

A mental photograph hangs on the walls of my memory. It's Precious and Jessica on the telephone together, for hours at a time. (The telephone played a big role in their young lives). They had their own brand of conference call. They sat, heads together, so they could both hear the other caller. They usually combined it with filing their nails, changing nail polish colors, experimenting with powder and eye shadow, or combing their bangs into a gravity-defying fluff, sprayed stiff.

Then Jessica moved. We moved away a short time later, and moved again at the end of a year. Unpacking, I always found Jessica's toothbrush in our toothbrush holder.

Each time, Precious insisted, "No, you can't throw it away!"

We had lost Jessica, and could only hope to run across her again some day. Her orange toothbrush was always ready for her to step through the door as if she'd never been gone.

We moved once again and, too soon, Precious grew up and moved away. Precious took her toothbrush with her.

We still have Jessica's toothbrush.

Music of the fields

Fields of clover, fields of wheat,
fields of daffodils and daisies —
fields draw you out to
contemplate the big picture

Mowing for money...

Sweet Pea and Peanut are working their way to summer camp.

The two of them help me in the kitchen and in the office. The car is sparkling clean, the yard is picked up, and they've even done a little gardening.

Using teamwork, they dug the grass out of the place by the east wall where I want to put some pastel red flowers.

They're not really pastel red. It's just that my sisters, preferring pastel blends and monochromatic color schemes, tease me endlessly about my passion for splashes of brilliant color.

Together, the girls shined the pickup's dashboard, then went on to sweep and vacuum floors. They've affixed labels to file folders, made photocopies, collated the sets, and argued over who gets to send a fax. We've had newsletter mailing parties in our household since before the girls were born, so they've grown up learning the assembly line processing of a mailout.

The goats have been fed pretty well since Peanut and Sweet Pea found they could get paid to pick armloads of good weeds and grasses for them. The goats coerce them into hauling oak branches and pecan leaves to the pen. The girls have learned a lot about goat appetites that way.

They're pretty creative when it comes to negotiating chores. They decided if they both push the garbage can out to the road the task gets marked on both their lists.

While cleaning up the yard, Sweet Pea came to me with a deal. "I figure I've picked up \$2 worth of trash. If I pick up five more things, how much more will you pay me?"

I told her it sounded like a math story problem, and if the two trains didn't collide I'd pay her another dollar. She looked at me funny. They must not do story problems in school like we used to.

Even with cash rewards, there's much groaning over the work. They perked up, though, when MyKeeper finally got the ancient riding lawn mower running again. Impatiently taking turns, they drove around the yard, then scooted out to the field in back, ready to race turtles.

They rode the old mower up and down rows, yelling Yee- HAW! Giddy-up! Ride 'em cowboy!

They drew a maze in the tall grass, and took turns finding their way out.

They pretended they wore leathers, and chased each other down, revving the handlebars like a motorcycle.

It was pretty funny watching them try to do an ice skater's skid stop that throws up ice - at the scootering speed of two miles per hour.

I came around the corner of the house just as Peanut whipped around a curve like she was screaming down the steepest roller coaster drop. Next thing I knew she was standing up, arms raised over her head and laughing. She didn't see me until I hollered the amusement park was closed - get off that thing, NOW!

"But, Gramma," she wailed, "we have to finish, or no money, and no camp."

"I don't know, girls. I'd have a hard time paying you for having so much fun."

Turns out, mowing the lawn is serious work after all. Very serious work.

Crossing the line...

There was a time we had trouble keeping the goats in their pasture. Putting up an electric fence didn't help, in fact it only made it more complicated.

Now that is all undone. Things change. Recently we expanded their pasture to give them access to more browse.

When MyKeeper finished installing the new fenceline, he took down the old fencing. The goats didn't even notice.

He wanted them to know what a nice thing he did for them, so he went out to the far corner and called them.

They didn't move or look up.

He took hold of a collar and tugged.

Nothing.

He flapped his arms and shooed them.

They kept on munching briar leaves.

He even went so far as to get the grain can and rattle it to lure them into their enlarged pasture.

They knew it was a trick. It wasn't anywhere near time for grain.

The goats ignored that former boundary all day. It was more than MyKeeper could stand.

Finally, one of the does passed over the invisible line. She probably knew where it was by her sense of smell, and of course the memory of an electric charge. Standing at the doorway, we could tell where the line had been by the length of the grass on each side.

Other goats followed. All except one.

Rosemary stood rooted, blocked by the invisible edge.

