

Seeds (Easter)¹
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April 24, 2011
Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

Today is the Christian feast of Easter. Easter celebrates the power of resurrection—of life coming out of death. Jesus invites us to consider the seeds as if they are our teachers. He said, "Unless a seed falls into the ground and dies, it bears no fruit." The seed has great power. It is buried in the ground and appears to die, yet brings forth the green plant, the flower and the fruit of new life. What can we learn from the miracle of the seed? How do we face death and come alive again?

READING

The Gardener of Eden²

James Broughton

I am the old dreamer who never sleeps
I am timekeeper of the timeless dance
I preserve the long rhythms of the earth
and fertilize the rounds of desire

In my evergreen arboretum
I raise flowering hopes for the world
I plant seeds of perennial affection
and wait for their passionate bloom

Would you welcome that sight if you saw it?
Revalue the view you have lost?
Could you wake to the innocent morning
and follow the risks of your heart?

Every day I grow a dream in my garden
where the beds are laid out for love
When will you come to embrace it
and join in the joy of the dance?

Easter Sunday is really about the problem of death. When I was growing up, my Christian church taught us not to grieve when someone died, but to celebrate—that when someone died, they were entering their better life in heaven. In a way there was comfort in that, but it required a kind of twisting up of the heart's natural emotions. The heart rages against death, and is utterly bereft by the loss of a loved one.

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2 From *Packing Up for Paradise*, online at http://www.panhala.net/Archive/The_Gardner_of_Eden.html

The message that I learned for Easter was that Jesus overcame death by rising from the dead. We were told to celebrate the death of Jesus, because it led to the resurrection. Now, I think that was a mistake—for death always breaks our hearts and hurts the fabric of community. How much more so for the death of a great soul, a healer and teacher of love! How can we celebrate that?

When I let myself enter the story now, I feel the tragedy of it, the horror. The ruling powers were so threatened by Jesus's simple message of love for everyone that they killed him. I believe that Christianity for too long has glorified the death of Jesus, made his death the whole point of his life. But I think it was the other way around. It was his life that we should celebrate.

Jesus wasn't the only great soul who has been killed by violence. I think about peacemakers and heroes, well known like Gandhi and Martin Luther King, or less well known, like Rachel Corrie, standing up to a bulldozer in Palestine, and Sister Dorothy Stang advocating for peasants in the Amazon rainforest and shot down by illegal loggers.³ How many we have lost! These great souls dared to live from their deepest values, to risk everything for love, for justice, for the great web of life.

I wonder if Jesus talked about death to his followers, preached about it, even seemed to prophecy his coming death, not because he was a prophet who came to die, but because he was afraid—he was trying to kindle his own courage, in order to be more fully truthful in his preaching, to be more completely bold in living his message. He knew the risk he faced was to be killed—that risk was ever present in a community living under military occupation by an imperial power. He knew it was dangerous to be a witness, a voice, to invite the people into their full dignity and belovedness. And so he had to come to terms with this—that to live fully alive was worth the risk. It was not about choosing to die, but choosing to live without being entombed by fear.

How many times have I tempered the work of my soul out of fear of what others might say or do, out of fear that I might not be accepted or welcomed by the community in which I find myself? The pattern becomes so ingrained that I don't even notice any more how I adapt myself, censor myself, hide myself. At the deepest level, aren't we all afraid to live from our very centers, live from our deepest values—aren't we all afraid of rejection, afraid that we might not be loved?

But, Jesus faced those fears, and took the risk to live his truth. And that is also frightening to us. Frightening because, yes, he paid the ultimate price—he was killed for it. And if you had just watched your best friend be executed for living his truth—might you not conclude that it wasn't such a good idea after all, to be so free and so loving?

³ http://www.daytonpeacemuseum.org/peace_martyrs_of_the_21st_centur.htm

But there is another side to it—because if you had known Jesus, you also had witnessed the light that was kindled in him, the power of that love and truth, the wholeness of his living. And there is a contagion in that kind of wholeness. Death had held no power over him, because he had conquered his fear of death in order to live his truth. It must have been something like what people felt after Martin Luther King was killed—of course, at first people were devastated, riots broke out, some wanted to give up. But Dr. King, too, had conquered his fear of death, to live in the fullness of his calling. There was a light in him that captured the hope and imagination of people and gave them courage to continue the struggle.

