

Seeds, Part One
(c) Rev. Sylvia A. Stocker
February 21, 2016

“They tried to bury us; they didn't know we were seeds.” – Mexican proverb

Reading: Words of Oscar Romero, Archbishop of El Salvadore, who was a hero and advocate for the poor, marginalized, and oppressed. He was assassinated while leading mass in 1980. Although his assassins were never caught, it is widely believed that the government Archbishop Romero spoke out against was behind the killing.

This is what we are about.

We plant the seeds that one day will grow.

We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.

We lay foundations that will need further development.

We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.

This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.

It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way,
an opportunity for [God's] grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results,

but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.

We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.

We are prophets of a future not our own.

Last October, I attended the Parliament of the World's Religions. Held every few years in locations all around the world, this time the Parliament was in Salt Lake City. My spouse Steve and I took the train from Boston to Salt Lake City, stopping in Denver for a couple of days to visit my brother.

Traveling over the Rockies by train was an amazing experience. But the most amazing experience was to be in the presence of over 10,000 people from religions and cultures all over the world who had gathered to find common ground.

The 2015 World Parliament's goal was to plant a seed – the seed of compassion. Separate days were devoted to the smaller (though not so small) related themes of income inequality; war, violence, and hate speech; and climate change. But all of those smaller themes were linked to the overarching theme of compassion, a theme chosen in response to the troubled times in which we live.

The first day of the Parliament was devoted to the first-ever Women's Assembly – promoted as 'an opportunity to address and discuss the responsibility of the world's religions to affirm women's dignity and human rights, and religious and spiritual inspiration for women's empowerment.' (World Parliament Program Book.) It was there, in the Women's Assembly, that one of the speakers cited today's thought to ponder:

“They tried to bury us; they didn't know we were seeds.”
– Mexican proverb

I have been thinking about that quotation ever since. So much so, that I envision a sermon series devoted to seeds – this being the first sermon and others to follow along at irregular intervals.

“They tried to bury us; they didn't know we were seeds.”

What is it to feel buried, only to discover you are a seed that is sprouting?

Imagine this: At the Women's Assembly, I was with a few thousand other women, many of which belonged to faiths that do not allow women's voices to rise to the top. Not as

priests or elders or prophets or pastors. That assembly may have been the setting (so far) where I have been most acutely aware of the enormous privilege I have to serve a denomination where women lead. Worldwide, my experience is actually the exception, not the rule.

But I think I have a glimmer of understanding those women who currently remain buried for now. When, as a teenager, I first felt called to the ministry, I had never met a woman minister. Soon after I felt that call, a male UU minister directly and bluntly discouraged me from pursuing it because I was a woman. I was a different person then, and so was he. But the point is that Unitarian Universalism was different then, too. We have changed. Where it comes to women, we have begun to grow up.

But I can remember what it felt like to be marginalized, just as many women at the Parliament continue to be marginalized in their faiths. Women who remain buried for now – seeds to sprout later, I hope. It was an honor to walk beside them. I continue to hold them in my heart today.

What is it to feel you are buried, only to discover you are a seed that is sprouting?

Imagine this: Every day of the Parliament, the Sikh community offered a free lunch to all 10,000 people in attendance. Called *langar*, the practice of feeding guests is central in the Sikh faith – a symbol of equality. Fifteenth century Sikh founder Guru Nanak said,

“Share with each other. There is no difference between you; we're all equals.” (Sikhs Serve Thousands at Utah Conference to Demonstrate Equality, Antonia Blumberg, October 17, 2015, Huffington Post http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/sikh-langar-parliament-of-world-religions_us_5622c61be4b02f6a900c9e68)

So during a 2-1/2 hour period each day, attendees lined up outside a large hall,

removed their shoes upon entering, covered their heads, then sat in lines on the floor, while Sikh priests delivered plates, utensils, and vegetarian food – as much as you wanted to eat. I am not sure I have the words to describe what it felt like to be welcomed in such a kind, gentle, and nourishing way. Perhaps this word picture describes it best: At lunch the first day, I watched tears roll down the cheeks of the person sitting beside me as a parade of absolute strangers served him.

But then imagine this as well: The Sikhs are not always treated with the kind of generosity and respect they showed us. In fact, one Parliament attendee was the brother of one of the victims in the 2012 Sikh temple shooting in Oak Creek, Wisconsin.

What can feel more like being buried than such an attack, motivated by hatred and prejudice?

What can feel more like a seed sprouting than to reach out across the fear, betrayal, and hatred, and break bread with everyone – *everyone*?

What is it to feel you are buried, only to discover you are a seed that is sprouting?

Imagine this: The first day of the Parliament, a group of Tibetan Buddhist monks began working on a sand mandala in the front lobby of the conference center. On the surface of a table that was maybe 5 feet by 5 feet, they slowly and painstakingly applied colored sand to create an intricate, beautiful design across most of the table. Each day they worked. Every day for five days. For hours. With tiny tools and infinite patience.