The others munched their way across the new field, eventually capering with joy when they found a patch of dense growth.

Several times they left the field for their familiar browse stations, and then returned for more fresh weeds. But Rosemary wouldn't budge.

Huh-unh! No!!

She just knew the others would pay for their temerity. She lay right at the boundary, her forelegs crossed in front of her as adamantly as any

person with their jaw clenched and arms crossed in front of them.

Rosemary rejoined the herd each time they came back over to her side. It seemed like she was telling them, Don't know how you got through to the other side, but I would certainly get zapped if I tried it.

After dinner I went out to them. They clustered around me. I "browsed" with them. A couple of steps, stop, munch (that was them, not me, I prefer barbequed chicken). A couple more steps and wait, then a couple more. I stared off to the south as I crossed that menacing line. Rosemary crossed it with me. I kept going, a couple of steps at a time. The others moved out ahead. Rosemary stayed by me.

A couple more steps, and then Rosemary's eyes bulged out. Her head popped up, and her tail. Somehow she managed not to bolt. She looked at me, then back behind her.

I put on my very most innocent expression, the one I had stored, leftover and unused, from my youth. It was probably from the one time Mama didn't catch me at the cookie jar, or hitting one of my sisters. Rosemary peered at me with a questioning look.

I told her, Yes, it's OK. Honest. And I moved two more steps inward. She looked at the ground again,

back at me, and over to the goats threshing goodies from the dense, green patch. She went over to get her share.

MyKeeper snickered from the doorway. He swears my critters have taught me their language.

Taking a break

Throw down the pencil
Lean back in the chair
Stre-e-e-t-ch
My eyes escape out the window
lured by a West Texas landscape
Fields entice the mind to follow footless
Off I wander
to ponder
and dream

Noah's first stop...

The first days on our Texas county road left us aghast at the crowd of grasshoppers that co-owned the property. Neighborly folks told us it was the year of the grasshopper.

Over the next few days we unpacked boxes, arranged furniture, and explored the acreage from corner to corner. We discovered that it was also the year of the ant (red ants, fire ants), the year of the wasp, the year of the mouse, and the year of the grass burr. It could have also been named the year of the cricket, the year of the spider, and especially of spider webs. AND the year of the fly!

I had never seen so many bugs. It made me wonder how Texans managed to co-exist with so many creepy crawly creatures.

Noah came to mind. Can you picture him gathering critters two by two and finding a place for each pair in his Ark? And think how much feed and bedding he had to haul into that ancient vessel. I was thinking how many pens and nests and shelters he

needed to provide within those cubit measurements. I bet Noah's wife reminded him not to forget the shovels. And a mop.

He was likely pretty happy to have his large family with him when it came to chores. And I wondered which part of the Ark they saved for their own quarters.

Lost to musing, it occurred to me how the days might drag, all the waiting and watching and rocking on the waves. I got to thinking how they might run low on food for themselves, or feed for the animals. Noah was probably itching to get off that boat before the elephants got too rowdy, or before the skunk duo got too irritated at those pesky coyotes. And I'll bet he couldn't believe how many rabbits were crowding the hutch.

Returning to the house after a tramp across our acres, I beat a grasshopper through the front door and slammed it. Right then I decided that even though the Ark finally landed somewhere far to the east, their first stopover was right here in West Texas. I don't know how they did it. Maybe the geography was different then.

Here's how it must have happened. When the Ark first touched down, Noah flung wide the gates and said, "Whew! Get those bugs OUT of here!!!"

Ritual

On the way to
a favorite place
we stopped
stretched
kicked some leaves
crunchy, crisp maple leaves
kicked some more
Remember when?
The one thought
turned up more.
We reminisced. And kicked.
Pulled out lunch.
Sat beneath a maple,
soaked up dappled sunlight
chirps and crinkles
The favorite place? Another time.
Today begins a tradition
fitting for Autumn.

Hog sale...

Two men stepped into the pig pen: MyKeeper and the neighbor from down the road who wanted to purchase a couple of our whey fed hogs for the freezer.

We had penned the weaners when they were little - a chubby bunch of porkers with voracious vegetarian appetites. From outside the pen, we fed and watered them for months, but it was inevitable that the day would dawn when they would be loaded up and sold.

Seeing the men invade their space, the hogs dashed as one in a wild panic, swerving in and out between legs and staying out of reach. The pigs seemed to know these guys were amateurs, and they would not be duped.

MyKeeper kept up a valiant pursuit, while the neighbor fell back to watch. He might have been trying to devise an easier method of capture, but it's more likely he was enjoying the show.

