

“What would you do?”

This week’s journal prompt is the above question...

I have lived at 804 Eaton Hill East for nearly 25 years. I was in my late 20’s when I bought it; a idealistic single young woman with a dream. This property is 30 acres that had been sold off many years ago, that was originally part of the farm below me. I have learned that old time Vermonters have a hard time letting go of property, even after it has been sold, and they seem to resent any subsequent owner, particularly if the portion of property was sold off by a relative prior to them inheriting the main property.

When I moved in, early in 1994, it was well known that the former owner of my property and the farm owner below were not friendly. In fact they openly disliked each other. I have never lived anywhere where there were neighbor issues, that has never been a part of my life, so I was completely unprepared to inherit the dislike that my neighbor had for anyone new moving onto the property that I had legitimately purchased. Immediately however, I experienced it in the form of police being called frequently (the complaint was my clients speeding on the road). Then my neighbor accused me of being on his land because of the location of my driveway (which was built in the 1960s). He threatened to put a boulder in my driveway to prevent me from coming in and out, and to stop any business traffic. He was a large man, physically and verbally, very angry and menacing, and promised to put me out of business.

He assured me that he would make my property unusable to me, by “taking back” his land, on which my driveway was supposedly built. One day in the spring, there were surveyors everywhere. They surveyed the entire border between my farm and the farm below. I was intimidated and fearful after my neighbors threats. I had just bought this dream home, all by myself, and had no one to support me or to confide in. I felt completely in jeopardy of losing everything. When the surveyors finished the job, I never heard another word about the driveway being owned by my neighbor. Although I was vindicated, I felt the dislike from my neighbor even more intensely.

In the summer of ’94, I was pregnant with Stephanie, very uncomfortable and sick in the summer heat, teaching a lesson in the lower arena, truly suffering, when another neighbor I had never met came to my farm,

interrupted my lesson to angrily accuse me of having horses on his property, as he had found hoof prints around some of his apple trees. This was the owner of a 3 acre piece of property that adjoins the east side of my property, that I have since purchased. This neighbor never used the property, but had been alerted by the adjoining neighbor (a third one, that owns the entire east side and north side of property adjoining mine, and a close friend of the farmer below) that my horses had been coming on to his land. I did not believe it, since there was a 3 strand barbed wire fence separating the properties, that was decades old. However, when I went to inspect, the fence had been cut. The property marker pins were no more than inches from the old fence, but the fence indeed was on the neighboring property, and he had removed a portion of it, and my horses had obviously been taking some trips to the adjoining property's apple orchard. They had done no damage, but they had left hoof prints as evidence. Neither of these neighbors kept animals, nor had they ever tended to this fence before. Neither of them had ever met me, so their open hostility was not expected.

It's odd to live on a small, dead end road and not have your neighbors wave to you. That was the case for many years. It's uncomfortable. To have cars drive by you too fast when you are horseback riding. To have tractors or 4 wheelers rev their engines just as you ride by. To have vehicles not slow down past a trailride line of children and horses. To feel like your neighbors resent you for living on land sold two generations ago.

The old man passed away recently, and his son is the sole owner these days. He is a gentle person, who maybe isn't really interested in being friends, but he will give a half-hearted wave, and he is not in the least bit unfriendly, and truly cares about the land, and the trees which he sugars.

During the past 7 years since I met Billy, there has been a slowly blooming relationship with the neighbors below us. We have allowed them to tap our maples and they have also taken a great deal of our manure pile for fertilizer. We have worked together during hunting season to keep the area safe, and to allow each other to harvest deer humanely. It has been such a positive change to feel like I can talk to my neighbors! I love it here, and I am so grateful to own this property— I love it as much as they love theirs. My dream is to someday be able to ride through a narrow strip of property that they own, to reach Eaton Hill West, a stone's throw away from my western border but inaccessible without crossing their land. My children,

students and boarders would love to have access to many more miles of dirt road.

A couple of years ago there was a terrible tragedy at the farm below (a long story) and my neighbor is in prison awaiting the outcome. During the interim time one of the now adult daughters who has a house on the lower farm property acquired 2 horses. I don't know where they came from, but I have never seen them used, they just live there in a pasture. Every winter these horses get skinny, and every summer they gain their weight back. This winter the bay horse has become alarmingly skinny. Hard to look at skinny. Every time I ride past, they come to the fence and nicker, with bright eyes, nice and alert, but way too thin.

