty artfully cute.

January 21, 2010 at 12:23 a.m.
Kim Anspach says:

I'm already in love with them. I shall try not to name them all.

[Let's talk about...](#)

January 21, 2010 at 9:10 a.m.
Posted by jenh under blogging
Tags: blogging, goals, MFA thesis, writing
5 comments

Many of you – the you-who are reading this, wherever you are, even in my imagination – know that this blog began as an experiment. If a master of fine arts could be a novel, a group of essays, a collection of short fiction, could it also be a collection of a different medium? What happens when the essentials of the personal essay are applied (sometimes sparingly) to blogging? I began by writing about the other experiment in my life, that of learning how to farm and do it sustainably.

Now I want to mix up the two and put the writing under greater scrutiny. You'll see that reflected in the posts of the coming months because my thesis defense is set for the third week of April. And because I have a whole range of topics about writing in this form that I haven't brought up, nor put them into the context of an agrarian life.

You'll still read about the farm, our trials, the animals and the other trappings of our world. But I hope you're willing to take the experiment further with me. Talk back and converse – comment – when the mood strikes you. I will do my best to provide posts and ideas worth discussing. The comments and the posts will be folded into the final (yes, printed) form.

Thanks for reading!

Responses to [Let's talk about...](#)

January 21, 2010 at 12:11 a.m.
Laurie O'Brien says:

Ooh! What an exciting idea. Although I can't promise I will have anything interesting to say in a reply. But, I will say that I didn't know goats were so cute!

January 28, 2010 at 11:08 a.m.
jenh says:

Thanks, Laurie. I can't promise that I will have anything interesting, either. But I'll at least try to entertain you. Hope "n'orlans" is treating you well.

January 25, 2010 at 3:03 a.m.
joe harrington says:

I'm interested in the people, too. Like, if MariaAna and I tried to do what you all are doing, I'm not sure the relationship would make it.

I'm also curious to know more about the neighbors' reactions to the two "girls" on the farm. And your own familial/ancestral relation to farming in Kansas – differences and similarities.

January 28, 2010 at 11:07 a.m.
jenh says:

Good point. I have kept people at a distance in this blog. I think there was, at the start, a bit of fear in doing so. It's one thing for me to write about my perspectives, but another to bring someone else into this world who may or may not want to be here. But Jess is game so you'll see her more often here. -J

February 4, 2010 at 2:44 a.m.
Jess says:

All my life I've been considering this. Will I be accepted in my community if I'm "different"? For a long time it kept me at a distance from my family. Not because of they didn't accept us, but because of my fear of not being accepted. Really, most people just want to know if you're good at doing your work.

I feel like we have an advantage in this particular community. They know my family. And by family, I mean 4 generations of relationships. The folks out here aren't as connected as they used to be. I'm still meeting people my grandparents knew.

But ask Jen. Her family moved to Missouri almost 30 years ago and they are still the new folks.

Acceptance is familiarity. We're just like everyone else out here. There are old timers, hippies, back to the land/homesteaders etc. And they call us the "ladies" which is cute.

Wondering when to intervene

January 20, 2010 at 1:32 a.m.

Posted by jenh under farm life

Tags: kids, nannies, worry

1 comment

Discombobulated. Long a favorite word. A [GRE](#) word, but one I knew years before I took that exam. Appropriate to describe the confusion spawned by awakening at midnight to the sounds of moaning animals.

The weather, too: It smells like sweet spring rain. I heard distant thunder. *In January.*

Tan-Headed Goat, a nervous creature whose number I often forget, bucked the daytime kidding trend set by three of her herdmates to give birth to twins at about 12:15 a.m. I watched the labor and birth but it became apparent that the mother needed to be left alone. She spent more time trying to figure out where I was and what I might be doing in the barn than cleaning her kids.

The first hour or so is tricky: all goat kids need to have some of their mother's milk in that hour because it contains colostrum, which helps get their immune and digestive systems up and running. Whether the kids stand up to get this first milk is one of a long list of things that we worry about. I second-guess everything from the onset of labor to birth to the moment we get them settled into a new stall. It's difficult to tell when to assist in a natural process, if at all.

Back at the house, the baby monitor gives us blind updates, the sounds it carries our only source

of clues.

Response to [Wondering when to intervene](#)

January 20, 2010 at 7:56 p.m.

Keith says:

Next kidding season, you'll need surveillance cameras.

[New \(squawking\) life in our midst](#)

January 19, 2010 at 2:06 pm

Posted by jenh under farm life

Tags: kids, nannies, One-sixty-three

3 comments

The goat that I least expected to deliver first did just that yesterday afternoon. A routine stop by the barn to check on a couple of goats who sounded congested instead revealed One-Sixty-Three in labor. She's one of the most skittish goats in the herd, and my appearance at the doorway caused her to get up and try to find a new place to hide. She delivered in record time – about 10 minutes later. When I have a few minutes later today, I'll update about our nerves with this first birth (the second guessing, the worrying, trying to figure out when to butt in and when to stay out) but we are happy that mother and two kids are fine and tucked into their warm kidding stall in the barn. This afternoon we'll "sex" them – figure out who's who – and give them color appropriate, yellow or blue, ear tags.

They are as adorable as puppies, and as vocal as hungry humans.

Responses to [New \(squawking\) life in our midst](#)

January 19, 2010 at 10:47 p.m.

Elaine Fellenstein says:

Congrats, one down 8 to go. Glad all went well.

January 19, 2010 at 11:00 p.m.
jenh says:

Actually, now we're at three down, six to go, and our stable includes five new goats. We're hoping everyone stays healthy.

January 20, 2010 at 4:00 a.m.
Teri says:

Pictures!

I'll use it to hack through four days of fog

January 18, 2010 at 12:28 a.m.
Posted by jenh under farm life, random observations
Tags: fog, Spring, hoe, Bachi gato

My [new hoe](#) was in the newspaper today [touted](#) as one of this spring's must-have tools. Now I know the name: the Bachi gato hoe. Elegant, don't you think? A weapon against weed aggressors!

Please. Send. Spring.

Paint color names have nothing on sweet corn

January 18, 2010 at 12:05 a.m.
Posted by jenh under food
Tags: sweet corn
1 Comment

Fleet, Trinity, Mystique, Luscious, Brocade, Delectable. Double Standard, also Frisky, Polka (no dots, maybe a dance?), and the northern-clime-sounding Montauk. There's Spring Treat and Sugar Buns, Sugar Pearl and Whiteout (minus the blizzard). Augusta's good in August, Silver Queen is royal, and Vision makes me think of a field of tasseled stalks.

Response to [Paint color names have nothing on sweet corn](#)

January 18, 2010 at 12:24 a.m.
Elaine Fellenstein Says:

MMM, dreaming of warm weather and sweetcorn now. Just got a package of seeds from

Johnny's in the mail. Must have patience.

[Open letter to The Ladies](#)

January 13, 2010 at 6:42 p.m.

Posted by jenh under farm life

Tags: goats, kidding, nannies, winter

4 comments

All right, ladies. You made it through two bouts of illness unscathed. You survived plunging temperatures that froze the hair on your heads into crystal shards. You've stood silently in the snow, even when the wind came howling across the valley at 40 miles per hour.

But it's sunny today. Forty degrees. Light wind out of the south. The snow is melting. Consider it an early spring gift. (Well, maybe not spring, since we've yet to see the wrath of February, or the lions of March.)

If you were determined to delay birthing kids until a temperate Kansas January day, you've found it. And we are tired of waiting.

We've spent semi-sleepless nights listening to your pawing and murmurs over the monitor.

We've dutifully lined up any possible medicine you or your kids might need, and read up on our disaster planning. The kidding pens are lined with straw and water buckets. We make sure you are pampered every early morning, midday, evening and sometimes even at 3 a.m. We tiptoe into your pen so as to not startle you out of your large, pregnant coma-sleeps.

So we selfishly ask you to consider making today the day to have those kids. We'll even throw in

a little extra alfalfa.

Responses to [Open letter to The Ladies](#)

Joe Harrington Says:
January 15, 2010 at 4:14 p.m.

I wonder what the goat:human ratio has been, in these recent posts. My guess is that, if you had a “word cloud,” “people” would be pretty small, and “GOAT” would loom as large as capricorn.

Back in school, we were taught that there wasn’t much “American literature” before the mid-nineteenth century b/c almost everybody was a settler/farmer, and those folks just didn’t have time to write – they were just trying to survive.

January 18, 2010 at 12:00 a.m.
jenh says:

Yes, I’ve been a tad bit goat obsessed lately. It’s like waiting for a birthday or Christmas that keeps getting scooted further and further out on the calendar.

–I’m fortunate to be able to squeeze some writing in at all. Still, I know that between winter farming (mostly planning), work, blogging, facebooking, reading and netflixing, there is time, if I make it so. -J

January 18, 2010 at 11:16 p.m.
Lori says:

Please tell me you have SOME baby goats!?!?
Been waiting for the news.

January 18, 2010 at 11:33 p.m.
jenh says:

Lori, things look good. Two were born this afternoon, and I’ll be writing about that. The first 24 hours are critical, though, so we are watching and keeping our fingers crossed. -Jen

[Capricious](#)

January 10, 2010 at 3:46 p.m.
Posted by jenh under farm life
Tags: goats, nannies, winter
4 comments

Hours of persistent silence on the baby/barn monitor woke me with a hunch at three a.m.

I dressed in the dark, slipped past the sleeping dogs and crunched across the snow to the empty barn. From the doorway, I cast a flashlight beam across the narrow corral. Eighteen blue-white eyes reflected back to me. They rejected the daytime pleasures of alfalfa, water, heat lamps and fresh straw to stand all night in the snow.

Responses to [Capricious](#)

January 10, 2010 at 6:30 p.m.

Teri says:

Damn those goats are foolish and stubborn – living up to their stereotype for sure.

January 11, 2010 at 2:14 a.m.

Noel Rasor says:

I just had an etymological epiphany: Capricious, Capricorn, goats are kidding in January...so interesting!

January 11, 2010 at 2:24 a.m.

jenh says:

That's how they get their name: *Capra hircus*. The root, *capra/i* is in capricious, capricorn, capra, etc. All of them fickle but strong willed!

January 15, 2010 at 4:11 p.m.

Joe Harrington Says:

From the OED (re: caprice, capricious, capriccio):

[a. It. capriccio sudden start, motion, or freak, app. f. capro goat, as if ‘the skip or frisk of a goat’ (in Sp. capricho): L. type *capriceus. (For the sense cf. CAPRIOLE.)]

[Counting down the days](#)

January 8, 2010 at 6:41 pm

Posted by jenh under farm life

Tags: 128, calendar, country vet, time, winter
2 comments

I can't count weeks on a calendar accurately. My calculations for the first due date were off by two days, so technically today's the earliest day one of goats could have kids. You'd never know it by looking at the ladies lounging in the barn.

This makes us hopeful that the worst of the temperatures — supposedly -12 degrees tonight — will be over before the first nanny delivers.

Despite the amenities in the barn, some of the goats insist that nesting outside in the snow is the better option.



Responses to [Counting down the days](#)

January 9, 2010 at 2:08 a.m.

Noel Rasor says:

I'm so relieved to learn that your counting was off! I can't believe how anxious I find myself, thinking of your gals and the cold temps. I suppose it's a product of my own new-mom-ness, though my over-developed sense of empathy plays in here, too. In any case, this post is very reassuring.

January 10, 2010 at 3:54 p.m.

jenh says:

We are relieved as well. And they've put off birth long enough to get past the

worst weather, so we're hopeful for the week.

[Snowbows and snowdrifts](#)

January 7, 2010 at 7:01 p.m.

Posted by jenh under farm life

Tags: kids, nannies, snow

1 Comment

I saw my first snowbow this morning. Wind whipped the loose snow high into the air just after sunrise, and the light filtering through the particles created a vertical ribbon of color. A positive omen.

Omens, chance, superstition: I could use faith in those for this week. The more I read about the dangers goat kids face in subzero weather the more I'm worrying about how to make this go well. We have most supplies in order: the towels, buckets, iodine, BounceBack (a bit like Gatorade), sanitizer, gloves – all the things I said I looked forward to picking up at the pharmacy. What we don't have we will go without. If the nannies could wait until Sunday when the temperature jumps from zero to 20 degrees, I would be so grateful.

At the suggestion of one of our books, we're borrowing a baby monitor. All night, we listened in on the goats pawing at the straw and munching grain and hay. Now that it's below 10 degrees, the receiver seems to be having trouble connecting with the barn monitor; we may be getting up every two hours to check on them instead.

Baby monitors are nothing compared to the lengths some people will go for newborn kids. I've read about people bringing their goat kids into the house when the weather is like this. I can just see how the dog and the cat would react to that, let alone what would become of my kitchen floor.

Despite my attachment, they are livestock, and livestock belong in the barn.

The wind is carrying snow across the driveway and depositing it in two and three-foot drifts along our trucks and the barns.

I keep reminding myself that I chose to do this, that I'm volunteering to have animals and work this hard. It does seem crazy on a day like this.

Response to [Snowbows and snowdrifts](#)

January 12, 2010 at 11:51 p.m.

Jules Shores says:

in some countries the 'barn' is the basement or the ground floor of the house. Can we imagine that?

[If only I could type in the barn](#)

January 6, 2010 at 8:47 pm

Posted by jenh under blogging, farm life

Tags: blogging, kids, nannies, winter

2 comments



Nature has a sense of humor, or at least drama. The does have timed their deliveries during a quick six inches of snow, to be followed by plummeting temperatures. In a few hours, we'll be going out to check on the mothers-to-be when the windchill is expected to be -17.

For now, we're watching over nannies like this one, One Forty-Six. She looks like she swallowed a globe for dinner. She and her fellow pregos are waiting out the snowstorm in the relatively cozy old dairy barn.

We invite you to follow along at home, in the old parlance of television. That's one of the aspects of blogging that draws me to the form and to read the writings of others: it's a perfect medium for playing out the stages of a drawn-out event. (So is twitter, some would argue.)

We'll be posting periodically over the next few days as the first kids are born. At least four of the nine nannies look nearly ready now, and the others are likely to follow in the next week or two.

Responses to [If only I could type in the barn](#)

January 7, 2010 at 2:32 p.m.
Noel Rasor says:

Sending warm, safe thoughts to you, the nannies and the kids.

January 13, 2010 at 12:14 am
Jules Shores says:

interesting thought. does one's internet capable cell phone, lap top or PC belong in a barn? somehow i can visualize an old typewriter in the confines, but modern technology seems out of place. i sadly realize this is where most of the food in the grocery stores comes from. huge computer machine run, no hands on the animals, no love, no appreciation, no give and take.... am i being old fashioned? i hope so.

[Looking for more open spaces](#)

January 5, 2010 at 5:30 a.m.
Posted by jenh under writing
Tags: time, writing
2 comments

5:10 a.m.

This week I will write in the tiny crevice between the must-dos and the whew-I'm-beat.

Responses to [Looking for more open spaces](#)

January 6, 2010 at 3:52 p.m.

Dan says:

Dear Jen,

I heard about your blog a few months ago, and, now, thanks to the semester break, I finally found the time to delve into it. I'm very intrigued by this dual project: the farming and the blog/thesis. I'll try to check in more often, and please let me know if there are any types of comments or such that you're looking for (I'm especially interested by the communal aspect of blogging a thesis). It seems like all is well (and busy) with you.

Happy New Year.

Best,

Dan Hoyt

January 6, 2010 at 3:59 p.m.

jenh Says:

Hi, Dan, and welcome. Please do look around and let me know what you think of the project (or any post). It's sometimes a schizophrenic blog because I tend to either write about writing/blogging, or about farming – still learning ways of combining the two. Agrarian life meets new technology! Cheers, -Jen

[Goats versus Farmers](#)

January 4, 2010 at 1:41 a.m.

Posted by jenh under farm life

Tags: Cash, goats, Scoop, snow, Steak, winter

8 comments

Today's singular goal: get our does into the old dairy barn.

An NFL coach could not have designed the plays on a chart. The home team:

Nine massive does, all due to kid (have their kids) beginning late next week; that is, wobble-legged-pregnant.

One buck, Cash, a sire extraordinaire with a red beard and curving horns.

One 11-month old calf, Steak, with an acute appetite for grain.

One watchdog, Scoop, who periodically forgets his rightful protector place and decides to herd, or worse, chase.

Three bucklings who follow us wherever we go and nibble aggressively on our coats.

The visitors:

We two farm women, herding unherdable goats into their proper places.

The playing field:

One dairy barn, outfitted with two large straw-covered bays and, when we need them, nine kidding stalls.

Five interconnected pens and “hallways” of chutes of varying sizes, with gates frozen in the snow. Snow. Lots of it. Drifted up to three feet in some places, melted and re-frozen in others. Oh, and for added benefit: a high temperature of 13 degrees.

The game plan:

Direct the does into the barn simultaneously while turning back Scoop, Steak, Cash and the three goat goblins.

On the first pass, we managed to get more than half of the nannies into the barn. High fives all around.

The remaining group would have none of this walking through snow, however. Goats will usually

do cartwheels for grain, but show them a snow drift or a puddle and all deals are off. They turned around. We went left to stop a return, and they switched gears to go right. Go for the block and poof! you're on your butt in the snowdrift. Goats 1, people zero.

Getting the last few into the barn required opening and closing of gates and barn doors in a farm version of musical chairs, scooting animals from one bay to another to another. The final two wanderers required coaxing, pleading, banging on buckets, firm voices and waving of arms. The only way to get them in was to dig two gates out of the snow and block re-entry to the main pen. The bucklings were all too pleased by this because it meant they could join in the melee going on next door. Scoop got into the act by chasing the smallest buckling and had to be remanded to another barn altogether. And then we ended up with everyone in the dairy barn: the nannies, the buck, the bucklings, the calf and the dog.

Ultimately, with some ingenious distractions and more buckets of grain and waving of arms, we put everyone into their rightful places. The nannies are closed up in the barn like chickens for the night. Scoop, Steak and Cash are in their own little bachelor pad pen. Next to them are the little ones bedding down on fresh straw. Somewhere in the mix are three or four barn cats. A peaceable kingdom, at least for the moment.

