

## A Neighbor's Reciprocity

In "Mending Wall" Robert Frost repeats a line from Benjamin Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanack*: "Good fences make good neighbours." The poet asks "*Why* do they make good neighbours?" (italics Frost's) but struggles to offer an answer. The stone wall between the speaker and his neighbor seems superfluous: Frost's apple tree won't intrude on his neighbor's pines. The writer, however, does not ask what, apart from a sturdy fence, constitutes neighborliness. For a woman, on the other hand, the question takes on an immediacy Frost could afford to ignore. Granted, we all should keep our critters from bothering the neighbors, but being a good neighbor does not end with a reliable fence, far from it. Neighborliness asks for reciprocity, the exchange of services, and good will. It requires prudent decisions, an investment of time, and the overlooking of small irritants.

My acreage came to me in 2004 in the form of a wheat farm. It happened, my son and his wife, who after college left California in favor of Wyoming, needed winter pasture for their cows. Walter was then the state veterinarian working with the Wyoming Livestock Board, which consists of ranchers appointed by the governor; he thought it prudent to do as the Romans do, while in Rome.

"Winter grazing doesn't hurt the seedlings," the farmer said of the new spouts, explaining that wheat was a form of grass that went dormant in winter. In the spring, when Walter needed to take his cows off the land, load them onto his stock trailer, and haul them to their summer range, he herded them a mile down the road and ran them through our neighboring ranchers' loading chute. Usually my youngest flew in from California to help with it. On horseback Walter and his brother drove the herd, while the ranching neighbors joined in on their atvs. To reciprocate

Walter lent a hand to the ranching brothers and their families at round-up time. I usually tagged along, bearing gifts of potato salad, homemade bread, and a tailgate dessert.

In those days Rome was Cheyenne for me. Weekdays, on their way to work, my son and daughter-in-law dropped off their kindergartner in her pj's; I took over from there. The acreage was then sharecropped by the Wheatland farmer mentioned above, who had informed me he would retire in a few years, at which point I was on my own. Those were the years when I lobbied for the farming of hemp in Wyoming. My daughter-in-law, an attorney with Legislative Services, passed on pointers on how to petition Wyoming lawmakers. Inasmuch as my acreage lacks the groundwater to irrigate crops, my long-term focus was on raising hemp.

A few years ago Walter and Lynda got job offers too good to refuse, though it meant relocating to Texas. They sold their cows and their house and packed up their daughter. My days of grandparent-duty had come to an end and so, I built a home on my acreage. Here I indulge the life of a recluse except when family comes calling for hunting or snow skiing or to participate in the festivities of Frontier Days. My dog and I walk an hour a day, and my guitar helps wile away the leisure hours, but that's it. When a neighbor wants to stop by, which doesn't happen often, she or he calls ahead.

The ranching brothers and others hold easements to traverse my land to their rangelands and homes. One neighbor was a woman whose ranch lay south of my place. One time we chatted by the gate when I happened to cut the grass as she arrived. She explained that the county had dug up a lot of gravel on her property and had left it in heaps. "They paid me for it but decided it wasn't good enough for road maintenance," she said.

These days I grant grazing privileges to the ranching brothers for their cows, for which they pay grazing fees. When I need something done that I can't accomplish on my own or that's

too costly to hire, I may ask one of the brothers. Both of their ranches lie to the west of me.

Usually the response is “When we can work it in,” meaning ranch work comes first, which is understood. For example, in the summer of this year—in June 2018, to be exact—I asked if they would grade the area where I wanted to construct a hoop house aka high tunnel, the modern equivalent of what used to be a greenhouse. One day in mid-July one of the brothers showed up with his machine and set to work. “I happen to have a free morning,” he said. When I expressed dismay at the day’s heat he reassured me. “The cab has a/c.” At our annual settling of accounts he will deduct his time and skipster expense from the grazing fee the brothers owe for this year.

“I could use some gravel to build up my driveway,” I said to my western neighbors as I moved into my new abode. The builders had packed up but left a muddy driveway.

“We need the same for our roads,” said the brothers. I knew this, of course, having repeatedly navigated the washboards to their respective homes. By this time the ranching woman to the south of me had died. Her son, who ranches further north, has leased it out for grazing. Not only is he bereft of his mother but also he recently lost his 22-year-old son in a freak one-vehicle accident. I thought to share something about my brothers who took their lives, one at eighteen the other at thirty-two, but his rancho stoicism precluded any such self-disclosure. I invited him for lunch instead, where he regaled me with his own and his late son’s rodeo exploits.

“This neighbor will sell us the gravel for a few dollars per ton,” I said to the ranching brothers. “It’s a lot less expensive than ordering it hauled in by the excavation company thirty miles away.”

