

Swine Misconception

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by Kelli M. Shanley

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My husband and I, newlyweds in the 1970s, searching for a place of our own to stable our horses and not finding one that felt right, purchased that homestead from my parents. Consequently, living on the same land for 50-plus years, I've seen all kinds of animals, domestic and wild, tread the pasture paths of the property.

During my parents "farming" days, the pigs were my mother's least favorite—and rightly so in my mind. From the time I was little, I remember her telling horror stories of when she'd go to the barn and the boar would get out of his pen every chance he could and chase her to the house. I recall one time when I was about five years old watching her run from the barn yelling, "George you get rid of that pig—George you better do something about that pig!" slamming the screen door behind her with a grunting, round monster at her heels.

Therefore, as a child and growing into an adult, never in my hog-wild dreams did I visualize pig tenants in my equine hotel ... until one day a neighbor's barn walls collapsed from the snow load, killing three breeder pigs and leaving 17 homeless with no place to slurp their slop or lay their fleshy rumps. Me having a soft heart for an animal in despair and a neighbor in need of a hand, said, "I'll take the three, young, 'small,' 150-pound ones and keep them in my barn until you rebuild yours."

What I didn't expect, with my ingrained impressions that pigs are mean, dirty, have no personality, are stupid and disgusting, was the fondness I developed for these pork rounds. I was astonished to find they like to take baths, play like children at a game of tag with a stick, and jump and romp like puppies, shaking their heads with big ears flopping in fun.

It was great fun the day I realized that when I'd whistle, they'd run with glee toward me. It got so I'd whistle just to watch them run to me, then I'd give Inky, Eleanor and Grunt a good scratch behind the ears. They love getting scratched behind the ears; it's one of a pig's favorite things besides eating, rooting, bathing and sleeping.

An aura of happiness enveloped me as I peered over their stall door every day after entering the barn to do chores. They would sit side by side, staring at the doorway, waiting to see me and for me to say, "Hey, what ya' doin' in there, cuties? Are ya' hungry?"

Understanding what I'd asked, they'd oink, jump up, shake their heads and run to meet me, wagging their tails. Yes, I said wagging their tails. I know—it surprised me, too. Knowing very little about pigs, I wasn't sure if they were happy to see me or if it was a nervous fetish, but I allowed myself the "they're happy" thought. It made me feel good. I found out later that it did mean they were happy to see me.

One day upon entering the barn, I heard a noise I'd never heard before. It made me a little nervous, but I searched to find where the odd noise was coming from. I followed the disturbing sound to find Inky, the boar, stretched out with his head propped on a fluffed, bedding pillow, snoring like a chainsaw. Grunt and Eleanor were sitting on their haunches, huddled in the corner with looks on their snout faces that every woman at some point in her life understands. When they saw me, they grunted and shook their heads with what I perceived as disgust with the situation. Inky, oblivious, kept snoring away.

Daily I cleaned their stall and they joyfully helped by lending a nose in fluffing the bedding, asking me to scratch and rub their backs, rolling in the new bedding and trying to steal the manure fork. Then one day, like a mischievous child, Grunt eyed the stall door that was open a crack. She oinked, I looked at her, she oinked again and appeared to smile. Lunging for the door, I yelled "Oh no, you don't," but I wasn't quick enough as she grunted once more with amusement, bolted out and made the aisle of the barn her own little racetrack.

I laughed a belly laugh watching her jump and squeal with delight, running rampant up and down the aisle of the barn, joyful to get out and play. This little exhibition in no way delighted the bewildered equines of the barn, though, whose

eyes bugged and nostrils flared with loud snorts; they plucked themselves off their stall walls as the pink-and-white, squealing, short, round “thing” ran with delight.

The next day, thinking one running around was cute, I let all three out. Well, I admit it was not one of my more brilliant ideas. Not realizing they were fairly athletic, in a very short time I had 15 pounds less cat food, an uprooted tack room rug, and I was huffing and puffing from shooining them back in their pen. I decided I’d better not do that again soon.

I’m not sure a working pig farm would have pigs with the personality of my three star BOAR-ders and memories of my mother surge back as I wonder how I’d feel when they weigh in at 500 pounds and run to greet me. However, I think everyone should spend some time with a pig and learn a swine is only a swine in human terms, but a pig in the swine sense is indeed a beast of beauty.

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