

Groundhog Day – A Bucolic Tragedy

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It all began innocently enough, one fall 25 years ago. “What’s that cute, roly-poly little animal?” JoAnn asked, looking out across the field towards the river.

We had just bought a 1750 farm house on nine acres near the Great Swamp Wildlife Refuge in New Jersey and were in the manic throes of demolition and repair prior to moving in. Periodically we’d take a break, step out of the clouds of old plaster dust and loose vermiculite ceiling insulation to marvel at the eruption of color on the maples, oaks and sycamores on the surrounding hills and the Noah’s Ark of wildlife that seemed to have been let loose on our property.

We would collapse into sleep to the eerie cries of hoot and screech owls and the gobbling of wild turkeys, awaken to the music of songbirds, watch red-tailed hawks soar overhead, and gape at the size of the great blue heron that glided down the river like a 747 on its approach path. In addition to the ubiquitous squirrels and chipmunks, that first autumn we spotted deer, raccoons, skunks, a red fox, coyotes, muskrats, rabbits, an ancient snapping turtle almost the size of a coffee table, and even a few years later, a bear.

“What’s that cute, roly-poly little animal?” JoAnn asked. I pulled off my dust-caked safety goggles and looked. “Oh. That’s a groundhog. When I was in college in upper New York state, farmers used to pay us to shoot them.”

The next spring we planted our first garden, tended it lovingly, and then woke one morning in October to discover the deer had simply stepped over the 6’ high fence and eaten everything. “OK,” I thought, as I surveyed the trampled wreckage. “I get it. This is the country. We’re not in suburbia anymore.”

The next spring we expanded the size of the garden and replanted behind a 9’ fence. The deer stayed away and the garden flourished. In addition to fresh asparagus in spring, and salads and vegetables all summer, each fall we’d put away a year’s supply of tomato sauce, green beans, zucchini, Swiss chard, and broccoli.



JoAnn and her herbs

JoAnn started a herb and perennial flower business and pretty soon there were 100 different varieties of herbs growing alongside the vegetables and in the kitchen garden by the back door. We nurtured all the usual favorites – thyme, oregano, basil, fennel, rosemary, lavender, parsley, sage and chives. We planted rue and wormwood around the back porch to keep away mosquitoes, and grew comfrey, feverfew and evening primrose for healing, plus some fun exotic varieties like curry plant and Good King Henry.

In February we’d invite friends and their children to tap the maples for sugar; in October we’d press cider and bake pies from our apple trees.

JoAnn added dairy goats to the menagerie, and we’d treat ourselves to fresh herbed chèvre.

A scarecrow, like Stevens’ jar in Tennessee, watched over all. We thought we’d found Elysium here.



JoAnn and her goats

Habitarunt Dio quoque sylvas, as Virgil says.

Something Worse Than the Snake Enters the Garden

Then, some years later, we woke one morning to discover a creature had tunneled under the fence and worked its way down the zucchini, taking one malicious bite out of each plant. I felt violated. I patched the fence and waited. My time would come. Sure enough, several days later, I spotted the tall tops of fennel swaying in the still air. I charged. My blood was up.

The groundhog was trapped against the fence, far away from his escape hole. Glaring eyes, snarling teeth, a sharp blow from a long-handled shovel and a spattering of blood. I'm sure I yelled as I charged and swung. I recall that when the anger cooled, I buried the first one decently with some appropriate words lifted from a Mohawk hunting ceremony – “Thank you, little brother....”

No more predators appeared, but something worse than a snake had entered Eden. JoAnn loves animals with such a deep grace and passion that I'm sure St. Francis has a statue of her in *his* garden. But she also loves her plants and wanted to help support us with the herbs and perennials she grew and sold.

The next spring we experimented with electronic counter measures. I started lo-tech, putting an old radio out at night tuned to the loudest, most vitriolic late night talk station I could find. I figured if the sound of loud ill-tempered human voices didn't scare the groundhogs, the content of the shows would repel them. The first bad rain storm short-circuited that idea. We then went hi-tech, trying out all those nifty devices you see advertised in magazines – the ones that emit underground ultrasound blasts capable of driving away mice, moles and other vermin. Right. The only noticeable effect I saw was some earthworms turned into Popsicle sticks.

So we decided to harden the site, dug 3' of fence below ground all around the perimeter and ran a wire one foot off the ground on the outside, hooked up to the electric fence around the goat pen. Except for the times I forgot to turn off the current and zapped myself with 10,000 volts, that seemed to do the job. Groundhogs, it seemed, were smarter than humans.

Then that fall, the first deep tunnel opening appeared inside the garden, several feet under the electric fence, cleverly hidden among the dense cluster of lemon balm. It took a while to find it. I'd discover the destroyed plants in the morning, walk the perimeter wire looking for signs of breaches, finding none, and then wait for the tell-tale movement among the foliage inside the garden, weapon at hand. Finally, one groundhog lingered too long over the radicchio, and I nailed him just as he dove for the tunnel opening. That summer saw a progression of hard-won small victories in a larger war we were clearly losing. I'd close in one tunnel with the nastiest muck I could get from the goats' stall, only to have another appear someplace else. We controlled the garden by day, but the night belonged to the groundhogs.

