

The bovine offices: Meditation and milking

by [Suzanne Guthrie](#) in the [November 28, 2012](#) issue



[Some rights reserved](#) by [Marji Beach](#)

Good morning, cowgirls!" Sister Carol Bernice calls. We have two cows and a new calf on the farm. Syl, Jiffy and her daughter Mercy are lovely fawn-colored Jerseys.

"I think I was predisposed to love cows," says Sister Carol Bernice. Her grandfather was the general foreman on the Victoria Regina Ranch in Wyoming. She remembers the look of satisfaction on her grandmother's face as she spooned fresh cream into her coffee. At the time, little Carol knew that that looked like something good that she wanted too. Sister CB had no experience taking care of cows before we acquired Jiffy and Syl last spring. "Good thing Jiffy and Syl knew what they were doing. And like the cows, I am a creature of habit, and having our schedules coincide is delightful. I call my times with the cows 'the bovine offices.'"

Jiffy and Syl are happy to see Sister CB. A low moan becomes an appreciative moo. She gives them a mixture of grain and molasses called "sweet feed," and while the two adults lap up the treat, the calf is unsupervised by her mother for a moment. Little Mercy opens the bag of wood shavings and then explores my pad of paper with her tongue. Sister CB lights a small camp stove to heat water to wash the cows, and eventually she'll make a cup of coffee for herself.

Jiffy willingly comes into the stall, where Sister CB brushes her, cleaning her tail and flanks and washing her udder and teats in warm soapy water. She has brought last night's milk down from the kitchen to feed Mercy. The calf hasn't yet found her mother's low-hanging teats, so Sister CB feeds her with a comical, giant bottle. While she feeds the calf, Jiffy licks the nun's head affectionately. "This is a real cowlick," she says of her matted hair. "When she breathes on me it is like a benediction."

I watch Sister Carol Bernice milk Jiffy. Sitting low on the little stool, her head resting against the massive cow, she and the cow perform a ballet of mutual understanding. Plagued by flies, the cow telegraphs her need to shift her body, and Sister CB deftly grabs the bucket out of the way. She said once that the cows have taught her to meditate. "When I'm in chapel, my mind slips off in a thousand directions, and suddenly a half hour is over and I've been everywhere except in meditation. But when I milk, losing concentration has consequences. Jiffy says, 'Hey, watch it there! Pay attention!'" She adds, "Never try to rush a cow. You'll be sorry."

The flies plague them both. "Ow! That one bit me through my sock! I suppose there would be heaps of dead things around if there were no flies, but I wish they would go bother the heaps of dead things instead of us! It's not Jiffy's fault and it's not my fault when she's antsy and dancy and it's hard to milk her. I realize that in much of life there's no point in placing blame. I realize that blame is a defense mechanism I have that isn't very useful. The cows are teaching me how to be a better human."

Sister CB takes the pail to the counter and pours the milk into a bucket. It looks like melted ice cream with beaten egg whites on top and smells like warm pudding. She covers the bucket and goes back to her stool. "Jiffy! You have so much milk! I'll never be able to carry all this up the hill!"

When she's finished milking, Sister CB puts homemade Bag Balm on Jiffy's teats. The salve is made from olive oil mixed with our own beeswax and calendula. "Who's eating my pocket?" she says to the calf, which is no longer interested in my sleeve but is nibbling at the nun. Mother and calf go off into the field as Syl comes into the milking parlor.

It's time for Sister Carol Bernice to have her "coffee with Syl." After washing the cow, Sister CB makes her coffee and milks the cream directly into her cup. I wonder if cappuccino was invented by city people who missed squirting foamy milk into their

coffee at home.

Now Syl and Sister CB attune to one another. Sister CB told me once that when she milks she whispers “Yah-weh” as she alternates hands milking the teats. “When I get my breathing and my milking coordinated it gets mystical. Milking is not a chore, it’s a kind of communion.”

While Sister Carol Bernice continues to milk Syl, I watch Jiffy and Mercy gambol in the distance. I didn’t know cows danced. Now I can easily imagine a cow jumping over the moon as it rises in the night sky. Jiffy and Mercy settle down to grazing. I feel deeply calm watching them.

“Cows embody peace for me,” says Sister Carol Bernice. “I hear the doxology while milking. ‘Praise God from Whom All Blessings FLOW!’ The flow and fountain of God’s mercy! So much manifested goodwill comes through the cows to us! I’ll make yogurt, butter, cheese and ice cream from this bounty. I think I could live on bread and milk—and sometimes I do.” Speaking to Syl, she says, “How do you girls turn grass into milk?” And then to me, “And the manure! It’s pure gold! Have you seen our tomatoes?!”