

## August 30, 2009 “Watering, Growing, Weeding”

**Reading** from my blog “Taking Stock” on our church website  
uubrunswick.org

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*Queen Anne's Lace* © Sylvia A. Stocker

Black-eyed Susans are one of my favorite flowers. To me, they look like bright, happy faces. Seeing them never fails to lift my spirits.

I also love them because, technically speaking, they are weeds, albeit weeds that have found favor with dedicated gardeners. You see them growing with wild abandon in late-summer fields. And you see them planted in the finest gardens, too. My heart fills with a mischievous glee, knowing a common "weed" has shed the bonds of that derogatory title. A Cinderella of the plant kingdom, I suppose.

So, last year when we were choosing plants for our new garden, naturally black-eyed Susans were at the top of the list. I loved watching them gain altitude and strength and then set out buds. When they blossomed my heart soared.

Except something was missing. Queen Anne's lace.

When you see black-eyed Susans growing wild in the fields, they are always dancing with Queen Anne's lace. They look beautiful together. In contrast, the black-eyed Susans in my garden did not look quite right without their native friends. I would venture to say they even seemed a bit forlorn.

Setting about to rectify the problem, I studied some gardening catalogs. Sure enough, seeds are to be had at a modest price. Some catalogs even boast seeds that – horrors! – have been treated so that they will not spread like common weeds. Why, I wonder, wouldn't you want flowers you love to spread?

Then my spouse suggested we harvest some wild seeds on one of our walks. I stored the seeds all winter long, waiting for springtime planting. Spring finally came, along with discouraging and unrelenting rain. By the time I

planted my seeds, the time was really past.

Meanwhile, a mysterious new plant emerged from the soil. Noting its soft, feathery, intriguing leaves, I decided to let it stay when I was pulling weeds. Imagine my surprise when it bloomed – a beautiful, healthy Queen Anne's lace! And right beside the black-eyed Susans, too. How it knew to take up residence in that precise spot, I will never know. But I am grateful and, yes, I am enjoying a certain mischievous glee, too.

**Sermon: Watering, Growing, Weeding © Rev. Sylvia A. Stocker**

I chose this sermon title – Watering, Growing, Weeding – way back in the middle of June, a full two and a half months ago. I was spurred on by the newsletter deadline, and the title arose out of my eager anticipation of summer.

Summer, the time of expansive living. Of playing and relaxing. Of warmth, sunlight, and aimless thoughts that drift where they will. Time to put aside the hectic busyness of the rest of the year. Time to slip with ease into natural settings. Time to watch the baby birds strengthen their wings and take flight. Time to be gardener of both earth and spirit, as both the seeds of the nature and seeds of wisdom have the space, freedom, and gentle warming to sprout, grow, and mature.

In summer, I have often felt my own soul soften and mellow, taking flight with courage and hope. I have often felt my own heart grow expansive with love and compassion. For me, the gift of summer, with its warmth and enduring light, has often been an easing of burdens an opportunity to play, and the invitation to open the door to new ideas, to become more pliable and thoughtful, to dig around inside, doing some internal weeding of the soul that I find helpful to accomplish once in a while. Such weeding opens me up, makes me more receptive to new truth, helps me to countenance changes I might find hard, stretches my heart to a larger capacity.

The poet Yehuda Amichai captures something of the necessity to do the kind of exploration I mean:

*The Place Where We Are Right; Yehuda Amichai*

*From the place where we are right  
flowers will never grow in the spring.*

*The place where we are right  
is hard and trampled like a yard.*

*But doubts and loves dig up the world like a mole, a plow.  
And a whisper will be heard in the place  
where the ruined house once stood.*

Acting always from a place where “we are right” might produce an inner garden where everything is neatly in place... but nothing ever changes, except that, with time, the plants themselves will suffer in soil that is never turned or nourished by the introduction of new varieties.

Acting from a place of doubt and love – and, for me, curiosity and faith that new good things *can* emerge – allows the aberrant Queen Anne’s Lace, a common weed, to take root and delight.

Back in June, I anticipated entertaining doubts and loves. I imagined digging like a mole, a plow, and I hoped for a whisper, an insight, a scrap of wisdom, a new intimation of the workings of the heart and soul. Such is often the work of summer warmth and light, at least for me.

And so, as the newsletter deadline approached last June, summer, it seemed to me, was the perfect time to ask: how do we become good gardeners of the soul?

