

Apples, Immortality and Romance

*Presented by Daryl Hunter
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UNITARIAN FELLOWSHIP
874 York St., Fredericton, New Brunswick, E3B 3R8

It is my understanding from Allyson Calvern that the reason I am here today is because someone read the article about me in the "Live-It" section of the Daily Gleaner by Laverne Stewart. A section which often deals with how retired people put in the time.

So I wondered, what did I say in that article that would prompt someone to ask me to speak to a congregation such as your group? Or maybe you are just desperate for a speaker at this time.

I had to dig it out and read through it again to see what might be of interest about my retirement. I don't golf. I don't do woodworking or other crafts. I'm not a greeter at Walmart.

I grow apples and plums and grapes and cherries and blueberries and gooseberries what I call "edible landscaping". I volunteer at Kings Landing Historical Settlement in the orchards and in the fruit tree nursery.

I do nature photography. I enjoy history ... especially ancient history.

I have researched the life and accomplishments of Francis Peabody Sharp, a self taught horticulturist from Woodstock, who was way ahead of his time hybridizing and experimenting with apples, plums and other fruits and plants back in the 1800's. I have wandered through old abandoned farms looking for lost varieties of heirloom fruits, especially apples.

In the past two years I have been helping a friend write the biography of Tappan Adney, a naturalist, ornithologist, anthropologist, ethnologist, writer, painter, and model birchbark canoe builder who lived in a cabin in the woods in Upper Woodstock over sixty years ago.

Yes, both Nature and ancient history fascinate me. A week ago I visited the Mayan ruins in Tulum, Mexico, and the rainforests of Costa Rica. I went into the remote jungle of Panama to visit an Embera Indian village where the people still live by their native traditions.

The title of the Gleaner article about me was ... "BACK TO NATURE." The subtitle was "He finds the greatest joy in the little things in life." Perhaps it was that "philosophy" that caught someone's interest.

The writer, Laverne Stewart, got me in trouble with my three brother-in-laws and my two son-in-laws, who are avid golfers when she quoted me as saying, "It doesn't take much to entertain me. I don't need a four wheeler or a yacht. I don't have any interest in going golfing. It is repetitive and boring to me." I think I may have insulted them.

I went on to say, "I seek adventure, and I find it right in my own yard."

So, what could be so fascinating in my yard? It's all in how you look at things, at the mysteries of life. I have more than 130 varieties of apples on 60 trees. Some varieties date back to the 1600's, back to the time of the first explorers to this country, the missionaries, the Jesuit Relations, who brought the first apple trees to this land.

What would be so fascinating about growing these old apple varieties? First of all, it has to do with immortality!

Understanding the basics of propagating apple varieties will help to explain that statement. You cannot plant the seed of an apple variety, such as a McIntosh apple, and grow a McIntosh apple tree. You cannot plant a seed of a Granny Smith apple and grow a Granny Smith apple tree. Each seed comes from the pollination of two apple blossoms, a male and female fertilization, and just like you don't look exactly like either of your parents, each apple tree that grows from a seed will not be exactly the same as its parents. It could have smaller or larger apples, more sour or sweet apples, or it could have apples of a different colour than its parents. Generally, from such cross-pollination, only 1 tree in 8,000 or 10,000 will actually produce apples that will be of a quality desirable to most humans.

So how do you propagate a specific variety that has desirable qualities? You have to GRAFT. You keep a piece of the original tree alive and growing. You take a piece of that tree and you graft it onto a rootstock, or onto another tree, and keep it alive. You can keep alive a tree that was first discovered and enjoyed by the early explorers and settlers, and enjoy the same fresh taste, the same cider, or apple pies, that they did 400 or 500 years ago.

