



## UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

---

“Gardeners of the Spirit,”  
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson  
on May 8, 2011

In some traditions, the preacher begins the sermon with an invocation. At the church where I did my internship, the minister<sup>1</sup> adapted a common invocation into this: “May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts find their place this day in the heart of God.”

For the past few days I’ve been chewing on words by May Sarton, and they are my invocation for today:

Help us to be the always hopeful  
Gardeners of the spirit  
Who know that without darkness  
Nothing comes to birth  
As without light  
Nothing flowers.

Today I want to ask you, how is it with your spirit? I ask you to imagine your spirit as a garden-- what season is it in right now? And what kind of shape is it in? Is it moist, or parched? Is it well tended or kind of neglected? Are the plants there thriving, and providing nourishment for you and for others? And if not, what are we going to do about that? That’s what I want to explore with you today.

Going back to May Sarton’s prayer, “Help us to be the always hopeful gardeners of the spirit,” what jumps out at me are those two words “always hopeful.” Asking to be always hopeful--now that’s a worthy prayer. Because if you are hopeful, then that shapes everything about how you look at the world and how you live in the world.

You know, don’t you, that hope is not the same thing as optimism? Optimism is the belief that things are going to turn out well. Sports fans are optimistic when their team is heavily favored. Politicians are optimistic going into an election when the polls show them way ahead. In the later years of the Red Sox’s 86-year World Series drought, nobody would say that Red Sox fans were optimistic. But they remained hopeful. Being hopeful means knowing that it might not turn out well, that the odds are against you, and still, believing in the possibility that things just might work

---

<sup>1</sup> The Rev. Roger Paine, senior minister of the First Parish in Lincoln, Massachusetts.

out, and trying, doing what you can to make that happen. It's having faith and then acting on it, in spite of all the evidence to the contrary.

You have to have hope to be a gardener. Why else would you order seeds in January or plant things that take years to mature and bloom or bear fruit? You know that this season might be too hot or too cold, too wet or too dry, there are all kinds of things that can happen to your tender sprouts--pests, hail, disease, to name a few--there's no guarantee that they will thrive, or even survive. There's no assurance that the promise inherent in a seed little plant will ever be realized. You do your best, but in the end, what happens is beyond your control. It takes hope to be a gardener, or a parent, or a person of faith.

What does it mean to be a gardener of the spirit? It means you are responsible for tending our own spiritual life. It's not something anyone else can do for you. You certainly can seek guidance and companionship, can sit at the feet of sages and learn from their wisdom. You can study and deliberate and make plans, the way a gardener does in the middle of winter.

But at some point you have to get to work: go outside and dig in the earth, put your hands in the dirt and get it under your fingernails, get down on your knees. Tending your spirit means making time to be still, time to wait and watch and listen for what your soul wants to say to you. It means trusting that still, small voice, and having the courage to follow where it leads. It means making your spiritual work a practice--doing it even when you don't feel like it, because you know it needs to be done, the same way a garden needs to be tended.

For some of us, this spiritual work and gardening are one in the same. I am a sometimes gardener, but I've done enough of it over the years that I know the popular rhyme<sup>2</sup> I put at the top of today's order of service is true:

The kiss of the sun for pardon,  
The song of the birds for mirth,--  
One is nearer God's heart in a garden  
Than anywhere else on earth.

There's something about being outdoors, digging in the dirt, taking notice of the many small miracles unfolding all around, especially this time of year, that makes me mindful of and grateful for the great Mystery that surrounds us, that spirit of life which pulses through creation.

Gardening, like any spiritual practice, helps you to get to the heart of things, to be close to the heart of God. To sense you are a part of this living, breathing, throbbing, unfolding creation. You know that book, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*?<sup>3</sup> Well, I'm imagining a companion to it: "Everything I Need to Know About the Spiritual Life I Learned in the Garden." Here's some of what I've learned.

