Vol. 2. (1), 2015, pp. 47-53

Journal of Narrative Politics

Of Percherons, Nubians, and Other Palimpsests: Gatherings on the Debris Field of Lost Cultural Knowledge

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Draft Horse Days

In July of 2000, I took my children to a local fair in the town of King Ferry, New York, billed as 'Frontier Days'. In a small round-pen at the fair, we happened upon a yearling Percheron gelding being raffled off by the New York State Draft Horse Association. Percherons are a breed of heavy draft horse developed by the French, and imported into the United States and Canada in the middle of the 19th century. One can say, without exaggeration, that draft horses built post-conquest America in the late 19th century, and no breed more than Percherons. They hauled fire trucks, dragged logs out of forests to clear them for agriculture, pulled plows and helped clear glacial debris boulders out of agricultural fields, turned millstones in areas with no water, and helped farm ladies cultivate their household gardens. And they provided fertilizer and reproduced themselves. Before us stood an example of this bygone era, up for raffle.

I looked at my children, then ages 8, 6, and 4, and announced, 'We are going to win this horse.' I bought twelve tickets for ten dollars and wrote on the back of each ticket, 'I want the horse.' (One had the option of accepting $500 in cash instead.) My kids, who were still young enough to believe all my proclamations, asked me, 'When do we win the horse?' I looked at my ticket: Drawing to be held on October 4. 'October 4,' I said. 'We are going to win this horse,' I repeated, in case they missed it the first time.

I promptly forgot about the raffle. My children, however, did not, and in about two weeks started telling me, 'Six weeks and we get our horse. . . . Five weeks and we get our horse.'

Finally, in late September, when my son reminded me that we got our horse in one week, I had to break to news to him: I sometimes say random, crazy stuff. He looked disappointed in me.

I remember October 4, 2000 well. I was sick and came home from work with a bad headache. It was back in the days of an answering machine, and so I unplugged my phone and went to bed. My son came home on the bus and asked me, 'Did we win the horse?' I told him of course we had not and that I had unplugged the phone. He seemed to accept this explanation with the same resignation he had when he realized, perhaps for the first time, that his mother did not always speak rationally. A few hours later, I plugged the phone in and listened to the messages.

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'Hi, this is Carol. You won the foal. We need to know when you are going to come and get him or if you want us to deliver him to you.'

I won't drag it out. We had him delivered the next day to a farm owned by a friend. Barely a year old, he was already sixteen hands tall. He had no training beyond knowing how to have a halter on him, and had not been well handled. In the six years I would own him, he would go on to become a magnificent horse, do second level dressage fairly well, and shoot up to almost nineteen hands and 2200 pounds. He had a wicked sense of humor for a horse, and on occasion, for no apparent reason, would take off bucking and farting across the arena, impressing even the most hardened polo players with his athleticism. We called him Tzaddik, after the crooked letter in the Hebrew alphabet, which also means righteousness, suggesting (and hoping) that wisdom and righteousness come out of long and crooked paths, like winning draft horses in raffles at small fairs. He had a crooked leg. In 2006, I sold him to the wealthy man who had opened up the bonds market. He bargained me down to my bottom dollar and got me to throw in tack. It was my first lesson in the old adage that the rich do not get rich giving away their money.

I have owned and ridden horses for a good part of my life. Tzaddik was the end of a fallow era of my horse life, but ushered horses back into my life and I continue to ride daily on more suitable mounts. I learned to ride in Northwest Montana as a child. My earliest horse, Agate, a small Palomino Pinto, was my childhood companion in the forests of Northwest Montana overlooking Flathead Lake, where I would ride off each day away from my distracted and unhappy family. I would leave the house around eight or nine, and bum breakfast off the old lady from Baltimore who lived along the point near where our cherry orchard was. She always smelled strongly of whiskey by about ten a.m., and I figured out this was usually worth leftover pancakes or toast and eggs. Her family would come in and chastise her for feeding the neighborhood ragamuffin and she would proclaim to them in a slurred Baltimore accent: 'Janie is mah praad and joa.' I liked that, all that pride and joy stuff.

