

Words of EnCOURAGEment Issue #2

Summer's Abundance

by Courage & Renewal Facilitator and education professor, Paul Michalec

I love going “on retreat” and doing the work of reflection whenever I need the space to reconnect with my professional heart. But I also need to make a living and that requires plenty of “off retreat” time doing a different form of work. To live within this tension I look for ways of being on and off retreat while going through my professional day. This article is an invitation to go “on-retreat” while being mostly “off-retreat.” I invite you to explore, along with me, the theme of summer’s abundance in your personal and professional life. I’ll begin with a brief reflection on the theme of summer, followed with an illustrative poem “From Blossoms” by Li-Young Lee. Then I’ll invite you into a time of reflection with a few guiding questions to consider. Finally, I’ll conclude our “retreat” with my reflections on “From Blossoms” and welcome your insights, wanderings, and wonderings into the circle of this E-journal.

You might want to take a moment to sit quietly, take a few deep breaths, and let your breathing slow before beginning....

As you find yourself relaxing, begin thinking back to your favorite summer memories as a child or young adult. What images best capture the essence of summer’s abundance for you? While you are working to recall those memories, I’ll share some of my remembrances and perhaps trigger some long forgotten images from your past.

Summer brings to mind slowing down, resting, and hanging out with friends and family, community and all of its blessings. I hear Cicadas signing their slow dreamy songs of summer love, hot and languid; the best that can be mustered given the rising mercury. I remember drifting along in a boat under a roasting Louisiana sky eating hotdog sandwiches watching dragonflies swim through the humid air. Summer days were for wallowing, belly-deep in the mud and bathtub-warm water watching tadpoles transform into small frogs with tails still attached. In my adulthood I love watching the summer thunderheads build over the eastern plains of Colorado. If I’m lucky the storm will offer cooling breezes, heavy with the dusty scent of water. Summer storms, like summer itself, have a certain fullness, a sensual quality lacking in other seasons.

Summer’s abundance can have a darker side as well. The rain clouds I admire today and that filled my childhood imagination with gargoyle-like cloud masses sometimes bring fierce winds, tongues of tree-splitting lightening, and damaging hail. And as a gardener, I rejoice when my squash plants thrive in the summer heat. But when they start hurling vegetables at me because I’m not eating them fast enough, summer’s abundance feels a bit oppressive.

Take a few minutes to sit with or write out your memories of summer’s abundance and fullness. Like summer in the natural world your stories might be heavy with scent, humidity, and life’s potential; abundance almost to the point of overwhelming your senses. And your stories of summer may contain images of pain and sorrow as the cooling beauty of a summer rainstorm can sometimes foreshadow the damaging hail that follows. Both stories are worth telling as both can be thought of as inseparable companions. Let your imagination follow where it will.

Now that you’ve captured a few summer memories, here’s a poem that offers a different way into the personal and professional wisdom of summer. As you read the poem, or better yet have someone read it to you, listen for a word, image, or phrase that captures your attention around the theme of abundance. You might want to mark up the poem with circled words, notes in the margin, and additional questions or observations that relate to your personal or professional life.

From Blossoms

From blossoms comes
this brown paper bag of peaches
we bought from the boy
at the bend in the road where we turned toward

signs painted Peaches.
From laden boughs, from hands
from sweet fellowship in the bins,
comes nectar at the roadside, succulent
peaches we devour, dusty skin and all,
comes the familiar dust of summer, dust we eat.
O, to take what we love inside,
to carry within us an orchard, to eat
not only the skin, but the shade,
not only the sugar, but the days, to hold
the fruit in our hands, adore it, then bite into
the round jubilation of peach.
There are days we live
as if death were nowhere
in the background; from joy
to joy to joy, from wing to wing,
from blossom to blossom to
impossible blossom, to sweet impossible blossom.
in *Rose*
by Li-Young Lee
Boa Editions, Ltd.

To see where this poem and your summer reflections might take you, here are a few questions to consider:

-What image seemed to grab your imagination? Is there a relationship between that image and the current state of your professional or personal identity?

-Where and how are you most likely to experience the “the round jubilation” of your personal/professional fullness?

-Think for a minute about the taste, texture, and scent of your first bite of a summer peach. Let those feelings wash around in mind. Are there any aspects of your work that feel like a summer peach?

-For you, what does it mean “to take what we love inside, to carry within us an orchard...”? How have you done that in your own life or work?

When I read “From Blossoms” to prepare for this article my attention was drawn to the last lines: “from blossom to blossom to impossible blossom, to sweet impossible blossom.” I started working with the word “impossible” and quickly realized that “impossible” was not a negative attribute as in difficult or challenging but rather a positive characteristic such as miraculous, unexpected, or fully-whole. I began reflecting on those places in my professional life where I might encounter an “impossible blossom.” After over 25 years of teaching I quickly thought of my students as “impossible blossom:” miraculous, unexpected, and fully-whole. I thought about my classroom as an orchard of potential transformation where I tend each student with care and attention. Sometimes this means gently pruning away diseased wood with helpful advice and guidance. At other times I fertilize with praise and encouragement. And sometimes tending my educational orchard means learning to accept the dust of disappointment, and accepting the possibility of never seeing a student reach his/her “round jubilation.” For some of my students fruition will come later in the caring hands of another teacher who will marvel at the complex story of struggle and sweet success waiting just below the student’s dusty educational skin.

As an educator I felt compelled to rewrite the ending of Li-Young Lee’s poem to read: “from student to student to impossible student, to sweet impossible student.” Some of you reading this essay are teachers and may relate to the way “From Blossoms” touched my educational heart. But many of you are called to other professions and bring different orientations and understandings to the poem. Maybe you are a doctor and you would end the poem: “from patient to patient to impossible patient...” Maybe you are a lawyer: “from client to client to impossible client...” Perhaps you are a leader of a religious community: “from member to member to impossible member...” Or maybe a principal: “from teacher to teacher to impossible teacher...” What ever your professional goals I hope that you take the time to enjoy your professional peaches and find

ways to fully understand and marvel at the “round jubilation” that you helped bring to fruition. Enjoy the tastes, textures, and flavor of your hard work; summer’s abundance.

I will end with an invitation to share your wanderings and wonderings around “From Blossoms” What spoke to you? What wonderings and wanderings would you like to share with other readers? Please email news@couragere renewal.org to share, and we’ll compile responses for a future edition of Words of EnCOURAGEment.