A deal was struck. As the brothers carried many loads of gravel in a dump truck that holds about five tons per load, they left three or four truck fulls in my driveway. A few weeks later one of the brothers arrived with their skipster to spread it. The gravel cost me less than forty

dollars, and the neighbors' deduction from their grazing fees was a bargain compared with the alternative.

Climate change and an aging farming population have rendered my field devoid of wheat; hence, I hope to raise a few acres of hemp someday. In 2018 the growing of hemp became legal in Wyoming but until the Department of Agriculture issues its guidelines, farmers must adopt a wait-and-see stance. Nevertheless I made excursions and inquiries in Colorado, where hemp farmers raise seedlings in high tunnels before they transplant them into the field when about 24 inches tall. Meanwhile my acreage has taken on an unmanaged appearance, not "wild" in the traditional sense but reverting to grassland that abounds with pronghorn and mule deer. Birds like meadowlarks, goldfinches, and lark buntings are plentiful. Other common sights are prairie dogs, badgers, rattlers, foxes, coyotes, and raptors from kestrels to red-tailed hawks. Whenever my youngest grandchildren visit, they delight in observing from basement windows the toads and geckos in the window wells outside.

"How do these critters make a living?" asks ten-year-old Anthony.

"They are so cute! I want to hold them," squeals his six-year-old sister.

"We don't cuddle wild creatures," I tell them but point out the small caves in the embankment where the animals escape the occasional rain storm. "In winter, I imagine, they hibernate in these hideouts."

Next year I'll take Grace and her brother to the creek where the underbelly of a bridge houses a colony of swifts that daub at their mud nests while raising their young. A resident owl snoozes nearby, eyes wide open. To clamber down the creek bank by the bridge is arduous; I take a broomstick with me as my wandering guide. The swifts seem upset at my presence, so I keep

brief my occasional visits. On hiking back to my house I might spy a pair of bald eagles that have alighted on a utility pole.

When hunting season comes around in early October my house transforms into a sort of outfitter's station. This year six pronghorn hunters were my guests, two of them my sons, our youngest preferring to bring Antony and Grace during Frontier Days. One of the hunters was a college-kid grandson, two others were men my sons and I have known since they were in second grade. When the crew wasn't roaming the fields or cutting and processing their harvest in my garage, they ate three hefty meals a day, watched football games while sipping beer, played cards and a complicated game of dominoes, loaded my washer with their bloodied overalls, and slept downstairs in the beds I was glad to provide. In exchange they lavished favors large and small on yours truly and left choice antelope cuts in my freezer. The hunters also brought me several landowner's coupons documenting their harvest that I submitted to Wyoming Game & Fish for modest redemption fees; it's how the agency keeps track of what has been harvested.

This year, in addition to antelope meat, my hunters left a rabbit in my freezer, skinned and gutted and ready for the pot. It evoked memories of the Hasenpfeffer of my childhood days. Remembrances of growing up in Germany are distant now, too distant almost to share with adult children or grandchildren. Hunting is a bloody business, to be sure, but no more bloody than what's killed and butchered in a slaughter house. I do not eat meat like I did when young but still appreciate a bite now and again.

It is mid-October and my hunters, my boys, have returned to their homes in Texas and California. A scent of Irish Spring aftershave lingers, leaving me with memories of their dad, my California companion until he departed this life fifteen years ago. Darold loved his boys with a devotion expressed only within the limits of an extreme patriarchy that left us all wounded;

it's what he learned in childhood and never questioned. "Darold, poor baby," I whisper to his memory, "I love our boys for both of us now." Even as I say this, however, I wonder: Can reciprocity claim to be a kind of love? Is it not a form of materialism, exercised to make life bearable in this vale of sorrows?

Reciprocity is but a poor cousin to the altruism that psychoanalysts like Viktor Frankl and Erich Fromm theorize as humanity's highest good. That selfless love of biblical parables, exemplified in the good Samaritan who cares for the injured traveler he finds by the wayside, and the forgiving father who welcomes the wayward son who squandered his inheritance: How many of us are capable of generousities as these? Prompted as it is by enlightened self-interest, reciprocity falls far short of the biblical ideal.

Agreed, reciprocity fails to equate with the Judeo-Christian edict to "Love thy neighbor as thyself" yet it permits me, a single woman no longer young, to enjoy a place on the high plains of Wyoming. If it weren't so, I would be hard-pressed not to opt for one of those retirement homes where people eat too much and exercise too little. Reciprocity may be as close as I can come to loving my neighbors, let alone the three sons who seem to reiterate their father's authoritarianism with their own children. Ours is an imperfect union, which is why I sometimes hum too myself a ditty from yesteryear: "It is not love, but it's not bad."