

Thinking about the Season

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My mother, Marion Abbott Gunderson, age 85, died last week. The family process of preparing and participating in formal rituals to honor her life is now behind me. The support of the Rolfe community and the wider community of friends is a solace. This week is a time to reflect on my relationship with Mother, what has transpired in recent weeks in regard to her failing health at the Rolfe Care Center, her death, the funeral arrangements, connections with family members and friends, and existential issues.

Mother and my father (Deane Gunderson, who still lives on the family farm southwest of Rolfe) were the only children in their respective families. That meant that my five siblings and I have had no aunts, uncles, nor cousins. Nor have we had to deal with the deaths of aunts, uncles, and cousins. Yes, there were the deaths of my grandparents when I was young, and indeed, some of the grief from those years continues to linger with me. However, I have not previously experienced the death of someone with whom I was so enmeshed, with the possible exception of the closeness I felt to Grandma and Grandpa, who lived on the homeplace farm three miles from the farm where I grew up.

I have known for a long time on a cognitive level that grief is not rational. Now I am experiencing the fact of that truth. I have moments of deep sadness, but I also find myself humming tunes such as, "The Day of Resurrection," "For All the Saints," and "Rejoice, Rejoice, Rejoice." Indeed there is a sense of relief to know that after so many months of failing health, Mother has been able to make what I call "the Great Transition." I base that term on some of the things I have read in the *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* and related Zen books. I also revert to sadness and songs such as "Song Sung Blue" by Neil Diamond and "Blue Christmas" made popular by Elvis Presley. Perhaps the most persistent tune that wafts into my consciousness is the hymn, "We Gather Together." Fortunately, the congregation sang that hymn at Mother's memorial service.

I am not sure how well I will do in finding the balance between taking the time, on one hand, to nurture myself and do some important reflection, and on the other hand, to focus and be productive. Although there is laundry, apartment-cleaning, book-keeping, and other work to attend to, I am sure I will continue to turn to family members and friends for fine conversation, visit my massage therapist, write in my journal, read scripture such as Psalm 139, and eat good quality chocolate. I also need to walk and meditate more and actually practice the wise things I know about nutrition. And I can go to the Collegiate Presbyterian Church or Unitarian Fellowship in Ames or the Shared Ministry (a merger of the Rolfe's Methodist and Presbyterian congregations) on Sunday mornings. But much of that will unfold over a period of many days, if not weeks. Hopefully, I won't eat too much chocolate.

Today I was going through a box of materials that I brought back to Gilbert from Mother's and Dad's home on the day after the memorial service. The box contained various papers that I had sent Mother in the last decade or that she had picked up from some of my photo exhibits or clipped from newspapers. The box also contained some snapshots from recent years. One document was my 1998 Christmas letter. It contained a passage that I like to think of as fodder for a parable about life written from the perspective of the tall grass prairie. I had been thinking about the concept on-and-off this past week, wondering if I had ever written down the thoughts and if I could find them on my computer hard drive. Fortunately, the letter contained the passage as well as a date, and I easily found the file.

In the past decade, I have learned much about issues of agriculture, especially about the contrast between our modern mono-culture of row crop production (corn and soybeans) and the rich bio-diversity of tall grass prairie that once upon a time covered most of Iowa. The bio-diversity of the prairie was as significant as that of the Rain Forest in other parts of the world.

I am working to return a "permanent" pasture on my farm land near Rolfe to prairie. The process involves annual prairie burns that my tenant squeezes in during the springtime after the snow thaws but before he is heavily involved in planting. Gradually, the native plant species are becoming more abundant. Unfortunately, the non-native Brome Grass will probably always dominate. I also have two tracts of land that I have taken out of row crop production, where I have planted a diverse mix of prairie seed. Most of that seed comes from a central Iowa prairie seed specialist. However, during the mid-1990s, I hand-picked some seed in the Rolfe area in the railroad right-of-way and along dirt roads where the land had never been tilled, leaving remnants of prairie. Sad to say, it has been several years since I have harvested prairie seed. Fortunately, though, in my 1998 Christmas letter, I wrote about harvesting prairie seed and how important the process was to me on a spiritual level. Here is what I said:

