



The Bunkhouse Chronicle

Craig Rullman
Columnist

'Happy People'

The great battery of recent storms has made things interesting. Cars are off the road, pipes are freezing, heat pumps are failing, and I've got three snowy mounds down in the corrals I think contain horses. By the time you read this, we may have received another 15 inches, which will raise the stakes considerably.

Yesterday, while snowshoeing from the house to the barn, I kept thinking about Werner Herzog's brilliant documentary, "Happy People, A Year In the Taiga." The film chronicles the life of fur hunters near the remote village of Bakhta, along the Yenisei River, in the deep Siberian taiga.

They get real winters around Bakhta, and it's a tough life for the Happy People. They have some modern conveniences, but it's truly a life without much luxury. They make their own skis, smear a kind of birch-bark porridge over themselves against mosquitos in the summer, charge around the dense taiga on rickety Soviet snowmobiles, fish the river from questionable boats, and in one epic scene,

a trapper returns to his cabin after checking his lines only to find it has been crushed by the incredible snow load. It is a matter of living or dying for him to get a fire started against the brutal cold, but he just quietly whistles his way through to solving the problem.

It's at that point in the movie when we understand why it is called "Happy People." They just are. It's a mindset, a quiet embrace of their circumstances, a gut-level resilience in the face of daily weather and wilderness hardships that defines who they are. They seem to be happy because they aren't mentally at war against the realities that surround them. They aren't imagining sun-soaked beaches in the Caribbean and torturing themselves with comparisons.

We do better when we do that, too.

There is no question that all of this snow, and below-zero temperatures, have brought some hardship. Simple tasks take twice as long, getting anywhere is dangerous, and we can start to worry about things we don't normally think much about. Ice dams, for instance, or the EM function on a thermostat — which I didn't even know existed until our heat pump motor decided to unbuckle itself and fall over. Some of our neighbors have reported ominous sounds in their ceilings, and last night one of our dogs growled at snow falling from the trees.

Things can get weird fast when the weather goes wonky.

But the Happy People have far more difficult challenges than we do, and for far longer, and seem to



PHOTO MUSIC BOX FILMS

The hunters and trappers of the Siberian taiga, despite extreme conditions, are Happy People.

take everything in stride. As Laurence Gonzales wrote in his fabulous book, "Deep Survival": "The maddening thing for someone with a Western scientific turn of mind is that it's not what's in your pack that separates the quick from the dead. It's not even what's in your mind. Corny as it sounds, it's what's in your heart."

It seems to be that, at some level, the Happy People of the taiga have made a lasting peace with the notion that the challenges and inconveniences of life are natural, and healthy, and can even be fun. Hunting cabin in the middle of nowhere collapsed? No problem, I'll just build a little fire and whistle a little tune. It's hard not to love a mindset — a richly lived nonchalance — like that.

I'm not proposing that shoveling snow off the roof, thawing out pipes, watching three hours of plowing

magically disappear, or thinking about the flood I'm certain we will fight off in the barn this spring is fun. But there is certainly a way to bring myself around to enjoying the challenges, to shrug a little bit more in the face of consequences and occasional setbacks that I may not like.

And there is, in fact, a tremendous upside to these storms. One of the reasons I've embraced this episode of incredible weather is that it has convinced me, after several years of

procrastinating, that I need a tractor. More importantly, it has also convinced my lovely bride. I've been toying with the tractor notion for some time, throwing the idea up in the air to see if it landed in the need, or the want, box. But perpetual plowing and shoveling has made the decision for me. And so the great snow of 2017 has come like a gift from the heavens, because it convinced me that I both need, and want, a tractor.

And that makes me very happy, indeed.

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