

Fertile Soil: Returning Life to its Mother, Earth

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship
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Everything that happens to you in life is sustenance.

—Howard Thurman

To be alive is to be constantly meeting change. The day there is no longer any change in my life is the day I leave this earth. To keep our face toward change and behave like free spirits in the presence of fate is strength undefeatable.

—Helen Keller

WELCOME

Love is never wasted. Mothers Day is fraught with such deep feelings. Love, loneliness, affection and grief. Gratitude for having had opportunities to throw ourselves into the service of bringing life into the world, and befuddlement about circumstances that seem to thwart our most sincere efforts to connect. But love is never wasted. Every bit of love we have given and received has contributed in its own time. And in the unfolding of all time every bit of love extended or felt endures in the collective and still growing great consciousness of which we are all a part, along with those who have come and gone, and those yet to be. Along with people around the world today who use a countless variety of rituals to celebrate life, acknowledge loss, and rekindle hope, let us speak now of love. As the chalice is lit please say with me our covenant:

Love is the spirit of this fellowship and service gives it life. Celebrating our diversity, and joined by a quest for truth, we work for peace, and honor all creation. This is our covenant.

As we gather this morning, we carry with us many unseen guests: loved ones who are no longer with us... memories of all kinds... dreams and aspirations that have motivated us along the way. Howard Thurman wrote, “Everything that happens to you in life is sustenance.” So we bring with us today the whole truckload of our experience, the people, the baggage, the rubbish, the souvenirs.... All that has been thrown together into the compost of our lives... creating the rich and fertile soil out of which we continue to grow, and drop our leaves, and grow again, following the cycle we have learned from our mother, the earth.

GATHERING HYMN *Lady of the Season’s Laughter* #51

CHILDREN’S CHOIR *Children of Tomorrow*

MILESTONES

GUIDED MEDITATION

I invite you now to relax. Close your eyes if you wish.... Breathe deeply. As we enter the

journey into your near future.... Breathe deeply. Let your body be at ease.... Let your mind be at ease.

For endless miles you have been pushing through dense chilly fog. The terrain is hilly; you have crossed over creeks... and icy open rapids where water raged, beautiful, unpredictable. You have come through it all to get to this moment... this point, which you sense...somehow...is different.

Despite the ups and downs, it seems perhaps that the journey has been mostly uphill. So you sense that you are approaching a new height from which you might look upon the world with new eyes.

And now, pushing through overhanging cold wet leaves, you emerge onto an amazing vista. What do you see?

With the fog behind you, there is no looking back. Ahead lie miles of uncharted territory.

And at your feet, just inches away, is a great cliff. Take a moment now – to name that cliff. Name that cliff. It is a steep, dangerous, awesome drop down into... into... What will you call it? An abyss? Or a beautiful valley? An ancient sea bed, eroded over the eons into a glorious brown basin. Where beneath the cold and wet lies an expanse of life...waiting to become green again.

You stand at the edge. What do you see? Will you go forward? Will you go back? Will you camp here? For how long? Will you risk pressing down the rocky slope into the unknown?

There are mysterious forms of life in the valley ahead. Name them. Are they there to enrich you? Or to devour you? Name these creatures, and recognize them as small blips of texture and color in a vast, beautiful landscape.

You stand at the edge. What do you see?

Remembering this vision, I ask you to gently, slowly, return to this room... breathing deeply... open your eyes, remembering your vision... allow yourself to be one with the world.

RESPONSIVE READING

We were Never Meant to Survive #587

MUSICAL MEDITATION

MESSAGE

What did you see as you looked out over the cliff, into that uncharted territory? What kind of perspective did you bring with you today — out of which will form your vision for tomorrow?

A story is told about perspective: Two children were brought to a large warehouse to receive birthday gifts. The first child, opening a door to discover a gigantic room full of toys, immediately burst into tears, sobbing, “But they’ll all break!” Her twin was led to a door across

the hall that opened into a gigantic room full of manure. She rushed in, and with both hands she began to dig through the foul-smelling stuff, throwing it into the air and shouting, "There's a pony in here, there's a pony in here!"

