

Anxious Gardeners

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In case you haven't heard there's an election in two days.

And I imagine in pulpits around the country this morning sermons are being given encouraging people to vote, offering subtle or not so subtle lectures on, if not who to vote for, then what a person of this or that faith ought to consider in deciding who should get their vote. And some preachers will undoubtedly push the envelope and defy IRS rules by endorsing one candidate over the other by name.

I'm not going to do any of these today.

I mean, you know you should vote if you can. So just do it.

And if, at this point, you're still not sure who you will vote for, you might at least consult and reflect on our Unitarian Universalist values and principles before you decide.

As far as an endorsement, well, there's no way I'm touching that.

Instead, I want to talk about gardening.

Well, sort of.

But first, let's talk gardens themselves. Gardens are usually aesthetically pleasing, offering myriad delights to the senses. Some gardens provide a place for contemplation, others supply flowers for cutting and still others produce food for the table. And a few offer all of these.

Gardens nourish us spiritually, emotionally, and physically. Is it any wonder gardens have been used as a metaphor for paradise throughout the ages...be it the place of our mythic origin or ultimate destination? Suffice it to say, I like gardens.

I'm less keen on gardening, however.

Part of the reason I don't particularly like gardening is that over the years I'd come to convince myself I'm not that good at it. "Every plant I've ever had dies,"

I lament to people whose gardens I admire. An admission that might surprise visitors to my home which has flowers abloom all year long. But that is thanks to my husband's efforts, not mine.

The fact of the matter is gardens require effort to build, grow, and maintain. That is, they require gardening. Watering, trimming, repotting and the like constitute some of the most important work readily associated with gardening. But there's another that's easily overlooked and sometimes derided: how we relate or connect to our gardens.

We all know or have heard of people who talk to plants and while that's not specifically what I'm talking about in reference to how we relate or connect with the garden, it does remind us, concretely, that our lives are lived in relationship to others, ourselves, and the world in which we live.

The noted Jewish theologian and scholar Martin Buber taught that there were two forms of relationship we can have with other people and the world around us, "I-Thou" and "I-It". In his book, "The Alphabet of Paradise," Rabbi Howard Cooper, summarizes Buber's philosophy as follows, "In an 'I-Thou' relationship one subject, 'I,' relates to another subject, 'Thou.'" This kind of relationship is characterized by openness, mutuality, directness, presentness: "being with". The "I-It" relationship is characterized by the absence of these qualities. In an "I-It" relationship we are relating to the world according to what it can do for us, and to other people as if they are objects." ("The Alphabet of Paradise", 142). Another way to think about it is the "I-Thou" form of relationship is an encounter with the fullness of another which is transformative in some way, whereas "I-it" is a detached experience of another, during which we collect data, analyze, classify, and theorize about the "it".

Cooper offers the following story from Buber's life as example of the difference between relating in an "I-Thou" way and an "I-it" way,

"He (Buber) once described an experience on his grandparents' estate with a favorite horse whom he'd loved to stroke. He felt its life beneath his hands, was aware of its ears flicking and its quiet snorting as it 'let me approach, confided itself to me, placed itself elementally in the relation of Thou to Thou with me.' Then one day, 'it struck me about the stroking, what fun it gave me, and suddenly I became conscious of my hand. The game went on as before, but something had changed....And the next day, after giving him a rich feed, when I stroked my friend's head he did not raise his head.'" At that moment, Cooper says, "Buber felt himself judged. He had moved from 'being with' the animal to using it for his own amusement. A subtle difference, but all the difference in the world: The

difference between relating in an “I-Thou” way and an “I-it” way.” (“The Alphabet of Paradise”,144).

As you listened to Buber’s experience you may have recalled “I-Thou” moments in your own memory. And if so, you may have also recalled the moment when, like for Buber, “I-Thou” slips into “I-It.” Cooper notes, “Buber stressed that the “I-it” relationship isn’t bad in itself, for it is... how... objective knowledge is acquired and we can get on with the world of the everyday.” The “I-Thou” relationship therefore is necessarily transient. (“The Alphabet of Paradise”,143).

The risk then isn’t that we’ll lose ourselves in an “I-Thou” relationship, but that we will confine ourselves to an exclusively “I-it” way of relating to the world. Which, according to Buber, is the root of existential angst, meaninglessness and sense of impending doom that permeates modern life.

All of this makes me wonder, maybe it’s not that I’m no good at gardening, maybe its that my relationship to gardens has been too narrow, too closed. Maybe it has been marked by too much separateness or detachment, rather than mutuality and reciprocity. Such ideas may seem silly to some when discussing literal gardens with tomatoes or begonias, but what about metaphorical gardens?

