

Dandelion Wisdom

As the world began to be painted in color again this spring—with dull grey skies finding their way back to blue and the dry grass underfoot turning green seemingly overnight—my eyes kept being drawn to the same thing. Everywhere I went: dandelions.

Walking the dog? Check. Crossing our back yard? There they were. Running around on the playground with my 3-year-old? Couldn't miss them. They weren't the only bright colors around, but they caught my attention over and over. So I paid attention in return.

And I found myself thinking, “Here are these flowers, growing all over the place, that just give away their beauty. Yet people look right past them, or think of them as a nuisance.” It saddened me that this had become my default reaction as well.

It's very common to treat dandelions like a problem that needs to be solved. But when we do that, we also overlook the gifts they offer. That list is actually quite long, so I'll just mention a few.

They're an important source of nectar for bees, both early in the spring and late into the fall. Given how stressed bee populations are right now, and the critical role they play in producing the food **w**e eat, those flowers are gold in more than one sense.

For centuries, humans have used dandelions medicinally: detoxifying the liver and kidneys, treating high blood pressure, balancing blood sugar, reducing inflammation, and more. The leaves are a great source of vitamins and minerals. Plus, I'm told that roasted dandelion roots make a surprisingly tasty substitute for coffee.

That root that burrows so deep and makes removal from your lawn so difficult also draws up nutrients that benefit the nearby plants with shallower roots. It loosens compact soil and creates “a microclimate that draws earthworms”ⁱ that further rejuvenate the soil.

And in perhaps my favorite example of dandelion's unrecognized awesomeness, a recent research project earned an award for “develop[ing] a procedure for the industrial use of dandelion as a source of rubber.” In five to ten years, they plan to launch production on a series of car tires made from dandelion rubber.ⁱⁱ

Persistence. Versatility. Simple beauty. Transformation. Quiet, generous service to others. What an amazing array of gifts laid at our feet every day that we may not even notice.

And when the flowers turn to seed and become puffballs? I have to say, evolution got it absolutely perfect in coming up with a design that not only allows the seeds to travel great distances on air currents, but that also made the dispersal method more or less irresistible to kids.

I remember one day when I was growing up, a few of us were sitting at the bottom of this steep incline of very green grass. I don't know how old we were, but I remember it as an untroubled sunny afternoon. I picked one of those dandelion puffballs and blew on it as I made a wish. But my delight at seeing each little parachute carried away on the wind, and with it my hopes that the wish would somehow come true, were quickly replaced by the sense that I'd done something wrong. I knew I wasn't "supposed to" do that because it would spread unwelcome dandelions. And so wonder got replaced by shame.

Now, I know that many of you out there are gardeners, and I suspect at least a few of you might be starting to twitch a little bit by now. I understand. Gardening isn't my thing, but I do recognize that not every plant belongs in every location, just as its medicine isn't appropriate for every ailment. If you're trying to grow a vegetable garden, then removing dandelions makes total sense. Sometimes, the stubborn roots we put down get in the way of other nourishing things we need to cultivate.

But I also know how easy it is to look past our own gifts—the strengths we have that we don't even recognize because that's just how we are. It's what comes naturally. It isn't until someone brings what we think of as ordinary to our attention that we realize how special it is.

Which brings me to you, and to Unity Church. Over the last 10 months, I've had the profound privilege of serving this congregation as the Hallman Ministerial Intern. And I want to make sure that you recognize your many gifts. Because that's also a long list.

There is a generosity of spirit here that is profoundly beautiful. It shows up in the way people greet each other, and volunteer their time. The Pastoral Care Team demonstrates it in the loving presence they provide to people going through difficult transitions. It's palpable in the mutual encouragement and genuine affection I witnessed among the members of the Women's Ensemble. I also want to note that it takes spiritually generous people to maintain the kind of healthy dynamics that exist in this community. And they're invaluable, because you're freed to focus on the real, life-saving work of the church.

You're a true teaching congregation. Not only in how you interact with the intern, though I always felt like people had my back, and I could not have asked for a more thoughtful, supportive internship committee. But it's also in how you frame teaching as a spiritual practice, which among other things, reminds people that in coming to church, we're going to be changed by each other—whatever our ages, whatever our roles, wherever we may be in our spiritual development.

