

What I've Learned From Chickens



Chapter 5: Contentment is in the Details

It was one of those long lingering evenings that are the gift of early summer. The air smelled like warm grass spiced with the salt the breeze brought from the harbor two blocks away. After several weeks in the dishwasher box on the dining room floor, my chickens were ready to go outside permanently.

We had spent the day retrofitting the garden shed with a little chicken-sized door for the birds to access their small fenced-in yard, a couple of nesting boxes, and a roosting pole six feet up spanning the rafters. The whole family got involved carrying the birds out one by one. Nine careful trips with a chicken tucked under an arm or Mac-style with the bird held gingerly in front on outstretched arms as it squawked and flapped its wings excitedly.

We gently set each bird up on the roosting pole. They stood there looking down at us, confused at first, baaakkk baaakking softly. But they stayed put as we added the others, appearing to completely trust us to provide everything they needed. As they slowly settled in, lowering their soft bellies down over their feet, we said goodnight and shut the door. I took one last look through the window. They blinked at me with sleepy eyes, seeming so at home already.

I felt so proud that we were able to create such a nice space for them, a real chicken house. I was also deeply grateful that they accepted it so graciously. It was a delicious feeling to take care of something this way. It was different than taking care of children and I went to sleep wondering why that was.

In the morning, I couldn't wait to visit the chickens. I ran barefoot over the dewy grass and looked in the window. They were all sitting on the nesting boxes or on the floor drinking from their water bucket and pecking at their food. I slid open their trap door so they could go outside. They just stood there, tipping their heads from side to side, looking. They clucked and commented excitedly to each other, stretching their necks out long to see the world better and, eventually they took a few tentative steps forward.

I ran into the kitchen to grab a cup of coffee and dragged an Adirondack chair over to the edge of the chicken fence. I sat down to watch. After a while a speckled bird stuck its head out and hopped down onto the ground. It cocked its head to look at me and took a few more steps. Another chicken followed and soon they were all out in the sunshine, marveling at everything. It was all new to them. A black bird started scratching and found a worm. It leaned over to examine it and picked it up in its beak, shaking it. As if on cue, all the other birds ran over to see. The black chicken started running and the chase was on. There was great excited squawking as Black was chased to the fence and forced to turn. One of the others grabbed the worm and started running the other way. The rest followed, of course, and the fracas continued until someone eventually swallowed the worm. Then everything stopped. They stared for a moment, then each shook its feathers and proceeded to mill about some more, sampling the vegetation. It quickly

became clear that clover was their favorite. After one taste of clover, the bird would eat every leaf off the plant in a wild flurry.

They explored their new world with great gusto, trying different bugs and jumping up to taste leaves that grew over their heads. I watched until the sun grew too high and hot and I had to go inside.

At night they learned to put themselves to bed up on the roosting pole, so all we had to do was close the door after them to keep the predators out. It was quite a sight to look up and see them perched there, all lined up with their fluffy underbellies exposed. They tilted their heads when I came in to check on them and made soft cooing baaalk baaalk bak noises. It would occur to me in those dusky moments that the chickens were perfectly content. I was a bit envious of them, me with my human guilts and concerns and worries and those chickens so simply focused on the moment.

Everyone thinks of chickens as not particularly bright, but I had to ask myself who was the stupid one? I was a worrying, scurrying fool with my college education and big brain, and the chickens, with a brain the size of a soybean, had all the calm and peace of Buddha. I began to think that perhaps intelligence was highly overrated. But what if there were a way to combine intelligence and single-mindedness? Could I learn to stay tuned to one thing at a time and enjoy it to its fullest? Could I do that for just one hour, one minute? Can you?

It is a difficult thing to undo the decades of conditioning that causes most of us to obsessively look forward and back rather than focus on this moment now. As a species, we humans are insanely addicted to past and future and the big picture. The chickens know nothing of all that. They process things one detail at a time. Look! A beetle! Ping! Beetle is in beak! Snap! Beetle is in gizzard! Yum!

Some say the devil is in the details. but it seems to me that God is in the details.

I decided to start noticing.

I tried an experiment. I was munching on some cashews on a sunny afternoon. I was writing about focusing and thinking about focusing, but I could not accomplish the simple task of focusing completely on eating one cashew. I could take one out nut of the can, look at it, admire its shape and texture, and decide to do nothing but enjoy the cashew for the next forty seconds as I chewed it and swallowed. I was on the third one and hadn't succeeded yet. My mind kept drifting out the window ... or to the next words I wanted to write ... or to some small thread of worry ... and I knew I was not the only one who can't accomplish this simple feat.

Finally, I closed my eyes and enjoyed the complete cashew experience without being distracted. It's perfectly lovely to be in such a moment. When we slow down enough to notice the little things, we are at our most peaceful and loving; we are open to communication with our higher selves. I wanted more of that.

Once more, I stopped my writing to focus on the dog as she snapped at a fly. My heart rate and breathing slowed as I brought my whole presence into the moment with her. She looked at me and I looked back into her beautiful brown eyes, the color of a newly opened glossy chestnut. Soaking up the details keeps me firmly in the present moment and, just like the chickens, I am content. Worries about how I would pay for my car's new transmission or improve my son's performance in school faded away. I could see clearly that they were insignificant in the scheme

of things. The car would get its new transmission ... or not. And my son would find his way in school ... or not. The energy of my worry did nothing to help get things done and it probably even hurt. Worry wore me out and destroyed my ability to see solutions. Worry made me tense and crabby. Who would I be without worry?

I decided to try it for an hour.

Worrying thoughts came fast, but I caught them and cast them away. I felt lighter as I did. I began to see the children through eyes of appreciation, noticing Tom's confidence, Liam's funniness, Cailin's sweetness with her brothers, and Mac's bright smile as he told a secret to the dog. In each moment, all is well. I relaxed into it, just *being with* them, rather than *doing for* them. They seemed to like it.

As I erased more and more of the worrying thoughts, I noticed other thoughts that made my body tense up: expectations and judgments. I realized that I had a long list of things that the kids should or should not be doing. Tom should work harder at painting the trim on the house ... Liam should not play on the computer so much ... Mac should sit still and do his homework ... Cailin shouldn't ... Ahhh, so that's the difference between caring for the kids and caring for the chickens ... I didn't have any expectations about the chickens! Without the burden of expectation, I was free to simply enjoy the chickens without needing to decide whether or not they were doing things "right." The chickens never disappointed me, because I never created an expectation about them.

Okay, so who would I be without expectations? What would happen if I wasn't always trying to teach and push the children to be "better" and meet my expectations? What part of how they did things was my responsibility anyway? What about my expectations of myself and my husband? Could I really let my expectations go? Wasn't that the same as not caring?

It seemed paradoxical to think that things would be okay if I ceased to expect anything and it was scary at first, like taking my hands off the steering wheel, but I began to recognize the physical sensations that came over me whenever I allowed an expectation to form. It felt like an internal pressure that caused painful tension in the muscles between my shoulder blades. Once I became aware of the feeling, I could see how my expectations were actually hurting me. I slowly let them go, replacing them with beautiful visions instead. I have since learned to envision the kids living their best life and to leave the details about how they get there or exactly what form their life will take completely up to them. They have lessons to learn, consequences to bear, and paths to explore that have nothing to do with me. My job is to provide encouragement, a safe place to land, and a steady presence should they want to process their journeys with me ... or not.

I now honor a simple truth: A child's life is not ours to control. And you know what? Those tender souls who found their way into my home and heart have grown and flourished *beyond* my expectations.

As a matter of fact, so have I. By savoring the details of my days, I have learned to be content.