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*Shared Reminiscence*

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## Fred's Figs: A Legacy Tale (In Three Parts)

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### *Part One*

I prepared myself to scramble up the tall, rickety ladder. It's been leaning against the fig tree since last summer. Fred left it there at the ready in order to gather the figs before the birds could steal them and the bugs could eat them from the inside-out. Fred, my old friend, the angel of our neighborhood, died after 85 trips around the sun. Now he's back in the stars, but this is still his fig tree, still his garden—almost a mini urban farm—and Fred will always dwell here. For six summers, Fred offered me figs from his tree; the first summer after his death, I carried on his sweet fig-giving custom. And I served as caretaker of Fred's garden.

I discovered the first ripe fig of that first summer without Fred because I bopped into it as I was heading into the garden to water. The fig was a lovely ornament: dangling, bulbous and dark green. I was caught surprised by the ripe fig, as last I'd checked, the figs were seemingly days—weeks, even—away from ripening. The tree had been covered with many small, rock-hard drops.

So, last night when I discovered the ripe fig, or, maybe the ripe fig discovered me, I wondered if perhaps there were more. How could there be only one ripe fig? I decided to ascend Fred's ladder high into the lush uppermost branches so as to look down upon and from within the tree and survey it for potentially ripe fruits. Lucky me! I found two more!

I also acquired a wholly new view of Fred's garden: To the lower left, through the lush layers of leaves and branches, I spotted rows and rows of heirloom tomatoes. (After Fred died and we were making early preparations for the garden, Fred's daughter and I found plant tags in the greenhouse. On the tags Fred had written in black marker "a-i-r l-o-o-m" for use in indicating which seedlings were collected from last season's crop of round, gorgeously purple Russian heirloom tomatoes.) Glancing diagonally toward the middle of the garden, being careful not to fall off the ladder, I saw the island of raspberry bushes, now finished fruiting; the patch of new potatoes, ready to be excavated with a pitchfork; the ancient apple trees who no longer offer fruit. Rising up on the near horizon at the garden's edge, the pole beans and vines stretching in all directions, covered in small purple buds: future beans! To the right—opportunistic weeds, asparagus stalks gone-amok, misbehaving roses, and colonizing grape vines.

As I perched in the fig tree, so far above the ground below (where there was garlic planted until we pulled it up for curing), I was visited by memories. I was a major tree climber as a girl, and I closed my eyes momentarily and asked myself this question: What age do I feel right now, tangled in the arms of Fred's fig tree?

I also had a strong, visceral remembrance of visiting my dear friends Sara and Herb the year before Sara died of quickly-spreading cancer, at their house on the west bank of the river, just north of the bridge. They'd invited my daughter Isobel and me over to help pick ripe figs. Herb, my elder brilliant colleague, and his wife Sara, a precious comrade, enjoyed only a couple of years at most in that house on the river—they'd just gotten the interior walls tinted the dessert colors Sara saw in her imagination, planted some new plants in the well-

established garden, hosted a fantastic Passover Seder for which Isobel and I made homemade kosher chicken soup with two kinds of matzo balls: the small dense kind that sink, and the large fluffy kind that float.

I'll never forget that charming, hilarious experience of helping them pick figs on a late summer afternoon at their final home as a couple. Herb perching on an almost too-short ladder propped against the old, lush fig tree; Sara watching from an upstairs window (we broke the screen as we tried to pry it widely enough for her to lean out and see Herb straining as he reached up to pluck figs), alternating between begging him to be careful and bossing him about where the best figs were and the proper technique for picking them (in response to which Herb sweetly sang songs to Sara promising to be careful, reminding her that he was an old man with many years of ladder-climbing experiences to call upon.). My daughter Izzy and I stood on the deck below the tree with bushel baskets. I attempted to catch the figs as Herb tossed them down to me and then handed the figs to Izzy who placed them in the baskets for safe-keeping, occasionally eating a fig that was too ripe to carry back to our house on our bicycles.

Now as I eat figs too ripe to carry across the street from Fred's garden to my house, I think about the legacy Fred continues to give me. To be trusted with the caring for Fred's garden, a garden that has grown perpetually for 85 years, tending the plants and cultivating the land, allows me to continue my relationship with him. To spend Sunday afternoons with his adult children pulling weeds and gathering the harvest allows me to expand my relationship with Fred, to learn new things about him, about his people.

I've even adopted some of his habits-of-speech. I hear myself asking a friend, "Could you use some figs?" I take delight in watching my friend break open the green flesh to discover the sweet purple insides of one of Fred's figs.

