

Driving Flies

When Laura and I and our two daughters, Juniper and Amanda, lived in Whitney Valley and took care of the Rouse Brothers' cattle and hay ranch, the crew at the owner's home ranch brought the "hospital bunch," steers who had been sick and who the crew wanted to get rid of as soon as possible, up to Whitney early in the spring and put them in the pasture closest to the house until they ate the grass too short for further feed. When the steers lived in the pasture closest to our house, flies flew thickest in our house. Flies and cattle flock together, but some flies always lived with us in summer in Whitney Valley, wherever the cattle were.

Though I tried to keep doors and windows adequately screened, the nature of our family, based more in love and adventure than in any concept of strict rules, meant that doors were sometimes ajar and the wrong windows, those without screens, were sometimes open.

The old shack of a house, that we loved more than any mansion because it sheltered us well and allowed us many freedoms, including painting the doors any color we wished, leaked flies between boards in any case. Flies laid eggs in exposed insulation in the attic, so our best efforts only slowed down the fly-population explosion indoors.

We wouldn't poison our environment with insecticides, especially because our daughters then were young and idealistic (and now are much older and still idealistic), and we had no desire to crush that idealism with adult practicality. Though Laura and I had thought for many years that people may, without troubled consciences, kill pests, Juniper and Amanda

started our education over again with the innocent observation that the commandment says, "Though shalt not kill." It does not add qualifications, like "except for flies and other bothersome insects."

Within certain reasonable guidelines, which we all worked together to establish, we were and still are willing to be educated by our children. What are children for, we reasoned, but to improve the world and all the people inhabiting it, and what better way is there to improve the world than by bringing new, more humane solutions to old problems? Killing flies by methods other than sprays, for example with swatters or rolled newspapers, was also proscribed, so when the flies became a nuisance because of their density in the house, we organized a fly drive, which demanded that all four of us work together.

The house is L-shaped, with the front door at the end of the L's shorter leg and the rear door at the end of the longer leg. Simultaneously, we two adults started from the confluence of the L and diverged toward the doors, each working with one of our largest, heaviest towels, large to cover the maximum area possible, heavy, because heavy towels shoosh through the air more effectively than light towels. With spread arms, grasping the towels, we waved them forcefully and drove air and flying insects ahead of us.

One daughter stood at the door from the back room and shut it after we drove the flies from that area, and one stood at the front door and shut that when most of the flies had flown out of the house.

Perhaps the swallows, who lived in nests they built of mud under our eaves, came to recognize the shout, "Okay everybody, flies are too thick in here. Let's have a fly drive." As the flies buzzed through the front door, some of them made an easy harvest for swallows that provided an alternative to poisons for insect control and gave part of the answer to the

question, "Why did God make flies and other annoying insects?"

Sometimes, enough flies leaked back past our active towels that we had to have a second or even a third drive. That was all right with all of us. Each drive took only a few minutes, gave us the opportunity to work together to solve a problem, and showed us there often are simple, environmentally-sound solutions to problems we usually try to solve in complex, environmentally-unsound ways.

And afterward, the inside of the house was ours again, except for frogs under the house in the cool habitat where the pipe coming up from the well to our pitcher pump by the sink dripped, and except for spiders, who feasted on some of the flies that strayed and stayed behind the drives, and except for an occasional bat, cats, dogs, and sometimes a raccoon or two who snuck onto the back porch for a snack of cat food, and we were glad to share the house with all of them.