Other days, I would ride up into the hills, at that point completely unlogged and undeveloped, and would often find the rock circles and indentations left by Native American settlements. (This area bordered on the Flathead reservation and was in use by the Salish and Flathead until the 1930s, a mere 30 years before.) Flathead Lake glistened in the distance, and nobody ever knew where I was. Nobody seemed to care at what hour I came home. I always did, though, so I never found out what would have happened if I had not. I was left alone to ponder the lives that might have been lived up here in this breathtaking place. At this age, I began wondering why anyone would leave such a nice place and not live there in their dwellings any longer. I always regarded these places dotting the mountains as a kind of mysterious rupture.

When I grew bored of the hills and vistas and teepee circles, I would ride Agate down the Old Dump Road and wander through the dump, sometimes getting off and examining treasures, occasionally finding one I could manage to get home in my pocket. I learned then the reality that one man's trash is another man's treasure, and this fascination with the waste streams of our culture has stayed with me to this day. Nothing beats a good day at an open dump when times are changing.

Sometimes I rode further into the back roads, where there was an old cowboy bar. Thinking back on it, it is hard to imagine such a place existed: a jukebox, a long bar, smoky and dark, on a back road, accessible on horseback. A quiet, friendly bartender and a few women who were always there. I would go in, order a Coke and a grilled cheese, charge it to my dad (a well known local physician), talk to the man who ran the joint and the several rather painted ladies

who loved to see me do tricks on my horse, told me I was cute and listened to my jokes. Only later as an adult did I learn that often, when I left the bar, Lee the bartender would call what was then the equivalent of Child Protective Services to find out why this ragged little girl (I was eight or nine at the time) was all alone on back roads with nobody but her horse at strange hours, often as dusk was starting to fall. Only later did I learn the truth of another great adage: There are worse things than being a neglected child if you have a good enough horse. It was a childhood of revelation and concealment, of indulgence and ignorance, of near misses and great escapes.

So one could say, and I would claim, that I grew up on horseback. The sudden entrance of a yearling draft horse into my life should have been in keeping with expectation. Horse people end up with more horses eventually, and all seem to understand one another. Horses are horses. You can train one, you can train them all. Thought no horse person ever.

Tzaddik, however, was another matter. He was already, at a year old, bigger than any horse I had ever owned. Draft horses grow up slowly, both mentally and physically. I was out of my element and knew only too well that horse training is not something to take lightly. Badly trained horses, especially big ones, can be dangerous. So I availed myself of help. I subscribed to the *Draft Horse Journal*, bought *The Percheron Horse in America*, and joined the Draft Horse Club. Here is where my story begins.

The New York State Draft Horse Club is comprised of a small group of people who are serious about draft horses. They consist of breeders, trainers and 4-H kids, and the entrance into the club by a professor of Asian religions with a background in dressage was met with polite reserve. Most of the members made their living farming, and all used horses in some way or another on their farms.They specialized in the Big Hitch, teams of six or even eight horses pulling wagons and demonstrating precise movements. Because central New York has an active Amish population, many of these people had strong ties with the Amish, often breaking and training or breeding horses for the Amish to use in farm work, or hauling horses for the them to auctions or sales further than the Amish could go without trucks.

It was at one of these meetings that I met an older man who worked teams of draft horses in a six-horse hitch. He ran a clinic for people learning to drive a team of horses, and I took the clinic. As we were talking, he told me of a strange obsession he and a few of the other older men had: driving through the hilly central New York countryside and "rescuing" abandoned farm equipment. Mowers, tedders, balers, plows, disks, drags, you name it. He told me that with the advent of the tractor in the post-war era, people were suddenly first encouraged and then, with the closing of so many draft horse support services, forced to pay for a tractor, and buy the fuel to run it and the fertilizer to grow their fields. He said amazing things – things that sounded like they came straight out of Marx, how people became so alienated from the very methods of their farm labor, and how the era of profitable farming in hilly, small scale central New York came crashing to an end because people could not farm with a large enough scale to ever pay for the equipment they had gone into debt to buy. He talked about the importance of small scale when farming in rural New York, and how the hills and rocks and ravines made it dangerous to work on a machine that did not have an inborn sense of self-preservation. But in spite of all this, the sales pitch of the tractor era was too great. Draft horses were sent to slaughter (or, out west, simply turned loose to join wild herds) and the obsolete equipment used in farming with these beasts was simply left at the edges of fields. Tractors took over, and were often equipped with intentionally non-compatible hitches, and farmers began a life of farming on borrowed money, in debt to names like John Deere and International Harvester. This man told me that when his father

