

November 2009

From: A Quiet Corner of Connecticut

**A special note to Aspire readers:**

As I write this from my tiny one-room cabin in the woods, I can hear my chickens scratching and clucking busily outside the window. The hens that were destined to lay an egg this morning have already done so -- with a loud community celebration of their achievement *every single time*. Bak bakbakbak BAK BAK BAKKKKK!~, the chorus goes on for a full minute or more. As I listen to them, I wonder: Why don't *we* celebrate loudly, from the top of *our* nesting boxes, every single time we fulfill *our* purpose? Wouldn't that be amazing? Every time a child lays his head peacefully on his pillow and accepts a bedtime story and an embrace, we should all ring a bell in celebration of yet another uplifting moment of parenting on this planet. Let's start doing that!

So, you see, I am still learning from my chickens ... and my pigs ... and all the perfect creatures who live on this wild land with me. I am honored to be sharing my lessons with you.

Love this day,  
Sharon

**Preface from What I've Learned From Chickens**

I will always be grateful for what I've learned from observing the gentle ways of chickens. Chickens know how to pay close attention to the important things in life ... and how to enjoy the deep contentment that comes from forgetting the rest. They take great pride in their work and fully accept their purpose in God's plan. They even know how to die with grace.

As I told my chicken stories to various friends and family over the years, I noticed that the room would often grow quiet as others leaned in to listen. Of course, they were fascinated by the interesting things chickens did, but when I spoke about how chickens had changed *me*, their eyes began to sparkle eagerly. Heads nodded as I described how tense and overwhelmed I used to feel before I learned from chickens. People would say, "I know what you mean, that's how I feel!" They wanted to know the secret.

Well, there is no secret, just an acceptance of the natural way of things. As we "grow up," our modern world tends to slowly close our eyes, our ears, and our hearts to the divine intelligence that flows all around us. We simply need to be reminded. This remembering often comes by way of small wonders that make us look deep and "grow in" to who we really are. In my case, the small wonders happened to have feathers and four-toed dinosaur feet.

# What I've Learned From Chickens

by Sharon Roy

## Chapter 1: The Power of Yes

“Hey Mom! Can we hatch ‘em?”

I am driving through a misty April evening with my seven-year-old son, Mac, who has a pile of eggs on his lap. This is a request I've heard several times since we began volunteering to do the chores at an 18<sup>th</sup> century living-history farm museum, a place where the chickens run free and time breathes deeply.

I answer the same distracted way I always do. “No.”

It's how any sensible person living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century with close neighbors and forbidding town ordinances would answer. Especially someone with barely enough land to pitch a tent.

“Why not?” he says with his anything-is-possible optimism. “The hens have a rooster.” This is a reference to a delicate talk we've already had about why we couldn't hatch eggs from the grocery store.

I sigh and prepare for the long No. “They need to be kept warm and we don't have the right equipment. Everything needs to be just right to hatch an egg.”

He frowns, thinks for a moment, then brightens, “Hey, I know what we can do! We can put them under the lamp on the counter!”

“No, we're not going to put them under a lamp. It wouldn't work.”

“Can we someday?” he asks.

“We'll see,” I say. The classic grown up's cop out.

“Does that mean maybe?” The classic kid's reply.

“Maybe.”

And the conversation is over for now. Except this time a thread has been pulled loose inside of me. Things don't feel tidy. When did I turn into the kind of person who says No, without even stopping to think about it? As I drive along the streets of Bristol, Rhode Island, the charming harbor town I call home, I begin to feel haunted by a determined vow I made as a girl *not* to turn into the kind of mom who says No all the time. It seemed to me then that mothers were quite prone to do that and I had intended to be different. But yet here I am, a mother, with yet another No falling from my lips.

The tomboy I once was shakes her finger at me and scowls. She is a powerful wild creature with briars in her hair, a bandage on her elbow, and a flush of poison ivy on her shin. I find her intimidating. She has not yet learned that there is a bunch of stuff she cannot do and so she can still do anything. She jumps onto the bare backs of horses that do not belong to her and rides without permission. She stares down the boys who don't play fair and isn't afraid to punch them if she needs to. She can probably even fly. Now, she wants to hatch some eggs.

