

The Wild Iris  
The Garden, the Gardener, and Creation  
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Peggy Brace is one of those exceptional women of a certain age who looks at all patches of dirt as potential places of beauty, and more often than not, succeeds in the transformation. Peggy has an astonishing garden.

It's the type you'd expect to see an army of buff landscape dudes fussing over. But, in truth, Peggy tends the garden herself...and she's nearly 80-years-old, though you'd never, ever guess.

Peggy is a special kind of Yankee dame in Concord, Massachusetts, who seems ageless and invincible; wise on the ways of the world and the home, down to earth but sophisticated, full of vitality, always ready to share what she has or what she knows or thinks with people she likes.

Peggy's house resembles a magical gingerbread cottage, complete with a cupola-topped playhouse in the midst of her gardens. The backdoor is always open, although she is rarely inside!

Usually, one can find Peggy out behind her house, colt-like, muck booted, with her gray-blond hair tucked beneath a bandana. There she'd be, turning over her enormous compost heaps or tending rows of raspberry brambles or an herb garden laid out in a kind of medieval spiral.

Or, she might be working away joyfully on her patio, creating the spectacular chancel decorations for the Sunday service at the First Parish of Concord.

It probably won't surprise you to learn that I adore Peggy. She's one of my most favorite people. And, as you can imagine, when I lived in town, it was nearly impossible to leave her home without cuttings from her gardens, or herbs, or buckets of compost.

Whenever Peggy gifted me with a perennial cutting, she'd tell me the story of how she came to have the flower in her garden in the first place. These genealogies are important to me because these cuttings became part of my garden and so the gift received by Peggy becomes my gift, too.

To hear her tell it, I inherited Veronica from the garden of Debbie Greeley, Phlox from Paigy Elliot, a yellow flower that grows lanky and runs wild but which I can never remember the name of from Betty King, Goatsbeard from Barbara Wheeler, and Primrose from Penny Logemann.

With several seasons of heavy rain, and Peggy's compost having already nourished these plants elsewhere), her cuttings nearly took over my own more modest perennial plot.

But I loved it, because there in wild profusion was the spirit of Peggy and Debby and Betty and Barbara and Penny – women with dirt under their fingernails, women who have lived fully human lives through many seasons,

borne sorrows, made a difference, and given themselves away like perennial cuttings for oh-so-many new gardens.

Peggy's gifts and the resultant garden in my own yard closely mirror of the intention of our annual Flower Communion ceremony, so it's no surprise that she springs to mind like daffodil or crocus this time of year.

This uniquely UU communion was a seed planted in 1923 by the Rev. Norbert Capek in his native Czechoslovakia.

Capek's story is inspirational and tragic. When the Nazis took control of Prague in 1940, they found Dr. Capek's gospel of the inherent worth and beauty of every human person to be too dangerous to allow him to live. He was sent to the Dachau concentration camp where he was murdered in 1941.

This gentle man suffered a cruel death, but his simple and universal message of hope and decency, earth's beauty, and humanity's oneness endure in this noble and festive ritual of flower communion.

My colleague, the Rev. Mark Ward, astutely notes that the point of the communion was not really the flowers themselves, reminding us that Capek asked his congregants to bring flowers from their homes or from roadsides, even just a twig. "He wasn't looking for hothouse wonders from the florist shop. He was asking his members to share themselves," to share a human journey.

We do the same, decades later, in our communion here at UUCM. We celebrate the cycles of life and honor the process of "building community with a lovely metaphor of creating bouquets and sharing our gardens. As Capek wrote, from the depth of darkness at Dachau "that there is a source of strength within in, that if cultivated may give rise to something beautiful."

Each year, I try to see how many flowers I can identify as they are collected and swapped during the flower communion ceremony. I was much more competent in this when I was tending my ever-expanding garden; during those years when I claimed a real relationship with the blossoms, the soil, the bugs and slugs, the unexpected rot on the leaves...all of it (maddening though it could be!)

Like many of us, I want to experience deep connections in my life - to other humans, to Nature, and to whatever sacred spark brought it all interdependently into being. And, I find myself yearning much like my colleague, the Rev Richard Gilbert, in his poem "For the Flowers Have the Gift of Language" for evidence of this intimacy.

Although he does not say so, I can imagine that Gilbert was inspired by Norbert Capek, as he penned these words. He begins:

Speak, flowers, speak!  
Why do you say nothing?  
The flowers have the gift of language.  
In the meadow they speak of freedom,  
Creating patterns wild and free as no gardener could match.  
In the forest they nestle, snug carpets under the roof of  
Leaf and branch, making a rug of such softness.

At end tip of branches they cling briefly  
Before bursting into fruit sweet to taste.

Flowers, can you not speak joy to our sadness?  
And hope to our fear?  
Can you not say how it is with you  
That you color the darkest corner?