The garden, in Richard Blanco’s allegorical poem, “Election Year”, is a metaphor for American democracy. A garden we’ve, “struggled and promised to keep.” How is our relationship with that garden?

Have we stood, proudly, too proudly, perhaps, admiring it from afar? Have our routines, “mornings over coffee, news of the world...delightfully disturbed by the occasionally noted, “magic act of hummingbirds-appearing, disappearing” tricked us, as Blanco writes, “into seeing how the garden flowers thrive in shared soil, drink from the same rainfall, governed by one sun, yet grow divided in their beds where they've laid for years.”

Now up close, in another contentious election year, we see, “In the ruts between bands of color, ragweed poke their dastard heads, dandelions cough their poison seeds, and thistles like daggers draw their spiny leaves and take hold.”

The garden has lost ground.

And so, like surgeons we don our gloves, we grab our sheers, pull at the weeds, snip dying blooms, prop up leaning stems...tinkering with laws, sharing or shouting opinions, changing, adding or subtracting rules and regulations, finding people to blame, causes to vote for or against, and institutions to prop up or weaken, throwing everything we can think of to keep the garden going.

Then, once cautiously assured of the adequacy of our efforts, at least for a while, we step away and the garden resumes its former place, a sight to enjoy just outside our window or beyond our deck.

Yet for all the time and effort we spend on the garden, how much do we really spend with it? Indeed, how can gloved hands be with dirt? Dirt, which Ellie Schoenfeld refers to in her poem, “Patriotism.”, as “her country.”

Dirt that gathers under the fingernails. Imagery that suggests a certain vulnerability, the potential for messiness, yes, but also intimacy, found beneath the surface of things, or as Martin Buber would say, encountered between “I and Thou”.

Schoenfeld reaches in, hands bare, to meet the soil, encountering it directly, entering a relationship marked by presence. A relationship through which she grows toward a greater awareness and larger vision. So now when she speaks of bacteria and bugs as compatriots working for the common good, or pledging allegiance to the dirt of the world, dirt that provides for the just and unjust alike, she speaks with the weight of wisdom. Wisdom acquired working with the garden not merely on it. She speaks with authority derived not from detached observation but intimate companionship.

Still, there’s an election in two days and many of democracy’s anxious gardeners are wondering about that vine in the garden of democracy Richard Blanco describes in his poem. The one “you’ve never battled”...that...“creeps out of the dark furrows.” The one that, despite all our efforts, “returns with equal fury”...a vine.... “that lives by killing everything it touches.”

Henry David Thoreau noted, “There are a thousand hacking at the branches of evil to one who is striking at the root.” And indeed, the deadly vine in American democracy returns because, standing from afar, we think we know who or what the vine is.

But we’re wrong.

The vine is not a who or a what. It is not an individual or movement. It is a how. How we have chosen, consciously or unconsciously to relate to ourselves, others, and the world in which we live. How we have chosen, consciously or unconsciously to relate to the ideas and principles around which we organize our lives.

During his inaugural address in 1961, John F. Kennedy famously said, “Ask not what your country can do for you — ask what you can do for your country.”

Although today we're talking about democracy rather than country and "being with" rather than "doing for", the spirit of his words, in many ways, point to a way to get to the root of the vine that has us so anxious.

And so the charge today is to ask how we will meet or "be with" democracy rather than treat or use it solely as a means to advance our personal agendas or those of the voluntary associations which claim our loyalty.

Of course, as Blanco notes toward the end of his poem, "Maybe it's not just the garden we worried about, but something we call hope pitted against despair, something we can only speak of by speaking to ourselves about flowers, weeds, and hummingbirds, spiders, vines, and a garden tended under a constitution of stars we must believe in, splayed across our sky."

Indeed, masked behind our present worry for this nation, for democracy itself, is a larger, deeper worry. A haunting sense of alienation that has to do with meaning. Meaning that we have lost, can't find, or fear we never will.

"Existence", Martin Buber wrote, "will remain meaningless for you if you yourself do not penetrate into it with active love and if you do not in this way discover its meaning for yourself. Everything is waiting to be hallowed by you...Meet the world with the fulness of your being and you shall meet God."

There's an election in two days and it is time to remove our gardening gloves. Time to encounter, directly, with bare hands, the soil that is ground of every garden, of all being. To let it gather beneath our fingernails and hallow, not merely analyze, classify, theorize, or collect data from everyone and everything around us. For in truth, every day is an election day, on which we choose how to meet the world, and every vote counts.

Amen and Blessed Be