The mandala signifies compassion. At the end of the conference, in a religious ceremony, the monks dismantled the mandala, distributing packets of sand to all who wanted one. The practice is to place the sand into flowing water to carry compassion into the world. I have my own packet of sand and I would like to walk to the bridge over

the Androscoggin River some Sunday after church when the weather gets better. All will be invited to accompany me as I scatter the Buddhist monks' seeds of compassion into the waters of Maine, to be carried out into the wider ocean of the world.

But remember these were Tibetan Buddhist monks? Remember how Tibetan monks were (and still are) persecuted by the Chinese? Murdered? Imprisoned? Driven from their homes and land?

What can feel more like being buried than to endure such persecution?

What can feel more like a seed sprouting than to continue the tradition of spreading compassion throughout the world?

What is it to feel you are buried, only to discover you are a seed that is sprouting?

Imagine this: Some of my favorite presenters at the Parliament were the International Council of Thirteen Indigenous Grandmothers. I loved the grandmothers. (Who doesn't love grandmothers?) Gathered from indigenous peoples all over the world, those amazing women have united to '*represent a global alliance of prayer, education and healing for our Mother Earth, all Her inhabitants, all children, and for the next seven generations to come.*' (from their Mission Statement at <http://www.grandmotherscouncil.org/our-mission>)

The grandmothers embodied love and joy. Praying, chanting, singing, telling stories, laughing, and crying within the context of their particular, respective cultures, the grandmothers demonstrated how to find unity in diversity, how to find and keep common ground.

One of them, Florademayo, a Mayan grandmother, brought a wordless prayer to all of

us. We held our hands over our hearts and hummed three notes to ourselves over and over again. It may sound odd, but imagine several thousand people gently humming together. The effect was very magical.

Now imagine this: The grandmothers were all indigenous women, suffering the fate most indigenous people do around the world, where invading cultures try to erase the ways of the first peoples.

What can feel more like being buried than to have your traditions, your culture, your people marginalized and even eradicated? To have the old ways scorned and dismissed?

Yet what can feel more like a seed sprouting than to find strength with others who share your vision and to draw on the old ways to bring love and healing into the world?

What is it to feel you are buried, only to discover you are a seed that is sprouting?

Imagine this? Angaangaq Angakkorsuag, an Eskimo-Kalallit Elder from far north Greenland brought his sacred drum – the drum of his ancestors – and prayed in the way of his ancestors.

His people have been people of the ice for thousands of years, living intimately in and with an ecosystem that is now threatened to the point of disappearing. He said, “The big ice is melting, you cannot stop it. It is melting whether you believe it or not.” (from notes)

He told us that when the scientist first came to study the melting glaciers, his people approached them to tell them what was happening. The scientists rebuffed them, dismissing them because they lacked scientific training and fancy instruments – these people who had lived intimately with the ice for thousands of years.

What can feel more like being buried than to have your own lived experience and that of your people and ancestors brushed off so dismissively?

What can feel more like a seed sprouting than to keep speaking, telling your story the world over, to people of all faiths, traditions, and nationalities?

What is it to feel you are buried, only to discover you care a seed that is sprouting?

Imagine this: The last night of the Parliament, we attended a concert put on by singers, dancers, and musicians from all over the world. We saw Scotch Presbyterian bagpipers, the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, Hindu dancers, Cambodian dancers, Ute peoples blessing the assembly, Sikh musicians, whirling dervishes, African drummers, and more.

At the heart of the concert was a performance by a choir of children from all the religious traditions. A couple of hundred children, small children to teens, filled the stage. Hearing those colorfully arrayed children sing together was the most enchanting moment of the entire week.

Yet, we live in a world that often divides us from one another, a world that accentuates our differences and portrays those differences as fearful and contemptible.

What can feel more like being buried than to have our hearts cut off from our fellow beings?

What can feel more like a seed sprouting than to push back against hatred by gathering all our children to sing together?

What is it to feel you are buried, only to discover you are a seed that is sprouting?

I believe all of us have seeds within – many seeds, ranging from life-affirming seeds like love, justice, humility, and hope to life-destroying seeds like hate, prejudice, and selfishness. We get to choose which seeds to plant and tend. Think for a moment: If you could be one seed, what would it be? I would choose the seed of compassion, which is why I attended the Parliament, with its overarching theme of compassion, in the first place.

What would you choose?

There is much in the world to dissuade us from planting our seeds – much to stunt the growth of tiny seedlings: droughts when love and encouragement are in short supply; floods of doubt and fear; poisons of hatred and prejudice. But what can feel more like a seed sprouting than to push back against all that would discourage us and plant and tend our seeds anyway?

This is what we are about, said Oscar Romero.

We plant the seeds that one day will grow.

We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.

We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.

We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.

We are prophets of a future not our own.

So may it be.

Benediction

Words of Dawna Markova, adapted

May we not die unlived lives.

May we not live in fear
of falling or catching fire.

May we choose to inhabit our days,
to allow our living to open us
to make us less afraid,
more accessible,
to loosen our hearts
until they become wings,
torches, promises.

May we choose to risk our significance;
to live so that which came to us as seed
goes to the next as blossom
and that which came to us as blossom,
goes on as fruit.