

What I've Learned From Chickens



Chapter 3. The Value of the Struggle

I peered through the hole in the egg and saw dark wet feathers and a tiny body breathing very hard. I stared in awe. Then I remembered that I was letting all the heat out and closed the lid quickly. My newfound trust in the process vanished as my mind sprang into high alert, looking for things to do and worry about. I leaned in closer to look through the little scratched window. The chick wasn't doing anything. Maybe it needed help. It might die! I needed it to live now as much as I needed my own heart to beat.

I ran to the computer and pulled up the Google search page. I typed in "Hatching chicken eggs" and waited while over 1,300,000 results came back. I clicked on one and scrolled down quickly to learn about the moment of hatching. Here is what it said:

"A little hole or crack in the shell will be the first indicator of hatching. The process may take a day or more. Be patient. You may be tempted to help the chick cast off the shell, but resist the urge. Rule one: Don't touch the eggs during the hatching process. The chicks have to do it all by themselves!"

I sat there in the light of the computer monitor, blinking. So, I was to do nothing? Hmmm. That couldn't be right. There was always some action I could take that would make any situation better. But not in this case. The words on the screen wavered at me: "Don't touch... The chicks have to do it all by themselves." I let the words settle in and felt the effort of trying to control the outcome leave my body. There was nothing for me to do. No action required. The chick would make its way out of its shell—or not. And if it did make it out, it would be stronger for having struggled, ready to tackle the job of surviving out in the big world. My only job was to sit back and accept whatever happened to the little chick I loved.

Has there ever been a harder assignment in the history of humanity?

I stood slowly, wary of the eerie calm I felt, there was a fragility about it that made me want to tiptoe. I went back to the incubator and sat down next to it. The chick's breath was rapid at times and it was very still at others. Too still. For long moments, nothing happened at all and I wondered: how could it possibly hurt if I just picked a chunk of shell off its back? The pressure grew in my belly, screaming, "DO SOMETHING!" But I just waited until the pressure left, committed to letting this chick find its own way.

As I watched that first little chick labor mightily, I wondered: How often had my efforts to "help" robbed someone of an experience they needed to go through? Was it possible that I should step back more often and trust that the people I love would get more of what they needed by struggling through things themselves? It began to dawn that perhaps helping was sometimes selfish on my part, for I was usually helping because seeing the struggle made *me* uncomfortable. So I wasn't really helping them for their sake, I was helping them for mine. If my son got frustrated while tying his shoes, I would usually tie them for him. The benefits to me were

twofold: I didn't have to witness his struggle and it was faster. How much more valuable that time would have been if I had squatted down next to him and provided gentle encouragement as he learned how to overcome frustration and tie his laces on his own.

What about my own struggles? How had they shaped me? Who would I be without them? I thought back to my college days when I didn't have money for food. I remember feeling resentful whenever a friend would get a check every Saturday from her dad. Self pity swept me up in its arms as I let myself wallow, "Where's my check? How come my dad doesn't send me a check?" But I knew in my heart it wasn't because he didn't love me; he was simply letting me struggle. And through the struggle, I learned how to take care of myself -- a lesson that has led to a life of unfettered freedom unlike my well-cared-for friends have ever known. I had no choice but to get creative and find jobs that fit around my class schedule. Instead of indulging in the cafeteria food, I learned how to prepare simple and inexpensive meals that were extremely healthy. Even then, I felt a deep pride that I was able to stay on the Dean's List in my engineering courses and find time to work, to cook, and to walk to the grocery store and schlep those heavy bags home. Through the struggle, I learned to step up to the plate and swing and swing and swing until I got a hit. I developed perseverance and the confidence that I would always find my way. This level of trust in one's own abilities cannot be bought; it must be earned ... through struggle and accomplishment. There is no other way.

As this lesson was reinforced for me by the chicks, it illuminated my parenting. Out on the playground I learned to hang back if Mac got into a disagreement with another child. "Why didn't you tell him to give me the swing back, Mommy?" he would ask later, confused and a bit hurt by my lack of involvement. "Because then you wouldn't have learned how to handle it yourself," I would reply. At this he brightened; it made sense to him, which reaffirmed its rightness. Children know what they need, and struggle is one of the most important gifts we can give them.

