

The Sweet Life

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This April I went to Ault Park every day, not with my son, not with my husband, not to get material for ministry, not to figure out what flowers I like. This April I went to Ault Park every day for me. Every day I walked the paved paths and watched trees bloom. I watched apparently barren earth give way to sprouts and finally flowers. I smelled every magnolia tree I could find, the early roses, and any flower that looked like it might have a scent. I looked at the color and variety of tree buds. I walked up close and gently held them in my hands. I walked and smelled and looked and I was grateful, blessedly grateful. This is the first spring in five years that I have had this luxury and it is sweet, very sweet.

One spring I was sick from my pregnancy, the next spring I was so sick and sleep deprived from our new baby that I don't remember anything, including the spring. The two springs after that my back hurt. Those two years of back pain created powerful memories of my limitations.

Those days come with a strong memory of doing the only thing I could do, lay in bed and stare at the fan on my bedroom ceiling. I have every inch of it memorized. Not a good memory, and sometimes I still stare at that fan in perplexity, my one time diversion and now unpleasant reminder. But I have chosen to honor these bad memories, because they too inform, are part of, the sweet life, perhaps more than anything else. With the absence of things I regularly took for granted, like walking in the park during spring, I cherish the ability to do it now, and when I do it, it is that much more sweet.

For months these thoughts lived alone in my head, my insignificant story. Recently I shared them with my clergy group and I was surprised to realize that I was saying something relevant, something moving. My colleagues began to ask me questions, to speak of their stories and their challenges to perceive and appreciate a sweet life. I realized there was a sermon living in my head.

The spring is more rare and sweet to me because I know the pain of its absence and I now fully understand, it may also, for some reason in the future, be absent for me again. Replace my story for yours. Consider an unrealized treasure you lost; love, a friend, the ability to do a beloved task, hobby, vocation, or sport, time, health, certainty, something. We all share this story somehow, that can teach us what is sweet in our lives.

What the sweet life is not. It is not:

- 1) Money (although money helps)
- 2) Material Goods (although in proportion they can bring pleasure)
- 3) A passive life
- 4) Happy things all the time
- 5) The same for everyone
- 6) A Simple or simplistic life
- 7) A Shallow life
- 8) A life devoid of want or suffering
- 9) A life of immortality

These are not characteristics of the sweet life.

Rather, the sweet life is a complex life that honors joy and sorrow, and actively celebrates unique moments of vitality and pleasure in the present. Everyone has their own version of this life. My story of walking in Ault Park might be your idea of the boorish life. But you have your story. And all our stories evoke the words of writer Joseph Campbell, "Follow your bliss!" And they mimic the mission of Henry David Thoreau who went to Walden Pond to "suck the marrow out of life."

Years ago I read the book, *Dandelion Wine*, by Ray Bradbury. A remarkable book, but the only scene that I remember in detail, is that of a man who is trying to build a time machine (I believe). He ultimately fails and his wife comes to sit by him and tells him it wouldn't help anyway. She tells him to look at the sunset and explains that the sunset is so sweet, so rare because it always changes, because it can't be predicted or repeated. And if we all had time machines we would repeat beautiful sunsets and then begin to take them for granted. In the process, the sunset, the present, and our lives would become meaningless.

The sunset is precious because it dies tonight and is reborn in an unexpected sunrise. I'll never forget the summer night I was on Cape Cod when a full moon rose over the water in a clear sky, while the sun had not yet set. The moon was on fire, the water was on fire. Everything was blue and on fire. For years I have mistakenly tried to repeat this moment from my past. When I am on the Cape (I'm sure I'll do it this summer), I check sunset times. Sometimes the sky is cloudy, sometimes the moon is not full, usually the sun sets first. That special sunset was rare and sweet and I am glad I appreciated it when it happened because it is now in my past. Although, instead of checking sunset times on the Cape I would be better off opening my eyes when I am able, to the rare, unexpected sweetness found only in the present. Ray Bradbury was right. We don't need time machines. We need to witness this moment, to delight in sweetness by actively sucking the marrow out of life where we find it.

The sweet life is not necessarily a wealthy life, and it is most definitely not an excessively materialistic life. In 1960, the brilliant Italian filmmaker, Federico Fellini explored this misperception in his masterpiece, *La Dolce Vita* ("The Sweet Life"). *La Dolce Vita* is a famous, controversial, and provocative film. The main character, Marcello, played by Marcello Mastroianni, is a journalist hanging on the fringes of the frivolous, Italian society scene. He is unable to commit to his girl friend. He is well dressed, and pleasant enough when he wants to be, but aimless, unable to connect, easily diverted by excessive pleasures, such as beautiful women, fame, and a nice car. This is the film where Marcello escorts the well-endowed and despondent Sylvia (played by Anita Ekberg) out of the Trevi Fountain - do you remember that scene? The film also introduced the word "paparazzi" into English. But it is not an easy film. It is not even a pleasurable or pleasing film.

