

Seeds for Celebration

for the

Jubilee Community

Asheville, North Carolina

Winter, 2004

Via Creativa: “The Spark”

WINTER, 2004 : VIA CREATIVA: THE SPARK

He knelt and with his knife cut the lifeless-looking branch through, not far from the earth.

"There!" he said exultantly. "I told thee so. There's green in that wood yet. Look at it."

Mary was down on her knees before he spoke, gazing with all her might.

"When it looks a bit greenish an' juicy like that, it's wick," he explained. "When the inside dries and breaks easy, like this here piece I've cut off, it's done for."

...Mary remembered Martha had told her that "wick" meant "alive" or lively."

... "That one?" she said. "Is that one quite alive? – quite?"

Dickon curved his wide smiling mouth. "It's as wick as you and me... there'll be fountains of roses here this summer."

(from Frances Hodgson Burnett, The Secret Garden)

Most of us would prefer to have life served up to us full-blown. Complete. Soup to nuts. Cooked to perfection. A silver platter would be nice, thank you. We favor full, all things considered; not partial. Please send this back to the kitchen and bring us a full order. We don't want the glass half-empty, nor do we want it half-full. We want it brimming. And with the nectar of our choice.

We want summer-time, summer-time, sum... sum... summer-time all the time. Lush and full, leafed out, blossoming, bearing fruit. Sunshine and rain and soft, moist nights when we nestle down into the sweet mulch of delight and feel our souls bulging with the hot and vibrant buds of passion. Hooeeee!!! That's how we want our lives to be. Every day. Every moment.

Then comes winter. When nights are so much longer and seem so much darker. When picnics, beaches, waterfalls and skinny-dipping seem like a distant memory of something that happened in another life. When cold reaches under your undies and slips into your bones and makes even your liver shiver.

Whether it's calendar winter or heart winter. Whether it's a dark night in January or a dark night of the soul, it comes for each of us. And it reminds us that sometimes life doesn't show up as a spicy, steaming 4-course meal topped off with flambé something and whipped cream. Sometimes, the kitchen's closed. Locked up. Lights off. Sometimes, summer seems ever so far away. And we look at our lives and begin to wonder if there's any green in all this dead wood. Any wick.

Winter is the time for fire. Candle-fire, fireplace fire, backyard bonfire. Fire in the furnace, fire in the wood stove, fire under the teakettle. There's something very comforting about fire in the winter. It warms us and turns our darkened dejection into cozy comfort.

There's something about the spark and flicker of a fire which triggers a kind of vague awareness of the spark of effervescence that glows within us even in the winter. Call it a spark of the Divine, a spark of hope, a spark of assurance, a spark of chutzpah... it really doesn't matter. What matters is that we sense it. That we are still alive, despite our heavy winter wood. That there's wick with. Were it not for the night, we'd never see the flicker of the stars. Were it not for winter – heart and calendar winter – we might never be aware of the spark that glows within us. The Holy Ember just waiting to fire-up blossom into a fountain of roses.

VIA CREATIVA: THE SPARK

January 11, 2004 – THE SPARK OF BAPTISM: OF GIVING AND RECEIVING

Isaiah 42: 1-7

I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations.

Matthew 3: 13-17

He saw the spirit of God descending like a dove.

Baptism is the Christian version of a cultural initiation ceremony... a ceremony intended to bring the new kid on the block into the gang. The pledge into the brother- or sisterhood. The wandering pigeon into the flock.

Initiation ceremonies are some of the oldest rites of our species. The purposes of these rituals might be to strengthen the tribe or community, to give the initiate a sense of belonging or to extract a commitment from the initiate. Whatever the purpose, the ceremony is all about giving and receiving.

- Initiate gives loyalty and devotion to the community.
- Community offers protection and rewards to the initiate.
- Initiate promises to change his or her ways to fit with the community.
- Community promises to embrace and support the initiate.

Baptism is a way of offering yourself to bigger purpose than yourself. It's a way of acknowledging that the spark within you is a spark worth keeping. A spark worth nurturing. A spark worth living for.

And if the baptizing community is worth its holy water, it will offer the newbie all kinds of fuel and firewater to keep that spark alive. It will blow on the spark so it may burn as brightly as it's made to.

VIA CREATIVA: THE SPARK

January 18, 2004: THE SECRET SPARK

Isaiah 49: 1-6

God made of me a polished arrow and in a quiver God hid me away.

