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Harvesting Wild Asparagus (1972)

Steve and I shared a house on a farm near Oregon's eastern border, in the Treasure Valley for very low rent. The house sat under huge old cottonwood trees, with good ground near the house for a large garden.

The owner of the farm let us use his big green tractor to turn the soil for our garden, and I, having had some experience driving tractor, hooked up the discing implement and began to prepare the soil for a garden.

I forgot, for an almost-critical moment, about steering a tractor by using the rear-wheel brakes to turn until I came inches from tearing out the fence. High up, just ahead of the ground-churning discs in inevitable motion, I felt sudden dreadful excitement, fear of what seemed like impending catastrophe as I approached the fence behind the thundering diesel engine that wouldn't respond to my request through the steering wheel.

I remembered soon enough that a wheel-tractor is manufactured with individually-operated rear-wheel brakes for assistance in steering and stomped on one brake so the large left rear wheel stopped, and the tractor pivoted around that wheel and turned, and the discing implement followed. I roared down the garden, parallel to the fence, ripping up sod and soil but not the fence.

As my mind settled back toward confidence that I could work ground for the garden without ruining the tractor or the fence, I reminded myself that I could, if necessary, put the clutch in and stop all work long enough to think about how I could avoid catastrophe.

We spared the landlord's fence, worked much manure and spoiled hay into the soil and planted and raised an excellent garden.

Steve and I both were learning all we could about existence. We experimented industriously to see if we could live without jobs. Steve knew how to solder and weld, and he used those skills to make jewelry.

We thought we might make enough money selling handcrafted goods to pay for our basic existence. We found a

place where manufacturers dumped Philippine mahogany, and we harvested a load to carry home in Steve's van.

I made small boxes from the wood, and a mirror frame that Steve cut a five-sided mirror for. Everything we made was beautiful to behold.

Very little of it sold, despite the best efforts of the craft co-op shop personnel in the nearby small college town. Very little of anyone's craft efforts sold, but everyone in the co-op learned a lot, some of it disillusioning. Part of what we all learned was that we must replace the illusions that don't work with visions that do work.

Art is an exception if by "work" we mean something that provides some economic income. Art merited our involvement even if we didn't make money from it, though it is more acceptable, in the consumer culture, to pursue art vigorously if it looks like we will eventually make money from it.

When I realized most of the finest boxes and mirror frames I made weren't going to sell, I started carving the wood for no practical purpose, just to represent parts of visions living in my mind.

I tried to round out my visions by playing my guitar and singing and by writing poems and short fiction. I knew I would eventually need to earn money, but I still had some money received from insurance when a drunk driver hit me, and I still had work to do to recover from injuries before I could work more than a few hours at a time.

The cottonwood trees around the house offered new green leaves to the warming sky. Seeds we planted in the garden sprouted and began to grow.

Along some of the big irrigation ditches that served the farms around us, asparagus began to push green, very edible stalks from the ground.

No farmer in the area cultivated asparagus anymore, but the plants had seeded themselves for many years where weeds grew and cultivators wouldn't reach, along ditch banks, for example.

No one cared if we harvested these delectable weeds, so we did. Finding asparagus among the rapidly growing spring weeds became a daily adventure. We harvested all the asparagus we could eat, aware that we ate, with much appreciation, large quantities of an expensive vegetable, free to us.

We ate asparagus raw, steamed, fried, and baked, usually with rice. We harvested lambs-quarters, miners' lettuce, several varieties of dock, dandelions, and other wild plants.

The garden began to produce, and we shifted some of our

harvest to what we had cultivated ourselves, culminating toward the end of summer with our harvest of several varieties of melons, slower growing than most other garden produce, but well worth waiting for.

I showed Steve I could vacuum a floor with a canister-type vacuum cleaner while I sat comfortably in a wheeled chair, moving the chair as the size of the rug dictates.

We had so many projects going, we filled half the large living room with tables. We thought we might eventually fill all the floor space with tables and have to move our living up one table height and start over.

After melon harvest, we rode in Steve's van to California. We experimented. 40 miles an hour the first 100 miles gave us high mileage. 45 miles an hour the next 100 gave us slightly fewer miles per gallon of gasoline. We increased our speed by increments of 5 mph until we arrived in the Sacramento Valley at 60 per, consuming about 25% more gasoline than when we started at 40 per. We were sure the flat front of the van made it much less efficient at higher speed.

In California, late summer baked the land. We swam in Butte Creek a lot. I met Laura almost as soon as we got there, and she went with the growing group of people we got to know who also swam.

I knew almost from the first that Laura and I would eventually marry, but it took me a while to convince her. I was in a hurry about living, learning, and building various forms of art, but I wasn't in a rush to talk Laura into marriage, mainly because she didn't respond to my suggestions that we marry in any positive fashion if I tried to rush the process of getting to know each other.

Like any form of art, and like early-planted but slow-growing melons, courting Laura toward marriage took time. A slow and careful approach showed well in the finished form of marriage and garden, just as free, wildly-growing asparagus, good raw right after harvesting, was also good, with much variety, in cooked forms if we carefully prepared it.

We all learned and enjoyed our journey toward goals we defined in more and more detail as we walked into our future.