In addition to Mac, we had three teenagers at home at that time. The lesson about struggle came just in time to give them the extra freedom they needed to get themselves into jams and then get out ... on their own. Sixteen-year-old Tom got a car to drive and assumed responsibility for all of the expenses that went with it. He struggled mightily through many adventures with that car and nearly every penny he made went into it. When I heard about some of the snafus, I swallowed hard and told him, "You'll figure something out." And he always did. The hardest part was getting the other adults in his life to leave him to it, "*Don't help the chick out of the shell...*" I would think as I tried to get them to keep their hands off and their wallets closed.

Those teenage years are all about getting out of the shell of childhood and if we try to help, we rob our children of the experiences they need to survive in this world. Teenagers intuitively know this, which is why they push their parents away so roughly sometimes. Tom gave me a birthday card just before he went off to college. "Dear Mom," it said, "thank you for letting me live this last year of my childhood *my way*." There were tears of joy in my eyes as I realized I had successfully given my son the gift of struggle.

Struggle can come in all sizes and we have to learn to always recognize it for what it is ... a chance to grow. Whenever a child whines, "Mawwwm! He called me a..." or "She took my..." I learned to say, "Go work it out." And they did. In fact, they stopped trying to involve me because

I wasn't any help. When I stepped away, they were forced to resolve their conflicts independently – and that is far better preparation for life than running to a parent.

I've even learned to accept my own times of struggle with more grace. During my year with chickens I awakened to many truths in my life. Truths that couldn't be denied; truths that required decisive action and emotional pain. I am convinced that the chickens opened the way inside me to feel the truth. I listened more carefully to my higher self, which was the extent of my spiritual system at the time. I can see now how God was working in me.

My marriage, like most, had its ups and downs. We had created one family out of two, welcomed Mac into the world, laughed, loved, survived adultery, and struggled mightily to find forgiveness. Destructive patterns of addiction remained, however, and they took their toll over time.

Addiction hardens hearts. My husband's addiction compelled him to put satisfying his yearnings before our relationship. We went to therapy and he maintained his right to continue the behavior, called it his "right to privacy." I have come to understand that he wasn't intentionally trying to hurt me or our family, he was just lost in a system of false beliefs and strong cravings. Still the lure of addiction is a mistress, requiring the user to lie and deceive in order to continue to get the fix. The pain of deception in what is supposed to be an intimate, loving relationship is overwhelming to the addict's partner. Over the years, his pattern of betrayal ate away at my love for him until it was gone. Gone. And neither of us knew how serious it was until it was too late.

On the evening of November 5th 2004, I stumbled upon the latest evidence of his problem. I stared at it and felt the beginnings of horror ... and then nothing. I felt nothing. It was a blessing to not feel the combination of desperate fear and rage that I had felt in the past. Then, in a flash, a wave of peace came down on me, seemingly from above. It was the peace that goes beyond understanding and with it came a bolt of knowledge, a kernel of deep knowing that couldn't be denied. It was the knowledge that my marriage was over. I just sat there, lost in wonder. The blissful peace was so new to me, I delighted in it, but the pain of the message I had received was beyond imagining. How could I be done with this man and this life we had made? My mind protested feebly, but my soul knew. Something greater than myself had made the decision that it was time for me to be free of the drama and trauma of his addiction.

While my discomfort had been growing over the years, I had never consciously considered ending the relationship; it would be too unbearable for us all. But here was this powerful knowledge that it was what I needed to do and that we would find our way somehow. To follow this knowledge would be a leap of faith, a way that had been softened when I listened to the voice that said Yes! to chickens. I sat with the knowledge for the weekend, waiting to for the freak out that would certainly wash over me and remove my nerve. But it never came. I was steady in my resolve and the blessed peace never left, even during the most difficult conversations, even during the times of greatest emotional pain. I was following a will that went beyond me; maybe I was righting a wrong. In any case, I am forever grateful to the gentle hand that guided me through that awful time of struggle and grateful to the chickens for teaching me that the struggle was necessary to my eventual hatching into a new and healthier life.

That first little chick did break free that day, and then another and another. We continued to watch as eight chicks in turn kicked and squirmed out of their shells. Each wet little body

collapsed on the wire floor of the incubator and lay there panting until it recovered. Once each chick was dry, we gently lifted it out of the incubator and placed it in a stereo box on the dining room table. By evening nine eggs remained in the incubator, four that should have hatched with the others and five that had a week to go. Eight little balls of fluff, seven gray and one yellow, peeped softly and scurried about in their new cardboard home. The chicks seemed to particularly enjoy pooping in their water dish and tossing the chick mash all around until, eventually, they all fell asleep in a heap under the warm lamp that hung over the edge of the box.

As the evening drew to a close, I stood for a long time, just watching them breathe.