died, the children inherited a debt for farm equipment. So he gathered up the bits and pieces from the farm, learned to train draft horses, and tried to recapture something he had remembered from his childhood. A hobby, he called it.

Suddenly, the landscape of central New York changed for me. As I drove through the countryside, I started noticing not only the old property lines announced by windbreaks and derelict stonewalls, lines demarcating one hilly, hard to farm tract from another. I also started to see, as if for the first time, the abundance of abandoned old plows and farm equipment, often on farms that had clearly seen better days or at the edges of newer residential developments. Sometimes I would get out of my car and walk through fields and brush. I would place my hands on the rusted iron, examine the workmanship on the piece of equipment and wonder who had been the last person to hook this plow up to a two or four horse hitch. I would wonder, sometimes, if the person had known when he had hitched the equipment up for the last time that it was the last time. I would wonder what happened to the horses. I learned, over time, driving around my region of the country, that there is more equipment sitting in old fields than there are old men interested in collecting it up and pressing it back into service. And as each year passes, the people who would even know how to do that, let alone care, are dying.

The soon-to-be son-in-law of this old man, himself a trainer of draft horses, died an untimely death, nothing to do with horses. His soon-to-be wife drove his casket to the cemetery through the pouring rain on a wagon pulled by draft horses. A few years later, the old man followed the same path. His farm went up for sale. Somebody bought it and his Percherons are now gone.

It is easy to dismiss draft horses and a fascination with old farm equipment as simple nostalgia. And a good part of it may well have started as just that for some of the old people driving these teams. But in my short stint of less than six years interacting with the draft horse section of the horse world, I came to realize that it takes generations of collective knowledge to learn how to safely hook 2200 pound animals up to a piece of sharp metal and head off across a hilly field, and that one should be careful about using "nostalgia" as a critical lens for all revivals of past systems of production. Horse people who often did not have draft horses referred to Percherons (and Clydesdales and Belgians and Suffolk Punches and Shires) as gentle giants. Draft horse people know these horses are gentle because somebody realized that you don't want giants to be any other way, and gentleness takes training, training, training. One woman put it to me this way: 'We lost in less than forty years what it took people about ten thousand years to figure out. And there aren't enough of us who know how to do this to go around.'

I remember visiting an organic farm where a group of young people was talking about using draft horses. One young woman said to an equally young man, 'Will you breed me my draft horse? I can train him myself to do my farm work.' He replied, 'Yes, that would be fun. Let's do it.' Indeed. I wrote it down. 'Yes. That would be fun. Let's do it.'

'There aren't enough of us who know how to do this to go around.'

What is at stake here for me is a cluster of concerns about knowledge, particularly knowledge about breaking a dependence on fossil fuels for food production. What do we know, what do we not know, how do we know what we know and can we be wise enough to know enough about the world to know what we are slowly ceasing to know? And are there forces we cannot see, or perhaps don't feel inclined to notice – cultural, economic, political – that actively conceal from us the slow slipping away of forms of knowledge that make us self sufficient? Any good critical theorist would insist that we do not need to even ask this question, because it is so

obvious. But during the days that I owned Tzaddik, I was a veritable bore about the history of draft horses in America, and how few people actually knew how to train these horses to hitch. It was an embarrassment to my children, but I felt like a prophet, speaking to the people around me who were asleep in troubled times. For me, it seemed like more than nostalgia to care about a form of cultural knowledge that had been so central to so many moments in human/animals co-labor. It struck me that we had lost a critical way of being in the world with animals and that we had not even seen it slip away. We no longer even connected meanings to the ubiquitous pieces of machinery dotting the landscapes very close to our homes.

