

Life on a Farm by Luanne Armstrong

□ "Every act of communication is an act of translation." Gregory Rabassa

□ I live on a farm that was once part forest, part swamp. I live with animals both domesticated and wild, with plants, with flowers, with a garden. My grandparents lived here, my parents, my siblings and I, and then my children too. I walk on the land every day and never get bored. There is always something new to see and learn. In the summer, I sit on my deck, which overlooks a pond, a field, and past that, the lake. Barn swallows nest over my head. Paper wasps build small grey cones among the swallow nests.

□ Once, I was sitting on my deck with a group of young people. A wasp came by to have a look. One young man looked up and exclaimed, "You have wasp nests up there." I do. My excuse to friends and family is these are nonaggressive paper wasps, not yellow jackets. But I wouldn't remove them in any case.

□ "All you have to do is sit still," I said. "They will come by to see who you are. After they know you, they won't bother you." This poor young man gave me a look that said, very clearly, "crazy lady." But, to his credit, he didn't move. There was so much more I wanted to tell him, but, where to start?

□ I wanted to tell him, "Just say hello." Some people proclaim, "The earth is alive," and while I sympathize with this statement, for me it is easier to say, "A wasp is alive." Or perhaps, "Grass is alive."

□ Grass is not only alive, it is responsive, and in its grass way, aware. Grass, mowed, turns into lawns, but given a chance, it will spring up and go wild in a very short time. It will cover sidewalks, parking lots, and walls. People rarely notice grass and yet they walk on grass all the time. They sit on it, lie on it. How many look down and see that the grass is alive?

□ Current research indicates that grass knows something. The smell of mown grass, which to the human nose seems so pleasant, is actually the smell of pheromones sent out by the grass. It is threatened, calling to pollinating insects. But we don't hear it as that because we don't know.

□ The grass is alive, I can say. But then I stop. What do I mean? Does the grass have consciousness, emotions, intelligence? I can't tell. How to translate the grass? The grass looks inert but it is always moving. It grows, changes, exudes pheromones, and sends out root tendrils that find cracks in the strongest concrete. If I lie on the grass, does the grass say hello back from within its grass aliveness?

□I may never truly know but it doesn't matter. The realization of the aliveness of the non-human is the crack in the paradigm, a shift from understanding nature as passive, unfeeling, and mechanical, to seeing the non-human all around us as aware, a huge something in which we, as humans, participate but can never control, that we can study, become aware of, learn about and find many patterns of translation.

□The assumption that plants and animals have no feelings was made by science hundreds of years ago, for convenience.

□Everyday at our farm, this act of translation between human and non-human continues. A new horse lives at our farm. She is a rescue horse, a pretty red Arab mare that was neglected by her previous owner. I will never know what happened to her. When I come into the field, she turns her head away and won't look at me, unlike the other horses, who watch me, ears pricked to see if I am bringing treats, or hay, or a halter. She flinches at my touch and moves away.

□So I am forcing this mare, Fannie Mae, to greet me. When I go out with her hay, I hold it until she looks at me and sniffs my hand. Then she turns her head away, lays her ears back, and won't eat unless I move off. I scratch her neck, I stand with her and breathe. Soften my own staring eyes so I lessen the predator messages my body is sending. I can interpret her behavior, but I can't really know what her experience is, or why she behaves this way. We have no shared language but I can interpret, guess, wonder, study, and learn her body language.

□Eventually, I hope, she and I will figure things out on the basis of interpretation, body/sign language, and if I'm careful and aware, we can make an agreement on how to spend time together and be at peace.

□My brother takes our dogs and hikes up the mountain every day. Often he follows the tracks of the female cougar who dens high on the mountains. Often he comes across a trail where she is following him. Sometimes they see each other.

□She never comes down to the farm but we are glad to have her on the mountain. There are too many deer and not enough predators. We welcome her return as a sign of an ecosystem recovering itself. My brother believes she knows him and recognizes him.

□Everywhere, in small ways, such translation continues. My daughter is an urban gardener. I'm a farmer. There's a difference, although we could argue all day about what it is. In her city garden, she planted her raspberries properly, out in the sun in good soil. But one plant reached up and across into the shadowed branches of her Gravenstein apple tree, and there it produced the earliest and fattest raspberries.

□The realization of the aliveness of the non-human is the crack in the paradigm, a shift from understanding nature as passive, unfeeling, and mechanical, to seeing the non-human all around us as aware...

□The assumption that plants and animals have no feelings was made by science, hundreds of years ago, for convenience. It's actually a cultural assumption. It has no scientific basis. This assumption makes it easier to experiment on animals, easier to exploit them, hunt them, or use them as a "resource." This kind of thinking has resulted in the snarled mix of contradictions, beliefs, sentimentality, superiority, and fear with which humans continue to regard and portray the non-human world.

□But current research that examines plants and animals for 'intelligence' finds it in many new and surprising ways. Such research is finding that certain animals and plants are far more 'intelligent' than anyone had ever even guessed. However, intelligence is the wrong word. Consciousness is the wrong word. But science doesn't have the right words. We have no language because plants and animals are not like humans. Such comparisons are habitual but not useful.

