

After the Long Season...the Harvest Comes

Sunday Talk

11/16/14

By: Michelle Whelan

When Kat first asked me last week if I would speak today, I had just gone through a phase of joking around with one of my friends where we were cliché-ing each other to death, at every opportunity.

I would complain about being busy and the response would be “a stitch in time saves nine” and then mine was “Rome wasn’t built in a day.’ And then it was on... “ A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush”. “All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.” And my parents favorite- which still makes almost no sense to me...Six of one is half a dozen of another. What??

So anyway... when Kat asked me to talk a little bit on the theme of the Harvest season the first thought that came into my mind was “you reap what you sow.” And then I thought – well, that’s not uplifting. I’d better think of something else. But after a little while of fruitlessly trying to steer my thoughts away from the land of the cliché, I decided maybe it was time for me to give the tried and true a chance.

And when I did that –and really thought about it for a bit, I realized that, “you reap what you sow” is not necessarily a negative thing. I have pretty much always taken it as negative because, for me, it usually came at the end of a cautionary tale – like one of Aesop’s fables. In which the wolf dresses up as a sheep and then gets taken for a sacrificial lamb. Or like when my parents were explaining that their grounding me was actually me reaping what I had sewn -- by sneaking out of the house in the middle of the night. Somehow, at the time, the potential positivity of the saying escaped me.

But taking a step back from personal experience with parental delivery, I can see that actually – like so may other things- in and of itself it is not negative or positive – it is merely a description of a process- of a natural order – plant the seed, let the rain water it, maybe you help a little, allow the sun to shine on it, weed a little and wait. Maybe you sing to it. And then 20 days later, or 30, or even 50 – the energy in that seed, combined with the relatively slight amount of energy put in by us, combines with the energy of the sun and then this amazing thing happens. A literal manifestation of energy – that we can hold in our hands, hold it up to the sun, -- have you ever held a tomato up to the sun. The color in a tomato can be absolutely amazing-- and then we can eat it– transforming it - into the energy we need to move around, and to look at the sun and sky, and make music and laugh and sing, and go back to planting more plants.

When I really think about that process, and look at a tomato –at the the sun’s energy manifested in my hand – I think – that’s astounding, and – I know not everyone here believes in god – so apologies in advance- but I have to attribute this energy, this natural order, all of these interdependent things that work together in such a beautiful, perfect cycle to something – to some kind of energetic force that flows through the earth and us, and so I think the idea of planting things, and watching them grow, and paying attention, and reverence for that universal life force, are very much intertwined for me. I will never understand how someone who says they believe in god could be anti the environment, or worse yet, could be profiting from its destruction and still sleeping at night.

There’s a creature –called the Tardigrade –also known as the "Water Bear". It is a microscopic animal. This animal, first discovered in Africa feeds on bacteria and protozoan, and is built only on a few hundred cells. It lives in moss and “awakes” when the moss gets wet. It feeds on moss by sucking the cells off. If the moss becomes dry, Water Bears encapsulate themselves, if necessary for years to wait for the next rain. They are multi-cellular segmented creatures- with what looks like eight legs and claws and a recognizable little bear-type face. Tardigrades can survive temperatures that far exceed boiling point and temperatures almost to absolute zero. They can go without food or water for up to 10 years. They can withstand radiation over 1,000x what a human can. I think about Tardigrades when I get worried that nature won’t survive because of us humans.

Have you every noticed how patterns in nature seems to be reflected in many places, on many different magnitudes of scale? How the rings of an oak tree can look just like ripples in the water? And the cones of fir trees have scales, and how rivers seen from an airplane can look just like the veins in our hands?

Most of you probably remember learning about Fibonacci’s numbers in school at some point. These are logarithmic patterns found across different life-forms – palm trees show them in their rings, daisies in their leaves, the nautilus in it’s spirals.

Life grows out of a spiral form. Spherical stars and planets form out of spiraling clouds of plasma. A human embryo is a spiral.

It seems to me that nature’s patterns and rhythms are also reflected in more than just the physical plane. That they stretch across space and time much like the seasonal cycle of planting seeds and watching. Tending some. And For some of us -- singing and praying. And Waiting, And finally, harvesting.

It seems to me that these rhythms are reflected through patterns across all of our endeavors.

And that the seeds we plant sometimes come to fruition after a very long waiting period. And it would be easy to think that nothing is happening. When in fact so much is happening. Just in a way that we can't see.

