

Being Thankful...from the ground up

If we have a national feast day it is surely Thanksgiving Day. Not just the food and the gathering clan, but the stories. Those stories re-ignite the habit of being thankful. There is so much negative contentiousness permeating the very atmosphere that being thankful requires a deliberate focusing of attention.

When we count our blessings we usually start with family. Many family members have long left our lives but in remembering them we feel the gratitude for those interactions that enriched our childhood. Did you have a beloved grandfather who broke off the thorns before he gave you the rose?

Friends are blessings: so often we have neighbors who become friends, reassuring us that the world is replete with undeserved kindness. Sometimes we are overwhelmed by the accusations of misdemeanors, big and little failures: we read stories of crime and punishment or, more depressing, crime and no punishment. At such times we need stories to cheer us.

Around the Thanksgiving table is not the only place for old and new stories. Stories can spring out of a chance encounter in the grocery store or in a letter from a friend. Reading the fine print in an environmental publication I came across a name that may be familiar to those of you who remember when the Smithsonian's vessel was anchored in the Ware River a decade or so ago. Walter Adey, a scientist at the Smithsonian Institution has found a way to use algae as an anti-pollutant. That is surely finding the good in an evil!

Algae's affinity for tainted water can actually be used to clean it. As the account went, "Adey's algae-covered "turf-scrubbers" have been set in contaminated water where they are removing nutrients from the Suwannee River watershed." In addition, the phosphorus and nitrogen-rich algae can be harvested from the screen and used as fertilizer. When applied to plants, the algae degrades as the plants grow unlike the usual fertilizer that leaches nutrients into the groundwater. As a result, the water near algae-fertilizer fields is cleaner.

Another small story was an award given by the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society – very old and prestigious as such groups go. The PHS awarded a Certificate of Merit to a nun, sister Margaret McKenna, for her garden and fruit tree grove. Not a traditional monastery garden but a drug and alcohol rehabilitation program garden, New Jerusalem Now.

The garden is managed by those people recovering from substance abuse. In the words of the PHS judges, "...the garden is a true oasis, producing a bounty of vegetables and donating much to those in need...returning productive people to the community." Stories can bring us pleasure and hope without being important or dramatic. Often small is beautiful. There was an elderly farmer in Western Africa where the desert was continuing to claim the land and other farmers had left. When asked why he, too, did not leave, he answered, "My father is buried here."

By allowing the native sprouted tree seedlings to remain in his fields, he protected his crop. Trees mixed with crops help anchor the soil and deter the wind from blowing away the precious seed. Over time, fertility increased and slowly others followed his example, encouraging one small miracle after another to take root.

You do not have to be a tree hugger to be thankful for the largest US climate action in our history that demonstrated quietly, politely in Washington against the controversial 1700-mile Keystone XL oil sands pipeline. Bill McKibbin initiated it but he was seconded by scores of ranchers, religious leaders scientists and students. The privately held company TransCanada is already responsible for 12 oil spills in the US in 2011.

The strip mining of the Alberta tar sands has been an environmental disaster. It takes 8800 pounds of earth and tar sands plus an average of 155 gallons of fresh water to produce one barrel of tar sands oil that, once refined, will fill half a tank of a Chevy Suburban.