Responses to [Goats versus Farmers](#)

January 4, 2010 at 2:31 a.m.

Noel Rasor says:

What an entertaining description of a day that had moments where it wasn't quite so entertaining to those living it! I have quite the image in mind of the waving arms, banging of buckets, and crafty not-to-be-herded goats. Thanks!

January 5, 2010 at 11:22 a.m.

Jen says:

Thanks, Noel. Humor isn't my strong area, but I try every once in a while. It definitely felt like tackle football.

January 4, 2010 at 6:39 p.m.

Elaine Fellenstein says:

Glad to hear you got them all inside. I'm keeping the good thoughts going that all are safely delivered and scampering around in warmer weather soon.

January 5, 2010 at 11:18 a.m.

jenh says:

Thanks for the good wishes, Elaine. At one time, I thought about sleeping in the barn (alternatives are to get up every two hours to check on them, or if you have a good ear, a baby monitor). But even the best sleeping bag on a cot would be unpleasant in zero weather. We're taking a wait and see approach, for now.

January 5, 2010 at 5:21 p.m.

Lori S says:

Oh, for a video camera....

Sounds like excellent training for anything that comes your way in life.

January 6, 2010 at 11:30 a.m.

jenh says:

Thanks, Lori. Yes, it's good preparation for anything unpredictable! Even herding cats.

January 6, 2010 at 8:51 p.m.

Lori S says:

Or children or researchers... home, work, life... herding seems to be a strong theme.

[The nervous expectant parents](#)

January 3, 2010 at 2:08 am

Posted by jenh under farm life

Tags: birth, goats, kids

A friend recently gave birth to a baby girl. Congratulations, I said by email. Can't wait to meet her. Then I added a P.S. :I know it isn't anything on the same level, but we're expecting as many as 18 kids beginning next week.

You know, I can raise a vegetable and if it dies, well, it's my fault or the weather I couldn't control ruined it or something else happened that can be shrugged off. I lost future profit.

Animals, however, are a different matter. If we fail on this first crop of kids, we're losing a life.

And an investment, too, but that comes later. Right now I just want everyone to be healthy.

When we bred the does with Cash in August, memories of mild Kansas winters filled our heads.

None of this blizzard followed by teens followed by snow followed by single digits and then more snow. The forecast for the first possible day they could be due: high of four degrees, and a low of four below. It's our lucky winter.

Most of the time, the guidebooks say, everything works out fine and no human intervention is necessary. But then there's this long list of when to get involved, and how. What to look for and how the baby goat should be positioned. Among the supplies needed to prepare for this are Gatorade, back-up milk replacer (in case, heaven forbid, a nanny dies), rubber gloves, iodine and even K-Y jelly. I'm looking forward to going to the pharmacy to say the groceries are for my goats!

Mixed up with the anticipation and the excitement is fear. I realize that nannies have been birthing kids for millenia without me. Farmers of all shapes and sizes have been raising herds of animals

for almost as long. But the nerves are there.

We've been through kidding seasons in warmer spring, when John was overwhelmed or sick, and kids died, and nannies died. We're depending on kids as a part of the farm's portfolio, but also its identity. So, in short, bound up in the birth of these kids are the hopes of the farm. The anticipation builds.



December 2009

[Over/under whelmed on New Year's Eve](#)

December 31, 2009 at 7:43 pm

Posted by jenh under blogging

Tags: blogging, moonlight

4 comments

Tonight is the first ["blue" moon](#) on New Year's Eve since 1990: the semi-rare occurrence of two full moons in a month, made more special by falling on the eve of the new year.

(I'd like to know why we capitalize new year. Never looked it up. Capitals Make Words Important.)

There is a hard crust of ice and snow over the soybean field. Jess remarked that the reflection of light on ice gave the illusion that you could ice-skate right into the moon. I'd like an escape like that sometimes. A river to skate away on, as Joni Mitchell penned.

In the coming days, I'll be backposting the bits and pieces of the past several days: in effect, messing with time. It's not the nice way to keep a blog, which goes in reverse chronological order. There were things I meant to say and posts I need to respond to. I have been overwhelmed lately with responsibility. At some point, I skated away, but I kept looking over my shoulder. Ooooooh, where are the armchair psychologists?

– I used to write essays in one big two or three-day blitz, then revise until either deadline forced me to stop or I felt I'd taken it as far as I could go, for the moment. There was the rush of following the thought and crafting an opening and an ending and tying it all together. The blog form, however, carries more day-to-day responsibility. It needs consistent, regular attention, especially if one wants to carry on a conversation.

I won't make this a new year's resolution – I break those. Let's just say I've made a quiet promise to myself to see this through, and enjoy it in the process.

Responses to [Over/under whelmed on New Year's Eve](#)

January 1, 2010 at 2:13 a.m.
Elaine Fellenstein says:

Wow, great mind image “ice skate into the moon”.

January 1, 2010 at 4:39 a.m.
Teri says:

I like this. It feels more you, less edited and more spontaneous. Looking forward to catching up to the past, esp if it involves goats!

See you in the new year/New Year ;)

January 5, 2010 at 11:20 a.m.
jenh says:

Funny you should say that it sounds more like me. I rushed it out before taking care of animals that day, but I still edited a lot along the way. I'll keep that in mind. New snowfall expected this week...

January 1, 2010 at 4:43 a.m.
Teri says:

ps. I do not approve of my semi-colon and single parenthesis being anthropomorphized into yellow winking bubble. This is what is wrong with America. Where is Y210K when you need it?

[For the love of a hoe](#)

December 26, 2009 at 4:12 pm

Posted by jenh under family, farm life

Tags: Christmas, gardening, hoe, snow

2 comments



I asked for a massage for Christmas. Thought I'd relieve a little muscle stress. Jess got me a hoe instead. The irony and the accompanying humor aren't lost on either of us.

I had no idea until this year how many different kinds of hoes there are. Man creates a dizzying array of specified dirt tools.

Last summer, the hoe of the moment was the elegant Cobra Hoe. The business end of the hoe looks like a cobra ready to strike. Jess showed me how to wield its sculpted blade against weeds in tiny places.

This new one I'm sure has a name, but the label is in Japanese. Until the snow melts, it'll be a pretty toy on the back porch.

Nothing says love and we're in this together like a brand new garden hoe.

Responses to [For the love of a hoe](#)

January 6, 2010 at 3:44 am
Joe Harrington says:

. . . then there's the crack hoe (sorry . . .). But seriously, that one looks pretty serious – almost an adz.

January 6, 2010 at 11:29 am e
jenh says:

Oh, you have no idea. The puns are waiting to be pounced on.

[New life for an old sled; beginner's mistakes, and luck](#)

December 25, 2009 at 12:43 pm
Posted by jenh under family, farm life
Tags: Christmas, goats, sled, snow

If I remember one thing about this holiday season next year, it will be walking through the blowing snow and the snowdrifts to spend Christmas with my nephews and in-laws across the road. Uphill. Twice.

Or it will be the lasting sensation of winds at 40 miles per hour slamming against us, the barn, the drafty house. The winds carry the snow seemingly for miles. The pasture is one gray-white blur of blowing snow. I can imagine the Dirty Thirties, the dust storms, on a day like today. An unrelenting barometric fury. This is rare weather – the first time in 20 years for a blizzard like this, one weather report said.

The goats haven't moved for more than 24 hours; they are clustered with the calf and the dog in a refuge of straw at the interior of the goat shed.

We are still so new at this. There are things that we know would make our lives (and those of our livestock) easier, such as heaters for the water troughs. Alas, we need to lay electric wiring below the water tanks for that to work — goats are notorious nibblers. So for a few cold days in early December, we poured warm water from the tap into five-gallon pickle buckets. We loaded them into an old wagon and hauled them to the goat shed, then poured them into the tanks and broke up the ice. The ice, a friend once said, is laughing at us as we turn to walk away.

The Radio Flyer won't rumble through the drifting snow, so we reached for a new solution: the sled my father used as a child. Long and sleek, it glides over the snow. We are using it to carry water buckets, grain bags and bales of alfalfa, hay and straw. What could be more festive than dragging a sled through the snow to feed and water the animals, right?

Someday I will look back at the first two years, the ways we got by without education or training or experience, and laugh. For now there are snowdrifts to conquer.



[Time loop](#)

Posted by jenh under random observations

Tags: sunrise, time

1 comment

The sun's morning march from June to December is one long retreat along the eastern horizon. Each day, the leading edge of the sun peeks over the treed ridge more to the south and later. Then beginning Dec. 21, the process reverses: one long ascent, a slide to the north. Stitched together, the morning light changes would look like one long sunset to the south and one long rise to the north.

I observe this progression from the goat pen in heat of July, when the sunrise is early enough to illuminate 6 a.m. chores. By October, I'm driving into the sunrise en route to work. I look forward (in)to the light either way.

Time merges into a graceful oval, a solstice anchoring right and left.

I wrote about my perception of time in an essay that I should dig out of a box. It stuck out in the essay like something tacked on to the main subject, whatever that was. I didn't use an oval. It was a racetrack, wasn't it? No, it was a mental quarter-mile track, such as one wedged between high school football bleachers. December, January and February camped along the upper straight

edge, with March, April and May banking left, the summer months on the next straightaway, and on around the loop to December again.

Age condenses time; I move faster around the loop.

Response to [Time loop](#)

January 6, 2010 at 3:40 a.m.
Joe Harrington says:

Cool, Jen. Even I – as a non-pickup driving, non-trailer towing “city” slicker, can relate to this one.

[Trailers are My Nemesis](#)

December 20, 2009 at 3:05 pm
Posted by jenh under farm life
Tags: driving, trailers, trucks



[--a circle story. A beginning, and a conscious loop back to the end. typical of essays, not so much of blogs -- though that doesn't mean it isn't allowed.]

Driving used to terrify me. The only traffic signal in my hometown was a single flashing yellow light in front of the courthouse. Passing a driver's test there didn't require the skills for stoplights,

multiple turning lanes or congested high-speed freeways. Thus when I moved to a larger city, I lacked the confidence to get behind the wheel. Only when I was 21, when the distance to the grocery store and work proved prohibitive to walking, did I finally learn. I spent half of a night in an empty school parking lot backing up and going forward over and over until I could drive a standard transmission.

You would hardly know now that I feared driving so much. I'm at home on the highway or in a major city, and I can parallel park in the tightest of spaces with ease.

If only I could back up a trailer.

In my mind, backing up should be a simple process. If I pull forward in a straight line, the trailer taunt on the ball hitch behind me, I should be able to go in reverse along the same line. Alas, the ball hitch breaks the imaginary line in the middle, giving the trailer a movement all its own.

The magic of backing up a trailer requires the inverse of right and left. When you back up a vehicle without a trailer, a turn of the wheel to the right moves the body to the left. But with a trailer hitched to the back, a turn to the right turns the trailer in an arc to the right as well. I don't know my right from left when I'm standing stock still, let alone backing up a trailer (I should have paid more attention to Sesame Street). Add to this any well-intentioned person standing outside the vehicle telling you to "go left—no, no, no, left!" and it's a recipe for tension. Maybe even divorce.

Two weeks ago, we drove one county north to pick up 30 bales of hay for our hungry goats.

Despite directions from Mapquest, I got lost. I missed a key road twice and we were 45 minutes late. When we finally got to our destination, I tried not to panic: I would have to reverse the trailer in a half-circle about 15 yards to the opening of the barn without jackknifing, hitting the farmer's horse trailer or knocking into his fence.

The young farmer patiently gave me instructions from my left. He even offered to do the driving for me, and I said yes, but still put the truck in reverse and gave it my best shot. And again. Pull forward, repeat. I could see Jess on the right side, looking worried I'd hit the other trailer. I followed the farmer's advice, and on the third try pulling all the way forward to the crest of the driveway, I got it right. We loaded up the hay, paid the bill and left.

Now back at home, the trailer is somewhat adjacent to our barn, abandoned at the awkward angle that I left it that day after five attempts at backing up. Apparently I need to find another empty school parking lot.

Wave to Me

December 19, 2009 at 2:03 p.m.

Posted by jenh under farm life

Tags: tradition, trailers, trucks

Where I grew up, people in trucks (and sometimes in cars) communicated with oncoming vehicles using the two-finger wave. Your hand never leaves the steering wheel to wave; instead, hand resting around one o'clock on the wheel, you raise two fingers in salute. To me, this gesture conveyed a secret code. It was more than a courtesy. It meant that both drivers belonged on this road. They may have nothing in common, but they both drove vehicles in the country. Therefore,

they each had the potential for a shared work ethic, communal politics and similar worldviews.

Maybe that memory was in my subconscious when I bought my first pickup truck more than 10 years ago. It's a light-duty 1996 Nissan that ferried us around town and for many years was the essential tool for annual apartment moves (a rite of spring in college towns). It has a beat-up silver camper shell, and the bed sports a plywood board covered with carpet. This makes it a reasonable camping cabin on the road. It has seen better days: the ceiling liner in the cab tore down last year. Only one speaker works. Broken passenger side door handle. Needs a new ignition. But it runs and still gets us to town. The only thing I won't ask of the Nissan is to haul a trailer.

For that purpose, we have the "good" truck: a 12-year-old forest green Ford with a matching camper shell. The exterior tells the stories of only a couple of minor fender-benders. I bought it about three years before we moved to the farm.

The countryside I live in is much more urban than the one I grew up in. Driving a truck is not enough to signify that belonging I remember. I might be just another person headed to my day job in town. Now, add a trailer to that truck – especially one loaded with bales of hay – and suddenly there it is. The wave.

I find this comforting, like I am passing some kind of test. I'm not a wannabe farmer; I do real work. We have livestock. It means we get up before dark and take care of them. Animals provide part of our livelihood, and they dictate the contents of our days. To a passing vehicle, this puts us

instantly into the same camp as dairy farmers up at four. Not that we're anywhere in the same league.

The particle idea

December 17, 2009 at 7:12 pm

Posted by jenh under blogging

Tags: Lipstick Traces, New Yorker, Sasha Frere-Jones

3 comments

Another what-is-art perspective: Sasha Frere-Jones, pop culture and music critic for the New Yorker began her Oct. 21 [column](#) by exploring what defines an art form in music. Determining its lifespan is ludicrous. Real country is dead. Punk is dead and has been for 20 years. Rap has become a niche genre. Pick one and argue – no one will agree.

Frere-Jones brings up a book I need to read, Greil Marcus' "Lipstick Traces," which she said is about the life of an idea – the spirit of punk over time. It shaped her critical thinking process: "What is a piece of work trying to do? What if that outcome is achieved by something else entirely?" Art that seems edgy at the time is eventually adopted and recognized within the Mainstream Art World. The graffiti that has migrated to museum galleries had its roots in a form spray-painted on trains and buildings.

Here's the idea that I leaped on: "You don't track a particular form, but instead track the intense quality (the particle) that drew you to the form. That particle will eventually migrate and settle into another form (or ritual) once the original form has run its course."

Oh, the possibilities that appear when I apply this particle idea to writing! Letters that people sent to each other and diaries of the 18th or 17th century were forms of communication. Today they are in museums and libraries and we mine them for the lives they reveal. Livejournal, Blogger, WordPress – these are the new form, or at least the frame. Will blog posts and emails be in future electronic archives, saved as the real evidence of communication and social relationships circa 2009?

I think that the particle concept gets closer to what I have been wondering about the form of blogging. I am a writer who studied the essay form and wrote essays for years, then turned to the blog for my thesis. I have wanted to argue — and tentatively asserted — that blogging could be a new genre, just as the novel was a new genre. I would like to see it become one of the Allowed Genres (novel, poem, short story among them) in English departments.

The column ends with these two of three question sets:

- 1) What makes a genre something and not another thing? Why are we calling it by one name and not another? Is the genre still entirely itself, or has it become something else?

- 2) Does the genre have widespread appeal and recognition? Is it dominating popular discussion and pushing other genres forward?

It's delicious to think about this in the context of blogging.

Responses to [The particle idea](#)

December 22, 2009 at 11:45 p.m.

Joe Harrington says:

The instance of graffiti migrating from subway wall to gallery wall is an interesting example, in that it is a form that stands out in both places. It's pretty clear when a wall has been tagged – and how much artistic effort and skill went into it. When it's brought into the museum, it's still art, but establishes a different relationship to that term. (Whether it's oppositional or co-opted is another matter).

Jen, what does Frere-Jones mean by “particle”? More importantly, what do you mean by it? Like, a meme? Or an aspect of a form?

I think time is a crucial factor in all of this – esp. the journalistic or epistolary aspects – and that will be fodder for a post on my blog.

Do you **really** want to go into the rabbit-warren of generic taxonomy? I'm not sure that represents progress.

December 31, 2009 at 6:44 p.m.

Jules Shores Says:

Very interesting. A lot of people want to categorize/slot graphic novels as a genre, but in all actuality it is a format for relating a story. And as Joe wants to slot graffiti as an artform/genre the worst case scenario for graffiti, not to be confused with the archaic graffiti, is the ever omnipresent roadside billboard that is/has become a visual blight to our roadscape and landscape as well as becoming an integral part of our diurnal visual experience. Does it persuade us to buy what it is trying to sell? Do we really want to call that art? But it is sadly a genre. So what makes a genre is a reflection of what one is not only seeing, but what one is participating in or just watching, making relationships with and juxtaposing the ideals, ideas and reflections of everyday life with a personal “tweek” and the symbolism and icons of the times. A genre depicts/reflects a personal insight into an everyday, common experience. It can be a physical manifestation, conceptual, emotional, abstract, musical, visual, written. It can be ugly. It can be beautiful.

January 5, 2010 at 2:32 p.m.

jenh says:

Thanks, Jules. Genre is a vague concept to me. I use it in a more familiar sense than the formal literary definition, but I need to dig out some old textbooks. If a genre, as you said, depicts or reflects a personal insight into an everyday, common experience, how does that apply to the novel, the short story, a drama? Maybe I'm being too literal. I like the breadth of your definition, though it seems like I could fit anything into it. People cling to

boundaries and definitions.