For example, I have in my collection a variety called the *Lady apple*, or *Pomme d'Api*

This is an ancient apple dating back in records to the early 1600's to gardens of King Louis XIII at Orleans, France. Known then as *Api* or *Pomme d'Api*. In the gardens it was planted along winding paths and in pots. The ladies of the court would carry these pretty little fruits in their purses and use them as breath fresheners. In France today the apple continues to be popular for wiring onto evergreens to make garlands and Kissing Boughs, and for floating on Wassail cups. The Queen Mother was presented with a purse of *Api* apples in 1962 at the 300th anniversary of the London Royal Society. Some researchers believe it to be the apple brought from Pelopenessus by the Roman censor, Appius Claudius, who built the great Appian Way.

A piece of that original ancient apple tree is still alive and growing in my orchard, and bearing the same apples that pleased the rulers of ancient empires.

There is a romance with Apples, or any fruit or other type of gardening for that matter:

British clergyman John Lawrence published a small book in 1716, *The Gentleman's Recreation*, "a 12 page lecture on the 'divine' and the 'exalting' in fruit gardening". He proclaimed himself "the first and almost only writer in this last century who had received the *spirit of gardening*." In the book he wrote this about our earthly habitat, "...and as I little doubt that if the angels were confined to these lower regions, they would seek the retirement and pleasure of a garden, as most agreeable to their heavenly dispositions."

Listen to this description of one heirloom variety called the *Mother Apple* or American Mother:

"It is an old variety from Bolton, Massachusetts. First recorded in 1844. It resembles *Esopus Spitzenburg* apple in appearance and flavour. The flesh is soft, juicy, rich, very spicy, with a mild, tart-sweet flavour, variously described as being "exotic", "like pear drops", "chick wintergreen", "balsamic", "hot, sweet, perfumed, almost vanilla flavour." It was sent to Britain's Queen Victoria as a gift, who liked it so much that she asked the British Parliament to lift the duties on American apple imports, which they did."

Romantic poems and songs have been written about apple trees and apple blossom time.

I'll be with you in apple blossom time.

I'll be with you and change your name to mine.

One day in May, I'll hear you say,
"Happy the bride the sun shines on today."

What a wonderful wedding there will be.
What a wonderful day for you and me.
Church bells will chime.
You will be mine
In apple blossom time.

OR this old favourite

**In the shade of the old apple tree
While the love in your eyes I could see
When the voice that I heard
Like a song of a bird
Seemed to whisper sweet music to me**
I could hear the dull buzz of the bee
In the blossoms that you said to me,
With a heart that is true
I'll be waiting for you
In the shade of the old apple tree

So, how do I get "entertainment" from my orchard and gardens? In order to be a good gardener or orchardist, you have to pay attention to the cycle of life, to the seasons, and the emergence of the insect pests and diseases. You have to be a good observer and train your eyes what to look for. There are signs you will see that others will pass by.

You learn to stop and smell the Roses or the Apple Blossoms.

You become very aware of the "Balance of Life", of the "Intelligent Universe" in your orchard or garden. If you use synthetic chemicals to control or destroy these small organisms, you will not learn about the balance. On the other hand, if you learn about the balance, you will be able to control them with your knowledge, and that has its rewards in feeling in tune with the master plan.

For example, insects grow through stages or cycles and emerge at different times as temperatures accumulate - what horticulturists refer to as "degree-days." By recording accumulated degree days you can determine which insect pests will be emerging and need controlling. For example, codling moth larvae, that make the big holes in the side of the fruit, emerge at an accumulation of 248 F degree-days. To control them I use a "mating disruption" method. Small twist ties laced with the female moth's pheromone (a sex hormone) are tied on tree branches. This confuses the male moths when looking for a mate. Other insect pests can be attracted to "sticky traps" and caught using special odours and bright colours.

