

Picking blackberries: an adventure in simple living

Rich Heffern | Jul. 7, 2009 NCR Today

It all started in the blackberry patch. One hot July day when I was a kid growing up in Missouri I was taken to an overgrown pasture outside of town where gallons of this delicious wild fruit hung, free for the taking, on thorn-bristling vines that drooped heavily toward the earth. We filled our pails with berries until our hands were stained dark blue and hauled them home to use in pies, cobblers, and for homemade ice cream.

I can remember being spellbound beyond all reason, delighted and pleased that the local countryside had provided this bounteous harvest without any sowing or cultivation on my part, but just by means of its unheeded daily comings and goings: the spring rains had fallen, the June sunshine happened. On those long July afternoons the fruit had ripened while the meadowlarks sang and the bluebirds warbled nearby.

I have never forgotten the lesson of those pastures, long since gone to shopping malls. The Earth takes care of us. She provides a pantry from which we draw our daily sustenance.

The flame of enthusiasm for simple living, I'm sure, was struck from such childhood experiences. It was fanned to life by other happenings. I remember when my mother bequeathed to me a venerable old Dutch oven that had been in the family for several generations. Cooking soup in a sturdy vessel that my grandmother had used and her mother before her provided rich satisfactions that all the expensive cookware in the best department stores couldn't duplicate.

On a trip through the Southwest as a teen I can remember an afternoon when I spotted the jewelry-bedecked and colorfully dressed Navajo shepherders and their simple dwellings made of native wood and stone, at home amid the dazzling splendor of that redrock country. Again, a spellbinding fascination and a beckoning call.

The first time a teacher in Catholic grade school told us about Francis of Assisi, I rang like a bell. I understood the passion of this medieval man for simplicity; his urge to cultivate an intimacy with all of creation by limiting his wants and satisfying his needs in simpler ways. Later in life, reading books by and about other such simple lives as Henry David Thoreau, Dorothy Day, or Gandhi added to my understanding and heartened me to take further plunges.

On the long holiday weekend just past, I spent Saturday morning looking for blackberries on a Missouri Ozark hillside. This year wasn't a particularly good one there for the wild fruit. Too little rain came in mid-June when the fruit begins to set and ripen. I came home rewarded though, because I'd heard a dozen different birds singing and saw a flock of bright yellow goldfinches feeding on sumac berries on the hillside. I got lots of exercise and fresh air.

Again, the adventure of simple living paid rich dividends.

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