A Hobbesian Solution

Stern measures were called for. This was serious. This was war – nature red in tooth and claw. I knew that in early spring, the latest brood of groundhogs would come out of hibernation and forage in the fields waiting for the first baby lettuce to blossom in the garden. I had initially thought of using claymore mines and napalm, but settled on search and destroy sniper missions. Take the war to the enemy. I'll skip the gory details. Enough to say that in two years, when JoAnn wasn't around, my buddy Joe from up the street and I harvested 21 groundhogs. It was clean and surgical, no needless suffering inflicted. One shot, one kill – Zen and the art of groundhog extermination.

Joe was a veteran of that earlier real war in 'Nam. He wanted to hang the carcasses on the fence as a warning. That was too Kurtzian for me. I just stuffed the bodies down the groundhog holes before filling them in. Might as well bury them where they'll do some good. And by this time, there was no Mohawk ceremony.

The only casualty we sustained was one day when JoAnn was out shopping. Joe, firing from inside the kitchen with a scope, forgot to allow for parallax and drilled a round through the lower frame of the new Pella window. We both turned into 10-year-old boys who knew when Mom got home we'd be busted, grounded – or worse. He took off just as JoAnn's car was pulling down the driveway. When she saw the bullet scar, I did the right thing. I blamed Joe. And the carnage continued. But ominously, the more groundhogs we prejudicially terminated, the more we had to deal with, as if nature had entered the fray, rebalancing the equation by increasing groundhog fecundity.

A Peaceful Alternative

Then the miracle happened. Another friend, a deeply spiritual person appalled by the violence, suggested a more peaceful alternative. She would pray for the groundhog's safety. So when the first buds began popping out the following spring and the groundhogs reappeared, she spoke to them. I don't know exactly what she said, but I imagine something like, "Dear sweet groundhogs, thank you for the joy you bring us by your playful frolics each spring. You know that the Creator loves you as He loves all His children, and wants you to live to fullness amidst His love and abundance. He has given you succulent grasses and wild herbs and flowers for your nourishment. Enjoy nature's bounty and please allow the humans with whom you share this planet to enjoy the gifts given to them, as well. Or the mean man who lives in the house will kill you."

I make no representations here about spiritual powers. The facts speak for themselves. For three years we would spot the odd groundhog out by the pine forest or even in the goats' pen, but the garden was safe, and bloomed again as of old. We had won over the hearts and minds of the groundhogs. Life was good again.

But by that time our lives had changed as well. JoAnn had closed her herb business when Home Depot started selling Mexican-grown herbs at \$1.00 a pot, and we'd bought a summer place in Nova Scotia to escape from the swelter of New Jersey. The person we hired to look after the goats watered the garden as needed, and mulch kept the weeds under control until we returned. Our spiritual friend had meanwhile moved away, but we figured her prayers would keep working. Confident that all was quiet on the home front, we started traveling again.

The Fall of the Garden

We returned from a blissfully romantic vacation in Tuscany, our heads full of how we could expand our garden to include some of the marvelous food we'd experienced, and walked into a war zone. The garden was leveled. No less than four tunnel openings inside the fence gaped in plain sight like ulcerous sores, big enough for a warthog, let alone a groundhog. The devastation was total. Nothing was left. They had driven one tunnel right through the asparagus patch. Even JoAnn's nursery perennials, so lovingly tended, had been ravaged, trampled and ripped from the soil.



That evening, the last helicopter lifted out of the sacked city. It carried a few overlooked cucumbers, one zucchini they'd somehow missed, and three small tomatoes. I tossed chemical bombs inside the open holes on the way out. No sense retreating with unused ordinance. A pall of sulfurous smoke spread over the ruined garden. I half expected the groundhogs to rush into the garden firing off Uzis and AK-47s into the air in celebration.

The desecration of the garden turned out to be the close of the pastoral idyll we had enjoyed for so many years. We cared for our goats as they aged and died, but didn't replace them. Our farming days were over. Each year, before the cool green of June started to wither into the brown heat of July, we packed our car and headed north for Nova Scotia.

Epilogue

In Millington, we still live amidst nature's bounty. Each spring still arrives in feathers of green; each fall the hillside across the river still explodes in red and gold. Cardinals, woodpeckers, juncos and titmice still cluster at the bird feeder; hawks still soar overhead. And the deer still wander, now into the empty garden whose gates hang forlornly open. A few strips of plastic mulch peep through the weeds and the scraggly sorrel plants that

return each year. Here and there amidst the tall grass and lemon balm run wild, a solitary perennial raises its head to mock memory. A cracked green transplanting pot lies next to a broken rake by the old stone well. Most of the fence has already collapsed; the rest will follow in time.

Decades from now, someone else may turn this soil again and find the remains of wire and fence post stubs and wonder, "Was there a garden here once?" Not finding empty helmets or javelins eaten thin with rust, he will never think of war.

One wonders, are there lessons here? Was there some ceremony overlooked? Did we neglect some obligatory spilling for the gods or ritual binding of oak leaves on the head for the dance? Or is it all just a Hobbesian fight for survival? I do know that JoAnn and I miss the garden; we certainly don't miss the taking of life. Ultimately the cost of the garden became too high to bear.

Meanwhile, the groundhogs waddle contemptuously where they wish and eat what they want. It's their country.