

“Temples of the Heart”

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Reading

Buddhist teacher Joseph Goldstein tells this story of a time he lived in India. He was there to practice meditation.

He writes:

Anybody who spends any time at all in India must come to terms with the countless . . . people begging. It is just part of reality there, . . . I was in the bazaar one day buying some fruit. There were a lot of beggars around, and one little boy was holding out his hand. He looked hungry, so I took one of the oranges I had bought and gave it to him. It felt good to respond to him. But he just took the orange and walked away. Not a smile, not a nod, not a thank-you, nothing. Only when he did that, . . . did I see clearly that some part of my . . . generosity, my motive, had wanted an acknowledgment. I had not been expecting effusive thanks. . . , but I had wanted something. And this child just took the orange and walked away.

*from Transforming the Mind, Healing the
World*

Sermon: “Temples of the Heart”

Her name was Gussie, Gussie Brock,
but to the members of her Unitarian congregation
she was simply and lovingly known as “Gussie the Viking.”

As my colleague Robert Fulghum, her one-time minister, tells it,
“Long ago her Norse ancestors migrated west
in open wooden longboats across the North Atlantic
to settle in Iceland” in the ninth century.¹

“The restless gene in Viking blood must have remained potent
because, when Canada opened [the] western prairies to homesteaders
after World War I, Gussie’s family left Reykjavik

¹ Robert Fulghum, *What On Earth Have I Done? Stories, Observations, and Affirmations*, St. Martin’s Press, 2007.

and immigrated to. . . Alberta
to settle near. . . Medicine Hat on the South Saskatchewan River.”

“They dug in on raw land, built a sod house, and went to work farming”
in “harsh country.” Through “mean winters.
Hot summers. Relentless winds. [And] drought.”

It was a “tough life” in “hard times. Matched by strong people.”

“[Yet,] somehow they hung on. But just barely.”

Many Christmases ago, Fulghum asked the members of his congregation
to share holiday stories from their lives,
which he planned to compile into his Christmas Eve sermon.

(A brilliant idea that I need to copy for the future!)

The one that moved him most was Gussie’s.

Looking back almost eighty years, she said that:

life was so desperate out there on the prairies,
and we were so poor that the most we could ever expect for Christmas
was to be alive, warm and [with] something to eat.

The worst Christmas of all came after a week of heavy snow.
Firewood was scarce.

We were burning dried cow pies for heat
and huddling together in a heap under all our blankets
in all our clothes to keep from freezing to death.

We were living off boiled potatoes and turnips,
and [it looked like] there might not be enough to last until spring. . .

On that Christmas morning my father got up and made a fire as usual.

He was a solemn, stubborn, hard-working man.
We knew he loved us, but like most Icelanders
he didn’t express his feelings openly.

It took all he had just to keep us alive.
But he did that with all his heart and soul and strength.

My mother was ill—too sick to get up or eat.

When father called us kids to the fire,
we didn't expect much—least of all any [gifts].

[But,] as we crawled sleepy-eyed and shivering out of bed,
we stopped, astonished.

For there in the dim light we saw on the table—an orange.
A single orange on a white napkin.
We were dumbstruck.
An orange. An ORANGE!

Out here in the middle of nowhere in the middle of winter.
An honest-to-God orange,
glowing in the dim light like a golden ball.

“Merry Christmas,” he said, “the orange is for you [all].”

We wondered, “how on earth did he get that orange?
Where? [And] when? [And] how long had he had it?”

It was [a] two days' ride on horseback to the railroad line.
Three days to the nearest village.

He was [surely] capable of doing something like that,
but we wanted. . . details.

We begged him to tell us. But all he would say was, “It's a miracle.”
And we might as well believe [it], because there it was.

We sat still as he so carefully peeled the orange
and divided the sections to give each child an equal share,
along with pieces of the peel.

The smell filled the room.
Our mouths watered in anticipation.
We were almost afraid to touch the miracle in front of us.

And then, oh my, what a moment, we began to eat the orange,
the juice dripping on our fingers and down our chins.

I can still taste it. [It was] the sweetest thing I ever ate.

[But, then,] my oldest brother suddenly said, “Wait.”

He pointed at Dad.

We saw that Dad have given all of the orange to us, the children.
Every bit. [Leaving] none for him[self].

So my brother took a knife and cut a piece of his orange
and placed it in front of my father.
And the rest of us did the same.