[The blog as a new 17th century salon](#)

December 17, 2009 at 6:38 pm

Posted by jenh under blogging

Tags: art, blogging, MFA thesis

2 comments

Recently the New York Times [featured](#) tiny homes-turned galleries. They are sparse places where living occurs but are intended for display. A gallery opening takes visitors to the immaculate bedroom where the gallery host/apartment renter otherwise sleeps. Celebrity or pop culture art adorns the walls of one apartment, and cast-glass sex toys poke out of cast-glass handbags in another — an exciting backdrop for morning coffee, the author noted. But also on view is a beer can on a plastic chair, and a neatly arced pile of shoes: visitors are corrected that no, this is not art. Sometimes it's hard to tell when everything is on display.

This is one of the many lines of the article that caught my eye: “Like 17th-century salonistes, home gallerists use the intimacy of their homes – or other people’s – to incite discussion and forge a deeper connection to the art.”

Think of the blog: It is an intimate space. I have invited you into it to see where I live, how I think, and what makes me and my writing tick. You're invited to discuss it with each other and with me. If it is art or art in progress (peek in over the author's shoulder, watch the stroke of the keys), and you get to know the author/artist, does that forge that deeper connection? I think it does.

This brings up Joe Harrington, who had a series of posts on blogs as art or not art (final one [here](#);

or start [here](#)). Early in the discussion, I had argued that art requires context: a single paragraph extracted from a blog, to be judged as art/not art is no different than isolating a single paragraph or sentence or word from another larger work (or for scale, A line of A Poem) and making the same judgment. Extracted, it may be devoid of meaning.

Following a visit to an art museum, which houses works by Warhol and others who upend the everyday, he [said](#), “Either way, it seems like space/place – esp. public v. private is a crucial determinant” to the art, or in this case, whether a blog is art. The frame, the context (much larger than the context I mentioned above) is that of the public, sanctioned form — the degree earned, the MFA project turned in.

Perhaps this is the context I am looking for. Something that sanctions this As Official Art.

In the meantime, I turn back to the example of the apartment turned gallery a la 17th century salon: is it art because I say so? Because it results in a product to be shared with the public? Because it forges an intimate connection with the artist?

To be continued.

Responses to [The blog as a new 17th century salon](#)

December 22, 2009 at 11:40 p.m.

Joe Harrington says:

How about “BlogArt”?

Anyway, just another word re: Context and the avant-garde. There are varieties of art (like

pop art) that play off of the Institution of Art by placing a familiar, everyday item within it. Then there are those (like some performance art, public sculpture) that place an anomalous object in a familiar, everyday place. But a familiar, everyday item in a familiar, everyday place – well, I suppose I could, in my own mind, think of it as art – or frame it as art by taking a photograph, painting a picture, etc. But most folks don't notice.

So, I think that the art work has to do something to or with the context. If the blog is art, then presumably it's not going to read like other blogs. It's going to de-familiarize the form. In fact, Brecht might be a good place to go to think about all this.

January 5, 2010 at 2:47 p.m.

jenh says:

Joe, you're going to think I live in a cave, in the dark, with nothing to read. I'd never heard of Bertolt Brecht until that reference. A quick Internet scan yields "Brecht had no desire to destroy art as an institution; rather, he hoped to 're-function' the theatre to a new social use." The high art/pop culture debate. –I didn't set out to revolutionize blogging, but to see how it worked for creative non-fiction writing. Inverting the form would mean understanding it thoroughly and then turning it on its ear. I'm not there yet.

Blog/art = bloggart = possibility

December 17, 2009 at 4:43 pm

Posted by jenh under blogging

Tags: art, blogging, Urban Dictionary

A friend posts a status update to Facebook entitled "bloggage" whenever she has a new post, and then links to her blog. At first, I liked the term. I am fond of other slangy -age words, such as toolage (acquiring skills or tools) and billage (piles of bills to be paid). The addition of -age softens the root. Makes it less serious. It takes away the sting of a pile of bills and renders them less important. And that is the point: bloggage shrugs off the writing. "Here it is, read it if you'd like to, not that I'm trying to push you to it." It also rhymes too much with and calls to mind garbage.

Therefore, I propose bloggart, and I'm taking it back from [Urban Dictionary](#). UD proposes the

term as a noun that means one who “flogs his blog in every forum.” Flog? Surely they mean highlight or boast, something close to braggart. No matter, as I will redefine the term for myself. (In the online world of popular opinion as The Decider, there are three votes approving this submitted definition on UD to five votes down, so the naysayers win for today).

Bloggart could be defined as a person: a person writing a blog as art.

So, what do you do in this thing we call life?

I'm a part-time bloggart and farmer. You?

But its better use is as a noun describing a blog striving to be art, or that has the context of art, whether it's telling the world about you and your five house cats or poems or a fictional blog of frogs or an exploration of how a farm dream and a thesis become reality.

Of course, trying to define bloggart means trying to define art. A different post.

Where were you a year ago?

December 10, 2009 at 2:57 a.m.

Posted by jenh under family

Tags: death, family, John, tradition

Things I remember about [John](#):

His presence. Powerful. Sonorous voice. He intimidated me for years until I learned how to tease him.

Loved to tell off-color jokes he picked up “at coffee” or at tractor church. Real groaners, sometimes (okay, be honest) racist ones.

Nothing perked him up like grandkids.

Short-tempered. Terrible teacher; best if you watched what he did from a distance.

How did he know all that he knew? How to disassemble a rusty 1956 tractor and turn it into a gleaming red Farmall worthy of chugging in the Power of the Past tractor parade. How to weld. How to use the tools that sit largely unused, waiting for us to discover them in the shop.

I remember thinking that I was an accepted member of the family the day he had me help pick up and haul out rocks out of a cow shit-strewn field. Now that’s family acceptance.

At this point, these 16 years later, I call him my father-in-law, though the law in that phrase doesn’t exist. He died a year ago this week, leaving us with unanswerable questions about how to run the farm. We struggle with the responsibility and get frustrated periodically.

He wouldn’t have taught us anyway. I like to think that he’d be proud of us.

If I could tell you what I’ve learned

December 9, 2009 at 10:06 p.m.

Posted by jenh under blogging

Tags: blogging, MFA thesis, research

3 comments

I consult a lot of books and magazines for farming advice. To guide me through the requirements

of a college education, I rely on people. Recently, one of them said:

“Your project is really challenging in that a thesis or dissertation represents a fixed reflection of your level of accomplishment and knowledge in a particular area at a specific point in time. Instead, you are considering building on technologies that are designed to grow beyond that boundary and in a form that is not necessarily fixed and a topic that could grow and take different shape over time.”

That’s a head-scratcher. Is a thesis a fixed reflection of accomplishment? I think of tests as fixed reflections, but even those aren’t accurate. Writing develops over time. Most MFA students incorporate at least part of what they’ve been writing for several years in workshops into their thesis.

Maybe it’s the “instead” in the statement above. Perhaps I am doing both: taking advantage of a flexible medium that allows growth over time, but also shows what has been learned over several years.

The idea that I could delete the whole thing, or that WordPress could someday fold or be bought or dissolve, is part of the attraction. I never wanted to write a thesis that was fixed, a product that sits on a shelf in the reading room of the English department. There’s something energizing in its temporary, flexible nature.

That sounds more harsh than I mean it to.

I once interviewed a retired nutritionist who gave scholarship money for graduate students in social welfare. She said she was tired of graduate research that came up with solutions based on theory, instead of based on talking directly to a community and involving its members. That research formed theses that “sat on the shelf,” dusty, forgotten. Even though I’m in a completely different field, that practicality has stayed with me. If it doesn’t involve you, move you, make you think or feel or take action, why bother?

Responses to [If I could tell you what I’ve learned](#)

December 14, 2009 at 4:15 a.m.
Joe Harrington says:

“If it doesn’t involve you, move you, make you think or feel or take action, why bother?”
Indeed so. But lots of printed books (even unpublished theses) have done all those things for me. I don’t think “aliveness” or “deadness” is a function of the medium per se – provided that the writer/artist is doing lively things with the medium, and not just conforming to a dusty, received template. There are plenty of conventional, boring blogs, after all.

I think your comment about the temporal, flexible nature of the blog – and its relation to the archive – is more to the point. It’s relationship to time is different than print. I’m not sure that one is better than the other, but I insist on having both options.

Now the question becomes: how is your writing *making use of* that flexible, ephemeral nature – in a way that you couldn’t, if you were to print all this out and put it between covers?

December 23, 2009 at 3:29 am e
Judy Roitman Says:

Hi, Jen. We haven’t met, but I’ve heard about you from Joe. And can’t help wondering: print is not temporal? Not ephemeral? Cheers.

January 5, 2010 at 2:51 pm e
jenh says:

Hi, Judy, and thanks for your comment. I think that what I was after is the idea that print is physical evidence of writing in a way that electronic media is not. You can burn a book, and it can go out of print. But it has that feeling of permanence in your hands. Electronic mediums seem more temporal than print because they rely on so many other factors to continue their existence. Of course, the second that I argue that electronic writing requires a back-up system and a way of filing it forever, anyone could counter that a library files away and logs a print item the same way. Perhaps this is the wrong track.

[By the light of a nearly full moon](#)

December 4, 2009 at 2:18 pm

Posted by jenh under random observations

Tags: fireflies, moonlight

5 comments

A seasonal sleight of hand: ice crystals on frozen earth shimmered in the deep dark before dawn and recalled the glimmer of fireflies in summer grass.

—I grew up calling them lightning bugs, but fireflies has more two-syllabic elegance. Lightning bugs flashing in arching yellow bromegrass is one of my first memories of rural Missouri. Did I write about it in one of the dozens of spiral notebooks that reside unopened in an attic closet? I wrote about everything, then.

Now I self-censor and edit. I move a cursor across the screen and delete disagreeable passages.

I consider printing out this whole blog, wondering what would happen if this electronic archive disappeared from my life, taking with it memories of ice crystals on December mornings.

Responses to **[By the light of a nearly full moon](#)**

December 9, 2009 at 5:42 a.m.

Chris McKitterick says:

In Minnesota, we called them lightning bugs, too. I love summer here, hillsides twinkling with their visual mating calls. Now I'll recall them when I see ice crystals.

It's beautiful outside tonight, the trees thick and fuzzy with snow. And it's so quiet.

The internet seems so massive and permanent, but you're right: Like ice, it could all transpire into vapor.

December 9, 2009 at 11:49 am e

jenh says:

I waver between a desire for the security of permanence and an appreciation of the temporal. Maybe that comes from growing up with a biologist father who emphasized the natural world's cycles and the length of global time.

Blogs, despite their temporary electronic nature, are a quick and easy attempt at the old standard of permanence, the book. But like a book, they "sit on a shelf," the author temporal and unknown, if no one reads the blog. Thanks for writing.

December 9, 2009 at 2:47 p.m.

Joe Harrington says:

this is probably the best post yet, Jen, insofar as you are thinking about the relation between your content (the world in your actual space, melting ice on tall grass) and your medium (the possibly melting blog).

What's the ground of that analogy between ice and bytes? Or: what does it mean to think of technology in terms of nature (or vice versa)?

BTW, I've been theorizing your project (on my blog), since this is a totally new thing and I'm trying to figure out how to advise. But it would probably be more useful to all of us if you were the one to theorize your own project here. Here on the blog you're theorizing, that is.

December 9, 2009 at 3:46 pm e

jenh says:

Yes. I've been meaning to all week, actually, and though I haven't commented every time on your posts, I'm following them. My plan is to spend much of December – a somewhat calm farm time – on the subjects of blogging, memory, genre, and applying some of what I've been reading. I'm also going to interview a blogger who has published a book and has another on the way about the relationships she has with the two media, and I'll put some of the interview into

the blog. Lots planned for the next four weeks.

December 9, 2009 at 5:51 p.m.

Jules Shores says:

Lightening bugs caught in a jar, feeling guilty, running out into the darker later to free them. Scared that you might have changed/damaged them somehow. Shouldn't they be able to go about their business without my interference? Not that I couldn't absolutely find an exact wonderment in their existence as well as my own. Just as your childhood journals lay dormant in the attic so will your electronic archive/journal, but it will be in the belly of some humongous memory bank where all our future children might have a glimpse of you and me and lightening bugs.

[Check the box](#)

December 1, 2009 at 7:33 p.m.

Posted by jenh under farm life

Tags: Black Friday, catalogs, seeds, Spring

4 Comments

A mailbox jammed with catalogs signals not Black Friday not Christmas Toys but Spring.

Responses to [Check the box](#)

December 3, 2009 at 3:04 a.m.

Joe Harrington says:

as tho to emphasize the gap between the farmers/gardeners and the rest of us . . . ?

December 4, 2009 at 2:54 p.m.

jenh Says

Yes and no, that's the simple answer. All catalogs are trying to get consumers to buy, and most people do a lot of buying at this time of year. But just as a clothing catalog sells an idea to the consumer — that this product will improve their lives, make them feel good, etc. — a seed catalog is selling the promise of renewal. December means our mailbox fills with catalogs for seeds, hatcheries, potatoes and onions, which means that no matter what happened during last year's season, the promise of renewal, the chance to start over, is around the corner. The weeds that overtook the tomatoes are long forgotten when gazing at beautiful red fruits in a December catalog.

December 9, 2009 at 2:33 p.m.

Joe Harrington says:

I guess I was thinking more about the relation of blogger to audience.

December 9, 2009 at 2:48 p.m.

jenh says:

Well, to have an audience, is it best to alienate by stepping apart from the audience? Or to hope the audience sees something that they can relate to, even if their lives are much different?

November 2009

[Wired Chicken House](#)

November 30, 2009 at 7:32 a.m.

Posted by jenh under farm life

Tags: chickens, history



As you whiz by farmland on the highway, you see physical remnants of the past: abandoned farm equipment rusting at the edges of pastures, farm buildings and even houses falling in on themselves. Such a shame to lay waste to what once helped people eek out a living, house animals or raise families.

That's one of the reasons I thrilled at the sight of new electric sockets and light fixtures in the garden shed. It once was the family farm's chicken house. Built on a concrete slab, a small chimney spires out of the center. A wood stove likely exhaled through that chimney while

keeping baby chicks warm decades ago. In the years between, it sat empty or worked as a tool shed.

It's not the shining star of the farm – it needs paint, wall reinforcement and termite-hollowed window sills rebuilt. But the potential is there, and I'll post updates as we rehab the building in the next few months to get ready for our first 40 chicks.

[Good Eats](#)

November 29, 2009 at 7:19 p.m.

Posted by jenh under food

Tags: heritage breed, locavore, Thanksgiving, turkey

We fed and entertained no fewer than six people and as many as a dozen between Tuesday and Friday this week. Vegetarian spinach lasagna, root vegetable pot pie with biscuit topping, and egg, pecan and cornbread casserole for breakfast. Wouldn't have spent my vacation any other way, but I'm now ready for someone else to cook or at least do some dishes.

Our locavore Thanksgiving meal was the gem of the week. The turkey came from a local farmer who raises both heritage birds, including Standard Bronze, as well as the Broad-Breasted White that comprises 99.9 percent of all turkey consumed in the United States. The [heritage bird](#) had a narrower breast, much more muscle (dark meat), and dark feathers. That also made it much more expensive, because it's harder to pluck every last visible pin feather.

Our goals for the turkey went beyond locally raised, or even heritage breed. We sought a farmer who pasture-raised turkeys. A bird that spends almost its entire life on grass instead of in a crate has a richer taste. The meat isn't mushy and doesn't require a processor to inject it with saline, as

they do with the BBWs.

To round out our locavore table, we included salad greens from our garden that have survived the frost, and mashed several pounds of roasted butternut squash with Thai curry and not-so-local coconut milk. We filled many glasses with local wines we picked up at [Holy-Field Winery](#), and loaded up with apple and strawberry pies made from fruits our family had picked, canned or frozen.

To work off that food – and all the goodies everyone else contributed last week – we went to work on Friday on an enormous project to clear the fence of debris. We’re trying to avoid using herbicides to control the grass, favoring weed trimmers and burning instead. It is not the easy way.



[Death of a buckling](#)

November 27, 2009 at 12:32 pm

Posted by jenh under farm life

Tags: death, E. B. White, goats

2 comments

A few months ago I killed a severely injured adolescent rabbit by striking it with a broad wide

shovel. Why, then, can I not make myself to do something similar – end pain – for a dying goat?

I am reminded of the amazing essay “Death of a Pig,” by E. B. White: “I spent several days and nights in mid-September with an ailing pig and I feel driven to account for this stretch of time, more particularly since the pig died at last, and I lived, and things might easily have gone the other way round and none left to do the accounting.”

Just as White’s pig failed to show up at suppertime one day, the littlest goat did not scamper into the yard to see me, and by doing so let me know that his health had changed. By the time I noticed him standing uncertain in the barn doorway, or later, when we saw the signs of anemia, and brown-green excrement stuck thickly to his tail, time may have already run out. I don’t know. “A sick goat is a dead goat” is an adage among those who raise these animals.

He was the runt of four bucklings we bought last spring, the last to wean from bottle-feeding and always lowest in the pecking order. His most memorable trait was poking at people standing in the barn in hopes that milk would appear as it would from his mother. In the last week I have watched the larger two bucklings charge at him so hard near the alfalfa that he has toppled to the side. I imagine that out of my sight, this has been happening for many weeks, increasing the difference in their rapid gain in strength and his weakening.

For his last 48 hours, we isolated the goat in a large pen with fresh straw, alfalfa and water. We turned on a heat lamp and he stood beneath the bulb, shivering. I went to visit several times. Late on Thanksgiving, he spread himself in the straw, back and neck slightly arched. His bleats turned

garbled and warbled. I knelt beside him many times, knowing he was uncomfortable. As though he were a friend, I patted his head and willed him to let go and die.

