

Spring, Passover and Easter: A Celebration
UU Fellowship of the Eastern Slopes
April 1, 2018

A seasonal exploration of the nature of topsoil

Opening Words

Shelly: We began today with the story of Persephone bringing back spring every year. Earth comes alive, buds unfold, flowers bloom and trees leaf out. When the snow melts and you finally brush away last year's wet, dead leaves, the soil underneath is moist. It smells good! Musty and earthy! That is the great smell of topsoil.

Topsoil is very important. Topsoil and sun make spring happen. Do you know what it is? Topsoil is the very top layer of the earth's crust. It's usually 2 to 8 inches deep, sometimes deeper, and in it are the nutrients, the *food* that plants need to grow. Topsoil is made of **minerals** and **water**—it holds **air**, too, which is why it feels fluffy sometimes—and topsoil also contains **organic matter**: decayed dead plants, crunched up leaves, dead bugs and twigs. Often, the blacker the topsoil is, the richer it is in nutrients, and the stronger its awesome earthy smell. You know the earthy smell I'm talking about, right? You recognize it, too, in some vegetables, like spinach and beets and mushrooms.

Especially when you're in the woods, that aroma is really powerful. In fact, when topsoil is disturbed or turned over, a special molecule is released—this is what makes the earth and the woods smell so good! That molecule is called Geosmin.¹ Try it—next time you're outside, stir topsoil with your finger or a stick, and you'll find that the aroma becomes stronger. Rain can disturb topsoil, too, which is why after a rain we often smell that musty richness.

Rev. Betsy: The topsoil layer is an active place. In addition to all the decaying plants and critters that have died, it's also full of life: tiny organisms, fungi, worms, beetles and other insects continually churn through topsoil. Kind of like us, topsoil is always changing. In fact, this shallow layer of the earth that houses a whole circle of life is *life-giving*. What an appropriate theme for today! After a season of growth and blooming, plants die and trees drop their leaves. Rain and snow break down leaves and sticks, stems and berries, until *they* become topsoil, full of nutrients. They then feed the next generation of tiny organisms, worms and insects...and new plants too.

Topsoil is precious—it easily erodes or blows away, and intensive farming can deplete it of nutrients. It takes many years—sometimes over a hundred years—to create one inch of topsoil, and our country alone loses 3 tons of topsoil per acre every year.² This means that topsoil is not only cool and interesting and aromatic and valuable to life, but that it's very special, and we need to take care of it.

In our big bowl here, you can see the beginnings of new life: seedlings growing in soil specially formulated for starting seeds. They need to be fed as all plants do, so we will do that right now.

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geosmin>

² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Topsoil>

You probably know that forest fires can regenerate and strengthen the forest's life. In some ecosystems, fire naturally restores the soil by putting nutrients—from the ashes of trees—back into the soil.

Marion: Here in this dish are the old hopes and dreams from this service a year ago. [She pulls out several slips of paper and reads...]: “to care for myself” - “to heal my heart” - “to start again and fix mistakes” - “to experience all that May has to offer.”

A year has passed since we wrote down these hopes, and we have lived into them. Some came true, and we still hope for others to come true. Today, we are not the same as we were a year ago. What we have said and done and learned this year has changed us. Now, a year later, we have new hopes and dreams. In a few minutes, we will think about that.

But first, we will put our old hopes to bed. With thanksgiving and respect, we will turn them to ashes and sprinkle them on our topsoil as nourishment for the new seedlings. Not a goodbye to these thoughts, but a settling of them as we walk onwards.

[Ritual: The slips of paper from last Easter/Passover are burned, and the ashes are sprinkled on the bowl of earth/seedlings. Shana plays *Inch by Inch*.]

A Blessing for New Life:

The earth is cool and dark,
and far below, new life begins.
May the soil be blessed with fertility and abundance,
with rains of life-giving water,
with the heat of the sun
and the energy of the raw earth.
May the soil be blessed
as the womb of the land becomes full and fruitful
to bring forth the garden anew.

