

The Hawk and My Chickens

by Helen D. Gunderson

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This morning, my five laying hens were making a huge ruckus. Instead of my paying attention immediately, I tuned them out, thinking, “Oh, what people don’t know about urban chickens. Hens can be as loud as roosters.” But I looked out the kitchen window, and saw some of the chickens pressing in a frenzy against their pasture fence. Unusual. I thought maybe they were eager to get away from their feed trough, waterer, leaves and dirt into areas with more green vegetation. But when I threw some collard greens to the layers, they paid no attention. They continued to press against the fence. I opened the gate to see where they wanted to head. It did not seem to make sense that they would make a bee-line to the front of the house, driveway and front step. How could they possibly intuit there might be something good to eat there?

I went back to the pasture and saw a huge hawk fly out to a perch high in a tree on the neighbor’s property. Then I noticed Addy, a Silver-Laced Wyandotte. She was traumatized under a young gooseberry plant and was seriously wounded.

At some time during this drama, perhaps while Addy was still under the shrub, I stood still in the middle of my backyard pasture, feeling in a time warp. The damage had been done. I did not know how to help



Cora on left, Addy on right.

Addy—either by approaching her, examining the damage, and nursing the wounds or by ending her life to end her suffering. However, I did not need to make an immediate decision. And even if I did, I did not feel capable of taking action. I also sensed that the hawk would not take further action as long as I was in the yard. I could pause a bit, but I also needed to act to make sure all the chickens were secure. I let out a sound—not exactly a scream, not exactly a holler. I didn’t want to strain my vocal chords. I did want, however, for the deep angst to come from the earth through my feet and whole body. It wasn’t angst simply for that moment—simply in response to the hawk attack—but angst that had built during the many months of presidential election drama. This morning, the election was over with the results known early last night.

My attempt to give deep voice to the moment and let the angst flow through my entire body and out into the fall air, or perhaps even into the universe, was ineffective. I felt one-dimensional like a cut-out cardboard statue of a movie star such as John Wayne—flimsy and not truly grounded there in the center of my large back yard. The feelings did not flow. The hawk did not wince. My response was as ineffective as pissing or whistling into the wind. I doubt John Wayne was as tough in his private life as he attempted to appear on screen. And certainly, I was neither John Wayne nor one of the tough characters he portrayed. I felt more like a child, standing alone, staring at the hawk in the barren tree on a chilly, overcast day, frozen for a moment in time. I felt like the young, innocent boy Joey, who is exposed to some of the hard realities of life in the 1953 Western movie “Shane.” Joey’s hero was a gunslinger, turned good guy, named Shane (played by Alan Ladd) who defended Joey’s family.

I did not know if I could help Addy, but I realized I better round up the other chickens and put them in their small run that is covered with protective netting. Then I realized that Rosa, a gray-brown Auracana was missing. I did not know if she had been one of the crowd that had rushed to the front of the house or if the hawk had already air-lifted her from my yard.

When I caught and returned three of the chickens to their small run, Addy had already gotten herself to the ground floor of the attached chicken hotel. The other chickens joined her there. They seemed too traumatized to even think of pecking her wounds but hunkered together in a corner.

I posted a note to the Practical Farmer of Iowa listserv, asking for help. I did not know what to do, but I knew I needed advice, and if there was to be medical attention or euthanasia, I would need help. I got a few responses. Wonderful and caring as if I was part of a large family or at least a community. I called Marilyn Andersen of rural Story City, who has been one of my chicken mentors. I called Patrick Burke at PFI, who said he would get back to me in a half hour. I called a friend who is a research veterinarian at the USDA lab. My friend asked about Addy’s condition and suggested I let Addy rest.

Patrick referred me to Abby Strobbe, a veterinarian who lives not far from me and who makes house calls. I called and left a message, then Patrick emailed me to say Abby’s phone had fallen in the toilet either literally or metaphorically. I emailed Abby. She came by and assessed Addy’s condition. Abby assured me that she thought Addy would survive. Abby carried Addy to the garage where I have a particle board cubicle that I use in the winter for my layers. And it was also the area where Addy and the other four chicks when they arrived at my home on Burnett. I got straw and put down fresh bedding. I also put in a supply of chicken feed, some greens, and a waterer. Abby and I left Addy there. Abby said she would return in the evening.