Baby! Can you smell it?! There is not just a pony in here, but a whole herd. And we are beautiful! Take a deep breath! O yeah, that's us! Our problems, pains, sorrows, unfulfilled promises, unresolved conflicts, unpaid debts, dreams deferred... and every kind of life experience.... Breathe in that power, that energy, that wisdom! Did you get some? Breathe it in! Right there--underneath the perfume, underneath the deodorant soap--THAT is life! That is us!

You may try to cover it up, throw it out, wash it, flush it, compost it, or save it in a hope chest... whatever YOU tend to do with IT, remember what it is: Everything that happens to you in life is sustenance.

Everything that happens to you in life, is sustenance. Everything. Whatever type of soil we are growing in, we are growing. Whatever type of fertilizer has been dumped upon us has made our individual experience unique, and at the same time: it has somehow enabled us to understand the experience of others.

The sum total of our life experience is the fertile soil in which we grow. We can try to run from it, climb out of it, dig deeper...but there is no escape. The only escape is to leave this world...and even then to decompose and become a part of it.

It is inescapable. Ole and Lena learned about that one day when they were stacking bales way up in the hayloft. After several hours of exhausting labor, they looked around to discover that they'd stacked an impenetrable wall between themselves and the ladder to get down. Well sure Ole, says Lena, now what are we goin' to do? Well I don't know, says Ole, but I think I see a bit of light up and over there, isn't there a window? So Ole, he squeezes through some bales and sure enough, he finds an opening, and with a great vista. And he rests there enjoying the view when Lena finally yells to him, Well can we get out that way? And Ole he says Sure thing we're just above the liquid manure pit. But don't worry Lena cuz I just mucked it out last week. And Ole he jumps down, makes a big splash and scrambles out of the pit. Come on down he yells up to Lena, it's only ankle-deep! So Lena squeezes her way to the window and without even looking drops down, and finds herself neck deep in liquid manure and when she finally climbs out she's angry and she's going to have a few words with Ole. She says But you said the pit was ankle deep! And Ole says yeah sure, but how was I supposed to know that you were coming down feet first?

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I've had a compost heap in the yard behind the last three houses that I've lived in and I've always thought of the composting process as an individual kind of thing. So when my son Rick initiated a campus-wide composting program at college I was skeptical. How would you get the custodians and the administration and the waste haulers and kids in all of the dorms to be so mindful and cooperative? But it worked! And then we moved to Bellingham where the whole

city is doing it— what a delight!

In keeping a single household compost heap we were advised to not include meat and bones, fat, corn cobs, citrus, sticks, or a disproportionate amount of grass. Some of these things are too large to decompose, some interfere with the pH, some attract skunks and raccoons.

Apparently these are not a problem in a large municipal composting program where the scale and the grinding enables us to include even pizza boxes, gourds, and oyster shells. Still, to maximize our metaphor today, for starters, let's imagine that each of us is growing out of the fertile soil of our own personal experience.

Take a look at that. Has anything fallen into your pile and failed to decompose? Why is this happening? Do you routinely turn your heap? Even small items may fail to transform if they stay on top all of the time. These things will only stink and attract flies.

You've got to bury that waste. I have to admit that there are one or two experiences in my own compost heap – worries, injuries -- that, as much as I say I want to throw them out, I always keep them on top. Gotta keep 'em in view. They may be out in the back yard, but I never really let them go.

Another way to keep your debris from decomposing is to have too much of one thing. Like in any good recipe, ingredients and proportions may vary. Your heap will be different from mine. But still, if you want the pile to heat itself to an adequate temperature, there has to be a mixture of what are called "brown items" and "green items." Is it stretching the metaphor too far to suggest that we need to throw a balance of what we might call "good experiences" and "bad experiences" into our pile...if we want a robust soil to emerge.

