



Years ago, my mom gave me an Italian olive jar for Christmas. It's like a big urn, earthen and ancient-looking – it actually *is* semi-ancient, I think – and I put it in my front yard, near the azalea bushes, amidst a bunch of flower pots. The first spring, I filled the jar with dirt and planted begonias in it. They did pretty well, but they died that winter, and after a few seasons, I stopped replanting them. It was kind of a hassle – the olive jar's wide in the middle but small at the top – and eventually, I just kind of... let it go. (I'm always letting things go.) The jar was pretty enough on its own, I thought, and it looked nice surrounded by my potted plants.

Then, three springs ago, something mysterious – and decidedly un-begonia-like – started growing from my olive jar. It was on the tall side, with long, deep green leaves. A weed, I assumed. I started to pull it out, but it seemed like an awful lot of trouble, not to mention messy. Besides, the weed was actually sort of attractive. As spring turned into summer, I decided I liked the weed. Fall came along, then winter, and the weed turned brown, shriveled up, and finally disappeared altogether... only to reappear the following spring... and the one after that. Which was *this* spring.

And do you know what's happened? My weed is blooming. A few weeks ago, right there at the top of those deep green leaves, an enormous, lacy, pinky-white flower appeared. I recognized that enormous, lacy, pinky-white flower. My next-door neighbors have two bushes full of them (though theirs are bluey-white). My weed, as it turns out, is a hydrangea. Surprise!

I have no idea how a hydrangea plant started growing in a long-neglected hunk of dirt in an old olive jar. I assume it had something to do with the neighbor's bushes – something involving wind or bees, maybe. I'm just delighted it happened. Not only is the hydrangea a lovely addition to my humble homestead... but it's a heck of a good metaphor. Y'all know how I love those.

And there are so many ways one could work the blooming weed metaphor! So many potential aphorisms to extrapolate. *Ugly ducklings sometimes grow up to be swans? Good things come to those who wait?* *Every cloud has a silver lining? Some people are just late bloomers?*

All true enough (like most clichés). But too easy – and not where my mind wants to wander just now...

My mind is wandering into the future, and wondering what I will do with my new hydrangea. If I were a better person – the kind of person I'd like to be – I would definitely remove it from the olive jar and plant it somewhere special in my yard, where it could spread its roots and stretch its limbs and grow up to be a flourishing bush. And there's a possibility that I *will* do that... at some point... if I find the time... and I'm in the mood... and it's not too hard.

But there's an even greater possibility that I won't. Because I'm not that good. And high on my list of not-that-good qualities is laziness. I am as lazy about yard work as I am about housework, cooking, finances, and lots of other practical challenges that others manage to attack with energy and enthusiasm. I have my own enthusiasms – areas where I'm *not* lazy – but they're much more abstract and far less useful. When it comes to reading, thinking, studying, critiquing, or debating, for instance, I'm practically obsessive compulsive. I live mostly in my head, in books and online, where ideas are the primary currency. (If only I could find a way to buy groceries with those.)

I'd love to think my blooming weed might change all that... that I'll look at it every day – this miracle in a jar – and be inspired to become a different person. A *better* person. I'll start eating organic-only, sewing my own clothes, cleaning my baseboards regularly, keeping a compost heap, avoiding Facebook, and finishing this column *before* deadline.

It *could* happen. And politicians could stop cheating on their wives, too.

Human nature is a tough adversary. Yes, you can temporarily overcome yours; I do it all the

time. I have a family and a job and a home, so I have to. But it's always a struggle, and I never get it licked for good. I have developed a certain amount of discipline, but without any passion, the discipline only takes me so far. I get things done, but I do them half-assed. (Half-assedly?) I'm just like that. It's my nature.

If I sound like I'm making excuses, I don't mean to. Think of this more as a confession of sin. I don't really like my nature very much, you see, and I wish I were different. I wish I could cook with joyful, creative abandon, like my mom. I wish I could look at an ugly room, completely re-imagine it, then make that vision a reality, like my sister. I wish I could build furniture by hand, like my brother-in-law, or produce a play, like my husband, or learn how to handle money, or cultivate a spectacular garden.

But at the end of the day, I would always rather be cultivating the *metaphor* of the blooming weed, than the blooming weed, itself. That's my comfort zone. My nature.

And for the most part, the laws of nature apply. If I were better, my life would be better. I pretty much reap what I sow. (Or *don't* sow, as it were.)

But every now and then...

Yesterday, a nice man bought my daughter an Icee at K-Mart. Amelia and I were in line behind him, and he was buying them for his own two kids. I wasn't even sure I had enough cash to cover our purchase – things have been very tight, lately – and I snapped a stern “no!” at Amelia when she asked for a treat. When we got to the counter, the check-out lady handed Amelia a big paper cup, pointed to the man (who was heading out the door) and said, “Go get yourself an Icee.” The man just smiled and waved and I almost burst into tears. After a long, hard day – a long, hard year, actually – that simple, unexpected act of kindness was almost more than I could bear. I didn't deserve it.

And that's what I see when I look at my blooming weed. A simple, unexpected act of kindness. An undeserved gift. A reminder.

Maybe one day I *will* become a better person... the person I'd like to be. Sometimes, it seems like I'm making progress. Other times, not so much. But I do know some of those "good" people. They actually exist – people who don't just *mean* well (like me) but actually *do* well. People who never bounce checks, or skip the gym, or forget to send a thank you note, or ignore the dust bunnies under the bed, or feed their kids McDonald's, or watch American Idol. People who have it all together.

Maybe one day, if I try hard enough, I'll be one of them. But I've had decades of experience being me, now, and I have my doubts.

Fortunately, for people like me, there is something called grace. And we're told it flows like a river. We can't earn it. We can only receive it. (Sometimes, that's the hardest part.) And we can try to pass it on.

I guess that's why I write this column. As Elton John sang: *I know it's not much, but it's the best I can do.*

(And trust me; you really don't want me "gracing" you with my cooking.)

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