Gardening Lessons: To Take Something Beautiful and Make it More Comfortable
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The beautiful spring weather we've been enjoying this week, reminds me of where I grew up in southern Virginia where summer starts in March and keeps going strong till October, where the air is hot and thick most of the time. There was one summer, where every day I would walk my dog down the dirt path behind my neighbors' houses. A few houses down, was a man named Mr. Jim. He was a curmudgeonly old man, the kind who used to give out pennies and advice instead of candy on Halloween. Mr. Jim had a beautiful garden, and the edge of this garden was a lattice work fence with raspberry vines. These vines were sharp and covered in spines, but if you reached in really carefully you could find a warm juicy raspberry. These berries were not mine to take of course, and they were just a little dangerous to get to, and so naturally, I wanted them very badly. And so I would walk past them with my mom, gazing longingly. And she would steer me away, trying to convince me that the figs on our tree at home would be just as delicious. I did not buy this. And so one day as I walked the dog alone, I spotted the raspberries. I looked around, and seeing no one I decided to take some. I picked off ten or twelve, as many as I could cup in one hand, as I held the leash with the other. When I had taken as many as I could, I popped the first one into my mouth. SOUR! I bit down on what I had believed to be a perfect red raspberry. Instead my mouth was filled with the bitter unripe, disappointment of not yet ready blackberry. Disgusted by these bitter berries, I threw the rest of my handful on the ground, scattering wasted blackberries everywhere. These fruits, were growing into their potential, about to be sweet and delicious, and I cut them off too soon. I was not a careful gardener.

Reflecting on this story, reminded me of a passage I'd read from the Christian New Testament for a class I'm taking on Spiritual Care this semester. This passage has some language that might not ring perfectly true for us as Unitarian Universalists, but I'd invite you to make room for some theological translation. So this passage from the Gospel of John talks about God, and how God sees themself as a careful gardener, believing each day in the potential we have to grow and bear fruit. John 15 reads, "*I am the true vine, and my Father is*

the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already cleansed because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit."
This passage functions to teach Christians that there is hope for new fruits yet to be eaten in our lives. There is hope that we ourselves are the branches, growing in our own unique and beautiful directions, learning and growing and finding the places that have enough sunlight and freshwater to help us produce the fruits of a happy and generous life. And as Unitarian Universalists, people of faith who draw from many sources including the New Testament, I think this metaphor about vines that grow towards fruitful places and toward barren places can be useful.

What was important in this passage, and in my story was that not every branch, every path we take in our lives will be fruitful. Some branches will lead to sour fruits that sting our tongues with bitterness. These are the wrong paths we take, the decisions we make or the decisions that were made for us that end in pain, and disappointment. These are the paths that we might have known deep down weren't the right ones, but that we took anyway. Some of these paths may have the unintended outcome of teaching us an important lesson, that lesson itself, another type of fruit, but others are simply places we have gone that have nothing good for us. Have you experienced this kind of journey before? For me this has looked like the moments where my selfishness has disappointed other people, where my ignorance has hurt others.

And have you had those moments where the path you thought would be absolutely right turned out to not bear any fruit at all. These are the well-laid plans that for whatever reason never come to fruition. These are our good intentions, our spoken commitments to justice that go unfulfilled. Yet as a community of faith, we can hold onto a hope that each day as we strive to be better, to live happy, justice focused lives, we can help to guide each other towards fruitfulness.

Another way we can think about this metaphor, is to imagine our lives as many branches growing out from us leading in different directions. One branch is our family life, the responsibility we have to people we love, another our professional life, one is our

interests and hobbies, the things that bring us joy and fulfillment, and still another is our spiritual life, our commitment to community. I think we know sort of objectively that we need to maintain some sort of balance of these things. And so perhaps if everything was simple, these four branches would grow perfectly together, all of them growing parallel in the same direction. But I don't know about you, but I've never seen a tree like that, and I've never met a person like that. The pieces of our lives often grow in different directions. And depending on the phase of life that we are in, one aspect, like our professional life might be growing faster and in a wildly different direction than another branch. So then, what we can work towards is finding the offshoots the smaller segmenting branches that connect these different areas and eventually create a strong, balanced canopy. Frederick Beuchner writes, that "vocation is where your greatest joy meets the world's greatest need." It's these intersections, the places where the things we care about, the things we are good at, the things we need to do, meet and help us determine the course of our lives. These are the off shooting branches that comingle the different pieces of our story.