But seriously, I say to the girl within, of course we're not going to hatch eggs. What would we do with the chickens? We don't have any room! My tomboy folds her arms and turns her head, disgusted. You are no fun, she says. Where has your sense of adventure gone?

Where indeed? I wonder. The question lingers for a few minutes and then fades away as I pull into the driveway, a victim of countless urgent tasks like boiling water for pasta, emptying the dishwasher, and taking out the trash.

We eat the farm eggs for breakfast.

The next week at the farm, I carry buckets of water to the oxen and Mac runs around with Belle, the farm beagle, searching through the hay for eggs. He's got thirteen eggs in a wicker basket by the time we are ready to leave. David, the farm manager, walks over with an empty carton to make it easier for us to take them home. He is dressed as a 18<sup>th</sup> century farmer in hand-sewn and patched trousers, a simple cloth shirt, a homemade felt hat, and shoes he made himself. The authentic clothing isn't merely a museum costume; it is his preference whether on the farm or off. He has the appearance and gentle, wise demeanor of Abe Lincoln. When he talks, you listen.

"You know," he says and then pauses. He makes you wait for the rest, which might be why you listen better. "I have an incubator if you'd ever like to hatch any eggs."

Before I can stop her, the neglected 12-year-old in me leaps up from my belly and socks me in the arm. "Yes! Let's do it," she says before I can get a word in edgewise. I have apparently been possessed because those very words come out of my mouth. It's a done deal.

I wait for the familiar crush of overwhelm I get whenever anything is added to the enormous pile of duties I already don't have enough time for; yet instead of that vague throw-uppy feeling, I experience something else. In that instant of enthusiastic Yes! decades of tension leave my body. I am here and now, like a child, completely absorbed in the brilliant new adventure of hatching eggs. All the cells in my body slurp thirstily as this feeling, this fresh, clean rain washes the muddy tension away. Within minutes, David is handing me a Styrofoam incubator and I am asking him how to use it as Mac bounces around in glee. The eggs have already become my babies instead of a quiche.

On the drive home, the late afternoon shadows are long and I am filled with an excited peace. Mac sits with the eggs on his lap and we chat happily about their potential as chicks instead of shiny orange yolks wiggling on a plate. My typically incessant thinking, thinking, thinking about logistical worries has been replaced by an absolute focus on this moment of co-creation with my boy, the hens, their rooster, and God.

Looking back, I can clearly see that transcendent moment of Yes, that moment when the calcified layers of fear and doubt and caution were replaced with light and ease. Like many

women I know, my life had become overwhelming. With a blended family of six to manage, day-to-day demands had worn away the courage, spontaneity, and joy I had as a girl. I felt that if I didn't control everything, we would spin off into space. It felt as if saying No and thinking of reasons Why Not kept the fences on our life and kept us safe.

And yet, saying Yes to chickens turned my exhausted inner frown into a jubilant smile and, in that one affirming breath, I began to expand into my authentic self. The self I was born to be, but had lost along the way.

From my new perspective, I can ask What happened to me? As a child, I was full of wonder about the world. I saw it as it truly is: a place of infinite, magical possibilities, a place where I could make anything happen. Like most children raised before the age of video games and 255 cable channels, I used my imagination constantly and played outside during every spare moment. I got dirty. I fell down, brushed myself off and got going again. I came home delighted and tired. My mother usually didn't know where I was for hours at a time – and no one ever thought to call the authorities. I was free to experience nature and my world with wild abandon.

Left to themselves, this capacity for wonder seems to be innate in most children; it is our birthright. Watch a young child play. Notice the sense of abundance and possibility, the complete lack of conceptualized fear. As we grow into adulthood, however, we start to see the world as a smaller, more limiting place. In school we are all told to sit still, stay in line, and be quiet—all variations of No that make the teacher's job not just easier, but possible. In the media, we are fed a constant stream of stories that feed our fear. Those fears mount and we begin to resist life rather than live it fully. We say No and hold ourselves back. Our desire to stay safe and comfortable retards our growth, paralyzing us. In fact, most of us don't grow at all; we shrink. By the time we're thirty, we have absorbed far more reasons to say No than to say Yes. This takes place on a couple of different levels: the No we say to life, and the No we say to others, usually our children.