It was a scene of surreal turmoil, a collage of chasing and dodging, cornering, evasion, and escape. And through it all the air was filled with ear-splitting piggy screeches.

Teamwork was lacking, so I climbed into the pen to help. I've seen pigs corralled before. It looked easy. This was not going to be easy. Nor would MyKeeper ever admit defeat.

I did my best to keep heading them back toward him. He greeted them with open arms, but they eluded him every time.

At last MyKeeper caught a hoof and held on for dear life. The pig didn't stop, so MyKeeper made a dive and slid into the muck like a baseball player snagging first base.

The fevered hog ran headlong into the fence - bumped it so hard it flipped up and let him under. It was a madhouse reversal. There was the pig, almost free, and MyKeeper sprawled on his belly in the pen. The only connection was a strangle-hold grip on one kicking, flailing, twisting, wrenching hoof.

Through my head flew visions of MyKeeper dragged through the welded fence panel and strained through the grid - something like a potato diced into french fries.

In a split second panic I shoved my weight against the panel and lifted it just as the pig dragged MyKeeper under it.

At this point I don't know who was squealing loudest, but soon the pig wearied and My(Exhausted)Keeper lashed a rope around its hind feet. The pig and the man lay panting and glaring at each other.

Then there was another pig to catch.

The guys graduated from that school of hard knocks. They let the pigs settle down, backed the truck up to the gate, sprinkled corn and barley from the pen to the cage, and left the pigs to load themselves. I don't remember all the details, because it's more fun for me to remember the other part.

Peaceful pastures...

Think how soul-soothing peaceful it is driving down country roads, past barns and farm houses and fields dotted with wildflowers and farm animals.

Life on our county road has taught me it's deceptive, that pastoral scenery, and not nearly as bucolic as it looks from a car window at 50 miles per hour.

The critters that graze fields are let out AFTER they've been fed or milked or birthed or doctored, and IF they survive their illness or injury. Tenders of livestock cram their daylight hours with chores. They neuter, dehorn, dock, brand, breed, and sometimes bottlefeed. They clean bottles and wounds and pens. They rescue critters from weather extremes, poison weeds, and the numberless pitfalls of an unfriendly environment.

Our goats kidded recently, and there were many complications.

Naomi lost her kid. I don't mean it perished. I mean she left it off somewhere while the herd

grazed. Like fawns, kids don't move a muscle to give away their hiding place, and when Naomi's kid came up missing, she came bawling to me.

I made a quick search of the shelter, circled around the outside, then scanned the field. The baby could be anywhere in all that tall grass.

The girls were enlisted, and we ran in four directions. Sweet Pea and Peanut struck out. Punkin found a skunk. Luckily, it was a standoff, because Punkin said it was the biggest skunk in the world. I don't know why it retreated to its den, but I'm sure glad it did. Now I can save that large can of neutralizing tomato sauce for another batch of spaghetti.

Running the perimeter of the field, I found the little one, more by instinct than sight. It lay heavily camouflaged by tree branches, briars, and a fencepost.

Next was Camilla. She decided her kid would have to air dry because she didn't like that taste. MyKeeper says if there was a finicky goat anywhere in the territory, of course it would end up being ours. We gave the slimy newborn a towel rubdown, thankful that it was a warm day.

Melinda dropped hers out in the field. Melinda's not too bright, and she is the one who is always last and always lost, but I thought she pulled off a

brilliant plan that day. She's the only doe who chose not to battle the flies in the shelter. She and her kid were coated with "beggar's lice," though, and several other clingy weed seeds. Another major clean-up job.

Melinda's kid hadn't been on the ground more than a minute when Rosemary moved forward to check her out. Her own kid was already at her side, born a few days before.

Rosemary sniffed the soft little newborn. Hmm. Baby. To Rosemary's mind, one minute was long enough to qualify Melinda as a mother. She nudged her own kid toward the nursery and left with the other goats while Melinda doted over her newborn. Though the does have all taken turns, Melinda is most often selected to be the babysitter while all the others go afield to graze.

We couldn't figure what all the noise was about a bit later, but Leah was frantic. Round and round the shelter she went, calling her kids. They were there, all three snuggled together for the night and too comfortable to answer. I shoved one toward her, but she knew there were more. MyKeeper shined a flashlight on the other two kids and Leah rushed to them, greatly relieved. It doesn't seem possible, but I believe we have a goat with night blindness. We'll feed her carrots.