It has been helpful to learn more about the seasons of the year. For instance, during the end of the year when the days became shorter, it is reassuring to know that people throughout history have had to deal with the darkness, wondering whether the sun would return. They created rituals to communally deal with their angst in an era of history long before the Church decided to designate December 25 as the date of Jesus birth. It has also been helpful to hear about cultures that emphasize cyclical thinking more than linear. For instance, the Celtic traditions celebrate their new year at our harvest time. The Jewish new year also begins in the fall. When I first heard about those traditions in which the new year begins in a season when much in nature dies or becomes fallow, the idea seemed incongruent. However, now that I think about it, our traditional New Year's Day on January 1, is during a time when most everything in nature can seem dead or dormant, at least in places like Iowa that have real winters.

Late fall, winter, and the holiday season can precipitate an emotional down time. But then I think about the prairie seed that I have harvested by hand. There are times when being out in my simple little prairie projects by myself or walking the

railroad right-of-ways is as wholesome a process as I know. That is partially because the process involves being on a quest in nature, but it is also because gathering seed is a sensual process. It involves touch even if it is hard to feel the seed through my sturdy leather mittens. Touch is important in order to softly tug on the seed head and determine if the seed is ready to come off the parent plant. The act of harvesting seed also helps me address the issues of pain that can occur with the separation of parent and child. That kind of angst of abandonment is at least sub-consciously part of most of our psyches and can be triggered, along with other sorrow, in down times.

What I realize as I slide the seed off the parent plant, and as I think about the traditions that celebrate the new year in the fall, is that the seed is prepared for new life, whether scattered naturally or by human efforts. If the seed does not come off the parent plant easily, it is not ready. Each species and each remnant of prairie has its own timing. The Drooping Coneflower reaches maturation nearly a month earlier than the Pale Purple Coneflower or Purple Prairie Clover. When the seed is ready and comes freely, it is a pleasant feeling for me as an interloper in nature. Fortunately, when the parent plant is ready to let go, it has already given the seed everything it needs to sustain itself. The seed is ready to be idle for a long time — perhaps months, perhaps many years — before it is ready to grow into a plant and send down roots. Meanwhile, the parent plant continues its own life via its own deep root system.

I have often thought of new life beginning only in the spring, perhaps at Easter time or when young, green shoots of corn emerge from the ground. But actually, new life occurs all year round. In regard to prairie seed, I can adopt a new metaphor and imagine new life beginning at that time of year when the hints of the upcoming winter and shortened days start creeping into my subconscious. In many ways, my work at prairie restoration is a spiritual effort.

A friend loaned me a book with the title *Growing Myself*. It talked about how one can learn about herself during the process of growing a garden. I am not good with gardens or house plants, but since prairie restoration projects are not plowed under each year like a garden, I have confidence that every ounce of effort that I put into those projects will yield something long-lasting. I hope they will be a great physical resource, perhaps a symbol of what was in Pocahontas County before our European style of farming cleared the land and led to the current mono-culture of agriculture.

I have heard that the Celtic people believe there are tree nymphs that guard sacred Oak trees. Perhaps there are prairie nymphs, and the tall grass prairie has its own measure of sacredness. It is interesting to muse about how the Judeo-Christian scriptures would be different if the writers of those texts had lived near the tall grass prairie. How would they have changed their metaphors for the divine? What

if they used the metaphors of prairie root systems and the resulting rich soil instead of rocks and rivers? Or what if they spoke of Big Bluestem and Compass Plants instead of grape vine, fig tree, sheaf of wheat, or mustard seed? Or what about the rich diversity of a prairie ecosystem that is so different from the mono-culture of a vineyard? Or what about the purifying burning practices that enhance the health of a prairie? I suspect that prairie-based metaphors would point to the notion of mystery.

I definitely come face-to-face with mystery when learning about prairie plants or working on prairie restoration projects. I wonder how the native species along the railroad tracks, in road ditches, and other prairie remnants survived? How does the very tiny seed of the Gentian carry the genetic code needed so a new Gentian plant can reflect the characteristics of the old ones? How can such a small seed be so durable, containing and protecting the essence of life while lying dormant many years before becoming a plant?

