



Spirit & Place

STORIES



Blueberries

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RELATIONAL ASPECT OF HARVEST

My sisters and I are grumpy. Complaining half-heartedly, I push my t-shirt sleeves onto my shoulders and shade my eyes from the vicious sun, dead overhead—wondering at the thin layer of sweat that materialized over my whole body the instant I stepped outside. I am handed a clean, empty plastic ice cream bucket, the kind with a wire handle.

I groan a bit, seeing that the shrubs our grandmother is pointing out are in the unprotected open, leaving us prey to the rays that you swear have fingers. The heat is painful, and I listen as my freckled skin tells me this might be the day I actually burst into flames. We face our target: bushes brimming with ripe blueberries, awaiting our pilfering.

I didn't fully appreciate, back in 1980s south Mississippi, what my grandmother had created in her backyard. Nor did I understand the lengths she went to preserve everything that grew on her small-town lot. After blueberry season would come pecan season, and while we grumbled just as readily at our task of shelling, at least we could do it on the shade of her porch.

There's a funny thing about these memories: I consider them fond. How is that?

I can't say that at the time of my harvesting chores I called them a gift. Take the blueberries. Did I realize they only ripened once a year? Was I aware that in any given year, depending on rainfall, the harvest might be meager? Had I ever compared the flavor of a freshly-picked blueberry with one that came from a clamshell in the supermarket? Or, did it even occur to me that what I was picking was an entirely different thing from the chemically-manufactured "blueberry-flavored pieces" that dotted our box of muffin mix?

I can only deduce what has happened. To my actual memories of heat, work, and perceived obligation, I've added nostalgia and awareness. I wasn't picking blueberries alone on the side of the road; I was doing it with the grandparent I knew best. But it would be nearsighted to assume that this memory is about my grandmother alone. I have lots of memories of her—from playing with her 1950s costume jewelry to our trip to Disney World. But the memories I recall most often are the ones involving food. Food

from her garden, that we picked and shelled; food that we saw from earth to table.

There is something in us that wants to know our food. It's not coincidence that I can't remember much of what I ate as a child—most of it came from a box, prepared by myself and a microwave. My brain didn't find the process interesting enough to reserve a wrinkle in its honor. But when I was intimately involved in gathering the bounty of a plant, my gray-matter started taking notes. It could have been the effort involved—my perception of a fat, sweet blueberry as reward could come only after baking a few hours in the grudge-bearing Mississippi heat. It could be the sensuous nature of the harvest—dirty fingernails and clothes wet with sweat, the steady sound of the handmade pecan cracker—sending five-alarm messages to the brain that something important was happening.

My guess is that it's both of those things; but at heart, perhaps it's the relational aspect of the harvest—an experience I rarely knew. The way our generation learned to eat is downright promiscuous. We know so little of our food—the one thing we're responsible for choosing to nourish our bodies. Our relationship with the food we eat should be more than reading calories on boxes and counting servings on the Food Pyramid—these activities do little more than turn our meals into something we calculate instead of savor.

Even as a city-dweller, with not much more to my garden than a few late-planted tomatoes, there are ways for my family to know our food. A once-a-week trip to a farmer's market allows us to look the grower of our food in the eye, even when we can't grow it ourselves. We can bring home some of our vegetables, not in plastic bags, but with dirt and roots still attached. We can get our goods from a CSA (Community Supported Agriculture), where every week brings a box of surprises, forcing us to look up a new vegetable and get to know it better before eating it for dinner.

And when those options aren't available or affordable, my kids and I can dig dirt in the backyard, plant some seeds, and see what comes up. And hope that by the time we are somewhere close to my grandmother's age, we've learned something.