Chicken keepers: Loving and eating animals

by Terra Brockman in the May 28, 2014 issue

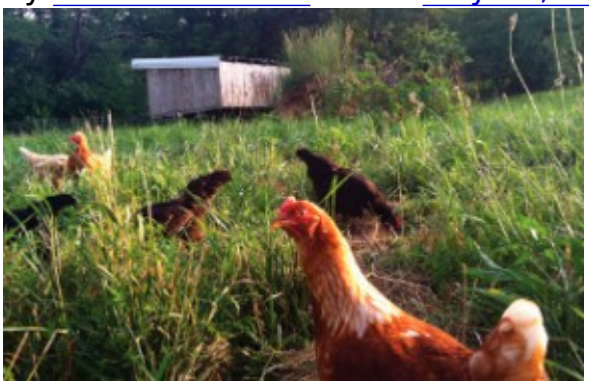

Photo by Terra Brockman

On a sunny winter day I visited the Academy for Global Citizenship, a public charter school on the southwest side of Chicago. The school emphasizes sustainability and experiential education, which includes having the students feed and water the school yard chickens, clean their coop, and collect their eggs. As I approached the coop, a half dozen kindergartners crowded around to introduce me to Buttercup, Daisy, and Puddles. Like the students, the school's resident hens were a diverse trio, one gold-speckled brown, one glistening iridescent black, and one fluffy white. But all had the glittering eyes and brilliant red combs of healthy hens, and they clucked conversationally with each other, as contented hens do.

The children chattered away alongside the hens, comfortable with them yet respectful of their space—neither cuddling them as if they were pets nor keeping a wary distance as they would with wild animals. When recess was over I followed the children as they scampered to line up at the school door. I had come to join them for their afternoon class, a review of everything they had learned in their unit on chickens.

Having grown up in the fourth of five generations of a central Illinois farm family, I have a more than passing familiarity with chickens. Some of my earliest memories are of gathering still-warm eggs from the nesting boxes in my grandparents' chicken coop. But these days I've become interested in urban chicken keeping—and in the notion of "keepers" in general.

*Keep* has echoed in my mind ever since I heard Wendell Berry say that there's really only one commandment concerning the creation: keep it. The phrase appears early in Genesis, when God put man "in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it." Investigating further, I found that the English verbs *till* and *keep* come from the Hebrew words *abad* and *shamar*. These are not arcane or abstruse terms but wonderfully straightforward words describing everyday activities. *Abad* is the root of words related to work, service, or serving. *Shamar* means to preserve and protect—to keep.

Suddenly I understood why a soccer goalie is also a keeper, and why the inner region of a castle, the most secure area, is a keep. Echoes of the gentle benediction that ends the church service, "The Lord bless you and keep you," sent me to my computer, where I again found the word *shamar* and learned that the benediction comes from the priestly blessing that the descendants of Aaron were to pronounce over the people of Israel. I heard *shamar* reverberating back thousands of years, back before Christianity, even before Aaron. And I heard it ricocheting right up to the present day, bouncing around the playground at the Academy for Global Citizenship. As I began to fully appreciate the resonance of "to keep," even the mundane word and work of housekeeping began to take on a reverent glow.

But what about our collective home, our blue marble spinning in space? How do we keep it, preserve and protect it? It seemed that by investigating how urban chicken keepers relate to their chickens, and how keeping chickens situates humans in the larger ecosystem, I might be able to explore that question.

Buttercup, Daisy, and Puddles might be good teachers, I thought, because as the children intuitively knew, hens occupy a distinct space between pets and wildlife. We love pets like family members. We admire wildlife for its beautiful otherness. But chickens? They do not fit into either of the animal categories to which we are most accustomed, and so they force us out of our comfortable, binary ways of thinking. They are neither completely wild nor fully tame. Rather they are the domesticated descendants of wild jungle fowl, prized by many cultures for their powers of divination. Because they represent the liminal, they might be a means by which we can better understand the contradictions and complexities of the relationships between us and our fellow humans, our fellow creatures, and our common world.

