

Staying Afloat in the Bog
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In the fall, when my children were young, portable and keen on family outings, we faithfully and enthusiastically attended the Renaissance Fair down in Carver, Massachusetts. You know – mud wrestling, jousting, lute players, wenches in tight bodices, and roasted turkey legs on steroids.

The ride to Plymouth County from our home in Concord was long and mostly quite boring, save for the last few miles as we cruised along secondary routes, passing by New England frame houses, farm stands, and inevitably, several newly- flooded cranberry bogs.

The bogs always caught my eye and filled me with a small thrill...these exquisite, oddly-shaped pools of crimson, spilled out on the drab landscape like Beaujolais wine on a soft brown carpet. The sight of those glistening "bog rubies" aroused and flooded my senses with something quite potent and wondrous.

After our visit one year, I mentioned my little cranberry bog epiphany to a colleague who had recently moved to Plymouth. "Oh," she enthused, "I've just been on the tour at Ocean Spray Cranberry World. Amazing little fruit, isn't it?" I looked at her blankly. "You mean, for Thanksgiving dinner...as a *condiment*," I queried, wide-eyed and eager.

"No," she laughed, "I was talking about how they stay afloat and all?" My blank look persisted until I sputtered, "Well, actually, I don't know, I've never been to Cranberry World, wishing I could magically channel a pilgrim.

Before the conversation got hopelessly bogged down, she let me in on the secret...when ripe cranberries are cut from their underwater vines during wet picking, only the healthy ones float to the surface for harvesting.

How do they stay afloat? These berries are buoyant because of four small air pockets that surround the inner seed. Four symmetrical cavities of emptiness are built in by nature to allow for buoyancy and robustness. Spiritual little fruit, isn't it?

I imagine you've never been asked before today to liken yourself to a cranberry. Yet, I wonder aloud with you whether we, too, are divinely engineered with pockets of spiritual "air" surrounding our inner-most cores. And whether these spiritually-ventilated air pockets are intended to keep *us* buoyant, but instead, we get bogged down by a stifling and self-imposed worldly fullness.

It seems to me that often (and inevitably) those hallowed, hollowed spaces within us become congested with tasks and chores and thoughts and ambitions and commitments. There is not a crack or a corner left where anything refreshing, unexpected, unplanned, or transcendent can wedge itself into this jam-packed chamber.

They are so full, so blotted, that the *Holy Spirit*, or the *Spirit of life*, or *shekinah*, or *atman*, or *kavod*, or *taqwa*, or *Tao*, or whatever we chose to call it, becomes displaced from its natural domain; the Spirit is squeezed out, the air pockets close in on themselves, and we go down in the bog like an unhealthy cranberry.

It's tough to break this pattern because "fullness" is held in such esteem in our culture. We equate it with mastery, expertise, and success. A "full life" is a badge of honor, even when that life may actually more "swamped" than full.

Emptiness is to be avoided because it implies lack, deficiency, failure. Here in 21st century America, we don't like to be beginners and we don't like *emptiness*. Full stop. So, our lives can become *too full* even when, at times, they actually *seem* empty by our own self-defeating social standards. This is especially true and hazardous as we enter the "buy it and it will make your life complete (even though you can't afford right now) season of the year. Perhaps the beloved cranberry comes onto the American scene in late November to serve as more than a condiment, eh? Spiritual little fruit!

The wisdom of the cranberry bog blends well with many religious traditions that teach us about the virtues of emptiness, perhaps none more so than Zen Buddhism and Taoism.

One of my favorite Zen parables on this subject is called [A Cup of Tea](#). In this tale, the master Nanin receives a student who has come to inquire about Zen. Nanin serves tea. He pours his visitor's cup full, and then keeps on pouring. The student watches the overflow until he can no longer restrain himself. "It is overfull," he exclaims, "No more will go in!" Nanin replies, "Like this cup, you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?"

In Nanin's sage reply, we are reminded that in Zen, emptiness IS form and form IS emptiness. Emptiness is the *point*, not a step on the way to fullness. One must commit to "unknowing," and empty oneself of ego and material attachment.

Likewise, in Taoist disciplines such as Tai Chi and Chi Kung, the goal is to make room for energy (or chi) to circulate and heal us by expanding rather than by contracting or overfilling us. Again, preserving the internal hallowed chambers allows for a spiritual buoyancy within us and for the possibility of transformation in our lives.

Thomas Merton, the renowned Trappist monk, draws on this ancient Eastern wisdom in his own book on contemplative *Christian* prayer. He talks about an essential emptying, modeled by Jesus himself, that reaches to the very roots of our nature as human beings.

