

“The Parable of the Brown Thumb”

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One thing I have always known about myself is that I have a brown thumb. Whenever somebody gives me a plant, I immediately worry about how much time we will have together. How long will it take for my neglect to turn this beautiful plant into a brown, shriveled mess?

It is strange that I have a brown thumb as I come from a long line of amazing gardeners.

When my father's parents, my grandparents, first moved into their modest home, my grandfather looked at the empty backyard with its dry and sandy soil and thought, "It doesn't have to be this way." So he trucked in fertile soil from a distant farm, spread it across the tiny yard and, after laying out rows of seeds, through his hard work and the magic of time, a full, beautiful victory garden emerged. His growing family would never be wealthy but they would always know the taste of fresh vegetables at dinner. In time, my father - who was just a young boy then - would also learn how to work in the garden.

And my grandmother, too, became renowned for her talent with plants. As Grampy transformed the back yard, she looked out at the front and the sides of the house, all devoid of color, and thought, "It doesn't have to be this way." Through her tireless efforts, the small house soon became surrounded by a luxurious display of all kinds of flowers. Growing up, I heard rumors that neighbors would change their morning commute just so they could drive by and start the day with the beauty of my grandmothers flower garden. One neighbor even named her "the morning glory lady" and would occasionally leave gifts on her doorstep.

Like my father, the family garden was the backdrop to my childhood. Each spring, my father's seedlings would take up every available square inch of the house exposed to sunlight. The seedlings were in tiny plastic pots, recycled yogurt containers and anything that would hold soil. I listened to his annual lament about the local groundhog and deer who would feast on the results of his hard work, even with the fences he built to keep them away. But despite the challenge of nurturing seedlings into mature plants and the interference of pests, I, too, enjoyed fresh produce every summer. As a kid, I did not realize what a tremendous gift this was.

My father still tends his big garden, a garden that now includes a number of native plants to attract and feed migrating butterflies. Ironically, the soil in my father's garden was too fertile for these plants so, like my grandfather, he had sandy soil trucked in from someplace else. My father decided that a yard inhospitable to butterflies did not have to be this way.

I told you that I have a brown thumb. But I, too, once chose to have faith in a different vision for myself. I also decided that things didn't have to be this way.

It began with a ficus tree. When I first lived in the Boston area as a young adult, in one of those apartments with a bunch of roommates you hardly know, I found an odd thing in the dining room among the items abandoned by previous roommates – a tall stick in a pot of dirt. I realized this once was a healthy ficus tree that was not doing well at all, being neglected and stuck in a room with the shades pulled.

So I tried two radical things – I opened a nearby shade to give it light and regularly watered it. And slowly, magically, it came back to life. When I moved from that apartment, I took the tree with me. I found great joy, watching it wave in the breeze on the back porch, full of green leaves once again.

And then there was a spider plant. When I relocated to Chicago for seminary, I left my one and only house plant – first given to me by my father – at the office where I worked. Returning to the area many years later to begin my ministry here, my former coworker told me that the plant was still alive. I asked for one of its babies. If you know spider plants, you know they are excellent at reproduction.

My former coworker later gave me an enormous spider plant with many stems and plantlets. I said "I didn't want the original plant, just one of the babies." She replied "this IS one of the babies." Before I knew it, I was busy nurturing these many tiny plants into their next stage of life.

In time, I discovered that plants indeed do survive when you take care of them. But, on a more personal level, I also discovered how meaningful it is to attend to these fragile beings. I began to look forward to Monday, watering day. There is something about nurturing these plants, studying them for signs of wilt, transplanting them to more suitable pots when needed, that is healing for me.

I have now graduated to more difficult plants, even keeping an orchid alive for an extended period of time. Out of a sense of sympathy for their plight and the lower risk that comes with being a plant's last chance, I often choose my new plants from the discount shelf in the garden department of big box hardware stores. There are still occasional casualties under my care but the problem now is not killing plants but finding space for all the survivors. As the events of the world around me seem to keep turning more towards cruelty and death, this domestic ritual with my houseplants has become even more important as it grounds me as a person in service to life rather than it's meaningless end.

I have long had a brown thumb. But at some point I said, "it doesn't have to be this way." To my delight and surprise, my vision for being a steward of plants and not a threat blossomed into being.

The story of my evolving relationship with plants is such a small one in comparison to the story of the native people, living into their covenant with the land, fulfilling their promise to the water, reclaiming it from exploitation and abuse from human industry through the work of science and the blessing of ceremony. But whether it is a small step towards being a servant of

life or demanding a return to the “old ways” of being in relationship with the earth, every movement towards a new vision, countering a truth that doesn't have to be this way, is an investment in the ancient practice of human hope.

As we gather at the beginning of a new year together, I invite you to live with these questions:

Who are your people and what gifts do they give you in service to life?

What part of your life, your community, your world doesn't need to be the way it currently is?

In this month of vision, this time of beginning, what small risk will you take to move towards that new way of being?

In this morning's reading, Robin Wall Kimmerer recounts what she calls a water communion, a gathering where people came with water, clean and pure, from many different places to bless the suffering lake and its journey towards health..

In her book “Braiding Sweetgrass,” Kimmerer reminds us that ceremonies used to be about community. They used to be about the land. Now celebrations tend to be about the individual- birthdays, anniversaries, weddings and funerals. When will we return to celebrating the land, to honoring community and to bringing community into being through our celebration?

This morning, we do not gather at the edge of a lake, long revered and now polluted, but on a different kind of sacred ground. We have not come “down to the river to pray” but to bring a little piece of ourselves through our vessels of water so it may dissolve into and create a greater whole. Perhaps this is part of “the good old way” that reclaimers of earth and the builders of community call us to practice.