[Ritual: The finding of eggs - with messages written on them.]

[Ritual: Reflecting on “new life.”]

Homily – Topsoil

I hadn't seen the young man in seven years, not since we trained together as chaplains in a Portland hospital. At twenty-nine then, a gifted academic, Roman Catholic, someday he would work at the Vatican as a canon lawyer. He had what it took: razor-sharp focus, a brilliant mind and a lot of ambition. He and I touselled all the time, he with theory and logic, a fiery dogmatic conservative in every way, certain in every argument. We couldn't have been more different.

Now he tells me how he's loved serving *ten* small rural parishes. Ten at the same time! He's companioned farmers through their days, stopped in along long dirt roads for a grilled cheese

sandwich and marshmallows roasted around the hearth. I hardly recognize my hot-headed young colleague in this quiet, open, thoughtful priest.

Spiritually, he has moved away from academics and grown close to the land. He loves the feel and smell and promise of rich, black soil. “*This*,” he says, “is what’s real.” In his spare time, he reads about living close to the land, caring for the soil, growing things, farming.

“But what about the Vatican?” I want to know.

“Ah, no,” he says, “the country is where I will be. It’s all I want.”

My intellectual friend, who used to skewer us all with theological precision, also surprises me with his appreciation of the ancient pagan ways, his favorite part of Easter the rituals—one candle of hope in the dark, blessing the earth, holy water, and the moment of celebration, symbolic with flowers and light, trumpets, joy for the gift of life. “Christianity,” he says, “just baptized all those rituals. Humans have always loved ritual.”

Whether you are a person who embraces the old pagan ways, whether you observe the high holy days of Judaism or whether you rejoice in “the Resurrection and the life everlasting,” what connects us all is the life-giving soil of Earth: humankind’s source of harvest, and beauty and home; literally, our ground of being.

Author Wendell Berry wrote an essay about *topsoil*. Scientific here, tender there, his words are deeply spiritual, too. I love this description of the essence of topsoil through the lens of Christianity. Berry draws an unlikely parallel between topsoil and the way Jesus lived. So I invite you, as my young priest friend has done, to let the edges of your beliefs and your opinions soften for a moment. Think widely, universally, and see what speaks to you as Andy reads Wendell Berry’s words:

“The most exemplary nature is that of the topsoil. It is very Christ-like in its passivity and beneficence and in the penetrating energy that issues out of its peaceableness. It increases by experience, by the passage of seasons over it, growth rising out of it and returning to it, not by ambition or aggressiveness. It is enriched by all things that die and enter into it. It keeps the past, not as history or as memory, but as richness, new possibility. Its fertility is always building up out of death into promise.”³

Scientifically, borders on the miraculous. Beneath our feet, its slow, steady cycle of life and death—its quiet productivity, its very way of being—literally gives life to the world. Makes life possible. How?

With a *passivity*, Berry writes—an absence of ambition or aggressiveness. With *beneficence*—“resulting in good,” according to the dictionary, “charitable, generous, kind, open-handed, liberal, lavish.” What a way to be. Topsoil, he says, is *peaceable*. Definition—“peace-loving,

³ Wendell Berry. “A Native Hill,” *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry*, Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2002, 25.

nonviolent, non-confrontational, even-tempered, amicable.” What a way to be. *Fertile*, topsoil is “enriched by all that dies and enters into it.” Again, what a way to be.

Is it only for that ancient Jewish teacher and activist, Jesus of Nazareth, to embody the essence of topsoil? What can *we* learn from the aromatic topsoil outside our door? On this day of celebration across cultures, what would it be like for us to soften and accept and live in peace?

In closing, let us listen once more:

“The most exemplary nature is that of the topsoil...in its passivity and beneficence and in the penetrating energy that issues out of its peaceableness. It increases by experience, by the passage of seasons over it, growth rising out of it and returning to it, not by ambition or aggressiveness. It is enriched by all things that die and enter into it. It keeps the past, not as history or as memory, but as richness, new possibility. Its fertility is always building up out of death into promise.”

So may it be.