---

<sup>2</sup> This is from "God's Garden" by Dorothy Frances Gurney.

<sup>3</sup> By Robert Fulghum.

First, dig deep. Plants need room to put roots down, to get nourishment and to provide stability for their upward growth. A plant with shallow roots dries out or is easily blown over. The spiritual life calls us to go below the surface. To drop down into the depths, to spend time with what we find there, even when it is difficult or uncomfortable.

Next, you need to do the work. To be a gardener, you need to break a sweat and get blisters on your hands and sometimes an aching back. It takes work to make progress in the spiritual life. It can offer times of bliss, yes, but it also involves boredom and heartache and fear and just plain effort. Gardeners will wear out the knees of their pants--and so should gardeners of the spirit.

One of the things I struggled with as a vegetable gardener was thinning crops. I hated pulling up tiny seedlings to make room for others to grow. Which ones would live and which would die? I didn't want to kill any of them--it felt like playing God. But when I didn't do this, they crowded each other out, and none of them thrived.

Pruning is another example. Many plants do better when parts of them are cut away. For some reason, I've never been a reluctant pruner. I wholeheartedly adopt the motto I heard once, "When pruning, if you aren't horrified by what you've done, you haven't done enough!"

In life you have to make choices--as much as you might want to, you can't do everything. You can't even be in two places at once! Though multitasking is popular these days, it's not good for you, and it's not good for the soul.

What I learned from gardening is the importance of discernment--making choices, deciding what to do, and what to weed out, and what to prune back. I don't do this particularly well--but I'm trying.

The gift in this, in limiting yourself, in not trying to do everything, or please everyone, or be everywhere, is that it makes it possible to be in one place--where you are--and awake to the possibilities in it. One of the maladies of our time is that we are so busy, so entranced by all those glowing screens, that we can miss the little miracles happening all around us. Another problem is that it's easy to get wrapped up in one's self--to think, "I am the center of the world, my problems are so big and important"--we need ways to regain perspective and balance.

I came home from work the other day tired and with a headache, and, to tell the truth, kind of cranky. I lay down on the couch and fell asleep for a while. When I got up the daylight was fading. I went outside and dug in the dirt for a few minutes and that helped to restore me. Then I took a few minutes to just sit outdoors under the darkening sky. I looked up the trees with their buds about to break open. I saw the crescent moon through the branches and was reminded that the aggravations of my little life are just that--little--in the scheme of things. That life is a gift and a blessing. That it doesn't take that much to renew and restore the soul. That, thank goodness, I am not in charge. Sometimes just a few minutes outdoors, under the sky, is enough to remind me of what matters, that life is precious and mysterious and awesome.

You don't have to go to the ends of the earth to discover this--you don't have to look any farther than the world just outside your door, The poet asks,

What, in the earth world,  
is there not to be amazed by  
and to be steadied by  
and to cherish?<sup>4</sup>

And I ask you, once more, how is it with your spirit? Do you know how to feed and restore your own soul? Can you listen to your own deep longings, and follow where they lead? Do you know how to be in touch with that force, that source of creativity and compassion, that some of us call God? Do you take time to look at, to really look at, the world?

If your spirit is tired or parched, then please do something about it. Turn off your computer and get outdoors. Spend some time on your knees. Ask for help.

We are here to be gardeners of the spirit--we are called to pay attention to this world and to these lives we have been given and to this very moment; called to tend our spiritual lives, to sink our roots down deep and to stretch and reach for the heavens. To be hopeful gardeners--accustomed to the shadows, of course, knowing something of the dark; and leaning toward the light, so we might grow and flourish and do something to make the world more beautiful.

My spiritual companions, my prayer is that we will so tend our lives and our spirits that they will be like gardens that grow and flourish and bear fruit in their season. That we will do this not just for ourselves, but for one another, and of course, to bring more light and more love into this broken and beautiful world.

Amen.

---

<sup>4</sup> Mary Oliver, "The Singular and Cheerful Life."