

Mundane or Miraculous?
The Age-old Argument Between Average and Impressive Tomatoes
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Sometimes, we misread the signs of the spiritual journey. It's easy to do...and sometimes our misreading leads us astray. On the other hand at other times, though (and strangely), in spite of our misreading, we travel so much further than we had planned, so much further than we thought that we could. We travel so much further on along the way.

Good morning and good Sunday, I hope this new day finds you well. Today is Sunday, July the 10th. It's a week after Independence Day. I hope that holiday was good for you. There is a woman named Sally Lane. She lives in Trenton, New Jersey. She seems pretty fierce. She follows the news closely and she was angered a couple of weeks ago when Senator Liz Cheney of Wyoming asked General Michael Flynn if he believed that the violence of January 6th was morally justified, if he believed that the violence was legally justified and if he believed in the peaceful transfer of power. She was angered because General Flynn did not answer these questions. Instead, at the advice of his lawyer, he availed himself of his right not to be "held to answer" the questions of the January 6th Committee. He pleaded the Fifth, making a legal appeal to the same Constitution that also insures the peaceful transition of power. That made her pretty angry and so she posted about. She offered an interesting reflection about where we are these days. She posted, "Happy 4th to everyone not pleading the 5th about the 6th." I admire her pluck, her spirited and determined courage.

It becomes an act of courage sometimes—patriotism, even—to stand apart from the news and be at peace. It's an act of resistance and a mode of survival to look for American beauty in different ways, to discover ourselves again...or, in some ways, for the first time.

I tried to do that in the garden. I tried to capture the essence of the New American Country Tomato on camera. I couldn't get the right angle until I got down on my knees...or as Mary Oliver says, until I was "idle" and "blessed." Then, I captured something special. An echo sounded within me. So, I took a good, deep breath and I took a good look around and I wondered. I wondered about the once in a lifetime miracles that happen and about the ones that happen everyday. I thought about ministry and I thought about that song by Peter Mayer.

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

And I thought about the passage in The Book of Miracles, number three in that first set of fifty (right up front), the one that reminds us that miracles aren't rare, aren't magical. It tells us that,

Miracles occur naturally as expressions of love. The real miracle is the love that inspires them. In this sense everything that comes from love is a miracle.

One can find lots of miracles in the garden. All we have to do it look...not look past the ordinary things in life in order to find the extraordinary but look lovingly in to the ordinary because love is the miracle. The title of this morning's reflection is Mundane or Miraculous?—The Age-old Argument Between Average and Impressive Tomatoes

Gardens are getting ready for the summer yield. Its flowers are bearing fruit, reminding us that healthy growth takes time. A garden is the proper environment within which healthy growth is possible—average and impressive growth. The average and the impressive both require particular conditions to grow. Tomatoes, of course, are important parts of the “interconnected web” that holds us all but is this web of interconnection mundane or miraculous?

Do you ever get superstitious about your spiritual life? Are you the type of person that looks to the world for outward signs, for external confirmation for that which is inwards and spiritually real? I am.

For months, was trying to make sense of this thing that often happens to me. I was vegetarian for a long time. Then, I went back to eating meat. I make an effort to eat locally grown, organic, healthy living conditions... I try to be intentional about it. As often as I can, I cook out on the grill but this weird thing keeps happening and I'm trying to make sense of it. Maybe you can help me with this.

Every time that I used the grill, it gets rained on the following morning. I marinate something and season it well. I cook it up nice and I eat it. I don't put the cover on right away, of course, because the grill is still too hot and the cover would be damaged. So, I decide to wait until after dinner. I make a plan to go outside and put the grill cover back on after I've enjoyed my meal and after the grill has cooled down sufficiently.

And, like clockwork, before I get out there, I hear the first, few raindrops on the roof. I am often not yet conscious of what this implies. So, I take no action. Minutes later, the frequency of the drops increases. The rain intensifies and I realize that the grill is uncovered and that frustrates me for some reason. Probably, because the first grill that I had rusted out terribly over the years. I still have it. I'm holding on to a dream that I have that I will restore it someday and make use of it again. That work does not rank high on my to-do list but it qualifies. So, that's a start, at least.

