**What Is Is-ness**

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I am a terrible gardener. I think I have finally come to terms with my brown shriveled thumb. Maybe.

My first foray into gardening was twenty-five years ago, when I was in a townhouse rental that had room for a flower bed. I bought a bunch of cute Martha Stewart Tools and a trunk full of plants, spending a small fortune. I enjoyed digging holes for all of my 563 flowers, and then I waited. Sometimes I weeded. Most of them died. I thought maybe they might come back the following summer. They did not.

In Boston, I talked Liz into purchasing a very expensive, waist high cedar box to plant a driveway garden. Again, I spent another fortune on 4,987 vegetable plants, fancy potting soil, along with a few five gallon buckets to grow tomatoes in. In the end, I harvested three zucchini, a tiny chili pepper, and about six and 1/2 tomatoes. Because I am positive that I “did” everything correctly, I am certain that plants don’t grow for me because they don’t like the way I smell. What else could it be?

I come from long lineages of gardeners and farmers, but didn’t get the cultivation gene. My earliest memories are of harvesting potatoes in my mom’s garden field, and stealing raspberries from my grandmother’s woody bushes.

My stepfather loved to grow tomatoes and zucchinis. When the bounty of tomatoes grew to excess, it seemed there was no problem in finding other kitchens that would welcome them. Zucchini, on the other hand….those babies were sneaky, the weeds of the vegetable kingdom. One day they would be too small to pick, but the next day they would be the size of footballs. Neighbors had “enough” zucchini and you couldn’t pay people to take it home. I mean there is only so much room in the freezer for zucchini bread, right? Robin Wall Kimmerer, in her book Serviceberry, writes of friends going on stealth zucchini giveaways at night, stuffing the green bombs in their neighbors’ mailboxes.

I know I am speaking to a community of gardeners~~ our whole church is a garden, literally and metaphorically. Our form~~our beautiful grounds reflect who we are as people of God~~rich, textured and diverse. We are cucumbers and bright pink azaeleas; we are knockout roses and creeping phlox and yes, big old zucchini squashes.

Our church is bursting with color and glory these days, but it didn’t happen overnight. It has taken years of cultivation and creativity, success and failure, planning and weeding carefully of generations who have gone before us, and who are still with us. There are worker bees among us, lovingly caring for the greening of our church. I am going to ask the worker bees to raise their wings who have been involved in the beauty and abundance of this place. (POINT OUT THE PLACES~~labyrinth, pet memorial, Milton’s garden)

There are two people, however, I especially want to point out, even though they will not be happy about this. These two sweet potatoes are vigilant in the caring of the gardens around outside of our church~~making sure the birdbath is clean, and keeping an eye on the health of bushes, calling the landscapers to prune that which they can’t do on their own, and most of all, reverently caring for our memorial garden.

Our memorial garden is the places where ashes of the saints of our church rermain forever, a place people visit for solace and connection, a plance that honors those holy beings who gave so much in growing out church what is today. You need to walk out there today, and notice the riot of color and rich greenery. Silently and under the radar, the gifts of time and unassuming cultivation, Ron and Jayne Miller’s care for the sacred space has yielded a living representation of who we seek to be, God’s welcome and joyful love on the corner of 5th Ave and White Pine. Ron and Jayne, please, if you are willing, let us thank you.

To all of our church gardeners and grounds-keepers, your gifts reflect the Is-ness of who we seek to be as church, as community. We are grateful.

But, what is Is-ness? In her poem, Chelan Harkin explores this question from the viewpoint of a tree, a log, leaves, an eco-system, and one thing is clear: Is-ness isn’t possible without connection. We can’t truly BE without community. Trees rely on the vast underground connection of roots in order to thrive. They make way for one another to reach the essential sunlight. Their leaves decompose to enrich the soil for worms and other organisms that sustain life. Soil, in it’s very Is-ness is the skin of the earth. Next time you have dirt on your hands, ponder THAT!

Rosemary Radford Ruether, is one of the leading, and one of the first, ecofeminist theologians. Her book Gaia and God was transformative in my spiritual theological journey. Her studies laid the foundation for ecofeminism, by examining examining western religious, scientific, philosophical traditions that led to a disconnect between humanity and natural world. She critically analyzes traditional interpretations of our creation stories and doctrines of sin and eviel, exploring how they have not only places primacy of human life over all other life; the individual against the whole, and other dualistic systems that pit people against people, spiritual against material, arguing these kinds divisions have contributed to ecological and social problems.

