

## SUMMER IN FLORIDA

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Sunday, May 29, 2011

When I was growing up as a boy in Wisconsin, summer (for me) was an absolutely magical season of engagement, wonder, enchantment and delight. Now I don't know how many of you have ever spent much time in Wisconsin (or in other parts of the upper Midwest, for that matter) during the summer months, but take it from me, after the long months of winter and the hesitant arrival of spring, summer in those parts is nothing short of a season of liberation and joyance!

Summer for me growing up was largely synonymous with the rustic little cottage my family had right on the shores of Lake Michigan -- at a secluded spot called Forest Beach, about 40 miles north of Milwaukee. Every summer my parents, my three brothers and I would spend what seemed like countless, lazy days at our cozy little cabin (there was absolutely nothing fancy about it, except its location) which sat right on a stretch of pure white sand beach, adjacent to lush, dark green forest land.

Most of my memories of that enchanted summer place are physical memories -- sights, sounds, smells, tactile sensations: the clarity and invitation of the sparkling blue lake waters, which, while cool, were always refreshing...the hospitality of the warm, white sands which were like a giant sandbox to play in...the beauty of the beach roses and grasses dancing in the summer wind and sun...the friendly cry of the gulls overhead and the pleasing cacophony of songbirds in the nearby trees...the magic of the golden dappled sunlight streaming through the verdant forest trees...the mustiness and fertility of the rich, dark, black soil...the buzz and clatter of the swarming insects on the window screens at night...the rhythmic lullaby of nighttime rain on the metal roof...all these hospitable summer carnal sensations conspired to make Forest Beach, at least for this simple-hearted Wisconsin boy, one of the most magical and enchanting places on the face of the earth.

Barefoot -- and in minimal clothing much of the day -- I remember spending warm, languid hours exploring the beach, swimming the lake and wading the creeks...traversing the woods, bluffs and fields. As a family, we ate outdoors for breakfast, lunch and dinner...meals that were rich with the fresh foods of summer -- cantaloupe, sweet corn, tomatoes, cucumbers, peaches, watermelon. We swam, sailed, fished and sailed the lake...watched in awe as the powerful thunderstorms rolled in from the West most afternoons...had roaring bonfires on the beach at night while we sang folk songs to my Mother's guitar...and, truth be told, often skinny dipped in that magical darkness just beyond the fire's reach. Summer at Forest Beach was earthy, energetic, and magical, and although my family sadly no longer owns or occupies that sacred place for it had to be sold after my Mother's death, I can return there anytime I want...just by calling to heart and mind all the magical qualities of that enchanted summer place.

I'd like you each to take just a moment of silence with me, and recall a summer place that was for you a place of enchantment, relaxation and joy.

I guess you could say that for all of my life, I have been “a summer person.” Not only is summer my favorite season of the year, I even have what, for better or worse, most people would describe as “a summery personality!” By nature, I’m cheerful, optimistic and open and warm...just like summer! What can I tell you...I’m a summer guy, through and through...I was just born that way!

But my particular personality and seasonal prejudices aside, this morning I want to talk about summer...specifically about the spirituality of summer, and the unique blessings that can come to us, (and I want to repeat that phrase...“can come to us”) in this the warmest of our four seasons.

Now...I know what a lot of you are thinking right now, you’re saying in those busy little, skeptical Florida heads of yours, “Scott...for God’s sake...get a grip on yourself! Your boyhood summers in green and temperate Wisconsin do sound wonderful and idyllic...but Wisconsin in August is one thing, and Florida in August is another! Any rational person will tell you that summer in Florida is simply too much of a good thing!

80 degrees and low humidity on the sun-drenched shores of Lake Michigan is one thing...100 degrees with nearly 100% humidity here on the sun-baked Treasure Coast is another...surely you’re not going to tell us to spiritually embrace summer down here? Heck, at least half the population of the Treasure Coast (most especially those who can easily afford it) has enough sense to get the heck out of here over the coming hot season! You’ll see, Scott...summer in these parts is something to be endured rather than enjoyed!”

Look...they call me late to lunch but they don’t call me stupid! I fully understand that summer here on the Treasure Coast has (how shall I say this?) some rather extreme and vexing challenges. As a cyclist, for example, I must admit that I prefer riding in April when the air is still moderately cool, than in August when the air is like a pizza oven pushing 100.

Summer in this part of Florida means running air conditioners pretty much 24-7 – and moving quickly between our air-conditioned cars to our air-conditioned stores and homes. It means avoiding the noonday sun, wearing sun-shielding hats, slathering on sunscreen and scrupulously limiting your hours baking on the beach. I will fully and unashamedly admit that, by pretty much any reasonable standard, summer in Florida is a bit over the top...a bit extreme and excessive...and few of us (I’m pretty sure) wouldn’t mind if the Florida summer climate weren’t a bit more temperate...a bit more subdued...a bit more, moderate, reasonable, and low-key and gentle!

Despite everything I have said this morning about being a summer person, I myself am admittedly going to “escape” these tropical climes for a week or two in both July and August to the more moderate climes of the Adirondacks in Upstate New York...what can I tell you?...enough is enough!

But...on this Memorial Day Sunday -- which historically signals to us Americans the beginning of the robust summer season -- I want to affirm my passionate belief that each of the four seasons -- winter, spring, summer and fall -- call to us spiritually in ways we must not ignore or resist. Each of the four varied seasons (even summer here in Florida!) beg us into deep, meaningful, satisfying relationships...communions, if you will, with self, with others, with nature, and with the great mystery that is imbedded in all. The world wants us...begs us...year-round... to be woven deep and intimate into the very fabric of its being...and we ignore that holy invitation in any season at our spiritual peril!

