

The joy and common sense of gleaning

by Ralph C. Martin

When you harvest your crops, don't reap the corners of your fields and don't pick up stray grains of wheat from the ground ...Leave them for the poor and for those travelling through. Leviticus 19: 9-10.

Gleaning is often associated with embarrassment and guilt. Those who gleaned were embarrassed that they were poor enough to have to glean. Those who were wealthy enough to turn food into money and power, felt guilty about not sharing. Thus the centuries-long tradition of gleaning faded.

However, the Ontario Christian Gleaners, based near Cambridge, <http://ontariogleaners.org/> are reviving the practice. It is clear that embarrassment and guilt have been banished and replaced with joy, an abundance of joy.

“We had our first wedding,” giggled Shelley Stone, the manager. “She was 76 and he was 80 and they had so much fun trimming vegetables together, that their next obvious step was to get married.” It wasn't until after my visit that I realized that joy is as much a part of the real story as is common sense, for these modern gleaners.

In a clean, airy building they receive vegetables, from farms and processing plants and food distribution centres, that would otherwise go to waste. Every week day morning, an average of 65 volunteers show up (most are early), ready to work. The regulars know what to do and wash, trim, dice, dry or package produce. Shelley manages the raw supplies, dried stocks and requests for packages of dried soup mix and with a few instructions newcomers are assigned a task with a partner or in a group.

Just as the daily rhythm is underway, Shelley stops everyone to welcome them from her platform of pallets. “Why stop folks raring to go?” I wondered. She offers a cheery good morning and tells them a story about where some of their product was most recently appreciated. Later she explained to me, the guy so focused on efficiencies of energy, money and labour, that everyone who volunteers is shown the big picture. They keep sight of why they are there. This too makes sense.

The majority of volunteers work in a large room with cutting tables, where they trim any non-edible portions from donated produce and look out for each other. “If you wouldn’t want to eat it, then trim it,” explains Shelley to a few uncertain helpers. One fellow with large hands of many decades of work experience, responds in a deep baritone, “we should throw out all the broccoli because it all tastes bad to me.” Shelley smiles, tosses up both hands and disarmed, he carries on trimming as if broccoli was his new inspiration.

Teens of many backgrounds, and often not native to Canada, love to wash the thousands of pails donated by Tim Horton’s. One group begged their leader to let them come back for an extra unscheduled day. The principle of fun is evident, and on a hot day, why not spray somewhat randomly? In developing countries, recipients of the 3 lb bags of soup mix in clean pails appreciate the utility of the pails almost as much as the food.

To round out the 15 items in each soup mix, donated lentils from Saskatchewan, which are slightly off colour, or peas or beans are added for protein. Barley from local farmers is included as a carbohydrate source. After the mix is dried to less than 12% moisture it can be stored at room temperature for at least one year and easily shipped. In 2011, 5.3 million servings of soup were donated and by July this year, another 4.2 million servings had been prepared.

In the well known 1857 painting of the Gleaners, by Jean-François Millet, we see 3 women stooping to retrieve left-over grain, much as Ruth did in Biblical times. It made sense to gather grain which might otherwise go to waste. This cultural appreciation for sharing and conserving, tends to dim in our busy world of readily available food. Many eaters have such easy access to prepared food that they hardly notice what they eat, while doing something else.

It is in the midst of plenty that we can reconsider gleaning with an excellent real model in our community; an example of common sense and joy. If we encounter periods of limited food supplies, as many in the world still do, we will need the attitudes, skills and habits that flow from respecting and appreciating food.

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