

“Ripe, Riper, Ripest”

A series of reflections by Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull
Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden
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Ripe

The Fruitery. It's a small market on East Main Street in Middletown that I heard about shortly after my husband, Dan, and I arrived in Connecticut just two years ago. It's unique, quirky even. What's ripe and not deserves consumer respect in the form of “hands off.” How ever much the cantaloupe or plums or peaches or cherries are just longing for my gentle squeeze, I restrain myself. Ted, Mary, Brendy, or Gretchen will do that for me.

“How about a couple of plums ready for eating? How about a few that need to wait a few days?” “Okay, I'll put them in separate bags so you can tell the difference.” Such is an exchange when one shops there. It's worth it. The plums are succulent to order. The nectarines melt in your mouth if that's what you ask for.

With markets and orchards brimming with such Eden-like produce throughout the summer—though my experience with Eden is limited to an apple or two—“ripe” is a tangible, edible, inhalable reality throughout my favorite season.

Ripe is yet another notion, though related, when we consider the seasons of our living. We're born. If all is well, we grow. Our senses sharpen. Our curiosity awakens. If we're fortunate, our mental acuity quickens. Our limbs move increasingly in the direction we hope for—walking, running, climbing, swimming, flexing. If we pay attention and open our hearts, our conscience deepens. If we know we can't do it alone, we find caring community. In so many ways, the seeds of our being find nurture and respond accordingly. It takes patience, hope, confidence, even pain. The poet Rainer Maria Rilke understood:

“Being means: not numbering and counting, but ripening like a tree, which doesn't force its sap, and stands confidently in the storms of spring, not afraid that afterward summer may not come. It does come. But it comes only to those who are patient, who are there as if eternity lay before them, so unconcernedly silent and vast. I learn it every day of my life, learn it with pain I am grateful for: patience is everything!”

Ripe depends not just on those of us who are human, but on the forces of non-human nature, sometimes forces that counter human nature, sometimes forces that transcend us altogether, however we name them. Ripe is a miracle wholly natural and yes, holy.

I recall the lyrics of Peter Mayer, composer and performer who also happens to be a member of the White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church in Minnesota.

When I was a boy, each week
 On Sunday, we would go to church
 And pay attention to the priest
 He would read the holy word
 And consecrate the holy bread
 And everyone would kneel and bow
 Today the only difference is
 Everything is holy now

....

When I was in Sunday school
 We would learn about the time
 Moses split the sea in two
 Jesus made the water wine
 And I remember feeling sad
 That miracles don't happen still
 But now I can't keep track
 'Cause everything's a miracle

....

...the leaves, the flowers, the berries, the plums, the pears, earth and air, sun and rain, and yes, the seeds of open hearts holding the promise of our own ripeness and ripening.

Riper

“For the beauty of the earth...” How easily the refrain of this century-old hymn can sound like gratitude for la-la land. It's one of those hymns that I grew up with—“Unitarianized” only to the extent that “God” is traded in for “Source of all.” Synonyms for the sacred provide countless options at the border crossing of so-called conventional religion and Unitarian Universalism. Nonetheless gratitude is at the heart of understanding that we who are human are not creation's last act. The earth of which we are a part was here long before homo more or less sapiens rose from all fours into a biped, and it will likely be here long after us. It is an unknowable stroke of grace that we are here at all and even more so that we are here and now together searching, wondering, asking.

With every question we ask, with every expression of gratitude we summon, life grows riper. It can't happen if we don't notice. Noticing is perhaps the common ground of the person of religion and the person of science, and they are often the same person. Ripeness noticed and ripeness experienced evoke wonder and gratitude. We mature spiritually.

“...for the mystic harmony linking sense to sound and sight” sounds the refrain of this hymn of wonder and gratitude. The spiritual is sensual, linked to sound and sight and to touch and taste. In a world where so many have so little and so few have too much, there is nonetheless abundance. There is enough for however we regard “us” and enough for however we regard “them,” and so much the better if we understand that “us” and “them” are intimately and ultimately “we.”

An example comes through a story told by Robert Walsh. Robbie, as he is known, is a Unitarian Universalist minister of many seasons, a poet, an essayist, a colleague, and a friend. For over 20 years he was minister at First Parish in Duxbury. I can readily imagine the backyard of the parsonage there, the scene of sumptuous wildness of which he writes.

