Epiphany in the Beans

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Adapted by Fishtank Staff

121 *It came to me while picking beans, the secret of happiness.*

I was hunting among the spiraling vines that envelop my teepees of pole beans, lifting the dark-green leaves to find handfuls of pods, long and green, firm and furred with tender fuzz. I snapped them off where they hung in slender twosomes, bit into one, and tasted nothing but August, distilled into pure, crisp beaniness. This summer abundance is destined for the freezer, to emerge again in deep midwinter when the air tastes only of snow. By the time I finished searching through just one trellis, my basket was full.

To go and empty it in the kitchen, I stepped between heavy squash vines and around tomato plants fallen under the weight of their fruit. They sprawled at the feet of the sunflowers, whose heads bowed with the weight of maturing seeds. Lifting my basket over the row of potatoes, I noticed an open furrow revealing a nest of red skins where the girls left off harvesting that morning. I kicked some soil over them so the sun wouldn't green them up.

They complain about garden chores, as kids are supposed to do, but once they start they get caught up in the softness of the dirt and the smell of the day and it is hours later when they come back into the house. Seeds for this basket of beans were poked into the ground by their fingers back in May. Seeing them plant and harvest makes me feel like a good mother, teaching them how to provide for themselves.

122 The seeds, though, we did not provide for ourselves. When Skywoman buried her beloved daughter in the earth, the plants that are special gifts to the people sprang from her body. Tobacco grew from her head. From her hair, sweetgrass. Her heart gave us the strawberry. From her breasts grew corn, from her belly the squash, and we see in her hands the long-fingered clusters of beans.

How do I show my girls I love them on a morning in June? I pick them wild strawberries. On a February afternoon we build snowmen and then sit by the fire. In March we make maple syrup. We pick violets in May and go swimming in July. On an August night we lay our blankets and watch meteor showers. In November, that great teacher the woodpile comes into our lives. That's just the beginning. How do we show our children our love? Each in our own way by a shower of gifts and a heavy rain of lessons.

Maybe it was the smell of ripe tomatoes, or the oriole singing, or that certain slant of light on a yellow afternoon and the beans hanging thick around me. It just came to me in a wash of happiness that made me laugh out loud, startling the chickadees who were picking at the sunflowers, raining black and white hulls on the ground. I knew it with a certainty as warm and clear as the September sunshine. The land loves us back. She loves us with beans and

tomatoes, with roasting ears and blackberries and birdsongs. By a shower of gifts and a heavy rain of lessons. She provides for us and teaches us to provide for ourselves. That's what good mothers do.

I looked around at the garden and could feel her delight in giving us these beautiful raspberries, squash, basil, potatoes, asparagus, lettuce, kale and beets, broccoli, peppers, brussels sprouts, carrots, dill, onions, leeks, spinach. It reminded me of my little girls' answer to "How much do I love you?" "Thiiiiiiiis much," with arms stretched wide, they replied. This is really why I made my daughters learn to garden—so they would always have a mother to love them, long after I am gone.

The epiphany in the beans. I spend a lot of time thinking about our relationship with land, how we are given so much and what we might give back. I try to work through the equations of reciprocity and responsibility, the whys and wherefores of building sustainable relationships with ecosystems. All in my head. But suddenly there was no intellectualizing, no rationalizing, just the pure sensation of baskets full of mother love. The ultimate reciprocity, loving and being loved in return.

Now, the plant scientist who sits at my desk and wears my clothes and sometimes borrows my car—she might cringe to hear me assert that a garden is a way that the land says, "I love you." Isn't it supposed to be just a matter of increasing net primary productivity of the artificially selected domesticated genotypes, manipulating environmental conditions through input of labor and materials to enhance yield? Adaptive cultural behaviors that produce a nutritious diet and increase individual fitness are selected for. What's love got to do with it? If a garden thrives, it loves you? If a garden fails, do you attribute potato blight to a withdrawal of affection? Do unripe peppers signal a rift in the relationship?

I have to explain things to her sometimes. Gardens are simultaneously a material and a spiritual undertaking. That's hard for scientists, so fully brainwashed by Cartesian dualism, to grasp. "Well, how would you know it's love and not just good soil?" she asks. "Where's the evidence? What are the key elements for detecting loving behavior?"

That's easy. No one would doubt that I love my children, and even a quantitative social psychologist would find no fault with my list of loving behaviors:

- nurturing health and well-being
- protection from harm
- encouraging individual growth and development
- desire to be together
- generous sharing of resources
- working together for a common goal
- celebration of shared values
- interdependence
- sacrifice by one for the other
- creation of beauty

If we observed these behaviors between humans, we would say, "She loves that person."
124 You might also observe these actions between a person and a bit of carefully tended ground and say, "She loves that garden." Why then, seeing this list, would you not make the leap to say that the garden loves her back?

