

“Little Acorns, Mighty Oaks”

This is a good year for acorns. According to the *Boston Globe*, backyards across New England are bursting with a bumper crop. I've learned that, just like people, oak trees have fat years and lean years. It can take a couple of seasons for an acorn to form from a little oak flower. And the abundance of seed varies dramatically depending on weather and other conditions scientists still don't completely understand. So that a "mast year," which is what oak tree specialists call an autumn like this one when acorns are falling by the bushel, comes around only periodically.

The park at the end of my street does seem pretty well littered with them, which is good news for the squirrels and mice and bluejays. Folk wisdom says that a mast year means a long, hard winter ahead. But at least there will be enough to eat, and having acorns galore means the squirrels won't be chowing down on so many of the bulbs my wife planted last weekend. Most acorns do get eaten, by bears and turkey and ruffed grouse, and in earlier times native peoples ate them, too. Boiling them for about fifteen minutes gets rid of the bitterness, and then you can roast them just like any nut.

Eat all you want, because in a year like this, one big oak will produce 50,000 acorns more or less. And not all of them can turn into new trees. But of the ones that do germinate and grow, you can be certain of this. The acorn from a white oak will mature into a white oak. A blackjack oak will make other blackjacks. Acorns from a red oak will sprout into a tree just like the one it came from.

Some think the same rule applies to people. There's an old saying, "the acorn doesn't fall far from the tree," which means that children tend to resemble their parents. Good and bad traits are passed along to our offspring, for better or worse, partly through genetics, partly through the power of example, and partly through the operation of spiritual laws that tend to keep our world in moral balance just as the laws of nature keep the number of squirrels and the number of oak trees in a rough equilibrium.

You might call this the law of karma. You might say "what goes around comes around." Or drawing from the scriptures, you might say that no good tree can bear bad fruit. But it's a fact that what you put out into the world tends to be pretty much the same as what you get back. Lovingkindness begets lovingkindness. Charity engenders charity. Hatred generates more hate. Whereas joy and laughter are contagious. Just as the laws of thermodynamics tell us that no energy is ever lost from the universe, so religious teachers tell us that moral behavior tends to preserve and perpetuate itself. Every action for good or ill has an equal and reciprocal reaction. And expecting seeds of envy or jealousy or resentment to yield anything other than a harvest of bitterness would be like hoping that acorns might produce a maple or birch.

How does the law work? Maybe you've heard the story of the poor Scottish farmer. His name was Fleming, and one day as he was out in his fields trying to make a living for his family, he heard a cry coming from a nearby marsh. Alarmed at the noise, he dropped his hoe and ran to the bog, where he discovered a young boy who had

wandered into the muck and become trapped up to his waist in the swampy ground. Farmer Fleming managed to rescue the terrified boy from what could have been a cold and watery end. The next day, an expensive carriage pulled up to the poor farmer's home, and a well-dressed gentleman stepped out who introduced himself as the boy's father. "I want to repay you for saving my son's life," the rich man said. "But I can't accept payment, sir" the farmer objected. "Is that your son?" the gentleman asked, pointing to a youngster in the farmhouse door. "If he's anything like his father, he'll grow to be a man we can be proud of. Let me pay for his education." The farmer's son went on to attend the best schools and eventually graduated from St. Mary's Hospital Medical School in London, becoming renowned to the world as Alexander Fleming, the discoverer of penicillin. Many years later, the gentleman's son who was saved from the bog fell ill with pneumonia. The drug that treated him was penicillin. The gentleman's name was Lord Randolph Churchill. His son was called Winston.

Or so said the email where I originally heard that tale on the internet. Parts of the story, I later learned, had been embellished quite a bit. Actually, Alexander Fleming attended medical school thanks to a bequest from his uncle. He never got any money from a nobleman. Still, he was the son of a hardscrabble farmer, one of eight children, and that generous gift did enable him to pursue his higher education. And while Winston Churchill's pneumonia during the war was really treated with sulpha drugs, still penicillin has saved the lives of millions of other people. So the laws of karma might not be simple or straightforward. But still I think the overall principle holds.

An oak tree has to reach the age of forty or fifty years before it finally flowers and produces seeds. And good deeds don't always yield immediate results. Sometimes other people take advantage of our generosity. Some years, all the bulbs we plant expecting daffodils in the spring do get eaten by the squirrels, and seeds of kindness seem to fall on barren ground. Not every acorn grows into a mighty oak. Not every good deed results in a miracle cure. But in the long run, you still reap what you sow. Love remains a perennial. Disappointed, pruned back, decency prevails. And for this we can share glad thanksgiving.