I remember when I was pregnant with my first child. I was so tired. I could fall asleep almost anywhere, at any time. And I was saying, to one of my girlfriends- that I had been doing nothing, except sleeping, And she said, you couldn't be more wrong. You are very, very busy. You are making a human. You don't get much busier than that. But making a human --for my conscious mind and awareness, just meant quite a bit of waiting around.

And -to some extent this waiting around, without becoming overcome by anxiety, requires faith. Faith in the universe, and the rhythms of nature. Faith that our energy, our attention, and intentions, our thoughts and our deeds are not wasted. Faith that they resonate somewhere, cause ripples that move outwards, and eventually, someday, spiral back to fruition.

My mother was an unusual person. She lived her convictions. And therefore, we --as children-- lived her convictions. I was raised Catholic, and sometime before I was born, Pope John XXIII convened Vatican II - the second Vatican council to reinterpret Catholic doctrine in modern times. This resulted in -- among many other changes-- the mass no longer being said in Latin -which was one of the changes that my mother did not agree with.

Hence, for years, we went to church in the basement of a monastery on the top of a mountain where they said the mass secretly in Latin. When we moved and there was no monastery conveniently located within a couple of hours driving distance -- we attended mass at a Byzantine Catholic church -- where they chanted the entire thing in Ukrainian - which, my mother deemed to be more true to the original Mass in form as well as language, than the one in our heretical, native English.

She also became a vegetarian long before it was fashionable to do so -- growing sprouts in our fridges -- putting wheat germ on everything in sight, and waking up the entire neighborhood with the sound of her juicer when she made tall foaming glasses of vegetable deliciousness for us to drink every single morning at 4am.

When I came home from school every day -- the table was littered with newspapers, books, pamphlets and letters. And the radio was always blaring with some kind of informational program. She was one of the seven founding members of Right to Life, thought we should never have left the gold standard, and wrote countless letters to senators and politicians campaigning to protect social security.

My mother passed away when I was 17. From brain cancer. I sometimes think that, if she had not. If she had lived to watch her children's lives unfold, and she were waiting to see the fruits of her labors manifest -- she would have had to wait an awfully long time to see any evidence in me...

Especially if she were looking for me to be in agreement with her ideas...

But when I think about whether the seeds she planted and the lessons she taught – have unfolded, I think she was successful in instilling need to search for and identify a belief system, and to feel uncomfortable if my actions did not reflect that belief system.

She taught me to care about food -- to almost see it as a kind of medicine – that can help us or hurt us depending on what we're putting into our bodies.

I learned from her that that I might not, and I often don't agree with the choices made by my government and authority figures, and that I have a responsibility to speak out when that happens.

And on some level -while I never imagined I would end up in the nonprofit world - I guess I must have absorbed the belief that writing letters and advocating for, and rallying people to a cause can change the world.

So then I think of the seeds of my own thoughts and intentions... and dreams and actions...and I think of my children...

The other day, I attended a parent teacher conference for my daughter Rowan. Each child in her class had been asked to create their own Powerpoint presentation on the giant panda and the teacher showed Rowan's dad and me the one Rowan had made. On the last slide in the Powerpoint, the question was asked – what would she do with the knowledge she had gained? Rowan's response? When she grew up, she planned to go all over the world talking to people and writing letters to people to convince them to stop building houses and killing trees and taking away the giant panda's habitat.

To use another harvest-y cliché. I guess the apple does not, in fact, fall far from the tree. And... everything comes full circle.

Sustainable Nantucket started our Farm to School program in 2010. As many of you may know- we built an over 8000 square foot garden behind the school and –ever since have been -- as you could see from the book we read earlier—teaching, through the lens of agriculture, what we hope are lifetime lessons in nutrition and environmental stewardship.

I think we are also-- by teaching children to grow food--- teaching other lifetime lessons -- about patience, and the rhythms of nature, and that planting the seeds of intention, followed by attention, –a little bit over time, eventually bears fruit.

Last week I read a story in the paper about a former professional football player named Jason Brown who walked away from his highly lucrative sports career to become a farmer. In the article he says:

You look over a sweet potato field and you don't see a crop, the vines are kind of wilting. There is nothing there to pick. You've got to have faith. I went out to plow up the potatoes last week and looked behind the tractor. I don't know if I've ever seen anything quite as beautiful as those big brown potatoes lying everywhere.

So I am waiting... for the day when my cliché-loving friend comes out with 'a good deed never goes unpunished'. And then I can come right back with ' -- actually -- the good news is...you reap what you sew'. You might just have to wait a little while.