

“De Colores”

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull
Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden
Meriden, CT

Flower Communion Sunday
June 16, 2013

De colores, de colores se visten los campos en la primavera.

All the colors, yes, the colors we see in the springtime with all of its flowers.

...on into

All the colors, yes the colors of people now taking their place in the sun.

I love this song, laced with a melody that invites us to dance as much as it invites us to sing of the colors of humankind and of flora and fauna that blossom before our eyes and under our noses. In Alice Walker’s words:

“There is a flower at the tip of my nose smelling me...
There is a song deep into my body singing me.
There is a dance deep in my bones dancing me.”

There are flowers of countless colors, songs of restless rhythms, dances of body and soul. And there was Mrs. Kingman’s garden. Right next door to the house we moved into when I was four years old was Mrs. Kingman’s garden. She was our landlady, which is why for a long time afterwards I thought landladies had to be at least a hundred years old, because that’s how I remember her—snow-white hair, slightly stooped, with a voice you could barely hear. She walked with a delicate dignity, her ever-present cane, and a gentle smile.

I can only imagine how many years earlier she had begun to spin the magic that was her flower garden, carefully plotted for color and fragrance with paths that perfectly suited my small sandaled feet. In childlike reverence I paused at every cluster of snapdragons, Sweet William, forget-me-nots, black-eyed susans, daylilies, columbine, and sweetheart roses. Each blossom invited me to rest my gaze and inhale its nuanced scent.

I didn’t think about meditation then; I just entered it. I didn’t think much about prayer then; I just knew I was grateful. I didn’t think much about going home either, even when my Mother called to me again and again, rudely interrupting the spell that was cast by the glory of what this ancient lady had planted in her backyard.

How do our gardens grow? From barely visible beginnings. “Seeds,” wrote Carol Williams, in *Bringing a Garden to Life*, “are the archetypal beginning, the unit of being. Sometimes they are so small one can hardly see them.” Each of the flowers you hold grew from a seed. It didn’t just happen. Mother Nature is compassionate and cruel in her habits of gardening. Some seeds never take root. Others flourish. Human nature is thoughtful and thoughtless in our habits of gardening. To bring a garden to fruition, we must discern as best we can the workings of Mother Nature and serve as her partner—weeding, watering, hoping that enough but not too much sun will shine, that enough but not too much rain will fall, and trusting that seeds well tended will take root, burst through the ground, and blossom.

Each of you holds a small patch of the garden that is this congregation on this Sunday morning in June. Each of you holds beauty that has blossomed when love and dedication take root. If you were all to hold up your flowers—and I invite you to do so—a veritable garden rises, reminding us of the many gardens and yards and seedlings from which they sprang. Who knew they would once converge in the same garden?

Just a few steps from where we are now sitting other seedlings have taken root. If you haven’t yet visited the labor of love and memory that is our Spiral Garden, I urge you to do so. Each planting is native to this region. Each is a perennial. With careful tending, we’ll witness them again next year—the next generation that is—hardier and bolder than ever. Like the perennial seeds that marked their beginning, we are seeds planted and intended to last far longer than a single year. We are seeds equipped through nature and nurture to weather seasons gentle and brutal year after year into our ultimate ripeness, and we are each distinctive. The harvest of who we are and what we are about is not any less colorful and variegated than the Flower Communion garden that rose from our outstretched arms just a moment ago, the Spiral Garden outside our doors, and that magical space that enchanted a young child and enlivened an elderly woman.

Our is not an easy garden to grow—tending the particular needs of every seed; celebrating every color, texture, shape and scent; affirming that we are all part of the megagarden that is life itself.

Mary, Terry, Barry, and Larry, how does your garden grow?
 With plantings perennial, a few biennial,
 With columbine and trumpet vine,
 With inclination and imagination,
 With careful tending and lots of bending,
 With joys and sorrows and iffy tomorrows,
 But almost never, never, never in neat and tidy rows.

We find our affinity not in neat and tidy rows, but in patterns unexpected, curious, and at home with wildflowers, wildflowers of heart and mind.

With each new member, with each new friend, a seed is planted. It’s up to all of us to welcome it, to nurture him, to befriend her, to learn his name, to invite her to this or that, to celebrate not tolerate a garden once again transformed by new life, new possibility, new facets of love, each finding her place/his place under an ancient sun.

In just a few days I'll head to Louisville, Kentucky for the Annual General Assembly—GA—of our Unitarian Universalist Association. Building on the power of last year's first ever Justice GA, our faith's Standing on the Side of Love campaign will infuse the many ways in which we will worship, witness, wonder, and discover what it means to inhabit with gratitude and accountability a garden well beyond what I could have imagined walking through the neat rows of that long ago garden. "From Promise to Commitment" is the theme of this year's gathering. It could as well be called "From Covenant to Commitment." From taking to heart how we are in relationship with one another to living that relationship is what we will explore and discern in worship, workshops, and witness.

This year's public witness—and there is an event of public witness every year—focuses on Environmental Justice. In other words, how are we tending our earth-garden, and how might we do so in ways that reflect a more profound reverence for life? Two weeks from now, I will have more to say and to share as I wonder aloud on "Bluegrass Singing."

In the meantime, we are gathered here with sprigs of flowers in our laps, sprigs of flowers stemming from seeds planted, seeds of beauty that happen when love takes root, seeds of justice cultivated into acts of risk and sacrifice on behalf of inclusive love. I speak of Norbert Čápek, who introduced the Flower Communion to his congregants in Prague, Czechoslovakia just 80 years ago this month; who summoned the love that had taken root in his own soul to resist Nazi oppression; who paid with his life; and whose rite of flowers given and received lives on in our congregations and our very laps. I speak of all the fathers who have planted gardens and nurtured them through nurturing children into their full blossoming, and I pray for all the fathers who have fallen short of compassionate gardening and all the children who struggle to blossom. The gardening called for in parenting is perhaps the most challenging kind. And when one considers humankind an extension of our intimate family, as did Norbert Čápek, the demands can culminate in the ultimate love and sacrifice.

How do our gardens grow? With the spirit of women and men on whose shoulders we stand, with the kindred spirits who join us in raising our voices and marching and advocating and telling our stories of oppression resisted and transcended, and in singing with full heart:

*All the colors,
yes, the colors we see in the springtime with all of its flowers.
All the colors,
when the sunlight shines out through a rift in the cloud and it showers.
All the colors,
as a rainbow appears when a storm cloud is touched by the sun.
All the colors abound for the whole world around
and for ev'ryone under the sun*

For every living creature under the sun.

So may it be and Amen

Sources:

De Colores, Words: David Aiken, Music: Traditional Spanish folk, arr. By Betty A. Wylder, in *Singing the Living Tradition*, Unitarian Universalist Association, 1993, 305.

Alice Walker, *There Is a Flower at the Tip of My Nose Smelling Me*, illustrator Stefanok Vittale, Harper Collins Publishers, 2006.

Carol Williams, *Bringing a Garden to Life*, Bantam Books, New York, 1998, 79, 85.