

# A New Year



*Each morning before we wrestle the world  
and our hearts into the shape of our brains,  
look around and say, "Wow!"*

*Feed yourself fire.  
Scoop up the day entire  
like a planet-sized bouquet of marvel  
sent by the Universe directly into your arms  
and say, "Wow!"*

*Break yourself down  
into the basic components of primitive awe  
and let the crescendo of each moment  
carbonate every capillary  
and say, "Wow!"*

*Extract from the poem Say Wow,  
by Chelan Harkin*

To look at the world with wonder. If one were to make some kind of New Year's resolution, a wish or an inner longing - perhaps this would be it. We often look for the extraordinary. As if it was something extra valuable. As opposed to the everyday and ordinary.

Taking care of the everyday chores of the animals and plants - sweeping the floor, upholding space - is not a background task. It's not something you do while waiting for the big, life-changing events to take place. The question of how empathic communication works, how to do it, and how these encounters occur - is a recurring one. There is no simple answer, but perhaps it all comes down to dedication. The same kind of dedication that makes you get up every morning at dawn and face the world. And step into time. Again.



The horses are already waiting at the gate; those who have announced their need for supplementary feed. The others are moving calmly around the pasture, looking for grass underneath the snow, or standing by one of the bales of hay silage.

At the same time you can hear the roosters, hens and ducks down in the barn. They are waiting for the door to open, with some impatience. At the same time the cats in the bungalow are waiting for their breakfast, and the wild birds remind us that the feeders need to be refilled. The sheep nap on the horses' feed, while the water needs refilling too. And the guinea pigs sit in their big pile of straw and wait (singing) for more vegetables.

Not much time left for marveling in this great sea of activities. *To be of service.* Yet it's precisely here, in the midst of the hustle and bustle, that the true glimpses are found. The little comments, the insights; real empathic meeting points. Right in the middle. Not at specific, chosen moments, but all the time - in the centre of everyday life. If you can thin out time, precisely in this state of active availability, then maybe you can reach outside yourself.

This path goes inwards, lined with paradoxes. By giving one's whole self to the maintenance of the living space, an opening is created. As if out of oblivion, as if one's ever-repeated identity loses itself for a brief moment. I forget myself and let the world in.

Identity can only be released if there is something else, deeper and invisible/endless, that can define one's self. Because even though you have to forget yourself in order to take in the world, you need a receiver; bigger than anything else. Someone who does not judge and who can receive another individual without any limiting opinions, or preconceptions.

This is why the forgetfulness is so important. It makes room for unconditional love.



I pour out a whole box of fresh vegetables next to the guinea pigs' huge winter straw pile. They refuse to move into the barn, even though they have an open passage into it. So the straw pile must be gigantic. A small flock of eight guinea pigs lives here. Since they became more numerous, they have changed their behavior; they sing more and in different keys. Some sounds are completely new. I realize that I've never seen guinea pigs in a herd before, and am ashamed about the fact that I didn't even know they were herd animals.

It's always fascinating to watch as vegetable after vegetable is being pulled into the straw pile, as if by an invisible force. Little furry paws and heads with squinty eyes pop up here and there. On this particular morning they have a lot to say. The night has been cold, which doesn't bother them at all. They just crawl into the lower aisles and sit close together. But they haven't done that tonight. Because of the moonlight, they have chosen to stay on the upper side.



The moon is almost full and the light reflects off the snow. It's as if that light energizes them, somehow. A kind of subtle joy spreads through the small group. A joy that is reinforced by the shared experience. Everyone experiences it in different ways, but every individual's experiences are also inside each and everyone of them. It becomes like a multifaceted painting, or an orchestra of sensory experiences.

Of course you don't want to seek shelter and hide from the world. You want to be in the centre of the action. So there they are, late at night, sitting on the straw pile and looking out towards the lower field. There is often a very special haze down there, which cannot be fully explained. Like curtains of mist, veils of time. The guinea pigs describe a floating feeling. It's like traveling on an open sea. The most prominent emotion in this image is *trust*.

There is no need to understand any of this. There is a tenderness in the reception of all these experiences. Gratitude would be superfluous, as the condition itself is incomparable. Gratitude is more like a discovery. This is something truly permanent.

There is no sense of time during this conversation. The room has also changed. It doesn't matter how much is going on around us. This is a different kind of *now*.



*Foto Carina Albertsson*

As they sit there, in the middle of the night, they also experience a sense of belonging. And that is where the joy seems to come from. Not just the individual's experience of happiness, but a greater, more intoxicating feeling that comes from a shared context.

I suspect that this is a normal state for them, although the experience seems to be enhanced by the special light of the night. There is also a perfect equality here; the individual and the larger community are *not* in opposition. There is an equilibrium. Like a precise balance between two scales.

