

For Easter a few years ago our resident green-thumb expert Kate had purchased plants for our worship space. Stan and I were the recipients of one of them, and we dutifully planted it, as Kate told us to do, in our front garden. It is truly a life-giving plant. It blooms from May-November and grows so rapidly it would take over our entire garden if we let it! Even our severe cutbacks and lack of green thumbs have not killed it. It makes it through the darkness and cold of winter and our unprofessional pruning in the summer and graces us with brightness and beauty. These yellow blooms (point to flowers) are definitely life-flowers—blossoms of resurrection that make us smile! I believe the resilience and the journey of this plant embodies the life message of today's readings.

Although the readings from Maccabees and Luke speak a lot about suffering and death, life ultimately wins the struggle. This message permeates all that we do. It is the story of dying and rising, death and rebirth, darkness and light. It is the story of God being with us in the darkness and uncertainty and recreating us through this experience. Spiritual author Richard Rohr in his book *Everything Belongs* speaks of these dark periods as good teachers and says this: "The paschal mystery is *the* pattern of transformation. We are transformed through death and rising, probably many times. There seems to be no other cauldron of growth and transformation." (p. 45) Let's consider a few ways that we are refined by fire—transformed through struggle and the vulnerability of letting go. I'd like to talk about 4 examples that focus on prayer, relationships with other people, and society at large.

In our prayer life, in our relationship with God, perhaps we may have to let go of a cherished image of God or an unhealthy one. Maybe we have to let go of a style of prayer we were accustomed to and enter into a new, more contemplative one. These changes usually create

some discomfort and cause us to search and struggle for while, but ultimately we open up to a whole new perspective of God and life that is more authentic and life-giving.

We also experience dying and rising in our relationships with other people. When relationships rupture or end through a break-up or death, we experience pain and grief that needs to be held gently and worked through. This darkness is not something we would choose to experience, but it is a great teacher. It raises questions about who we are, what our purpose is, and what life is really about. Through our struggle and search for answers we are transformed, and when we deal with this in a healthy way we experience life and resurrection. Our family saw this with Stan's brother Ed when his son died and subsequently his 27-year marriage ended. His life was turned completely upside down and the pain was searing. He struggled for a long time and, being the intellectual giant he was, questioned relentlessly. Eventually he came to an inner peace deeper than he had ever before experienced. He was recreated through this cauldron of pain and emerged a more compassionate and life-giving man.

Sometimes relationships aren't what we thought they were. I experienced this in ministry several years ago when I chaired a Worship Committee. For many years the clergy on staff and lay ministry leaders worked as a collaborative team. No one pulled rank or strong-armed decisions. This changed, however, when a new associate was assigned to our parish. My eyes were opened to the reality that I had the responsibility to make ministerial decisions but no authority to carry them out, not a good position to be in. It became painfully clear that my role was not what I thought it was. This recognition was one part of a long journey that eventually led me to this community. The fire of my pain and struggle has yielded life in abundance—thank you for your life-giving presence.

Finally, there are ongoing struggles for justice and acceptance in which light and life emerge gradually over decades or longer. It can sometimes take us a while to live into the meaning of the words “all are created equal.” Recently I officiated a wedding that I believe exemplifies this ongoing struggle and the resurrection that eventually comes forth. This wonderful young couple has crossed religious and racial boundaries in a way that would not have been possible 50 years ago. They are African American and white, Jewish and Muslim. Their marriage was witnessed by a Catholic priest in the midst of family and friends who were African American, white, Asian, Jewish, Muslim, Christian, agnostic, and other. During the ceremony we acknowledged the couple’s deep respect for each other, the goodness and peace their faith traditions have in common, and how their faith has influenced who they are today. As this occurred, I felt among the group a deep oneness and peace, a melting away of traditional barriers. We closed with a blessing during which we connected our heart with theirs. I felt our hearts beating as one throughout the blessing and the final words Shalom—Asalaam—Blessings of Peace be yours. After I said Amen, a spontaneous Amen reverberated throughout the 250 attendees. Through their Amen they publicly gave their blessing to this union rich in diversity and oneness. At the reception we continued this oneness and celebration as we ate, drank, and danced together! For days afterwards I marveled at what I had experienced. On a personal level early on this couple had significant struggles with some of their families’ reactions. In engaging these struggles and working through these issues, they were transformed. Understanding and acceptance emerged, and their wedding day became a life-filled start to their marriage. On a societal level, although they have had some struggle, they are reaping the benefits of others who struggled for many years before them. I feel so blessed by Travis and Jennifer’s courage and love and am deeply grateful to them for that life moment.

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For each of us whether our struggle is with our prayer life and relationship with God, our relationship with another person or a group, or a larger issue in society and the fabric of humanity, it is critical we trust that God is with us in the journey. Because God is with us, we need not fear or avoid the darkness and questions of the struggle. For as Richard Rohr says “when we look at the questions, we look for the opening to transformation.” (*Everything Belongs*, p. 45)

As you walk through the struggles of this coming week, remember that God is holding you lovingly in the lessons of darkness and recreating you for your emergence into light.

Celebrate life and today’s message from Hafiz and Jesus: “Life, life, life is far too sacred to ever end.” “All are alive to God.”

Readings—32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time
2 Maccabees 7: 1-2, 9-14
God’s Bucket by Hafiz (*The Gift*, p. 81)
Luke 20: 27-38

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