I have many lesson students and boarders, and have fielded many questions from them about the horses at the farm below. I have not been able to answer, because I don't know. Why do they keep them? Why are they so skinny? Are they being fed? Have they been dewormed? Have they had shots? Have they had their feet tended to? Are they starving? Who's are they?

This past Monday I rode down the road, they came to the fence and nickered. I have not seen anything in their yard for them to eat for some time. The bay is absolutely skin and bones, she looks terrible. That night I felt like maybe I should go down after dark and throw them some hay over the fence silently without being seen (I'm not sure how I would do that without being seen). But I didn't. This is the first time I have really felt like maybe I myself need to do something. But I don't want to offend my neighbors, or start something that I might not be able to maintain.

Tuesday I took a break between classes, and looked on my Facebook to see that one of my clients had posted a photo of the horses with the question of how this could happen to an animal in this state. I was initially relieved to see that someone had finally spoken out about this, then as I read the comments I felt like somehow I was being blamed for not doing anything myself despite the fact that I live next door and have horses too... I vented to my adult students that night and then it was our family discussion over dinner. Both of my daughters were upset about it, and we all wanted to say something on Facebook about the unusual position that we are in...without offending anyone, particularly the neighbors.

Stephanie posted something, I think she felt a bit defensive about it as I did. I re-read the posts, and felt much less defensive. Betsy then posted the most thought provoking, eloquent response ever! How there are many factors involved, and that we don't know the whole story. We don't know how old these horses are. That she sees them eating hay when she goes to school at 7:30am. That our horses finish their hay within an hour of feeding time. That we ourselves had dear Ariel, our beloved starter lesson horse for years, who aged dramatically this past year and melted away to nearly a skeleton despite the intense feeding program we had for her. Ariel declined all last fall, yet was perky and happy and animated. We kept her going until she told us she was finished, which very clearly happened on 12/20/16. Anyone who didn't know the story, that saw Ariel during the last weeks of her life, probably would have wanted to call the ASPCA too. Unfortunately, within just a couple of hours of Betsy's post, the entire post was deleted, before I had a chance to respond.

So...what would you do?

Alienate the neighbors by making a complaint?

Encourage the clients to make a complaint?

Sneak down and feed the horses at night? (At a cost of \$70/week hay)

Do nothing and hope the horses survive until green grass grows?

Offer to take the horses? (Rehab of hooves, vet care and feed to build them up again is tremendous. Not knowing if they would ever be usable for anything)

Keep in mind that horses are my income. I must keep them as a business. They have to bring in money. At the current time I am full, I have no empty stalls. My feed bill is astronomical, \$200/week in grain and \$600/week in hay. Farrier and vet bills. Farm maintenance; sawdust, utilities, etc. Winters are difficult for any farmer, horse farmers particularly as our income is directly related to the temperature. I don't teach regularly in the winter, and lessons are my main income.

I caretake for over 30 horses, 5 humans, and countless small animals. Their safety and well-being is my first concern. Today, I found my mailbox knocked down...of course I feel like someone below thinks I made the complaint that brought the authority to inspect the horses. I worry about my family, and my animals, and I don't want them in jeopardy. Paranoid? Maybe, but I've seen harm done to things when people think that wrong

has been done to them. I don't know all the people below me, and the one I know best is not there now. I don't believe he would have allowed this to happen, but he is not there and he has a large family living there, as well as some non relatives. Some of them seem not to be responsible, but they are his family and I feel loyalty to him. I feel very uncomfortable with this situation.

There is so much more that I'm thinking that I can't possibly write. What I know about some of the people that live below me. What I've been told about the horses, some of it contradictory. What has happened to me in the past by someone who thought I had done them wrong. Why I have been the sole proprietor for nearly 1/4 of a century now, and am so afraid of losing what I have. What happened to my neighbor. What his kids have done without him there to guide them. What the former owner of my property did to make my neighbor dislike them. What the neighbor did in retribution. I don't like strife, I hate any kind of conflict, and I've done nothing about the horses below. I have saved numerous horses, I love to do that, but I'm at maximum capacity now. And I know and don't know so much that factor into this...

So my journal prompt for this week is "what would you do?"