

On Death and Duty

by Steven Smith, Marshalltown Iowa / Originally published in Spirit Journal, July 2015

Not long ago, I took a life.

I was born on a farm, grew up on a farm, live with and care for a little farm still. I have been fortunate to serve as minister to some little country churches. I've a heart for old farmers, I mean those who started their journeys when horsepower meant something with four legs. They have lived their lives embedded in nature, in tune with the rhythms of existence, fundamentally. They know the inevitability of death as a part of life, sometimes are the necessary instrument of it.

These old farmers...I have held their hands while they buried their spouses. I have held their hands while they buried their children. I have held their hands while they have died themselves. In my experience they die well, old farmers. There is an acceptance, no struggle, they are at peace with it. It does not lessen the sadness of those of us who remain, but we accept it. It is simply the way of being.

A herd of goats is a part of the little farm I care for myself these days. I provide them safety from predators, shelter from the elements, abundant graze and browse in season, fresh water, sea salt, good hay in winter, trim their hooves and care for them when they are ill, am midwife to their birthing, mother to orphans, scratch their heads when they ask it, am a climbing frame to their kids, walk with them to new pastures, sit with them while we ruminate. They teach me much. They share their milk with me in season. They know my voice. I know their names. They have all been born on this little farm, and I have known them their entire lives.

Alys was an old goat. I had assisted in her birth, and then in the birth of her own kids. We had argued over the years, and shared quiet moments together, and knew each others' voices. In many ways I knew her better than most of the people I work with. In the end, she was suffering, as old goats do, and could not be helped. I gave her a final treat of oats and sunflower seeds, scratched her head. And then I took her life. I wept as I buried her body in compost to give up its elements for the nourishment of this farm where she spent her entire life.

I have a duty. On this little farm a goat is allowed to be a goat. A cow is allowed to be a cow. A dog is allowed to be a dog. And I have a duty to each of them. I took Alys's life. I ended her suffering. I suffer in her stead. Whether this is selfless or selfish of me is open to debate. These questions always will be.

I have told my daughters that someday when it is my turn I would like to be composted and spread on the farm for other life to use. I doubt that will be allowed; the next best thing would be to wrap my carcass in burlap and bury me shallow and plant a burr oak on top. Then someday, my elements could shade the goats while they ruminate, and a child could climb bits of me, and maybe bits of what was once me will mingle with bits that were once Alys and together we'll be born into some amazing creature that will live its life here, or go where we have never been.

Lao Tzu said:

To live until you die

Is to live long enough.

Thank you for listening. Peace to you all.