### *Part Two*

I had intended to offer Fred's figs as dessert at a picnic I planned with my friend Erica, her children, and my daughter Isobel. So yesterday afternoon I headed into the garden, wandering past the zucchini, corn, and tomatoes, pausing periodically to check on the ripeness of various fruits and vegetables, acknowledging the spent raspberries and close-to-finished potatoes to my left, anticipating the sweet perfection of Fred's figs. The figs looked sound as I approached the tree, but I discovered upon gently grasping a fig that while I had been away from the garden for a few days Fred's fig tree had been captured by starlings and yellow jackets and a couple of hummingbirds. All of the ripe, sexy figs had been poked with little holes (hummingbirds), eaten from the inside-out (yellow jackets) or almost completely consumed and left dangling from their stems like deflated balloons (starlings). Fig pulp dripped onto my head and blouse, yellow-jackets buzzed in my ears, and I realized that there would be no figs for dessert. I was already running late for the picnic so I didn't even have time to change out of my stained blouse, nor fix my bangs which were stiff and sticky from the pulp.

The only consolation for my disappointment was the knowledge that the last basketful of glorious ripe figs was quite appropriately consumed by a group of World War Two veterans. As Izzy and I were leaving town the weekend right before the fig incident I just reported, we offered to a friend the figs that I'd just picked (ripe figs don't travel well), hoping he could share them with his colleagues at the Veterans Affairs Medical Center where he works. Turns out his colleagues loved Fred's figs and so did his clients. Fred shared many stories with me about World War Two and I wonder if perhaps he served alongside some of the old vets who enjoyed eating his figs. Maybe they were in the unit with Fred that liberated one of the concentration camps? What if all of these years later, Fred's figs were being gobbled by his comrades?

Today, the day I write part two of "Fred's Figs," was the very day of the month when I offer a collaborative inquiry session at Mary's Woods, a continuing care retirement center next door to the university where I teach. I've been offering a monthly session since this past January, and will do so for

the rest of this year and as long as they'll have me. At each session my custom is to read a short piece of writing, usually something I've written or am in the process of writing, and then we spend the remainder of our time surfacing themes, making connections between what I read and our own experiences, reminiscing about the past, and talking about our present lives, too. So, today I read "Fred's Figs: A Legacy Tale, Part One."

After a short span of silence when I finished the little essay, the group offered thoughtful, even surprising insights and stories from their own lives. One gentleman, P., sighed, paused, and then said, "I think you vividly illustrate the web of life, and how it crosses generations. I like the feel of your essay." His wife, D., remarked: "When people have died, they live on in us—in our memories and the stories we tell." Another woman, H., remembered how as a young girl she met her lifelong best friend because of a cherry tree, the kind that grows the bright red little sour cherries best for pies. The cherry tree grew in the yard of her friend's family's home, and H. and her best friend started out as enemies—the future friend had caught H. stealing cherries from the tree! Then P. shared another story having to do with a dilapidated row-house in 1960s inner-city Philadelphia. He reminisced about renovating the row-house and living happily with his family for many years in the middle of an ethnically and economically diverse neighborhood. The highlight of the story was his mention of the plate of ripe figs offered to him supposedly as a housewarming gift by a local progressive politician who showed up on his front stoop; from thereafter, P. and his wife ruefully referred to figs as "political figs."

Members of the group and I went on to talk about gardening, of the gardens we've known, the gardens we tend now, as well as the merits of letting plants do what they want, letting the garden exist in some intermediate zone between absolutely wild and overly designed. And we connected this strong, shared sensibility about our roles as human stewards of micro-agriculture to a more expansive, aspirational commitment to letting other creatures become and be who they want to become and be. We acknowledged the delicate balance to be sussed and cultivated between providing structure, on the one hand, and freedom, on the other, for those who are under our care, whether children, frail elders, partners, companion animals, neighbors, colleagues, or vulnerable members of the community.

After I returned home from Mary's Woods, Fred's son stopped by to check in and offer me some green beans from Fred's garden. He also brought me some figs—smaller, harder, and less sexy than the figs from last week that the WW2 vets gobbled. He has it in mind that we must fight a battle to save the rest of the figs from the hummingbirds, yellow jackets, and starlings. As well, he says this weekend he's going to make some fig jam. I tell him about my harrowing experience in the fig tree yesterday—in vivid detail, of course—and then we reminisce about our past experiences with angry, stinging creatures. He shares a story from his boyhood about how he and his friend were pursued through our neighborhood by a swarm of hornets; I share about being stung by yellow jackets multiple times on my head while riding a horse in the Oregon backcountry and how I had to dunk my head in a snow-melt mountain river and sleep off the venom-hangover in a bivouac. We laugh and commiserate, and then turn our conversation back to Fred's figs. We wonder if there is still a chance for the little unripe figs to ripen and we acknowledge that had we remembered to tie foil ribbons on the tree branches and enlist the scarecrow in security detail, we'd probably still be enjoying the best of Fred's figs. We make some provisional plans for next year's growing season and turn our attention to re-sowing the lettuce.