In studying this "balance" you will learn that ladybugs are your friends because they eat aphids which damage the tender young leaves. There is so much going on all around you if you learn how to see it.*

Francis Peabody Sharp was a student of Mother Nature. He lived in Upper Woodstock and was conducting many scientific horticultural experiments back in the 1850's and 1860's long before there even existed a Department of Agriculture. He studied plants with a microscope, the tissues in the leaves, blossom buds, stems, and roots. He developed a theory he called the "Antagonism of the stalk and the root." With this knowledge he was able to cause apple trees to come into bearing at 16 months from seed (not 8 to 10 years), and on just three-foot high trees. He had a plum tree 6 inches high with a plum on it. And in his orchards he was growing, packing and shipping PEACHES from Woodstock something that has never been done since. The study of the great mysteries in Nature gave him wisdom to do what no other men had accomplished at that time.

The power of observation, and interpretation, is how you can see a new and different world in the same old world you have lived in for all your life. It will increase your knowledge. It can be entertaining. You don't have to go away to far away places, but you can discover new things right under your feet.

One of your members who is no longer with us, Leo Dionne, shared many of the same philosophies of life as I do when it comes to respecting the intelligence written into the code of

life, manifested in the world of Nature. We both were interested in the discoveries of Francis Peabody Sharp and together we explored the old remaining orchards of Sharp to see what we could find. Dr. Dionne, when a student, had interviewed the last living employee who worked in Sharp's nurseries. It was the same man who had the job of picking and packing the peaches for shipping. Dr. Dionne had also interviewed Tappan Adney back in the 1940's when he was a student doing work up in the Woodstock area. It was an unforgettable interview for him. Tappan Adney met him at the door without any clothes on and invited him in. At no time during the one hour interview did he excuse himself to the young Leo Dionne to go get dressed. He was a true "naturalist" in every sense of the word!

The movie, Enchanted Forest, which was first released in 1945, had a great impact on me as a young child. It is a story for children, but with a wisdom suitable for adults.

It teaches about Nature's melody. It is a story about Old John, an elderly hermit who lives in a hollowed-out redwood tree deep in the forest. He listens to the melody of the brooks and the wind in the trees. He hears voices in the forest that most people do not hear. He talks to the animals.

The story opens with a train wreck in the mountains, and a year old boy is lost in the vast redwood forest, but he is found by Old John and his animal friends. Old John raises the boy there in the forest for 5 years and teaches him to recognize and heed the voices. In one scene when the young boy asks him who the voices are, he answers, "The voices are the spirit of the forest - sometimes they talk and sometimes they sing." Then he adds, "You can always hear music if you have a heart that sings." He tells the boy, "One day when you go into the world, you will be strong and wise and good from the things you learn in the forest."

Catherine Waterman published a wonderful poem in 1860, of which I'll quote just a few lines

"The Language of Flowers"

"Earth hath a thousand tongues, that swell
In converse soft, and low -
We hear them in the flowery dell,
And where the waters flow.
We note them when the pliant reed
Bends in the summer air,
Its low-toned music gently freed
By the soft breezes there;
And angels from their starry height,
On Hills, and dales, and green banks write.

There is a language in each flower
That opens to the eye,

A voiceless - but a magic power,
Doth in earth's blossom's lie;
.....etc.

As for me"I too believe there is a message, a harmony, a melody in every tree and flower that grows. Plant a flower and when it blooms and sings its song, bees and butterflies and hummingbirds will come. Visual music of the light spectrum, and intoxicating aromas of vibrating odour molecules, help to compose the melody of Nature. So does the wind in the trees, the pebbles in the brook, and the ocean waves against a rocky shore. These sights, sounds, and smells all work in harmony, impacting our senses with primitive rhythms that we can dance to, gently or lively, depending on the mood they bring. This is Nature's orchestra, and it has been playing these immortal and sacred pieces down through the ages, even to the ancients who perhaps heard them much clearer than we do today."

Plant an apple tree, and when it blossoms, it too will sing a song, and bees and butterflies and hummingbirds will come to it. And when it bears apples in the fall, it will sing a different tune, and deer and squirrels and raccoons will become the new audience.