They ask me if I understand what they mean, and I don't really know how to respond. They experience a greater simultaneity. For me as a human being, it's as if everything else - except what I am focusing on in the moment - is switched off. My mind becomes like a rolling ball. My presence is always a tiny bit behind. I never catch up, except for brief moments.

There is something about the willpower as well. As if there are two different kinds of will, which at first glance look exactly the same. The personal, detached drive. Which, in a slightly confused way, constantly changes direction depending on the circumstances. The isolated will is without context and is mainly about conditioning. But then there is another, greater will, which is more like a longing. The guinea pigs experience this pull more as an opening. There is also a curiosity here. Because this yearning takes you to a completely unknown destination.

All of this takes place in a snapshot, which is outwardly almost completely still. If my only focus had been to give the guinea pigs what they need to survive, this whole story would have remained hidden. But if my task had *not* been to give the guinea pigs what they need to survive, I would not have been available for their stories.

They look rather quirky, sitting in a sea of kale and carrots. The memories of the past night are still there, like traces of frost in their fur. The satisfaction of breakfast is total and unrivaled. They have no need whatsoever to know what will happen next. The certainty of the greater picture, which includes this single event, replaces all need for planning ahead. Their presence is so much greater than mine. But every time I visit them, they share small glimpses. Actually, it may be that they are throwing glimpses around all the time. And on a few isolated occasions they hit my consciousness.



I leave the guinea pigs to move the hose, which fills the tubs with water for the horses, sheep and goats. On the way, I let out Lurva, a cat with a traumatic past. She eats her breakfast in a private room, and now she has finished eating.

Her little body quickly slips out the door, and then she jumps into one of the armchairs in the barracks. She expresses a certain sense of pride. Against all odds, she has managed to build a life, despite everything that has happened. She is not quite like the other cats, she follows her own path and her adaptability is limited. But she has still managed to create a functioning everyday life, which was far from obvious when she first arrived.

She still has flashbacks. She can hear the screams of her siblings. And the stress in the barn where it all happened, has been preserved in her memory as an odor - which may never be completely washed away.

There is an undiminished pain in the memory of how her mother and siblings died, while she herself was stuck behind the inner and outer walls of the barn. When she realized what was about to happen, she climbed as high as she could and then fell down into the gap - during an unguarded moment. She was safe, but also totally trapped. No one knows for how long she was wedged there. But what is known is that a young couple walking their dog heard her yelping behind the wall. They tore down the boards and pulled out this tiny kitten, which according to the vet was no more than three or four weeks old.

Lurva realizes that these memories will never fully leave her system. She shares her life with pieces of time that will forever mark her.

These traces of time follow an irregular rhythm. And beyond the pain of the memories, it's a great stress to never know when these disconnected pieces of time will cut through the present and take over her entire being. You never really get used to it.

Therapies and counseling helped reducing the time in between. But Lurva found that it was also about finding a deeper sense of acceptance. She cannot undo this. It happened. And somewhere in that acceptance grows the seed of inner dignity. Instead of feeling guilty about being the only survivor - as she did for many years - a new sense of pride gradually emerges. Her story is unique, and maybe she can actually carry it, in her own way.





She has started to make her own tracks in time; this reduces the feeling of powerlessness. She moves in certain circles and patterns, especially before eating. Or if, for some other reason, she gets excited. She creates a kind of regularity in a world that has been overwhelming from the very start. She realizes that it cannot heal the core of her trauma. But it gives her a sense of relief. She doesn't have to be completely healed in order to go on living. That might be asking too much of herself.

It's enough for her to let go of all that *is not*. All the frozen pieces. Then the pain is relieved somewhat. And she realizes that she really wants to live. She doesn't understand why, it's not logical at all. But it's a stronger force than anything else. And life won't stop until it finds a way. She moves between food and water bowls, different beds, and occasionally she goes for short walks outside. Not a very spectacular existence, perhaps. She is one of many unwanted cats, looking for a decent life. But she is also so much more than that!



The water has of course overflowed into the tub and my mittens get soaked when I try to remove the blocks of ice. The jacket gets tangled in the fence, as usual. And while all this is happening Hugo, one of the horses, is watching everything with a certain calmness and sense of humor. People are, in his eyes, rather messy creatures. He doesn't say this in any condemning way at all. It's more like an observation. Normally, I would have mucked out the outdoor stables while the next big water bowl is being filled, but today I choose to stay with Hugo for a while.

Hugo has been the peacemaker of the herd for as long as I can remember. It's a strange thing about that he once should have been put down because of behavioral issues. But that was a long time ago, and not something that often occupies his mind. Hugo is a horse that, in the eyes of the world, cannot be used for anything. A previous back injury means he can't be ridden, and because he's a gelding, he can't be bred either.