It was a backyard that stretched into a cluster of wildness, visited routinely by the family cat, but not by Robbie. One long ago summer, he grew curious, and while curiosity didn't kill his cat, it left Robbie with more than a few scratches and bug bites. Was it worth it? Who knew that blackberries waited in profusion behind the tangle? In Robbie's words:

“I took the berries and smushed them, sweetened them, and boiled them down until they became eight little jars of jam. I gave most of them away.

I loved the taste. It was magnified by the memory of picking the berries in that overgrown, uncultivated setting, and of transforming them in the kitchen. I did not create that taste, but I did get it into a useful and accessible form. I tasted some of it that winter when the berry plants were gray and brittle. Another person tasted it in Florida, and still another in the mountains of Colorado.”

Ripest

How is it that any of us can claim to own a piece of this earth? How is it that we can claim to own the fruit of the earth, whether that fruit comes in the form of perfect ripeness from a nearby market or from what we casually call “our backyard,” whether that fruit comes in the form of cantaloupe, plums, peaches, cherries, or blackberries or corn, grain, greens or tomatoes? We are of the earth and to the earth we return. Like the fruit of the earth, we are not meant to be property, but to be appreciated and affirmed for who we are and to appreciate and affirm our fellow beings. When I dedicate a child, I envision that child growing into the ripeness of old age and attaining all possible wisdom and compassion, knowing wonder and gratitude and grace no matter what befalls her, no matter what brutal wildness he might encounter.

Like the wild tangle in Robbie Walsh's backyard, gifts of ripeness are commonly hidden and come with a price. For some it is scratches and bug bites. For others, it's a letting go that leads into groves of grace we never imagined.

So it has been for a member of this congregation. Toya McCabe holds gifts of imagination and compassion, with a strong penchant for exploring parts unknown. Many months ago she went to Ghana with the dream of establishing an orphanage. Absent in her luggage were certainty, funding, and a timeframe, let alone a business plan! Not long after she arrived, she met Kori Yaaka. They married this past February. Together they are establishing the Joy Foundation. Toya is now back for a visit.

Just yesterday I checked in with her via e-mail. What's happening? How is life for her and Kori? How would she like to stay connected to this congregation or otherwise? We know that she and Kori are living on the proverbial shoestring. Her response was one I can only call the message of “an old soul,” another way of describing one who embodies sage-like wisdom.

“Kori and I live off of and share all the money we have with those who are striving to nourish themselves every day.

When we buy anything in Ghana or get services from anybody even including the buying of petrol or paying for cooking fuel, it goes directly to the feeding or livelihood of that person, their family and children. Every act of spending money goes for the others’ survival. A powerful difference from our Western ways.

There is some kind of vital force in this that creates a unique bond. Another way of looking at this is that some bonds of separateness have been severed. I stand before another being; I give her money to buy tomatoes. I survive because of the tomatoes and she survives because of the money. Face to face. Being to being. She cannot survive without me and I cannot survive without her. When the illusion of separateness is broken, in whatever form it takes placewe are living in an aspect of the Unlimited.”

The Joy Foundation is taking root in the purchase of two modest parcels of land, but just as much in the exchange of money and tomatoes, the mutual survival of which Toya speaks.

How can we open our hearts and minds so that, in the ringing words of Mother Theresa, “the whole world falls in?” How can our souls ripen into enough love so that compassionate justice is the only alternative when the whole hurting world falls in? Ripeness is for sharing. Spiritual ripeness is understanding separateness as an illusion.

Robbie Walsh had more to say.

“There is an abundance in the Creation...at least the material parts of the Creation. It is less clear about non-material things. Has God been extravagant with justice? Is there an excess of human love in the Creation? I think not, not without our help. But we can do it—I believe it—with the gifts we are given. We can transform the world until justice and love grow among the toxic vines and biting bugs.”

Amid the brambles of this slice of history that we occupy, Toya and Kori are building a foundation of joy. Amid backyard brambles once the sole domain of a family cat, Robbie harvested blackberries, “smushed” them (love that word), and cooked them into jam, gifts for friends near and far. I step into a local market, trusting that Ted, Mary, Brendy, and Gretchen are wise stewards of their wares. I head home with a bag of ripe and riper, a late summer harvest for which I can only say Thank You.

In so many ways, the seeds of our being find nurture and respond accordingly.

Amen.

Sources:

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Robert Walsh, “Abundance,” in *Stone Blessings*, Meditations by Robert Walsh, Skinner House, Boston, 2010, 42-43.