John 1: 35-41

They said to him, Rabbi, where are you staying?" He said, "Come and see."

The difference between a spark and a roaring fire is visibility. It's hard to hide an inferno. It's easy to miss a spark. And maybe that's the reason we gloss over our gifts or skip over our skills. Maybe that's the reason we so effortlessly dismiss another individual or another species. Maybe that's why we ho-hum our way by countless scenes of never-to-be-repeated beauty and never even notice.

We're used to things being slapped into our faces and ideas slammed into our consciousness. Western culture may be complex; but subtle, Sweetcakes, she's not. It wouldn't take even a half-witted alien too long to figure out how firmly our civilization is rooted in money, power and comfort. Even our cultural religion – ludicrously calling itself "Christianity" -- which claims to follow Mr. Sell-all-you-have-and-give-to-the-poor-Jesus, has built thousands of buildings bigger than malls and owns more land than any other private enterprise. Jesus, my dear, your spark of love has been dunked in a bucket of greed.

It's the nature of sparks, however, to find new hiding places. To smolder and glow and warm from within. All sparks don't become conflagrations. Or need to. Sometimes, all that's necessary is a tiny phosphorescent awareness that you ain't all dead wood. That you and all life around you are imbued with a holy fire. Even a spark of it.

VIA CREATIVA: THE SPARK

January 25, 2004: THE SPARK OF AWARENESS (Howard away)

Isaiah 9: 2-4

Those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined.

Matthew 4: 12-17

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

"You know how to piss God off?" asks Alice Walker. "Walk by a field of purple flowers without noticing."

Whether or not it really does piss off the Creator, we'll never know. But one thing is certain:

- when you walk by a field of purple flowers or a spectacular sunset or a smiling face or a giggling child and never notice...
- when you amble by a warbler warbling or a brook babbling or a storm booming and never lend an ear...
- when you glide by a drunk on the street or a tragic newspaper headline or a development-devastated mountain and never even wince...
- when you mosey through a day which is up to its eyeballs in joy, wonder, sorrow and pain, and assumed it was all the same as yesterday...
- when you bumble through life unaware of anything but your own needs and desires...

what you have done is robbed yourself of an irreplaceable treasure chest of wonder. What you have done is absented yourself from the living and gotten a good jump on death.

Awareness can carry you to hell. Or it can whisk your nappy butt into heaven, which Jesus contended was here all the while and not necessary to wait until death to enjoy.

VIA CREATIVA: THE SPARK

February 1, 2004: THE SPARK OF BLESSEDNESS

Micah 6: 1-8

God has shown you what is good: to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God.

Matthew 5: 1-12

Blessed are you...

When you say, "I feel blessed," what do you mean? Do you mean, "I feel lucky?" or "I feel satisfied?" Do you mean, "I feel like I'm getting what I want?" or "I feel like God is smiling down on me?" Maybe you never say it at all. Maybe it feels too presumptuous to assume that you are blessed and some other poor slob going through hell, isn't. That God would – for some crazy reason – pick you out and decide to ladle out some holy hooah into your little goblet.

To bless actually means "to make sacred." It means to connect whatever is being blessed with the Divine. When you sneeze and someone says, "Bless you," they are offering an ancient prayer that your soul get connected with God lest you die and the Devil snatch your butt.

But what if – like the Genesis creation story says – we're all blessed? Every tree, rock, snowflake and plankton. Every eye, ear, gargle, giggle and gonad. What if each and every dit and diddle of creation is already sacred? Already connected with all that is holy? And blessedness is simply an awareness of that connection?

What if being blessed has less to do with having what we want than knowing who we are? And that we're all blessed bozos on this bus?

VIA CREATIVA: THE SPARK

February 8, 2004: THE SPARK OF SUDDEN INSIGHT

Isaiah 58: 5-9a

...to let the oppressed go free... to share your bread... to not hide from your own flesh... then shall your light break forth and your healing spring up...

Matthew 5: 13-20

You are the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

Did you know bats can see pretty dang well? Yes, they have sonar-guided flying agility that the military boys would kill for. (God knows they kill for less than that.)

But bats can see as well as many mammals.

So where did the expression "blind as a bat" come from? Was it assumed that because bats had sonar they didn't have eyes? Was it because bats only come out at night; and who needs eyes in the dark? Whatever the case, we have not given bats their due. We have passed around a colloquial assumption that bats had fewer abilities than they actually do.

