

VIRIDITAS: GREENING POWER

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This time when I sat on the bench it sank into the ground only an inch or two. And as the sun eased a winter's worth of tension from my neck and shoulders, all I could do was close my eyes in warm gratitude. There is a brief window of time in Northern New England, that span of days between mud season and black fly season, when sitting on an outside bench is possible and enjoyable. Spring sounds more lovely than what Northerners usually experience this time of year.

After what felt like a long time I opened my eyes. The tall and twisting maple tree closest to the house was just beginning to leaf out, and that flurry of yellow green gave it a welcome softness. My mind moved from that softness to the harsh reality that the biting and swarming flies were only a day or two away. They emerge with the shade those maple leaves provide. I shook my head, willing myself back to the loveliness of that moment, and noticed a strange movement in the tree.

Some of the middle branches, those closest to the house, were bouncing up and down. I got up for a different perspective, and noticed a squirrel pumping on the edge of a branch and generating momentum. The branch dipped lower and swung higher each time, soon bumping into the branches above and below. They clicked together until half the tree was swaying. And then it happened...Lift off! That grey squirrel body straightened itself out and shot toward the house's gable vent, maybe twelve feet away.

That's when I noticed the vent was missing a slat, and through what must have been a two by six inch opening, angled downward, the squirrel shot up and through like a fuzzy, grey arrow. It was only a few minutes later that the same branch started to bob up and down, this time with another squirrel, and the whole process repeated itself. I should have been horrified that squirrels had found a way into my attic, but instead I was amazed at how they had discovered the opening and devised a way to get in. It was like watching the acrobats of Cirque du Soleil, and I couldn't quite pull myself away.

Life has incredible wisdom. This is what Hildegard of Bingen understood, and she called it viriditas, or greening power. This woman spent a lifetime expressing how what she called "living light" was converted into green energy. Hildegard was a 12th century abbess, a mystic and prophet, a creative genius by any account. She was a healer, a scientist, a preacher, a musician, a composer, a painter, a writer, and an environmentalist at a time when women were unlikely to be any of these. And in all these areas she was amazingly accomplished. She was so powerful and influential, so talented and outspoken, so threatening and irrepressible that it has taken nine hundred years for the Catholic Church to make her a Saint and a Doctor of the Church, its highest honor, bestowed upon her just two years ago.

Hildegard understood life to be wet and wondrous, strong and supple, with lush greenness immanent in all creation. She held that this greenness, or viriditas, accounts for our

spiritual and physical health. A uniting force, it is what gives the cosmos and us vitality. For Hildegard, the sun's warmth, the greening of a tree, the inspired acrobatics of a squirrel, and the appreciation of all this by a human being is *viriditas*, or the "green truth." Life's wisdom is expressed in so many ways, and Hildegard employed so many creative avenues for her own expression. Vitality, for her, was neither a scientific nor a religious concept, and it was both a scientific and a religious concept. She was deeply spiritual, incredibly artistic, and amazingly scientific. She understood the universe to be an organic living entity, and she understood herself to be a co-creator.

Hildegard railed against anything lacking in that greening power, anything "dry like a branch cut off from a tree." *Ariditas*, which contains the word *arid*, describes the dry brittleness in life, the branch that snaps rather than flexes under the squirrel's weight. She noticed where life's suppleness was not, describing as dry those who were corrupt, abusive, and unjust, those aligned with death rather than life. The Church was at the top of her list, hundreds of years before Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation. At the age of 80 she was still so fiery, that she got her entire Abby expelled from the church for a year. This woman understood greening power, and its absence. She knew when the creative force was employed and when it was denied. She knew life's wisdom, respected life's wisdom, and worked with life's wisdom. This made her vital, and most around her knew it.

In the world of trees and grass and flowers it is easy to see this vitality, the creative and generative impulse of life. Among human beings it is sometimes less clear. Yet, we are more similar to trees than we may realize. Hildegard knew this, entreating us to be "strong like a tree." She assures us that we have a generative, strong, and supple nature. Our *viriditas* is evident when we create beauty and meaning: when we raise children, nurture relationship, make music, dance, draw, paint, and write. And this greening power does not abandon us when we experience loss, when we are pruned by life.

We don't often describe loss as pruning and we don't usually equate ourselves with trees, but it is a useful analogy. Pruning stimulates new growth, although there is trauma initially. Pruning stimulates branching, flowering, and fruiting—by which seeds are produced, and new life is made possible. It is always next to the wound site that this new growth emerges. Wounding and regeneration occur, one right after the other, one right next to the other.

Think of the Biblical story of Jacob wrestling with God and being wounded. In the course of this wounding he is also blessed, and renamed Israel. Similarly, the wound created by pruning yields a blessing. We engage in self-pruning, or self-initiated loss, when we leave an unhealthy relationship, when we give up drinking or drugs, when we move to a place that is new to us, or when we leave a long-held profession. Life prunes us when we experience death or disaster, separation or betrayal, when we grapple with disability, or are debilitated by serious illness. Again, there is initial and sometimes ongoing trauma, but almost always there is also new growth right next to the wound. The growth that occurs with physical trauma is often more spiritual in nature. We respond, as would any tree in the forest of life. *Viriditas*, greening power, moves through us and we grow as a result.

