

I now see the day, May 18th of 1963, as the best day of my life, not because I did something remarkable or of immense importance but quite the opposite in fact. I placed third in a gardening contest. This may seem like a strange “best day of my life”, but after I explain, it will become clear as to why this day was so great for me. It all started when I came home from school and asked my mother to play chess with me. Playing chess was one of the few things I enjoyed and that made my mother upset. She wanted me to have “a multitude of extracurricular activities.” As a youngster I didn’t quite understand what that meant, but I soon found out.

The next day was Saturday and on Saturdays my friends came over for a chess tournament. However this day was different. I woke up to the sight of seeds and gardening tools in my room with a note. The note’s exact wording is not something I recollect, but it said something along the lines of this: Timothy, you don’t do much other than chess outside of school, and that is not a healthy lifestyle. You are going to try gardening. It will be good for you to be in nature on a more regular basis. Love, your mom. I was initially quite upset, but at some point later in the day I thought perhaps it wouldn’t be so bad.

I thought wrong. My mother was not talking about a modest vegetable bed or a few pots in the backyard with some Swiss chard growing in them. She was talking about sending me away for two months to my uncle Bill’s farm where I would tend to his crop fields all day. This was potentially the worst thing I would ever do, or so I thought. The night before I was supposed to go I was up late trying to think of a way evade the situation, but alas it proved to be inevitable.

In the morning I woke to the sound of my uncle’s old truck driving up our road, creating the distinct sound of tires on gravel. I knew that meant my gardening “excursion”, as my mother called it, was nearing. Sure enough 30 minutes later I was in a rusty old truck that smelled like

manure. I could not have envisioned a worse scenario. On top of that it was astonishing how long the drive felt, when in reality my uncle said we had been driving a mere 45 minutes.

Work on Uncle Bill's farm was a hard laborious job. I woke every day at 7 AM, ate breakfast, got right to work and did so until sun-down. Work included planting seeds, harvesting crops, tilling soil and fertilizing. One night I lay awake thinking about my "job". It occurred to me child labor restrictions existed. I could use that against my uncle in order to quit working, but I decided not to for two reasons: One, I had started to get used to this lifestyle, maybe even like it to some extent, and Two, I was not actually being forced to work. Rather I was told by my uncle what he would like me to do and the expectation was that was that I do it.

After a few weeks on the farm, my uncle approached me holding up a flyer, saying "want to give it a try?" I moved closer to see what the flyer said and was initially amazed how such a thing could exist. It was for a gardening contest. All I had to do was grow the heaviest vegetable in my division. I asked my uncle what he suggested I grow. His recommendation was to enter in the root vegetable section, reason being now would be a good time to plant root vegetables because by the time the turnip was ripe it would be the contest time. That reason was good enough for me, and Uncle Bill had healthy turnip seeds that would grow quite large. The next few weeks I spent tending to my crops and fertilizing them so much I practically knew I would win. Contest day came and I was so anxious to harvest my turnip I could hardly wait. I spent close to 20 minutes alone uprooting it. When I finally pulled it out, I was astonished. It was massive, but it had a massive problem too. It was so big that part of it started growing up to the surface. That caused it to get too much heat and light from the sun, which burned it. That meant a good amount of weight was lost because it was shriveled. I knew I might not do as well as I

thought in the contest. When my uncle saw me, I could tell he was sad. “It’s not all bad, it is still larger than any turnip I’ve grown,” he said. That made me somewhat less upset, and by the time we got to the contest I felt motivated and excited. Mom would be proud if I won this, I thought. If only I had put a little more soil above the seed I could have won by a mile.

The contest area was a rundown park recreation center laden with photos of past years gardening contest winners, scales to weigh the vegetables, and most importantly the prize: a blue silk ribbon. As each vegetable division went my anticipation grew. The root vegetable section was next. One by one they were weighed and ordered. I was the last one. So far the best vegetable was a beet at a whopping 38 pounds 14 ounces. It would be a miracle if I beat it. It was finally the moment, I rolled my veggie onto the scale and was so nervous. I looked at its weight: 33 pounds on the dot. I had won 3rd place. Although some people would have only been okay with first place, I was just happy to have placed in the contest, and my uncle and I both knew that it would have weighed far more if not for part of it getting burnt by the sun. When I got home I showed my parents the award I won, and they were both as happy as I was.

Only in my old age, as I walk the land that used to belong to Uncle Bill, do I now see that contest as the best day ever, because of what it taught my uncle and me. The work I put into that turnip showed him I cared and I was open to learning something new and I could work hard. It also proved the same to me and gave me a kind of confidence I needed to try again the next summer and the summer after that and the summer after that. I never did win first place, but what I got was even better. Time with my Uncle Bill, who died peacefully knowing I would continue his life’s work on the farm. I made a good living from those fields, and I have a nephew who I’m told is a pretty good chess player. Maybe I could teach him a thing or two.