

Lenten Spring

by Vigen Guroian

*Now wind torments the field,
turning the white surface back
on itself, back and back on itself,
like an animal licking a wound.*

*Nothing but white -- the air, the light;
only one brown milkweed pod
bobbing in the gully, smallest
brown boat on the immense tide.*

*A single green sprouting thing
would restore me...*

*Then think of the tall delphinium,
swaying, or the bee when it comes
to the tongue of the burgundy lily.*

Jane Kenyon, "February: Thinking of Flowers"

WHEN THE EARTH is still damp and cold with melted snow, I kneel at the edge of the perennial bed beseeching the first green blades of the crocuses and daffodils to grow. I drift into my vegetable garden and rake off last year's withered vines. I look down at the dead gray shoots of the asparagus vines and try to imagine how in a month's time splendid green spears will break through the mounded earth.

Spring has come slowly this year. But there's work to be done. The vegetable garden needs to be turned and smoothed. The straw blanket that covers the perennial bed should be removed and the remaining old growth cut down. For the gardener the first signs of spring are an irresistible invitation to make the earth a paradise once more.

Gardening and the spiritual life are very much alike. And as Evelyn Underhill has commented, there are appropriate and inappropriate ways of cultivating both the earth and the spiritual soil of our lives:

The idea that a good vigorous campaign with a pitch fork is the best way of extirpating tiresome weeds from a herbaceous border is the one we most have to unlearn. We plunge in, toss the ground violently in every direction, pluck out the weeds, make a big pile, and retire in a state of moist satisfaction saying we've done a very good morning's work.

But have we? We've disturbed the roots of the best perennials. We've knocked off some shoots. We've grubbed up loads of little modest seedling.... And in our hurry we've broken weeds and left the bottom half of their stems in the ground to start vigorous life again

The Ways of the Spirit ed. Grace Adolphsen Brame

Every experienced Christian gardener knows that there is a spiritual spring which comes just as surely as nature's spring. The Lenten spring is God's invitation to prayer, fasting, and penance. Like the deep-rooted thistle weed, some of our worst habits withstand all but the most persistent, persevering, and strenuous exercise. A quick pull on the root, however, will not do the trick, nor will an aggressive chop of the hoe. Patience is needed, and the humble willingness to drop down on one's knees and work carefully with the hand fork and trowel. The Christian gardener patiently picks sin from the soul's soil and cultivates it with care and attention to the tender new growth of faith.

The Christian gardener also respects the fact that God appoints each soul to be "the sort of garden it is to be." "Your job," Underhill admonishes, "is strictly confined to making [your soul] as good as it can be of its sort." Some of us will be contemplative in the manner of a rose garden, and others are more earthy and restless, like a potato patch. The Christian gardener respects God's prevenient grace in the synergy of salvation just as she also studies carefully the nature of the plants that grow and gives the appropriate care to each.

The land is poor where I live, and when I first dug up my vegetable garden, I came to a place where there wasn't a trace of topsoil, only shale and sandstone. It took lots of manure and compost to make the garden productive, and still each spring I dig up pails of rocks as if they had grown from stone seeds all winter long. Then I rake the newly cleared earth and trace the rows for sowing the seed of spinach, mustard, and beets. I send each seed into the earth from the tips of my fingers with love, and hope for new life and growth of rich green paradise.

How love burns through the Putting in the Seed
On through the watching for that early birth
When, just as the soil tarnishes with weed,
The sturdy seedling with arched body comes
Shouldering its ways and shedding the earth crumbs.

Robert Frost, "Putting in the Seed"

With prayer and fasting in the Lenten spring, the Christian clears the self's

soil of stony sin and makes room for the birth within of the pierced heart and bleeding flesh of Jesus. "A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh" (Ezekiel 36:26, NRSV). Our love and labor combined with God's grace can make even the poorest stony soil grow round red beets, sweet hearts of flesh.

A Byzantine hymn says, "The Lenten spring shines forth the flower of repentance." The flower of repentance, however, grows only in the soil which has been enriched by the death of the old self that we have let die in it. The Son of God took our sins into the tomb with him, and his body that was planted in a garden bore the fruit of eternal life. When we moved into our home, I made a flower bed in the partial shade of an old wild cherry tree and saved space for my favorite woodland flowers. Early one spring, while hiking, I found a colony of the bloodroot flowers with snow-white blossoms. So I planted some under that tree, and now they bloom each spring. The bloodroot flower rises straight to the sun out of a purple sepulcher of enfolded leaf. At nightfall the elongated finger-figured petals press together prayer-like, searching for the morning light. And after a brief life these perfect petals fall back into the rich brown earth from which they sprang, and in their place rise heart-shaped leaves nourished by a bright orange-red medicinal balm.

