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Sheridan Unitarian Universalist Fellowship (SUUF)

“Spirituality for the Pragmatically Challenged”

Composting for the soul

By Phil Gilmore

I am a pretty literal fellow. When someone says “Duck!” I tend to look up and say “where?” rather than getting my silly head out of the way. For me, it is a triumph to understand a little of the deeper meanings when a discussion veers away from the concrete. So when I started thinking about this presentation I truly wanted to talk about the spirituality of composting. It doesn’t get much more literal or earthy than that. Since most of you probably don’t come to church for a science school lecture, I had to try to come up with a way to make this presentation truly contemplative and hopefully spiritual. We’ll see.

Ronn’s talk about the meaning of faith was inspiring to me. As a teenager I simply couldn’t get past the literal meaning of faith as belief in something without any proof. Remember Mark Twain’s definition of faith as believing something you know ain’t so? It simply made no sense to me. The leap of faith looked like a fool blithely plunging off a cliff believing a net would appear. I rejected “faith” as anything more than wishful thinking or self-delusion.

But when Ronn suggested that Faith might simply be the sense that beauty, love and truth are worthy ends in themselves despite their underlying mystery. Or the conviction that our best effort is intrinsically worthwhile, without any expectation of rewards. Whole new worlds of meaning suddenly presented themselves to me. Faith might be that fleeting spiritual feeling I experience at odd times. That intuition that something is just right even without any tangible “proof”.

Bill Bradshaw used gardening as a metaphor to talk about his spiritual garden. Inspiration! These earthy subjects have lots of opportunities for metaphors. You remember his mixed up rows, with the seven principles representing 7 different types of crops? And yet I still feel a lot more comfortable with the solid. Even metaphors are a little too soft for my concrete thinking sometimes. Perhaps that is why the 7th principle is much easier for me to rap my head around than any of the others. At times, for brief snatches, I can understand God as being the totality of the interdependent web of all existence.

Over The Christmas break Janelle and I took Brenna, Maya, and Ben to California. It was the perfect trip. Old friends, sunshine and balmy weather, beaches, good food, a Broadway musical, sea world and Disneyland. What fun! But we also got to stand in line for hours to ride thrilling rides for 2.3 minutes elbow to elbow with other revelers. I marveled at how few of these folks seemed phased by the crowds, and queues. We got to drive on the 65 mile per hour parking lots they call freeways. I marveled at the skill of these drivers. We got to see the limited access to this beautiful area created by all the

people. Getting off the plane in Billings in the snow and driving home with the few others on the highway didn't seem too bad.

In fact the population density there put me in a funk. How can all those people not only survive, but also seem to sort of enjoy where they are? And this area of southern California is actually sparsely populated compared to many areas of the world. I am positively depressed to think of how humans are overwhelming our planet. Climate change, shrinking glaciers, dead zones in the oceans, taking habitat from other species to the point of extinction, burning too many fossil fuels, cutting new roads through the last of the road-less areas, the list is long and sad. We are impoverishing future generations by our numbers and our consumption of resources. So, how does this relate to compost? I am glad you asked!

Composting is one way we can start to save the world! By promoting and actively composting I feel a closer connection to the earth. Screening compost in preparation for spreading on the garden you have to get your hands in the fresh compost. You smell the earthy fresh smell, see and feel the good moist texture and the beneficial insects that you are adding to the soil. The connection is real and immediate. At that moment it is inescapable that we are part of the ecosystem.

I feel good that Sheridan composts many of our organic wastes, and lets us all use it in our community. But it is an even greater joy to watch your own kitchen and garden wastes turn into something that not only sustains but enriches the earth. For me, this is the key to spirituality. Instead of consuming resources, actually putting something back to enrich the mix. Donating to a charity, or donating time to a good cause not only enrich the charity or cause, but they enrich ourselves. Our interactive inputs enrich the human mix.

Just like in human relations the more diversity in the compost pile, the more complex and nutrient rich the end product. When you compost a large pile of leaves you get something called leaf mould. It is great stuff that happens naturally in old growth forests. It helps hold moisture in sandy soils, and helps break up heavy clay. But it is a little like having only one friend. The nutrients are pretty limited. You really need more variety to truly grow and thrive. A compost pile made from a wide variety of organics will not only benefit the soil structure, but also provide lots of complex nutrients for your plants. People with diverse friends get the benefit of seeing things from many points of view, gaining a diverse and complex wisdom in the process. Making leaf mould in your relationships is not a bad thing, it just limits what you can give back to the community.

The larger the pile of compost, the faster the process happens. All that food promotes larger and larger numbers of micro-organisms until the food is exhausted and the process slows down as the next level of organisms take over and continue the process. The same feeding frenzy has been happening in the world of ideas. The internet has been a quantum leap in the sharing of ideas around the globe. The good ideas are being communicated ever more rapidly. Truly we are making progress even though what we

seem to hear most about are the failures and problems. The stage is set for rapid improvement in the human condition.

