

LITTLE FLOWERS, OLIVES, PUMPKINS

Herb Caen (1916–1997) was a great writer and three-dot journalist. You can be sure that any writer, like myself, who seemingly without any reason throws in . . . , much to the frustration of young copy editors, is a person who loved and was influenced by Herb Caen.

He once defined heaven as “a perpetual October in San Francisco.” Well, San Francisco has changed . . . the old neighborhoods are gone, only the rich can afford to live there . . . and the climate has also changed. But those of you who are old enough can remember what Herb meant. He also once wrote . . . “ I tend to live in the past . . . because most of my life is there.” So bear that in mind as you hop along the somewhat unconnected stepping stones of this week's reflection.



First of all, I would like to thank all of you who took the time to look around and share with

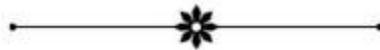


me what you saw at this wonderful time of year. It was a beautiful montage of sites in small towns, big cities and even one at sea! The one I will share is from an old and talented friend. Her husband was in the hospital and had been there for two weeks. As she was driving see him she had to stop in a turn lane. She looked out and saw a blue cornflower growing up through a crack in the road. "It was," she wrote, "strong and sprightly, hanging on to some piece of earth somewhere . . ." It reminded me of the blue flower that the Dutch writer Etty Hillesum (1914 - 1943) found outside the wire fence of a camp where the Nazis were holding her. It gave her a sense of freedom. She visited her little flower every day until she was moved to Auschwitz. But even in that setting, the flower somehow remained with her.

My friend's husband isn't facing the same type of situation as Etty Hillesum. But as we age we all encounter some hard places. Nevertheless there are always little things that help us get through life's challenges. For my friend and for Etty, it was a cornflower. For the great poet Matsuo Basho (1644 -1694) it was a little violet. He had been struggling to get to the summit of a high mountain so that he could see the far horizon. But he found something else,

*On the mountain path,
what is the special thing?
A simple violet.*

I think that either consciously or unconsciously we are all violet seekers. Treasuring the little things we hold onto that give us strength in times good and bad. As a friend put it, "planted by angels, watered with tears, warmed with smiles."



Life at Starcross has been a little different as of late. No longer do we focus on the beautiful red and gold torches of tall trees. Now we and many volunteers are becoming intimately acquainted with olive trees. They are harvested by hand with little rakes from Italy. When the harvesters are dropping olives onto nets and carrying them to the press in the barn, they are following the tradition of many centuries of people. Some do this while singing!



Most of us stand around as the first drops of the oil, the *olio nuovo*, slowly drips from the press. Everyone dips a finger in to taste. Making olive oil is a long, slow, and tedious process. But in the end I believe everyone, including the trees themselves, are happy.



Last Friday many of our youngest friends got even closer to the earth. Since early spring we have been growing pumpkins for the children and the families that rely on our Food Pantry. I love pumpkins and I'm quite sure the kids do too! The row is 100 feet long. The children carefully examined the pumpkins and chose just the right one. Some of our interns were standing by to help clip the stem, clean the dirt off, and carry the largest pumpkins. Parents with cameras were having a good time also. This event started many years ago, not only because I am fond of pumpkins, but because I remembered when a little kid was looking sadly at one of our pumpkins. He told me he had seen some in town but his family didn't have the money to buy one. Well, no money is needed here. I think that this yearly ritual makes the kids happy, the people who helped grow the pumpkins happy, me happy, and perhaps the pumpkins happy!



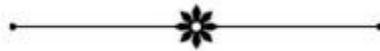
As we head into deep autumn, many things happen all at once here. First of all, this is when we must raise most of the money needed to keep Starcross going all year. That means filling orders from friends for holiday wreaths, olive oil, books and the like.

But this seems to be a time when people often face challenges and need an extra helping hand. Significant parts of this country have turned their back on the general welfare and

think only of their personal welfare. This can make difficult situations much worse. We are often asked to be part of a chain of helpers in events far away or next door. We do what we can and are not alone. Thankfully there are many people who are resolved to see that compassion and human dignity remain a part of our values in this country.



Special spiritual opportunities also occur at this time of year. It starts here with constructing a little altar in our Chapel. This is a practice we borrowed from our Latino/Latina friends and their *Dia de los Muertos*, Day of the Dead. We put out pictures of people who were, and still are, much loved. Somehow it helps diminish the distance between those on each side of the river of life. Someday I know I will cross that river. I am surprised to find that I am not always sad at that realization, but often find it rather comforting. When he gets a little older I'll arrange with my grandson Damien to see that my picture is properly displayed on that altar — maybe with a piece of good Dutch chocolate. Damien will know what to do with the chocolate when the altar is dismantled!



We started with Herb Caen so it seems right to end with him. Let's imagine that it's a morning on the old Broadway in San Francisco, and there is Herb . . . with his cup of cappuccino sitting at his sidewalk table at Enrico's. . . . If we just sit patiently he will eventually come forth with one of his famous one-liners . . . such as, "*Logic is no answer to passion.*" That goes well with this jumbled up Friday Reflection.

Let us all search for a violet — or a little blue flower.

Brother Toby