It amazes me how frequently it happens. I have even been trying the craft a theory about the relationship between barometric pressure and my desire to make use of my grill. Obviously, I have not gotten very far with that but I don't understand why this keeps happening. It seems to always turn out this way...that I am inside, enjoying the evening and **the gentle falling of the rain** and I realize that I haven't replaced the cover and that the grill is rain-soaked again. It's not always this way.

Sometimes, it's different. Sometimes, the rainfall and my forgetfulness don't coincide until the morning. I will wake from deepest slumber to **the gentle falling of the rain** and am shattered by the realization that has become a constant in my life.

But I found a way to beat the system. I got the better of it a few weeks ago.. I cleared off the old porch that's just about halfway fallen apart. I set up a table and a couple of chairs. I made a plan to eat outside. I planned to use the grill, eat, clean up and, then, put the grill cover back on...and it was unlikely that I would forget or become distracted by sunsets or cell phone or music or anything because the porch is right next to the grill and its cover was staring me right in the face.

It worked out great. Just as I had planned it. I cooked. I ate. I cleaned up and, then, put the grill cover back on. I know that it was only a tiny achievement but I was quite happy with myself. I went to bed quite happy and quite satisfied. I enjoyed the deepest of slumbers and, sure as the day is long, I woke to the sound of weather. I heard the telltale tip-tip.tip. I heard the summer sound of **the gentle falling of the rain**. It didn't shatter me from slumber this time. I had outwitted the weather. I'd been mindful. I'd been focused. I was intentional that time. Strangely proud of myself, I took in a great deep breath and I bounded out of bed and headed for the window. I looked forward to a feeling of genuine and great self-satisfaction. I wanted to see the cover that I had placed on my grill the night before effortlessly and perfectly resisting the falling rain.

Unfortunately, that didn't quite happen. The overnight winds lifted the grill cover entirely and placed on the lawn a few feet away. The grill was soaked again...which was bad news, if that's the way we want to look at it. It should be noted that the grill cover was, in fact, working quite perfectly (if not as intended) keeping the nearby grasses perfectly dry. What sense can one possibly make of a spiritual sign like this? How does this guide us further on the journey?

I guess its true what they say—"The best-laid plans of mice and men do often go awry." It is the sense we make of life despite our plans that is most useful to us. This is so obvious when things go wrong in life. When things go wrong, making sense of things is our only option. Spirit appeals to my imagination much more clearly, it would seem, after life has taken its course despite my efforts, after my plans have gone awry, after the overnight winds have lifted the grill cover and after the rains have chosen to fall. When things go according to my plans, spirit appeals to my imagination just the same but I don't notice. I have tended to pay attention to the spectacles of life more than the average, everyday things. Do you have this experience? I have a habit of keeping tabs on the miraculous much more than on the mundane. I have tended to make a bigger deal out of the impressive-looking tomato. I have a tendency to try to make sense of the impressive material things that are all around me...but I'm less and less convinced by what I've been doing.

There is a passage in the pilot episode of The West Wing that nowadays guides my thinking. President Bartlet was reflecting on the preciousness of his granddaughter, Annie, and he told the story in which she was centrally involved. He said,

There was this time that Annie came to me with a press clipping. It seems that these theologians down in South America were very excited because a

little girl from Chile had sliced open a tomato and the inside flesh of this tomato had actually formed a perfect Rosary.

In Roman Catholicism, a rosary is a string of beads that is used for keeping count in a form of devotion in which five (or fifteen) decades of Hail Marys are repeated, each decade preceded by an Our Father and followed by a Glory Be. The inside flesh of this particular tomato represented a string of rosary beads. President Bartlet continued, saying,

The theologians commented that they thought this was a very impressive girl. Annie commented that she thought it was a very impressive tomato.

What is your perspective on this? I'm not after your impressions about The West Wing episode. I'm asking about the quality of your perspective in life. I'm about our collective sense of mystery and wonder. Were we to look into the inner life of an average, American tomato, would we be open to seeing the miraculous?