Compost in turn supports my garden by improving soil texture, providing nutrients, storing water, and providing air space to allow oxygen to the plant roots. The growing plants thrive and grow with the help of the compost, trapping CO₂ and releasing oxygen. There are wheels within wheels to this process. As organisms consume and break down the organics, much of the CO₂ is released into the atmosphere. This ultimately frees up the nutrients new plants need to grow and take up more (or perhaps the same) CO₂. The living organisms that do the work of composting are themselves part of the cycle. The nutrients they release are used by other organisms to grow and thrive. Humans interact with the world and each other sharing thoughts that enrich us all. Without this interaction we would all be just another ape trying to survive in a hostile environment. With the interaction we are slowly improving our understanding, and hopefully making the world better for all. Although I get worried about the earth a lot, I just read an article in Newsweek by Gregg Easterbook that the chance of dying in a war today is lower than at any time in human history. Nuclear warheads are being disassembled rather than being built, and per capita global arms spending has declined 40% in the last 25 years. Perhaps we are making a little progress.

My garden produce reduces my impact on the earth by reducing or eliminating the need for fertilizers. Plants that grow with compost are generally healthier making them more resistant to insects and plant diseases. Modern farming has become heavily dependant on fertilizers, genetically modified plants, and pesticides. These “improvements” have increased yields making farming more efficient and our food less costly. Which begs the questions, without these farming aids would we be able to provide enough food for all the people on earth? And what is the cost of these artificial means? Excess fertilizer and insecticides are leaching into our streams and ultimately the ocean. The dead zones in rivers and the ocean, and declining coral beds are symptoms of this overuse of chemicals. This intensive farming is also reducing biological diversity. Everyone is eating the same roundup ready corn. Composting is one small way we can push things back to a more sustainable level. I think of it as one step above installing a more efficient light fixture or improving the insulation in our sanctuary. These things reduce my impact, but composting actually reverses a small amount of my impact. Whenever we interact with one another honestly we cannot avoid improving the world. A tiny insight we might have may spark an idea in someone else. Even if they do not share it, their life is improved. If they share it, the world changes.

All these farming “improvements” actually started when humans started farming. Humans have always striven to produce more food with less. At first it was simply saving the best seeds, and breeding the best animals to produce better future crops. Shortly we figured out that manure in the garden made things grow better. That was good enough for thousands of years until scientific thought started to define exactly what was doing the improving. Suddenly chemicals and then pesticides and now genetics started artificially increasing our crops. But the science didn’t look at the whole picture,

at least at first. Hopefully we are learning our lessons about unintended consequences and short term thinking.

Thomas Jefferson discovered that it was more practical and cost effective to purchase new land when his fields used up their fertility than it was to apply enough compost to keep it productive. Modern farming uses the same economic theory to justify all that it does. Perhaps we are lucky that there is not unlimited land, and unlimited fossil fuels to keep this steamroller continuing on this one-way path. Ultimately the earth itself will limit us. I have faith that humans will see the consequences and react to improve things. The evidence suggests that we are doing just that with our day to day decisions.

But how can our little efforts do anything in the larger scheme of things? Two recent documentaries “An Inconvenient Truth” and “Who Killed the Electric Car” both point out that lawmakers and corporations are poor vehicles for change. In fact the message I took away is that we have to make the changes ourselves. We are all buying more fuel-efficient vehicles, installing more efficient lights, insulating, buying more energy efficient appliances, installing solar collectors and wind turbines, buying organic food, and composting. The larger impacts come when the government and corporations realize what folks are telling them by their buying decisions, and make changes accordingly. This is as it should be. How many of you would resist a mandated change? Guess most of us are contrary by nature. So all these little changes we all make are actually the best way to make the larger changes. I think it is not too much of a stretch to suggest it is the only way to make real permanent changes.

So the good news here is that all the little changes we individually make are already changing things. I have faith that by making these small changes I am making an impact. It feels right, I don't have a lot of empirical evidence, but ... About 2 months after we started composting on a sizable scale one of our skeptical employee's marched into the office, with a big grin. He had just turned the pile for the first time and was excited by what he found, a rich dark compost buried under the surface. Perhaps we need to just turn the pile and see what we are getting under the surface. Every time I go to the store there is a little more “organic” on the shelf. Suddenly “green” is losing some of it's negative press and becoming more mainstream. Something is composting here. And every one of us is doing our little bit to break down the information we receive, contributing our little bit to the mix.

By growing even some of our own food using compost we have made we are also reducing the food shipped to us from other areas. A little less diesel is burned hauling in food and hauling away those organic “wastes”. Is this another small piece of evidence that what we are doing is right, and working?

Finally, you can easily taste the difference in your homegrown, organic produce. The difference is partly because it is fresher, partly because you have worked for it, but mostly because of the healthy complex nutrients you are providing in lieu of chemicals. We all benefit when we work together with our small changes. Farmers markets with organic produce, and locally grown produce are becoming more and more common.

Mysteriously, Compost happens whenever organic material touches the ground. Apparently all the bacteria, fungi, worms, and insects that do the work of composting are everywhere in the soil waiting to do their job even when there isn't much organic material available. To my mind this is as good as any other evidence or definition of "god". The complexities of the composting process are self-limiting, self-promoting and automatic. I don't need to understand all that happens in the pile as it always works, sometimes quickly, and sometimes slowly but always. How cool is that! Composting is one of the very best things we can do to reduce our impact on the earth and put a little back. I don't know about you, but I get a spiritual lift from actually doing something that is so helpful.

When I find myself concerned about my mortality, I realize I am entirely too wrapped up in myself. My prescription for this fear is to try to consider others, and actively do something for someone, or perhaps to do a little composting. It is downright hard to be afraid for yourself when you are concentrating on helping others. We are all part of a bigger picture. And remember, when you die you will become compost. Whether you like it or not, ultimately we will all enrich the earth! Isn't that comforting?

Thank You