Unity has hit critical mass in embedding racial justice into the fabric of church life, and I'm so thrilled I was here to experience it. From the Anti-Racism Leadership Team, to Beloved Conversations and the life-changing pilgrimage to Selma, to the Racial and Restorative Justice Team, to Black Lives Matter, and more, you are engaged in the difficult, heartbreaking, messy work of collective liberation that our country desperately needs. Certainly, the work is far from over, as this week's events in Charleston, South Carolina, demonstrated all too painfully. At the same time, you're leveraging your moral authority as a faith community in ways that have the potential to create lasting change in the Twin Cities and beyond. What's unfolding here is uncharted, but it's organic and authentic as well.

I also want to name the sense of reverence that infuses the life of this congregation. The interwoven collaborations of ministers and Worship Associates. The chalice lightings and readings that start each board meeting, each Welcome to Unity class, each small group gathering. The special worship services and memorials and weddings and rites of passage that dot the landscape of the church year. The glorious music ministries. We're reminded in a thousand ways that what we're doing every time we gather is sacred.

Of course, any list of this congregation's gifts would be flat-out wrong if it didn't include the staff. I know many of you already appreciate what they do, but I need to tell you that the compassion and depth and thoughtfulness and care that these people invest in their work go far beyond what you're likely to see in the normal course of things. They put their hearts on the line every day, and they're acutely aware of the impact that Unity Church can have within, and among, and beyond its people. I'm especially grateful to Rob, Janne, Lisa, Barbara, KP, and Laura for all the ways they've mentored me this year.

By the way, on a less lofty note, this congregation seems to have an unusually high number of incredible cooks. I'm just saying.

As I've started taking my leave of Unity Church over the past several weeks, the word constantly on my lips is gratitude. But that's been true since my first week here, when I realized that I'd landed in a place that was living into exactly the kind of ministry that calls me. I truly can't imagine a better match for what I wanted and needed to learn.

The other word that keeps coming up...is love. I love this place. I love parish ministry. And I love all of you. **All of you.** Whether we've been in meetings together all year or we're meeting for the first time today, you've got a claim on my heart. One of the great privileges of being a minister is that feeling tremendous love for people is part of the job description. It's also one of the things that makes ministry so hard.

But in the end, this love I feel isn't about me. It's about touching into something universal and allowing it to flow through me. Because even on our most despairing, grief-filled days, we still live on a planet that can't stop being miraculous. Every hour of the light and dark, every cubic inch of space, every square yard of the surface of the earth.ⁱⁱⁱ

So I put this question to you: What would it be like to take seriously the idea that you are profoundly loved right now?

Not for who you'll be once the dishes get washed, or you've found paid work again, or you get through the cancer scare. But in **this** moment, with all of its imperfections and awkwardness and heartbreak, you are fully loved simply for existing. What's it like when you try that on?

Here's the thing: you **are** loved like that. And it doesn't depend on me, or the other ministers, or your family and friends, or the other people in the congregation. It doesn't even depend on you—there's nothing you've done to earn that love, and there's nothing you can do to lose it. All you have to do is remember.

There's a life force inherent in the warp and woof of this particular universe that keeps healing us and loving us. It keeps us seeking. It keeps those dandelions

pushing up through cracks in the sidewalk, moment by moment, day after day, because **that's just how love is**. It's that simple—and that difficult.

“Believe in a love that is being stored up for you like an inheritance,” writes Rilke. “Have faith that in this love there is a strength and a blessing so large that you can travel as far as you wish without having to step outside it.”

I don't know yet where my family and I will travel next. We're still living with uncertainty on that front. But wherever the air currents cause us to drift, I do know that I've got the wind at my back as I head into the void, and I know I'll carry with me the seeds from this extraordinary community.

And so this is our goodbye. What's lovely about the word “goodbye,” though, is that it's a shortened form of a benediction—“God be with you.” And with this simple, ordinary, easily overlooked, much-maligned, dandelion of a word, we actively bless each other at a moment of parting.

You have indeed been a blessing to me, people of Unity Church–Unitarian. May you make the most of your holy restlessness. May your sense of wonder take you new places. May you strive not for perfection, but for opportunities to be the arms of the love that embraces all. And may your kindness, your depth, and your generosity of spirit return to you a thousandfold.

Ashe, amen, and blessed be.

ⁱ <http://www.thepracticalherbalist.com/holistic-medicine-library/herb-myth-and-magic-template/>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.moderntiredealer.com/news/story/2015/06/continental-s-dandelion-research-earns-prize.aspx>

ⁱⁱⁱ Walt Whitman, “Miracles.” <http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/miracles>