At the time no one could have predicted what a terrible year for gardening this would be. Who would have known it would rain for nearly all of June and July? It rained so much, in fact, that I have still not connected my hose to the spigot outdoors. Our rains were dreary, unrelenting, and nearly Biblical in duration. Crops have suffered in this moist climate. Weeds have

flourished – in a literal sense – and perhaps, for many of us, in a metaphorical sense, too.

And nearly everyone I have encountered has lamented – at times impatiently, and at times with discouraged weariness. As a result, I know for me, and perhaps for you, too, the advent of fall leaves me with some dreams unfulfilled and some tasks undone. I move forward with a little bit of disappointment – as though I’ve missed out on something while the time slipped, unnoticed, through my fingers. Perhaps some of you share similar feelings.

And so my summer reflections have taken a surprising turn for me. Just as my garden is in need of good weeding after all that summer rain, so too does my soul require some careful tending. Now is the time to examine what has taken root in my heart and soul, and to pull out what does not serve.

The truth is, we would all be well served to do that internal weeding once in a while. Not every volunteer in our inner landscape is a lovely Queen Anne’s Lace, as it turns out. Some of the seeds that get watered by summer rain make a shambles of the garden of our soul and prevent us from flourishing overall.

This has been a strange summer: Odd weather. Acclaimed anniversaries of such events as the moon landing and Woodstock. Notable deaths: Michael Jackson, Walter Cronkite, Ted Kennedy, to name just a few,

The violence in Iraq and Afghanistan continues. And here at home, this has been the summer of the great debate on health care reform, as America ponders the best way to fix a system that pits doctors – who swear allegiance to their patients – against insurance companies – who swear allegiance to their shareholders.

Regardless of our individual views on health care reform, I suspect most of us will agree some Americans have sunk to new lows this summer as they have strapped guns to their bodies and headed off to so-called town meetings to rant about health care reform. What has happened to my country, I have wondered? Have we no shame that our citizenry, who enjoy freedom of speech, feel compelled to use that freedom to yell and threaten one another?

How do people become so convinced of their rightness that they allow self-righteousness to take hold, losing their regard for the humanity they share with others?

*From the place where we are right (wrote the poet)  
flowers will never grow in the spring.*

*The place where we are right  
is hard and trampled like a yard.*

*But doubts and loves dig up the world like a mole, a plow.  
And a whisper will be heard in the place  
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The town meetings have been vitriolic and vociferous to be sure. But on the home front, in my day-to-day living, I have witnessed something equally concerning: the feelings of helplessness and hopelessness – dare I say despair – expressed by so many people. The mood on the streets I travel seems to be that no matter what, the big businesses will win in the end, and the little people – which is to say us – will lose out in the end.

In an on-line discussion one of my friends recently asked, ‘Has anyone noticed how deeply our cultural depression has set in?’

Those who replied to the question noted a feeling of being bamboozled by elected officials, corporations, and the mainstream media. They noted how exploited they felt by a system so based on consumerism. Some saw cultural depression as a yearning for something deeper, for an increased spirituality – a renewal of the spirit.

If I could choose just one weed to pull from the garden of the soul, it would be that weed of helplessness, hopelessness, and despair. I would pull that weed that whispers, “you have no power,” “there is nothing that can be done,” “there’s no point; the big guys are going to win anyway.” I would pull that weed. And I would plant a seed to renew the spirit.

When I feel my own spirit flag, I am helped by remembering others who have persevered suffered through times of great trial, without giving up their personal power or hope.

History is full of such stories:

- The Buddha, who left a life of comfort and ease and produced a major religious movement based on the insights of his study of suffering
- Harriet Tubman, who returned to southern plantations again and again to rescue slaves and bring them to freedom.
- British parliamentarian William Wilberforce, who, in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, worked tirelessly – with many setbacks and some considerable successes – to abolish slavery in England.
- Aaron Feuerstein, owner of the Malden Mills in MA, who, after his mill was destroyed by fire in 1995, kept all 3000 of his workers on the payroll while the mill was being rebuilt.
- Jesus, who – watching his people suffer under Roman rule – called them back to the deepest spiritual truths that would help them endure.

I look to those stories – and others, like this one: Fifty years ago – in 1959 – the Dalai Lama fled Tibet for India, which has remained his home base ever since. By then, the Chinese had occupied Tibet for 10 years. The Dalai Lama witnessed his people suffering terrible atrocities in those years. He has watched from afar ever since. And in the intervening 50 years, the Chinese have completely changed Tibet, systematically eradicating the majestic culture that once was.