This may seem like much ado over the death of a farm animal, particularly one that was obviously the weakest of the herd. What bothers me – what, as White said, keeps the goat’s death steady “in the bowl of my mind,” is the fact that I could end the suffering of a partially skinned rabbit crying out in the barnyard, but I could not do the same for the goat. I could not shoot the animal, nor slit its throat, as would have been more humane than leaving him lying there in the clean straw, eyes lackluster, for the final 24 hours.

The sun is beginning to come up, and we’ll soon go to the barn to remove the body. I know that death is a part of farming, as it is a part of all living, but it seems to me that I should have done more, or could have, to either prevent it or make death come more quickly.

Responses to [Death of a buckling](#)

November 28, 2009 at 11:49 p.m.

Elaine Fellenstein says:

You have my sympathy.

December 3, 2009 at 2:59 a.m.

Joe Harrington Says:

This is good writing, Jen. And a topic (life and death, humans and animals) that us non-farmers can relate to.

[Turkey Day dress rehearsal/dressing down](#)

November 25, 2009 at 3:16 pm

Posted by jenh under food

Tags: Elizabeth Kolbert, industrialized farming, Jonathan Safran Foer, Thanksgiving, turkey, vegetarianism

Last week we held a mock Thanksgiving for friends, complete with the [traditional](#) Broad-Breasted White Turkey. The 20-lb bird was a re-gifted gift that transferred from industrial farm to wholesaler to employer to employee to us. We wanted to experiment with a trial bird in the new smoker-grill, before the real day and 11 guests arrived.

In the spirit of cooking an industrially produced animal, I recently read Elizabeth Kolbert's nuanced [review](#) of Jonathan Safran Foer's "Eating Animals" (Little, Brown, and available [here](#)). As usual in her writing, she brings a personal context to the review, from the perspective of one who raises chickens herself. She explores the morality of industrialized food. She focuses on the amount of money and care we lavish upon pets in this country vis a vis our apparent apathy toward the treatment of the livestock that become food on the plate.

"How is it that Americans, so solicitous of the animals they keep as pets, are so indifferent toward the ones they cook for dinner? The answer cannot lie in the beasts themselves. Pigs, after all, are quite companionable, and dogs are said to be delicious," she writes. This is the central question to Foer's book, and one I consider regularly as well.

Kolbert's review captured my attention more than the book she reviews would, I think. It's something in the matter-of-fact, near clinical listing of the facts of our industrialized food system, and how the writing reveals a sense of wonder. She does not judge people for how they eat or their choices, but more focuses on the bewildering ironies that underlie our basic assumptions of how we relate to animals.

Of Foer she is more direct in her judgment, as a review should be. She follows his moral reasoning – that vegetarianism is the only answer – only to watch him undo this perspective by introducing the practices of a heritage breed turkey farmer he has met. He seems to want it both ways – don't eat meat, but support a heritage farmer. She concludes, “We are, [Foer] suggests, defined not just by what we do; we are defined by what we are willing to do without.

Vegetarianism requires the renunciation of real and irreplaceable pleasures. To Foer's credit, he is not embarrassed to ask this of us.”

Back to the bird: An enormous animal, bred to have the maximum chest size, one so large that the animal at full grown cannot support its own weight. Delicious brined, then smoked on the grill for several hours.

These ironies, in other words, surround me as well. We had our trial bird, enjoyed it, and yet knew (or could guess) the conditions that brought it to our plates.

For the actual holiday, I have purchased a heritage bird from a local farmer. I did so for several reasons, which I'll get to later – there are morals, curiosity and research involved.

[Readings on a cold fall morning, first real day of vacation](#)

November 24, 2009 at 9:17 a.m.

Posted by jenh under random observations

Tags: Dementia Blog, Pastured Poultry Profits, Storey's Guide to Raising Chickens, The Hoophouse Handbook, The Letter Scene, the Organic Farmer's Business Hanbook, Weed the Soil Not the Crop

1 comment

-the rewards for taking time to develop this system were twofold: we could now afford to grow staple, storage items, such as onions, carrots and potatoes; and we could devote more time during the busiest months in the market garden to high value perishables and specialty items for restaurant sales and the farmers market.

-ground stakes are generally made of the same pipe as the hoops, but with a swedged, or compressed, end so that the hoops fit over them in a female/male arrangement.

-I think it is unfortunate that we have created a chicken that is so far removed from a normal chicken's ability to forage and fend for itself in the barnyard.

-if the story refuses to end, if the story exhausts the frame called "story," if the story is about the dissolution of story (what we cannot remember is no longer story, but Sappho), if the story is remnant, ruin, then what holds us to it?

-The more room your chickens have, the healthier and more content they'll be.

-how to proceed when, after all, they have met only once, a few evenings ago, downstairs, and from her shy vantage point at the windowsill in the conservatory, though she followed him with her gaze, she could hardly lift her eyes from the gleaming buttons in his jacket?

-exercise one: If you only had \$100 left, what would you do with it? how would you spend it? on what? there are no options for family or friends to help you out – it is truly your last \$100.

Response to [Readings on a cold fall morning, first real day of vacation](#)

December 3, 2009 at 3:03 a.m.

Joe Harrington says:

For me, this is one of the more interesting posts, for two reasons. One is that it gestures toward the non-farm audience – e.g., the fourth-from-last para, as well as the last two. And it makes me want to connect the dots – between the excerpt re: story and the excerpts of story. AND . . . the language in these bits is so sonically interesting – read them out loud .

..

[A rush to feed the animals before dark](#)

November 18, 2009 at 2:17 p.m.

Posted by jenh under farm life

Tags: alfalfa

4 comments

Alfalfa bits stuck in my “good” scarf signal a merge of 9-5 life with farm life.

Responses to [A rush to feed the animals before dark](#)

November 25, 2009 at 12:48 am e

Joe Harrington says:

really cool poem, Jen

November 25, 2009 at 2:11 p.m.

jenh says:

Thanks. I am trying to think in brief snippets and scenes.

Sorry to have been quiet lately; but now I’m on a 9 day vacation stretch and that helps free my brain. Enjoy the holiday break.

November 26, 2009 at 2:24 a.m.

Noel Rasor says:

I love this—you capture so much in a single statement. In my new job I meet tons of public sector folks in our trainings, and I love the intro part of the day. I’ll ask them to talk in groups about some non-work aspects of their lives – without fail there are multiple versions of what you write here. The Dept of Labor inspector who has horses and is

teaching her grandchildren to ride; the SRS caseworker who aspires to be a cake decorator; and so many others. It is such a privilege to be reminded of how wonderfully complex and unpredictable we all are.

November 27, 2009 at 11:33 a.m.
jenh says:

Thanks, Noel. That's true – I suppose many of us juggle in some way what we do for a paycheck with our other passions and interests, whether hobbies or callings. The trick seems to be to find the sweet spot where they are the One Thing. –You'll have to tell me about the new job sometime. -Jen

What it takes to run a farmers market, part 2

November 17, 2009 at 2:18 p.m.

Posted by jenh under the business of farming

Tags: farmers market, market board

1 coordinator
2 community board members
5 voting vendor board members
11 sponsors and advertisers
75 dues-paying members
93 stalls, each marked with a tiny identifying number
12 board meetings
1 annual meeting
1 winter meeting
\$5,040 in membership and advertising fees
sunlight, water and sweat equity
\$21,798.60 provided by members to sell at market
\$16,600 in salary expenses
\$700 for a new tent, dolly and table
Salsalicious, Eggstravaganza, Cooking Japanese, Tomato Tasting, A Taste of Italy and other events
2 rapid market assessments
About 40 musicians
And most important, thousands of willing customers



What it takes to run a farmers' market, part 1

November 17, 2009 at 7:30 a.m.

Posted by jenh under the business of farming

Tags: farmers' market, future plans, market board, Moon on the Meadow

This Saturday will mark the last day of the [local farmers market](#). Held Saturdays from mid-April to almost Thanksgiving, it offers fresh vegetables, fruits, meats, cheese, flowers and crafted items to the 2,000-3,000 people who browse through its parking lot stalls. For those who can't wait all week, there's a scaled-down version offered on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

One of the aspects I appreciate about our market is the festive, celebratory air. It's an event.

People bring friends or company from out of town. They use it as a social venue and run into their neighbors. They get to know the farmers, bakers, soap-makers and even the musicians busking on Saturday mornings.

For the past year and a half, I've been learning what it takes to run a successful market. Or at least, what seems to work here, where the market is comprised of about 100 diverse people whose only uniform commonality is that they sell at market. My education has been in the form of a three-year stint on the market's board.

As a consumer of the farmers' market fare, I never would have guessed at the delicate balance the board strikes between business owners and consumers. There are bylaws, applications, rules, consumer advocacy issues, advertising, special events, expenses, income, and even future planning involved. We try to uphold the integrity of the market, which is based on producers growing or creating what they sell, not on re-sale sales. Sometimes that means saying no.

The board is comprised of a salaried market coordinator, five board members who also are vendors at the market, and community members, of which I am one (the other is the author of [this blog](#)). The vendor members can vote, but the community members and the coordinator cannot. This matters little to a relaxed group that seeks opinions from all.

Going into next year, my perspective will shift again as we expand our farm: we hope to sell at market beginning next April. For the first time, we will be on the other side of the table.



[fall mashup](#)

November 5, 2009 at 7:21 p.m.

Posted by jenh under blogging, farm life, random observations

Tags: barthers, CSA, daylight savings, hoop house, kittens, locavore, Scoop

1 Comment



October: a collective pat on the back for never missing a [CSA](#) vegetable delivery for all 7 months.

Scoop raced across the pasture, the limp and [tortured trip](#) to the city long forgotten.

The [end of daylight savings](#) illuminated morning chores with 5 rosy sunrises in a row.

I love barter: A massive salad spinner exchanged for a few bags of arugula.

Ordered a [heritage turkey](#) for our [locavore](#) Thanksgiving.

The four roly-poly kittens are bigger than cereal bowls and learning how to mouse.

Put blogging and farmwork in one post and vowed to do it again.

[Barn re-siding](#) came to a standstill when the contractor took a break; hoping it's finished soon.

Toured hoop houses at area farms and delayed putting ours up till spring.

Anticipating that the mailbox will soon fill with the future plans of chirping chicks and sprouting seeds (catalog season).

Response to [fall mashup](#)

November 10, 2009 at 6:51 p.m.

Jules Shores says:

Added this to my favorites. They had a special on Good Morning America and they analyzed commercial hamburger beef patties. They found that one, yes one, processed hamburger patty had eight different cows' meat in it. That's nuts.

I love your blog and I appreciate what you are doing. Blogging may just save our society and your prosaic words are poetry for those that live every day trying to make a difference without being prejudiced or judgmental of our neighbors. I live next door to a single, black

woman with four kids and I simply cannot judge her for feeding her kids hot dogs and chips. She is doing the best she can do.

When you live on a farm and provide good food to the community and yourselves it's one thing, but to educate a poor neighborhood about eating/living healthy well that's another blog.

Toward a distant spot on the horizon

November 4, 2009 at 10:18 p.m.

Posted by jenh under blogging

Tags: blogging, college degree, PDFs, thesis

3 comments

The goal is somewhere on the horizon. It's past hosting Thanksgiving at the farm, beyond New Year's resolutions and after the goat kids and the chicks arrive in February. It's probably at a point somewhere between first plantings of cole crops in the ground and the tomatoes poking up under the grow lights indoors.

The goal is the product of this blog, or what comes out of it. The ever elusive thesis and graduation.

I have been a student in higher ed for 15 of the last 19 years of my life (one BS, one double-major BA and eventually, an MFA). Of all of that, this is the most intimidating project I've ever tried to accomplish.

Easily overwhelmed by Big Goals, I tried to ease into thinking of this as a finished product by attending a power point presentation last week. It focused literally on the step-by-step process for submitting a thesis electronically, a necessary procedure in the graduation process. Informative? yes. Inspirational? no. Nothing like watching someone fill in a form click by click on the

projection screen to make me want to gouge my eyes out.

I came away from the presentation with one singular understanding. There is no other way to turn in a thesis at this university (or most others, I bet) except as a PDF. This blog will have to be packaged for said PDF, and it changes the way I think about it. Convert individual posts to individual documents? Would I edit them? How would the links be represented? What will I lose in the conversion from free form association to the linear PDF? What would I do with comments? Much to think about.

Responses to [Toward a distant spot on the horizon](#)

November 9, 2009 at 1:46 a.m.
helliontroy says:

I think you should turn it in as a pop up book. Here's an easy [how-to](#).

That way links could point to other pages, and much of the interactiveness could be preserved. Probably the first ever pop up thesis, too, eh?

November 10, 2009 at 6:44 p.m.
jenh says:

Interesting idea! I'm also exploring something that turns entire web sites into [interactive PDFs](#).

A librarian raised an interesting point: "Your project is really challenging in that a thesis or dissertation represents a fixed reflection of your level of accomplishment and knowledge in a particular area at a specific point in time. Instead, you are considering building on technologies that are designed to grow beyond that boundary and in a form that is not necessarily fixed and a topic that could grow and take different shape over time."

I never thought about it that way. I view it as both a culmination and a live experiment.

[Cash and his harem](#)

November 2, 2009 at 7:25 am
Posted by jenh under farm life
Tags: Cash, goats, kids, mating, nature shows



This is Cash, for whom we violated the [no-name rule](#). It's becoming less of a rule all the time. He is so-named for the cash we paid to bring him to the farm, and for the hope that he lays a foundation for a successful business – cash for kids.

He spent his first three days in August in a separate pen adjacent to the one shared by the female goats. The nannies huddled up to the fence in a cluster of tail-fanning enthusiasm to check out the new guy. He somehow jumped the fence on the third night; we discovered him that morning sleeping in the nanny pen.

His presence helps transform the goat pen into an imaginary television nature program – the kind with a British voice-over thrilling at each twist and turn of courtship. There's a little night music, though it's more like a soft low car honk. A husky bleat. The cologne is a musky stench (at least, to humans). Those horns worn by both parties bring an element of danger to all that nuzzling.

Humans. We read romance and television into everything.

[Three beef thoughts](#)

November 1, 2009

Posted by jenh under farm life

Tags: beef, CAFO, free-range, Steak

1) I cooked a [CAFO](#) beef roast this week. On sale! the sign entreated. I ignored moral qualms.

Three hours later, the roast satisfied comfort food cravings but left a guilty aftertaste.

2) The rejoinder: An unrelated [beef recall](#) from the northeast. A reminder that food without moral qualms is more cash expensive but costs less to the soul.

3) Steak the steer leads a good life. Forty acres to roam. Upon sight, he lumbers up to the fence to get a scratch around his ears.



October 2009

[Dreaming of chicken tractors](#)

October 27, 2009 at 12:02 pm

Posted by jenh under farm life, food

Tags: chicken tractors, chickens

1 comment

I visited among chickens Sunday and fell in love.

Suddenly, what has seemed like one of those, yeah-maybe-someday ideas for the farm seems

possible.

I've read some books: Storey's Guide to Raising Chickens, Chickens in Your Backyard, Storey's Illustrated Guide to Chickens. The renegade gold standard, Pastured Poultry Profits, arrived in the mail today. I've memorized some facts: a pullet's resting heart rate can average 312 times per minute. There are 113 recognized breeds of poultry. Sunlight affects the rate chickens lay eggs and their overall health (duh). I've started planning: Perused some coop plans. Cleaned out the garden shed to make way for birds in the spring.

There's no comparison between my readings and spending an afternoon walking and talking with a farmer and seeing firsthand how he raises birds on pasture.

The farm we visited raises poultry, sheep and the most – dare I say it – darling cattle I have ever seen (it was a heritage breed with a mop of thick black fur curling over the eyes like a pompadour).

All the birds are housed or have access to large “chicken tractors.” These are bottomless chicken wire and wood or PVC pipe structures that sit open to the ground. The houses rest on runners or wheels. Twice a day, the farmer takes hold of the pull rope and drags each house slowly about fifteen feet. The birds scuttle along. At the new location, they eat insects and forage in the grass for a few hours, then move again. The pasture gets fertilized and the birds get fresh air and forage.

Loose, moveable fencing surrounded the chicken tractors, and it also kept in the laying flock.

These clowning copper beauties fluttered around the pens and came to stuttering stops on the rooftops of their fellow birds. They have their own home, a domed chicken tractor with nesting boxes.

Well, the fence kept in most of layers. A few were happier escaping the large pen perimeter in a chicken's game of the grass is always greener. Except it isn't, because the grass is chicken-fertilized-green everywhere.

Experiencing another farm's approach to what we envision for our future makes it so much more tangible. I can't wait to get started.

Response to [Dreaming of chicken tractors](#)

November 6, 2009 at 3:27 a.m.
Joe Harrington says:

ever heard Buff Tarkington and the Transylvanian Naked Necks? They rock.

[Letter the editor, part 2](#)

October 26, 2009 at 7:42 am

Posted by jenh under blogging, communication

Tags: blogging, comments, Joe Harrington, Letters to the editor

The first [comment](#) under the letter to the editor referenced Joe Harrington [referring](#) to this blog.

The anonymous post asserted that posters should be aware that their comments might just become part of the blog, as though that's a bad thing.

(That's also when I realized that I might as well have my full name in [this section](#). Joe had used

my name in his post. If I could write a letter to the editor, surely I could stand by the blog, too.
Done.)

I resisted commenting on the comments for almost a full day. Then I decided to write back (comment number 50, or you can skip the whole string and read it [here](#)).

Here everything comes full circle and I am blogging about a comment in response to comments to a letter to the editor about comments. Now that's a meta conversation!

However, the experience reminds me that all web media has an incredibly short shelf life. It may be archived forever by the site itself or by the Google gods, but the immediacy of a conversation is ephemeral. Writing this post a couple of days later only adds to that.

I ask myself if I really wanted the conversation, the give and take. The letter prompted a conversation, certainly – 52 comments. I stood apart while most of that happened, though.

My intention in writing the letter was to try to convince the paper's editors, and perhaps its comment participants, that allowing or making hurtful remarks at the bottom of an article is just that – it makes friends and loved ones affected by that crime feel affected by it all over again. I'll never convince them that they should stand by their posts with their names, because they love the anonymity – it's not worth arguing about. But a simple functional click to move the conversation one step away, where everyone can yell at each other in another sandbox, would at least preserve a morsel of decorum.

