My Piece of Paradise

The love of the wilderness is more than a hunger for what is always beyond reach; it is also an expression of loyalty to the earth, the earth which bore us and sustains us, the only home we shall ever know, the only paradise we ever need — if only we had the eyes to see. Original sin, the true original sin, is the blind destruction for the sake of greed of this natural paradise which lies all around us—if only we were worthy of it.

Edward Abbey

Many years ago I read this quote by Edward Abbey, and if I remember correctly it was credited with being a slogan for Sierra Club International, an environmental activist group concerned with the well being of our planet. I have recalled it often, because it speaks to how I feel about the planet. It also speaks to the disdain I hold for those who would foul our planet for economic benefit. Thus, I have no problem with the concept that those who would do so are indeed sinners on the most fundamental of levels. The forest and wilderness have been a part of my life for as long as I can remember. My brothers and I grew up playing in a forest, and perhaps that is where my love of nature and my passion for sustainability had its origins. Maybe that is why this quote has always resonated within me since I first read it.

I have been often troubled in my life, and to tell the truth, most often it was I that caused those troubles. These troubles would take my mind to very dark places of despair and hopelessness. I feel overwhelmed until I can commune with Nature and the Creator who made her. After slowing down a bit I pay attention to seemingly simple things:
listening to the sound of water as it splashes and flows; watching debris as it is caught in the centrifugal force of an eddy, swirling around the outside, moving in ever-tightening circles, until at last it is overcome and sinks beneath the surface. There is something to the eternal rhythm of nature that assures me that “this too shall pass.” Most importantly, I believe I am closer to God when I am in tune with nature.

To me it seems foolish to neglect the richness of the bounty the Earth has to offer. My passion for sustainability is my attempt to understand how best to reap Earth's bounty without pillaging her. This has led me to live in Benton, Arkansas, a town populated by mostly rural people with country roots. I am very lucky to be able to have chickens while still living within the city limits. I also have honeybees, three fruit trees, four blueberry bushes, a fifty-foot row of strawberries, and four grapevines. In addition to all of this, I have close to a thousand square feet of garden space and am trying to establish a closed ecosystem known as aquaponics, which is really a combination of aquaculture and hydroponics, aquaculture being the farming of fish and hydroponics being the water-farming of plants. Aquaponics is an attempt to blend the natural waste bio-filters found in water with the nutritional demands of fruits and vegetables. It is an intensely managed closed-loop system where there are no waste products, and all water is recirculated. I use almost no chemical inputs, except when they are necessary, and I am very conscientious about what and how much is used. I want to use the Earth's natural processes to fight undesirable outcomes rather than use more pesticides and man-made chemicals that I believe are harmful to humans and to our Home. My efforts are an expression of “loyalty to this Paradise” we have been given. These efforts are an attempt to take Nature's own processes and use them to feed us without using things like airplanes
to spray sundry poisons and chemicals into the air while flying over crops causing, all sorts of delayed problems that are unhealthy for all of us, our Planet included.

“One man's junk is another man's treasure.” I think this is a fitting adage to describe how people feel about “my little garden of Eden.” I do not wear or require the wearing of fig leafs, but it is still a paradise to me. There will never be any of Mr. Abbey's “true original sin” there. It is a place of abundance. A great deal of the food my family members and I eat comes from this simple garden. I hope when I get to heaven it is as wonderful as my little garden. It appears unkempt: it is grown up around the edges with weeds and various grasses, along with the occasional volunteer vegetable plant sticking a leaf up here and there. It is that way on purpose, because it serves as a filter for my nutrient laden compost to prevent nitrogen run off into the waterways during heavy rains. When the weeds grow tall, I pull them and feed them to the chickens. Some can see the awesome wonder of nature providing her bounty in a manner that is sustainable and agree with me about it being a little slice of paradise. I cannot tell of the times people have eaten the fruit of my garden and commented on how it was the best tasting fruit they can remember.

I have found few of the gated community, suburbanite types of our species that admire my little garden. These would include the McMansionites, who would torture any blade of grass that dared not conform and remain in its duly appointed place. These buyers of ornamentals, or fruit trees engineered to not bear fruit such as the Bradford Pear Tree, often pay a higher price than I paid for trees that bear some of the sweetest peaches I ever tasted. Ironically, my fruit-bearing Peach trees also have spectacular blooms in the spring and just as many as any ornamental. These people see a jungle that needs a bush-
hog, some weed-killer, a heavy dose or ten of insecticide, and a visit from animal control to dispose of my precious hens. I pity them.

How can one watch a hive of honeybees and not marvel at the incredible organized and complex behaviors of such tiny creatures? A beehive is such a small thing yet so vital to our existence. Without them, who or what is going to pollinate our plants so they might bring forth fruit? The bees also share their “fruit” with us, honey, which is the main ingredient in the nectar of the gods. Honey is a wonderful remedy for some types of pollen related allergies, and really good eating. We can also harvest wax from time to time. Think of the old saying, “Mind your own beeswax!” it is a natural water repellent that is great for protecting all sorts of surfaces from moisture. You can even make your own hypo-allergenic earplugs for those who suffer from swimmers ear. The phrase “make a bee-line,” which means to go straight to a point, is a reference to the honeybees returning from pollen gathering. While the ones who leave fly away in concentric circles, the returning bees always fly in a straight line to their home. I would be remiss if I did not mention the “waggle dance” of the bee. When the hive gets full and the season is right, the bees will often split a colony. When the scouts return from their search for a new home, they take turns dancing. They dance with their tail pointing towards the new home, and the intensity of the dance is directly related to the suitability of the new home. The more suitable the home is, the more intense the dance, or the waggle of the tail. To use the slang of the day, “It is way cool dude.”