I think it must have been like that for the followers of Jesus after he was killed. First of all, fear and confusion, grief and brokenness. But then they tell the story of the light being kindled in each of them, of courage and a passion for life, of a dedication to preaching the truth boldly, and a gathering together of community in the power of healing love. So this shining life of Jesus was multiplied into the lives of his followers, as they too faced their fears and became bold in living.

And that is when they remembered the story Jesus told, about how unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces much fruit, in fact it multiplies one-hundred fold.⁴ Jesus had found hope and strength in the cycles of life that were everywhere around him in the earth. He noticed how an individual seed is nothing until it opens up to the larger cycles of life, and gives itself into the fruitfulness of the garden.

Suddenly, this story made sense to his followers as well—that Jesus' life was the grain of wheat that was planted in the ground, that he had risked everything for the message of love that was in his core, and now, all was not lost, but bearing fruit in their own transformed lives. They were the new seeds. And they too could find the courage to overcome their fear of death, and plant themselves in the ground of love, truth, and community.

Now, sometimes people get sidetracked in the story of Jesus by demanding an explanation of what really happened, or by arguing over the history of it all. But that isn't the point. A story doesn't have to be taken literally to have power in it. One of my colleagues expressed it well last week, she was quoting from someone else, and I couldn't find the source of this quote—but it goes like this: "The difference between history and myth is not that one is true and the other is not. The difference is that history happens once and it is over, and myth happens over and over."

There was something mythical in the life of Jesus, something that endured, because it so embodied what we face as human beings. All of us must face our fear of death, in order to live fully alive. This story is happening now, in our own times, just as much as it may have happened 2000 years ago. We face a world that is still full of oppression and greed, that still kills those who challenge systems of power. Beyond that, we also face a new crisis that stirs up our fear of

⁴ Gospel of John 12:24.

death—we are living in a human society that is destroying its own habitat, that has lost its awareness of the great web of life on which we depend for everything.

A seed is full of potential, a seed embodies the great unfolding of life that happens season after season. The Jewish people knew these seasons. According to Eli Rogosa, “The ancient teachings of Israel are rooted in its agricultural heritage of decentralized small-scale farming. ...the ancient Israeli farmer believed that the land and the people are one total living ecosystem. In addition to the practices of composting, crop rotation and fallowing, the Israeli understood that healthy soil would only bear nourishing fruit when the people, all of the people, were fed.”⁵

We have mostly lost this intimate connection with the land and its rhythms and its community of people. Most of our food is grown on huge industrial size plantations, with seeds that have been converted into corporate production tools. Grains of wheat are shipped all over the world, far away from the soil in which they grew. Instead of following the rhythms of the natural world, we are trying to bend the natural world to the ways of machines and industry. When I was learning about seeds for this worship service, I began to be more and more afraid and despairing for our modern world.

Here is one example of what scares me. Corporations now hold patents to modified seeds that are called “terminator” seeds. The seed is sterile or suicidal by nature and won't reproduce, requiring the farmer to buy new seeds each year, rather than be able to replant from the seeds that are grown in the crop.⁶

There is something monstrous about changing the very nature of a seed so that it can be controlled by a corporation. A seed is a sacred thing. A seed is the source of the generation of life. A seed is a source of courage and hope. The seed I hold in my hand has co-evolved with humankind over thousands of years. Vandana Shiva speaks about seeds as being part of the commons—they are a gift of nature and culture, to be shared for the well-being of all and saved for the well-being of future generations. Like the Jewish rabbis preached, the crops would not prosper unless all the people were fed.

Farmers over centuries grew and traded seeds, and developed a diversity of seeds for propagation in multiple environmental conditions. The very diversity of seeds is what helped us survive. And yet, now, when we need resilience more than ever, because of the challenge of climate change, we learn that 75% of the diversity of agricultural crops has been lost since the beginning of the last century.⁷

5 <http://newfarm.rodaleinstitute.org/international/features/2006/1206/ancientseed/rogosa.shtml>. “The biblical vision, the Talmud and Israel’s ancient laws, documented in the Mishnah, written down in the 2nd and 5th century in the book “The Way of the Seed” or “Seder Zari’im” in Hebrew, explains the principles of food justice, gleaning, tithing and the power of blessing, that are at the heart of the Hebraic tradition.”

