

“The Cosmic Maple” - A Celebration
The UU Fellowship of the Eastern Slopes
March 11, 2013

Margaret Rieser

So, guess what today is? It's the last Sunday of winter. That means next week we'll be enjoying the first Sunday of spring, and we will have turned the corner. Or will we? Perhaps we've started turning the corner already. Sometimes change starts before you can actually see it.

When we think of spring we think of putting away the roof rake and the skis, the opulence of lilacs blooming, buying seedlings, and eating asparagus. I'm not sure any of that's going to happen this week. But we do get to experience some changes that are harder to recognize; if we pay attention, we discover signs that our world is changing. We have bold sunlight, the birds are acting different, not to mention that we have different birds, red fox pee smells skunky as the males attract mates, and sap buckets are on the maple trees.

Collecting sap from maple trees to be boiled down to syrup is one of my great joys in this season of change. To be honest, it's one of my great joys in life. I'm outdoors, riding on the back of a trailer, part of a fabulous crew who work together like an almost well-oiled machine, towards a shared goal. We notice all sorts of changes around us, as we ride the back roads of our beloved town, filling the barrels on the trailer with sap. We learn the trees and their particular ways. Some have names. Amy's "tree love" is nothing special to look at but she never fails to have overflowing buckets, even when other trees nearby are taking a break. The Grandmother tree snuggles close to Lucas, Hanora, Serge and Lana's barn. She's seen a lot of change in her lifetime, and still wants to do her part, sporting 6 taps and buckets. We love her and thank her and all the other trees for the sap. Gratitude rises in our hearts, for the sunshine, for each other, for every bit of the experience.

There is a story told by indigenous people of northern North America (taken from *Braiding Sweetgrass* by Robin Wall Kimmerer): When Nanabozho, the Anishinaabe Original Man walked through the world, he noticed who was flourishing, and who was not. He felt dismayed when he came across villages where gardens were not being tended and tools were not being kept in repair, and children were not taught the ways to live. Instead of seeing piles of firewood and stores of food, he saw the people lying beneath maple trees with their mouths wide open, catching the thick, sweet syrup of the generous trees. The people had become lazy, and took for granted the gifts of the Creator. They did not do their ceremonies or care for one another. He knew what he had to do: He went to the river and dipped up many buckets of water and poured the water straight into the maple trees to dilute the syrup. Today, maple sap flows like a stream of water with only a trace of sweetness to remind the people of both possibility and responsibility. And so it is that it takes 40 gallons of sap to make one gallon of syrup.

Gathering sap, more than anything in my life so far, captures my idea of heaven, of the best life has to offer. I believe that to find the goodness in life, you have to work. The work is hard, but it's honest and real. And it relies on leadership, teamwork and shared goals, kind of like an orchestra, or a soccer team or a spiritual fellowship. And like those things, gathering sap both depends on, and leads to community, love and joy. The result is sweetness itself.

One last story: In the late 1700s and early 1800s, Benjamin Rush, and other people opposed to the enslavement of Africans, proposed that maple sugar production was a viable way to end the United States' economic dependence on slavery, since most slaves worked in the cane sugar industry in the South. In fact the painting on our publicity flyer for today's service, by Eastman Johnson, a local Fryeburg artist, was used to help show how maple sugaring in New England could replace the slave-dependent sugar making in the South. Perhaps some of the answers to big problems are closer to home than we think. A good thing to ponder on Social Justice Sunday.

Doug Burnell

When Margaret asked me to say a few words at this “maple service,” no passionate plot line or meaningful metaphors jumped to the fore. As a longtime moderator and very low-key basketball player/fan, I can readily conjure up seasonal comparisons and contrasts amongst annoyingly intense but importantly democratic annual meetings for our local governments, highly commercialized yet still beautifully athletic NCAA March Madness bracket games, and the demanding but delicious tradition of making maple syrup. My sappy connections have been erratic from year to year, but always based on a solid in-law relationship which began with my sister marrying into the 6th generation of the Weston family, who has farmed the same land in Fryeburg Village since 1799.

This year, I have been called to help with the operation more than ever, since my brother-in-law has been struggling to bounce back from a concussion he suffered back in December from snow sliding off a barn roof. Bringing back 50 years of memories sharing in this farming tradition, physically and mentally demanding March days meaningful for their sense of place have recently been piling up for me: struggling to carry pails of sap from overflowing yard and roadside buckets through deep, wet snow and then hoisting them overhead to pour into the truck tank; lugging armloads of split wood from the woodshed into the sugar house to keep a handy supply; piling chunks into the firebox to maintain draft-induced flames which bring the cold sap to a rolling boil in the back pan above its magical fin-like flues; getting lost in the sweet steam until reminded by searing surfaces and goopy syrup-lava of the true nature of this heated enterprise; dealing by contrast with chunks of sap-ice, arctic gusts of wind, and frozen pipes; and taxing powers of concentration and dexterity filling jugs large and small with extremely hot syrup out of the propane-fired finishing pan.