So I skip ahead from my draft horse days to a new chapter in my life.

Goat Days

On March 23, 2015, my daughter Hannah brought a three-week-old baby goat home from school one Friday afternoon. The goat had been rejected at birth in the freezing temperatures, badly frozen, and was discovered late in the morning by the farmer, who took her in and nursed her to health, only to discover that she had lost the use of her hind limbs and her ears to frostbite. We were to babysit her for the weekend so the farmer could get a break (to go to a Billy Joel concert in the city). We played with her, fed her a bottle and napped with her on the sofa. We followed her around as she hobbled from room to room, picked her up, wrapped her in blankets, and all in all just had a total baby goat cuddling experience. It was wonderful.

I am a religion scholar, and I study people's claims and narratives about religious experiences. I do so with a kind of detachment and a methodological stance that never requires me to make any validations of another's truth claims. So it was odd to me that at 57 years old, I should have an experience that when I sought to explain it to other people, I would erupt, 'I had a religious experience with a baby goat.' This was, in fact, the only way I could explain the utter transformation that overcame me after a nap and a deep dream with Elsa, the little once-frozen goat.

Elsa and I stretched out on our sofa for a mid-afternoon nap. Her little front legs stretched alongside my head on the pillow, Elsa placed her chin on the side of my face and we both fell into a very deep sleep. From time to time, Elsa would make a little grinding noise with her teeth, and it would resonate through my skull as I slept. There on the sofa, I had a most vivid dream, unmatched in my dreaming life before or since: It had no narrative, but was a dream of images and sensations only. I dreamt of waves of green grass and running water, of blue skies and cool breezes, bushes and berries and branches and wind in the trees. I could hear birds and smell soil, and I saw the world from a goat's eye view. In my dream, I walked around in a state of grace, as if I had re-entered the Garden, and was no longer alienated from the natural world. I felt a sense of ecstasy and exhilaration in the dream. When I awoke, with the little goat still under the blanket next to me on the sofa, I was utterly unable to explain what I had just experienced in my dream, and yet felt this incredible compulsion to do so. My husband suggested, and he may very well be right, that the little animal's presence had given me a serious oxytocin high. I may very well have been tripping on the affection hormone.

Regardless, the next day I made a decision to get my own goats. 'Let's do it. It will be fun,' I said to myself. (Write that down.) As fate would have it, on March 25, two days after the Great Goat Religious Experience Dream, as I have come to call it, two Nubian runt doelings were born. I'll get to the point: I bought them and they arrived at my home on May 10 and live with me still –- part companion pets, part sustainable brush clearers and fertilizer systems and future

milk producers, and part reminders to my family that I often take my passions very literally. Beatrice and Belinda.

What this period of intense caprine involvement has taught me is this: I know nothing about goats. And in fact, most other people around me know nothing about goats either, or more accurately, as a whole society, what we actually actively know about goats consists of a series of distortions, misinformation, and downright lies about goats. It is as if, as a culture, we have all agreed to swallow a propaganda campaign to discredit goats. When I tell people I have goats, it is as if a carefully manufactured and reproduced cultural tape gets played: Goats eat anything. Goats cause chaos. Goats smell terrible. Goats spread disease. Goats are impossible to tame. Goats have no place in our current society. (And whispered: Crazy old women like goats the way some crazy old women like cats.)

While I will admit I know nothing about goats (though the last few months has meant I know more than the average person), I have found it to be true that, unlike draft horses who do in fact require some kind of specialized knowledge to care for and train, goats are good animals for idiots. Kind of like dogs and babies, they have a long history of co-evolution with human beings and therefore we are almost hard-wired to figure them out fairly easily. Within days of their arrival, Beatrice and Belinda were convinced I was their mother and I bought into this fantasy too, and the three of us quickly developed a whole repertoire of noises, body language, words and phrases that have made it possible for us to coexist with a certain ease, something bordering on a comfortable familiarity.

