

The Kin-dom of Humus

by Kimberly Hunter

Pastor Ruth's call for Lenten reflections on gardening got me thinking about growing faith and food - about the fun as well as the many, many failures I've experienced with both faith and food, about how both can break us apart and bring us together, about why some of us have an ever-increasing stack while others of us are literally dying from lack.

In a society as broken as ours, where the "kin-dom of G-d" seems not-yet, I find it difficult to follow (let alone to teach!) Jesus' "*Don't worry...*" philosophy and equally difficult to believe his romantic promise of "*All these things will be given to you.*" Sure, I can trust Jesus' words for myself, since I've always had *more* than enough food, clothing and shelter.

But I cannot embrace Jesus' Way without envisioning people like my friend Andrew. He and his family live in northern Kenya, where a severe drought is slowly creating famine. Though Andrew often "looks at the birds of the air," he does so not from awe but rather from frustration because the heavenly Father to whom he prays is feeding the birds from his family's already struggling garden.

If you listened closely to the reflection Mr. Campbell shared a few moments ago, you may have heard how some people can muster up the grace and generosity necessary to welcome these birds, which I judge as guilty garden thieves.

Most days I cannot summon such radical acceptance, such inner-grace. If G-d uses human gardens to provide for the birds of the air, where is the divine provision for families like Andrew's? What, I ask, does Jesus' promise mean for those of us who are dying from lack of faith or food? These are some of the many questions I ask Jesus while we are working in the garden. And sometimes, if I'm listening, I hear him ask me *the same questions*. Those quiet, desperate moments are when I most watch and wait and pray for enough courage and understanding to walk in the Way of re-membrance.

When the pain of injustice confounds me, as it so often does, one Way I find solace is to replace my busy rushing with stopping to kneel or lay down in the dust, bow my head toward the earth and fold my hands into the soil. Such full body prayer grounds me in the mystery of who I *am*, who I am *not* and who G-d *might be*. Somehow, the world makes more sense from down there. It feels safer, smaller, slower, simpler. Even if I try, I cannot hurry up the growing process. Becoming takes time. When my hands become soiled, I feel at home and can more readily remember from where I have come and to where I am going. Sometimes, when I'm grounded, I even look forward to returning to the dust. A mother several seasons older than me once suggested I can feel that way only because I'm young, healthy and have no children who depend on me. She may be right. But whatever the reason, that's how I feel sometimes.

Ironically, though I am the eldest of four siblings and as such desperately strive to create order from chaos, it calms me to see, smell, hear, touch, taste evidence that proves—despite my most valiant efforts—while I am always invited to partake of life, I will *never* be able to control it. Never. (And if you get to know me well, you will thank G-d for that. I know I do!) Life is bigger, smaller, older, younger than me. Life began before and will go on after me. And yet, I am part of its whole.

The place in the South Early Street Community Garden that most reminds me of this holy mystery is the compost pile. Thank you, Phil, for restoring the bins to their original, transformative purpose.

People often confuse compost with soil. Though they look similar, they are not the same. Another word for compost is *humus* (not to be confused with hummus, which comes from tahini and creamed chickpeas). *Humus* is the organic—living—part of soil. I *love* this humus, this compost. And because I was a language teacher before I became a gardener, I *love* words that are rooted in and remind me of humus. These include words like:

Humor

Humble

Human
Healthy
Holy
Whole
Home
Heat
Hum
Hmm?

Anyways. Words. Yes. I was telling you why I *love* compost. When it's well-tended, compost delights me as much as I imagine Ashton's new puppy—the great Gatsby—delights her. Watching compost fills me with awe, joy and energy. I relish the moment when the house or office compost bucket grows full, so I can walk—sometimes happily “humming,” other times heavily “hmming?”—over to the South Early Street garden to dump what some call “waste” into the first of four bins. For with those cores, shells, grounds, paper, peelings all “pressed down and shaken together”—the process of creating *humus* begins.

This simple ritual feels both defiant and sacred. Defiant because compost physically *re*-members, restores, reconnects what society systematically *dis*-members, disappears, buries or otherwise tries to forget. It also feels sacred because compost invites us to participate in a transfiguration that results first in redemption—a reclamation through union of what was once lost through division—and this redemption ultimately leads to rebirth.

If you struggle to believe in resurrection, sit in front of the compost bin for a few months and wait. Watch what happens. If you listened well to Mr. Campbell's story, you may have heard how something dead can be involuntarily brought to life again—and can often become more vigorous than life wrought through intentional human effort. But to get born again, first something must die.

The decomposition of becoming *humus* mirrors the composition of becoming *human*. Both involve layers and cycles of heat and time. According to Genesis, G-d simply said, “Let there be light!” and there was, like striking a match. Creating humanity, however, required actions as well as words. G-d said, “Let us create humankind in our own image,” and carefully commenced doing so with water, *humus* and a breath of wind.