And so I found myself sitting in a pint-sized chair in a colorful classroom, curious to see how city kids keeping a few chickens might illuminate the question of our

mandate “to keep” the creation. The teacher calmed the kids down and then started a PowerPoint presentation to review the parts of a chicken, eliciting exclamations of “Wing!” “Beak!” “Comb!” and “Feathers!”

Then the teacher asked, “What are the five things the animals who live with us need?” Hands shot up around the room. “Food!” was the first answer, followed quickly by “Water!” Then the teacher and students discussed shelter and how animals needed sun and air to be healthy, but also protection from the sun on hot days and from wind, rain, and snow.

I was intimately familiar with animals’ food, water, and shelter needs, since I’d grown up on a farm and had done chores every morning and evening. Even on the coldest, darkest winter mornings, I lugged two sloshing five-gallon pails of water to my cow, Frosty, and made sure she had enough hay before I ran down the lane to catch the school bus. Each of my five siblings did the same, looking after the food, water, and shelter needs of their sheep, chickens, goats, rabbits, cows, and pony.

As far as I was concerned, food, water, and shelter covered basic animal needs. But in the classroom more hands were up, waving the bodies attached to them and vying for attention. “Friends!” shouted one student. The teacher nodded as she clicked to a photo of a flock of chickens in a green pasture: “And what else?”

“Love!” shouted three or four kids in unison, putting their arms around themselves and rocking back and forth in what was apparently the school’s sign language for love.

Love was not an animal need I would have thought to articulate. But as I reflected on the summers spent on my grandparents’ farm, love was certainly present, as were “friends” in the large flock of laying hens. Sometimes a flock of young males shared the chicken yard as well—fryers that would end up one Sunday afternoon as the crispiest fried chicken on the planet, a fact that complicated but did not contradict the love that was showered upon all the chickens and other animals that my grandparents kept.

On that central Illinois farm where my father and grandfather were born, taking care of the hens and gathering their eggs each day was not so much a chore as a mission. Each day eggs appeared in the straw-filled nesting boxes, their size and shape perfect for a child’s hand to cradle. I’d return to the house and show the basket to Grandma. She would *oohh* and *aahh* over it, then ask, “Did you thank the

hens?” If I forgot, she had me go back out and do it.

A habit of gratitude becomes second nature when you grow up with a grandmother who insists that you thank the hens every time you gather their eggs. Even now, 50 years later, this question echoes in my mind every time I eat an egg. And whether I do it out loud or internally, I always thank the hens.

The hens on that farm had all five of the things the children identified: food, water, shelter, friends, and love. Yet none had names like Daisy, Buttercup, or Puddles; in fact, none of them had names. Perhaps it was because when their egg-laying days were over, all their days were over. I’m not sure what end-of-life issues the hens and children at the Academy for Global Citizenship will face, but on the farm the end came swiftly, and then Grandma’s hens were transformed into the most delicious and velvety chicken soup, with the rich, golden flavors that come only with a long and happy life.

That is certainly an odd notion—to love a creature and then to eat it. But the oddness, or outright discomfort, is a surface dissonance—one that can disguise the deep harmonies beneath. That dissonance may arise from simple, binary thinking (pets vs. wildlife; life vs. death) and from a reluctance to embrace complexity and ambiguity. But beyond the dissonance is the deep harmony of how things work in this world, with plants dying to feed animals and animals dying to feed plants.

Native Americans understood these necessary interdependencies and felt their weight. They apologized when taking any living thing for food, whether it was a berry, fruit, root, green, or animal. They did not make a distinction between plant harvesting and animal harvesting. In either case they recognized that they were taking life to sustain life. At the same time, they acknowledged that one day it would be their turn to return to the earth to feed plants and animals, including other humans.

It has taken scientists quite a while, but some have come to a point of view similar to that of the Native Americans (see Michael Pollan’s “The Intelligent Plant,” *New Yorker*, December 23, 2013). It turns out that plants interact with and react to their environment and can be shown to have a desire for life similar to an animal’s. Pulling up a beet or carrot brings death as certainly as bringing down the hatchet on the neck of an old hen. And from chemical signals that plants emit, we can conclude that they do not want to be sliced, diced, sautéed, and eaten any more than a

chicken does.