Saying No to life is the loud and immediate “I Can't” we utter when we are presented with a new opportunity. Saying Yes means listening carefully to that inner voice that nudges us, whispers to us in the dark, and badgers us until we heed its call.

Saying No to our children comes quite naturally. No is an amazing discovery for a young mother—a remote control device. When the child reaches for the cat's tail or a hot radiator or a glass vase, I can say No from across the room and the crisis is averted. I think when we first start saying No to our children we say it for very good reasons.

But as children grow older, their requests require more thought. “Mom, can we carve our pumpkins now?” they might ask just as I've put on my boots to go rake the lawn. Thinking about their request requires time and energy. If I did bother to think about it, my thoughts might go like this: It's four o'clock and I need to rake those leaves now. If I don't, then I'll have to do it tomorrow and it might rain before then and the leaves will get heavy... and so on. It's too much to figure out most of the time so the default becomes No, simply because it's easier. What if the default were Yes? “Yes, that's a great idea!” or even, “Yes, but I need your help raking for an

hour first.” There are so many creative options as to how and when we get things done, but they all flow from Yes. Nothing creative ever came from No.

Of course, as a parent I still need to say No at times. The answer to “Can I eat all of my Halloween candy?” is still usually No, but now I try to be more present for the question and answer consciously. That awareness makes all the difference. For I am also free to say, “Yes! Eat as much candy as you want.” The amazing thing is that the delicious surprise of the Yes! is often so sweet that my children only want a moderate amount of candy even if they can have it all. Apparently, their souls need Yes! more than their tongues need sugar.

There are many ways to practice saying Yes. I once had a dear friend named Caryn who taught me about something called hoobly shoobly. Hoobly shoobly was an attitude, a state of mind, it was all about Yes. Caryn and I met while working in Bar Harbor, Maine during the summer between my freshman and sophomore years in college. We found each other at the YWCA where we were both staying and soon discovered that we shared a love of exploration and sunrises. “Let’s Hoobly Shoobly,” she’d say in her soft Maryland accent and off we’d go between our waitressing shifts. We’d jump in her car and start driving through the lush green of Mount Desert Island in whatever direction called to us. If either one of us saw a side road that shimmered with invitation, we’d take it, even if it meant making a sudden screeching turn. We laughed until our cheeks hurt and stuck our head out the window to view the bright blue sky. The expansive spirit of Yes guided us to some spectacular sights and profound encounters with people. When we got lost (and we always did), we let our intuition guide us back to something familiar. It never let us down. That experience of turning off our minds and placing all of our trust in our hearts created a giddy sensation of freedom and bliss. Our rides often ended on the top of Cadillac Mountain where we shared a bottle of cheap champagne as we watched the sunrise—delighting in the fact that we were among the first people in America to feel the sun on our faces that day.

As time went on and my list of responsibilities grew, I felt that hoobly shoobly spirit less and less. I became weighed down by all of the have tos and shoulds that life presents. After being stuck in the habit of the reflexive No for so many years, saying Yes to chickens was an ecstatic coloring outside of the lines. It didn’t make sense; it was silly and foolish and weird. But in spite of that (or maybe because of it), the bubbling fountain of joy that welled up inside my heart reawakened the hoobly in me. I decided then and there to keep it alive by surprising myself with sudden turns whenever inspiration strikes.

It’s hard to face the woman I was before I said Yes to chickens, because we are very different people now. But I need to remember her, to see her gently. We all do. She is everywhere and she has so much wisdom to share. What happened to her is happening to the woman who teaches your children, to the single mom in the yellow house on the corner, to the successful

executive who worries about her kids all day, to the mail lady, to the young woman who brings you your coffee in the morning. Maybe you can't see the brittle tired that lies behind those brave smiles, or maybe you can ... maybe you see yourself.

