



Intentionally Rural

Lessons in humanity learned from livestock, in the the classroom of creation.

By Jonathan Elliott

My wife and I grew up in the suburbs; she just north of Raleigh, NC, and myself twenty minutes west of Washington, DC. We met at the University of Virginia through the Catholic Student Ministry. After graduating, my (not yet) wife, took a job in Pittsburgh, and I returned home to work and to study in Washington. In our separate cities, we both enjoyed the close proximity to friends, to concerts and lectures, and to our parishes.

Nonetheless, we now live and work at Whiffletree Farm in Warrenton, Virginia. We moved from urban life to rural life because of the opportunity to farm alongside our friends here at Whiffletree, raising pastured chickens, laying hens, turkeys, pigs, and grass-fed cattle. In one sense we moved because of a job opportunity, but in taking this job we knew it was more than a career move, it was to be a change in lifestyle.

The attraction of rural life and work was, and continues to be, twofold. First, it puts us immediately in contact with creation. The daily work of feeding chickens, collecting eggs, or managing pasture is a daily interaction with an order not of our own making. It draws me out of myself, out of my own idea of what should be, and to the world that actually is. Living around and working with chickens (and turkeys, pigs, and cattle) has helped me to appreciate what it means to be a human being, a particular kind of living being, a rational animal. Seeing the hens peck and pick on the hen at the bottom of their social order can make them seem rather cruel. Reflecting

on this however, reminds me that humans can be far crueler than hens because our cruelty comes from our free will and not from instinct. At the same time, though, it is our free will which allows us to love, and the ability to love is what really makes us human. By simply being themselves, the chickens can help reveal us to ourselves.

To be constantly surrounded by a multitude of other living creatures is also to be constantly confronted by death. Our meat chickens live eight weeks before we slaughter them here on the farm. Sometimes a heifer or cow miscarries and passes a deceased calf. I spend enough time with the pigs to get to know certain ones and their “personalities” just in time to take them to the county’s slaughterhouse. The livestock’s life-span may be far shorter than ours, but just as they do not see their last day coming, neither can we. *Tempus fugit, momento mori.*

In this cycle of life, death, decay, and regeneration, there is a discernable order. Although this is not news to anyone from a rural background, it is an often-surprising reality to those from a suburban or urban upbringing (like myself), that there is a symbiotic relationship between our soil, our grass, our chickens, our cattle, and our kitchens. To put it quite simply, healthy soil produces healthy pasture, healthy pasture produces healthy chickens and healthy cattle. Healthy animals improve the health of the soil in a cycle that is both incredibly simple and inexhaustibly complex. These healthy animals make for healthy food which in turn makes for healthy people. Through reason we recognize God as the origin of this or-



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der, and it is through faith that we believe that this order burst forth into existence because of God's eternal love for us. Out of both common good sense and gratitude, we try and allow that order to be our guide in the way we farm.

In these ways, rural life readily provides the opportunity for self-understanding. The comforts of city and suburban life (public transportation, sewage, trash removal, snow ploughing, and now nearly ubiquitous wifi) have a way of concealing our dependence on others. The challenges of rural life are a daily reminder of our inescapable reliance on others and the importance of community and neighborliness. On the farm, we depend upon each other to cover the farm chores when someone is sick. We rely on the good-will of our neighbors to move our cattle across or graze their land, bring our layers out of their winter quarters back onto pasture, and return escaped animals.

Of course, some of these observations are particular to my line of work, and not every rural-dweller is a farmer. But, everyone who lives in a rural area has their own daily experience with the natural world. Such a particularity is the second attraction of rural life. Two years ago, I visited my Godfather in South Central England. I noticed that quite a few of the homes (and not just the large estates) had no street numbers, but only names. I asked my Godfather if that made things difficult for postmen. He replied that indeed it did and it was something of a logistical problem, but I did not sense in his tone that it should be otherwise. Implied in his response, I think, was an approval of the love of place over efficiency. Whiffletree Farm is where we live and work. We did not create it, we do not sustain it in being, but through God's providence it is ours insofar as it is ours to tend, to make productive, and to beautify.

The Word became incarnate not as a composite of all humanity, but as a particular man. He did not dwell in or preach to all nations, but was born in Bethlehem, raised in Nazareth, died outside the walls of Jerusalem, and rose from the dead in the cave guarded by two Roman soldiers. It was through the particularities of this world, the world that in His divinity He created and "orders sweetly", that He revealed God to man and reconciled man to God. The created order, which rural life immerses us in, leads us to contemplate our transcendent God. And it is through our love of this particular piece of the world and the particular people, that we can encounter here that we love God.

Jonathan Elliott and his wife Ellen (main photo) live and farm in Warrenton, VA.

