

Bittersweet
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“Life at its best is bittersweet.” - Jack Kirby

In the beginning, it was all about our Christmas lights.

There is a small stand of trees – mostly pines – to one side of our house. Nestled higgledy-piggledy amidst the pines are three small fir trees about so high. Every year we string colored lights on them. At night those tiny sparks of color peek out from between the trunks of their larger kin. Subtle and pretty.

When we strung the lights last year (in 2014), I noticed vines growing high up in the branches of some of the tall pines surrounding the firs. The vines looked messy, and they obscured the lights. At the time I vowed to pull them out in time for this year's Christmas decorating. A good job to tackle during sabbatical, I thought.

That is how last fall I came to spend countless hours pulling up bittersweet vines that have infested my woods. Entire afternoons given to sweating and toiling, to dirt-filled sneakers and dirt under my fingernails, to aching back and blistering hands. What started as a seemingly simple task – to pull out the vines that were obscuring my little firs – turned into a gargantuan task that will probably be ongoing for as long as I live in that house. In all those hours of laboring, I had plenty of time to “pondah,” as we do here in Maine – plenty of time to consider bittersweet in just about every metaphorical way possible.

When I first noticed the vines a little more than a year ago, I didn't know what they were. Oh I had seen bittersweet berries before – but cut into bright, cheery bouquets or

woven into wreaths. I thought they were pretty.

In the ensuing months, as I pursued my morning walks with neighbors more learned than I, I learned the vines were bittersweet, that same plant whose berries I had thought so pretty. And bittersweet? I learned it was an invasive species that is slowly killing our native plants by girdling them. Indeed, on closer inspection, I discovered bittersweet was girdling one of my own pines.

When I set to work, the first thing I discovered, when I really looked, was how vast the infestation was. In their insidious way, bittersweet vines have snaked their way throughout my little grove. Now that didn't happen overnight. I have lived in that house for nearly nine years now. I'm sure the bittersweet vines were there when I moved in. I walk past them many times a day. But I never really noticed them before, even though they were right in plain view.

How much do I miss, I mused, as I bent over, pulling vine after vine? How much is hidden from me in plain sight, because my mind is on other things? Because it's so easy, at least for me, to be consumed by the minutiae of my "to do" list that I miss what is right before my eyes.

How much do we miss?

I remember the senior minister at my previous church had a 8-1/2 by 11 sheet of paper taped to the door of his office. Typed on it in giant ALL CAPS was one word: THIS.

This, what is right before us. This, which is happening now. THIS – not some rumination about what happened before or what will happen soon, or what may never happen at all, but THIS.

So many spiritual practices boil down to THIS, to focusing the heart and mind, to paying attention instead of sailing through life in a fog. Sometimes that fog can be systemic blindness affecting an entire culture. In fact, systems of oppression require that kind of miasma, that kind of blindness to flourish.

Here is an example of what I mean. Many years ago, I read Peggy McIntosh's famous essay, "Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack." In it, McIntosh, a white woman, working on women's studies at Wellesley College, described how the men she worked with couldn't admit *or even see* they were over-privileged as compared to women. She was perplexed by their inability to see what was so obvious to her. So she decided to do her own inner exploration, comparing her relationship to her own privilege as a white person to her male colleagues' relationship to their privilege as men.

She created a list of 26 privileges she enjoys simply because she is white – things like being able to find the history of her people represented in our nation's history books, being able to count on her people to be represented in leadership roles in government, the media, academic institutions, being able to find band-aids that more or less match her skin, being able to conduct her finances without her skin color negatively influencing the transaction, and so on. (Her list isn't exhaustive, but it is enlightening, at least for white people.)

All those many years ago, reading McIntosh's list for the first time stirred something deep in me. My eyes were opened to see what is in plain view in a whole new way. Perhaps most compelling for me was her description of how hard it was for her to hold those privileges in her awareness. She said, "*I repeatedly forgot each of the realizations on this list until I wrote it down. For me, white privilege turned out to be an elusive and fugitive subject. The pressure to avoid it is great, for in facing it I must give up the myth of meritocracy.*"

I love her description of white privilege as an “elusive and fugitive subject.” For me, those words capture the fog, the blindness, the inability to see what is right in plain sight.

Well, the *very next* day after I read McIntosh's essay all those years ago, I was talking with one of my friends. Excited by what I had read, I wanted to share it with her. So I started to describe McIntosh's essay. I could remember what inspired her to write her list. I could remember her process. I could even remember her description of how hard it was for her to remember her list until she wrote it down. But could I remember any significant number of the privileges she listed? No. I tried, but I could remember only a handful of them. All of the others had faded into the systemic cultural fog in which I live. I had to look them up, thus illustrating McIntosh's point of how hard it is to truly open our eyes.

Sometimes it is so hard to see, really see, even the things that are right in plain view.

That makes the commitment to see all the more important. With commitment comes practice. With practice comes the increased ability to open one's eyes. So the first lesson of the bittersweet was to open my eyes.

Of course, one has to be careful about evaluating what one is seeing. I thought about that a lot as I worked. Normally, I am not given to interfering in woods or forest areas. Letting the plants and animals work it out themselves generally is the best policy, by my sights.

