

What I've Learned From Chickens



Chapter 6: The Natural Way of Things

As the chickens matured it began to dawn on me that maybe I had gotten more than my fair share of roosters. For the first few months all the chicks looked alike, at least to my untrained eye -- three of my birds were black, a shiny ebony with a touch of rainbow iridescence; one was white; and the rest were gray with white flecks. They all grew that wobbly red stuff on their heads and I started to notice some varying plumage as their tails grew, but they were such a rag tag mix of breeds that it was hard to tell what was what. So for several more weeks, they had me guessing.

Then the crowing started.

At first it was only a few squawks, just a tad more aggressive than their usual noises, but as I listened more closely, I realized that they were adding syllables as the days went on. What started as a long raaaw turned into raaaw caa and then raaw caa errrr errrr and finally what we all think of as cockadoodledoo.

Not just one or two rowdy roosters crowing cockadoodledoo, but six. Six! Six of my nine birds were roosters. This information landed with a thud. Not only wasn't it fair given the laws of probability, but I had a problem. I had neighbors all around—there were seven houses within 200 feet of my chicken coop. There would surely be complaints about the all the noise; town ordinances would be invoked and that would be the end of my beloved chickens. I went to each of my neighbors and apologized, explaining that I would take care of the problem and thanking them in advance for their patience. Some of my neighbors were delighted by my birds; many were immigrants from the Azores and the noises reminded them of the Old Country. The chickens brought us closer to those who had felt uncomfortable with our cultural differences (before the chickens we were known as “The English” and watched with suspicion). One Portuguese couple that had held us at arm's length loved to come into our back yard and hold hands as they stood looking at the chickens. All this peace and love caused me to breathe a sigh of relief for the short term, but I knew I still had a problem: I couldn't keep six roosters on our small bit of property.

So on the next visit to the farm, I told David that I would be bringing over some roosters for him.

“But I don't want your roosters,” he said simply.

My mouth hung open. “What do you mean you don't want my roosters?” I said, “They're beautiful!”

“Nobody is going to want your roosters,” he said with a small, compassionate smile.

I blinked, taking a moment to digest that information. “Well, then, what do I do with them?”

“You could kill them and eat them,” he suggested helpfully.

I felt my knees wobble and my breath catch. “Oh my God,” I said.

I ran away.

The next week, I was back at the farm. I still had a problem only now it was a bit louder than it was before as my roosters gained crowing proficiency.

I strode up to David confidently, “Okay,” I said taking a deep breath, “I get it that roosters aren’t in big demand. And I think it might be okay to eat them, but I can’t kill them. Would you kill them for me?”

“Yes,” he said after a pause, “I’ll kill them for you.”

“Thank you,” I said, feeling a bit nauseous.

I ran away.

The next week, I was feeling very brave. “David, I really think that the most honest thing is for me to go ahead and kill them myself. It’s too much of a cop out to ask you to do it for me.”

“Okay,” he said.

“How would I go about doing it? How do *you* do it?”

“Well,” he began speaking in his quiet teacher’s tone, “I just chop off their heads.”

“Doesn’t the blood get everywhere?”

“Yes, a bit, but then it stops.”

“So after you kill it, then what? How do you make it ready to eat?”

“First I take the feathers off and then I take the insides out and it’s done. It’s not difficult.”

I gulped and ran away.

I seriously couldn’t see myself chopping off the head with an axe simply because I knew I wasn’t that good with an axe. Plus, it didn’t sound very nice for the chicken. No, I thought, there must be more than one way to kill a chicken. So I went onto Google and typed “How to Kill a Chicken.” There were a large number of hits—8,604,712 to be exact—many with step-by-step instructions and pictures. It turned out that there were many ways to kill a chicken, all I had to do was pick one.

For a week, I obsessed. I read and reread the instructions to try to get comfortable with the steps involved. I visualized myself doing it. My dreams were haunted. I talked to everyone who would listen and told them what I was doing. Talking about it made me less likely to ... um ... chicken out. It also put things in perspective. As I told my Portuguese neighbors, I discovered that most were very familiar with the process. “Oh yes,” said 4 ½ foot tall Anna with a grin and a twinkle in her eye, “I used to help my grandmother kill the chickens when I was a little girl in the Azores.” *Silly American*, they all seemed to be thinking, *killing a chicken is the most natural thing in the world. What’s the big deal?*

But killing something and then eating it has become a very big deal for most of us. As “civilized” people, we have lost the wildness that would make this act as natural as breathing. We drink, we breathe, we kill, we eat -- this is somewhere in our DNA -- our ancestors obviously did it or we would not be here. In just a couple generations, however, we have forgotten where our food comes from, thinking it comes from plastic wrapped packages in the grocery store. We drink, we breathe, we shop, we eat. It’s all very tidy and nice, but it is not *real*.