On a side note, there is a concern right now around the world about a mysterious situation with domestic honeybees. They have been dying off, not only inside their hives, but a majority never returned to the hives for the winter. They call it "colony collapse disorder" and at this time the cause is not known. The honeybees are used by apple growers and other fruit growers to pollinate their crops, so this is a big concern. There are no reports yet whether this disorder has affected the wild species of native bees. If so, it would be a very serious situation.

Most people at some time in their lives go on a journey where they are looking for meaning in their lives, perhaps searching for a wise God who will give them direction. They want to know the secret for living life to its fullest and reaping the greatest rewards. Some people are driven to surround themselves with an excess of material goods.

There is an old saying that you can know the creator by the creation. A good place to start looking is in your own yard. If you see a flower in bloom, even the lowly dandelion, and a bee comes to it, you will be witness to the most fascinating act of life on this planet, of symbiotic relationships, and evidence of a great intelligence and truth.

If you perchance should find a spider weaving a beautiful, symmetrical web, you will be forced to ask the question, "How could something so small know how to build such a perfect trap to catch its next meal?" How did this intelligence come to be?

I mentioned that a week ago I was in an Embera Indian village in the rainforests of Panama. The Embera people live by their traditional customs the way they have for thousands of years. There is a species of spider there that spins a large web and these people use the strands of the web to make threads for sewing, it is so strong. We were challenged to break it but couldn't.

It's no wonder that many of our own Native people traditionally assigned spiritual values to the animals and plants, and to the phases and cycles of the sun, moon and stars.

Native American, Chief Seattle, included these words in his famous speech of 1854, "This we know: the earth does not belong to man, man belongs to the earth. All things are connected like the blood that unites us all. Man did not weave the web of life, he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself." This is a simple but profound statement of wisdom.

Tappan Adney wrote about our native Maliseet people, "It seemed to me then that the Indian had attained not so much a low standard of living as a high standard of simplicity." In this age of materialism and "affluenza" these words ring even louder and truer than even then. We need to get back to the simple wisdom of Mother Earth.

Back in the 1980's the Telegraph Journal used to publish what it called "Nature Editorials" written by an unknown man of whom they refused to reveal his identity to me. I would clip them and save them and then look for opportunities to capture pictures that matched them. The editor would publish my pictures along with the write-ups. I'll read an example of one of many hundreds of these editorials.

"TRUTH IN TREES"

In a world of self-seeking ruthlessness, where does one find the verities that give a foundation for faith? In a world of harsh cacophony, where can one find the quietness that lessens the tensions of daily living?

Go to a woodland where the trees are tall, and interlocked branches form cathedral aisles. Stand on the snow that covers a soft carpet of primal humus that means life itself.

Among great oaks, maples, and beeches there is a serenity that is missing in the marts where men barter and trade. No man need be lonely if trees are his friends.

A great tree represents a fulfillment of time.

When a confused world gets too much for him, a man can seek a forest and among the trees find proof of the verities that give meaning to the path he treads.

Albert Einstein himself wrote these words, and gave this advice, "One cannot but be in awe when one contemplates the mysteries of eternity, of life, of the marvelous structure of reality. It is enough if one tries merely to comprehend a little of this mystery each day. Never lose a holy curiosity."

So on this beautiful spring day, go down to Odell Park, or for a walk in the botanical gardens, or along the walking trails by the river, or at Mactaquac Park, or just in your back yard. See what mysteries you can find, and what you can observe that you haven't seen before, because your sight was blurred with daily concerns and other distractions. Look for wild bees visiting the first flowers of spring. Smile if you see one, for that is good news. It is hope for the future.

Never lose your holy curiosity!

*For those who may be interested in planting a small apple orchard or just a couple of trees in your back yard, in 1997 I published on CD a complete guide to planting and maintaining a small "Kitchen Orchard". Stirling's Orchards have added it to their Appleman web site with my permission free of charge. The full contents of the CD can be found at:

<http://www.appleman.ca/>