"True contemplation," he writes, "is not absolute quietism. It is listening in silence, an expectancy, a general emptiness that waits to realize the fullness of the message of the spirit within its own apparent void. "

We further learn from Merton that the true contemplative is not the one who prepares his mind for a particular message that he wants or expects to hear, but who remains empty because he knows that he can never expect or anticipate the words that will transform his darkness into light. He does not anticipate a special kind of transformation. He does not demand light instead of darkness.

"What appears to be emptiness," Merton teaches us, " is actually pure being, pure love, pure freedom, pure Spirit."

We see Merton's concepts exemplified in the mandarin mallard from our reading earlier. As Donald Babcock tells us: " This is some sort of duck. Probably he doesn't comprehend how large and ferocious the ocean and neither do we. But he *realizes* it. And what does he do, I ask you. He sits down in it! He reposes in the immediate as if it were infinity, which it is. He has made himself part of the boundless by easing himself in, just where it touches him. I like that little duck. He doesn't know much, but he's got religion."

One could say that the duck, like the cranberry, is not just buoyant, but also spiritually "spacious," and we can be, too. The Concord based teacher, writer and space clearer Stephanie Bennett Vogt, who is a friend of mine (and is here with us this morning) has written a wonderful book about the process and experience of spaciousness called Your Spacious Self. (our guided meditation today was an adaptation of one in her book.)

I think Stephanie would agree with Brother Merton that you can not and should not go about "achieving" or "getting" spaciousness like you would a product or academic degree. Spaciousness is not something that you grow into or get good at. You don't *become* the cranberry or the duck. You already are.

Stephanie writes that, " Spaciousness is something you're born with. It comes built-in to this physical package we call a body--but way bigger. It is who we are. It is a state of being that reveals itself little by little the more we practice clearing and letting go. Most of us hardly know who we really are because we're so gummed up by a lifetime of attachments to things, beliefs, and outcomes. Each attachment is like an invisible string that sticks to us like Velcro. The more stress and worry, the larger the tangle we carry around with us everywhere we go. We become a little bit like Pigpen, the adorable *Peanuts* character, who walks around with his permanent cloud of dust.

What's more, we can get so caught up in this illusory cloud of attachments that it *feels* real. Everything we see and do gets distorted as it passes through the "rose-cluttered" glasses of our mind. We cannot imagine ourselves being any different than we are already. As author Anaïs Nin puts it plainly: "We don't see things as they are. We see things as WE are."

The good news, Stephanie tells us, is that spaciousness is something you can open up to and experience by gently clearing your self, your home, and your life--one thing, drawer, pile, step, thought, issue, or moment at a time.

In my view, Brother Merton and Sister Vogt, as well as our Zen master Nanin and our mandarin mallard in the swells, are asking us to acknowledge and embrace the same life-giving, spiritually-nurturing principle embodied by our amazing little botanical soul-mate, the cranberry.

And that message is so simple, really, even if its execution in our overfull lives is not. Don't rush to fill the seemingly empty inner chambers with all of the *stuff* of life or with all of the trappings of an over-cultivated spirituality. Breathe and allow. Stop and feel.

When we are swamped, we often reach for life preservers that we think will help us, but they only serve as distractions. We might strive to remember in those overfull moments that the most amazing life preserver resides within us.

Our hallowed, hollowed spaces are already full of pure being, pure love, pure Spirit.....an ever-renewable supply of spiritual oxygen that can raise *us* up, open our hearts, expand our awareness, and keep us afloat in the bog.

The air circulating within the cranberry simply *knows* intuitively how to keep its cargo afloat. And so does the divine spirit within us, if we'd just leave those amazing air pockets to their own devices. We don't need to hoard spiritual oxygen or improve on nature's design; there is no call for us to make these air pockets "useful." They are useful enough, as is, in their overflowing emptiness.

In a poem entitled, The Space Within, the Taoist master Lao-Tse writes,
"Thirty spokes share the wheel's hub;
It is the center hole that makes it useful.
Shape clay into a vessel;
It is the space within that makes it useful.
Cut doors and windows for a room;
It is the holes that make it useful.
Therefore profit comes from what is there ;
Usefulness from what is not there."

As we move from the to-do list of Thanksgiving to the hubbub of December, may we remain spacious, by keeping the hallowed, hollowed spaces within us open and useful for the power, presence, and work of the Spirit.

May we choose ease, choose peace, and choose joy; may we breathe, allow, stop and feel, as we face the constant challenge of staying afloat in the bog.

Amen and blessed be.