I focused on the reality of what I was going to do as I began to take action. I worked in the backyard until I had everything ready—the horizontal pole with a hole dug under it to catch the blood, a rope to tie the chicken, a fire laid out in the fire pit, plenty of newspaper to cover the

picnic table, my printed step-by-step instructions, a large pot for heating water, a flashlight. I worked until there was nothing left to do. It was time.

I went to bed that night and slept restlessly, looking at the clock every few hours to make sure I didn't miss the chance to get it all done before dawn, because I had read that is when the chickens would be calmest. I decided I would rather kill a calm chicken than an uptight one. I felt both anxious and oddly curious. I longed to get the whole thing over with, and yet I was immensely interested in the process and how I would handle it. At four o'clock in the morning, I gave up sleeping, quickly dressed and went out to the back yard. It was pitch black, well before dawn during that early part of September, and quite warm, with a wet wind whipping heavy clouds over my head. It smelled like rain.

I went first to the fire pit, struck a match and held it to the tender corners of newspaper. I watched as the flame flashed hot to consume the paper and begin to snap at the wood. When I was convinced that the fire had caught, I went over to the pole I had tied to two fence posts in the corner to make sure the post was secure and that the rope was all set. I rehearsed how I would secure the chicken by his feet in the most gentle way. Then I added wood to the fire and set the pot of water on the grate to boil. I took a deep breath. I felt a strange quiet inside, mixed with a clammy fear. How was it possible to feel both at once? My feet seemed to carry me around like they had more understanding of what was required than I did. I walked to the chicken house and opened the door. I shone the flashlight up to the rafters. There they were. I did not feel or think as I gently took the bird off the roosting pole, placed him under my arm and carried him outside. I closed the door behind me. The other birds cooed softly. The bird in my hands clucked and started to flap his wings. I turned him upside down and grabbed his feet. He quieted just like I had read.

I carried him over to the horizontal pole. I grabbed the cord and tried to wrap it around his feet. He flopped at one point and tried to peck my hand once, but I kept on wrapping his feet. I spoke to him constantly, "I am sorry, darling bird." "I will be gentle with you." Finally he was just hanging there in the night. I got on my knees so that my head was level with his and picked up my knife. I looked at him. He blinked at me upside down. I said a soft prayer, "Thank you God for sharing this beautiful rooster with me. I honor him and you." Not used to praying much, I kept it short. My breathing felt strange, as if I was being breathed. The chicken flounced and his foot came out of its wrappings. My breath caught in my throat and I quickly retied him. I lifted the knife and took his head in my hands. I tilted his head away from me to expose the area of neck I needed to slice. I pressed the knife to the spot and cut. It didn't slice. I tried to cut again. Oh my God, only the slightest cut was made. Oh my God, *Ohmigod, ohmigod, ohmigod*. I murmured, over and over again, absolutely panicked. The knife wasn't sharp enough! I started sawing away, knowing that if I couldn't cut clean, I had to cut fast so it would go as quickly as possible for him. *Ohmigod, ohmigod, ohmigod. I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry. Sorrysorrysorry*. Tears streamed down my face. It began to rain. I felt his eye blink against my palm. When I knew I had cut enough, I held his head still while the blood drained out. I was shaking with grief and horror at what I had done. I took a deep breath. Okayokayokay, I said trying to keep my grip on sanity.

And then a peaceful feeling flooded through me, like the warmth of the sun after a chill. Words can't describe what happened, but the chicken found a way to communicate to me. He said, "Aw, come on now. Don't worry about it, honey. This is what chickens do. We've been doing this for thousands and thousands of years."

It took me a couple of days to understand what had happened in that moment. My rooster had died with grace. As prey animals, chickens have a role in the food chain and they accept death (usually a violent death at that) as a natural part of their life, as natural as breathing or eating or pooping. At an elemental level, my rooster understood his purpose, and after offering the barest resistance, he simply accepted it. As predators, we have no such deal with death. We conclude that dying is not part of our purpose, so we fight it if we can. And yet it always finds us anyway. Where does death fit into our purpose? No answers came to me that morning as I took a life in my hands and ended it.

I simply became empty ... a vessel waiting to be filled.