

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Coming from the earth: humus, humanity, humility

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Last week we considered the image of the garden as a metaphor for the world as well as for our lives. I would

like to pursue this further by considering the actual dirt or earth that is that base for gardens as well as the source for what it means to be human.

We know this image well. We are created from the dust of the earth, according to Genesis. At funerals, the committal rite often includes the phrase from the English Book of Common Prayer, “earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.”

The word human comes from the Latin word “humus,” meaning earth or ground. In a recent meditation, the Franciscan priest and author Richard Rohr wrote: “Being human means acknowledging that we’re made from the earth and will return to the earth. We are earth that has come to consciousness. ... And then we return to where we started — in the heart of God. Everything in between is a school of love.”

Humus also is a gardening term that refers to the components of soil that are rich in organic matter. It is the final result of mixing yard material like leaves with left-

over plant food products and leaving them to decompose into what is called compost. (Yes, my gardener wife also has a compost bin.) It is the recycling of plant material. Think of it as “earth to earth” for the plant world.

Author and educator Parker Palmer also uses these images in an essay titled, “Autumn: A Season of Paradox.” Palmer writes: “I find nature a trustworthy guide. ... As I’ve come to understand that life ‘composts’ and ‘seeds’ us as autumn does the earth, I’ve seen how possibility gets planted in us even in the most difficult of times.”

MAGNIFICENCE OF MUD

Philosopher Brian Austin, in his book “The End of Certainty and the Beginning of Faith,” tells of hiking with his family along the trails which parallel stream beds in the Great Smoky Mountains. They often return with mud-caked hiking boots. While he finds himself impressed with the majesty of the mountains, it is also, (in his words), “the mud, still glistening with the mist that makes dust come to life, [that] harbors mysteries as magnificent as the mountains.

“From that mud, from its carbon, nitrogen, hydrogen, oxygen, and assorted metals, a child can be woven. The atoms in that mud, the same kinds of atoms that comprise

my children and you and me, have existed for billions of years. ... This mud is spectacular, and we believe that God made it so. This mud is rich, pregnant with possibility. ... To see ourselves as made of the same stuff that rests under our boots as we journey a mountain path is no insult to human dignity, no affront to the image of God in us; it is rather a reminder of the majesty of inspired mud, a reflected majesty that gives us but one more fleeting glimpse of the blinding brilliance of the maker of the mud.”

These authors remind us that in the cycle of life we are closely related to the earth. We have much in common with compost and mud, which contain the chemicals that also make up our bodies. They affirm that we are God-breathed dust, made from the humus. We are mud balls who have been created in the image of God.

DUST AND ASHES

Another word that comes from the Latin root humus is humility. We see it expressed by Abraham when he bargains with God to spare Sodom for the righteous people’s sake. In Genesis 18 he expresses it thus: “Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes.” Likewise, Job in his lamentation

refers to God as the one who “throws me into the mud and I am reduced to dust and ashes.” (Job 30:19)

Eugene Peterson put it this way: “The Latin words humus, soil/earth, and homo, human being, have a common derivation, from which we also get our word ‘humble.’ This is the Genesis origin of who we are: dust — dust that the Lord God used to make us a human being. If we cultivate a lively sense of our origin and nurture a sense of continuity with it, who knows, we may also acquire humility.”

Fully understanding who we are requires the realization that we are part of the earth, the soil, the humus, to which we will return. It is only by God’s grace that we have life. The confidence and faith that we have is important to affirm, but we must also be humble in recognizing that there is so much more that we do not understand or possess.

As we engage others in our community, be they refugees or immigrants, people who are different in race or class or political persuasion, or persons of a different faith or of no faith, let us remember we have all come from this same soil. We are called to recognize this with humility.

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