

C.L Fornari, July 5, 2020

## **Cultivating Joy and Renewal**

Some years ago when I was going through a rough time I had a very vivid dream. In this dream I was out in my garden, working in a large flowerbed. Suddenly, I felt a strong gust of wind and when I looked up I saw a towering black storm cloud approaching very rapidly. The wind tore my hat from my head and sent it sailing away.

Knowing that this storm would flatten all the tall flowers that were in the garden, I hoped I could save at least some of them. I quickly started cutting the tall stems in order to bring them indoors.

Minutes later I pushed into the house with a huge bouquet of flowers in my arms. The sky was dark gray now, the wind howled, and as I closed the door a heavy rain started to pour down.

The inside of the house was as dark as it was outdoors, but as I put the bouquet of flowers in a large vase on the table, the entire kitchen magically lit up with warm, golden light. The storm outside faded from my hearing and sight, and I was so delighted by this change that I laughed out loud.

And then I woke up.

This dream had been so vivid and colorful that it seemed real, and as I got out of bed I found myself thinking, "This is how I want to live my life. That in the face of a storm, instead of being fearful, I want to find a way to pick a beautiful bouquet."

When COVID-19 hit, I remembered this dream. But of course my mind immediately had several reactions to applying that big bouquet philosophy to the pandemic, and you might be thinking the same thing.

"How cliché – when you're given lemons, make lemonade." Yawn.

Are you saying to look on the bright side? When so many have died from this virus? Well that's not appropriate.

Worse, does this dream mean that you should ignore difficult situations or disregard potentially dangerous storms? By wanting to live my life this way, was I saying that by focusing on the pleasant and pretty things that the tempest and destruction will just go away?

I even hear Dana Carvey's Saturday Night live character, The Church Lady, sarcastically saying "Now isn't that special."

And yet that conviction I had on waking, that this dream was a blueprint for how I wanted to live, remains despite all of those voices and reactions.

First of all, this dream is a reminder about the importance of paying attention to beauty.

In the face of difficulties we shouldn't ignore the beautiful things that remain. There are so many wonderful, magical things to focus on in this world. Even with social distancing and sheltering in place. I've been prompted to consciously make a decision to stop throughout the day and find five things that are beautiful. I remind myself to turn off the news and discover books I haven't read, movies I haven't watched, and online presentations of what artists, musicians and dancers are creating.

Secondly, I think that dream was reminding me about the importance of hope.

In *Showing UP With Hope: a Plan for Facing Adversity* Anne Lamott writes:

"You would almost have to be nuts to be filled with hope in a world so rife with hunger, hatred, climate change, pollution, and pestilence, let alone the self-destructive or severely annoying behavior of certain people, both famous and just down the hall, none of whom we will name by name.

Yet I have boundless hope, most of the time. Hope is sometimes cranky optimism, trust, and confidence that those I love will be OK—that they will come through, whatever life holds in store. Hope is the belief that no matter how dire things look or how long rescue or healing takes, modern science in tandem with people's goodness and caring will boggle our minds, in the best way."

In a time when so many people are boggling our minds in disappointing, selfish and hateful ways, we need to stop and find some of that boundless hope that Anne talks about.

Frankly, you have to be a hopeful person if you are planting gardens. Despite having knowledge about plants and how they grow, access to far more landscape products than anyone needs, and the space to plant, successful gardens aren't a given. Some things thrive against all odds and others fail even when I've done everything right.

If a person doesn't have hope, they'd give up on planting after the first rabbit ate all their green beans, or when the fungus caused the lilies to wilt right as they started to open. To be a gardener means that you have to cultivate hope with the same care and attention you give your flowerbeds.

So for me, cultivating renewal and joy is largely about attention to beauty, and hope. That, and seeking out opportunities to laugh.

Anne Lamott wrote that “We need laughter in our lives.” She says that, “Laughter is carbonated holiness. It’s like the cavalry arriving to help us get our sense of humor back.”

Amen. We need to welcome the cavalry of humor.

We all know of houses or estates that have names. Downton Abby, Saint’s Rest, or Windswept, for example.

In seaside areas like where we live, it’s popular to have a quarterboard on some houses with handcarved names. I understand that on Nantucket there’s a house that belongs to a plastic surgeon and the quarterboard reads, Nip Tuck It.

Well, at the top of my driveway is a sign...a bit more funky than a quarterboard, that says what I’ve named our place on the Cape: Poison Ivy Acres.

Yes, I have poison ivy in abundance in my yard, and I’m constantly digging and pulling up small plants in my garden. But that’s not why I named this property Poison Ivy Acres.

First of all, I choose that name because it’s funny. When hearing it for the first time, people laugh, and as we were just remembering, laughter is important...or maybe crucial.

But I named the property poison ivy acres because it is a constant reminder to me that life not only contains the beautiful flowers, lovely shrubs and tasty vegetables we want to grow. In addition to all of that, life is filled with the unwanted and itchy. There are storms, droughts, pandemics, injustices and cruelties. And I’ve always told people that if we are totally embracing life, we must accept all of it even as we work to be rid of those injustices and cruelties. Ignoring racism doesn’t make it go away. Pretending that there is no pandemic doesn’t help it to vanish. In order to take action, we need to first say, yes, this is a part of life right now. So how can we make it better.

The word “cultivate” implies action. You aren’t standing back and just watching what grows. You aren’t foraging for whatever you come across. No, you’re actively working to make something grow and thrive.

So when that church lady character says, “Now isn’t that special,” we might respond, “Actually, it takes effort.” It takes being willing to gather good things together in the face of difficulties.

So as we circle our arms around life today – all of it, the question is this: in the face of life’s storms, current and future, how can we pay attention to beauty, hold onto hope, and laugh out loud. How many really big bouquets can we gather?