



The Bunkhouse Chronicle

Craig Rullman
Columnist

A meditation in the barn

I decided to write the first column of the New Year down here in the barn, with the horses and the hay and the barncats.

My wife and I have managed to do a few things right, and this barn is one of them. Aside from a particular stretch of rimrocked desert in northwest Nevada — which I won't tell you about — it may be my favorite place in the world. The tack room is heated, I've got a two-burner stove with a chipped-enamel kettle where I can make tea, and I've fashioned this perfectly functional scrap-board desk that suits me fine.

The tack room is a kind of personal think-tank. I can brush aside a few wood screws, old tubes of phenylbutazone, random scraps of leather, and daydream at ease amongst the saddles and four generations of well-oiled tack. I like to sit here and listen to the horses, or lean into the window and watch the dogs run circles around the henhouse while

the wind shakes snow from the ponderosas.

It's not a terrible way to jumpstart a day.

Or a New Year. Like many others, I don't do resolutions — which are largely a way of lying to ourselves, and later forcing a series of embarrassing excuses — but I do embrace an evolving series of long-range visions, and winter is a great time to indulge a few of them.

Increasingly, my thoughts and energies are focused on building a particular kind of life underneath the noise, a way of navigating where politics end at the edge of our front porch, where we gather more often with friends to feast and play music, where next summer's garden explodes in outrageous vegetables, and where the obnoxious and heartbreakingly beautiful colt in the third stall starts as balanced and strong as his promise.

It should be — but never is — as easy as that.

The first one — shedding politics like an old skin — is the hardest one, but I'd like to get there if only because it underwrites almost everything else. I'd love to pay more attention to raising great tomatoes than which layer of government wants to tax me, tear up the Bill of Rights, or cajole me into yet another Faustian choice. I'd love to focus on flying lead-changes rather than think, even once, about how we've achieved a nation addicted to opioids and pharmaceuticals, or ponder the endless geo-political games played by people we don't know,



PHOTO BY CRAIG RULLMAN

The Figure 8 Think Tank on a winter's day.

probably wouldn't like if we did, and most certainly would never invite over for a barbecue and a beer.

I say all of that in a dreamy way. I'm not at all sure how realistic it is, given my conceits and predilections. I'm more and more certain that our government is merely a faraway monolith, working feverishly, like Las Vegas, mostly at reducing the individual to an "imbecilic dipstick," in the words of Ellen Meloy. And I'd join Meloy in saying that Vegas and the federal government share another trait, which is a kind of honest and elegant fraud.

One of the finer things about being down here, aw-shucksing and pretending I'm folksy — a reader's criticism that I absolutely love — is that for a while I can also pretend that politics don't matter much. And that creates a wonderful illusion right up until one of the mares throws back her ears

and squeals at the other one, or the cats leave a dead rabbit in the alley, or our oldest dog pees on a bucket to remind us all who is actually running this place. I can embrace those little reminders with a smile, because the flipside of folksy seems to be a constant and largely uninteresting anger.

Modern living — and maybe its always been this way — wedges us into an endless series of contradictions, a narrow channel with a lot of sandbars, and I guess what I'm striving for in my quaintest visions of the New Year is to reduce that friction, wherever and whenever possible. I'm seeking a less mediated life. I want to love the bulldozer and the trees at the same time, without looking over my shoulder for the next round of mortars lobbed in from one angry insurgency or another.

Of course, we never know where any of this is really

going. Just before the New Year I was honored to officiate a wedding for two old friends. It was a small and lovely ceremony underneath a gigantic cottonwood. We were lucky to get a break in the cloud cover and fabulous evening light. And not a day had passed before we learned that two other old friends were getting divorced.

The more I think about things, the more I begin to suspect that despite my best efforts, I don't have a single answer. Maybe I don't even want one.

So for now, in the quiet of this lovely morning, I'm just going to sit down here in the barn, listening to the horses eat, and sipping tea from an old Police Foundation coffee mug. I might even light up my pipe and fill the air with the sweetest smoke. I can sit here happily for a long time doing that. And anyway, it's cold outside and there is always plenty to do.

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