My father divided his share in two parts.
“These are for your mother when she’s [well],” he said,
and then we watched as, slowly,
like a man taking holy communion,
he ate his share of the orange.

It was the only time I ever saw my father cry.

As the years went by, the story of the orange became a family legend,
told by generations of the family.

The kids always said the orange “was the finest gift [they] ever got.”

[But, our father said it was different for him.]

He said his best Christmas present ever
was the moment when his children noticed he was without
and gave back to him part of what he had given to them.

* * *

I suspect we all have our own oranges.

At least I hope each of us has gathered up the moments of our lives
that tell of gifts freely given, gifts gratefully received,
and gifts shared from the abundance of our own being.

Those unexpected moments that enrich our lives
because we never really saw them coming.

What Gussie’s father called a miracle.
What some might define as grace.
Or what we might simply see as love in action.

But the only miracle behind that improbable orange
was the love of a parent who carried it in his very human hands
across the hard odds of an Alberta winter
to place it on that table for those whom he loved.

That orange was nothing less than an act of devotion,
and Gussie and her siblings knew it.

And, led by love, they responded in kind.

It is a powerful parable.

* * *

And it causes me to wonder what oranges have touched your life,
and maybe even changed its course?

What acts of kindness, or grace, or gratitude have so moved your heart
that the only meaningful response you could make with your life
was to give back something of yourself?

Often I find that when I ask people
why they do what they do in the world –
there's usually some sort of orange in the story:

the mention of a mentor who inspired them
beyond what they had thought were their limits;

the kindness of a stranger
who in a moment of need changed everything;

or the precious opportunity they would never have had,
had it not come wrapped up in someone else's sacrifice.

Whatever the moments you might name,
I believe they are worth paying attention to, because very often
these are the defining moments of all our days on this earth—
the ones that give shape to how we answer questions
at the very heart of being human:

Are our lives being lived in service to others and the greater good?

Are we known not only for being generous,
but for a generosity of spirit?

In how we spend our days,
are we striving to repay the debt of gratitude
we owe for the great gift of life itself?

I pose such personal and prying questions,
because they are the ones that matter most in the end,
the ones that will cause us to look back with either satisfaction or regret,
the ones by which the meaning of our lives will ultimately be measured.

But lest answering for our lives cause any of us to despair,
let us not forget that the sun rose again this morning, and we with it,
to take hold of another day and to make of it what we will.

Today is what we have, and though we might wish it otherwise,
nothing more is ever promised to any of us.

The sober truth has always been
that we make a life out of what we do with our days.

And that's why our oranges matter—
because so much of what we make of ourselves on this path through life
is an unfolding response to whatever has come our way,
the improbable blessings and the bitter heartbreak, too.

And at every point along the way, we face the choice
to decide what we will make of it all,
to decide what will garner our life's precious energy and attention,
to decide whether we will be consumed with life's hardness
or with an abiding appreciation for life's bittersweet turns,
with all their mayhem, and miracle, and mystery, too.

Over and again through each of our lives,
we have been given oranges.

We can call them different things:
education, a stretch of good health, unconditional love,
a roof over our heads, or the affection of our nearest and dearest,
but they are all oranges, placed on the altar of our hearts.

And so we must ask ourselves:
how can we possibly repay such good fortune?

How can we give back from what we've been given?

How can we respond to the gift of life
that has been ours from the day we were born?

The answer is, I believe, that we give back something of ourselves;
we build temples of the heart that make a difference in the lives of others—
and may even endure after we are long gone.

Such temples of the heart are built out of gratitude and generosity.
In other words, they're built with oranges.

So I invite you to take a moment
to reflect on a particularly meaningful orange in your life—
some gift or blessing you received, without earning or deserving it.

SILENT REFLECTION

If you want to change your life and this world for good,
make the connection between your gratitude
and the ways you give of yourself,
not just today, but every day,
knowing that the work of the world
is far beyond what any one of us can do,
but within reach if we all do our part.

In that spirit, I leave you with these words
from the remarkable Oscar Romero, the Archbishop of San Salvador,
who was assassinated while presiding over the mass
because of his outspoken support of the poor:

This is what we are about.
We plant seeds that will one day grow.
We water seeds that are already planted,
 knowing that they hold future promise.
We lay foundations that will need further development.
We provide the yeast that produces effects beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything,
 and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.

This enables us to do something and do it very well.

It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning,
a step along the way,

an opportunity for. . . grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results. . . .

[For,] we are prophets of a future not our own.

And, so we are.

Amen.