

Steam at Sunrise

By Christine Loughlin, OP

The hour of sunrise determines the route of the early ramble with our dog. September mornings afford enough light to saunter down the road through the conservation land to the Mill Brook which always communicates the amount of summer rainfall. No small trickle this year but a strong babble over the cement wall into the culvert under the road. One day last week the sun rose through a layer of soft purple-pink clouds. In the morning mist a column of steam funneled up in the neighbor's yard. The composting pile of wood chips from a felled tree had been cooking even in the coolness of a late summer's night.

In contrast, our four compost bins are slow cookers. We fill one bin at a time with the remnant beauty of flowerbeds and the depleted stalks from the vegetable garden, plus a variety of yard weeds and waste in all forms. One year we created a ritual for the stations of our garden ~ fashioning a humble meditation site near each phase of plant life from the hives with our pollinators to the rotting residue of a season's work. We set out a lawn chair near a bin and encircled it with candles. The labor of life in all forms ~ sun energy and water vapor, soil and insects, microbes and the mystery of death and rebirth. Impermanence marks our way. Perhaps it is the snow shoveled path to the compost pile in frozen winter that awakens the dreamer in us more than any other activity we engage.

Our Fall Food Fest gathered in a wonderful group of folk grounded in a deepening sense of the world we are becoming. Special guest speaker, Jim Ward, of Ward's Berry Farm, set up his table under the tent canopy and displayed an astonishing array of "noble" vegetables. First, the huge tear-shaped Blue Hubbard squash and then the Georgia Candy Roaster. Food staples of the northeast, great for storage that will survive in the root cellar long after the rest of the harvest has been consumed. These hard-shelled plants, utilized by Native peoples in a variety of ways, have again become popular as gourds, but relegated now to ornamental status. Our appetite is no longer limited to a season or to a place. Ironically, as our garden became global, our food choices diminished. Fast and easy foods fit our life-style. What a delight to see a group of friends from Stoughton ask to lug home the Hubbard. Jim had instructed that smashing on the ground is the best way to break open this thick-skinned vegetable. After the women shatter and share the sections, they promised to bring back the seeds so we can plant Hubbard squash in our garden come spring.

The *salad toss* is the highlight of the food fest ~ no doubt since the salad making indicates the potluck dinner is soon to follow! The story of four local gardens and their industrious gardeners were the "ingredients" for the *salad toss*. Marge told her story of growing up in the 50's with a garden integrated into family living.

Her father labored among the beans and potatoes priding himself on his produce; her mother matched that pride in her art of cooking what the garden offered. Marge never planted or weeded. Yet, the conversation and the convergence of the activities that shaped her worldview led her to conclude—*gardening is what grown-ups do*. Today she gardens, cooks, dries, cans, freezes, and more. It's what *adults do!*

Laurita and Carol tend the garden at New Dawn Earth Center. In her ingenuity, Laurita could immediately see—*this garden needs a work force! Let's invite others to stake out a plot and help with the watering and weeding, the seeding and reaping*. You can't imagine what Laurita and Carol tossed into their salad bowl ~ from the raised beds of the health care center, the children's garden, and the family plots that give new meaning to *community garden*.

When presented with an opportunity to purchase a lot behind their house, Denise and Shari pooled their resources and made a generous choice on behalf of the two-leggeds and the four-leggeds, the buzzing and the crawling ones in their neighborhood. If weeds could grow in abundance on that land so too could cultivated species. Sure they had spoken and waved to neighbors over the years, but this past spring they went up the street, door to door, passing out flyers inviting neighbors to create a community garden. Seven families signed up. They became fence builders and tillers, seed selectors and soil experts. When the youngest gardener, two year old Noah, tilts his head way back to look at his seven foot high sunflowers, he may just be making the same assumption Marge made 50 years ago—gardening is what adults do.

The fourth group of gardeners, members of the Universalist Society of Franklin, came with a formal builder's map and landscape design. There in the middle of that designed landscaped lawn a garden had been planted.

A whole new meaning to "religious education." The principle of the sacred web thrives in the garden where one encounters the surrender of life becoming the source of energy for other forms. A church garden is the perfect place for any "universalist" to reflect—*what's my life energy feeding?*

The salad bearers processed to the buffet table completing the potluck offerings from local gardens and kitchens. As the line queued to the table Linda delighted in reaching into her purse and pulling out three pictures of her beautiful granddaughter. "I notice something," she said. "I hunger for her when I am away from her." Such yearning is native to our genetic coding; eons before we humans appeared in Earth's story, an ache for the future promise stirred. Life dreams life into becoming. The salad makers, the farmers, and all those gathered hunger to shape a future for the offspring of every living form.

No local food event would be a "fest" without a representative from that organization whose very mission is inventing the ways to get local food to local markets. Kate Howell, Marketing Director for Red Tomato, Inc. displayed great poster with pictures of regional farmers and the innovative marketing containers for heirlooms, peaches, and apples. To demonstrate the genius and vision of Red Tomato, Kate shared the story of the eco-apple cooperative endeavor. To deal with numerous pests that challenged apple growers in our somewhat humid climate, over the years farmers increased the use of pesticides. We all recall the crisis this caused more than a decade ago when the residue from Alar resulted in an apple juice product not safe for children. Red Tomato, Inc. led the effort to organize apple growers, communicate information and techniques, share the trials and errors of integrated pest management. Today there's a whole new business of eco-apple orchards in the northeast. Look for the red tomato label in Whole Foods, Hannafords, Roche Brothers and more!

As September opens before us, we celebrate our 25th year in reading the 'signs of the times' and responding in mission and ministry with a grace that invites participation in bringing forth an ecological age, a time when human ingenuity will be in service to the Whole. There is a story in the Tradition that tells of an older woman in the temple, constant and reflective. One day as she watches young couples offer their newborn for ritual blessing, she senses one that holds great promise. Like Linda, this woman longed to surrender the ideas and institutions that did not support the unfolding potential before her.

The steam arose like incense from the compost pile, an ancient oak transforming. To mark our turn into the second quarter century, we notice potential all around us. Our future will be marked with new partners, a renewed promise. Our past flourishings decompose, activating a rising energy toward new form. We celebrate the foresight of Red Tomato, Inc. They labored to create a local food brokering system before fossil fuels and safe food issues became household

concerns. The way forward is always shaped by the generation most suited to bear witness to the demands of a time.

The poet Gary Snyder wrote: Once you find a place that feels halfway right, and it seems time, settle down with a vow not to move any more. Take a look at one place on earth, one circle of people, one realm of beings.

Settling down in a place doesn't mean things won't change. It means that we need to change with all the beings around us. Change is the one constant that keeps a living system active. We long to enhance the potential born in our time. The promise of an ecological age will be fulfilled when circles of people, the new generation, set their hands and hearts *to the plow and hold on*. Our task is to recognize those hands and hearts and provide the space where the *not yet* becomes the now. ■ CL