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Just Add Water

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Just add water

Bill Elgersma

I have a confession to make—we have a coat of arms. That is, my family name has a coat of arms. Really, we do. A coat of arms. Who has that?

I was reminded of this recently while packing boxes of treasures for our habitual move. I was rifling through a dresser drawer that accumulates all those things that don't really have a home but never get pitched. After discovering release forms for our kids' grade school outings—sorry, Mrs. Vreeman, you had the right to send that scathing note home after all; old report cards that, in retrospect, explained some of why teachers were cranky about the missing release forms; ancient insurance forms; reminders about health checkups that I now realize I should have heeded—I came across our family tree booklet with an odd symbol on the front. I never really paid attention to it before. Sure, I would open it and hunt until I found our family and check to see where I fit and then put it away without ever thinking about the symbol. It's not cultic or anything, but a close examination of the picture on the front sheds light on one of the several deficiencies in my family line. For one, who knew that lack of artistic ability is a genetic disposition with an artifact from the Middle Ages to substantiate it?

The curious person might ask, "What is a coat of arms and what is it good for?" According to Google or Wiki, these were used to cover, protect, and identify the wearer. Continuing to mine for information, I find that these were a serious representation for a family name, and one site suggested they conveyed a source of strength and power. For those who are interested, more could be said, but I just wanted to know about the history of these things, perhaps to sort out something of my background.

Knowing the little I do, my guess is that sometime before the Reformation, when the family was still Catholic and lineage was important, someone in Friesland did some rough sketching to represent the family on a shield, and this crest became us. But up in Northern Friesland in the wind, rain, and cold, how would a person go about representing the family name on something permanent? In today's world, I shudder to think what a coat of arms might look like. I'm not sure how a football or handbag would cover or protect, although sadly, they might identify the wearer.

However, as I return to look at our coat of arms, I am certain that for at least the past 300 years, no one has dragged it out beyond some family tree booklet, and at one point my family may have even owned that historical artifact. Quaintly enough, here I am, once again reviewing the picture, and after a recent conversation with one of my siblings, I realize perhaps that this coat of arms actually does reveal another genetic weakness my siblings and I share.

The picture on the booklet's cover is dominated by what looks like a poorly-drawn pitch fork, one of those forks in artworks like "American Gothic" except with a short tee-handle and serrated teeth pointing down instead of tines pointing up. Those of an older vintage may visualize a hay knife used in a time when a baler did not exist and both hay and straw were stored in stacks. Because of the length of stalk and all of the interweaving that naturally occurs when the stacks were built, a hay knife, a formidable weapon about three feet in length with huge teeth about two inches long and two inches apart down the blade, was used to cut the material so a farmer could feed or bed the animals. The utensil on the coat of arms bore a slight resemblance to the jagged teeth of that knife attached to a pitch fork handle—hardly a weapon suggesting strength or power. What were my an-

cestors going to do—pitchfork-saw someone to death?

According to the inset, this picture depicts an eel spear. Apparently eel fishing occurred in the winter, and my ancestors would chop a hole in the ice, lay straw at the bottom of the hole, and when the eels burrowed into the straw, the spear would be driven down the hole to confine them between the tines. Pull the spear out and dinner is on the fork so to speak. I guess that is how it went.

While I get lost in the pragmatic side of the symbol, my thoughts return to the subject of genetic weakness related to that coat of arms symbol. I suppose it isn't a true genetic weakness with a clinical definition, but I must acknowledge that somewhere in my family's blood runs water, and it seems to haunt us and affect our decisions—we run to it like moths to a flame.

I never realized this flaw until I found myself on the prairies. Traveling the TransCanada somewhere between Winnipeg and Saskatoon with land so flat I could watch my dog run away for three days, I saw fields of rape and wheat stubble disappear into the horizon, and I felt like an ant. The sky was as big as the land, and I was swallowed in it. Without water.

Those who grow up near water know an undefinable security in that body. Water means we will never be thirsty, not really thirsty—like there is no water and there is no way to get any unless rain falls. Water means life and growth and sustenance. We will never starve because water makes vegetation grow. We do not know deserts, but we do not like them, and we certainly do not trust them. A cactus may be fine at Christmas, in a pot on a window sill pillowed with snow on the other side of the glass, but we do not want a cactus growing in our garden. By their nature, we are not convinced they do grow; they don't seem to need water, and by our geographical upbringing, like our plants, we do.

Water also means security, privacy, and even mystery. Camping beside Lake Erie or Ontario, we are lulled to sleep in our tents by the sounds of the swells wrestling in ebb and flow by the pull of the moon. But these are not California or Florida beaches, destinations for visitors to stretch beach towels on and turn at the sound of their phone to ensure an even tan. These are waters not so much of leisure but of necessity. The iron-ore lak-

ers wallow, moored outside the bay waiting for their docks, while those emptied ride the white-caps to the locks, a watery highway to the world. We splash in the heat of summer, then wander the sand for shells and driftwood, odd bits of unrelated life that come our way. Occasionally we smell the fish before coming upon it, fly-laden, alive with maggots. The gulls have taken what they wanted and left the rest to the flies and bugs that we see nowhere else. Sometimes these are carp, big ugly carp—mostly head and spine is left. Sometimes but rarely a salmon, especially near the creeks that run inland from the escarpment emptying into the lake, and sometimes we find beached turtles. These are part of the water—survival. If nothing else, we can drink and fish; the beaches bear witness. Not like the plains where a mistake and the turkey vultures soar high above us like an announcement for a dinner party.

