

~ Harvest ~

On a sunny, mild late-Winter's afternoon I and a friend - a loyal vege swapper, who arrived in our local community from India around the same time as I arrived here - loaded my car with her two children, four and ten, my two-year-old son, a rickety ladder, a roll-along suitcase, a large paper grocery sack and many 'green' bags.

We drove to a workplace where, I had been told, a large orange tree stood dropping its unharvested fruit. A week or two earlier I had called there on business; the businesswoman, one of several tenants of the building, heard my answering machine message about the Community Fruit & Vege Swap and mentioned the tree and its fruit.

Orange trees, perhaps because of their rounded shape, are larger than they look. We began by picking the fruit on the lower branches, with the children's help, rapidly filling the suitcase and paper sack. The fruit was well-sized, firm, bright; the branches treacherous with long, sharp spines. I had not known, or remembered, that orange trees had spines. We propped the ladder under the tree; only I was allowed to ascend, as I could not vouch for its safety; my friend continued to pick low fruit by reaching up from the ground, while her tall, slim daughter climbed up and down the bottom two rungs, helped me haul bags up and down from the ladder, and chased after those oranges which missed the bags. We soon realised that even from the top of the ladder we could barely reach the mid-point of this majestic tree.

We were determined; the fruit was copious, and, as my tip-off had indicated and our noses confirmed, was rotting on the ground; we were not leaving without filling those bags. I balanced the ladder in more and more precarious places behind and under the tree, and climbed up into its spiny innards. I climbed and perched on top of the fences overlooking adjoining properties, a drab industrial storeyard and bedraggled strings of washing in unkempt unit housing, into which oranges rolled when I could not grab them quickly or firmly enough. Why did the people in those yards, in those units, not reach up and pick the fruit?

Workers from our building passed by, peered at us curiously, perhaps even suspiciously; we stared back; we were, secretly, proud to be harvesting the fruit that they would have allowed to go to waste. But then, who has time to pick fruit at work?

The sun's light was still bright and warm as it neared the horizon; the fruit smelled sweet and ripe; the branches and spines left their pungency on our hands. The work, stretching and bending, holding, reaching, grasping and balancing, felt good. The children were delighted; they wanted to climb the fences too; they clambered up into the lower branches of the tree. Their cries and chatter sounded sharply in the clear air. They laughed and we laughed. We smiled as we worked. I realised how rarely I work in community with someone - not paid, not organised, just because we both knew it was good. I realised that probably none of these three children had picked fruit before; perhaps none had ever climbed a fence, or a tree, in their neat, circumscribed, modern Australian childhoods; basic, delightful, fulfilling human experiences.

We stopped when all the bags were full, and the lumbering suitcase too. On the upper half of the tree the fruit still hung, plenty for the birds, or for someone with a ladder long enough. We left a plate of fruit for the workers in the building. The rest we took away.

The Community Fruit & Vege Swap concept can be extended in a variety of directions, depending on the inclinations and capacities of the individuals involved. The beauty of the model is that these extensions need not be particularly structured, organised or planned, but can be allowed to occur in a quite organic way.

Harvesting fruit in the community is just one of them. This may include harvesting fruit for elderly or disabled people who are unable to do so themselves, taking it to our Swap, and bringing back swapped items for the person in return; or in other cases, harvesting the fruit for them, but assisting the person to bring it along to the Swap themselves. It may include knocking on doors and asking if we can harvest trees which we notice have been

neglected, whether at workplaces or in home gardens, without promising any return, simply to prevent the fruit from going to waste. It may include sharing out the fruit between participants who attend our own Swap, and/or donating harvested fruit in the most effective fashion we can find - and there is no shortage of destinations for donations.

My friend and I gave away plenty of fruit – the suitcase-full and more – to friends and neighbours. I gave several bagfuls of oranges to refugee families I know personally, and to families of 'skilled migrants', who come to Australia in dignity expecting to implement their professional skills (mainly in hospitality and IT), only to discover there is no work available to them in their fields of expertise, thus finding themselves compelled to service the jobs Australians abhor, the lowest paid and the toughest – in abattoirs, farms, and factories - where they damage their bodies, sign away their rights to compensation, and exist unnoticed amongst us in poverty, disappointment and homesickness. At least, these are the stories of families I know.

Another attendee at our Swap works at a couple of women's shelters. Their addresses are confidential, impeding such services from easily receiving public donations, so her contribution of several bags of fruit was gratefully appreciated.

The balance of the oranges I delivered one evening to Fred's Van, a soup kitchen operated by the Society of St Vincent de Paul. Unfortunately, oranges are a messy and inconvenient fruit to eat, especially when one is homeless - no plate, no knife, no bathroom to wash in, and just think of the state of their fingernails! The oranges were given out whole, uncut and in their peels, because they keep better that way - anything else was considered impractical. I wonder how many of those oranges were rolling in the gutter the next morning.

No matter. We will practice, learn and improve, and the fruit would have gone to waste anyway.

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