Let me say all of this just a bit differently...by way of a personal faith statement. I believe with all my heart and soul that we human beings -- as creatures who find ourselves in this rich and amazing and complicated creation -- are intended by the very nature of life and being itself to be in close, joyful, reciprocal and mindful relationships with everything which is.

I believe that, at our fullest and best, we homo sapiens are active and eager relational creatures, passionately taking in and communing with our world. And so...if we are to reach our full and blessed spiritual and emotional potential as inhabitants of earth, we must open ourselves, fully and intensely at every time of the year, even here in steamy florida in August to the varied elements and unique experiences of the world around us. This "summery guy" believes that it is our spiritual destiny, our spiritual opportunity, to be fully engaged year-round with this creation and the other living things which inhabit it, and it is in that full and robust engagement where our joy and purpose in these fleeting, mortal lives of ours are discovered, secured and made real.

One of my favorite Carl Sandburg poems is addressed to a child, but I think it might as well be addressed to all of us as children of this amazing creation. Sandburg wrote:

You were made for joy, child.  
The feet of you were carved for that.  
The ankles of you run for that.  
The rise of rain,  
The shift of wind,  
The drop of a red star on a far water rim --  
An endless catalogue of shouts and laughters,  
Silent contemplations --  
They made you, from day to day, for joy, child, for joy.

All of this is by way of may saying to all of you -- in as gentle-yet-insistent way as I can -- that summer here in Florida is not something to be endured and outlasted...but rather a season to be engaged and enjoyed.

Can I say that again, please, for emphasis, to make sure you all hear it? Summer here in Florida is not something to be endured and outlasted...but rather a season to be engaged and enjoyed. Spiritually speaking, you and the world are not meant to simply tolerate one another

– to grudgingly put up with one another – as you might have to with an obnoxious neighbor or irritating relative. Again...we are called into intimate and joyful relationship with every season of the year...even during the over-the-top summer months here in Florida.

All right, so let's talk specifics...shall we? Even with its excesses and over-the-top-ness, Summer in Florida is a season of radical and reckless hospitality... a season of radical and reckless hospitality which invites us in to be a guest in its great and lavishly appointed living room. Think about it for a second...summer here in Florida invites us to reduce (or eliminate altogether) the usual barriers that stand between us and the world.

In summer, we can go barefoot on the lawn and beach. We pack the jackets and sweaters away...peel off layers of clothing, and get right down to a simple pair of shorts or bathing suit... and sometimes (truth be told...usually in the privacy of some private backyard pool ) even less – O those naughty skinny-dipping Floridians!

In this part of the world in summer we can walk or sing in the warm rain...watch the magic fury of wild thunderstorms from the safety of our patios...breathe in the aromas of countless flowers blooming everywhere...eat sweet corn, lettuce, tomatoes and watermelon in the park...listen to crickets and songbirds in the majestic live oaks ...feel the sunlight, wind and rain directly upon our faces. In summer in these parts we can dive deliciously into so many pleasing pools of simple, direct living. Summer in Florida entices us to know and touch, without complication or caveat, sky and sea...sunrise and sunset...forest and flower...beast and bird...family and friends...food and fun. Summer is the time which welcomes us to reconnect with life in all its deep and holy simplicity. Again...summer is the season that invites us to reduce, or eliminate altogether, so many of the usual barriers we put between ourselves and the world, and be fully mindful of the world that is everywhere at our fingertips.

Listen to this poem about summer by my colleague the Rev. Lynn Unger. It is entitled, simply, "Watermelon":

You know  
What summer  
tastes like – the pink flesh  
of a generous earth,  
this rounded life  
fully ripe, fully flavored.  
How could you be ashamed  
At the tug of desire?  
The world has opened itself to you,  
Season after season.  
What is summer's sweetness  
But an invitation to respond?  
There is only one way  
to eat a watermelon.

Bury your face  
in the wetness  
of that rosy slab  
and bite.

But, after reminding you -- and that's all this sermon is dear friends, a spiritual reminder to open your eyes, your hands, your ears, and your hearts to the dance that is summer in these tropical parts -- I must in the end return to my main spiritual point this morning. Each season of our lives (each season), we are mortal creatures who are being called, by both nature and our destiny as human beings, into close, joyful, intimate and reciprocal relationships with everything that is. Our lives are saved and made whole by the quality and depth of our openness...our mindfulness...our engagement with the world at hand. If we close ourselves away from the season that is at hand -- by barricading ourselves in air-conditioned cars...air-conditioned offices...and air-conditioned homes -- we will miss the radical hospitality of sunlight and moonlight...ripe tomatoes and sweet corn...oceans and swimming ponds...songbirds and cicadas...and lazy afternoons and evenings with family and friends cooking out under the trees. One of the great philosophers of all time -- Woody Allen -- had it right, "80% of success [in life] is just showing up!" Summer in Florida begs us to show up...and drink deep!

Yes...again...I know...I really know...summer here in Florida can be too hot...too humid.. too sunny...too buggy...too intense and bold. But I must remind you, dear friends...it is in the full fleshiness of these rich and robust days that you can know and be blessed by some of this world's holiest simplicities. So open your hearts...and your doors...and your windows...and the very center of yourself...to the summer that sings around you. Life is moving fast, dear friends, don't miss this sacred dance of warmth and hospitality.

Amen.