

About Tigers, Strawberries, and Virginia L. Fry



Marcia E. Brubeck, JD,
MSW, LCSW
674 Prospect Avenue
Hartford, CT 06105

860-231-1997
MarciaBrubeck.com

Not long ago I heard Virginia L. Fry, who directs the Hospice and Palliative Care Council of Vermont, speak about grief, loss, and bereavement—issues for all of us humans sooner or later. Given the inevitability of such existential bad news, how can we humans live life to the full? To answer this question, Virginia Fry told the following folktale, Buddhist in origin, about two tigers.

A woman was being chased by tigers. As they gained on her she found herself increasingly exhausted. Out of breath and spent, she reached the edge of a cliff and saw a vine growing down its face. Hoping to escape the tigers, the woman lowered herself onto the vine and began climbing down.

When she had reached the halfway point, she heard a noise. Looking up, she saw a mouse gnawing through the vine and, above it, at the cliff's edge, the gaping jaws of a tiger. When she looked down, she saw two more tigers waiting at the bottom.

With her lifeline eroding and doom awaiting, the woman felt terrified. Then she noticed one ripe strawberry on a beautiful plant nearby. Considering her predicament from all sides—tigers above, tigers below, and a mouse in between—she could think of only one thing to do. She reached out, plucked the strawberry, and ate it. Her last word was "Sweet."

According to Buddhist tradition, the tale represents an existential dilemma. We humans are stuck between the dual tigers of birth and death. Since neither one can be avoided, the only reasonable response is to reach out for each day's strawberry, enjoying life as the tigers draw near.

This advice requires us to live in the present moment without worrying about the future, but you can also enrich today by recalling strawberries from the past, from your childhood and from other periods up to recent times.

Do you remember how it felt to be very young? When you were eight, what did you like to eat for breakfast? For lunch? What was the first food you learned to cook? What was the best gift you ever received? The best trip your family took?

If your family had pets, which one stands out in memory? Do you remember music from your childhood? Your best friend? A favorite teacher? What was the best place your family lived, and what makes it memorable? What do you remember about holidays from your childhood? Did your family create traditions that you observe as an adult?

When you were a child, what special foods, activities, and other customs marked the different seasons in the year? Here in the United States, we have just celebrated Thanksgiving, a time for feasting. Did you help prepare your family's dinner for Thanksgiving or some other harvest festival? If so, what was your job?

Can you recall the sounds, sights, and smells of a favorite holiday? Were there chestnuts roasting, or hot cocoa or cider, or a turkey or ham waiting to be sliced and brought to the table? Did your family have special prayers, songs, or music to commemorate the occasion?

See how far back in time your memory can take you, and then follow the thread through the years to the present. Can you find at least one strawberry for every year you have lived? Write down your memories and celebrate them. They will enrich your appreciation of yourself and will help strengthen your values and your ties to your children and grandchildren.

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