□Nevertheless, evidence continues to grow showing that animals are smarter than humans have ever understood them to be. Baboons can distinguish between written words and gibberish. Apes can delay instant gratification longer than a human child can. They plan ahead. They make war and peace. They perform acts that indicate caring. In fact, biologist Frans De Waal has written extensively on morality and empathy in primates and other animals.

□It's not just primates that demonstrate unexpected abilities. Dolphins recognize themselves in a mirror. So do elephants. Black bears can count and so can pigeons, monkeys and ravens.

□It's not just animals either.

□In the words of botanist, Anthony Trewavas, plants can, "with great sensitivity compute complex aspects of their environment and change behaviour to optimize fitness within their local environment."

□This means they communicate with each other through networks, warn other plants of danger, call for help, feed other plants, or put out pheromones to attract particular insects.

□I can't really understand what goes on inside plants and animals. But I try to find out and to reach out, study, observe. Even still, I have to dwell in both the knowing and not-knowing, as listener and translator.

□As a child, I was always fascinated by the many lives being lived on and around our farm: the domesticated animals we cared for and some of which we ate, or wild animals, some of which we made into pets. When I ranged over the mountainside above the farm, or along the lakeshore, I saw a variety of wildlife, from bears to hawks to ravens. Sometimes on hot afternoons, I would lie on the moss under giant Douglas firs, and part the bits of moss to see the small intense lives being lived underneath: tiny worms, beetles, larvae, or spiders.

□But as an adult, more and more, I wonder about all these lives. I think about what it means to live somewhere and truly understand where I am living. The more I learn, the more complex it gets. I have always known that when I walked into the forest, voices, eyes, and ears announced my presence. Recent studies indicate that even the mighty fungi underground, mycelium, transmit my presence.

□When I go into the forest, squirrels chitter from tree to tree to far away tree. Often a raven will ghost overhead, cock its head, and peer down. Now I am learning that scientific research has shown ravens can learn amazing skills, that a collie can learn over a thousand names, that parrots seem to understand what they are talking about, that plants can recognize and help each other, that an old growth tree acts as a mother tree to young trees, sending nutrients to their roots. How can I understand this? How do I acknowledge something so vast, so unknown?

□It is bewildering to say simply, hello - to acknowledge the limits of translation, to acknowledge our own unknowing.

□I have now been wandering around the same piece of land for some sixty years and now it's clear to me that the more I know about it, the farther away I am from understanding anything. That's okay by me. When I was eighteen I knew everything and now, all I know is that I don't know anything. I'd like to go back and re-read every book I ever read but I don't have time. I do have time, however, to watch and see and listen as I go for my daily walk.

□On every walk now, a particular raven comes with me, appearing overhead or perching on a tree, silent, watching me. I stop to look, to recognize this presence. I don't know if it is a she or a he. Or why she or he comes on walks. But it does. Or they do. Yesterday there were a couple of ravens, clucking to each other in the dead craggy tree by the beach, combing beaks.

□I am surrounded by beings whose behaviors, rightly or wrongly, I interpret. How do I find the invisible line between interpretation, anthropomorphism, and fantasy? My life is full of thorny ethical thickets. I keep domesticated animals. I even eat some of them. I ride horses. I work with dogs.

□And when I watch animals, both domestic and wild, I interpret their behavior every day, trying to find the boundaries of a shared understanding. What do we share? Is it how our bodies move and communicate? Our senses? Plus we share land, we share an ecosystem, and I believe we share something else, a mutual recognition of being alive together.

□I may think that animals don't understand my language but I have no full understanding of "them", what I perceive as them and no clarity about how they see me. How do I appear to them? Are they afraid of me? What language does my body exude as I wander across fields, up the mountain into the forest, in the midst of an astonishing exuberance of being, from tiny beetles to horses to cougars, from moss to giant cedar trees. Do I miss the messages and greetings coming back?

□These new discoveries in science are saying look, plants and animals are different from what science previously assumed, which is different from what religions and culture have previously taught. The standard of "intelligence" or "culture" still remains a comparison with humans as ultimately superior in these areas.

□Why not do research in the opposite direction? Making comparisons asks the wrong questions. Why not make the assumption that animals and plants have something; what do we call it? Aliveness? Awareness? Conscious existence? Proceed from there. Why constantly ask animals and plants, who can't speak our languages and who have no legal standing within our courts, to prove their intelligence, their consciousness, their equality with humans? After all, do animals acknowledge our superiority? Does the grass bow before us?

□What kind of knowledge do they have of us? Over generations, ravens remember people who have harmed them. Do the whales remember whaling ships? Does the prairie remember our extermination of the buffalo?

□The biggest, most profound and most revolutionary shift we could move to now is to live in a world where saying hello to the grass is a sign of deepest respect and an

acknowledgment of our own lack of understanding and knowledge.

□It is bewildering to say simply, hello - to acknowledge the limits of translation, to acknowledge our own unknowing. Our bodies also have a kind of language. Sometimes, our bodies translate for us, simply by being alive in the world, seeing, taking it in, and loving the place we have landed for now.

□Yes, we are part of the world, and the world is within us as we are within an alive and enormous network of being that looks back at us. To perceive this is at once so profound and also simple. It begins with the most obvious everyday things around you. The most radical thing you can do is to look down, look around, say hello and then begin to learn what that means.