

“My Huckleberry Friend”

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“When yesterday, a boy spilled his berries in the pasture, I saw that Nature was making use of him to disperse her berries, and I might have advised him to pick another dishful.”

or perhaps like our morning version of Robert McCloskey’s *Blueberries for Sal*, to gather the berries that he could, to share them, and to come back another day to gather berries that may have been preserved by his mother for the long cold New England winter.

Many years ago my Mother and my then young daughters, Shana and Sarah, and I traveled to Maine in the autumn, a chilly but wonderful time to connect with inhabitants of small-town Maine close to where Sal and her sister Jane grew up. We discovered that the character Sal was based on a real little girl of that name and known to Robert McCloskey as a young neighbor, along with her elder sister, Jane. I wonder what reflections of berry picking Sal carried into her adulthood. She became a lawyer and perhaps a better one because of those summer days spent with her sister and mother gathering the ripeness of nearby hillsides in preparation for the freezing Maine winters. No doubt more than a few of those berries reached her mouth before landing in a pail.

Frivolous? I don’t think so. No more so than the young boy of whom Henry David Thoreau wrote in his journal, the young boy who spilled some of his precious berries, not aware that he was sharing them with Mother Nature. Our morning cast of characters in the adapted version of *Blueberries for Sal* was *invited* to be intentional about sharing. Thoreau gave Edward the benefit of the doubt, when the young lad simply spilled them. These accounts of berry picking in New England are separated by just less than a century. McCloskey wrote his classic tale in 1948; Thoreau penned his journal post in 1853. Both are stories of the ripeness of August in New England, a ripeness in which we reside this very morning.

Who was Edward you might wonder? He was little Edward Emerson, son of Ralph Waldo and Lydia Emerson. Henry David Thoreau was a close friend and a frequent visitor in the Emerson household, often staying with the children and Lydia during the senior Emerson’s long absences—not what it would seem now! Moncure Conway, a contemporary of Thoreau’s, expanded this story of spilled berries in his own autobiography:

Young Henry was well known for his “huckleberrying parties. These were under the guidance of Thoreau, because he alone knew the precise locality of every variety of the berry.”

Conway continues:

“I recall an occasion when little Edward Emerson, carrying a basket of fine huckleberries, had a fall and spilt them all. But Thoreau came, put his arm around the troubled child, and explained to him that if the crop of huckleberries was to continue it was necessary that some should be scattered. Nature had provided that little boys should now and then stumble and sow the berries. ‘We shall have a grand lot of bushes and berries in this spot, and we shall owe them to you.’ Edward began to smile.”

When Edward was a young boy, Henry was entering his 30's, an adult who had not forsaken childhood. No wonder he was compared to Pan, for his instrument of choice was the flute. No wonder he was compared to the Pied Piper, for his playfulness was magnetic. No wonder the adult Edward, as a reflective 73-year-old, authored in book form a stirring tribute to his childhood friend.

“This youthful, cheery figure,” he recalled, “was a familiar one in our house, and when he, like the ‘Pied Piper of Hamelin, sounded his note in the hall, the children must needs come and hug his knees, and he struggled with them...sat down and told stories... Then he would make our pencils and knives disappear, and redeem them presently from our ears and noses...”

While Henry David Thoreau did not suffer fools lightly, he exalted in children. He had never forgotten how to play. He had never forsaken the integrity of being himself.

Upon Thoreau's death at the not so ripe age of 44, the senior Emerson—Ralph Waldo—wrote a eulogy of sorts. It was an extensive piece and was published in the August 1862 issue of *The Atlantic*. Waldo, as his friends called him, was far more reserved than Henry in relating to children—and adults, for that matter. Yet he recognized in his younger friend, 14 years younger, traits that endeared him to children and traits that alienated many his own age; for he was constitutionally incapable of bartering his candor for social acceptance. I wonder with what nuance of envy Ralph Waldo Emerson penned the following:

“Had his genius been only contemplative, he had been fitted to his life, but with his energy and practical ability he seemed born for great enterprise and for command; and I so much regret the loss of his rare power of action, that I cannot help counting it a fault in him that he had no ambition. Wanting this, instead of engineering for all America, he was the captain of a huckleberry-party.”