We can probably get another two months of lettuce from the garden, especially if we have an Indian summer.

❧ *Part Three* ❧

Fred's car is still in his driveway and seeing it there still catches me by surprise. As I am coasting down the street, heading home at the end of the day, or when I am backing out of my own driveway on my way out somewhere, I see his little car—an old maroon Honda Civic—and my heart leaps and I think, “Oh, great! Fred's home!” In the next moment, I remember that Fred is no longer here in his previous form. His house, which he lived in happily for decades, is unoccupied. His car sits unused in the driveway. Weeds are starting to grow up around it through the cracks in the pavement.

Sometimes it also happens that very early in the morning when it is still quite dark, as I'm heading out with Happy-the-dog for a trip to our park for some exercise, I look across the street to see if the light is on in Fred's kitchen, if he is at the window washing dishes, preparing veggies for soup, or looking across the street at my house to see if I am up yet. When Fred was still alive, I always felt like Fred and me, and Happy-the-dog—and the water fowl at our park—were the only creatures awake in the neighborhood as the sun was rising.

Fred's final decline began during the late fall and intensified in the early winter. He had experienced months of unexplained recurrent anemia, fatigue, and vertigo. For a few months it was feared that the non-Hodgkin's lymphoma he'd had previously was back for another round. But Fred's team of doctors ruled that and other cancers out and made sure that his diabetes was under control, gave him periodic blood transfusions, and kept a close eye on him. His daughter or son took turns taking him to various medical appointments throughout the autumn months and into the winter. The dizziness from the vertigo drove Fred crazy, especially because it prevented him from taking walks through our neighborhood, puttering in his garage or the dormant garden, or jumping into his car in order to go visit family or friends or attend mass at Saint Agatha's. Fred was homebound and discontented. I worried if the lights in Fred's kitchen were on later in the evening than I thought was usual or weren't on in the early morning when I woke up.

In those darkening days of 2009, as often as I was able I'd pay an evening visit to Fred, dropping by for a chat, sometimes with some homemade soup (“Could you use some lentil soup, Fred?” borrowing his favorite phrase of generosity). Because of his diabetes and my chronic intestinal condition we ate virtually the same plant-based, whole-foods diet, so we took pleasure in giving each other homemade treats, especially if the ingredients came from Fred's garden. During these visits, or on the phone when I was unable to stop in, he'd tell me about his day, how he was feeling, the results of a medical appointment, reminiscences about the old country, recollections of last summer's tomatoes and corn, or what not. And he'd ask me about my day, or he'd wonder after Isobel, so I'd tell him highlights, mostly having to do with what was happening at the park, or on the political scene, or I'd describe in great detail some fantastic recipe Izzy and I made or planned to make soon.

Fred was fortunate that he had a couple of short periods where he felt stable enough—not too wobbly and weak—and so was able to leave his home not just for medical appointments or a blood transfusion, but for Sunday dinner with his family, or for a short cane-assisted walk around the block. But the overall trajectory for his embodiment was downward, back toward the earth.

I still have Fred's phone number in my cell phone contact list. Under his entry, I also have his son's and daughter's contact numbers—“In Case of an Emergency” remnants from the time when Fred was in his physical decline. But now Fred's grown-up children have their own entries on my contact list. His son and I occasionally text-message to check in about coordinating our times and tasks in the garden. His daughter calls to let me know what's growing at her farm or to find out if I could use some fresh eggs or green garlic. On Fred's first birthday after his death, his children and I exchanged messages to affirm our devotion to their father.

I realize how fortunate I am—and how it is far from inevitable, it didn't have to happen this way—that in addition to knowing Fred, I have the opportunity to know his adult children as well, to work with them to carry forward Fred's legacy. To know them is to continue to know Fred.

My relationship with Fred is undoubtedly based in part on memories of our past experiences, of the things we did for or with each other. But there's something even more significant going on: Fred was, is, one of the best and truest friends I've ever had. I continue to have a great deal of space in my mind for remembering him and I am moved to tell and write stories about him as a form of celebration and memorialization. But—and this is so important and yet I'm struggling to match my experiences with words and thus communicate with others about my experiences—my relationship with Fred exists in the *present*, in the unfolding of my daily life. Though we dwell in two different layers of reality, I feel quite certain that we are still cultivating our relationship. That he is still alive to me, still a central part of my daily life, that I have an active relationship with him, is a beautiful, perplexing phenomenon.