The great Maundy Thursday prayer of the Armenian Church says that through "his abundant love" and death on the Cross, Christ gave us "a drug and medicament of repentance." All the Lenten spring I awake to the morning sun and faithfully follow a path of penance that guides me to the bloodroot's bleached blossom and healing ointment. Its white petals remind me of the sinless Lamb of God who bought my salvation, and the tree beneath which that flower blooms also reminds me of another tree or two.

Instead of the budding death-bearing tree that sprouted in the middle of Eden, you [Christ] carried the wood of the cross up to Golgotha. Receive my soul, which has fallen in sin and is carrying a heavy burden, and carry it upon your shoulders like a lamb, to the promised heavenly place.

"This Ineffable Day" A Good Friday hymn of St. Nersess the Graceful

An important Lenten theme in Orthodox Christian worship is the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the garden of delight and our return to it through the Cross. The Byzantine Vespers service for Tuesday of the first week of Lent expresses this vision:

Cast out of old from Paradise through eating bitter food, let us make haste to enter there once more, abstaining from the passions and crying to our God:

Thou hast stretched out Thy hands upon the Cross, drunk vinegar and tasted gall, and patiently Thou hast endured the pain of the nails: uproot all bitter pleasures from our souls, and in Thy tender mercy save Thy servants.

Once we were cast out of Paradise through eating of the Tree, but through Thy Cross we are restored again to Paradise.

The Armenian Melody hymn for Sundays of Lent also recalls the Garden of Eden: "There in the Garden there were three: /Adam and Eve and the commandment of the Lord." Because they transgressed against the command not to eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil which was in the garden, Adam and Eve forfeited the opportunity God gave them to live a yet more perfect life. Instead, their sin subjected them to that very same death all the other creatures die but which for human beings, who were created by God in his own image and intended by him for immortality, separates them eternally from the presence of God: this is what is meant by the first couple's expulsion from the garden and proximity to the Tree of Life.

In Paradise God exacted no labor from Adam and Eve, except that they tend the garden of their own selves. But they failed in their responsibility and were subject to nature's entropy, which human beings alone are unable to change.

During the Lenten spring this entropy and process of sinful death are reversed. The Incarnate Word dies a fleshly death and brings new and more abundant life out of that death. During Lent we who call Jesus the Lord of Life retrace his redemptive journey from the refreshing waters of the Jordan River, where he was baptized, to the desert where he denied the devil thrice. In Lenten spring Christians follow Christ's path from the garden of sorrows to the garden of his resurrection. On Good Friday we thirst with Christ on the Cross. We want to drink and refresh ourselves at the living waters that flow from the garden of delight, but to get back to that garden and drink from its living waters we first have to walk through the desert of our own inner spirit.

During Lent and Holy Week the Father beckons us to walk alongside his Son and on that way cast off our sin with prayer and fasting. The rest the Son has done for us. He will meet us at the gates of Paradise. He will carry us through death into new and eternal life. The Tree of Life still stands in the midst of the garden, but the condemnation has been removed. We can approach it and can partake of the life it gives because Jesus, the only pure and holy Sacrifice, was hung on another tree. This is his mercy and his grace.

In the Armenian Church the Melody hymns for Easter are the same as for Ordinary Sundays because in the Christian faith Easter is ordinary. And each week is a journey through ordinary time to the garden and the joy of resurrection.

The voice of good tidings sang to the women.
It sounded like the call of the trumpet:
"The Crucified whom ye seek is risen.
Mary called to the gardener:
"Didst thou remove my first born, my love?"
-- "That bird is risen, the wakeful being,
Did the Seraph trumpet to the Mother and
to those with her,
--"The savior of the world, Christ is risen!
And he has delivered mankind from death."

At the foot of my garden path, I have planted hyacinths of purple and pink and white. Through Eastertide their blossoms and sweet scent draw me into the garden.

A bright new flower has appeared this day
out of the tomb.
Souls have blossomed and are adorned
with divers hues, and have become
green with life.
The florescence of divine light has bloomed
in the spiritual spring.

Armenian Ode for Easter and Eastertide

Several summers ago my children found two turtles and put them in the vegetable garden. During a thaw the next February as I was digging up the soggy soil where the peas go, I lifted a heavy mound with my shovel, and then another. The two turtles had burrowed down for winter sleep, and I had rudely awakened them too soon. So I carried them to a corner of the garden

where I would not disturb them and dug them in again. When my wife said that she feared the turtles might be dead, I said I did not think so (though I wasn't as sure as I sounded). I insisted that in Spring they would come up. And they did in Easter week.

Lilies and hyacinths signify the resurrection, and I can understand why. But I have a pair of turtles that plant themselves in my garden each fall like two gigantic seeds and rise on Easter with earthen crowns upon their heads. With the women gigantic seeds and rise on Easter with earthen crowns upon their humbled heads. With the women at the tomb, I marvel. For "Christ did arise, Christ did awaken / Out of the virgin tomb, out of the tomb of light" (Armenian Ode for Ordinary Sundays). And he leads us back, back into the garden of delight.

from Vigen Guroian, *Inheriting Paradise: Meditations on Gardening*