Letter to the editor, part 1

October 26, 2009 at 6:45 am

Posted by jenh under blogging, communication

A few days ago I responded in frustration to the online comment forum of the local newspaper. The technology used by the paper allows posters to comment using anonymous profiles and pseudonyms, which is one issue. The other issue is that they follow directly at the bottom of an article, so that as a user scrolls to the last line of the story the comments follow beneath. In articles about deaths or crimes, the speculation by armchair detectives can go on for dozens of posts, as they did when notice of the accident that killed Rachel Leek appeared the week before.

I didn't know Rachel personally. She worked with many people that I do know, including members of my family. But regardless of the connection, it saddened me to see people dissecting the final moments of her life.

This put me in a strange position. I am an advocate of forums, of public debate both in person and online. Blogs are a great way of growing that kind of community, and the newspaper forum grows a community, too.

Instead of joining that online fray, I turned to the old way of civic engagement: I wrote a letter. I signed my name electronically. I confirmed my identity when the newspaper called to verify.

Then the comments began.

[Adventure in the big city](#)

October 25, 2009 at 7:25 p.m.

Posted by jenh under farm life

Tags: Scoop, Great Pyrenees, veterinarians

A visit to the vet transformed our 100-plus-pound Great Pyrenees into a quaking, quivering pile of fur on Friday. He had been limping for three days. No apparent cause. Normally, the farm veterinarian can come to us, but he is sick himself and referred us to a vet in town. That meant Scoop would endure a ride in the truck and spend time inside a clinic, where the ceiling is much lower than the open sky.

When it comes to animal health around here, there are two different approaches. One is what we call the city vet way: treating the animal not only for its health, but also for the emotional connection of its human companion. We have a city vet for our indoor pets (we did live in town with those animals for all of their lives with us), and they make a lot of money from boutique care. They advocate surgery and specialists, regular blood profiles and once, a \$185 bottle of experimental eye drops for Millie.

The country vets are often less expensive, straightforward and just fine with our goal of keeping an animal healthy and comfortable. They don't seem to go to the extremes of life preservation. Some people I'm sure think it's cruel not to pursue chemotherapy, for example, if a dog is diagnosed with cancer. But animals live in the moment, and they don't have any idea that the one who puts food in the bowl is prolonging life. In such cases, the pursuit of care comes down to what the human wants.

What this human wanted was the country vet, but had to settle for a vet in the city who thought like a country vet. No X-rays for that left foot. Instead, he got down on the floor and felt each toe of Scoop's good paw, then compared it with each toe on the one he has kept off the ground. Probably pulled a toe, he said. In case there was an underlying infection, he administered a round of antibiotics.

In under half an hour we were out the door and standing in the clinic's parking lot waiting for Jess to pick us up. Scoop melted against me. Without goats to guard and cars zooming by on two busy thoroughfares, all he could do was sit at my feet and lean into me, shivering with nerves. A city as small as this one seems like the Big City to this Great Pyrenees. I am beginning to feel the same way.

Detested as pests by many, adored for a moment

October 24, 2009 at 9:52 p.m.

Posted by jenh under random observations

Tags: grackles

As I write this, a week before Halloween, black birds are surrounding the house in a friendlier version of [The Birds](#). A massive flock of [grackles](#) are brawling and chatting in the elm trees. To the north, they lie close to the ground amid the dried soybean plants. West, they carpet the grass and are moving toward the cornfield across the road. Behind us they are a hopping, squawking blur of iridescent blue-green heads and feathers.

I enjoy getting up from the computer to go to the windows and make them scatter, but I don't try it with the enthusiasm it would take to make them leave. I revel in the morning ruckus.

In ten minutes they are aloft to investigate the next farm.

Dismantling the Season

October 18, 2009 at 6:58 pm

Posted by jenh under farm life

Tags: gardening, end-of-season, frost

The descent into fall is happening faster than I remember from previous years. Maybe that's because we only experienced hot weather twice in the summer season, an extraordinary anomaly in Kansas.

Sunday I shuffled out the door sporting my olive green muck boots. Frost shook free from the grass and covered the toe of my boots. The fourth frost of fall and the calendar doesn't yet say November!

We dismantled the tomato patch of cages, T-posts and the graying jute string that connected them all. We dragged the cucumber fence panels along the pasture line to their winter home with the rest of the panels and the equipment. Frozen inedible tiny cucumbers trailed from the fence all along its journey.

I pulled all the hoses, winding them in unwieldy loops for storage in the basement. The camper-trailer now has a new home with the other trailers, making room for our future chicken pen. Jess coaxed the Bobcat and the old Ford tractor into the final act, preparing the new garden bed for a cover crop of red clover and six hundred-foot rows of garlic.

In the past, I have left up tomato cages until almost March. Fall used to happen; I sat back and enjoyed the change of seasons. I might have swapped out summer clothes for warmer sweaters in the closet, but that is as close to shoring up for winter as I remember. Now we are doing what we are supposed to do in hopes of a successful expansion next year.



Melancholy on Sunny Days

October 17, 2009 at 3:56 pm

Posted by jenh under random observations

Tags: death, friends, guilt

Someone you knew died. You are struck by the boldness of color: the brightness of sunlight, the silent blue of the cool morning, the soft mew of kittens in the barn, the company of raucous good friends. Underneath, there is guilt in the pleasure, the acknowledgment of the living, of continuance.

Third Time's the Charm

October 17, 2009 at 1:53 p.m.

Posted by jenh under farm life

Tags: kittens



The only female cat at the farm has had three unsuccessful litters of kittens, or so we thought. Each time, she waddled away for a couple of days and then came back, thinner. No sign of life. Maybe she's one of those cannibalizing momma cats.

Third time around, she surprised us. Nothing says overdose of cute like four 6-week-old kittens peeking out of hay bales.

[Working for a Living](#)

October 15, 2009 at 1:17 p.m.

Posted by jenh under random observations

Every workaday morning following animal feedings and commute, I walk from truck to office.

Along the way I pass a campus employee whose sole job is to keep the plaza clean in front of one sprawling building.

The man vacuums leaves for *hours*.

October must be hell.

[What's more real: the printed word or the blog \[opinion\]?](#)

October 14, 2009 at 2:15 p.m.

Posted by jenh under blogging

2 comments

I've relegated another post to my drafts folder in favor of this quote:

“So blogging is basically having any idea and just putting it out there. It used to be that one had an idea one did some research, developed it, expanded it, deepened it and published something, at the very least a article in the New York Times Magazine or an academic article. Now, just write down in a few paragraphs anything that comes into your head and others will read it!”

This quote was printed below an odd New York Times [blog post](#) asserting that straight women like vampire fantasies because vampires are substitutes for other forbidden loves, such as gay men. I leave that assertion – entertaining though it would be to ponder – and go back to the quote. This is an idea I've been struggling with. As I said, I have a growing pile of half-started posts in the draft folder, all of them on the subjects of blogging as literature, whether blogging is a genre, blogging as art, and the like. I don't have a background in rhetoric, so when I start wading into issues such as genre I think that I am indeed doing what the writer of this quote asserts: just writing something down without it being legitimized by the usual rigors of academia, or as some would argue in other contexts, the rigors of journalism. It's putting it out there, albeit in a different sense than what I've written about [before](#) using that phrase.

At the same time, that's one of the beauties of blogging in the first place: instant publishing.

Think it, write it, publish. Done. Doesn't matter if it's only your opinion.

I think this goes back to the idea that the printed, published on paper word is somehow more legitimate. It's not. (There, I said it. Does that make it true to you?) What blogging requires more over the printed piece is the reader to use their own judgment in evaluating the source. It requires critical thinking skills to evaluate whether there is capital T truth. There's a general assumption that the written, published on paper word is more tested or official, when that could be a false assumption. I'm sure you can think of examples.

Meanwhile, I'll get writing on that idea of legitimacy/literary blogging.

Responses to [What's more real: the printed word or the blog \[opinion\]?](#)

November 6, 2009 at 3:32 a.m.

Joe Harrington says:

Implicit in all of this is that blogging is a dialogic genre. That is, *the audience talks back* – immediately, not through reviews, letters, etc. That's scary and exciting. It threatens to undo the last 250 years of literary criticism.

On my blog, I often post questions: Here is an idea I've been entertaining. Is it worth pursuing, or should I put it out of my mind before I humiliate myself?

November 6, 2009 at 6:35 p.m.

jenh says:

Ohhhh, I love the idea of undoing 250 years of literary history! Posting questions is a great way to get a conversation going. I don't do it often enough.

[Today's haul to the hazardous waste drop-off; remnants of a different farm era](#)

October 13, 2009

Posted by jenh under farm life

4 Comments

2 gallons of wood varnish

1 quart of John Deere yellow paint
1 gallon of oak wood stain, lid rusted
1 jar of all-purpose cement bond
1 jug of Parson's Ammonia Cleaner
1 3-gallon jug of Sevin insecticide
1 gallon can of Silverbrite Alkyd Aluminum All-Sheen
1 gallon jug of muriatic (hydrochloric) acid
1 3-gallon jug of Gly-Star herbicide
3 3-gallon jugs of Poast Plus herbicide
1 gallon jug of Riverdale Weed Destroyer
2 spray cans of John Deere green rustoleum paint
1 bottle of febreze spray
1 3-gallon jug of unknown-named pour-on insecticide for cattle

Responses to [Today's haul](#)

October 14, 2009 at 12:16 a.m.

Teri says:

Aw, I would have kept the John Deere yellow paint. Surely something little around there would have looked great in that color. I bet you had to sneak it out before Jess saw what you were taking, she would have kept it!

October 14, 2009 at 12:28 a.m.

jenh says:

Ha! Surely you know this is a Farmall-red only farm, yes? No need for Deere paint. What do you think of blog posts of lists?

October 17, 2009 at 3:25 pm e

Teri says:

Well, *I* would have used that paint on something even if it were blasphemous.

I personally like posts of lists because I find it interesting what people group together and why. I would read your grocery list if you posted it, quite frankly.

Then again, I am a different sort of audience for your blog – I'm here to stay connected to my friends and to home. I understand this blog is for academic endeavors and you use certain posts for meta reflection on the subject of blogging/writing etc, but I prefer the personal.

I do have to say, I like the blog format for you because it's more immediate. I always enjoyed your writing – when I had the rare opportunity to read or hear you read it. You have a very keen sense of observation and can translate that well with words. I know you spend a great deal of time crafting your writing, which I think is important from an academic pt of view. BUT I selfishly just want to hear about your day to day life on a regular basis and get my fix of the girls out on the farm. Heh.

So keep doing your thing and processing through that MFA — I'm completely biased so when I say I like blog posts of lists, it's less about what fine writing on a blog should be and more about yellow vs red paint.

ps. Clearly it is raining and cold here and I am procrastinating before I am forced to go into my office in the damn city and finish a million page never-ending report that essentially says nothing because it's for the government and they don't like anything too definitive one way or the other and hello, I will be at the Chiefs-Redskins game tomorrow in this same cold and rain probably watching a really shitty game so look for the drowned rat in the Chiefs hat on your teevee. The end and good day to you!

November 6, 2009 at 3:38 a.m.

Joe Harrington says:

Me, too – I adore lists! This one, for instance, will tell the anthropologist of 2100 so much about our life today – esp. life on the farm.

I like the chatty, newsy posts, too – just for the voyeur value, I guess. But I *really* like the posts that link the day-to-day with the larger issues – ones that might be of concern to those who aren't Friends of Jen – or farmers – or Kansans. Is that the ever-elusive goal of art – to connect with people who aren't Us?

Dark Days Bright

October 13, 2009 at 2:26 p.m.

Tags: chores, dark, winter solstice

Posted by jenh under farm life

We've reached the point in the season when I shuffle out to the animals in the dark. It's only 19 days until daylight savings time ends, and a mere 9 weeks and 6 days until the winter solstice.

Though the latter is the shortest day of light for those living north of the equator, that makes it a day of hope to me. From that point on, our time facing the sun increases minute by minute for the

next six months. The growing season renews.

I like testing my senses in the dark. I have learned without the aid of moonlight to navigate to the animal pens, through the gate and onto the concrete pad outside the goat barn. I call for Scoop if he is not already up and barking at my intrusion. In the barn, I make my way to the food bin, feel for the plastic mug, dig into the kibble and empty it into the dog dish, then do the same for the barn cats.

Back outside, I can watch for the approaching dawn. Headlights cut across the pasture and wave over the cedar trees as the morning commute starts up. In the time that it takes Scoop to eat breakfast, I gulp down a mug of sweet tea and decide what I want to accomplish during the day.

It's a long list, but at that moment, darkness preserves all possibility.

[autumn 1](#)

October 10, 1:10 a.m.

Posted by jenh under blogging (edit this)

3 comments

Autumn makes me – and most people, I imagine – reflective. Change, end, beauty, death, looking back on years and decisions. The usual tropes. Somewhere along the way, memory sent me down an E E Cummings path.

Jess and I have a large volume of his work (*Collected Poems, 1904-1962*) and I haven't pulled it from the bookcase in years. I associate his poetry with the thrill of discovery; I read it almost two decades ago with the kind of inquisitive intensity that first love inspires. Youth!

What I found: “to stand(alone) in some/ autumnal afternoon....”

This knocks about my head and I puzzle over the autumn of the poem in the context of my own. I consider the picture above the pasture in the setting sun this afternoon: hundreds of gulls appearing as illuminated boomerangs gliding low to the ground. Above, further layers of flight glittered. Beyond them, more birds shone like drifting confetti.

And then I think, no, no, no, it wasn't like that. It wasn't heaps of overwrought description.

Only birds drawn to the nearby corn harvest, the prick of the first impending frost, and yes, that fatal stillness.

Responses to [autumn 1](#)

October 11, 2009 at 4:06 p.m.
Elaine Fellenstein says:

Nice. Now that it has gotten cold enough to still the copperheads, I will be spending more time walking the paths on our old farm out at the State Park. I love getting deep down in the woods and “listening” to the stillness. Someday I would like to experience this:
<http://littlebloginthebigwoods.blogspot.com/2008/09/last-dance.html>

October 13, 2009 at 6:18 p.m.
jenh says:

Now that I know where your farm used to be, I'll have to look at that swimming hole at the lake entirely differently!

November 6, 2009 at 3:43 a.m.
Joe Harrington says:

“Isn't the famous past definite tense, the ‘past historic’ – that's of no use in life and yet is the rule in that kind of [realist] novel – merely the sudden, definitive glaciation of the most incomplete gestures, the most ephemeral

thoughts, the most ambiguous dreams, sense left hanging in the air, tenuous desires, stray or inadmissible memories?”
- Alain Robbe-Grillet, *_Ghosts in the Mirror_*

[no echo: Warnock's Dilemma](#)

October 5, 6:06 p.m.

Posted by jenh under blogging, communication (edit this)

2 comments

Warnock's Dilemma: sounds like Warlock's Dilemma, doesn't it? No witchery here, just psychology. I just read of this concept in *Say Everything*. Scott Rosenberg describes it as the “peculiar problem of interpreting the lack of response to an online posting.” If no one replies to a post or a comment you author, you don't know why. It could be that no one cares what you wrote. Or that it was so stupid that it didn't merit response. Perhaps no one is reading what you wrote at all. But because you have no way to tell what the answer is, you might be more willing to be incendiary. You might prod hard, hoping to get a rise out of readers, just to affirm that they are there.

I see this phenomenon in our [local paper's](#) online forums, which allow comments to be visible right under the story. People lob textual bombs at each other hoping someone will take the bait. Most posters hide behind pseudonyms, safe from having to face the people that they poke over rape stories, petty crime, racism, abortion, the federal government.

Answering the call of Warnock's Dilemma can be more banal. I periodically post status updates to facebook meant to engage others: *Panic at the disco! I mean, office.... I am entertained by the sight of freakish okra, that, left unattended, grow to the size of bananas...Alas, the mushroom/gnome house collapsed this morning... Today's Acronym with a Sense of Irony Award*

goes to: the Exotic Animal Training and Management program (no joke), also known as the EATM – as in, EAT'M – or, what those circus tigers and lions might say to their trainers.

I get the same feeling when someone replies to a status update as I did as a child when I received a letter in the mail: I think, Aw, you cared! You noticed! Very self-centered on some level, or at least a call for attention. But it's a great excuse to get creative with wordplay.

Isn't the point of social media (facebook and its ilk) and social communication (blogging) to engage with readers, to connect with people? Otherwise it's so much navel gazing.

Responses to [no echo: Warnock's Dilemma](#)

October 6, 2009 at 3:26 a.m.

Noel Rasor says:

I have to add the possibility that no reply also can mean something more positive than the interpretive options listed above. In this short-attention-span multi-tasking world we live in, I frequently zip through Facebook status posts and find that several make me snicker or pause or ponder in some way. But I don't always take the time to add a comment (I'm sure that FB added the "like" option for exactly this purpose—to give us all a quicker way to validate/feel validated).

Even if I don't comment, for me the blogs of people I know, like status posts on FB only way better, serve the purpose of also allowing me to get a peek at their thinking and their ideas, to get a sense of what matters to them. As an introvert who values getting to know a smaller number of people well over having scores of friends who are really little more than acquaintances, blogs are great as I get to learn more about someone who I already think is interesting, and in all likelihood have fodder for a great conversation next time i see them.

Which, I suppose, is why I like the blogs of people I know way more than other blogs I read. It's a way to connect, but I like the possibility of really connecting in person to be an option.

October 6, 2009 at 11:26 a.m.

jenh says:

Exactly, Noel! Rosenberg's list is somewhat negative, and it's a negative behavior

to “bait” people. Blogging – and occasionally a Facebook update – is an opportunity to initiate conversation and connect with others. It can be a positive platform for exchanging ideas and a window into the personality of the writer.

I never gave a thought to the “like” option on FB. You’re right in that it allows people to feel as though they are involved or connected to a person without putting forth the effort of real communication.