Through textual studies of ancient Hebrew, she shows that our creation narratives were never to be construed as an argument for human dominance and plundering of earth’s resources for own comfort, but rather how each inch and atom of creation is connected in an interdependt web of life. This is something that First nations peoples around the world knew for millenia, but our western “progress” ignored.

The is reason for our climate crisis~~is human made~~our dualistic, western “civilization” has insisted the world was made for us. And this mindset has robbed us of our Is-ness, because we have been separated from God in the presence of the whales and mitochondria and the ooze of life in a bucket of lake gunk. There is so much more to say about this, but for now, my hope is that we embrace the fact that our Is-ness is not separate from the is-ness of all life.

We are in the season of Easter, and as we ponder what the resurrection means in our daily lives, I want for us to consider our Is-ness in the context of climate crisis and our faith and daily living.

*\*\*\*Our Jesus narrative gives us insight into this, because it is about suffering and sustainability, death and life. The Easter story invites us to hold the juxtaposition of the reality of the cycle of life and death, and how intimately they are joined. Just this week, I stood in my front yard and marveled at how the dead shriveled stubs of our shasta daisies miraculously havebeen reborn into tender green leaves and promising closed buds of beauty. Easter challenges us to let go of what is dead and decaying in order to give way to life.*

*In our interpersonal worlds, we are constantly met with opportunities to release death so something more sustainable can bloom. Daily, life summons us to let go in order to give way to rebirth. We are faced with decay and detritus of addictions, the fears of not-enoughness, the illusions of perfection that only serve to hold us back from what is sustainable and abundant~~our connections to God, to ourselves, to our neighbors. Sometimes we are just sweeping out the corners of our hearts~~letting go tiny irritants like someone cutting us off in a conversation rather than dwelling on it; and sometimes it’s allowing something to die even though we want to live on an on~~for me, it is acknowledging that my mom is dead, she is not coming back, and so how can I make room for her spirit to delight and comfort me?*

*Suffering and death is inevitable and the cross reflects this brutal truth. Now, more than ever, the cross is a symbol of the devastation of the climate crisis~~ think of Iniut hunters falling through thinning Arctic ice, innocent wildlife burning alive in inescapable wildfires, the Polynesian nation of Tuvalu being swallowed by rising sea levels. The cross is embedded in these tragedies. But, because it reaches far and wide in all directions, it is also a symbol of the possibility of transformation in the midst of suffering. Jesus “cycles” out of life, dies, and is reborn. All of life follows this path.*

*Forest ecologist Suzanne Simard has studied suffering and sustainability among trees. One of the discoveries of her research is that “when a tree is dying, it passes on most of its carbon through its networks to the neighboring trees, even different species” an act that contributes “to the vitality of the new forest.” Trees, like the Christ, serve all creation\*\*\**

And this is the very essence of our Is-ness. We are part of the fabric of Creation, as our theology goes hands in hand with what we know about the universe, that we are dependent on the rest of the life, and life depends on us. Creation serves us, and we in turn, serve creation. This is the cycle of our Is-ness, the cycle of who we are.

The Buddhist teacher, Thicht Nhat Han, is well known for his Orange Meditation. It begins with noticing the orange, how it feels, how it smells, the shape and texture. This kind of noticing while peeling and savoring the orange emphacises the concept of is-ness, the inherent nature of things as they are, without label or judgements. The point is not to change or control the orange, but simply focusing on the orange. This leads to experience the wonder of its existence. Practicing meditation like this helps cultivate accepetance and an embrace of life—in all of its wonders and worries with great ease. It helps us understand the cycle of life and death, suffering and sustainability, the Is-ness of all of who we are.

I invite you, this week, to try this “orange” meditation. Go sit in the memorial garden, or on top of Big Glassy out at Carl Sandburg, or sit in front of your cat or the fat zucchini your neighbor left in your mailbox. Wonder at it, see the holy in it, and find its Is-ness. I guarantee you will find your Is-ness too.

Amen.

SOURCES

Rosemary Radford Ruether, Gaia and God, 1994.

\*\*\*This section on sustainability and suffering, between the set of asterisks and italicized is sourced from a brilliant article I read online and can’t find the link to the actual page. It is not my original idea in the least. Thank you to the author, and my apologies for not having the correct attribution.