The flowers have the gift of language.  
At the occasion of birth they are buds before bursting.  
At the ceremony of love they unite two lovers in beauty.  
At the occasion of death, they remind us how lovely is life.

Oh, would that you had voice,  
Silent messengers of hope.  
Would that you could tell us how you feel,  
Arrayed in such beauty.

Gilbert gives us flowers as messengers and as metaphors for courage and ugliness, hope, fear, freedom, life and death, for individuality and purpose. Poet Louise Gluck (Glick) takes this concept of intimacy and dialogue in a symbolic garden even further with her exquisite Pulitzer-Prize winning poem cycle entitled "The Wild Iris."

Gluck takes us on a journey through the life cycle of a garden and a human life with poems in three voices - the flowers themselves, the gardener, and the Creator.

And, tellingly, she begins with the end of suffering in the title poem, The Wild Iris, spoken by the flower itself:

At the end of my suffering  
there was a door.

Hear me out: that which you call death  
I remember.

Overhead, noises, branches of the pine shifting.  
Then nothing. The weak sun  
flickered over the dry surface.

It is terrible to survive  
as consciousness  
buried in the dark earth.

Then it was over: that which you fear, being  
a soul and unable  
to speak, ending abruptly, the stiff earth

bending a little. And what I took to be  
birds darting in low shrubs.

You who do not remember  
passage from the other world  
I tell you I could speak again: whatever  
returns from oblivion returns  
to find a voice:

from the center of my life came  
a great fountain, deep blue  
shadows on azure seawater.

This poem sounds bleak on the surface, yet it speaks of renewal. After its growing season, a wild iris dies back, but it reseeds itself and blooms again the following Spring. It's a natural process, but there is still grief.

[An unattributed analysis of the poem from "Shmoop" explains:] "In fact, the emotions that the poem expresses are all too human. It's almost as if we are facing two poems- one celebrating the natural process of death and rebirth and the other exploring human anguish about the reality that we don't get to live forever."

So, should we avoid the garden entirely in order to deny this truth? Wouldn't we then find ourselves endlessly buried in the dark earth?" My Concord friend, Peggy, has lost many friends and faced some tough personal challenges, and yet, raspberries cascade over the brambles in her yard as she hoists fresh compost onto her perennial beds. Capek wrote poetry in Dachau. A choice. I'll take it, even with the sorrow and the struggle. How about you?

The gardener in Gluck's poem cycle meditates on just such a question in one of the book's "Matins:"

You want to know how I spend my time?  
I walk the front lawn, pretending  
To be weeding. You ought to know  
I'm never weeding, on my knees, pulling  
Clumps of clover from the flower beds; in fact  
I'm looking for courage, for some evidence  
My life will change, though  
It takes forever, checking  
Each clump for the symbolic  
Leaf, and soon the summer is ending, already  
The leaves turning, always the sick trees  
Going first, the dying turning  
Brilliant yellow, while a few dark birds perform  
Their curfew of music. You want to see my hands?  
As empty now as the first note.

Or was the point always  
To continue without a sign?

The poet finds creative and moving ways to respond to the gardener's questions that arise from within the garden. She gives us the Creator, who poses even more questions than answers. A UU God, perhaps?

This Creator even challenges the flowers themselves (but could be talking to the gardener, as well) in the poem entitled, "Midsummer:"

How can I help you when you all want  
different things – sunlight and shadow,  
moist darkness, dry heat –

Listen to yourselves, vying with one another –  
And you wonder why I despair of you,  
You think something could fuse you into a whole -

The still air of high summer  
Tangled with a thousand voices

Each calling out  
Some need, some absolute

And in that name continually  
Strangling each other  
In the open field –

For what? For space and air?  
The privilege of being  
Single in the eyes of heaven?

You were not intended  
To be unique. You were  
My embodiment, all diversity  
Not what you think you see  
Searching the bright sky over the field,  
Your incidental souls  
Fixed like telescopes on some  
Enlargement of yourselves –

Why would I make you if I meant  
To limit myself  
To the ascendant sign,  
The star, the fire, the fury?

This Creator cherishes the garden and the gardener, but there is tough love. The divine voice reminds us: Life is not easy, beauty is precious, growth is not guaranteed, hope is optional, be interdependent with other living things, God isn't a fixer, and especially, that humility is a good thing.

So, the next time you are feel buried in the dark earth, go somewhere green and listen for the voices of flowers, of your own natural wisdom, of the source that inspires you.

As Richard Gilbert reminds us in the second part of his poem,

The flowers have the gift of language.  
In the dark depths of a death camp  
They speak the light of life.  
In the face of cruelty  
They speak of courage.  
In the experience of ugliness  
They bespeak the persistence of beauty.

Speak, messengers, speak!  
For we would hear your message.  
Speak, messengers, speak!  
For we need to hear what you would say.

May we bloom where we are planted, from one Springtime to the next.

Blessed be and Amen.

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