Thanks for the conversation!

Locavoring leads to lazy afternoon

October 5, 2009 at 2:28 p.m.

Posted by jenh under farm life, food

Tags: Bluejacket crossing, farm tour, locavore, Lone Star Bison, Sleepy Jean's, Wheatfields

Sunday: chores attempted, the house clean, a pot of vegetable gumbo to share later, the animals in the pasture. We journeyed up the road to round out our tour of local farms. The tour is an annual event and for us, an excuse to see how others manage their farm juggling act. I’m on the lookout for chicken operations. Books with photos of buff and lacewing coloration, brown eggs versus white, fancy coops and chicken tractors are not enough.

We rounded out the day with a meal on Sunday afternoon of hand-crafted chocolates from a [chocolatier](#) around the corner, apples we picked in a nearby [orchard](#), local [bison](#) summer sausage, local goat cheese, [artisan bread](#), and of course, local [wine](#). Decadent? Yes. Particularly so when we could watch the [Octoginta](#) cyclists whirling by in the afternoon sun. A rare, delicious break.

Siding in the rain

October 1, 2009 at 2:14

Posted by jenh under farm life

Tags: rain, siding, thunder

2 comments

By the light of a sunless dawn I piled up sheets of siding. Last night’s windy rainstorms had lofted

the sections of white aluminum from the grass and scattered them near the goat barn. All night the wind and rain strummed the thin metal, evoking the warbling tones of a school play thunder prop. It will prove an expensive performance if the siding is damaged.

Response to [Siding in the Rain](#)

October 1, 2009 at 10:58 p.m.
Joe Harrington says:

Sheet lightening – sheets of siding – school play thunder prop – keep going – where does this take you next?

Are you a Marianne Moore fan? I'm teaching her right now, and I'm fascinated by the way that she can retain an almost 18th c. control of rhetoric and syntax, while at the same time making the most imaginative (bizarre, surreal, stagey, comic, baroque) shifts in subject – all within the same sentence!

September 2009

[blog lit](#)

September 30, 5:55 p.m.
Posted by jenh under blogging
Tags: blog lit, MFA thesis, Susan Schultz
6 comments

This blog is about an experiment in farming on one level and an experiment in writing on another. Or both on the same level, but I've kept them very much either/or. I suppose this is schizophrenic. The storytelling about the farm is comfortable, and I like nesting there. There are other things to tackle, though, for this online experiment to work. My hope is that writing about writing, especially posts about blogging, don't scare you away.

I've been asked how this blog is art, how is it literature. One can graduate with a master of fine arts in creative writing with a collection of fiction, poems, essays, or go for the full novel. So where does a blog fit into this, and how is it art the way that a university might define a novel or

collection to be art?

A few weeks ago, Susan M. Schultz wrote about the question of blog literature:

“So what is blog lit? In order to get to the answer, we need to think about what a blog makes possible. Rather than defining blogs by what people have done with them (written diaries, outed racist politicians), why not think of them as a kind of genre? Just as “the novel” or “non-fiction” or “book” contain multiple generic possibilities, so does the blog. It’s simply a container for writing, but a container that is limited and enabled by its rules and those of the software that helps the non-computer literate to create one.”

This idea of blogging as a container intrigues me, because it keeps all the possibility I associate with other genres. Within the framework, the container, of what we think of a novel, can be a narrative written forward in time, backwards or spliced together. It can be a series of letters, from multiple points of view, as chapters or not. These are just structural variances, “allowed” by readers if the novel is well written, if it is an artful work. A blog be a container with such variation, too.

This is a fundamental question. I typically think of blog posts as having an arc, of telling a story, whether by word or image or both, but I also am drawn to blogs that are mere snippets of thoughts and information. I have resisted writing the latter here, for concern that it is not artful enough. If I go off on tangents or write unedited, on impulse, unimpeded by these rules I have made up for art in the thesis sense, what would I create? This means letting go of the idea that if it isn’t artful

enough, then perhaps it doesn't count as the art of an MFA thesis. I haven't given myself the permission to do anything outside of what I think is acceptable for a thesis. Time to break that rule.

Responses to [blog lit](#)

Teri Says:

October 1, 2009 at 3:17 a.m.

Teri says:

I haven't given myself the permission to do anything outside of what I think is acceptable

Speaking from experience, I find that you are at your best when you step outside the so-called permissible zone. I like the Jen that comes out when unconstrained by convention, rules, and obligation. Sometimes it takes a little Knob Creek and some loud music to get there though, yes? :)

ps. Your post about visiting your dad almost brought tears to my eyes, how I wished I could have joined you all checking out the pond and the woodshop and the complete quiet of that country space. Can you convince Steve to join us for Thanksgiving this year?

October 1, 2009 at 5:58 p.m.

Susan M. Schultz says:

Jen—thanks for the quotation! There's another blog lit MFA project that I know of, here: <http://thetoleranceproject.blogspot.com/>
Very different from yours, hence a fascinating test of the form.

aloha, Susan

October 1, 2009 at 10:54 p.m.

Joe Harrington says:

“this feels like a ‘breakthrough post’” – OK, I'm parodying workshop-speak. But there's a lot of insight in this one.

If I go off on tangents or write unedited, on impulse, unimpeded by these rules I have made up for art in the thesis sense, what would I create? This means letting go of the idea that if it isn't artful enough, then perhaps it doesn't count as the art of an MFA thesis.

Depends on whom you ask. If you're taking your cues from someone with a rather conservative notion of what The Essay is and is not, then yeah. For me, ironically,

following this template ends up making this blog a lot like a lot of other blogs (albeit much better wordsmithing than most). Is that enough? For what? What's "lit"? That word is kind of an honorific – to that extent, it gets in the way.

Tangents, impulse, unimpeded, letting go: right on. Personally, to me, those sorts of things lead to art more surely than all the rules in the rule book of writing. Which I guess is another way of saying I'm a Romantic, not a classicist (gods help me).

IMAGINATION is not incompatible with form. In fact, can lead to new forms.

October 2, 2009 at 9:19 p.m.

Noel says:

It's fascinating to see your navigation process here! I'm thinking back to a few conversations we had at Free State when you were still working to find support for your blog-as-thesis endeavor (yay, Joe!). You pushed and pushed against the department's inertia to be able to go in the direction you've taken, but now I think you're bumping into your own inherited views of what "counts," so to speak, as lit, as thesis, etc. You're used to working (beautifully) with the essay, but it strikes me that a benefit of the blog-as-container understanding is that you can push beyond the essay and post exactly those musings, tangents, impulses, etc. as those will likely provoke the interactivity you want for this site and, I'd wager, plant the seeds—appropriately—for future essays and farm/life endeavors.

October 5, 2009 at 2:11 p.m.

jenh says:

Thanks for the encouragement. I'm generally risk averse – in writing and in life in general, so it takes a lot of motivation, pushing myself and allowing myself the freedom to explore. Getting there, slowly, but the journey is a good one.

November 6, 2009 at 3:49 a.m.

Joe Harrington Says:

Risk averse??! This from the person who is doing a BLOG as her MFA thesis? While holding a responsible full-time job AND running a farm in rural Kansas with her lover??? Maybe that's so much of the landscape that you don't see it any more, but to me, that does NOT say "risk averse." Excelsior!

[Road trip relaxation](#)

September 28, 2009 at 9:47 p.m.

Posted by jenh under family, farm life

Tags: Farkel, relaxation, travel

I have a new appreciation for what it means to leave town. Years ago, pre-homeownership, pre-pets and certainly pre-farm, leaving meant throwing a bag of laundry into the car, making sure I had gas money and leaving. Usually, in someone else's car, too, for this is in the pre-truck era as well.

Instead, for a mere 36-hour trip this weekend to visit my father, there were virtual planning meetings. Find someone to feed the dog and the barn cats. Check. Show them around so they know where to find everything they might need. Check. Learn that the animals must be confined to a smaller space because the fence is down; buy grain and revise farm-sitter directions. Check. Find a way to transport four people and three dogs. Check.

All the last minute errands and hassle were rewarded. I gazed at stars that I can see only at my father's rural Missouri home. These are the same stars that are out-shouted by nearby city light at the farm. I circled the ornamental pond in the front yard to stalk bullfrogs with my camera. I relished the leafy canopy formed by the trees that now tower over the five-acre property. Best of all, I spent all day with family on Saturday, doing nothing: we sat on the front porch from morning until night, talking, playing Farkel and drinking — from tea in the morning to sips of whiskey by evening. At home, I would have fretted about spending all day without attending to one of our many projects, but absent from the farm I could let the responsibility go.

[Pilgrimage to technology](#)

Posted by jenh under blogging, communication
September 23, 2009 at 9:55 p.m.

Tags: Annie Dillard, Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, voice
3 comments

Through the wonders of technology, I finished a book while shucking corn this week. [Joe Harrington](#) pointed out [audible.com](#) to me and the ability to multitask expanded instantly.

Until then, I had never listened to a “book on tape,” as I grew up calling them. Now they are just downloads. I still listened to the book somewhat the old fashioned way, via one stationary computer that talked its way chapter by chapter from the study.

Joe is also the one who recommended I read Annie Dillard’s [Pilgrim at Tinker Creek](#), the first book I downloaded. It is, as the author points out in one of two afterwords, one of those “required” books that an adult might pass up because they see a high school student toting it around; the fact of it being required reading might lead people not to read it.

I’m not in that camp, but I will admit skepticism. Another of her works, [The Writing Life](#), I found difficult to get into when, yes, it was required reading for a class years ago. I need to give it another chance now.

When listening to a book, there is a single voice. I began to hear that professional reader’s voice as echoes in my sleep. Usually when I read, I hear the different personalities of sentences, whether it’s a single-perspective memoir or a novel full of characters or a blog. The effect of a single audible voice took that away, and I was left with a consistent, constant voice. If my attention didn’t trail off into my multitasking, that singular voice forced me to pay closer attention to the details of the sentences and the ways that Dillard would take the tiniest details and broaden

them to questions of beauty, truth and god.

I kept thinking that like my own writing, the sentences were at times overwrought. In a 1999 afterward, she acknowledges this and chocks it up to the inexperience of youth. I have no such excuse.

Dillard wrote Pilgrim the year I was born. I think about this 24-year-old in 1972, and the events of that time for women, in war, in politics. Her close examinations linger in my mind as I look closely at the insects, the behavior of the goats, the lines of the pasture and the fog settling into the valley, and explore how to express them in words.

Responses to [Pilgrimage to technology](#)

September 25, 2009 at 11:42 pm
Elaine Fellenstein says:

I'll have to check this out. I have been downloading free public domain audio books from Librivox.com for a while now. Spent the summer weeding to Walden, Alice in wonderland and Don Quixote on the Ipod.

September 30, 2009 at 9:29 p.m.
jenh says:

I like audible, but like Netflix I now feel the pressure to keep downloading. I need to look into the next one. Too bad I don't have hours of canning to do while listening to it!

October 1, 2009 at 10:42 p.m.
Joe Harrington Says:

You can actually request a "break" in your membership of three months. I did that – I ran out of good ideas for books, I got hooked on free poetry reading downloads at PennSound, and I discovered Napster.

[A visual explanation of culinary chaos](#)

September 22, 2009

Posted by jenh under farm life

Tags: home-canning, tomatoes

1 Comment



Response to [A visual explanation of culinary chaos](#)

September 28, 2009 at 12:25 a.m.

Elaine Fellenstein says:

Nice rack.

[Hiatus](#)

September 22, 2009 at 12:06 p.m.

Posted by jenh under blogging, farm life

Tags: blogging, goats, tomatoes, writing | (edit this)

1 comment

The last two weeks: a blur.

I could blog of individual events, of episodes. That's often my choice.

But today I choose a nearly unpunctuated mass of blanch tomatoes peel tomatoes pick okra garden spiders! chop okra pick beans pack stewed tomatoes in jars wait wait water boiling need more web site content read cold antler farm blog farmers' market rain baby goats escape pick

cucumbers listen to the end of Pilgrim make pickles pick tomatoes praying mantis! moles tearing up the yard bees dying feed Scoop feed Millie orb weaver where's black cat? walk Millie orb weaver prep for leaving town foggy morning dinner with friends boil tomatoes press tomatoes into juice beer on the porch five amazing sunrises nephews and the family at the farm trim goats' hooves attend antique tractor show think about my father in law look for a chance to go apple picking cold snap shuck 300 ears of corn can corn wonder at the yellow moon leaves dropping.

Writing, it is apparent, didn't make it into the fold. I'm back now.

While I was out, fall arrived – today, in fact, is the Autumnal Equinox, with nearly equal parts day and night.

Response to [Hiatus](#)

October 1, 2009 at 10:38 p.m.

Joe Harrington says:

cool, Jen.

I esp. like the way the BIG sentence begins as though it will be a typical expository sentence and then blam! we get hit with the same blur of stuff. And the way “web site content” and “cold antler” are juxtaposed. And “yellow moon leaves dropping” would make a great poem!

[Before, and now](#)

September 11, 2009 at 6:19 p.m.

Posted by jenh under farm life (edit this)

A little over a year ago, I wrote the post below on a now dead/disabled blog. It puts into perspective where I am now, a year-plus into this farming venture.

“...I offer here a bit of unsolicited advice, should you be so foolish as to take on the following simultaneously: a high-energy job, graduate school, remodeling not one but two bathrooms at the same time, learning how to blog, becoming a landlord, planning for a farm, and keeping your sanity — over a period of about two months. Patience. Will. Be. Tested.

Here’s what can happen, in just two weeks of that timeframe. First, the remodeling gods will laugh at you and throw hideous problems in your way like a poured shower pan of concrete that can’t be replaced by something prefab/standard. The washing machine breaks, followed by a toilet that spontaneously cracks in half, stem to stern. Then the compressor goes out in the fridge, what my repairman humorously called “a massive stroke” from which it will not recover (that was \$53, just to get the death certificate). I swear it’s like we’re on some Truman-like stage, being toyed with (I picture it as the work of evil cats and don’t ask why).”

Of course, there have been trying times since moving to the farm, too. Like the day last spring when the riding mower became mired in the mud along the north edge of the garden. Then I got my truck stuck in the same muck trying to pull out the mower. Next, Jess’ plan to use the Bobcat to get the mower out had the same result and nearly buried the skid loader’s tires. Three hours of cussing and fuming came to an end when the calvary arrived – a friend with a bigger truck, a tow rope and beer to boot.

The lesson: avoid the puddles. Learn from mistakes. Look for the humor and the absurdity in everyday life.

Foggy mornings are becoming the norm

September 11, 2009 at 5:52 p.m.

Posted by jenh under farm life

Tags: fog, Millie

Millie and I meandered through the fog this morning for the morning ritual. Tethered to my arm, she walked in the cast of my long dawn shadow. Behind us, two trails in the dewy grass weaved paused veered like snail traces across the pasture.

If love were a tomato

September 9, 2009 at 2:34

Posted by jenh under family, food

Tags: home-canning, tomatoes

My mother is with me when I [home-can](#) tomatoes. She stands next to me and smells each tomato after I've cut away a small spot, to make sure the decay has not spread. This part of the ritual confounds people who have observed it. They smell nothing, they notice no difference between red and rot. Perhaps I alone share with my mother the same super-sensitivity to bruised tomato flavors.

She carried a near fanatical love of tomatoes. With a radar-like sense, she peered out of the car in June, scanning the roadside for vegetable stands with the first fruits of the season. Upon finding a stand, she would pull over and eagerly look at the boxes of red orbs for sale. One brown paper sack of tomatoes was not enough to keep her from browsing at another truck farmer's stand further up the highway.

My mother taught me to pick one tomato perfectly red, and to carry that example tomato around the garden for comparison. Anything less than that shade should wait to be picked another day. Were she alive, she would tell me that I picked too many with flecks of orange. But picking them underripe is the only way to save them in a season of cool, damp weather and ravenous grasshoppers.

The summer before her death, she enjoyed 50 plants, the largest number my father had ever planted. The harvested tomatoes covered the counter, the oak kitchen table, the wood floor of the dining room. My brother and I made an emergency trip home to make spaghetti sauce and can tomatoes for three days. She beamed at us from her resting spot on the couch.

These last weeks of August and early September have been the height of tomato season for Jess and I, and we have put up quarts of roasted garlic and basil sauce, slender juliette tomatoes that take hours to peel, stewed tomatoes with peppers and onions, and tomato juice. The work of blanch, core, peel, simmer, stir gives me hours of quiet reflection.

Bees on the move

September 3, 2009 at 3:10 p.m.
Posted by jenh under farm life
Tags: bee removal, beekeeping, bees
1 comment

I first learned about [colony collapse disorder](#) when I wrote an [essay about bees](#) and death (theirs, and my mother's). Three years after it came to the public's attention, though, the disorder has popped up in the news again. This time, it's because [scientists](#) have determined that it is not caused by a single pathogen, but several culprits. This probably matters little to the bees of the

farm, who seem to have natural resistance to mites and disease.

If we had been able to leave them in their [cozy barn colony](#), we would have. Last weekend, Jess and her brother pried open the door to bees' home and carefully transferred them to a new one.

First, Jess and her brother dressed in white, a calming color for bees. She donned the one borrowed bee hood, and he sported a white turtleneck pulled up to his nose and a white bandanna.

Next, they pacified what would surely be an angry hive. Into the cone-shaped smoker they put paper and damp leaves, then lit the debris on fire. The squeeze box of the smoker ushered plumes around the bees.

They popped off the barn boards with a crowbar. An entire city of workers, drones and their master the queen filled the cavity — 19 combs in all.

As beginners will do, Jess and her brother made mistakes at first. They abandoned a plan to vacuum the bees from the hive using a new shop-vac when it dismembered the bees sucked into the chamber. Instead, using a putty knife, they quickly sliced the combs and placed them in bee boxes.

Over the next few days, we watched the bees in their new garden-side condo. Most seemed to take to the new location and began sealing up the hive gaps. Others, however, required more convincing. A group of them went back to the old hive cavity in the barn.