Water is independent, and although the moon pulls and the wind pushes, it is its own entity. We work hard to channel, build canals, dikes, berms, but mostly we just work around it, acquiescing to its strength and power when all of our engineering brilliance is played out. Hurricane Katrina is a testament to this—water will take back what it gives, and those who live along the Mississippi or the Red River can attest to that. This knowledge creates a tenuous relationship, something like knowing I wasn't good enough for the girl I was going out with and waiting for the door to slam. Except when water slams the door, the debris that follows is much worse than a heart ache. But we know this about water, and we are never surprised. If anything, we are surprised it didn't happen sooner. And so we respect it, are awed by it, and fear it because we know that our mistakes may have permanent consequences.

But water is also protection. No one builds behind, beside, or in front of us in water. No one gets to build at all—we can't own it, and I like that. No one puts up a shed in the backyard that doesn't meet city codes for square feet; no one plants a streetlight that shines into a bedroom window; no tires burn rubber at 1 am, and no middle-aged men, struggling to recapture the youth they never had, ride the waves with open headers on motorcycles. The silence is deafening—a vacuum to our ears. Except for the occasional splash of a wave tripping into shore and the ambition of a misguided

ed fish jumping for bugs in the dark, the world is quiet—dead quiet. The moon paints a line that meanders toward shore, but nothing else touches it. The inky blackness that goes beyond the eye's vision swallows the rest, and we sit by our campfire or lie in our tents and hear the breeze come in off the water, smell the places it has been, and sink beneath the surface of our sleep.

But, as the shield suggests, our background never afforded water as a playground. Water has always had purpose. It fed us in the past; it transported goods and us from place to place; it washed us, and it quenched our thirst, but we never considered it our sandbox or playpen. Building sand castles, sun tanning, and boating to simply putter around the water have never been part of our lives, so rather than view water as something that owes us, something that we force ourselves on, we embrace it as family, the respected elder. It allows us to submerge and wash away the heat, the tension, the frustrations by its soothing calm and consistency and disciplines when necessary—sometimes severely—killing us when we are either careless or stupid.

While spending a week in Edmonton visiting a sibling, I came to realize this odd relationship. We were talking about the vastness of the prairies and the lack of water. The North Saskatchewan River splits the town, and residents navigate the bridges daily. We discuss the water's ice-green beauty, and then my sister, a longtime resident, sighs and mutters wistfully, "I love the river but I miss water."

I sit there for a moment, not quite sure of what I heard and ask her to repeat it. She hesitates and then says, "I miss water. You know, the lake." And I get it. The lake can only be Erie or Ontario in our worlds—lakes that cannot be seen across unless the air is clear, and very few will survive swimming across. As she attempts to explain what she misses, I have already conjured up my own list of reasons why I, too, miss water, slowly realizing this longing isn't as odd as I thought. We toss around names like Port Huron, Port Dalhousie, Port Dover, Niagara-on-the-lake, Long Point, Turkey Point—all connected to one or the other lake and the memories of our past. And even in the conversation, the stress seems to fly from us. We are water people

stranded on the plains of a continent, and at this point in our lives, we know we either have to accept our location or make changes before we can't.

This summer my sister packed up her house for two months, bought a trailer, drove east, and parked it on the shores of Lake Erie—a stone's throw from the water. She went to bed with the sound of the prevailing westerlies racing across the water and through the pine trees that stood guard, and she awakened to the sounds of the waves fighting with the sand and the pebbles as they attempted to get to shore.

At the bottom of my place is a creek: not a lake, not a river, just a creek, damp-dry in the summer. It isn't much, but on the plains it is enough. The valley that frames it, now overgrown with oaks, bears witness to the fact that at some point in history, this slit in the soil was much more powerful than it is today. Two miles down the road, a washed-out bridge proves this. I wait for thunderstorms that rip through the area, dumping inches of rain in hours and eliciting flashflood warnings for hundreds of miles. The water only pools long enough to squeeze through old concrete bridges that attempt to channel it and make gravel roads passible. My guess is that washed-out bridge was the result of an underestimation by some county engineer's calculation about gallons per minute, accumulation, and saturation. The creek bided its time, then became impatient with the pooling, flexed its muscle, and floated the bridge off to lodge in tree branches along the way to the Big Sioux River. And I like that.

So I pick up this booklet again—the 2007 edition, which has exactly 34 pages in it, and I examine the picture on the front again. The spear still looks like an over-zealous roofing spade—those things used to tear shingles off roofs—but somewhere in that tool I think I get the draw. I don't have a lake, might never have a lake, am not even near a real lake, but for right now, my little creek, strong enough to wash out a bridge, makes it all work. And as I glance across the valley to the hills on the other side, I look up to see the turkey buzzards prowling the sky and say to them, "Wrong neighbourhood, boys. I've got water."