

2010 LESSONS FROM THE BEE YARD

While bees have been revered since ancient times, recently these winged bearers of sweetness, have again captured our collective imagination. In the complexity of our world we seek out things that are natural, and that aid in keeping us in communion with the world beyond technology and an increasingly impersonal existence. We are often reminded of the role of the honey bee as a critically important pollinator, but they also fascinate us because we sense they may offer some guidance for the challenges of our times.

As a child my mother told stories of relatives who kept bees. Grandma Ryan was the beekeeper and remnants of those times still stood in the old honey house that I passed each day on my way to school. For me the honey house standing idle, and a bit dilapidated, represented the “olden days”. Bees and beekeeping were not a part of my world in the 1950’s. Although I was raised in an agricultural community I never knew or heard of anyone who still kept bees. So what might have gone on in this mysterious old honey house was deliciously left to my child’s imagination.

My first real encounter with the bees was when I lived in Zimbabwe, Southern Africa where a friend farmed on the edge of the Vumba Mountains and kept bees. On a visit to her place she invited me to help out with the bees. I was not terrified of getting stung and discovered that I was capable of the quiet, focused, attention that is required to enter into the bee space. The experience fostered the notion that I too might one day become a keeper of bees.

On my family’s return to Canada I visited my friend at her Quebec farm and she encouraged me to try the beekeeping arts for myself. She even sweetened the deal by selling me used equipment and telling me what to do next. My brother had just bought a farm in Lanark County so I had a place to keep the bees while I lived in the city. I signed up for a weekend beekeeping course at the University of Guelph and ordered my first batch of bees which arrived in late spring.

That was ten years ago. Since then I’ve developed a reasonable foundation of beekeeping knowledge. More importantly I have forged a deeply nourishing and healing relationship with the bees. I began beekeeping when I was recovering from the death of a child and the end of a marriage. The first gift of the bees was to help me gradually reconnect with the sweetness of life.

Along with my personal journey, the public has recently become more aware of the importance of bees as the result of the disappearance of massive numbers of bee colonies. Research points to a number of different factors contributing to what is called “colony collapse disorder” but the bottom line is that these precious creatures on which we depend are struggling. We sense that the bees have things to tell us, perhaps solutions to the problems that are besieging them and increasingly undermining our own

well-being.

As I've lived and worked with the bees my own understanding of their message has grown. What I call "lessons from the bee yard" fall into three main categories - stewardship, presence and community. Around these themes I've developed a two day workshop that provides people with the opportunity to learn more about the bees and beekeeping, and to make their own individual connection with the bees. The workshop helps develop the capacity to be still and to learn with all the senses. The workshop will include teaching, hands on experience of the bees and exercises to nourish connection to the natural world.

For more information visit www.madlinedietrich.com or call 613-852-4072.

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