So I find thinking about our lives as branches, vines growing in one direction or another, at times producing sweet fruit, or sour fruit, or no fruit at all useful as we think about our human journeys. But I want to be clear, that this metaphor is not intended to pressure anyone into taking a gardening class, or getting a job this fall picking apples at an orchard. Instead it is a reminder that good things, like community, like justice, like a balanced life takes time to grow. Even when life feels really trying, the good things are still growing.

As Unitarian Universalists, in a congregation bound together by covenant and by a mutual desire to build a just, compassionate world for all people, I think we can relate to the line in the passage I read from John that says, "no branch can bear fruit alone." How many of you have tried to do something difficult and important by yourself? And how well has that worked? I'm thinking about the stunning display of commitment to community that I saw at the Rummage Sale this past weekend. So many of you showed up to offer the fruits you have, your gifts of time and energy to create something exceptional for the community. There's no way, just one person acting alone could have accomplished such an event. It takes community. And I'm also thinking about next Saturday morning, when a group of us will gather at the Unitarian Universalist Urban Ministry in Roxbury to clean up

their facility. We heard a lot about the UU Urban Ministry a few weeks ago when Marvin Venay came to speak to us about their mission to counter oppression and improve the community through education, outreach, and direct service all in right relationship with the Roxbury community. Dan Lewis is the point person for this service opportunity, but Dan is fabulous but he can't do all the work that the Urban Ministries needs by himself, so touch base with him in coffee hour, if you can be part of this important effort. Like plants need water, sunlight, carbon dioxide and minerals, we need one another to work together and build a more just and compassionate world. After all we aren't so much gardener quietly tending the vines, but the vines themselves, intricately winding together. Our most pivotal instruction is Don't grow alone.

When I read the passage from John, I was struck by the garden metaphor and how useful and applicable it is for UUs. But I also found reference to this universal wisdom in a text translated from Surah Al-Buqara in the Muslim Qur'an. Verse 25 reads, "But give glad tidings to those who believe and work righteousness, that their portion is Gardens, beneath which rivers flow." We find reference to the gardens and their encouragement to righteousness in Christianity, Islam, and finally, in our own principles as Unitarian Universalists. If we think of all seven of our principles as a spectrum with bookends, on one side we have respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. This principle which forms part of the covenant we affirm as an association of congregations, teaches us that we are each part of this greater whole, and we depend on everyone and everything else within this whole for our lives. This principle speaks so directly to our idea that we are each vines off of one plant, growing in different directions and both feeding and being fed by the one unifying source. But on the other side of our 7 principles is the affirmation of our inherent worth and dignity. We are each individuals, with our separate lives, and separate trajectories.

And so regardless of who we are, where we come from, or how sour the fruits of our past may have been, we are each inherently worthy. I'm going to say that again, because it is the foundational message of my ministry, no matter what your past, no matter what disappointment you have had or in what ways you have disappointed others, you are worthy and good. When we make mistakes we do not lose this goodness. You cannot lose this goodness.

I had to remind myself of this principle, as I reflected on the end of my story about the unripe blackberries. You see, when I took those berries, and then carelessly scattered them on the dirt path, I had thought no one would ever find out. Yet unbeknownst to me, Mr. Jim, my neighbor, had quietly watched this whole scene play out. The next day he approached my mom and told her what I'd done. She was mad, and hugely embarrassed. Furious, she made me write Mr. Jim a letter apologizing and offering to help him work in his garden. I was so ashamed. But about a week later, I came home to a small carton of perfect blackberries sitting on my porch. A simple note read, "try them now!" Even though I had spoiled so many of his blackberries, Mr. Jim still had fruit to share. And they were sweet!

It is true that not every story ends this way, with a clean and simple conclusion. And even more true that not every mistake is as easily forgiven as a little girl stealing her neighbor's blackberries. My hope is not to compare this story to real struggle and sourness in our lives. But my hope is that this story might illustrate the power and the forgiveness and the constant possibility, that is promised in our interconnected community. This week as we see the spring unfold around us, my hope is that we have patience in the growth that is still occurring. Let us strive to live in balance, knowing that from time to time we will grow in disappointing directions. When this happens, let us put our energy towards more fruitful endeavors. Let us grow community, supporting our neighbors, getting dirt our nails to make spaces beautiful for people we care about. Let this communal growth, be always towards building more justice and compassion in the world, and let it be filled with forgiveness. As vines that twist and stretch, producing berries and thorns and leaves, let us find space to hold our individual stories and strength to support the mission of a community. Let us balance our worthiness and our independence and let us tend the gardens of our lives as carefully as we can. Amen.