

THE STRINGBEAN

A visit to the grocery store changes the way I look at produce - and people.

Patience is a virtue. One of the many I lack. Never more evident than when I am grocery shopping. Some days the only time I get out of the house is when I force myself to head to the market to buy what I need for dinner. Oftentimes I go there with absolutely nothing in mind and find myself inspired by the aromas of fresh-baked bread or slow-roasted chicken.

I enjoy the experience, except for the crowded vegetable section of the store. This is where most people slow down so they can inspect, fondle, smell, and squeeze until they have discovered that one grapefruit, that special cantaloupe that everyone else missed.

I can be seen, plastic bag in hand, waiting, moaning, and huffing as I finally slump over my cart in frustration. In just a few seconds I'm in and out, green pepper in hand and on my way to the scale to slap that sticker on it. No big deal for me. Except for yesterday.

I decided to pick up some string beans. Of all the sections in the vegetable market, the string bean people move the slowest. One bean at a time.

"Oh, Lord give me patience!" I said to myself as I approached the counter. There, blocking access with his cart, was an elderly man. His messy white hair, flipped up in the back, made him look like a 80-year-old hippie. He was average height and looked much like a string bean himself. Thin and frail-looking, he moved slowly and his hands seemed to tremble as he searched through the pile of beans.

Without turning his head toward me, he said, "It takes time to find the right ones. There's an art to this, you know."

"I didn't realize that," I said. "Although that explains why everyone spends so much time here. They're artists."

"I see them as people," he replied.

"The beans?" I asked.

"Yes." he said in a matter-of-fact tone. "See this one? This short, stubby one would tend to get passed over. Its appearance doesn't fit the perfect image of a long, thin, crisp bean. Most likely, after too much handling, the clerk will toss it out thinking no one wants it. So I take it. People don't know what they are missing, passing up this one," he continued. "Now I know this curved one won't be used either. Some people

see food as more than nourishment. It's all in the presentation. The image of a few select beans, all of the same length, lying on a plate nestled perfectly next to the entrée, supposedly adds to the enjoyment of the meal. I for one see my food as representing life itself. The world is full of texture, odd shapes and sizes. My world is not perfect. Nor is my dinner plate," he said.

Suddenly I realized that we were the only ones in this aisle. Very unusual for this time of day. I was calm and very attentive to everything this man was saying. Also unusual.

"Yes, this pile of beans reminds me that people come into my life in all sizes. Some are broken like this one. Others are still attached to the vine where they were nourished and protected and oftentimes were ripped away from their roots, carrying with them resentment and fear. Like this bean, the vine needs to be removed so that it can be seen in its full beauty and not one clinging to things of the past," he said as he tossed them in his bag.

A few minutes had passed as I stood in silence just watching the old man as he dug deep into the pile, turning and tossing them from the bottom as one would stir a salad.

"Well, I must go now," the man said. "I'll leave you with these 'human beans.' Be kind to them. Don't judge them just by looks. Inside everyone of them is the same life-giving elements. But like people, many will never be given the chance," he said.

"So they end up on the bottom, tossed aside?" I asked.

"The difference is," he replied, "as people we have a choice not to settle for the garbage heap." He tied the top of the plastic bag and turned away, missing the cart completely as he tried to place it inside.

"Sir, let me get that for you," I said.

"Every once in a while I misjudge the distance. I've been blind all of my life. You'd think I'd have this worked out by now."

Blind? I couldn't believe it. Suddenly a young lady appeared from around the corner.

"Poppa! I'm over here, straight ahead of you. Would you like me to pick out some nice tomatoes?"

"No, honey. I know just what I need," he said.

Turning back toward where I was standing, he whispered, "She's always in such a hurry. She'll miss the best ones. Have a great day!"

What insight. What vision this old man had. A blind man helped me to see what joy I had been missing in the simple act of shopping for vegetables. I wonder what else I have been blind to in the hurry of my day. By the way, tonight we are having brussel sprouts. I can't wait to get back to the market.