

What I've Learned From Chickens



Chapter 2: The 21 Day Miracle

It is later in the evening of the day we brought the eggs home. Dinner has been served and homework is in progress. I find myself alone with the eggs for a few minutes. I look at them and then at the Styrofoam incubator with its scratched plastic window and its jiggly wire for adjusting the temperature. I look back at the eggs and it's as if I've never really seen an egg before. I admire their shape and run my fingers over their smooth surfaces slowly. I look back at the incubator. I am having serious doubts about this contraption's ability to play mother hen to my eggs.

You see, God gave the hen everything she needs to succeed when it comes to hatching eggs. She carries with her the perfect environment, all the right instincts, and the patience of a saint. Left to herself, a chicken with the urge to brood creates a nest somewhere off the beaten path (usually where neither fox nor farmer can find her) and lays an egg every day or day and a half for a couple of weeks until she has a nest full. Only then does she settle herself onto the eggs and hunker down for the long wait.

The first miracle of fertilized eggs is that they can remain viable for two weeks or more, but they don't start to develop into chicks until they reach 55% humidity and the critical temperature of 99 degrees, the exact conditions that you would find if you took measurements under the downy breast of a brooding hen. Once the hen sits, she spreads herself out over her eggs and gets very still. Then she sits and sits ... and sits ... and sits some more ... for 21 whole days. On the 21st day, even though her eggs have been laid over the course of two weeks, they all hatch within 24 hours of each other. This let's-all-hatch-together feature is critical to the success of the species because, unlike most birds whose chicks are born naked, blind, and helpless, chickens have independent hatchlings who are protected by feathers and able to feed themselves. Once they hatch, they start wandering around in search of food and it would be an impossible job for the hen to care for the first hatchlings while still sitting on the rest of the eggs.

I lift the incubator off the table. Well, I say to myself, this ain't no hen, but it's all I've got. I place it on the floor in an out of the way corner of the dining room and plug it in. The thermometer rises to 102 degrees. I try to turn it down with the jiggly wire thing and it falls to 95 degrees. For over an hour, I jiggle the wire and watch the temperature bounce all around the ideal of 99 degrees without ever landing there. After getting ready for bed, the kids all gather around and we make the joint decision to put the eggs in and hope for the best.

I wake up early the next morning, eager to check on the eggs. I hurry through the predawn light, turn on the lamp that sits on the table next to the incubator, and squat down. The Styrofoam lid squeaks as I open it. The warm moist air rises to meet my face -- it smells like life. The thermometer reading is close to, but not quite, 99 degrees. I wiggle the wire a tiny bit and sigh, still hoping, but very unsure that the incubator is doing its job.

David, the farmer, told me that the eggs in an incubator need to be turned and shuffled at least three times a day to stimulate the action of a hen moving the eggs around with her feet. I mark each egg with an X so I can see which side is which. Then I move them around -- those on the inside of the “nest” go to the outside, those on the outside move to the inside. I love the way the eggs fit so perfectly into my hand, so smooth and warm -- substantial, yet delicate. Once they are in their new positions, I turn them over, working quickly so I can close the cover before they get too cold.

I pause for a moment after the lid is closed, lingering over the peace I feel within. Performing this simple task (the task of a hen’s feet!) expands my heart and focuses my mind in ways that are unfamiliar and lovely. I know there are many things I will do this day that are much more important to my family, but this one feels like the most important thing to my own spirit, and the blessings that grow inside are immediate and abundant. I don’t understand why this is so, but I am grateful. After all, if you had asked me before I said Yes! to chickens if I would be willing to turn and rotate eggs three times a day for 21 days, I might have punched you.

The next week finds us back at the farm. Belle, the beagle, howls her greeting and runs around in frantic circles when she sees us coming. David, who is walking up from the pasture, just waves.

“Hullo,” he says when he gets closer. “Did you get your eggs started?”

“I hope so,” I say. “It took a while for the incubator to settle down after we put them in.”

“It would have been a good idea to wait until it settled *before* you put them in,” he says calmly.

My heart flops over in my chest. “Do you think we killed them?” I am fighting panic.

“Well,” he pauses to carefully consider my question, “they weren’t really alive yet, were they? Not much difference between that and eating them.” He looks down at me with his eyes sparkling.

I think about this. “No, I guess not.”

“Take some more eggs today and put them in with the others. See what happens.”

So we do. As we feed the sheep, Mac discovers five more eggs tucked into the hay in a corner of the manger. He lights up with excitement and gathers them into his shirt with care. We bring them home, mark them with an O to distinguish them from the rest and add them to the pile in the incubator. Then we head over to the calendar beside the kitchen door and mark off another day. This is Day 7 and Day 21 is circled in red -- the due date for the first batch. Mac draws a green star around Day 28 -- the due date for this second batch. Mac looks up at me, smiling his newest ever-changing smile as his baby teeth fall out and the big ones grow in. He’s happy because we have five more eggs than we did before, and when you are seven more is always better. I am happy because I’ve got a back-up plan, some insurance against total failure. I’m in control again.