My favorite connections come from contemplating native Pequawkets evaporating away water from maple sap, probably in this very location in their village on the flanks of Pine Hill overlooking the Saco River and its fertile floodplain meadows, where they grew corn and other vegetables in fish-fertilized mounds. Although the presence of hand-carved wooden spiles and other sugaring implements indicate centuries of Weston-family involvement with the art of sugaring, my brother-in-law George's story is of a classic start from scratch:

From the deleterious effects of sticky steam on the wallpaper and utensils in his mother's kitchen and subsequent banishment, the fledgling boiling operation was moved to a pan over an open fire outside the impressive three-story farm house. Then, the old garage across the street housing Uncle Edward Weston's Model T Ford came into consideration.

An arch was installed and George and his cousin and friends took on the operation for real, selling some product to town folk, and even getting an order from Harry Eastman for gifts to his Western Maine Forest Nurseries employees. Late-night boiling led to an occasional sleepover in the loft of the garage, which must surely have resulted in sweet dreams. A pair of young steers was employed to haul a sledge equipped with sap cans up the dugway from the giant river maples, until the steers somehow fell into the open river and the sledge and contents were lost (the steers got out fine, and the boys shaken, mostly with fear of being disciplined). Initials burned into the garage wall boards still harken back to those days remembered now by only a handful.

The same graffitied garage has been added onto and outfitted with a holding-tank room, classic rooftop steam vents, counters and shelves, a paved floor, and a somewhat larger evaporator. Rusticity still prevails, however, in the befuddling folding garage doors which periodically blow wide open in heavy wind gusts, drafty old windows replete with original weights, and interminable dust and webs which can never be coaxed into totally disappearing.

So, the old-time methods and equipment still work their magic, yielding less-fancy syrup but far-greater nostalgia and opportunities for family teamwork. And, once again, cousin kids and friends, school groups, and old- and new-timers get to visit and experience mud and sweet steam, syrup on snow, and help maintain an ancient spring pastime on this beloved spot....

Bob Streeter - "This Maple Ministry," *The Farmer's Pencil Blog*, 20 June 2017.

The last of 500 buckets have finally been cleaned, two months after the sugaring season ended in mid-April. And not one of those buckets were hung in a traditional sugarbush, a section of forest where well spaced sugar maples are managed to thrive with little competition. So how does a farmer sugar without a sugarbush? You hit the road, three and a half miles to be exact. New England is full of roadside maples, and these Tamworth backroads are no different. In between the farm and the village there are fifteen different friends and neighbors with tappable sugar maples near the road, and all of these folks share a passion for rites of spring, like buckets on trees.

It almost feels like a three and a half mile congregation, a ministry of maple where the buckets baptize the faithful as winter takes its first early steps into spring. And I am no minister, but during those six transitional weeks of winter nights and springtime days, I can certainly preach the gospel according to sap.

My pulpit is a pickup truck. When the sap is running, I hitch to a trailer containing six empty 55 gallon barrels, along with the five Disciples of Sap: Amy, George, Margaret, Jennifer, and Lucy. We roll slowly down the road from one band of buckets to another, from one neighbor to the next. At each stop we all disembark to our usual trees, methodical and cheerful, powered by hope.

There is conversation, always conversation. The mood is as high as the sun, beating back the long winter behind us. People smile and wave, others stop to help empty a few buckets and then move on. Seasonal communion at this roadside church.

We drink the “wild water” as Jennifer calls sap, sampling different trees along the way. Some are sweeter than others, like people, and we remember the sweet ones. We find our way back to them.

Eventually, with a setting sun and falling temperatures, we make our way back to the farm. Barrels are pumped out into a 400 gallon tank where it can slowly trickle into my evaporator. We say our goodbyes and I prepare a fire for the solitary act of night boiling. Loneliness does not come easy to me. I love the cadence of my work when guided by quiet mindfulness. The rhythm is almost always the same in that three-sided sugarhouse on dark and chilly nights, steam rising for the stars. Every few minutes my right hand holds a piece of slabwood on a chopping block, my left arm swings the maul. It is a motion built on muscle memory, and I wonder if that memory is capable of forgetting the pain that is starting to creep in after all of these years.

I swing open the doors to the arch, throw in an armload of wood and close the doors quickly, not wanting to kill the boil. Next I'll check the temperature of the front pan, glance at both float valves, then perhaps finish bottling a batch of syrup into mason jars. Once every two hours or so I'll grab my hydrometer and draw-off about three gallons of 219 degree syrup. Some of that syrup eventually flows back down the hill to all of the friends and neighbors who shared their trees.

When the clock starts flirting with midnight, my body starts to shut down. It has usually been a long and physical day, and I don't dare sit down for fear of falling asleep and burning syrup in the front pan. At times I listen to music, or a baseball game (a sport made for radio), and often I'll let my mind wander to the low rumble of fire and the rolling sap. The questions always outnumber the answers in this open-aired cathedral of the night. My kind of church, I suppose.

I draw down the fire and make sure the sap levels are running deep. The urge to sleep has once again surpassed all other urges, and I walk across the dark yard feeling like I've nothing left to give. But across these recent years I'm learning to save a little something to somehow, some way, give thanks.