My list of intrigue about prairie life could go on and on. On one hand, I am grateful to be able to get answers from some of my friends who are experts in prairie work. On the other hand, I am in awe of the whole process and appreciate the mystery and wouldn't want to be able to "figure it all out." And maybe, just maybe, I am learning to be patient and appreciate the mystery of my own unfolding life. Also, the enduring metaphorical images, resulting from the experiences of working with prairie, help me deal with on-going cycles of life and death — death and rebirth.

In conclusion, my prayers go out to those people who are in grief over the loss of loved ones whether by death or other separation. May this new year be gentle toward them, and may their pain ease and their souls heal soon. And may the following reflection be helpful. I first read it at a friend's home. It was on a card she had received from a friend and tucked inside the cover of a book:

I often think that people we have loved and who have loved us not only make us more human but they become a part of us and we carry them around all the time whether we see them or not. And in some ways, we are a sum total of those who have loved us and those we have given ourselves to.

Often times as I drive across the Iowa countryside, I listen to National Public Radio, and just the right song is playing to fit my disposition or just the right topic is discussed to enlighten me. That happened last Wednesday morning as I drove to Rolfe to be with my father and siblings for meetings with the funeral home director and the pastor.

The guest on the "Talk of Iowa" on WOI Radio was an artist who had written a book about how artists could make their work economically viable. I was particularly interested in a point that

was made both by a woman, who called the show, and the author. The essence of what they said was that an artist needs to connect with a community, feel at home there, and have a sense of place there in order to do his or her work. They also contended that an artist needs to have other connections and market his or her work to the larger world.

Part of my life journey has been the desire to be at home in a community, not just be on the move. I also have come to realize that I am an artist via my photography, video, and related projects. I also want to finish a book about my rural heritage. All I have to do is write the last chapter. Sounds easy, but the challenge lies in discerning what the focus will be and giving voice to what I want to say.

I have lived in Gilbert for over 11 years. Gradually, I am feeling at home here and am grateful for the sense of being part of the community. I am also grateful for the connections that I have in Rolfe and Pocahontas County, whether those are old acquaintances or new ones.

It has been interesting to visit Mother at the Rolfe Care Center. I often see peers of my parents, who are residents of the center, or run into my own peers, who are visiting their parents or are on the care center staff. Indeed, there have been times at the Care Center when it seemed like the social hub of the town. There is a profound feeling of understanding and compassion when connecting in a place such as that with people that share so much of my heritage.

I am also touched by the compassion that people have extended to my family and me as an individual following Mother's death. Perhaps some other day I will expand on my thoughts about these caring connections. But for now, let me simply say that the best of an old-time sense of community seems to prevail during times such as this. One of my regrets is that I have not sent sympathy cards, made phone calls, or otherwise reached out to my high school peers and other Rolfe people, who are dear to me, when they have lost a loved one.

Well, this is probably not the last that I will write in follow-up to the events of last week related to Mother's death. Mother was accustomed to telling her visitors at the Care Center that it was time for them to leave even if they had been with her for only 10 minutes. I can't recall a time when I was there with her that she either didn't say, "Helen, you don't need to stay" or directly told me it was time to go. Some times I beat her to the punch and said "good-bye" to her before she was able to give her signal. She died on Tuesday, November 30. On Saturday, November 27, toward the end of our visit, she said, "Helen, it's time for you to bid adieu."

Dad called me on Tuesday to tell me Mother had died. That evening when a dear friend, Joy, stopped for a visit at my apartment, I somewhat ashamedly told her that a polka-like tune had been bubbling through my mind but that I wasn't sure what it was. I hummed the tune. She said it sounded like "There is a Tavern in the Town." I was embarrassed to be thinking about a raucous song at such a sensitive time. The next morning I told her that I really had not been thinking about "There is a Tavern in the Town" but the words "adieu, adieu." Fortunately, Joy is a walking encyclopedia of verse and song. She sang me the chorus for "There is a Tavern in the Town." I could not believe that I had not heard it before. Her voice was tender.

The words were exquisite and fitting:

Fare thee well, for I must leave thee,
Do not let this parting grieve thee,
And remember that the best of friends
Must part, must part.

Adieu, adieu kind friends, yes, adieu
I can no longer stay with you, stay with you,
I'll hang my harp on the weeping willow tree,
And may the world go well with thee.*

So I bid adieu to you for now.

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