I was disturbed. Glad the elections were over and surprised about how fast the results were known. But the attack of the hawk was a wake up call that the world goes on, and that there is much to reality that is not nice and is far beyond our control. The attack was a reminder to be vigilant and of on-going service. Regardless of who would win the various elections, every day work must go on. Too much attention is focused on the top dogs running for President with expectations that one of them would make big differences in the health of our country. I also believe it is risky to have too great of expectations for any leader whether a school superintendent, pastor, non-profit director, therapist, mayor, or other. Our on-going commitments are essential, and I am particularly proud of the people such as PFI folk who are in the trenches of advocacy for sustainable agriculture. I feel more like a hobby farmer or sunny day activist.

I was also restless, worried, and puzzled. Would I even know what had become of Rosa, the gray-brown Auracana? I had also called the Ames Animal Shelter. The woman there said they do not deal with situations such as mine with a wounded hen. But the woman listened attentively and talked about Red Tail Hawk sightings in the area this fall. I also told her about Rosa. The woman said she would call me if she heard from anyone that had seen a gray chicken in their yard.

Later, when I returned to the pasture and walked around, I noticed a scattering of feathers not far from where Addy had hunkered under the gooseberry plant. I looked closely, trying to discern if the feathers were more black and bright white with diamond designs like Addy's feathers or if they were more gray, brown, and dull white like Rosa's colors. It was eery to think that they might be Rosa's feathers and that the hawk had already taken her away. However, careful examination of the evidence indicated they were Addy's feathers. Mystery!!

I needed to move on and go to my church to help clean the kitchen. The young woman who is staying at my place had just come home from teaching and offered to give me a ride since I was running behind and knew I would be late if I rode my bike. Lauren had gone in the house to get some items. I also went back in the house. When I came out and headed for the car, I turned around and noticed that Rosa was near the garage door. I was so relieved.

I have never had children, so I have little understanding of parenting dynamics or feelings. But I have gotten some sense of what some of those dynamics and feelings probably are like from my experiences with my five chickens and four cats.

Rosa seemed traumatized, too. But she was not physically wounded. Her feathers were not ruffled. But she did look rather motley—as did the other chickens—due to being in a molting phase. In my mind, it is a silly time of year for molting.

I picked her up. At first, she was restless. But I comforted her—tried to exude all the love and healing energy I possibly could to her. And put her in the small, covered run.

I checked on Addy, who seemed stunned, but who was alive—yet standing in almost the same position with the same slumped posture as the last time I had seen her.

I headed for my church. Joe Lynch, a PFI member from Onion Creek Farm, called to ask how my chicken was and offered to help if needed. And of course, there were others who had offered help via email. And my friend from the USDA called back while I was riding the bus home.

Abby came to my home this evening. She had on a headlight so she could easily see Addy's wounds. She picked Addy out of her secure cube and weighed Addy. Then gave Addy a pain killer. Abby asked if I had honey. I went to the house and got some that had come from Audubon County Family Farms. Abby daubed some honey on the wounds then laid a piece of gauze on top of the main wound in the center of Addy's back. Abby also gave me instructions for what to do tomorrow. That will be a challenge for me—but a wonderful chance to mature a little more. A way to grow in compassion and caring for a creature who does not look real lovely.

Abby and I then talked for awhile—about my cats, about the animal shaman who lives in my neighborhood, and more.

I breath. I have explained most of what I wanted to say. I am humbled to have this place to farm. I am glad to have the opportunity, not only after living in apartments for a few decades but also never having had pets in my adult years, to have cats and chickens. Again, I know that I am a hobby farmer, but the cats and chickens have taught me a lot.

It's late at night, and I need to push away from the computer and go out and lock four of the chickens in their hotel, safe from the raccoons. Then check on Addy and beam some of my love to her. Who knows what she perceives or knows about me. Her healing may or may not be affected by my feelings for her. But I need to know that I have paid her some attention and that I have not treated her like just another creature with no connection to me.

And yes, I have written long and in detail, but I have done little justice to the deep, tender, poignant feelings that I have in regard to all of this. I do love my cats and chickens. And I do love the connections through PFI.

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