In a book about meditation entitled How to Meditate—A Practical Guide to Making Friends with Your Mind, Pema Chödrön tells the story of Saraha, a yoga teacher in 12th-century India. As she explains,

...he said (to loosely paraphrase him): [quote] "Those who believe in existence as solid are stupid. Those who believe that everything is empty are even more stupid." [end quote]

Chödrön further explains that Saraha...

...was referring to any beliefs that limit our experience and cause us to be unable to perceive what's in front of our eyes and nose. Beliefs that we hold so strongly and so dearly that we're willing to fight for them, beliefs that blind us and make us deaf.

I become angry with myself sometimes—too angry. I become angry with myself when I make mistakes. It's a habit that I began as a child and I haven't yet given it up. It doesn't serve me well but I still hold on to it for some reason. I told that story about the grill cover as a relatively safe example of this.

I don't really know how or where from, but when I was young, I learned that I should feel bad or be ashamed of things that don't go very well, that turn out wrong, that go awry. I often do. I often feel that way...even when feeling that way is not useful to anyone. When I was young, I learned how to criticize things, how to dismiss them by calling them ridiculous. Now that I am arguably no longer young at 57, I'm feeling the negative affects of what I have been doing. For instance, I like the West Wing story about President Bartlet, his granddaughter, Annie and the impressive tomato from somewhere down in South America. I like that story and I agree with it because I think critically and I don't tend to religious romanticism. I don't believe that God embedded a rosary in an otherwise average tomato. I don't believe that, at all...except for the times that I do. And there are so many times when I do believe in such things. There are times when the miraculous tomato successfully makes an appeal to my spirit, when it lays claim over me—or, at least, over a part of me—because spirit is in motion—like the river, like the ocean—and

we do not stand apart, steadfast. I would say, “like an island,” but the island is in motion too. Confessing her affections, a poet writes

...and I do care for you, I love you
I'll be there for you, I love you
Drink the water that I'll bear for you
Like an island rising, coming slowly from the sea
Causing tidal waves to beat and causing some catastrophe
The damage done, another sun will rise and shine the day

She implores us to...

...make a wish
[because] love comes in fits and waves
[and because] sweet miracles can come
between the cradle and the grave
where there is a will, there is a way

Where there is a will, there is a way. Where there is a willingness, an openness to possibility... Where there exists an inclination for wonder, there may be wonder. And where there is no such inclination, miracles are necessary. How else to shatter the illusions of the average, the typical or the mundane? But here's the thing. With just a little bit of effort, one can find the miraculous within the mundane. With just a little bit of spiritual practice, it becomes possible to find the impressive—and even the exquisite—in what seems like ordinary life.

My back is a bit sore today. I made the mistake of leaning on my elbow unusually for an extended length of time and I strained it. I had stacked a cord of wood. I had done a lot of driving. I was doing a bunch of sit-up, trying to trim a couple of pounds. And then, I leaned on my elbow for too long and I strained it. So, I've been feeling a little more brittle as of land but a funny thing happened. Last night, after the sun went down, I was watering my garden. I was heavily watering the tomato beds because they like a deep soak every now and then. The moon had risen over the horizon and was high up in the sky and the way that I was standing and the way the water had pooled in the garden and where the moon was right then... It all lined up so perfectly and I could the moon's reflection from the surface of the water that had gathered under the tomatoes. I suddenly had a tangible, visceral, experiential sense of how everything is intimately connected. I got down on my knees, maintaining the particular relationships—the angles and the relative distances—maintaining the relationships that allowed the light of the moon to bounce on the garden water's surface for me to see. My back pain hadn't gone away but it seemed to understand what I was trying to do and it let me do it. I got down on my knees and I touched the light.

How do we touch the light if we don't have a garden at the ready or when our backs don't allow us to get down on our hands and knees? How do we stay connect to the interconnected web? How do we find the miraculous in the mundane? [eat the tomato] I don't know that answer. I'll have to get back to you on that! Cheers and every blessing.

May it be so. Blessed be and amen.