However the senior Emerson had recounted the multiple attributes that he found so admirable in the young Thoreau, there was a note of superciliousness in such a remark.

What his father deigned a liability, Edward Emerson recalled with deep affection:

“This youth, who could pipe and sing himself, made for children pipes of all sorts, of grass, of leaf-stalk of squash and pumpkin, handsome but fragrant flageolets of onion tops, but chiefly of the golden willow-shoot, when the rising sap in spring loosens the bark. As the children grew older, he led them to choice huckleberry hills, swamps where the great high-bush blueberries grow...”

Yes, there is the “happy tongue” of which poet Mary Oliver would write another century later. There is the elixir of the sweet juice of freshly picked berries landing on eager taste buds. But there's more... The poet continues in reflective mode:

[There's] the field. The field they
belonged to and through the years I
began to feel I belonged to. Well,
there's life, and then there's later. ...
The field, and the sparrow singing at the
edge of the woods....

Fields and woods not so very far from the fields of Concord, where young Edward clasped the hand of his Pan, his Pied Piper, his “huckleberry friend” with other children scampering alongside picking all sorts of berries —huckleberries, blueberries, raspberries, perhaps climbing trees for mulberries.

Such memories are not to be taken lightly, though the content is redolent with lightness, with play, with succulence, and with sensory joy. Such was the case for the children who flocked to young Henry David Thoreau. Such was the case for Mary Oliver, recalling her beloved treks in “the fields outside Provincetown.” Such was the case for little Sal, as she and her sister most assuredly accompanied their mother on berry picking expeditions on which many a berry landed on an outstretched tongue before gravity could surrender it to a serious pail.

In the spirit of this summer, we are letting go—not of all considerations serious and otherwise compelling—but enough so that not all of our berries land in a serious pail.

If we strive too hard to be grown-up and distance ourselves from whatever *joie de vivre* we knew as children, something sacred and precious will fall casualty. How each of us needs “a huckleberry friend.”

“We’re after the same rainbow’s end,
waiting ‘round the bend,
my huckleberry friend...”

“Of course,” I thought when I first heard this phrase from the lyrics of “Moon River,” sung by Audrey Hepburn in the 1961 film “Moon River.” Of course, the reference is to Huckleberry Finn, that maverick character created by Mark Twain, nee Samuel Clemens.

Did Samuel Clemens know of the playful habits of Henry David Thoreau? The former was born just 18 years after Thoreau. Did Johnny Mercer, lyricist of Moon River, know? When Henry died at the youthful age of 44, he had an unfinished essay entitled simply, “Huckleberries.”

What is a huckleberry friend? Surely there are many explanations, but Johnny Mercer notes in his autobiography that the phrase “huckleberry friend” was “in reference to a childhood friend of his. He used to pick huckleberries with him down by a lazy river near his home in Georgia.”

Another explanation expands on this:

“ There are your good friends: people who love you. And then there are your huckleberry friends: people who've known you for years and have stuck by you and love you no matter what.”

Such was the young Henry David Thoreau for the younger Edward Waldo Emerson and other children of long ago Concord. Such were Little Sal’s sister and mother as they berry picked their way across the deep summer hills of Maine. Such were the companions, human and woodland, of Mary Oliver as she scoured the fields of her beloved Outer Cape for the succulence of August. Such is anyone you have known or anyone with whom you still keep company, “who has known you for years and stuck by you and loves you no matter what.”

How might each of us be such a friend? How might each of us reach back in time and resurrect for our “now” a huckleberry party of which we might have been the captain, the friend to be counted on, the friend who sticks by and loves you no matter what, or for that matter a member of the crew who will never forget? It’s not too late. It really isn’t.

May it be so and Amen.

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