

How My Family Discovered That Chickens Have Chickenality

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We did not get the chickens because the pandemic was coming. We did not get them to survive what has often felt like the end of the world and has certainly been the end of the world as we knew it.

We only got the chickens because we'd been promising the kids pets for a long time and my husband is allergic to dogs, cats and rabbits. When my 8-year-old son developed an interest in chickens, we took the plunge and said yes.

We agreed. We'd become chicken people. We'd been researching them for months, scoping out the local feed store, figuring out where we'd install a coop.

We ordered our chicks carefully from a local farm that raises heritage breeds. They were not meant to ward off doom or make a survivalist stance in the face of public collapse, though I admit: I love raising things, and I love a fresh egg.

Still, as it happened, our four chicks arrived March 20, the Saturday after California governor Gavin Newsom announced a [shelter in place order](#). In a thick rain, a farm delivery truck pulled up in our driveway, and a masked driver passed off a box holding their tiny bodies -- a Buff Orpington, a Cuckoo Moran, an Easter Egger and a Black Jersey Giant, all fuzzy and peeping, much tinier than their breed names implied.

This was an enormous delight. It was sure to be a grim season. What could be more hopeful than a chick? They were small bits of fluff and claw. We each named one chick: Dahlia, Indigo, Charlotte and Tulip. And as the world closed down and the rains fell, we lit a heat lamp, and made a new home for small birds in a cardboard box in our garage.

Let me be clear: the world where kids have no school and very little framework but virtual learning and video games while parents work crazy weird hours to keep their jobs is not OK. I like to call the current landscape of raising kids in America "All Children Left Behind."

It's a world of desperate and stressed out parents, of children losing social, emotional and physical ground. Kids are often lonely and isolated and tweaked out and afraid. Parents have lost the village it takes to raise kids well. My fury and grief about the obstacles facing America's kids is vast.



However, from my small corner of this hard season, I report: Having chickens helped some. This is how: Every day the kids would go and sit by the box, which later became a small indoor coop, to watch something grow. They had a space to observe life with patience and wonder. My son started a chicken log -- noting each aspect of our four chicks' development. He noted that chickens had "definite chickenality," and he wasn't wrong: Indigo's a rebel, always trying to fly the coop; Tulip's a people pleaser and lives for treats; Charlotte is mellow and rolls around, cooing. Dahlia squawks loudest when the others are gone -- in another life, she was a sheepdog.

Little by little they fledged and then filled out. The kids drew chicken pictures. The kids wrote chicken poems. We felt enormously grateful that this one thing was going right.

Chickens aren't pets proper; they require a [certain distance and careful hygiene](#) -- so along with the chickens has come an outdoor sink for washing hands and a shoe rack for the shoes we wear into the coop. But we've found that ours recognize their names, and that we've come to understand their various coos and clucks.

What I hadn't counted on was how the chickens would subtly comfort me, too. On Easter, it didn't rain, and there wasn't church or brunch to go to, but after a very abbreviated remote service online, we took the chicks out in the backyard for the first time.



We sat in the sun watching them bob and weave as they moved in a flock. They were at once wobbly and deft, picking amid new grasses. They watched out for each other and called for each other if one got lost. They also had a wily, sleek prowess.

We remembered that, despite their generally mellow nature, they are the closest living [descendants of T-Rexes](#). We admired their delicately scaly legs -- Tulip's are black, Dahlia's are jade green -- and marveled at their ancient, elaborate, talons. In our small backyard, they made time seem more vast.

Here is another discovery: It is very easy to be sad in the world now, but it is hard to be sad at the exact same moment you are watching chickens. There's something about being present around them that makes one a bit more patient, and curious, ready to suspend judgment, as if they help us channel ancient animal watchfulness too.

I like that they are not mammals, whose social languages I know, but emissaries of another [older order](#). I'm also aware that having watched our chickens, I feel able to watch wild birds more closely; to hear the range and variation in their call. The chickens make me feel more connected to life.

We've been home for five months now; we're all headed into what is sure to be a hard fall. People are stretched and stressed and heartbroken and thin. People are savoring joy wherever they can.

Amid during this strange, quarantine summer (I call it the summer of staying put) we installed a pretty sturdy coop in the backyard, got bales of straw to spread in the run, and built a compost bin to spin the straw into dirt. As for the dirt: well, I'll just say, my tomato plants love it. This is not what I planned to be doing this summer, but in a moment when there's been an enormous tear in our ecosystem, these acts bring me steadiness, a sense of patience.

Let's be clear again: The world will not be mended by means of chickens. The revolution is not about chickens. There are some thorny battles ahead of us, systemic problems that keep me up at all hours of the night. But the chickens do remind me about both persistence and the sweet smell of hay.

It's August now; and I see that even in a closed world, the chickens have drawn us out more, onto the little plot of earth we call home, one place in the middle of great devastation which we can actively tend. We took our vacation money and put in a play structure. We took a bare plot of earth and put in a fig tree.



Earlier this month, to our delight, we found our first three eggs; two small brown ones from Tulip, the Black Jersey Giant and one lovely, faint blue one from Charlotte, our Easter Egger. I am savoring these small gifts. I am in awe of the ancient egg.

I am so glad that right now, I can offer it as a gift to my children and show them some beautiful love letter from life. In finding this one place to connect, we've gotten some refuge, and laughter, and some courage to carry on.

"Tess Taylor is the author of the poetry collections "Work & Days," "The Forage House" and most recently, "Rift Zone" and "Last West: Roadsongs for Dorothea Lange." Views expressed in this commentary are solely hers