We start off so well, don't we? Like many who take on too much, at first I had abundant creativity and energy for my roles as mom, stepmom, wife, and career woman. I made special meals and we ate by candlelight every night. Without a TV to distract us, we found the time to play games and talk. But the deadlines I faced to earn a living and the challenge of managing our four children (his, hers, and ours) slowly wore me out. Plus there were dishes to do and towels to fold and bills to pay and the oil needed to be changed in the car. Like most modern women, my to-do list was too long for one person and there wasn't anyone signing up to help, so I did what most of us do: I held on tight and chased the list compulsively. While I continued to fake it, the negative thoughts ran laps in my mind until resentment and bitterness were firmly entrenched in my heart. The candles went out, the TV went on, and creativity ceased.

And that was before the blows I experienced during the first nine months of 2001. Private loss and betrayal left me broken-hearted even prior to the shared horror of the bombing of the World Trade Center in September. After that, I was like a drowning person who eventually stops struggling and just accepts the water into their lungs. Once they do, I imagine them floating peacefully for a while before their systems shut down for good. That was me – shutting down, giving up, floating through my life.

And yet, as I lifted those thirteen perfect eggs out of the car and carried them into the house that evening, I felt the subtle warmth of a hoobly sun rising -- the power of Yes was being unleashed in my life.

## **Finding your own small wonders.**

What small wonders do you have waiting to be discovered? Perhaps it is time for you to notice them. Following these steps in order can open you to discovering the fresh, fragrant joys of your life.

### **Step 1) Where are you in your life right now?**

Gathering awareness of where you are can help you get to where you want to go. For each emotion below, make an X along the scale at the point that best describes your usual state. A “10” indicates the greatest amount of that emotion you think it is possible to have; a “1” indicates the least.

Fear

1---2---3---4---5---6---7---8---9---10

Fatigue

1---2---3---4---5---6---7---8---9---10

Overwhelm

1---2---3---4---5---6---7---8---9---10

Anger

1---2---3---4---5---6---7---8---9---10

Joy

1---2---3---4---5---6---7---8---9---10

Peace

1---2---3---4---5---6---7---8---9---10

Love

1---2---3---4---5---6---7---8---9---10

Now take a deep breath and accept this information. Accept it fully. Close your eyes and love yourself *as you are* in this moment. Only do this step once a month.

### **Step 2) Make a new choice.**

Take another deep breath and circle the way you would like to feel instead. Journal about what your life would be like if you felt like this more of the time. Don't spend any energy thinking about what's standing in your way, because nothing real ever stands in our way of feeling joy, peace, and love. Feeling good is a choice and you can learn to

make it, regardless of what's going on around you or what other people are choosing. Remind yourself of how you want to feel at least once per day.

### **Step 3) Feel it.**

Choose to feel good now by imagining a scene that makes you feel that way. Allow yourself to go all the way into the essence of the emotion. Just feel it. Have fun creating new scenes to feel good in. Repeat this step as often as you like -- many times a day is perfect.

### **Step 4) Find your own small wonders.**

After you have completed step 3\*, make an intention for a single day that goes something like this: "Today I will be inexplicably attracted to the things that are my own small wonders." Picture yourself putting on imaginary glasses that allow you to see a special shimmer around those things. When you see something that beckons to you, take the time, stop the car, get off the bus you are riding on, DO WHAT IT TAKES to go over to it. Make the process a grand adventure with you as the hero who is willing to leap over tall buildings in a single bound to reach the things that shimmer to you.

Once you come upon your shimmery thing, touch it if you can. Linger for a moment. Really *notice* it. What is the quality that attracts you? What does this thing need to receive from you? What does it have to give you? Are you willing to enter into the dance of giving and receiving with this thing? Is any part of you trying to say Yes to it? What would saying Yes look like in this moment? Can you do that now?

Even if you are not ready to hatch this particular egg, the game of finding it can bring you more joy than you've had in a long time. Be grateful and ... Go play!

(\* Note: Doing Step 3 first is important because the energy you generate when you are feeling good is very magnetic and will attract other things that make you feel good.)

### **Step 5) Share.**

Reinforce your new awareness by sharing it with others. Take a few moments now to tell us about your experience by joining the discussion on my Facebook page -- <http://www.facebook.com/people/Sharon-Stark-Roy/706484369>. I look forward to seeing you there.