

An Extravagance of Roses
Sunday May 3, 2015

My family and I spent April vacation in Disney World. Yes, I enjoyed the Haunted Mansion, Pirates of the Caribbean, the safari at Animal Kingdom, the croissant and the glass of Bordeaux in Epcot's World Showcase, and meeting Phineas and Ferb, Oliver and Miles' (and Chuck's and my) favorite Disney cartoon characters. But even better was the chance to spend time together without anything we "should" be doing other than enjoying ourselves. And the hardest part of returning home for all of us has been the return to all the "shoulds." I wish I could keep them from ruling my life in ordinary time too but once again they've taken over: I should catch up on all the laundry... I should clean the bathroom... I should go to the dump.... I should call my aunt I should rake the lawn... Do you have a list of should too? And what would you rather be doing?:.... walking on the beach... curling up with a mystery... meeting a friend for coffee.... taking a nap? Sometimes when I am torn between the shoulds and my desires, a piece of doggerel from the children's novel *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* comes into my head:

"When Joy and Duty clash /
Let Duty go to smash."

Rebecca comes up with this verse when her teacher assigns her to write a composition on Joy and Duty. Her teacher criticizes the sentiment, so Rebecca switches it:

"When Joy and Duty clash/
'Tis Joy must go to smash."

Although her teacher still criticizes the lyric, she now approves the sentiment.

Kate Douglas Wiggin, the author of *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*, spent most of her life in a small town in Maine, not far from Saco, where I served in my first church. As I learned during my years there, that philosophic judgment, that duty takes precedent over joy, is still wide-spread. The New England way, inherited from the Calvinists who are our spiritual forebears, is to do one's duty. They, and we in our turn, are governed by the work ethic. To be practical, to be sensible, to be reasonable are the qualities of New England. Much of the tension in the novel comes from Rebecca's un-New England-like qualities: she is fanciful and imaginative, a girl of strong passions and dramatic gestures. But Rebecca's aunts, who are raising her, cannot see virtue in anything but duty. They are continually trying to turn Rebecca into a practical, responsible, prosaic young woman. Yet even in New England, duty does not always have the last word. For almost every house, even the fictional home of Rebecca's aunts, has its flowers; and what is the growing of flowers but a gesture of joy?

May Sarton, another Maine writer and gardener, also linked gardening with rebellion against the tyranny of the practical. As we heard in her poem "March-Mad," she described the time of winter bordering on spring as a time that

sends us to seed catalogues
to bury our starved eyes and noses
in an extravagance of roses,
and order madly at this season
when we have had enough of reason.

As if she had been reading this same poem – or had just lived through a window like this past one, Jamaica Kinkaid, another New England gardener, wrote in the *New Yorker* one Spring about the extravagance of roses she had ordered the year before from seed catalogues:

The dimensions of my foray into rose-growing were unknown to me until the beginning of April, when the rose-bushes started arriving; by early May, there was a total of thirty three bushes. I had not ordered them all at once; the excess came about because last winter was so long and cold, and I had so much time to stare at catalogues that I lost track of how much I had already ordered, and I sometimes made up, without meaning to, two or three schemes for the same spot in the garden... When the rosebushes began to arrive, I had not yet prepared the ground properly for them, because it was still freezing and snowing. So they were badly mistreated before planting... All the roses did well anyway.

Or I think of that other extravagant New England gardener, Miss Rumphius, whose story we told in a service last Spring. When she was a small girl, her grandfather would tell her that when she grew up, she must do something to make the world more beautiful. Many years later, when she had retired to a cottage on the coast of Maine, she admired the lupines which spread throughout her garden after an especially hard winter. She decided to spread beauty by ordering bushels of lupine seeds and planting them on her walks and bike rides around the town. Her neighbors must have thought she was wasteful – if not crazy – but they did not know, as she did, as May Sarton and Jamaica Kincaid know, the value of the extravagant gesture of joy.

In their knowledge they remind me of the woman in a strange story told by the gospel writer Mark. As he tells it, Jesus was at a dinner party, when a woman who had not been invited walked in. She carried an alabaster jar containing an expensive perfumed ointment. Imagine a bottle of Joy which costs \$800 per ounce. Without a word, she went up to Jesus and poured the ointment out onto him. The other guests at the dinner were shocked at her wastefulness – they knew by the scent just how expensive this perfume was. “This ointment could have been sold for more than \$15,000 and the money given to the poor,” they scolded her. But Jesus didn’t criticize her. He told them to leave her alone and scolded his friends for missing the point. For, he said, “you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish, but you will not always have me...”

Wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.” But it hasn’t worked that way.

Though the story has been remembered as Jesus predicted, the woman has not been held up as a model to follow. More often, the attitude of the people at the table has won out.

For they hold up a view which seems to come naturally to us as well. Like them, we tend to view the extravagant gesture with distrust and often disapproval. Take the word “extravagant” itself. Etymologically it comes from the Latin words “extra,” meaning “beyond,” and “vagare,” meaning “to wander.” Something is extravagant when it wanders beyond the normal bounds of action or emotion. There is no value judgment in that literal meaning, yet the word has developed a bad connotation. Extravagant to our ears means too much, excessive, wasteful. How can one justify an extravagance? And so we tend to restrict ourselves to living within the bounds society deems proper, opposing duty to joy and beauty and even to love, and often choosing the way of duty while the others go to smash.