In that story, you would think the roots for hatred and revenge would grow strong. But the Dalai Lama has never relinquished hope. From his home in Dharamsala, India, he works tirelessly for the good and the freedom of the Tibetan people. He says we can train our minds to any condition. He uses both his spiritual practice and his teaching to cultivate hope instead of despair, compassion and love instead of hatred. He teaches us:

*If . . . one feels hatred for others and continues to indulge in this emotion, it will become progressively easier to hate. ...If one wishes to overcome hatred, one should cultivate love and compassion. (1)*

Moreover, the Dalai Lama teaches us that difficulties provide opportunities to practice. Consider his experience with the Chinese, for instance, and listen to what he has to say about enemies:

*. . . for a spiritual practitioner, one's enemies play a crucial role....**In fact, the enemy is the necessary condition for practicing patience.** Without an enemy's action, there is no possibility for patience or tolerance to arise. (2)*

Every manifestation of life – even the gun-toting loudmouths at town meetings; even the big corporations who care only about the bottom line – provide opportunity for spiritual practice. I suppose in this scheme, there are no weeds – only black-eyed Susans, Queen Anne's lace, and countless other varieties of the life force.

I suppose in this scheme – where encountering intolerance provides an opportunity to train the mind toward compassion and love – the soil can be more easily turned over, the flowers can emerge in the spring, and the whispers of new wisdom can be uttered and heard. I draw strength from the Dalai Lama's example.

But that's the Dalai Lama, you might protest. Of course he has access to all kinds of spiritual wisdom. His entire life has been given over to such pursuits. Most of us live lives far more mundane than his, you might be saying. So here is a more earthy story to consider, much in the news this week.

For 45 years of my life – for *most* of my life – until I moved to Maine two years ago, Ted Kennedy has been my senator. Regardless of whether or not one agreed with his politics, it is clear that most of his adult life was given over to public service. A good deal of his private life was given over to

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1 John Powers, *Tibetan Buddhism* (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 1995), 419.

2 His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Howard C. Cutler, *The Art of Happiness* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), 179.

caring for his enormous extended family. By all accounts he excelled as family patriarch.

But I don't think there is any dispute that a significant portion of his private life was a shambles for a long, long time – and sometimes a shameful shambles at that. His excesses and appetites were legendary, harmful, and hurtful. He was a deeply flawed human being.

Yet I find much inspiration in Kennedy's story precisely because of his flaws – that despite tragedy beyond his control and terrible errors and actions within his control to choose and to do otherwise, he never gave up. His legislative legacy proves that -- but so does the fact that he managed to turn his personal life around. And so does the fact that he did what he could and shared what he could with so many. That was something I witnessed at my former church, where I saw him reach out to the families of soldiers who died in Iraq.

When I see flaws and greatness so intertwined, I am reminded of the hope born in every one of us, despite our large capacity for errors. I am flawed, too, in my own way – and so, I suspect, are you. We live imperfect lives. We make mistakes, we hurt others, we hurt ourselves. But mixed with our flaws is our greatness. Our flaws give us the opportunity both to grow in humility and to strive toward our ideals. Our greatness gives us both the invitation and the obligation to share what we have to offer with our world.

Along with certain fallibility, there is also *possibility* – possibility born every human being, waiting to be nurtured, tended, and grown into fullest blossoming. Producing that blossoming involves work of the spirit – it requires tilling the soil of the heart and soul so that new growth can emerge.

All of the people I have mentioned here – the Buddha, Tubman, Wilberforce, Feuerstein, Jesus, the Dalai Lama, and, yes, even Kennedy, flawed as he was, harvested the spiritual truths of their respective faiths to guide them and others around them. So might I harvest the spiritual truths of my faith to guide me:

- That the world is unfolding through you and me, and we are witness to an amazing creation.

- That we can make of our lives, our relationships, and our world something majestic and beautiful.
- That love is the strongest guiding force there is.
- That it is up to us to harness the power of that force.

Who knew what the summer rains would produce? At times when the world seems chilly and damp, I find matters of the spirit weigh most heavily. “Bluebird theologies” – theologies of easy platitudes – might fall away and give rise to a deeper questing. Doubts and loves dig up the world like a mole, a plow. And new growth can emerge.

May new growth be upon us now. And may our harvest be plentiful and good.