For 21 days, I repeated the egg shuffling process several times a day. Sometimes I did it alone, and other times I watched as Mac handled the eggs with great concentration and gentleness -- I was totally captivated by his sweetness. Every moment spent with the eggs, in fact, filled me with a new form of joy. I never hurried through the job; it never became routine. I

simply became completely absorbed by the process. Given my overwhelmed feelings at the time, it was a miracle that caring for the eggs never felt like a burden. They were always on my mind as a pleasant distraction, providing a sense of purpose each day, something outside of the routine, something outside of myself. I was immensely *interested*.

I find it fascinating that the 21 days it takes for a chick to develop and hatch is exactly the same amount of time it takes for the synapses in the human brain to stabilize when new circuits are being formed. It occurs to me that as I cared for the eggs, I was actually creating a new *habit* of positive thought and emotion. My heart was growing and the inexplicable love I felt for the unborn chicks was melting the crust of overwhelm, resentment, and fear that had built up over the years.

With a family of six to take care of, I had developed habits of planning and control that I thought were necessary to get through each week. If I didn't know where everyone was, what they needed, where they were going and how they were going to get there, then how would we all survive? The mental effort of staying eight steps ahead of every eventuality was exhausting, but I did it without knowing there was a choice.

Our society nurtures an illusion that we can control our lives and holds being "in control" as a virtue. From the time we are very small, we are rewarded for sitting still, staying quiet, and putting our crayons back in their box. It doesn't take long for us to notice that when we lose control and get a bit messy, the people we love and depend upon get upset. School reinforces this belief by teaching us that we can control our destiny by just showing up and doing our homework, so many of us step into adulthood clinging to control much like a thumb-sucking toddler clings to her blanky. And control does seem to work for a while -- as long as we keep all of our balls in the air and display lots of productive busy-ness, we are considered successful.

For some people life seems to be a contest to see who can claim the title of "Busiest" or "Hardest Working" and it is easy to get caught up in this game. Things get more complicated, however, as time goes on and the list of things we need to control grows. We find ourselves controlling our primary relationship, our children, our household, our emotions, our pets, our careers, our weight, our friends, our parents, our automobiles, and the height of the grass that grows in the yard. We even watch meteorologists obsessively, hoping for a clue that will help us to control the weather. Taking all of this on as our personal responsibility is exhausting and it is no wonder so many of us are running on empty, losing our light and our smile as we white-knuckle our way through life.

As I cared for the eggs, I noticed that they never made it to my to-do list. This is remarkable because my list was my life. It grew very long each week as I crossed things off and added new tasks, tracking the status of all the things I felt I needed to accomplish (or persuade others to accomplish) to keep our family running. If it wasn't on the list, it probably wasn't going to happen. How then did the eggs get turned at least three times every single day? Why didn't I forget about them? It's not like they were capable of crying or fussing to demand my attention, they just sat there silently ... waiting.

The answer, I think, is that the eggs spoke to me through my heart and I was drawn to them when they needed me by an intuitive connection that is not capable of being understood with our mortal brains. To my higher-level intelligence, the eggs *mattered*, whereas getting the barrels out to the curb before the Thursday morning trash pickup did not. The stuff that was

important to my head required writing down; the stuff that was important to my heart called to me, sang to me, and shimmered with such a beautiful light that it was impossible to forget.

As I cared for the eggs and the chickens that followed, I experienced being in the flow of life and it led me to make many more heart-driven choices, ultimately taking me to a new state of being and a completely different way of life where almost everything I do now is from the heart. It happened slowly for me (because I wasn't really conscious of what was happening at the time), but bit-by-bit my hands came off the wheel and I started relinquishing my role as Master Controller of All Family Sustenance and Destiny.

Miraculously, life continued to flourish in our household.

Another aspect of control that shifted for me was my need to know how something would turn out before beginning it. When we live in our heads, under the illusion that we are in control of our lives, we like to plan and strategize. We don't feel safe stepping onto an path unless we can see where it leads. This need for certainty and foreknowledge causes a sort of paralysis as we wait to know everything before acting. Freedom and abundance come only when we find the courage to follow our hearts -- one step at a time. Faith is trusting that each step takes us toward something important even if we don't know what it is. Faith is knowing that each step is not only a part of our journey, it is also a destination in its own right.

I honestly had no idea what what we would do with the chicks once they hatched. Quite uncharacteristically, I didn't spend any time worrying about it. My "living in the moment" approach was new and the old me would have thought it insane. But there I was, completely focused on the task at hand, turning my eggs, loving the moment, and filled with a deep trust that I would have what I needed at each step of the way. This kind of trust was foreign and it made me curious. Who or what was I trusting? If I didn't figure it all out ahead of time, who would? Was it possible that I didn't need to do all of that worrying and thinking? The decision to raise chicks seemed to have been made for me -- all I had to do was to say Yes!, take a deep breath, and leap. Whereas I once feared that uncontrolled leap into the unknown, I've discovered that it's where the angels live. And they are inviting us to let go and fly with them.

The angels woke me extra early on the morning of the 21st day after I'd put the first eggs in the incubator. I got up and moved through the early stillness to start the coffee and begin the morning routine. As the steam radiators started to whisper their first warmth, I made my way over to the eggs and squatted down. I lifted the lid to the incubator and reached for one of the eggs to turn it. My hand stopped midway and a flutter of excitement ran through my whole body.

The egg had a hole in it.