

Gleaning... What is It?

by Thom Ernst

In the Old Testament, there is reference to Ruth's gleaning in the fields of Boaz. What is gleaning?

According to the dictionary, gleaning has two definitions. One old and one new. One from biblical times and one from modern times.

Old: Gleaning is the practice of going through a field after it's been harvested and "gleaning" or picking up what is left, be it grain or produce. Wikipedia states that in biblical times the practice became a legally enforced entitlement. Meaning that the poor had the right to enter fields after harvest and pick up what remained.

New: Miriam Webster states that gleaning is the term used to describe the gathering of information bit by bit. That's an interesting tidbit in and of itself. We live in an age dominated and to a large degree controlled by computers. A bit is the smallest possible unit of information storage. Everything in our computers is reduced to bits, specifically 0's and 1's. There is something inherently disturbing about that. Every piece of information about our lives is defined by zeros and ones. In fact, if you will look at your power switch on a computer (one that has a rocker switch) it will have "0" for off and "1" for on. In our age, this definition of gleaning is a close second to the old practice of scrounging in a harvested field for the sustenance necessary to maintain life.

Therefore, both have to do with life and how too often life is reduced to bits or scrabbling in order to keep body and soul together. I grew up dirt poor. We subsisted for a number of years on what was called "government surplus" – powdered eggs and milk, blocks of cheese and flour, rice or beans. We don't do that anymore. Now the gleanings are more sophisticated – money is deducted from our paychecks and distributed to the needy – whether they are truly needy, as in dirt poor, or not. This is done through EBT cards which are basically zeros and ones that put zeros and ones from your account into the account of someone else. Abuse is rampant and too often the individuals who truly are dirt poor are barely able to exist while others live better than those from whom the bits are taken.

In the old times, in order to glean, individuals had to physically get into the recently harvested fields and work. Hard work. Back bending, muscle aching work. Work from sunup to sundown. At least for the time being, work of any kind is no longer a requirement to possess an EBT card. Yes, there are rules and supposed checks and balances to avoid abuse; however, many have learned how to subvert those and work the system. In fact, many on that system have learned that they can get more by not working than they can by working. The only problem with that is there is a void and hunger that remains unfilled.

King Solomon stated: "That each of them may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all their toil [work] – this is the gift of God" ~Ecclesiastes 3:13. What this means is that our pursuit of happiness so vibrantly expressed in our Declaration of Independence is contingent on our work ethic. Could it be that the lack of doing work, too often a refusal, is the reason for the discontent expressed by so many of those using EBT cards? Perhaps, our government should take Paul's words to the Christians at Thessalonica to heart and legislative action: "For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: 'The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat'" ~2 Thessalonians 3:10.

It's time to return to the old system of gleanings. God knows we're all dirt poor enough – whether that being poor is a condition of our economic status, or the health of our souls. We who are able are not “entitled” to not having to work in order to survive – and yet, here we are. To borrow from computer language, if you do your “bit,” it soon becomes a “byte” and then a “word.” Before long the words become a story with a happy ending.

Think about what you are gleaning in life. Are the bits and bytes you glean worth your effort or is it nonsense that just enhances your inability to find satisfaction? “Far and away the best prize that life has to offer is the chance to work hard at work worth doing” ~Theodore Roosevelt. The “work worth doing” is gleaning, to sustain life bit by bit!