COMMENTARY – IMAGINING PUBLIC LIVESTOCK

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'Death is never easy,' said my friend Matt, moments after we had chopped the head off one of my backyard chickens. We had two more to 'do' (i.e. kill) and we were still shaking. The chicken herself had stopped shaking – for what felt like minutes but was probably just 30 seconds she had flapped her wings (or tried to – I was holding them tightly to her warm body), even though her head was severed from the rest of her.

'Death is never easy.'

Never easy, but necessary if we choose to eat meat.

I rarely choose to eat meat, though, strangely, I've become more carnivorous since I started keeping backyard hens for eggs. Over the years, I've had many hens of different heritage and conventional breeds, but these most recent three had not produced many eggs at all over their months of tenure in my coop, and so I decided to eat them.

I would never say that I took any pleasure in ending my hens' lives, but I did feel a kind of solemn completeness in participating in the deed. Not ease – my shaking hands betrayed conflict with the concept and the act – but grim recognition that death, never easy, can be if not exactly embraced then at least to some degree honoured, and done as humanely as killing a living creature can ever be. Matt and my Sunday morning three-hen slaughter felt something like meat consecration, almost ritualistic. As I pulled out feathers by the fistful (discovering a meditative rhythm I found calming), I participated in a process of transforming 'my' hens (living, autonomous creatures) into my dinner – and it felt right.

What Matt and I did is something that happens day in and day out on farms and at slaughter houses everywhere. But it is usually out of sight for city dwellers who, in effect, subcontract the messy stuff of death to others. How does an urban backyard context transform the act into something very different? Crucially, I think, it brings the reality of death – necessary for meat dinners – closer to home. We might think of our urban backyards as private places, but ending a hen's life twenty feet away from a downtown sidewalk is an assertion, indeed an insertion, of a messy meat truth into the urban realm: Death is never easy. (The mess, by the way, was emotional, not physical. The neck chop was swift and clean – Matt is an expert – and the blood went into a bucket.)

Darrin Nordahl and Catherine Fisher have advocated eloquently and persuasively for public produce – fruits and vegetables grown in public places and available for all, free for the taking. How might we extend at least some of this food ethic and approach to urban livestock? Should it even be a goal? And what would a city that explored opportunities for public livestock look like?

Right from the start it has to be said (obviously but crucially) that animals are living, feeling, sentient creatures who deserve to live a healthy, safe and happy life. Calling animals livestock in no way absolves us of the responsibility to provide them with the good care that is their right and our duty. What I hope for, for every creature I eat, is that in a life of health, safety and happiness, it has just one bad minute – the moment of its death. And taking responsibility for the death of a food animal – particularly in a public place, not hidden – is one way, among many, to ensure that this is indeed the case.

Not only do most North American city dwellers subcontract the messy stuff of death to others, but we are also removed from the reality of the lives that our food animals live. In terms of the hens that lay the eggs we eat, for example, industrial production allows us to ignore the appalling conditions that the vast majority of chickens are subjected to – tiny enclosures, little room to move, clipped beaks, no access to the outdoors, no freedom to express their natural behaviours, and on and on. For all the squeamishness so many of us exhibit at the thought of actually killing an animal for food, I'd say that we've grossly misplaced most of our discomfort. It is to their lives that we should also direct our scrutiny. And one of the many ways this could happen is if we embraced the notion of raising at least some of our food animals in the places where many of us live – in our cities, in our backyards. Close to home.

So, taking a cue from Nordahl and Fisher's public produce vision and extending it to chickens, as an example, here's what public livestock could look like.

Imagine a park. Children play on the swings; parents and care-givers sit on benches nearby. Some children, though, aren't in the playground – they're gathered around an adult in a fenced-off area of the park where a flock of hens is scratching away at the ground. The children are excited but quiet, mesmerized by the creatures at their feet. The hens are quiet, too, focused on foraging for insects. The adult, a volunteer responsible for caring

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for this park's flock, hands each child a lettuce leaf and shows them how to hold it out for the hens. Soon, the chickens are pecking off little pieces of the leaves and gobbling them down. The children squeal with a mixture of nervousness and delight, some getting braver and patting their hands along the hens' feathered backs. This is the closest most of these kids have ever been to a farm animal and they are transfixed. They are even more transfixed when each child is given an egg to take home.

Many North American cities already have demonstration farms. The city where I live, Toronto, has Riverdale Farm, and scenes like the one described above happen every day. The only differences are that the person showing the chickens to the kids is a parks employee, not a volunteer from a community group; the farm is managed by the City; and visitors are not given free eggs to take home.