But the unnamed woman offers another way. Somehow she knew that Jesus needed a boost of love, and without thought for proprieties, she tried to give him what he needed. Mark’s gospel presents the most human portrait of Jesus, and at this point in the story, the Jesus he presents is tired, frightened, discouraged. He has come to Jerusalem, knowing that his mission may provoke the authorities to put him to death. His followers, for all their devotion, still do not understand him or what he is trying to do. It must have seemed to him at times as if all his efforts, perhaps even his life, were to be for nothing. He was giving to others all the time, but no one seemed to know how to give him what he needed. Until the nameless woman poured out love, demanding nothing in return. She simply gave and disappeared.

But as important as her ability to give, was Jesus’ ability to receive her extravagant gift of love. He didn’t say, as the rest of the company did, “this money could have been better spent,” or as people more commonly put it today, “you shouldn’t have,” “take it back,” “it’s too much.” He knew that the restrained, sensible gesture is not always adequate to express our human feelings, that sometimes we need not to take the way of duty, but to go beyond it into a larger expression of love. And he was honored to be the recipient of her gift of love.

Could you let yourself be honored to receive such a gesture of love? It’s not a question of whether we think we are worthy of the gift, for love does not use such measures. What matters is the spirit of the giving. This sounds obvious, but think how many gifts of love we refuse all the time because they seem too extravagant. I am not thinking only of material gifts, but of gifts like compliments as well. For some of us, any such gift is too extravagant to accept, but we are all trained at some level to turn aside the gift of praise. What we forget in considering only what the world deems appropriate, is that we hurt the giver as well as ourselves by refusing the gift. Sometimes we even hurt ourselves doubly, for often we are both giver and receiver and at once deny ourselves the giving and the receiving.

For imagine this story as a parable of the self. Within our selves we contain the woman with the ointment, the aspect of the self which wants us to love and enjoy our lives; we also contain the companions, the aspect of self which say that we are not worthy to receive gifts of love, that others need more, and that we must live out of duty rather than joy.

But we also have the part of the self represented by Jesus, that part which knows that we need to live in balance, so that we let neither joy nor duty go to smash, so that we do indeed love ourselves as well as our neighbors. The part that knows that “embracing reverence and love for all includes ourselves.” If we let this part of the self guide us, then we learn to see some gifts not as indulgences to be denied, but as gifts which renew the self and enable us to go on giving to others. The hiking trip, the day spent skiing, the vacation, the flower garden are good gifts to give yourself when you are also giving to others. For without them, you will have not more, but less to give to others.

In a week when we mourned with the people of Baltimore and of Nepal, and remembered the all the casualties of the Vietnam War, this is an especially important message to hear. We can do nothing to change the underlying structures which lead to the devastations of poverty, racism, and war, if we don't allow ourselves to be renewed by love and joy.

Perhaps the most important gift for us to give to and receive from ourselves is forgiveness. We need to forgive ourselves for not sharing in the circumstances of those suffering in Baltimore and Nepal. We need to forgive ourselves for falling short of the people we might be, forgive ourselves for the hand not held out, for the sharp word said or the soft word unsaid, and then move our energy from self-condemnation to new opportunity.

Our gifts to ourselves also may become gifts to others. Miss Rumphius intended others to benefit from the beauty of her lupines, but Jamaica Kincaid and May Sarton did not plant their flowers for others' eyes. They turned their extravagance of roses to others' pleasure through their writings. Over a century ago, Richardson Wright, yet another New England gardener and writer, also wrote of the benefits of an extravagance of roses in his delightful collection *The Gardener's Day Book*. In an essay called “A Good Rose in a Naughty World,” he described a doctor who took up gardening because he'd bought a house with a garden and felt he needed to keep it up. Though the garden contained a variety of flowers, after tending the grounds for several years, the doctor decided to concentrate on roses, and soon he had roses everywhere. Roses climbed over fences, and rose bushes took over the lawns. “In this Rose progression,” as Richardson Wright described it, “many changes came over him, as many came over his grounds... [For i]t is an obvious fact that one cannot have beautiful Roses in his garden unless he first has beautiful Roses in his heart – and the interior beauty increases with the exterior. The effect he had on those with whom he came in contact was an extension of the effect his own love for Roses had on himself and his home. To patients who didn't quite know what was the matter with them, [h]e casually prescribed, along with ... their pills, the growing of roses.” They always thought him a little mad, but they

recovered and also became rosarians. To those who could not afford this medicine, he gave slips, with instructions for rooting them so that they would grow and flower. Sometimes he even dug a whole bush out of his garden to give to someone in need.

And Wright concludes his description of the doctor with these words: “I came to realize that a good Rose in a naughty world can cast its beams a great distance and... [that w]e also need more solitary zealots here and there to throw the beam of their enthusiasm into the darkness of that world which has not yet come to know how much richer life can be when one makes a garden and works in it through all the seasons of the year.”

To go beyond the normal bounds in our gifts to ourselves, to those we love, and to the world at large is never a bad or wasteful thing if our extravagance overflows from love and joy. Instead of silencing that exuberance, we might do better silencing the voices which would have us see joy and duty as opposed. For they are not opposed. It is our duty to nurture joy, to prepare the ground for it and to spread its seeds broadly that it may bud and flower even under cold and harsh conditions. And ultimately it does not matter to whom we give this gift, whether to ourselves or directly to another, for, when properly tended, it is a flower which spreads and climbs, extravagant in its growth.

May you know this joy, this beauty in your own lives.

- Pamela M. Barz