

## Red Onions: Transformed By Beauty

by Alanda Greene

I was at the compost edge with two freshly picked red onions, washing dirt from their skins. At the time, my mind was wrangling with unpleasant thoughts, feeling wronged in a particular situation, reviewing how I was wronged. Not sure to whom I was stating my case. Not the red onions.

As I peeled back the outer layer of one, the sun caught its redness, lit it up like a ruby, and I gasped at the startling beauty of it. Thoughts stilled, and the red glow absorbed my being in gratitude and awe.

Suddenly I felt silly for what now seemed a petty absorption. Here I was surrounded in beauty, yet not receptive to it, letting myself be mired in thoughts not about now, not helpful, and an obstacle to being present.

A moment of grace took me out of that state and showed another possibility, showed yet again that the choice I make with my thoughts makes all the difference in my world. I had been grumbly and dark and, suddenly, transformed by beauty.

I would like to say that this insight transformed my mental behavior and ever after I desisted from irritable thoughts, instead seeking to find beauty and be moved by it. But this is not the case. Red onions have, however, continued to be a teacher in this area.

In the winter, retrieving an onion from where they are stored over the long chilly months, I was again arrested by the vivid deep red color of a dried skin, its patterns revealed like geometric stained glass designs. This experience recalled the former one at the compost. This time I wasn't mired in grumpiness, I just wasn't really there at all. Where had my mind been when suddenly this luminous deep purple red pulled it into the now? Now was full, rich, alive. That other place? I don't even know.

Pulling a red onion from the soil, peeling the hard, dirt-encrusted outer skin away, I see a white layer pasted against the dark red. The dark color behind the pale layer reveals a network of pattern, similar to brick work, to skin cells seen under a microscope, to the strata of layers in the inner bark of a tree. Again, I am arrested with beauty and the marvel of the patterns in Nature.

This sends me on a walk through the garden with the deliberate intent to look for beauty. I discover it everywhere. A radiant squash blossom, so intensely yellow it seems to have a light inside the petals, delights both me and also the bee happily wiggling inside, buzzing in pleasure. Light through the cabbage leaves reveals patterns of veins that look like the branching patterns of trees in winter. Fernlike carrot leaves flutter slightly in a barely detectable breeze, a feathery dance. Everywhere is beauty.

I recall part of a poem of the Navajo tribe and understand it in a new way.

With beauty may I walk

With beauty before me may I walk

With beauty behind me may I walk

With beauty above me may I walk

With beauty all around me may I walk

In old age, wandering on a trail of beauty, lively, may I walk

In old age, wandering on a trail of beauty, living again, may I walk

It is finished in beauty.

It is finished in beauty.

What is the mystery of beauty? How can it be explained? It is more than a perspective, lying in the eye of the beholder. Simone Weil noted, "In everything which gives us the pure authentic feeling of beauty there really is the presence of God. There is as it were an incarnation of God in the world and it is indicated by beauty. The beautiful is the experimental proof that the incarnation is possible."

This beauty – the way it brings a mental gasp, stops thoughts, and brings me to joy in the moment – makes me think that this is much of the artistic impulse. There is a desire to capture and share the awe experienced, to also create what will bring the moment of stopped thought, absorption, recognition of patterns and layers and meaning.

Beauty does have the power to transform. Red onions are not the same anymore – they are portals to wonder, remembrance, awe and gratitude. In the garden, it feels easy to find beauty but I am learning also that it is everywhere.

Can I turn my mind, tune my attention, to find it?