Toronto is full of community gardens and has a very active and vibrant urban agriculture scene, including many people who consider themselves city farmers. Some, like me, keep chickens in their backyards. However, because chicken-keeping is illegal in Toronto, you won't find *public* hens in any community-run gardens or community-run farms here. But it's not for lack of desire, motivation or skill.

What are the possibilities for public chickens (and other urban livestock), beyond the model of a City-run demonstration farm like Riverdale? Imagine a school, for example, where the students already have a garden in which they raise vegetables, manage the compost bins, and learn about food, nutrition and soil. Imagine that they also have a coop with a small flock of hens. They've researched coop design and built the structure in shop class. They've had a visiting farmer in to do a presentation. In science class, they've researched nutrition. In biology class, they've learned about the life cycle of chickens (they now know, for example, that a rooster is not necessary in order for a hen to lay eggs – something that many urban dwellers are unaware of). They've set up a schedule for weekend care of the flock and have a clear protocol for emergencies. In short, they've taken all the steps required of responsible animal keepers before bringing these creatures into the schoolground environment. And now they are stewards, kids who are growing up exposed to the reality of what it takes to have eggs on their breakfast tables. I'd even go so far as to assert that their potential for growing into compassionate adults – people alert to and concerned about suffering – is nurtured and enhanced by their experience with the hens.

These school kids' exercise in compassion could also take on a more immediate and public expression as they consider what to do with the eggs produced by their flock. Give them to a food bank or a local community group for free distribution to those in need? Host a weekly give-away day, open to anyone in the community? The possibilities are endless.

The kids will also be exposed to the uncomfortable question of what to do with the hens when they stop producing eggs. This issue often rears its head in debates over the wisdom of allowing backyard hens (and other food animals) in the city. Public health officials and animal welfare groups are understandably concerned with backyard slaughter. How can we ensure that these animals' deaths are humane and that the broader imperative of community health is not endangered in the process?

Again, Nordahl and Fisher's emphasis on the possibilities of *public* food production is instructive. *Public* doesn't necessarily mean a sanctioned free-for-all, in which anyone and everyone could take up an axe. It could, for example, mean publicly *regulated*, with courses, workshops or certification programs, so that only those people who are trained in safe and humane methods of animal slaughter are given permits to carry out the deed in urban backyards or public places.

No doubt, small enterprises offering backyard slaughter services would develop. Or, as an alternative to slaughter, systems could be set up whereby rural farmers willing to offer boarding services/retirement homes could be enlisted. Indeed, one pro-chicken city councilor in Toronto has been engaged in such discussion and found a rural host.

Such willingness suggests that the public danger of unwanted chickens being abandoned to the streets is inflated. Although chicken abandonment is an issue often raised by the anti-urban chicken faction, it is a concern mired in hyperbole. The summer of 2013 saw a media-induced panic over irresponsible people simply offloading their past-prime chickens onto the public, letting hens loose on city streets so that someone else has to deal with them (municipal animal control crews or, in a more grisly food-chain outcome, to be consumed by raccoons, foxes or hawks). Media stories gave the impression that there was a loose-chicken epidemic, but how many on-the-lam hens have you seen on your city's streets? There is no doubt a danger that some irresponsible chicken keepers will resort to this desperate and insupportable 'solution.' And no doubt that some already have. But is this grounds for outlawing a whole category of urban animal-keeping

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activity? We haven't done so for cats and dogs, and surely the loose cat and dog problem *is* an epidemic, certainly more so than the phantom loose hens.

There is no concern over urban livestock that can't be addressed, reasonably debated, and resolved using the public mechanisms already in place to deal with the whole host of uniquely urban dangers and annoyances that arise from living in close proximity with animals. North American cities already have bylaws and ordinances covering noise, odour and pests, all of which could be applied to any potential livestock problems. As well, most North American cities that currently allow certain types of livestock have clearly defined regulations, covering numbers of animals allowed, setbacks from neighbours, minimum sizes of animal housing, etc.

Hidden activities, closed off from public scrutiny, are those that diminish our shared capacity for positive community experiences and, instead, often lead to problems. Public activities, on the other hand, open to scrutiny, are those that allow for full debate and reasoned negotiation. Inserting livestock into the discussion of cultivating food in public places for free public consumption takes us one step closer to the imperative goal of food security for everyone. And, crucially, closer to the imperative goal of better lives and deaths for the animals we choose to eat.