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Finding movement in the new year.

Unencumbered

Our neighbor's worried about his chickens in this cold. The space heater has broken down, and instead of happily scratching and pecking they way they usually do, the hens just stand there in a huddle, hunched over and still. In the barn across town, a horse stands in a stall, two heavy blankets on his back. Straps keep the blankets in place. Six straps in all. They connect to hooks on either side of him. Two straps between the front legs, two between the back legs and two across the girth—he can't move much.

These are scary times in the barn, because water in the trough freezes quickly. A horse needs to drink a lot and will eat less if not drinking enough. This can become a downward spiral—if a horse eats less, it may not have enough energy to withstand the cold—to survive it. Horses also need to keep moving, hard this winter. The people working at the barn are thickly layered up—you can hardly tell who's who. They move slowly and stiffly. Everyone does.

Where I live, the estuaries have frozen over. You can only see moving water when the rising tide breaks through the ice floes. Even the local biology teacher's weekly newspaper column yesterday was about ice.

Eleven days now of extreme cold has become a burden. An unwanted party to our days. The cold slows us down. Prevents us from moving, from normal living. Oh, to be free of it! To be unencumbered....

Emerson wrote about being "encumbered": "Tomorrow is a new day; you should begin it serenely and with too high a spirit to be *encumbered* with your old nonsense." *Encumbered* comes from the Old French *encombrer*, meaning "blocked up," as in a river dam. Today, the French *encombrer* means "cluttered." The meaning of the Middle English root, *in-cumber*, is "to cause trouble or entangle." According to Google, the modern word *encumbered* means "being restricted or burdened in such a way that free action or movement is difficult."

Begin the day, says Emerson, unencumbered with your old nonsense. Unburdened. Able to take action. What if we began *the new year* like that?

"Do you feel encumbered?" I ask a friend.

"When do I *not* feel encumbered?" comes the reply.

Our bodies encumber us when illness slows us down or when our joints ache or that cough takes up residence again for the winter. Our feelings encumber us when we get wound up with worry or a relationship isn't going well. Our opinions encumber us: our old nonsense might be our stubborn need to be right. Or our guilt at not visiting that homebound friend or not following through as well as we'd hoped. Being hard on ourselves is old nonsense that encumbers us. It can prevent us from moving forward.

A year's gone by. We've just remembered dear departed friends, and we've welcomed new babies, too. For everyone, there've been joyful and difficult times this past year—times we were wrong or in-artful or unsure, times harsh words were spoken, times we needed help. We may be sorry for mistakes we've made, and we're grateful, too, for moments that have helped us learn and grow.

As January's cold slows daily living to a crawl, where in the new year will we find movement? That's where hope is. We can't change the weather, but we can do something about ourselves.

Imagine starting the new year moving freely, unencumbered. Instead of leading with our old nonsense, what if we choose to hold it lightly? If we feel stuck, hunched over in a huddle, what if we choose instead to move—just a step—toward one another? Clear the air. Mend a fence. Dare to let go of our position and open to each other. Instead of holding onto our stance or behavior, what if we chose to start again? A family therapist on the radio suggests that a couple declare their troubled marriage over. She advises them to start anew together, with a clean slate, and begin what she calls a new marriage with new understandings. Unencumbered.

The world around us can help. In the cold yesterday morning, sunlight lit up a red teacup on the table across the room. Unaccountably, that gave me untold pleasure. Even now, I feel a quickening arise when I picture it sparkling in the morning light. The late Wayne Dyer, motivational speaker, wrote about the remarkable effect on our well-being when we consciously shift in the middle of a weakening thought to *a thought that strengthens*. Calling to mind something that quickens the spirit—sunlight on a teacup on a frigid day!—is always a choice open to us. Poet Wendell Berry writes of such a strengthening thought. A man encumbered by illness and stuck indoors disobeys the doctor's orders and goes out to the barn:

Though he was ill and in pain,
 the old man got up from his bed,
 dressed, and went to the barn.
 The bare branches of winter had emerged...
 the loveliest of all, browns and yellows
 delicate and nameless in the gray light
 and the sifting rain. He put feed
 in the troughs for eighteen ewe lambs,
 sent the dog for them, and she
 brought them. They came eager
 to their feed, and he who felt
 their hunger was by their feeding
 eased. From no place in the time
 of present places, within no boundary
 nameable in human thought,
 they had gathered once again
 the shepherd, his sheep, and his dog
 with all the known and the unknown
 round about to the heavens' limit.
 Was this his stubbornness?? or bravado?
 No. Only an ordinary act
 of profoundest intimacy in a day

that might have been better. Still,¹
 the world persisted in its beauty,¹
 he in his gratitude, and for this¹
 he had most earnestly prayed.¹

In the poet's cold barn with eighteen ewe lambs, the old man "who felt/their hunger was by their feeding/eased." The neighbor with the chickens huddling in the cold thinks of them while at work—he looks forward to their quirky ways and coos when he checks in on them tonight. Horse and human—an ancient pair—are enlivened by an afternoon together, time well spent even if the cold only allows for a gentle walk around the barn.

May we also be fed by choosing to make contact, to tend to one another, to cherish "the beauty of the world." And like the incoming tide that breaks through the ice and flows free, may we find movement in this new year. May we let go of our old nonsense and, with a clean slate, move forward into the life we want to live.

Happy New Year!

¹ Wendell Berry, "XI," *Leavings*. Centerpoint, 2010.