Years ago, at my old house in Massachusetts, we had a small pond in the back yard. Steve used to mow all the way around the pond. But the day came when he tired of that and decided to let the back side of the pond grow up. He stopped mowing, and we watched as first weeds, then bushes, then poplars began to grow there. One day our next

door neighbor was talking to me, and, as he surveyed the emerging woods on the far side of our pond, he remarked, “That isn't very good stewardship of the land.” Well, I felt and generally continue to feel just the opposite. Let it grow wild, I say!

Yet on my sabbatical I was spending hours rearranging the vegetation – killing (I hoped) vast swaths of one particular plant.

Bittersweet is an invasive species, brought here from Asia in a misguided attempt to add beautiful color to ornamental gardens. By the time it has taken over completely, native plants are in ruins, and native birds and animals have lost their habitat.

I thought hard about how that worked as a metaphor. While I was weeding, hateful actions and rhetoric were in the news and on my mind: the terrorist attacks in Beirut, Paris, and San Bernadino, the shooting at Planned Parenthood in Colorado Springs.

Of course reports of the ongoing hateful rhetoric used to attract new recruits to terrorist cells is never far from the news cycle in the United States. Even more disturbing to my mind, however, were some of the sentiments I heard expressed among Americans: especially the statements denigrating Muslims and Mexicans labeling and treating them as “other,” and seeking to keep them apart from the rest of America. I find such rhetoric deeply troubling.

At first it felt to me as though those prejudicial statements, separating the world into “us” and “them,” was almost akin to labeling certain sectors of the human population as some kind of invasive species to be weeded out. The Muslims – surely they are the bittersweet. Or the Mexicans – surely *they* are the bittersweet. Or, (fill in the name of whatever group is on the out) – surely *They* are the bittersweet! Well, there was a disturbing metaphor for me, as you can imagine. I don't want to weed others out. I don't want to label people as “Other” or “Them” or “Those People.” I don't want the world

around me to operate that way, either. I want to see the sacred in others, no matter how different they are from me.

So I thought and thought and thought some more. I thought until I remembered the nature of invasive species: They don't add to the ecosystem already in place. Instead, they choke that ecosystem out, erasing it. In other words, invasive species don't increase diversity; they diminish it, rendering the landscape a vast mono-culture.

Then I got it.

What is bittersweet in human relationships is that impulse to fill the world only with *like* people – people who share the same physical traits, language, religion, culture, politics, and so on. The bittersweet vine doesn't live in harmony, doesn't make space for others. It takes all space and uses all materials for its own gain. What is important, it seems to me, is to weed out that insidious vine that chokes people off from their human kin from other walks of life. Weed out the vine that wants to close the door or build a wall.

Let me go one step further and suggest invasive bittersweet vines are those thoughts and behaviors that keep us from being our best selves...the doubts that immobilize self-doubters, the bombast and puffery that prevent a sense of humility, the fear that leads to hatred, the hatred that leads to violence, the greed that keeps us closed in, the jealousy that cuts us off from others, and so on.

Most of us could probably list some things we find least appealing about ourselves. Perhaps we have engaged in life-long struggles with some of those qualities. Those qualities, whatever they are, are the things that girdle our true growing, that stunt us and prevent us from shining as we could and as I believe we are meant to do. They are the pesky vines that snake their way through our souls, the vines to weed out.

So, the second lesson of the bittersweet is to take care in the weeding. Pull out those things that prevent us from being our best selves. Leave behind what is open, diverse, rich, and nourishing.

One day, a man walked by and greeted me. As we both admired the gigantic pile of vines I had pulled up, he remarked at how hard the work was, then shook his head and added, “They grow back so quickly.”

Well, I didn't know *that!* I looked at all I had accomplished and I had yet to accomplish, and my heart sank.

Bittersweet roots run deep. In fact, my research revealed bittersweet propagates not just from its lovely berries, but from rhizomes, or runners off the roots of other bittersweet plants. A lusty network of rhizomes snakes its way, unseen, underground in my yard. I have read numerous articles that say painting Roundup on the vines is the only true way of killing them. I have no intention of introducing that particular poison into my yard or life, so it appears I will be pulling up bittersweet for a long time to come.

But a life's work is really what we are talking about here anyway, isn't it? Seeing, truly seeing – that's a life's work, when so much can blind us. Weeding out the things that obscure our sparkle from the rest of the world – that's a life's work. Growing into our best selves – that's a life's work. In my view, religion at its best serves as an aid and inspiration for that very important work.

So the third lesson of the bittersweet is to engage the work and to keep on keeping on.

Well, when December rolled around, we strung the lights on our little fir trees and flicked the switch. And there in our little grove of trees, tiny colored lights pierced the darkness. It's always one of my favorite moments of the season – the moment when we

light the lights.

The bittersweet isn't completely gone – it isn't possible to do a life time's work in a few short months. But this year you could see the little firs from the road. There were no vines obscuring their beauty. The little lights sparkled and cheered.

I know the woods won't stay that way. The bittersweet will grow back unless I tend that grove with dedication and persistence. I know the work may never be done.

But the final lesson (for now) from the bittersweet is this: I can enjoy the beauty in front of me now, feel as sense of accomplishment for what I have done so far, and leave the rest until the time comes to work on it again. That's how it is in a bittersweet world. And that's good enough for me.