



Humanum

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Thanks Be to God

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For the fruit of all creation,
Thanks be to God.
Gifts bestowed on every nation,
Thanks be to God.
For the plowing, sowing, reaping,
Silent growth while we are sleeping,
Future needs in earth's safekeeping,
Thanks be to God.
—Fred Pratt Green

The lyrics of the well-worn hymn may seem trite, yet anyone who has spent time plowing, sowing, and reaping can attest that its words, though simple, speak of one of the very fundamental truths of man's relationship to the land and to the Creator: that is, they speak of the gift of faith. My family is blessed to share our four acres with a small collection of farm animals with which we try to live out this gift of faith through plowing, sowing, and reaping.

Our story is not unique. We migrated gradually from suburbia, moving ever closer to the country, until we finally made our home among horse pastures and fields of grain. It seems that many in our rural Virginia community have followed a similar path and now find themselves with a yard full of farm animals. In our neighborhood alone I can list a few: a school principal who raises chickens and pigs, a computer tech with turkeys and hogs, a property manager who also grows Christmas trees. This seems to be a new paradigm for family life in the country: dad works a 9–5 job and the family at home helps to run a small farm on the side.

We could discuss cost and overhead, the cost of chicken feed, the weight of a butchered animal and price per pound once the meat is in the freezer, but I don't believe the attraction to this life is rooted in financial cost benefit. Rather, it is here on a small family farm that we are touched

by the most basic fundamentals of life and death. The thrill of a mother goat throwing (that's farm language for birthing) twin kids and the disappointment when one kid dies because mama goat rejected him and left him in the cold overnight. The frustration when the goats escape through an unlocked fence and, in a matter of minutes, destroy days' worth of work in the garden. The steady rhythm of life, waking up to the sound of a cock crowing 30 minutes before sunup, every day. The reality that if you don't milk those dairy goats every day, they will quickly dry up and you won't have milk for the rest of the year. Nature is a tough, but very good teacher.

I purchased our first hen at the end of winter, a slow time for egg-laying. I was told to wait until the days surpassed the nights in length and promised that she would then begin laying. That day came and went, and still no eggs. I let her roam about the yard and every day became a mini egg hunt, checking all the bushes and cubbies around the barn, but the result was always the same—no eggs. In anger, I decided to stop feeding her: no eggs—no food. She could forage. A few days after that, she disappeared. For nearly a week I worried and looked for that hen, but saw no sign of her. I had given her up for lost when she suddenly reappeared, walking around the yard as if she had been there all along. I watched her for some time and found her heading to a bush by the side of the house. There, in a window well, I found the reason for her disappearance: she was sitting on a clutch of nineteen blue eggs. Yes, you read that correctly, chicken eggs can be blue. Because of moments like these I find it impossible to be an atheist. All I wanted was a bunch of eggs to fry, but in spite of all I did, I was given something much greater. That hen hatched those eggs for us and, instead of omelets for Easter, we had peeps.

We have only been here for three years, and yet even in this short time, the land has become part of us, not like a possession that threatens to own you if you don't maintain a level of detachment, but rather like an orchestra working harmoniously with its conductor. Without the conductor, the orchestra struggles to be of one mind and cannot stay together, nor can it have a vision greater than the individual instrumental part sitting before each player. The conductor sets the pace—he holds the score—and yet he knows that without the workings of each player he is nothing: A conductor in an empty room is no conductor at all. All the while, the conductor points to one greater than himself: the divine composer, by whose score we all are reading. Here, the land and the animals become players who practice their parts and work according to their design. As I have gotten to know them, I see how much they do on their own, unaided. How does the doe turn grass and brush into smooth, creamy milk? How does the chicken, so mysteriously sneak into the barn and lay an egg, nearly every day? Man cannot create milk from grass, eggs from worms. If I stop to look at it, this world reveals one hidden miracle after another. If the sky happens to be clear when I go out to the silent world and check on the animals at night, I gaze up at the stars and imagine Abram receiving his covenant from the Lord, and I wonder what kind of faith it must have taken for a man of seventy-five years to leave his land. And I have only been here three years.

At this time of year, in the middle of the winter, we are on hiatus from milking the goats—they need to rest physically before birthing again in the spring. The land has lost its green, and it too rests. Silently it waits for spring. Traditionally, it is this time of year for which the family worked all summer on the farm: the storing up of food and fuel for winter. This is a time in which we trust to divine providence for our future welfare, and yet we recognize that providence requests our cooperation. For our family, the hay is stacked in the barn, enough to get the animals through the winter; the firewood is split and ready to be burned.

We look forward to the spring, thanks be to God.

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