

## Friends and Neighbors

In “Mending Wall” Robert Frost repeats a line from Benjamin Franklin’s *Poor Richard’s Almanack*: “Good fences make good neighbours.” The poet goes on to ask, “*Why* do they make good neighbours?” (italics Frost’s) but struggles to offer an answer, confining himself instead to the observation that the stone wall between the two neighbors seems superfluous. Further, the writer fails to ask what, apart from a sturdy fence, constitutes neighborliness. For a woman neighbor living alone, 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 good will, reciprocity, and the exchange of services. It requires prudent decisions, an investment of time, and the overlooking of small irritants.

My acreage near Wheatland I acquired in 2004 in the form of a wheat farm. Part of the reason was that my son and his wife, who after college left California in favor of Wyoming, had acquired a small herd of cows. Walter was then the state’s 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, but he needed winter pasture for his cows.

“Winter grazing doesn’t hurt the seedlings,” the farmer said as he showed us the new sprouts in October, explaining that wheat was a form of grass that went dormant in winter. In the spring, when Walter took the cows off the land to load onto his stock trailer and haul them to their

summer range, he herded them a mile down the road to run 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 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 pjs. I took over from there, for my Wheatland acreage was then sharecropped by the farmer mentioned above, He had said 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.

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 weeds 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.

"I could use some gravel to build up my driveway," I said to my western neighbors the year after I moved into the home I built on the acreage. The builders had packed up and left. Once the rains started, my driveway turned muddy.

"We need the same for our roads," said the brothers. I knew this, of course, having navigated the washboards to their respective homes. The ranching woman to the south of me had died and her son, who ranches further north, leased out her rangeland for grazing. Not only is the

son 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 ranchero stoicism seemed to preclude any such disclosures. 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 skip-steer to spread it. The gravel's cost, and the neighbors' deduction from their grazing fees, were bargains compared with the alternative.

On my land the ranching brothers hold grazing privileges 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. 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 called 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 skip-steer expense from the grazing fee the brothers owe for this year.

One of the brothers is childless. His wife tells me, in her youth she suffered a horsebackriding accident that left her in a coma for a week. "I'm lucky to be alive," she says but explains she has had to accept lingering physical and mental disabilities.

Meanwhile Walter and Lynda got job offers too good to refuse, but it meant relocating to Texas. They sold their cows and their house and packed up their daughter. My Cheyenne days of grandparent-duty having ended, I indulge the life of a recluse on my acreage. The dog and I walk an hour a day, and I while away the leisure hours with my di Giorgio, a guitar made in Bazil that came to me in California. When a neighbor wants to stop by, which doesn't happen often, she or he calls ahead. Family comes calling for hunting or snow skiing or to participate in the festivities of Frontier Days; other than that, I'm on my own. Next year I'll plant and harvest my first high-tunnel crop. What I don't freeze or preserve in jars, I'll give away to neighbors and friends.

Climate change and other factors have rendered my field devoid of wheat. It 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.

When 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 eleven-year-old Anthony.

"They are so cute! I want to hold them," squeals his seven-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 time they visit 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 before 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 to steady the clambering. The swifts seem upset at my presence, so I keep brief my occasional visit. On hiking back to my house I might spy a pair of bald eagles that have alighted on a utility pole.

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. I have made excursions into Colorado, where hemp farmers raise seedlings in high tunnels before they transplant them into the field at about twenty inches tall. We'll have to see if it can be done here.

When hunting season comes around in early October my house transforms into an outfitter's station. This year six pronghorn hunters were my guests, two of them sons, one a college-kid grandson. Two of the 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 antelope cuts in my freezer. They gave me the landowner's coupons documenting their harvest and I submitted these to Wyoming Game & Fish for modest redemption fees; it's how the agency keeps track of what has been harvested.

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. 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.

It is now late 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 a patriarchalism 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 love? Is it not a form of enlightened self-interest, exercised to make life bearable in this vale of sorrows?

Reciprocity may be a poor cousin to the altruism that the mentors of my California days, psychoanalytic writers Viktor Frankl and Erich Fromm, posited as humanity's highest good. Today, many years later, I wonder: How many of us are capable of the selfless love of the biblical parables of the good Samaritan who cares for the injured traveler he finds by the wayside, or the forgiving father who welcomes the wayward son even though he squandered the father's assets as his "rightful" inheritance?

While reciprocity fails to equate with the Judeo-Christian edict to "Love thy neighbor as thyself" it permits me, a woman no longer young, to enjoy my place on the 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."