

You're My Little Potato

This is the first year I've had a successful vegetable garden. By successful I mean able to eat things grown in a specific portion of the ground. I've tried potted tomatoes and lettuce in the past and those have grown pretty well, until my children went through a two-week phase of being dinosaurs. They lumbered around the yard on all fours and their faces tucked right into my salad stuff until it was almost gone. It was intended to be eaten; I just imagined I would harvest it, bring it indoors and serve it on a plate.

This week I finally find time to dig out my overdue potatoes. They probably should have come out the week before. Does this do something to them, to be neglected this way? Do they just grow more? Or do they diminish and melt back into the soil? How would I know if they had disappeared?

Digging potatoes is a tedious business. I carefully clear off the earth I mounded over the tops of them, the stem like a flag on a mountaintop claiming the mound on behalf of Potato. I gingerly scrape away a layer of earth, then another and another, until – surprise! – I discover a hole inside my hole. There's an air pocket, and nearby, there's a potato. So this food growing thing does work!

While I dig, I think about my friend who just had a baby. She already has three, so her garden soil must be very fertile to be able to grow a fourth. Everything had been going along just fine, and then she found out that the illness that her mother had, the one she had before and thought she had conquered, has come back and will take her life.

My friend thought she would have more time with her mother. She thought she'd be able to leave the kids with her and go grocery shopping alone, that she'd be able to call her and tell her about the kids' first day of school, to brag about their accomplishments, to bemoan their struggles, to compare notes and gain the long perspective of mothering from one who had done it more than 35 years. But then she found out that her mother was going to leave her, to move out of the world they shared and go to a remote location without any wireless service, and never return.

This all came to a head around the time my friend was due to have her baby. She insisted that the doctors induce her, she delivered a healthy baby and three days later she drove four hours with the baby so that she could introduce him to him to his grandmother.

Her mother died the next day.

My trowel comes across a very white, long skinny root. I don't know if it is connected to anything, so I decide to use it as a trip line for a potato booby trap. I follow it, carefully remove the dirt around it, hope it will lead me to the underground jackpot. It looks a lot like a shoelace, and I shake my head at the thought of it leading me to a clutch of shoestring potatoes. The other roots I've found are amazing, some of them going a foot down into the soil, drawing from it all the nutrients the plant wants, unrepentant about how firm the connection is with the original home from which the plant sprouted. This shoelace root turns out to be connected to some irritating weed-grass that keeps trying to take over anything flat in my yard. I admire its tenacity but resent its success.

Parenting is a strange push-pull of connection and separation, new beginnings and roots. I want my children to know where they come from, to have healthy relationships with adults other than us as their parents. I also want us to be our own family, independent from our families of origin. When I say "our family" I want my kids to know who I'm talking about. I deeply desire that my family be a place of nurture and safety, someplace that allows them to take risks and discover their passions and dreams. I want them rooted here. Eventually, though, I want them to draw enough strength from being here that they are equipped to start a garden of their own, free to plant their own crops and flowers.

My friend was able to introduce her new son to his grandmother, then she was able to say goodbye to the mother who had given her the skills and courage to want to grow her own family. There's something beautiful about the circle of life there, something beautiful and mysterious about life springing up from the ground and returning to it at the end. There's something transcendent about digging in the soil and finding there life and sustenance hidden away, like a baby growing in a mother's body. I could flip it around and darkly wonder at the sickness quietly growing in a body too, slowly taking life away, but I choose to focus on the miracle of life today. I choose to marvel at the miracle of new potatoes growing and multiplying in the earth where once there was nothing but dirt.

Potatoes are a wonder.