Similar to becoming *humus*, becoming *human* requires *humility*. If we are never crushed and cooked down by the heat of life's layers, we can never be transformed. If we want to be reborn, we must first endure the hell fire that soils our appearance and turns upside down our ways of understanding. To generate the heat necessary to create *humus*, a gardener must carefully layer what is new, fresh and green between what is old, dry and brown. And every so often, the gardener also has to shake up the pile or overturn it in order to ensure all the layers interact. If done well, a compost pile can even serve as a water heater. (I experienced a compost-heated outdoor shower [here](#), and it was exhilarating!)

But like the balance between youthful energy and well-seasoned wisdom, a pile with *too little* brown creates a hot, rotting stench that offends everyone, while *too much* brown creates cold, lifeless stagnation. Often the cost of preventing change and preserving things as-they-are is petrification—being petrified by fear can turn us into stone. Likewise, excluding all that is old, dry and traditional can create a hot mess. Such a mess leaves no room for breathing, listening, waiting, sinking, settling down and settling in. Devoid of air pockets, food scraps just rot because the light cannot get in.

In his song, “[Anthem](#),” Leonard Cohen also “looks at the birds of the air.” He opens with, “*The birds they sang at the break of day. ‘Start again,’ I heard them say... Every heart to love will come, but like a refugee. Ring the bells that still can ring. Forget your perfect offering. There is a crack, a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in.*”

Like *humility* and *heat*, *humor* also hastens transfiguration. Until we crack open enough to crack up and laugh a little at our fears, failures and imperfections, we cannot surrender them to the pile and begin to embody another Way. Leaving our lives in those layers requires a letting go that exchanges striving and worrying for watching and waiting.

And so Earth invites us to participate in her rituals of re-membering, which give birth to *humus*—a creation process we will never be able to control. Only the Invisible can do that—those tiny fungi, worms, bacteria, all the microorganisms that enliven organic matter. Some call this science. I call it magic.

Likewise, becoming holy *human*—re-membering who we are, from where we have come and to where we are going—this also requires surrender to the Invisible, to the love, joy, doubt, sorrow, anger, confusion, epiphanies and other enlivening experiences that slowly heal what's been shattered. Some call this faith. I call it mystery.

I'd like to close by reading a passage from the wise Kentucky farmer, Wendell Berry. This is from "[The Body and the Earth](#)," a chapter in his book entitled *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture*. Listen, as Berry teaches us how to re-member:

"To try to heal the body alone is to collaborate in the destruction of the body. Healing is impossible in loneliness; it is the opposite of loneliness. Conviviality is healing. To be healed we must come with all the other creatures to the feast of Creation...

"The fatal sickness is despair, a wound that cannot be healed because it is encapsulated in loneliness, surrounded by speechlessness. Past the scale of the human, our works do not liberate us—they confine us. They cut off access to the wilderness of Creation where we must go to be reborn—to receive the awareness, at once humbling and exhilarating, grievous and joyful, that we are a part of Creation, one with all that we live from and all that, in turn, lives from us...

"Healing, on the other hand, complicates the [circulatory] system by opening and restoring connections among the various parts—in this way restoring the ultimate simplicity of their union. When all the parts of the body are working together, are under each other's influence, we say that it is whole; it is healthy. The same is true of the world, of which our bodies are parts. The parts are healthy insofar as they are joined harmoniously to the whole."

Friends, springtime and Easter are about re-membering and becoming both *humus* and *human*. Old and new, ancient and young, dead and alive, past and present, wisdom and passion, tradition and imagination, contemplation and action, air and water, light and darkness; *altogether* are necessary for transfiguration, for redemption, for resurrection—for compost. We need each other precisely because we are different. Without you, I cannot be born again. Only after a hellish heat cooks our wet-on-dry layers can the pile settle down, cool down and reveal as *humus* what once was separate, and from this union raise up new life.

Whatever we choose to call it, this watch-and-wait Way echoes the always-enough ecology of the birds and lilies in Jesus' sermon. Why are we striving and stacking up for tomorrow? All we need for today *is* here, now, this. If some of us are lacking, all we need for healing is to literally re-member what we have dis-membered and wait for it to become *humus* so we can become wholly *human* again.

Mother Teresa once wrote, "If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other." So friends, come, let us gather together around the compost bin. Let us invite even those—*especially* those—with whom we disagree to join us there. Let us watch and wait until we re-member from where we each have come, to where we all are going and why we need each other along the Way.

Perhaps this is part of what Jesus means when he promises if we seek first the kin-dom of G-d, the rest will follow.