At dawn, armed with flashlights like thieves, we slinked out of the house and up to the barn. Jess scraped off the resting bees into a large canning pot. The captured bees erupted into activity. They pinged like popcorn against the lid. She dumped them into the bee box and backed away.



On the third day, bees again returned to the barn. We debated what was going on – had a new queen hatched and now we had two colonies? But then something mysterious happened. In daylight, when tomatoes preoccupied me in the kitchen, the stubborn bees in the barn simply disappeared. We think they went to the bee boxes to join their brethren. We'll wait a few days before pulsing smoke across the boxes to verify this.

Thus with no training, we are now beekeepers. Our first chunk of comb, salvaged from the piles of comb placed in the boxes, is oozing in a plastic bag on the kitchen counter. To taste a dab of its honey is to know unadulterated sugar bliss, far removed from the ubiquitous chemical too-sweet high fructose corn syrup that lurks in most prepared foods.

We hope this rogue colony will continue to resist pests and disease, just as it has for years without intervention.

Response to [Bees on the Move](#)

September 5, 2009 at 1:19 a.m.

Teri says:

Good job on the bee situation, would have loved to have watched the process. I hope they take to their new box – having real honey is awesome.

Have a good long labor day weekend, what I wouldn't give to have some farm time right about now. Say hey to Jess and good luck with all that tomato canning!

August 2009

Thoughts illuminated by approaching storms

August 27, 2009 at 5:07 p.m.

Posted by jenh under family (edit this)

3 comments

I could go meta (or mental) and describe why I wanted to write this way, but I've decided to invite people into my head for a peek at process another time. This is a forum for experimentation, after all.

–Last night I woke up to the sound of clicks slipping across the hardwood floors. Shuh-click shuh-click shuh-click shuh-click. I stirred easily. Sleep had eluded me most of the night, punctuated by unfinished to-do lists and thick humidity. I waited out my insomnia anticipating the north wind of a pending cool front.

Bold bands of lightning illuminated the shuffling culprit, our elderly housedog. Millie had overcome near blindness and arthritis to make her way gingerly up the 13 stairs, around the railing, down the hall to our room in the dark. Her clattering paws approached the bedside.

A hemorrhage a year ago filled her left eye with blood, blocking her ability to see from that side.

Cataracts in the right eye narrowed her field of vision to only discern shadows from light. Deaf, she hears sounds as vibrations through the floor.

Pulsing lightning and the flash of cameras inevitably uproot her from her bed at the foot of the stairs. It's a tattered, flattened cushion topped with an old pillow. There are few places for her to hide from the lightning in a farmhouse with windows unimpeded by curtains.

We adopted Millie as an adult about seven years ago from the local animal rescue. On daily walks back then she nearly pranced to the park a few blocks from our home in town. Thought to be a corgie or sheltie mix, she had a proud, high gait. I catch a glimpse of that style on warm days after she has rolled on her back in the grass, all four legs jousting with the air.

Twice daily she receives a regimen of three pills wrapped in a ball of braunschweiger. At the sound of the pill bottles she wags her tail and at times, drools in Pavlovian anticipation. I have learned to offer the treat with my palm open or risk losing my fingers to her blindness. I also give her an eyedrop for the hemorrhaged eye, but for this she turns away stubbornly. Twice daily we go on a short shuffle around the garden, led by her nose to the ground.

Our veterinarian has explained that as long as she still expresses enthusiasm for life and eats, we will continue our rituals.

I don't dread the end of our time together but it makes me ache to recognize that letting go may not be far away. Jess and I agree that when we know Millie is suffering and there isn't a simple

way to alleviate pain, we will have to drive to the vet one last time and say our goodbyes.

The rain and the north wind of the cool front – a hint of the coming fall – conspire to bring these thoughts to the forefront. But just as I grasp for sleep in my restless state, I reach out to tousle Millie’s fur in the dark. She is wedged between the nightstand and the bed, her back to the window and the flashes of light. I anchor myself in the present, reassuring both of us.

Responses to [Thoughts illuminated by approaching storms](#)

August 29, 2009 at 12:40 a.m.

Elaine Fellenstein says:

Beautiful. I had to give Hammie a hug as I read this. At 6 years old he’s about half way through a French Bulldog’s life span.

August 29, 2009 at 2:40 a.m.

jenh says:

Thanks, Elaine. I’ve thought before that our attachment to animals is what makes us human – understanding their importance to us. Thanks also for the great blog suggestions. I’ve added Crunchy Chicken to my regular list.

September 2, 2009 at 2:55 am

Thomas hardy says:

While on assignment, (love that phrase) I came across “Thinking Animals”, which asserts the same argument! I’ve been mulling it over, too. How interesting it is to think about how we imagine ourselves in relation to other animals. First of all, funny that we imagine that we’re different at all. Second of all, all of the anthropomorphism that goes on in literature, movies, etc. Third, I know that I do it on my blog and yet I cannot really pin down what I’m thinking. What the heck is going on there? A feast for thought. Hmm... grad school...

And then there are people that do the opposite. Is there a name for that? Probably.

[Calling on the Colony](#)

August 24, 2009 at 6:09 p.m.

Posted by jenh under farm life

Tags: bee removal, bees, farm life, farm management, pollinate
1 comment

The bees have a date with a moving van, though they don't know it.

A healthy colony lives in the double walls of the old dairy barn. They enter and exit through a 2-inch crevice in the worn wood. Each morning as the dew dries they zip about the farm pollinating beans, tomatoes, clover and other weeds.

Two beekeepers have looked at the paint-peeled boards and estimated the hive to be several thousand bees. One of the keepers knocked gently wall inside the barn: tap, tap. He put his ear to the surface. No buzz. Another tap-tap to the left. No buzz. He concluded the hive goes up between the studs, not across beneath the windowsill.

The bees could go on living in the two-story barn if not for a plan to side the building with sheets of metal. The new siding will save thousands of dollars needed to keep re-painting the barn. I recognize the economic value, but the sentimentalist in me laments the loss of texture. The ridged boards. The curling strips of white paint. The gray, unvarnished past peeking through.

Sealing it from the outside will keep the barn from rotting away, and I cede this point, too. I'd rather look at the white metal panels than witness a slow destruction from water, wind, sun. We simply don't have time to keep it in its original condition.

Ultimately, we have decided to remove the bees ourselves, with the help of family. It will mean smoking out the bees to keep them calm (we hope), prying off the boards and removing comb.

We have old, never-used bee boxes to offer them as a new domicile. Our ultimate hope is to gain the benefit of honey as well as pollination from these flying farm residents.

Response to [Calling on the Colony](#)

September 1, 2009 at 1:50 am
Noel Rasor says:

I paused as I read “The gray, unvarnished past peeking through.” In my mind the words ‘varnished’ and ‘tarnished’ were mixed up, and that struck me as fodder for poetry if I were a poet.

Your larger point, though, is such an apt one for any denizen of an older home or space of any kind. I struggle with the desire for an arrangement that better accommodates 21st century life and the competing desire to also preserve the history of my 1925 bungalow. It would only complicate an already difficult balancing act to add consideration for several thousand critters.

[2 hours, 27 minutes and 37 seconds](#)

August 21 at 5:33 p.m.
Posted by jenh under blogging
Tags: ADD, blogging, Kevin's law
3 comments

I first understood blogging as writing that could be dashed out in staccato bursts. At 10 a.m. you posted a link to the video of cats playing with a sunbeam or the dynamic presentation on string theory you came across. At 5 p.m. you follow with a quick-and-dirty paragraph on the latest news about WordPress or that car accident on the bridge you drove past on the way home. Maybe at 9 or 10 p.m. you concluded the day with another pithy remark, a link and a photo to support it.

As this [article](#) points out, unless you have a multi-author blog, there’s probably not a reason to post multiple times a day. Who has time to read them? Besides, twitter is the answer to people who need that kind of steady contact.

Moreover, who has time to write multiple times a day? What would multiple posting mean for the quality of the content?

The title of this post refers to the amount of time it took for me to develop [another one](#). Years of editing thick tangled forests of sentences have turned me into a hyper-conscious writer. It's not just spelling and grammar (what everyone seems to think editors correct, though they do much more). It's consciousness of each sentence's relationship with its predecessor and those that come after, then the relationship of each to the whole. It makes me pause often, fingers poised over the keyboard; I reconsider, turn around or backtrack the path. I'll delete or page down and write again.

In other words, I produce content slowly, no matter the form.

I am also (undiagnosed) [ADD](#) when it comes to hunting up supporting links and information. It goes something like this: I look up the main subject, Food Inc. From there I am opening another window to look up Kevin's law and wading through the [site](#) offered by the film. I come across a blog about food safety and stop, copy and paste the URL and in another browser window for my Google reader feed. Soon my quick skim has taken me five or six or ten links away from the original question. Unlike some people, this doesn't overwhelm me, but I have a compulsion to keep looking deeper and heading link to link.

Thus each post is usually carefully constructed, rewritten, tweaked and then posted. Perhaps when

I am more familiar with the form and have played with it more I will become more nimble and speedy.

Responses to [2 hours, 27 minutes and 37 seconds](#)

August 21, 2009 10:18 pm

Joe Harrington says:

you definitely need to indulge in some parataxis (if not parapraxis)

August 23, 2009 at 12:10 a.m.

Janet says:

Don't count on it!

August 26, 2009 at 2:54 am

Elaine Fellenstein says:

Some of my favorite bloggers manage to do well reasoned posts on a daily basis. Robert Brady's Pureland Mountain and Deanna Duke's Crunchy Chicken are at the top of my list. Others favorites like Greenpa at The Little Blog In The Big Woods sometimes go more than a month without posting. Life and work just get in the way.

[Careful what you say \(industry wags its litigious finger\)](#)

August 21, 2009 at 10:13 a.m.

Posted by jenh under food

Tags: Food Inc., food safety, Howard Lyman, Oprah Winfrey

I recently watched the film [Food, Inc.](#) and, true to its tagline ("You'll never look at dinner the same way"), eating has not been the same since. I couldn't find anything to eat in a local cafeteria after I saw the film.

The documentary is segmented into the various ways food is industrialized and how humans are endangered as a result. Much of the content was familiar. I'm aware of how food production has changed over the last 50 years because I'm an avid [Michael Pollan](#) reader (reader sounds more worthy than "fan," though I am one). Also, for several years I have been trying – and slipping,

lately – to be conscious of food labels, [CAFO practices](#) and food safety when I choose what to buy and eat.

Still, the story of the mother of a 2-year-old who died from eating hamburgers on vacation has stayed with me. We live in a country where there are an [estimated](#) 76 million cases of food-borne illnesses a year; 350,000 of those cases require hospitalization and 5,000 people die. Some of these cases are caused by improper handling: foods not stored at the proper temperature, say, or contaminated when the same surfaces are used for meat and vegetable preparation. But others are caused by the presence of E.coli in the food supply, now traced vegetables such as spinach and the hamburger that killed Barbara Kowalczyk's son, Kevin.

Video of Kevin, presumably taken during the vacation, and his mother's subsequent motivation to become a food safety advocate (check out [Kevin's Law](#)) are moving. What struck me more, though, was the cloud of litigation. Barbara Kowalczyk would not say on camera how her eating habits have changed as a result of her son's death from food she thought had been safe to eat. The film implies that she fears repercussions, such as being sued by the cattle industry, as happened to Oprah Winfrey and industry critic [Howard Lyman](#). She was too afraid to comment in public about something as fundamental to her health as the choices she makes about food. Just the perceived threat is enough to silence her.

[Grow enough to share](#)

August 16, 2009 at 2:47 pm

Posted by jenh under farm life, food

Tags: gardening, swallowtails, tomatoes

8 comments



My general philosophy toward gardening is to grow more than I need. This puts the odds in my favor of having enough to eat, sell and share — with humans and the animal life of the farm. (Sometimes the list also includes enough to compensate for disease, though that’s a subject for a different post.)

A couple of nights ago, for example, I found swallowtail caterpillars devouring every last frond of fennel. We sold most of the big bulbs, and all that remained were small heads that we might harvest for ourselves, later. That was the plan. The swallowtails may force me to reconsider. I could hear the sound of ripping and tearing and chewing near the plants because so many of them dined at once.

I’ve been through this before: they love dill and parsley, too. Thus the goal is to plant enough that I won’t be tempted to pick off caterpillars that will someday transform into pollinating butterflies

in the garden.

We also encountered the critter factor with our first corn harvest. Deer and raccoons nibbled on the outer rows, but left me with the inner rows. Rabbits are now going through the tomatoes in Goldilocks fashion, eating one bite out of each tomato they find close enough to the ground.

Some must be a little too green, others a little too red, and the best ones just right. We have 200 plants, so perhaps there's enough to for everyone. I may dig the remaining fennel bulbs and add them to the damaged tomatoes for sauce today.

Responses to [Grow Enough to Share](#)

August 18, 2009 at 11:49 p.m.

Teri says:

You guys don't know how much I've been missing you all and the farm these days. I know your blog is supposed to be all for scholarly writing purposes (!), but for me, it's a way to remember there's something else out there than this damn city. I was in St Louis last week and I was this close (= 2 seconds) from not getting on the plane for the trip back and instead, driving on over for the weekend. I would have if I could have. Thought of you guys the other night when I made pesto – I imagine you're going to have a boatload of basil for just such purposes. Say hey to Jess!

ps. Pesonally, I *like* stories about Scoop ;)

August 19, 2009 at 8:59 p.m.

Jenh says:

Miss you as well. Hope you get away from The Big City and all your travels to see us soon!

August 18, 2009 at 11:56 pm

Joe Harrington says:

Thought number one: send them over to finish off our lovage. It's too bitter for us to eat anymore, and I hear they like it.

Thought number two: check out the reading list the Anonymae posted at my blog (post titled "Blog Lit?") The Blocker Prize?? Go for it, Jen!

Thought number three: This is classic blog stuff. Dots and doings. Which is fine. But is it fine art? As in Master of? Or any different than a gardening primer or newspaper column? At least you're not posting pictures of body parts, a la Justin Hall.

Here's my favorite part: "I could hear the sound of ripping and tearing and chewing near the plants because so many of them dined at once." Yeah. Now *that's* the unexpected – the concrete image that you wouldn't necessarily get in your average gardening/farming blog. Like the mating slugs in my backyard, that time. Who woulda thunk?

You *have* read Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, right? Lately?

AND: Anything from Essay Press! Do you know their work? See esp. Letters from Abu Ghraib – emails, not blog posts, but close enough. Also Kristen Prevallet's I, Afterlife: An Essay in Mourning Time. This will give you a sense of where the form is headed nowadays.

August 19, 2009 at 11:15 am
jenh says:

What a [great list](#) from your “anonymae” readers!

I'm familiar with several of their suggestions, though by no means the majority of them. I've most recently read Michael Pollan's Omnivore's Dilemma, though now I need to check out his blog. I've read Animal, Miracle, Vegetable twice and think of it often. Kingsolver's approach was an essay a month, with culinary and science background added by her daughter and her husband. In fact, when I originally proposed this project in more of an essay form, I realized I would be mimicking the same kind of approach.

As for the classic blog stuff, as you say: It's a matter of making time for the deeper posts, of taking the time to think and examine the world as closely as I would in essays – finding the quiet spot in my mind apart from daily demands. Brevity hangs over that. I need to balance that against writing too long. Guidance I read years ago said that a blog post shouldn't go over 300 words or so, because of the way people read online. But that was for a strictly information/business blog context, not one aiming for art. I realize that betrays that I think I need to write long prose in order to be artful (poetry noted). I don't, but as a longtime essay writer, I'm working on how to get there.

August 19, 2009 at 12:10 a.m.
Joe Harrington says:

Here's an exercise for you: do a post WITHOUT a picture.

August 19, 2009 at 4:01 p.m.
Joe Harrington says:

I don't know that posts need to be long. I rarely do more than skim long blog posts, unless they're on a topic of particular interest.

In fact, shortness could be put to creative use. Even a "to be continued" ending. Sometimes I just post a quotation without comment. Or a sentence. In fact that gives me an idea: a poem composed of blog posts – one per line. Hmm. Then see how it reads backwards. I think Magee did one section of My Angie Dickinson per post.

It might also be interesting to go back through the posts you've done so far, to see if you see any thematic patterns or other motifs.

August 19, 2009 at 4:02 p.m.
Joe Harrington says:

Oh – and honest to god, read some of Pilgrim. Just open it randomly, and read a few pages.

August 19, 2009 at 4:02 pm
Joe Harrington says:

And Pollan's essay "Why Mow?"

"Putting everything out there"

August 10, 2009 at 3:45 p.m.
Posted by jenh under blogging, communication
1 comment

When I began this blog, one of the first things I determined might help a reader would be to offer a synopsis of the people and places I planned to write about. As I started to write the summaries – the "[cast of characters](#)" – I paused, wondering, how much to say. Pseudonym or real name? Full names or first names? County, city, state? Do I write that I work in a museum, which type of museum or the name of the museum?

The question of how much to reveal about yourself online has been written about from a variety of angles. There are many resources with [advice for parents](#) worried about children and online

communication, such as what personal information children should avoid posting. There are also the problems adults face when balancing [personal and professional life](#) on social networking sites such as Facebook.

The question of how much identifying information a writer reveals when blogging is a similar issue, one that I haven't researched but know that people blog [about](#).

I seek honesty in writing. What is life writing without truth and conviction and trust between writer and reader? If I hide some details, am I less honest, less likely to build that trust?

Some early bloggers stepped into writing out their lives online without filter. I've been reading – devouring – a history and analysis of blogging by Scott Rosenberg with the unwieldy title of [“Say Everything: How Blogging Began, What It's Becoming and Why It Matters.”](#) Rosenberg explores the all-online life of [Justin Hall](#), the man who “invented oversharing” in 1994 through his daily self-revelations. He believed in what he called “putting everything out there.” That is, until Hall realized that revealing the details of his interactions with others, including dates and other bits from his life, could prevent him from pursuing relationships in the real world.

