



The Bunkhouse Chronicle

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Columnist

Listening to the Bees

In the voluminous lore and literature of beekeeping there is a tradition known as “Telling the Bees.” The basic premise is that bees appreciate a good conversation, don’t welcome surprises, and failure to properly communicate with the hive can end badly for all involved. There is even a religious aspect to the notion, as cultures across the planet have adopted the notion of bees as messengers between the supernatural and our lowly, pedestrian selves.

Last year, I began beekeeping. I went to school to learn something about bees, bee breeds, bee diseases, bee doctoring, the life of the hive, and the various do’s and don’ts of building and

maintaining a healthy colony of bees. This was partly a gigantic virtue signal, a response to the appalling condition of our world’s bees, but also a vigorous and sincere attempt to learn something new and to develop additional intimacy with the details of our life.

In the beginning I worked with our bees wearing a suit, one of those gangly, half butterfly-catcher, half-astronaut beekeeping costumes. As a rank amateur I felt the suit was a wise precaution, because I have also made it a life’s work to remain off the considerable rolls of life’s cautionary tales.

But the suit is its own problem. It’s hot, for one thing, like wearing a buffalo robe in a steambath, and similarly awkward. And what I learned, as I started working around the hive, was that the bees responded directly to my own behavior. I found myself talking to the bees in a kind of beatnik stream-of-consciousness routine. Pulling out a frame to inspect the condition of the queen, or of the brood, I would talk to them the same way I talk to a froggy colt, or a dog gone nervous in a thunderstorm.

Later, I would take my chair outside and sit next to the frame, watching the bees

fly in with their hind legs covered in magnificent blue and red pollens, and talk to them about their day. If the bees joined our conversation it was in the energy they returned, and if there is something to Telling the Bees I think that is exactly the reward: an energy pay-back that soothes the body and mind.

When I realized this I stopped wearing the suit. And I’ve yet to be stung, even when pulling up the frames for inspection, or dropping a patty of Api-Guard inside to help in the on-going war against varroa mites.

But there is another story that is probably more important than telling bees how we feel, or in one ancient tradition, draping the hive in black cloth to inform them of a death in the family. In this other story, I think, it is far more important that we shut our mouths and start listening to what the bees are telling us.

Only about 50 percent of bees survive the winter. That’s true regardless of the climate or the skill and experience of the beekeepers. The reasons vary: poisoned by neonicotinoids that are sprayed on commercial flowers, infestation by varroa mites, or any number of diseases

endemic in bee populations.

Another huge problem is the seemingly bottomless behavior of human beings, as in a recent case in Texas, where half-a-million bees were destroyed by somebody who dumped the hives and then burned them. Or another from last month down in Redding, when somebody in a truck ran up and down both sides of a road and smashed 85 beehives, apparently for a laugh.

This sort of thing probably shouldn’t surprise anyone. And Wendell Berry probably said it best: “Praise ignorance, for what man has not encountered he has not destroyed.” Best guesses indicate that at the present rate, even without the jackassery of human beings intentionally destroying beehives, managed honeybees are likely to disappear by 2035. That’s in keeping with what scientists are calling the “6th Mass Extinction Event.”

Today, in order for bees to do their indispensable part in the California almond harvest, it takes nearly every available bee in the United States. America’s beekeepers are doing their best to keep bees alive for that reason, and others, but even the honey market has been hijacked by unethical

Chinese businessmen who dilute their honey with syrups and then dump their products on unsuspecting American consumers.

There are allegedly laws to prevent this, but enforcement is poor, and a country that can’t stop 100,000 human beings from crossing its border every month probably can’t do much about jars of bogus honey either.

So the problems mount up, and ignorance and widespread pesticide use and colony collapse disorder march on unabated.

Our bees didn’t make it through the winter. Way back in February we had a day warm enough that I could open the hive and check on them. They were alive then. A few weeks later, when it was warm enough to check again, they were dead. All of them. There was a deep mound of dead bees near the entrance, where the last survivors had hauled the dead and dying out of the hive in a fight to keep it clean for the queen inside.

But here on the Figure 8 we don’t give up so easy. This year I’m doubling down, and we will bring two new colonies on board in the next week. And I look forward to another summer of telling, but mostly listening to, the bees.



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