I have a terribly unscientific and even romantic way of explaining this. I insist, perhaps metaphorically, that people have receptors in their brains for certain animals, goats among them. In fact, the more I think about this, I often wonder out loud to myself if flies can co-evolve to have receptors allowing them to find certain kinds of flowers that evolved to smell of corpses and these flowers depend on flies to pollinate them, and bees have co-evolved with flowers to create so much of the food we eat, why can't we have receptors in our brains for the animals we need to survive? I have always known I have horse receptors in my brain. Agate waked those receptors up on a cold winter morning when I was three and smelled horse for the first time and knew there was nothing finer. I find no other way to explain my sudden comfort with goats than to say that Elsa the Near Frozen Goat woke up my goat receptors. I don't actually believe this. But I also know it to be true.

On a recent research trip to Norway, I found myself going through the landscape section of the national gallery. Huge panoramic landscape paintings, some covering half a wall, were in every room, with scenes from Norwegian rural life in the 16th through 19th centuries. In so many of these paintings, my eyes were drawn to the presence of goats –- goats pulling sleds, being milked, standing in a doorway to a house, sitting with goatherds, chewing cud in the corner of the scene, hanging out with a clearly courting couple in an idyllic landscape. I won't argue that all of these depictions be taken at face value as accurate representations of goats in Norwegian culture, but surely the images were commonplace enough that one's eyes would not be drawn to the goats in the scene and be forced to exclaim, 'Whatever is someone doing milking a goat?' Or 'What is that goat doing in this painting?' In short, the ubiquitousness of goats in these landscape paintings does suggest that once upon a fine time, goats were commonplace in the fabric of daily western material culture.

So here was my epistemological *a-ha* moment with goats. I had no idea that goats were so compatible with people or that they would be so easy to tuck into a suburban life. I did not realize

all the ecological benefits of goats, nor did I know that a dairy goat, living in one's back yard, can, after being bred, produce between 3/4 of a gallon to a gallon of milk a day. Or that they would be such delightful companion animals. Don't get me started on adorable. But what I did know is this: one hundred years ago, this was common knowledge in the global north. Unlike draft horses, requiring a specialized kind of knowledge to employ their benefits, goats just slip right into a niche in human culture. It was a realization that another kind of cultural knowledge had slipped away from us, and what might keep us from reclaiming that form of knowledge could be something as simple as this: Goats get a bad rap. A simple, wonderful thing is being kept from us and *it is actually so easy*. (Write that down.)

Since the goats (the Ambassadors from the Republic of Capra, I call them) came into my life, I have also gotten bees and chickens. Each of these additional species of Mid-Life Crisis has required that I not only develop a new set of practical skills, but also that I sort through constructs of knowledge that have a decidedly late capital feel to them.

The other morning my husband and I were drinking coffee, surveying the little swath of manic farming that has taken over most of our backyard. He asked me, not at all aggressively, but in earnest, 'Are you being naïve to think you can learn to produce your own food like this?' I thought for perhaps too short a moment and responded, 'Don't you think it is naïve to assume that industrial agriculture is going to continue to feed us?' Of course, what I am trying to do may not be scalable, and in fact may belong more in the realm of the artisanal. Herein lies the crux of the DIY dilemma: How accessible is this kind of lifestyle and what does this kind of a journey contribute to the larger issue of feeding ourselves in a sustainable way? I do not know the answer to my husband's question, but I do know that at this early stage of turning my backyard into an urban farm, I am confident that this is the right thing to be doing. I have not weakened the grip that industrial agriculture has on our society, but I have eroded in my own mind the view that I am helpless to do anything about its toxic and alienating destiny.

The arrival of draft horses and goats in my life has given me a new perspective on trying to live sustainably. Some skills are hard won and dangerous to lose. Others are deceptively simple and you have to stand up and wonder out loud how and by whom we ever got convinced otherwise. For most of us, making the necessary changes to transition to post-carbon and into a more just distribution of global resources will not happen until we have that moment that makes it a moral crisis and we choose to follow our conscience, if we are lucky enough to be given that choice. But once we decide to act, we have to confront each set of new practical skills required of us by recognizing that with each piece of cultural knowledge we choose to reclaim or each new technology we set out to master, we first have to unravel intentional amnesias and twisted distortions. After we do that, hooking a draft horse up to a plow or milking a goat may seem easy by comparison.