We need to throw away the best, along with the worst, when their time has come. It is possible to cling too tightly and get lost in our happy memories, just as it is to cling too tightly to our sorrows. And if there's anyone who hasn't enough sorrow, regret, disappointment, or anger to blend with and balance your joys... Let me say, with all sincerity: go find some. No – don't create pain just for heck of it – but allow yourself to encounter pain from which you've shielded yourself -- whether that's in Haiti or in downtown Bellingham. Maybe your overflowing sense of fulfillment can bring balance into other lives that have experienced more than their share of suffering.

And finally, it's good to keep your compost contained in some way. Compost needs to be exposed to air and to moisture, but it doesn't need to be a sprawling, unattractive heap that everyone sees every time they walk by. If it's too spread out, the pile won't achieve the critical temperature that it needs to decompose. Yes, we need to ventilate it, but even compost needs boundaries.

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It can be difficult to let go of the past, perhaps more so in the face of an unknown future. Maybe

letting go of the past would be easier if we saw that by doing so we are simply affirming the present – affirming the present – the gift that we have with us right now. I used to work with a Mexican man named Hugo. Hugo was a very talented artist who had another job to put food on the table. If Hugo was disappointed with the fact that he had not yet made it as an artist, he never let on. He lived in the moment. And the joy with which he approached each day was best revealed in the way he ALWAYS responded when I asked, “How are you?” Ask Hugo, “How are you,” and he would reply, “Never better.” At first I found this response intriguing. Then, after a couple of weeks, it got a little annoying. But he kept at it. Finally I had to ask, “Why, Hugo, why do you ALWAYS say ‘never better’ whenever anyone asks, ‘How are you?’”

I don’t remember his exact reply, but essentially it was this: the sustenance thing. Yeah, there are some things in my life that are going well, and some that are not. I enjoy my work, I’m having trouble maintaining my resident alien status, I’m selling a few paintings, my father wants me to come back home to run his business, we’re going to have a baby, and we can’t afford it.... To Hugo, ALL was sustenance.

Whatever was in his present, whatever was in his past, and certainly his dreams for the future, all these things piled up and truly ELEVATED him... so that at ANY moment he was able to recognize, that he had NEVER before known so much about life, felt so much alive...he had never been better.

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Our compost heaps today are made up of Mother Nature’s abundant creations. In the natural course of things, and in our attempts to shape life on Earth... in our passion to cultivate the little plots we call home, living things die, they’re pruned, or pulled, or consumed....

- Small acorns that might have grown into massive oaks
- weeds with roots we’ve pulled incompletely, so that they’ll live to see another day
- mother’s day flowers that have blossomed
- buds that will never open
- leaves blown down from last fall
- and other leaves that, even though they were dead, held on tenaciously through wet winter winds, only to let go when the soft spring air returned
- there are volunteers -- plants that pop up unexpectedly -- whose efforts were unappreciated
- and wildflowers that were never asked to grow

But mostly, my compost heap is just the ordinary stuff of daily life: eggshells and Kleenex, remnants of ancient species of fish, and space age genetically modified produce.

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In a few moments I will invite you to join in a compost communion. Returning to the earth the old dreams, the old friends, expectations, goals, successes and failures.... adding to the pile that

elevates us, the experience that raises us to ever-new vistas.

We were never meant to survive. And even our best, our most motivating dreams have a limited life span. They were never meant to survive, but to drop their thousands of seeds, to fall, and decay, and recycle themselves in new forms.

So far I've been using the metaphor of the compost of our individual lives, but it is also true that we live and grow within the larger context of each other's lives. So now, in the spirit of interdependence, I invite you to come forward with whatever natural discards you've brought with you today, or select a piece from the table here... and place it in this compost box. (There are tongs on the table, and hand sanitizer back where you picked up the order of service today.) As we do this, we will sing a song called "Fly Away Orioles," (Teach: Fly away orioles ... yesterday, loneliness, bitterness, hopelessness).

AT END of COMMUNION

May our experiences and our dreams become the fertile soil out of which will arise tomorrow's dreams, next week's flowers, next year's children, and the next generation's unimaginable fantasies.