The film ends with Marcello attending a debauched, all-night party. In the morning he and his fellow revelers stumble to the beach, where a gross creature has washed up on the shore. Across a sandbar a pleasant, healthy, younger woman Marcello knows calls out to him, but he can't hear her, and chooses to turn and remain with his drunken friends. End of film. Marcello can't hear present sweetness, represented by the young woman calling to him from across a sandbar. He passively chooses not to know real sweetness, and instead remains in a haze with his drunken friends, while his spirit continues to drown in materialistic over-indulgence.

La Dolce Vita was Fellini's mocking commentary on Italian society and its zealous, ignorant embrace of materialism. For Fellini, the sweet life is not about money, fame, beautiful people, or any addictive substance or habit (whether than be alcohol, celebrity stalking, or sexual excess). Fellini is quite cutting in his exploration of these as misleading elements of the anti-sweet life.

Rather, Fellini suggests, and I agree, that the sweet life requires an attentive, respectful, discipline to the unexpected, creative pleasures of the present. The sweet life is about pleasure in moderation. The sweet life can be a special dinner or bottle of wine, a new dress or set of golf clubs, the leather seats in your car, sexual pleasure, an evening out with friends. Or it could be

watching the Red Sox win the World Series after an 86-year slump (and maybe someday the Cubs). Or it could be smelling the rain, listening to blues or the opera, volunteering for a cause, balancing your checkbook, learning a craft, spending time with an elderly parent or young child. The sweet life can be many things, but it always requires active choice and attention to the present.

You know I find parenting as hard as I find it rewarding. Yesterday my son walked up to me with a colored pegboard he imagined as a cake, sang me happy birthday (my birthday is in July), and told me that the purple pegs on it were very close to my favorite color, which he knows is pink. Sweet, very sweet. I am also remembering my first year in ministry, when I was riddled with doubt and struggled with insomnia. To my surprise, I learned I was regularly able to relax and sleep after visiting a 97-year-old parishioner named Lulu. Somehow with Lulu I was able to manage my fear and live in the present and relax. Probably because that is what Lulu did.

In her book *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times*, Buddhist teacher, Pema Chodron, explains that we must "let our heart be penetrated." She says that the purpose of meditation is to be "more awake in one's life." For her, this also means being more awake, more present, to our losses. Meditation should take us to the richness of our lives, whether happy or sad. We must "let our hearts be penetrated."

For all her wisdom she also tells a story of feverishly cleaning her home in preparation for a visit from a respected spiritual teacher. She spent all morning cleaning, wanting to get it done just right. When the teacher arrived she said, "Wasn't it a beautiful sunrise this morning?" Pema Chodron realized that in not paying attention to the morning sunrise she had just lost a moment that could not return. And she wondered about other moments lost to unnecessary activity. The lesson being, pay attention to the present, with minimal distraction from irrelevant activity. Let your heart be penetrated. This requires some bravery. If you are like me, much of your busy activity is actually protection from the present, from penetration of the heart. It can be hard to "open wide unto the body of life."

There is also, of course, a difference between obsessing about something as transient as the cleanliness of your home, and being overwhelmed by something as profound as the death of a loved one, a health crisis, or some trauma or dislocation. We all have moments, maybe weeks, sometimes years, when we just cannot find the sweet life. When we are too overwhelmed. Deep loss is a real part of life and a real part of the sweet life.

Sometimes what is sweet is best recognized after an absence. But not all sweet life pleasures can return. Some of the people I admire the most are people who can no longer participate in a treasured sweet life pleasure, so they choose (and choice is action) to positively place that energy elsewhere. I am reminded of Holocaust survivor, Viktor Frankl, who eloquently writes about the power to choose, and that even as a starved, cold, prisoner, he would not relinquish the power to choose life, and that this, along with fate, gave him the strength to survive.

As a minister I have learned much from our older members as they are challenged by ill health and limitation. I listen very carefully to their stories of sweetness and adaptation knowing that I too have and will continue to make this journey. I have learned much from Shirley Schmalz, who I consider one of my counselors. Of course, she attributes her good nature to her Christian Scientist upbringing (accepting life and loss without excessive intervention), but again I see her making positive choice.

I also remember the many discussions I had with Ed Lutton about leaving his beloved lily garden. I know many of you also shared in that discussion. Ed's lily garden in the back yard of his house on Ridge Road in Pleasant Ridge was a glorious site to behold. Yet Ed accommodated when he moved to Marjorie P. Lee. And strangely enough, I have another vivid memory of eating dinner at the Lutton's house one evening, and Ed rising from the table to watch the sunset outside the window.

Pema Chodron maintains that a spiritual life means going into unknown territory and that it takes a death for there to be birth. In this way I think that the sweet life is also about death and endings. What is sweet is sweet because it passes - love, relationships, flowers, sunsets, dinners, conversations, World Series championships, skills, health, even life itself. So we are called to love life because it moves. We are called to suck the marrow out of life, wherever we find it, because life and pleasure ends.

I have a friend who is remodeling the back of her house. She told me she is going to work longer hours to pay off the mortgage faster. When she told me this I said, "You have money and you are many more things than your job. Pay off the mortgage in time and enjoy your house and your life." Life is short and it is potentially sweet. Enjoy its riches. May the grace and the sweetness of the world fall gently upon you. And may you have the courage to actively choose to stay in the present long enough to embrace its riches. Amen.