

We have just finished our evening barn chores and are back in the cabin. It is cozy in the barn, and the scene there is not common in our locality these days. We have a small beef herd, and, if we followed the current custom, our cows and calves would be outside all of the time.

What the conventional wisdom is concerning this practice doesn't work for us. We think that our cattle are better off having some shelter, and we also know that we save feed, because the animals don't need to use so many calories to keep warm. We aren't second-guessing others, but this works for us.

I find cows endlessly fascinating. Our cattle have been outside night and day since sometime in April. Still, when the blowing, drifting snow turned the landscape of fall into a winter wonderland, the cattle needed no urging to come to the barn and go inside. That is perhaps understandable; most creatures, if given the chance, seek shelter. But it is what the cows did as soon as they came into the barn that was interesting. Effie was first through the door. She immediately went to her own place, the position she's had for many years. Since she was the first cow to enter the barn, she must have had some mental orientation that signaled her to go to that specific place among the fourteen tie-ups.

Black Effie followed her mother into the barn and took her place next to the old cow. Then came Vitsippa. She is just a young cow, but she stood by Halvan last winter and Halvan was already in the barn, since we had milked her all summer. So, Vitsippa went immediately to the next place. Lucia and Stjärna came in together, marched the length of the barn and poked their heads into the manger to see if we had some enticements there.

Queenie had a bit of a problem, though. We moved her from the place she stood last year as a heifer, and she wants to go back there. The cows go to the water tank to drink every evening, so Queenie has a learning experience every day. But, she is gradually catching on to her new location.

Then, there are Tuva and Rödkulla. They stood next to each other last winter, but they would exchange places nearly every day. They are doing the same thing this year.

Effie is the matriarch. She is the one who will come when called. When we move cattle from one pasture to the next, it is Effie who is first. And, there is no vote on the matter; wherever Effie goes, everyone else follows. She was born here on the farm in the spring of 2004, so that makes her a very old cow.

Doing barn chores on a snowy winter evening is not an unpleasant task. When the job is done and a row of cows, bedded with bright wood shavings, stand side by side, chewing on the bounty of last summer, I take a minute to just stand there and watch and listen. There is a peace in a barn full of satisfied animals that seems like a state of being that is worth emulating. We try.