As this is a blog about, on one level, farm life, and on another, more meta level, writing and online communication, I'm not concerned about running into Hall's kind of oversharing or overexposure. Instead, what I see are two separate issues to explore: whether to share identifying information (name, address, etc.) and determining what personal information (experiences) to share. Whether the latter reveals the former is something I'll be investigating in future posts.

Response to [“Putting everything out there”](#)

August 15, 2009 at 2:04 am
Susan M. Schultz says:

Having written my own blog, which is full of “sharing” (awful word, really), I’d say over-sharing is offering up what isn’t relevant or necessary to your context. So uncomfortable and potentially very private material can prove necessary, at times, while at others it can prove almost unbearable.

[Human behavior is the key to dog behavior](#)

August 9, 2009 at 7:15 am
Posted by jenh under farm life
Tags: coyotes, One-sixty-three, Scoop
7 comments

A few nights ago, Jess arrived at the animal pens to find the dog barking, at least one goat bleeding from its nose and no one able to tell us what happened.

She put iodine on the broad face of nanny goat One-sixty-three and looked around. More than a year ago, coyotes dispensed of several goat kids. It was soul-crushing to arrive in the field to find a bleeding kid that had been attacked or killed. We scooped them up and carried them on the back of the gator to the pens, tried to save them, and usually failed. I learned then that just because we raised animals for meat didn’t preclude us from feeling for them if they suffer.

We didn’t have Scoop the guard dog then. Since his arrival as a slightly malnourished puppy, there have been no coyote incidents that we know of. So the first question was, could it be coyotes?

Or could it be Scoop?

A second return to the pen revealed more goats flecked with blood. We thought the possibility of coyotes attacking twice inside the pen within an hour to be unlikely.

Over the course of the evening, we trotted down undesirable paths of thought: if it was coyotes, why couldn't Scoop keep them away? Would they come so close to the pens? And if Scoop was the perpetrator, we would have to give him up. It is absolutely forbidden for the guard animal to bite or nip the herd he cares for.

Ultimately, at feeding time, blame came to rest at Scoop's feet. That's when we realized he wasn't the problem – we were.

Over the course of several weeks, he had become a slow, picky eater who chewed each morsel and moved carefully from the left side of the bowl to the right. Impatient to get to other chores, we left him alone in pen to eat. If he didn't finish his food, he picked up the dish, nudged open the pen gate, and carried it off. It was adorable the first time I saw it; I didn't see the danger to the behavior. He dribbled stashes of food everywhere outside his pen.

At the same time, he became aggressive toward other animals when he ate, snapping at the calf, the goats and even the barn cats through the bars of the pen if they came close. Our reprimands meant little if we were there, and often, we weren't close enough by to have an effect.

The resolution of the mysterious goat injuries rested in the combination of the aggression and the

food stashes. It's likely One-sixty-three got too close to kibble spread somewhere in the pen, didn't know it, and Scoop bit her nose. Then she ran through the herd, bleeding, making it appear that others were injured as well.

Now, we have a strict routine. Scoop is still fed in the pen by himself. The second he growls at anyone drifting too close, we take the food away and he goes hungry. We also wait for him to finish and take away the dish before he can wander away with it. Plus, rains dissolved the rations hidden around the pens.

One-sixty-three is fine, and shows no fear of Scoop. He guards as his instinct tells him to do, barking at the faintest howl of coyotes at dusk and sleeping with the herd in the barn.

Animals live in the moment, and no one but the humans at the farm remember the incident.



Responses to [Human behavior is the key to dog behavior:](#)

August 14, 2009 at 1:35 am

Joe Harrington says:

First of all, isn't a Great Pyrennes (sp?) supposed to be a herding breed??

Question: how is this blog going to be different than all the other blogs in the world? I mean, the ones where people write about their dogs. Or their farms.

This document is being presented as "creative nonfiction." Clearly, the nonfiction part is there. And clearly, the writing is clear. But think about the *form*, as well. I mean the form of the writing. You could use second person, for instance. Or third person to talk about yourself. Parataxis, instead of hypotaxis. Verse instead of prose. Get jiggy with it.

The above post raises a lot of questions re: dog and human psychology. Have you read Joy Williams' essay re: her dog's attacking her – and Glenn Gould? That's the kind of thing I'm talking about. Or even Pilgrim at Tinker Creek. Allow for Drift.

Oh – BTW – did I mention I'm a pain in the ass? :)

August 14, 2009 at 1:39 am

Joe Harrington Says:

Dig Claire Montrose's "Compartmentalizing and Repressing" blog, linked above (on 8/13 at 8:39 pm, anyhow). Sentence structure. Transitions.

August 15, 2009 at 2:02 am

Susan M. Schultz says:

Have you seen Donna Harraway's book about dogs? Highly recommended!
aloha, Susan

August 15, 2009 at 8:42 pm

Thomas hardy says:

I, too, think that form is important when communicating one's writing. But it's sure hard to beat good content. Perhaps a fun way to make it different from all the other blogs – though it's pretty darn different already – would be to put in some questions or musings on the patterns, themes, etc. of the posts. I liked this post, but almost entirely due to the last sentence. More of that!

August 16, 2009 at 2:13 pm

Jenh says:

Thanks, Thomas. As the writing develops and there are more posts to tie together, I think that will be a great idea. There are themes I've imposed in my mind, but others will arrive more organically.

I get to spend a lot of time in silence watching the animals and observing their behavior, so there's sure to be more. Maybe you could give me some tips from frog-watching?

August 18, 2009 at 11:45 pm
Joe Harrington says:

Yeah, the Harraway book is great – has bearing on all sorts of speciation – goats, butterflies, homo sapiens sapiens. Maybe we'll have a Cyblog Manifesto out of it some day.

August 26, 2009 at 2:34 pm

Elaine Fellenstein says:

I really enjoy your blog. Greenpa at Little Blog In The Big Woods had some issues with a dog named Bruce and the chickens he was supposed to guard. It didn't turn out pretty so I'm very glad you got it figured out with Scoop.

July 2009

[April in July follows July in June](#)

July 22, 2009 at 1:53 p.m.

Posted by jenh under farm life, food

Tags: blight, Home Depot, tomatoes, weather

This dank, dewy, drippy weather in July has confused my tomatoes and thrilled the crabgrass. The grass now towers above my head in a wide swath of the garden that was once home to broccoli and cauliflower. The broccoli gave up when June became July – 12 days of temperatures above 90 degrees and unrelenting humidity.

Days of cool, cloudy weather and weekly rain are usually [rare](#) in mid-July in eastern Kansas. The

jet stream – something as I child I pictured as a satiny ribbon rippling across the states – has brought low pressure down, down through the central plains. In a weather game of crack the whip, the ribbon also has pushed a ridge of high pressure north over the western U.S. This has meant a reversal of fortune for the normally dank, dewy, drippy northwest, which has experienced highs near 100.

For tomatoes, the weather switcheroo has meant slow production and ripening, but much worse, the right conditions for early blight. Like most organic growers, we don't use fungicides, which are the main way to fight blights and other fungi-borne diseases. The blight begins as yellowing leaves at the bottom of the plant, browning spots, and eventually, a stem or two or 10 will turn completely brown and die. This usually doesn't kill the plant at first, but it slows it down. Disease can spread from plant to plant easily. I obey the number-one rule I learned about tomatoes from my parents: thou shall not touch tomato plants when they are wet. Or damp. Or dewy.

Another rule that people on the East coast are learning is thou shall not purchase tomato plants at Home Depot or Walmart (or Lowes or Kmart, for that matter). A devastating outbreak of late blight – a voracious killer capable of wiping out entire fields of tomatoes – has been [traced](#) to plants purchased at those stores. No one seems to be able to identify exactly where the disease began and spread – the greenhouses that supplied those stores, or within the stores along the shelves of bedding plants.

The organic industry relies on raising its own plants instead of buying them at a box store, but it can be affected by what home gardeners trudged home with from the store. Thus spores have

spread from yards to small farms to fields. Organic tomatoes are selling for as much as \$7 a pound in the affected areas.

While I reinforced tomato cages and stakes yesterday evening, the clouds broke and the sun peeked out. We're supposed to see sunny weather for a couple of days, which will make the tomatoes and me much happier.



[Dirt work is the real work](#)

July 6, 2009 at 9:09 pm

Posted by jenh under farm life, work

1 comment

The New York Times recently carried an essay that 1) impressed me because so few newspapers publish full-length essays (even if they are excerpted from soon-to-be-published books) and 2) caused me to rifle through my own thoughts on working in the dirt versus working in an office. “[The Case for Working With Your Hands](#),” by Matthew B. Crawford, explores attitudes toward what we think of as dirty work or labor. Crawford rejected academia a few months after earning his PhD in philosophy and turned to working with his hands.

The motorcycle repairman probes public attitudes toward people who work in manual labor or

skilled trades, an attitude that for some people is somewhere between pity and awe; many regard a tradesperson as somehow less than a college educated person, as though they “settled” for a trade job. Or, people romanticize working with your hands because it is so otherworldly compared to white collar office work. I wonder if this will change as the economy continues to shift and heave, reducing manufacturing jobs but also finance, real estate and other office jobs, too.

I share Crawford’s experience, and I’ll be exploring it more in future posts. For now, I’ll say that I work in an office and have a job I wouldn’t want to give up. It’s mind-challenging work results in tangible products, such as newsletters and web site content. But at lunchtime each day and again at 5 p.m., I am possessed by a zeal to get to the garden to do real work. Work that gives me blisters that become callouses along my thumb and palms. It’s work that is alternatively dusty, muddy, hot and uncomfortable that pushes me to keep going when I am exhausted with it.

Response to [Dirt work is the real work:](#)

August 6, 2009 at 10:27 pm
Joe Harrington says:

tho as to “real” = physical, i can’t help but think that one of the reasons it seems so “real” (as opposed to the soft indoor jobs) has something to do with all those Farm Bureau ads and Appalachian Spring and noble farmer rhetoric from politicians. in other words, it seems to me that the way one experiences the physical is conditioned by culture. so i wonder if the job of creating text in front of a computer is really that dissociated from the really real and the truly true work in the dirt.

June 2009

[Breaking the no-name rule](#)

June 25, 2009 at 2:02 p.m.

Posted by jenh under farm life, food

Tags: humor, Jess, Steak

3 comments



I try not to read too much into the behavior of our animals, but a braying calf prompts me to anthropomorphize. An 86-year-old farmer bought the calf's mother, and since then, the calf has let us know in no uncertain terms that he is upset. The farmer told us that he would have to make sure his fences were secure, because the bond between mother and calf can be strong. He once had a cow that walked almost seven miles back to the newborn calf from which she was separated.

The calf has been an unexpected part of the farm, part of a series of unexpected events that began with the death of Jess' father in December. After John died, we realized that among other things we did not know how to attend to the birth of a calf, and the only heifer on the farm was pregnant. I consulted with web sites and friends who had grown up near farms or on them. The main advice I received was that most of the time, there's no need to intervene, but should there be a reason to, have a rope or a chain handy. I could not imagine helping a cow deliver a calf using a chain. But the heifer dropped her calf on Martin Luther King Jr. day when the temperature hovered around 22 degrees. We snuck into the barn to check on them. It amazing that some mammals can drop to the ground, stand, and begin to nurse, when humans are dependent upon their parents, at times, for decades.

Jess named the calf Steak, a violation of [the naming rule](#), but a name that belies the dark sense of humor Jess possesses. And now Steak is in the pasture with the nine nanny goats and Scoop the protector dog, and he has almost 40 acres to himself until winter. For two days, he has either sulked in the tall grass or brayed forcefully at us. I'm hoping his mother can't hear him from the farm she now calls home.

Responses to [Breaking the no-name rule](#):

August 15, 2009 at 2:07 am

Susan M. Schultz says:

I'd like to hear more about the no-name rule, as well as the funny breaking of it here.

August 16, 2009 at 2:19 pm

jenh says:

Thanks, Susan. I haven't read any Donna Haraway since *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* (1991), and wasn't aware of the two *Species* titles. I'll check them out.

P.S. Please let me know what the name (URL) of your blog is. I'm always looking for more models.

August 16, 2009 at 11:08 pm

Susan M. Schultz says:

My newish blog is <http://tinfisheditor.blogspot.com>

My oldish blog is a book, *_Dementia Blog_* (Singing Horse Press, 2008).

I'm enjoying your blog, in large measure, because my dad always had a large vegetable garden. He'd grown up on a farm and always noticed things like the quality of the earth when we traveled. Keep up the good work.

aloha, Susan

[Helping Hands](#)

June 8, 2009 at 9:05 a.m.

Posted by jenh under farm life

Tags: farm management, farming advice, Silverstein

3 comments

The actions of a few neighbors have called to mind a few lines from an old Shel Silverstein poem from *Where the Sidewalk Ends*. Sometimes an offer of help is what you need, and other times, it's the wrong kind of help, and the "kind of help we can all do without," as Silverstein penned.

The kind of help we get the most is pointed advice – neighbors in a wide radius have plenty of thoughts and opinions to offer to two women trying to start a farm.

We hear:

"You girls need to spray those thistles."

"200 tomatoes – that's a lot. You up to handling all that work?"

"You should sell the ____" (Fill in the blank with most any equipment people see from the road.)

"That fence is rickety."

"You girls managing okay?"

I can see that we are a perplexing addition to a rural area that still practices row crop farming and large-scale cattle operations. Even as the modern era of sustainable, small agriculture gains broader acceptance, we are an anomaly. Two women, together, trying to farm, and in a different way.

One example of the reactions and advice we get is in the words of the kindly 80-plus farmer who bought our heifer. Jess explained to him that rather than sell the cow's five-month old steer to a

feedlot or through action, we planned to raise him on grass and take him directly to a local processor. This way, we know that the calf was raised without added hormones or unnecessary antibiotics. We'll know where our food came from, what it ate, and that it lived well and what we hope is a contented life of grazing on nearly 40 acres.

The farmer countered that it was a foolishly expensive way to get meat for our freezer, when meat is cheap and readily available in the grocery store! It never ceases to amaze me that farmers raise food to sell to others and then go to the grocery store for already processed provisions.

Yet, some farmers offer us the best kind of help – solutions to what we cannot do. The gap in our knowledge about farm equipment, let alone farm animal and pasture management, threatens to overwhelm us. So when another farmer said he would pay us for access to pasture, and he would cut the waist-high brome grass for bales he could sell, we jumped at his offer. Now, for the first time since moving to the farm, we can see the ridges and bulges of the pasture. It has been swept clean and the goats – who like to be able to see around them – have been wandering out into pasture again.

[The poem is Helping, by Shel Silverstein.](#)

Responses to [Helping Hands](#)

July 14, 2009 at 1:29 pm
Joe Harrington Says:

“It never ceases to amaze me that farmers raise food to sell to others and then go to the grocery store for already processed provisions.”

That's about as good a definition of alienated labor (and the commodity form) as I've come across!

July 15, 2009 at 12:55 pm
jenh says:

I'm a bit rusty on Marx, but I'll say that this is, in some ways, worse than being alienated from the product produced; there is an element of choice at work here. He could process his own food (or at least take it to someone locally to do it, as we do) but chooses not to.

It wasn't so long ago that processing took place at the farm. We have black and white family photos from butchering day that show Jess' family posing around a clean carcass hanging from the hooks in the barn. It sounds gruesome, but I look at the photo and think how the entire arc of raising an animal to the butchering of that animal kept the family fed, and tied their food to the work they put into the farm. If you don't work hard, you don't eat – a tangible result. Raising livestock to sell to the feed lot, conversely, creates a disassociation not only with the labor and the end product, but also the value of that final product – food, nourishment, health and income.

July 17, 2009 at 4:40 am
Joe Harrington says:

“this is, in some ways, worse than being alienated from the product produced; there is an element of choice at work here. He could process his own food (or at least take it to someone locally to do it, as we do) but chooses not to.”

And THAT is about as good a description of ideology as I've come across!

Calling number 128

June 1, 2009 at 10:40 a.m.
Posted by jenh under food

We don't name our farm animals, but it becomes impossible not to notice a personality trait in a goat or a calf that makes it stand apart from another member of the herd. Assigned a number, the number becomes the name. Goat 94 is one of the leaders of the group, and she is the first to wander up to you to get a scratch on the head, or to nibble on your shirt or jeans or shoelaces. She's also fond of pushing against my leg with her head, steady, with increasing pressure, trying

to get me to challenge her in return. Number 163 used to avoid us but since we treated her for an infection she likes to stand just out of reach and observe us. We notice that of the four baby goats, all of them bucklings (males), the smallest among them is most insistent about attention and food.

And yet, though we get to know them well and their individual personalities, we know what is ahead from the moment they arrive at the farm, be it by birth or purchase. For the nannies, the large female goats, it's a future as breeding stock for several years. For males, though, it's food for our freezer or for other people. I have maintained for months that if I am going to eat meat, and I know that I will, I'd rather know where it came from — how it was raised, whether it seemed content — than go to a store to buy the meat of an animal that was forced to a fattening diet and lived on a feedlot somewhere in western Kansas.

Our way is better for us, but it isn't for the faint of heart.



May 2009

[Giving up the latte life](#)

May 27, 2009 at 6:20 p.m.

Posted by jenh under farm life

Tags: change, farm life, latte life

I stretched in the early waning light of Memorial Day, muscles achy, covered in hay dust, and took in the results of a 12 hour day spent coaxing earth into a garden.

Saturdays, Sundays and the occasional federal holiday like this used to mean days off: if it was summer, it meant wandering to the farmers' market, getting coffee, maybe going out to eat for breakfast. Home life puttered. I squeezed in house cleaning and mowed that little postage stamp of a lawn. Evenings were for socializing, catching up with friends over a couple of drinks, maybe curling up to a movie. The pace of moving from one weekend to the next became indistinguishable as week folded into month, a blur of bliss. Yet at the edges, a vague sense of being unchallenged persisted.

Now a year into this farming adventure, my latte lifestyle has been replaced by goats, tomatoes, endless mowing, fence repairs, a flooding basement, coyote yips and howls, sunrises and sunsets over the Wakarusa valley, and the deep sense of satisfaction I get from working with my hands all day.

