

MY WAY TO LOOK AT CHICKENS

INGRID S. BUCHINGER

One of the basic rules of Bio-Dynamics is to preserve an agricultural organism as a whole. Dr. Rudolf Steiner, the initiator of Bio-Dynamics, emphasized the completeness of the agricultural organism. If we try to follow this rule we will feel the desire and even the duty to transform our suburban yard into a balanced and thriving piece of nature. We demonstrate to ourselves, our children, and our neighbors the value of saving all organic matter in a small compost pile and of finding the right neighborhood for plants in a sound community of annuals, perennials, shrubs and trees. To this we add a bit of animal-life as we would add spice to the soup.

Just as the compost is completed by the addition of small amounts of animal manures between its layers of weeds, so the garden gets the finishing touch in aesthetic appeal from the brightly colored feathers of the chickens or from the appearance of other small, useful animals. In the kitchen, the cook and the consumers alike will find that home-raised eggs from chickens pastured on grass and in the sunshine, rather than in confinement, remind them of the way an egg should taste. It may not be possible to raise all the eggs needed by the household from just a trio of small chickens; but this is not the point. We should train ourselves to observe the agricultural unit of soil, plant, and animal. We should become sensitive again towards their reaction to weather, seasons, and all sorts of influences. We do not need to make a scientific experiment for this. All we need is to do our best to care for these neighborly creatures, and then we will find out that they return our favors, and we ourselves become a part of the unit.

About fifty years ago, although we lived in cities and had to move often, we children were permitted by our understanding mother to keep and to take along a few chickens, rabbits or other pets. Since then I have had animals with only a few interruptions. My present set-up is a little more than a back yard. Our $3\frac{1}{2}$ acres, bordering other large gardens and a creek area, allow my chickens to spread through the orchard and goat pasture. The slender necks of leading hens on the lookout become visible out of high weeds near the hedgerows while young chicks hunt insects and seeds. Intruders like squirrels, woodchucks or strange cats are surrounded by a group of chickens and trailed.

They are escorted and noisily walked off.

A large bird crossing the place causes sudden silence and immobile rest, which soon dissolves again into the usual chatter, scratching and moving about. From my kitchen window I can see the fowl on the lawn between young spruces and flowering shrubs. Ducks, guineas, and pigeons are part of that family. I take mental notes for sketches and compositions. I feel comforted, inspired, or amused many times a day. Visitors of all ages enjoy these busy creatures as much as I do. Often I give away some animals or birds as a start for somebody else's garden.

These give-away starts often consist of a pair in the fall when I have to reduce the number of animals because winter is coming. But most of all I like to give an appreciative friend a hen with a new set of babies. This is a period in the bird's life when a move into new quarters will be most creatively performed. The hen, trusting in human care, is moved easily and makes use of everything for her little ones, which are still flexible and able to adjust well.

The rhythm of unfolding and maturation is different in different strains, and is often disturbed in commercially kept fowl. I have had hens for instance which have once-a-year hatching rhythms. Others will hatch two or three times a year. Some are hard to break up (to stop the brooding desire) and others are easily discouraged if the setting of eggs is not wanted for hatching. There are some strains which will not set on a clutch of eggs.

Dwarf chickens have always been popular as is attested by old sayings like "Bantams in every yard" or "Proud as a bantam rooster." The bantam size probably is about the size of the originally domesticated fowl. Man has bred tiny birds as well as giant birds, but both these extremes seem to be artificial productions.

I have found that the health of a hen is improved if she is allowed to hatch and lead offspring. My oldest hen at present is 9 years old, a small crossbreed with feathered legs. I have had leghorns (the smallest of the commercial breeds and with a few exceptions "non-sitters") who did very well and kept healthy for 5-6 years at least. It was the molting season which served as their period of rejuvenation. This was even more true if they were not urged to continue to lay during the molting season by being fed heavily. In my case it was hardly possible to feed my hens separately. The pullets who were maturing

fast and who were already laying, demanded supplements to pasture which the molters would not have needed. Although I have caged-out pure-breds for hatching eggs in spring, I mostly have a "family" set-up which leaves much to the instinct of each bird.

The often quoted pecking order is actually a constantly shifting, very delicate thermometer and depends by no means on physical strength alone. It does help us to observe the hens' behavior and to learn thus more about the perfect condition of our charges.

Green pasture, insects, wellwater, gravel, household leftovers (but no more than the hens will consume in half a day, or there will be uncontrollable decay) and some whole grain, sandbath, dry light shelter with high sleeping poles, — all these will turn the "stupid, dirty" chickens into handsome, well oriented beings, and will then teach us all lessons in a small frame about the world as a whole.

"I chickened out of it" somebody confessed.

"What, you allow that cat among all those chickens?" somebody else asked. I answered, "The chickens themselves have taught the cat to leave them alone."

Chickens may be a symbol of fear and confusion on the one hand. On the other hand chickens are able to teach an animal like the cat, who is better equipped for defense (and/or attack!) that he is to stay away. These contradicting conceptions ought to teach us something about chickens.

NEMATODES AND CROP ROTATION

That nematodes in oats can be successfully controlled by crop rotation, has been known for a long time. Growing a variety of crops keeps down pests. Koehler recently published the results of many tests concerned with the infestation of soils with *Heterodera avenae*. If the infestation in the preceding year was taken as a basis, the infestation decreased or increased in the following way: in oats +44%; in wheat +56%; in barley +26%; in rye +11%; in alfalfa —57%; in potatoes —74%. These are interesting figures with regard to biological control.

Potato nematodes, another pest, may be present in sewage sludge. Only after 90 days of digesting were the cysts of potato nematodes killed by the digesting process. This period of time grew shorter when higher temperatures were employed in the digesting process.

H. H. K.