

Tending is required

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—You do a lot of tending on a farm.

“Tend” in both English and other European languages is rooted in words that mean “to set on fire” or “to kindle.”

I thought about this at 3:30 a.m. one recent, 25-below morning when Nellie, our Yellow Lab, started barking downstairs.

“Hear that?” the resident alert system asked. Her hearing is more acute than that of the tawny owl, which can pinpoint in total darkness by sound alone the precise direction of a scurrying mouse in less than one-tenth of a second.

“I don’t hear anything,” I said.

“Nellie’s barking,” she said.

“That’s not barking. That’s our wind chimes shivering in the cold.”

More noise from downstairs.

“That’s barking!”

“That’s not barking,” I mumbled. “That’s venting.”

I assumed that this would end the discussion since I am narrowly considered to be the resident expert on female venting.

“Nellie has to go to the bathroom,” she said.

“Bathrooms are indoors,” I said, just to keep the architectural record straight.

“Do you want to clean it up in the morning?”

I am the designated solution for certain local situations. This consensus has been arrived at by the unanimity of one.

So I went downstairs. Nellie greeted me by rolling on her back and presenting her belly for a good rub.

I opened the kitchen door. With wind chill, it was 55 below. I shooed her outside. Why are you sentencing me to sub-Siberian temperatures? she asked.

Nellie sat on the porch next to the door, staring into the blizzard. She was motionless for one minute, two minutes, five minutes, 10 minutes. I let her back in. She ran to her cup, drew into a curl and was fast asleep in seven seconds.

I threw a couple of sticks into the woodstove so that I had something positive to report to the authorities.

I crawled back into bed.

“Is Nellie alright?”

“Of course,” I said.

“Did she go?”

“No,” I said.

“So why was she barking?”

“Well, if we eliminate venting as the most likely explanation, I have two other ideas. Here’s the first: She was testing her emergency-response system. I passed.”

“What’s the other?” she asked.

“She wanted her belly scratched.”

“Did you scold her?” she asked.

“Not orally.”

“Did you frown at her?”

“Not when she was looking.”

“Did you at least stoke the fire while you were down there?”

“Yes.”

“There you go,” she said. “Nellie knew the fire needed fuel to keep us warm. She’s such a smart dog. I don’t know why you punished her by putting her out in this weather.”

I, too, was stumped by my behavior. “I guess it’s because I’m mean.”

“Well, let’s just keep that between us,” she said.

I’ve been tending woodstove fires for almost 35 years. I’m not bragging. I mean this isn’t an item you put in your obituary, at least not in the first or second paragraph unless you need to be padded out with something upbeat.

He may have been mean to his dog, but he kept the water evaporating in the old stove kettle without having to be nagged about it too much.

I keep a fire going more or less continuously for six months every winter. Failures of diligence are measured by the number of times I have to kindle from scratch.

Tending is not just giving the fire an occasional poke in the gut.

You have to have gathered a season’s supply of firewood (or coal or pellets, either of which hold heat longer than old love letters, which are fragile things written in longhand English, a primitive language whose wrds

hve 2 mny ltrs 4 mdrn wrtrs. If we keep going in this direction, we'll be communicating eventually in the abbreviations of real-estate ads. "1BR, 1BA ISO same. All appliances incl. Call for appt.")

I've acquired essential tending tools over the years—a pair of long leather hearth gloves; a blow poker that directs a stream of hot air (yours) onto smoldering coals (inhaling is not advised); and a heavy metal poker with a right-angled, pointy barb near the end.

Some pokers, also called fire irons, incorporate an upside-down and backward, C-shaped barb, which, though classical in design, is, in my experience, not handy for repositioning firewood lengths in a stove. A poker with a bad barb might as well take up pacifism.

Farmers also tend livestock.

This involves planning, prevention, observation related to animal health and safety, medication, adapting their care to changes in conditions, chasing and cursing. I have seen cattle die from gorging on fresh clover in the spring and from stuffing themselves on fallen apples in October—both my fault for not tending.

A failure to tend conscientiously every day can keep you cold and mean on one hand and poorer than need be on the other.

Growing up in a city, I never had to tend anything except present company. I attended class in college, but tended toward distractions.

Tending is an old necessity that modern urban life has made largely unneeded. Urban tending may be reduced to watering a cactus or walking the dog. So who mourns this loss?

If we lose the habit of tending in our lives, we may short tending each other.

Individuals and institutions -- from daycare and schools to senior facilities and hospices -- now do much of our traditional family tending. On the whole, they do a respectable job—certainly better than I would do.

Time is now too dear to spend much of it tending our families and friends. This isn't a criticism as much as it is just taking notice of where we are. I was glad to have substitute tenders take my place. I know that I should try harder about staying in touch.

What, then, is the cost of stripping tending out of our lives? Do we lose the rewards of meeting small responsibilities and the connections to the quiet between the beats? Do we lose something of ourselves?

I dunno. It's something to think about the next time I can't figure out how to stuff a 30-inch-long log into a 26-inch-long firebox.

I discussed these points with Nellie as soon as I drafted them.

She rolled over on her back, presenting her belly for a scratch and a rub. (Most females I know don't do this when they're talking to me. I don't want to leave the wrong impression.)

She gave me the opportunity to tend to her needs, which I did.

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