A young man named Brandon knows how it feels to be self-pruned and to be pruned by life. He moved to the West Coast in order to marry Noelle. A mere six months after they married she was dead, killed in a car accident. He was devastated, having just changed his entire life so that they could be together. Noelle's family was devastated along with him, and they ended up grieving together, her father, stepmother, and sister the only "family" Brandon had nearby. They supported each other, and developed a powerful bond.

This was tested when, two years later, he cautiously told her father, Roger, that he had met a lovely new woman. To Brandon's surprise and delight the father said he would like to meet her. So they arranged a meeting of Brandon, the father, the stepmother and Amy, the new woman in his life. After their dinner together Roger declared that she was lovely and Brandon shouldn't wait too long to snatch her up.

Amy, was much more hesitant about the relationship with Roger and Chris, the former in-laws. It was hard for her to believe they could accept her, and even honor this new relationship in the face of such loss. She feared they would look at her and see the daughter they had lost, but that never happened. Instead they were a steady support and ready companions.

When the two married and had children, Roger and Chris were given the title aunt and uncle. They doted on those children, as if they were their own grand children. Yet, there was no blood relation—only a common bond born of what seemed like rupture. Three children later, Amy still worries they will experience the loss of Noelle, and not this new family's fullness. Instead, Uncle Roger and Aunt Chris feel fortunate to have this lovely young family in their lives. They have been so supple and strong when they could have been so brittle and weak. It has been a lesson in resilience and abundance, one that is more deeply touching with each passing year. Now Amy, the young mother, wonders how that conversation will go, when her children are old enough to understand how this special aunt and uncle came to be part of their lives. It is on this note that Amy Paturel ends her article, entitled "Loved Ones," that is a true account of her life.

"Holy persons," Hildegard notes, "draw to themselves all that is earthly." Our task in this world is to "green things." Hildegard did so by learning about herbs and their healing power, by creating inspired music, art, and writing, and by expecting that in religious community and in all human relationship there would be suppleness, strength, justice, and goodwill. She was propelled by "a power that has been since all eternity...a force and potential [that] is green."

Hildegard of Bingen, shared a love of creation with other Rhineland area mystics like Francis of Assisi, Thomas Aquinas, and Meister Eckhart. In the lush greenness of their setting, God's revelation could be nothing apart from their earthly existence. As the Theologian Matthew Fox notes, "a mystic is someone who falls in love with the world," and is propelled by that. Hildegard understood God to be "life in the fullest." Some have pointed out her seemingly Pagan orientation, as well as her Shamanic sensibility. Yet none of that runs counter to her deep Christian mysticism.

Hildegard described us, and all life, as being “penetrated with connectedness.” The green power that moves through us also binds us together. Like trees, we are drawn toward the “living light,” and branch out to provide a springboard and perhaps launch others into a new possibility. We all know of people who live to serve, who delight in giving of themselves, who delight in responding to needs others may not even recognize. When we are fortunate, their example can stimulate our own branching.

Kathleen McTigue writes of such a woman, and of her hole-in-the wall café where the only lunch offering is soup. If that’s what you want, it is the place to go, although, there is only one kind. Unless, of course, some is left over from the previous day, priced at a discount. And with each bowl of soup comes a homemade bread roll.

The woman behind the counter happily waits on her customers, and knows many of them by name. Kathleen, while waiting in line one day, observed this woman lingering with an old man who had already been served. She asked about his health and his wife, and commiserated about their illnesses. Six deep in line she had been feeling impatient, but when the old man went to leave, the café owner touched his hand lightly, smiled at him, and said she would look for him tomorrow.

Suddenly Kathleen was no longer standing in line, but “on an island of calm amidst the impatience, irritability and craziness of life.” She saw, with new appreciation, “this woman who makes her living by patiently shaping and serving two of the worlds most basic and nourishing foods.” Although this café will never make her rich, she has wealth she is willing to share. There is kindness and gentleness in her face when she offers the only choice available: butter roll or rye? There is clearly something more than rolls and soup that get carried out her door.

Viriditas has the power to unify and vitalize, to soothe and harmonize, to beautify and inspire. We are changed by the mere proximity of greening power and discover, it seems, that we are all drawn toward the “living light” and appreciative of its warmth. We know when its wisdom is present, because we are made wiser. As Hildegard might say, it is dewy and juicy and moist. Wisdom, for her, is always associated with water, life-giving water. And greening power is always supple, strong, and responsive like the trees.

We come together today with this greening power that manifests in so many different ways. It could be a tree leafing out or a squirrel propelled through an opening. It could be the music, art, and writing of a fiery abbess still appreciated centuries later. It could be a church that finally, after 900 years, acknowledges religious inspiration. It could be the new growth that emerges after we’ve been pruned by life: a widower who finds love again, or grieving parents dedicated to a family, not their own. It could be the warmth of the sun or the warmth of a simple café owner. As Hildegard of Bingen understood so well: we are penetrated with connectedness and our task is to green things.