The exchange between plans and people has shaped the evolutionary history of both. Farms, orchards, and vineyards are stocked with species we have domesticated. Our appetite for their fruits lead us to till, prune, irrigate, fertilize, and weed on their behalf. Perhaps they have domesticated us. Wild plants have changed to stand in well-behaved rows and wild humans have changed to settle alongside the fields and care for the plants—a kind of mutual taming.

We are linked in a co-evolutionary circle. The sweeter the peach, the more frequently we disperse its seeds, nurture its young, and protect them from harm. Food plants and people act as selective forces on each other's evolution—the thriving of one in the best interest of the other. This, to me, sounds a bit like love.

I sat once in a graduate writing workshop on relationships to the land. The students all demonstrated a deep respect and affection for nature. They said that nature was the place where they experienced the greatest sense of belonging and well-being. They professed without reservation that they loved the earth. And then I asked them, "Do you think that the earth loves you back?" No one was willing to answer that. It was as if I had brought a two-headed porcupine into the classroom. Unexpected. Prickly. They backed slowly away. Here was a room full of writers, passionately wallowing in unrequited love of nature.

So I made it hypothetical and asked, "What do you suppose would happen if people believed this crazy notion that the earth loved them back?" The floodgates opened. They all wanted to talk at once. We were suddenly off the deep end, heading for world peace and perfect harmony.

One student summed it up: "You wouldn't harm what gives you love."

Knowing that you love the earth changes you, activates you to defend and protect and
125 celebrate. But when you feel that the earth loves you in return, that feeling transforms the relationship from a one-way street into a sacred bond.

My daughter Linden grows one of my favorite gardens in the world. She brings up all kinds of good things to eat from her thin mountain soil, things I can only dream of, like tomatillos and chile. She makes compost and flowers, but the best part isn't the plants. It's that she phones me to chat while she weeds. We water and weed and harvest, visiting happily as we did when she was a girl despite the three thousand miles between us. Linden is immensely busy, and so I ask her why she gardens, given how much time it takes.

She does it for the food and the satisfaction of hard work yielding something so prolific, she says. And it makes her feel at home in a place, to have her hands in the earth. I ask her, "Do you love your garden?" even though I already know the answer. But then I ask, tentatively, "Do you feel that your garden loves you back?" She's quiet for a minute; she's never glib about such things. "I'm certain of it," she says. "My garden takes care of me like my own mama." I can die happy.

I once knew and loved a man who lived most of his life in the city, but when he was dragged off to the ocean or the woods he seemed to enjoy it well enough—as long as he could find an Internet connection. He had lived in a lot of places, so I asked him where he found his greatest sense of place. He didn't understand the expression. I explained that I wanted to know where he felt most nurtured and supported. What is the place that you understand best? That you know best and knows you in return?

He didn't take long to answer. "My car," he said. "In my car. It provides me with everything I need, in just the way I like it. My favorite music. Seat position fully adjustable. Automatic mirrors. Two cup holders. I'm safe. And it always takes me where I want to go." Years later, he tried to kill himself. In his car.

126 He never grew a relationship with the land, choosing instead the splendid isolation of technology. He was like one of those little withered seeds you find in the bottom of the seed packet, the one who never touched the earth.

I wonder if much that ails our society stems from the fact that we have allowed ourselves to be cut off from that love of, and from, the land. It is medicine for broken land and empty hearts.

Larkin used to complain mightily about weeding. But now when she comes home, she asks if she can go dig potatoes. I see her on her on her knees, unearthing red skins and Yukon Golds and singing to herself. Larkin is in graduate school now, studying food systems and working with urban gardeners, growing vegetables for the food pantry on land reclaimed from empty lots. At-risk youth do the planting and hoeing and harvesting. The kids are surprised that the food they harvest is free. They've had to pay for everything they've ever gotten before. They greet fresh carrots, straight from the ground, with suspicion at first, until they eat one. She is passing on the gift, and the transformation is profound.

Of course, much of what fills our mouths is taken forcibly from the earth. That form of taking does no honor to the farmer, to the plants, or to the disappearing soil. It's hard to recognize food that is mummified in plastic, bought and sold, as a gift anymore. Everybody knows you can't buy love.

In a garden, food arises from partnership. If I don't pick rocks and pull weeds, I'm not fulfilling my end of the bargain. I can do these things with my handy opposable thumb and capacity to use tools, to shovel manure. But I can no more create a tomato or embroider a trellis in beans than I can turn lead into gold. That is the plants' responsibility and their gift: animating the inanimate. Now there is a gift.

People often ask me what one thing I would recommend to restore relationship between land and people. My answer is almost always, "Plant a garden." It's good for the health of the earth and it's good for the health of people. A garden is a nursery for nurturing connection, the

127 soil for cultivation of practical reverence. And its power goes far beyond the garden gate—once you develop a relationship with a little patch of earth, it becomes a seed itself.

Something essential happens in a vegetable garden. It's a place where if you can't say "I love you" out loud, you can say it in seeds. And the land will reciprocate, in beans.