6 MANIFESTO ON THE FUTURE OF SEEDS, Produced by The International Commission on the Future of Food and Agriculture, Chair, Vandana Shiva, p. 14, & p. 28.

7 Ibid., p. 16 Footnote 1.

When I learn about these things I feel sick in my heart and soul. I hate to even talk about them here where we gather to find hope and light. But that is the nature of Easter—we must take the risk to face our despair, to face the dark tombs that hold our fears and losses, we must dive right into the depths in order to find our strength. Resurrection is not about what happens when we die, but about what happens when we face our fears, and plant ourselves in the truth of our souls.

We are all seeds of one kind or another, we all have gifts that are inherent within our being, unique talents that only we can give to the world. A seed doesn't really have much value until it is planted; it remains dry, brittle, encased in a hard shell. And so we too must plant ourselves in the soil of life, risk everything, and break ourselves open, if we want to bear fruit in this life, if we want our people to live. We must share our gifts for the benefit of the larger whole. It might feel scary like a death, but ultimately it is the only way to become fully alive.

David Whyte expressed it in a poem: *What shape waits in the seed of you
to grow and spread its branches against a future sky?*⁸

Where do we find hope for our world? Where do we find the courage to plant ourselves like seeds in the soil of life. I remember that Jesus found courage in the lessons of the earth itself. If I plant a seed in the ground, a real and genuine seed, I feel hope. I know how it cracks open and sprouts in secret, how you can't see it while it is germinating, but soon it breaks through to the air and sunlight. How miraculous it is—I can add water and soil and warmth, but I can't make it grow—it's in its very nature to grow. When I work with the seed, I find courage to work with the seed of life in my own heart, too. Henry David Thoreau wrote: "I have great faith in a seed. Convince me that you have a seed there, and I am prepared to expect wonders."

This week, as I was reflecting on the challenges facing our earth, I found myself making plans for a garden bed, needing to be part of the ancient relationship between people and the plants, even in a tiny 3 foot by 8 foot space in our yard. I feel hope when I meet with others in our church who can learn and teach each other about gardening, building up the soil, composting, and growing food. I feel hope when I ask Trudy if we can give out seeds to everyone at church today, and she gathers them up, and puts them into little packages, so that anyone who wishes can find the hope that comes from planting a seed in the ground.

I feel hope when I hear about the many groups of people that are working to preserve the diversity and freedom of heirloom seeds, and groups of people who are learning again to grow the ancient grains, like emmer wheat, the mother of all wheat plants. Emmer wheat grows wild in the land of Israel, and was used by Palestinian and Israeli farmers to make traditional pita bread, and the matzo bread used for the feast of Passover that has been celebrated this past week. Almost lost, Emmer wheat is making a recovery and finding new farmers and markets among people who care about the earth.

⁸ "What to Remember When Waking," from *The House of Belonging*.

Let yourself reflect on these questions: What are you afraid to be or to do or to say? Can you face your fears in order to live fully alive? James Broughton asks, "Could you wake to the innocent morning and follow the risks of your heart?"

I want to close today with an excerpt from the poem, entitled, *For Freedom*, by John O'Donohue.⁹ He writes:

As the embrace of the earth
Welcomes all we call death,
Taking deep into itself
The right solitude of a seed,
Allowing it time
To shed the grip of former form
And give way to a deeper generosity
That will one day send it forth,
A tree into springtime,
May all that holds you
Fall from its hungry ledge
Into the fecund surge of your heart.

CLOSING WORDS

Remember to take some seeds as you leave today—they are in little packets with instructions written up by Trudy. You can plant them when you are able. Our closing words are from Gregory Orr:¹⁰

When I open the book
I hear the poets whisper and weep,
Laugh and lament.

In a thousand languages
They say the same thing:
"We lived. The secret of life
is love, that casts its wing
over all suffering, that takes
in its arms the hurt child,
that rises green from the fallen seed."

9 From *To Bless the Space Between Us*

10 Excerpt from "Concerning the Book that is the Body of the Beloved," *Meridian*, Issue 14, Fall/Winter 2004