Consider the lowly chicken. The chicken egg is one of the cheapest sources of protein that can be found. My chickens have a cage, but it is over three hundred square feet for seven hens and one proud rooster. They have a pretty good life. They get to eat
culled garden fruit that often has some pest hidden inside. A treat within a treat for them. The protein inside is like chocolate to a toddler and reminiscent of the old tootsie roll pop advertisement: How many pecks does it take to get the worm from inside the tomato? They do a lot of work for me in the winter by eating the bugs that are trying to overwinter in my raised beds, and after they eat the bugs, they leave the waste portions to fertilize next year’s crops. I make sure they get plenty of the right food by feeding them a game-bird feed that is formulated to feed animals that will be released into the wild and is made up of non-chemically treated food stocks. (Organic chicken feed if you will). It costs extra, but at fifteen cents an egg, I can afford it and they deserve it. Like my grandchildren, my “girls” love their treats.

We eat the eggs, and in the spring, my grandchildren and I hatch some chicks to keep the flock young and vibrant. We have to cull the roosters around three months old. We harvest them, and my grandson usually does the honors. It may seem heartless to some, but these animals sustain us. We treat them with respect and give them good lives while they are here. If we did not harvest all but one rooster, they would eventually kill each other. That is the origin of the phrase “pecking order.” I should note that we segregate the chickens we are going to eat, so we do not develop a relationship with them, or give them names. My grandchildren do name the laying hens and Daddy Rooster, or as my granddaughter calls him, Mr. Bossy; my hen with feathered legs they call Pantsy. We harvest the chickens by decapitating them with a razor sharp meat cleaver. I was a bit concerned about allowing my grandson to kill them, for one I like having two hands, but mostly I did not know how he would handle it psychologically. Death and dying are a part of life, and if we eat meat somebody has to kill animals. I
thought it might be best if I was there for his first time to kill an animal to make sure we discussed what happened, and be sure he was not traumatized or somehow damaged by the incident. There is a reason for the saying, “running around like a chicken with its head cut off.” We saw it his very first time. The chicken was flopping around, and it was a humorous sight to see. My grandchildren literally rolled on the ground with laughter. I was somewhat concerned. I do not want to raise a sociopath. I was pondering how to deal with all that on the way to put the chicken in the pot for de-feathering when my seven year old grandson said, “Pawpaw, I think that is one of the funniest things I ever saw, but it is kind of sad if you are a chicken.”

I told him, “Yes it is, but our chickens had a much better life than chickens we buy at the store, and they were raised healthier and were better for us. If we were going to eat a chicken, a chicken had to die. Who killed it was really did not matter.” I also felt very proud as he demonstrated compassion, a most worthy and honorable trait that is very Christ-like in my un-biased grandfatherly opinion. It was a great teaching moment about responsibility. If you eat meat, you are responsible for the death of that animal. We should respect the life the animal gave for us, by treating it right during its life, ensuring a quick and painless death, and thanking God for the food which sustains us. After that first time, there has not been much laughter. Harvest is now a chore that must be done; only it is a bit more solemn than harvesting a tomato.

There is something miraculous about placing a seed in the ground and watching it as it presses its way towards the sun. Like most things in nature, the mission of the plant is to reproduce. The first commandment given in the Judeo-Christian tradition is after all to be fruitful, multiply, and replenish the earth. As a living organism the garden is in a
constant state of change. Crops like okra grow to over ten feet tall in my garden. It does
not take a mathematics genius to figure out that it grows over one inch a day during the
heat of the summer. The growth is imperceptible, but the ruler does not lie. Maybe it is
watching me, waiting on me to turn away, so it can shoot up a bit, only to stop when I
turn back to look. It becomes a gardener and okra version of the children's game of red-
light/green light. My garden is simply my recreation of many of the processes that occur
in nature.

This recreation forces me to tune into the rhythms of nature. I must feed the
chickens, sow the seeds, water the plants and harvest the foods, and all these things must
be done in their due seasons. Nature does not move fast, but when it is her time she
demands that you render due attention. If you neglect her, she will let the fruits she has
prepared for you spoil and return to the earth, perhaps to give you another chance next
year. Once tuned in to the timeless and eternal, the worries and cares of the day seem
much less significant. There is the task at hand, tomorrow will take care of itself, and
yesterday is gone. It is odd that being forced into the moment, focused on the task at
hand, brings hope that the future is brighter. My garden makes me proud, and if
I treat her right she provides some of the most wonderful, wholesome, natural foods on
the planet. I love my garden; to me it is a paradise on earth.