But this is not a reason to despair or to stop eating. Rather, it's a reason to fully embrace the cycles of life, from living soil to living soil, in the humble awareness that our lives are dependent upon the deaths of plants and of animals and that our own death will contribute to greater plant and animal life (if allowed to return to earth without the poisons of embalming). We are part of a world where everything eats everything, and we need to recognize that this is, as the Creator proclaimed, "good." It is also good to acknowledge and accept that we humans are temporary manifestations, way stations between soil and soil.

Along the way, we have those clearly articulated responsibilities of *abad* and *shamar* , to work and serve and preserve and protect the creation. On the one hand, this is simple (food, water, shelter, friends, love), and on the other hand, it is not. Anyone who keeps chickens enters a world of complex interconnections and messy contradictions, facing the problems of chicken sex, of poop on eggs, of predators—sometimes including your own lovable yet murderous pooch—and difficult end-of-productive-life issues. Dealing with these matters is not easy, but when we do, we are more intimately connected to our food, to each other, and to the world we all share.

Yet many of us, while hyperconnected to our digital devices, are completely disconnected from the natural world and from the sources of our sustenance. This has led to a sort of collective eating disorder, which has in turn led to a disordered relationship with our responsibilities regarding the creation.

The vast majority of eggs, for example, come from chickens given food, water, and shelter but no respect, gratitude, or love. Certainly no one thanks the modern battery hens, whose eggs roll off onto a conveyor belt as soon as they are laid. During my confirmation in the Lutheran church, I was told not just that there is sin, but that there are two kinds—sins of omission and sins of commission. With an inward groan I realized that in most situations in life I was pretty much damned if I did and damned if I didn't. It's true that we who eat eggs from industrial sources are guilty of both. We are party to the sins of commission: the debeaking of the baby chicks immediately after hatching, their close confinement with thousands of other hens without room to stretch their legs or flap their wings, the whole life of the bird lived without sunlight, green grass, or fresh air, without the ability to chase a cricket. But on top of all that is the sin of omission: no one ever thanks these long-suffering

hens for their eggs.

The notion that keeping chickens might help recenter and reorder our lives and relationships led me not only to the kids at the Academy for Global Citizenship, but to Mike, who keeps Henrietta Thoreau and three of her friends in his backyard in a central Illinois city (nameless because the town ordinance prohibits chickens). “I’m curious,” I said to Mike, “How do you relate to your hens?”

“Well, when I come home, I get a glass of wine and go into the yard to watch my chickens. They’re entertaining, and they chill me out,” says Mike. “But they’re not too bright. They’re interested in you because you are where their food comes from. They don’t realize that the situation is reciprocated: *they* are where *our* food comes from,” he chuckled, collecting three warm brown eggs.

Eating one of those eggs, or any egg, in gratitude and in full awareness that it is a chicken embryo, is a kind of sacrament, a humble thanksgiving. With every bite we can recognize the reciprocity, the inherent interconnectivity and interdependence that sustains us all. And we can begin to live in the mystery of a world in which life begets life, acknowledging that death is always part of the circle of life. It’s breakfast, and it’s also an unborn chicken, and that’s not only OK but good, because it’s how the world works.

By keeping chickens or tending a fruit tree, a raspberry bush, or a garden, we are obeying the command to keep the earth. We can also practice *shamar* by supporting farmers who tend their plants and animals in a way that respects, preserves, and protects a piece of the creation—an idea that had not occurred to me before I met Buttercup, Daisy, and Puddles. And so I thanked the hens once again.

*A version of this essay will be included in the forthcoming book* City Creatures: Animal Encounters in the Chicago Wilderness*, edited by Gavin Van Horn and Dave Aftandilian (University of Chicago Press). An earlier version of this note incorrectly omitted the editors.*