After the conversation with Lurva, it becomes even more clear: the importance of recognizing the invaluableity of every living being. Not only the ones we know and call by name, but all the others as well. The ones we tend to take for granted. The trees and shrubs all around, which are currently in hibernation. Do we see them as props, as a painting in the background, or do we endeavor to really meet them? Hugo widens my gaze, and for a moment I see the world through his eyes. First a replay of me falling through the fence, in order to move the hose - trying to catch my breath.

It's as if I have compressed time and made it small. The amount of events never quite fits into the narrow timeline that I have chosen to use. In Hugo's eyes it looks almost comical. To me it's an actual reality. But it doesn't have to be this way. It's as if I'm tripping over my own eagerness in a valiant attempt to cram as many experiences as possible into one day. Time can be expanded, Hugo explains. *You can relate to this world in a completely different way.*



He conveys an image of himself as a foal. The world has not yet had time to bind him, his thoughts have not created any immediate associations and conclusions. He is free, unfinished, and so is the world around him. That very moment, when he discovered the world for the very first time - through those very eyes - has been kept inside of him.

In Hugo's world, time consists of loopholes, like untouched pockets. In Lurva's case, a mirrored opposite. Flakes of time, frozen and stuck, due to severe shock and trauma. In Hugo's case; openings, like shortcuts between one time and another. Although he too was scarred by life's experiences, he was able to access these moments of unspoilt innocence.

It was with that gaze that he looked at the trees and shrubs in the pasture. It was with that intangible love of the world that he watched the horses in the herd around him.





In Hugo's experience of time, there were always the possibility of choices. When his life was at its most difficult, he had struggled to hold on to these realizations. Time was not there to entrap him. It was something he had recognized. Time was just a collection of events, without meaning or purpose. The rest was up to him.

I count the rest of the horses and look for Alora, who is currently healing a hoof abscess. She conveys an image of herself running fast through the field. It's as if she is floating and there is a feeling of being completely invincible. Therefore, she is also totally unprepared when she suddenly stumbles and steps wrong. It's not a difficult fall really, she lands softly on her side and immediately gets up again.

But for some reason it's as if the fall itself pushes out a wave of memories. As if they were previously held back by a thin shell, and it took almost nothing for that protective shell to crack and break open. When she first moved here, there were so many different things she wanted to try and experience. Everything was new and exciting, and she had so much to catch up on. So many unfulfilled dreams. There was hardly any time left for processing memories, which she preferred never to return to.

Over time, that thin shell had become more transparent than she had realized. It's impossible to release memories that have not been made conscious. And to be free, she now needed to return to some of the places she had left behind.

It wasn't the places though, but rather the inner states of mind she had been in at certain points in time. Unexplored glimpses of moments, left unfinished. There was also a sense of having lived on the edge of her boundaries, for much of her life.

The memories came rushing out, as if all the dams were released at once. Many of the images were blurred, perhaps because they passed by so quickly. But the feeling of constantly dancing on the edge of an abyss persisted. You must cope with life as a riding school horse, or a competition horse, but always without a manual. If you are not up to the task, you risk being euthanized. But it's unclear what is truly expected.

You can't relax because the task will never be completed. You don't fight any concrete predators in order to survive. It's more like groping in an abstract darkness. You have to cope with something, which is in no way clearly defined. This creates a constant, latent, underlying stress. And now, when this unspoken danger no longer existed, all the defenses she had built up to keep the fear at bay, crumbled and fell off.

All the memories associated with that feeling were now set in motion. The pain in her hoof, as the last pockets of pus emptied and healed, reminded her of the difficulty of letting go of that very last thing; the habit and identity associated with these stories. How do you actually do it, when you let go? How do you take that final step towards total surrender? Straight into the emptiness that is the only thing can create something completely new.



I sincerely hope that 2024 will be a year of listening. Because the stories never, ever end. No two mornings are the same. As I fill up on bread and oats for the chickens, one of the young roosters is walking by. He is keeping watch over the chickens, outside of the barn. And he has just become old enough to fulfil this task. It's a bit nervous, a lot can go wrong. But the desire to fulfil his place and role in life outweighs the uncertainty. We may never feel able to fulfil the tasks that lie ahead of us. But a deep, inner yearning and curiosity make us push the boundaries.





Empathic communication is about longing and dedication. And a genuine curiosity. These encounters can never occur while looking for gain; to get something in return. There are no payback systems, and it's not based on any techniques.

But perhaps we have within us - as Hugo describes - memories of a pristine, perfect context. If we meet there, perhaps we can experience each other's reality without a filter of interpretations, quick conclusions and opinions. Like wordless glimpses of another world.





Thank you for this year. Thank you for your invaluable help. Thank you for all the traces in time and all the meetings. With the hope that 2024 will bring us a little closer to an empathetic coexistence...



**Happy New Year!**

