

“I Believe in Learning from Bees” by Carolyn Fluehr Lobban

Eight years ago I became a beekeeper in an accidental way. My husband read a notice announcing a five week “Bee School” in late winter; since he was not free that night, he asked if I was interested. My sister-in-law, president of her local garden club in New Hampshire, encouraged me with a book about bees and beekeeping *Sweetness and Light*. The title is taken from a quote by Jonathan Swift: “Instead of dirt and poison, we fill our hives with honey and wax; thus furnishing mankind with the two noblest of things, which are sweetness and light” — the sweetness of honey and the light of the candle. That year Jean was diagnosed with an aggressive cancer that left her with only months to live. The first honey I extracted from a beehive was one of the last sources of nourishment she could tolerate. Before I learned the full joy of beekeeping, that first year with the bees revealed that I was embarking on a journey, not a casual hobby.

Bees are a source of life on earth. With little change in anatomy and social behavior, they have been on earth since the time of the dinosaurs, over 60 million years! Bees and flowers evolved together in a mutual embrace of pollen and nectar, and honey stored by bees is the glorious result. Bees forage plants and flowers for their nourishment, and fortunately for us humans they pollinate 75% of what we eat. But the colony is the bee’s great achievement. Comprised of the mother-queen, 90% female workers and 10% male drones – the colony is the living organism. After months of foraging, in winter they cluster in the hive for communal warmth and to ensure the queen’s survival. Contrary to popular fear, bees are not aggressive and only defend the colony when it is disturbed, which is why beekeepers wear protective clothing. When stinging defensively, a bee dies giving its individual life for the sake of the colony.

Thanks to the bees, I became a closer observer of nature and the seasons. I delight in seeing the bees fly as temperatures climb above 50 degrees. I seek policy change in our overuse of pesticides that threaten their survival; annually a third or more of American colonies perish. As spring approaches, I look forward to its harbingers, not only the crocuses but the bees diving into them. Ah bees, ah life, returning!

“This I Believe” is hosted here in Rhode Island by RI College professor Frederick Reamer. Tune in to FM 88.1 National Public Radio aired this piece Wednesday, March 26, 2014.