Which is what we often do with ourselves. And most of the rest of the world around us. Especially when it comes to wisdom and insight. We assume (here we go again) that wisdom is the province of philosophers and gurus. That the average Joe or Jill is as wisdom-less as a sack of potatoes. Which, (we continue to assume), along with all the rest of the vegetable world is as wisdom-free as a box of rocks. Or a mountain stream. Or a thunder-cloud. Or the Milky Way.

What if each morsel of life -- including you -- is imbued with wisdom? Rich, deep wisdom? And what if, every now and then, something happens to awaken that wisdom? Jump start it? Goose it into action? What if we have accepted too many cultural cliches about ourselves and the world around us? And are missing out daily on the wisdom all around us?

VIA CREATIVA: THE SPARK

February 15, 2004: THE SPARK OF CLARITY

Deuteronomy 30: 15-20

Choose life that you and your descendants may live.

Matthew 5: 2—24, 27-28, 33-37

Let your yes be yes and your no be no.

Have you ever noticed that everything now and then something happens which really clicks with your clicker? Jives with your juices? Something comes along – a word, a feeling, a sight, a movement – something which rockets its way into your Wah, makes a landing and takes you immediately to your leader. It could be a song on the radio, an Email from a long-lost friend, a sudden wind or a well-made taco. (Or a sudden wind after a well-made taco.) Whatever it is, something touches down in your inner-most innards; and a connection is made.

You get the sense that you know things you didn't know you knew. You feel if as your life just expanded beyond the four-score and seven it's been allotted. You get a sensation of clarity. Purity. Genuineness.

A clairvoyant is one who sees clearly. Seeing clearly is one thing. Speaking clearly is another. Clarity is different from honesty. Different from morality. Clarity isn't normally on the list of things that'll get you into heaven. But it might get a little heaven into you.

VIA CREATIVA: THE SPARK

February 22, 2004: THE SPARK OF HOLY PERFECTION

Leviticus 19: 1-2, 17-18

You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy.

Matthew 5: 38-48

You must be perfect as God is perfect.

Perfection is like dandruff. You're pretty sure you don't have it; but if you did, you wouldn't talk about it.

Nobody thinks they're perfect. Or at least nobody admits to it. But lots of folks act like they are. They act as if they and they, alone, know the right way to run a country. Or what a person should do with their genitals. Or what's going on in the mind of God. They wouldn't admit to being perfect; but they have no trouble in letting you know that you aren't.

If perfect means "flawless," ain't none of us has a chance at it. If it means "impeccably correct," we're also dead in the water. But, if perfect has more to do with our connection with the perfection of the Divine... that is, with the perfection of creation... the perfect balance that makes all life possible... If being perfect is about perfect harmony with life, then we all have a chance. Though we do have a ways to go.

Ash Wednesday

February 25, 2004 – 7:00 – 8:00 am

Matthew 6: 1-6

When you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to God who is in secret.

VIA CREATIVA: THE SPARK

February 29, 2004: THE SPARK OF KNOWLEDGE

Genesis 2: 7-9, 15-17

You may eat freely of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat.

Matthew 4: 1-11

The tempter came...

You can know your math, you can know your science. You can know your name and your mother's birthday. You can know all the state capitals, the periodic table and how to find the Big Dipper. You can know enough to score 1600 on the SAT's and enough to change your oil.

And sometimes, we think if we know enough, that's enough. In our knowledge- enamored culture, it's assumed that knowledge is not only power, but, finally the answer to all of our problems. "We can figure it out..." we tell our kids or our lovers or our co-workers. And often, that's possible. And often, it's not.

The spark of knowledge can ignite flares of compassion and infernos of brutality. It can kindle flames of understanding and conflagrations of animosity. Knowledge is one of those two-edged machetes that can cut away the undergrowth of misunderstanding or eviscerate you.

As vital as the spark of knowledge is to human existence, it's crucial to remember that there's far more to life than knowing about it.

VIA CREATIVA: THE SPARK

March 7, 2004: THE SPARK OF LIVING WATER (Howard Away)

Genesis 12: 1-8

In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

John 4: 4-15

The water I give will become in you a spring of water welling up to eternal life.

We all know living water when we taste it. Or when it's splashed in our faces. Or when we skinny dip in it. We may not call it "living water." That kind of language is a bit on the Loopy-La-La side of things; but we know what it means.

Living water is whatever makes life worth the ride. It's an experience, a person, a place, an emotion. It can be an idea, a song on the radio, a soft-and-cricket-enchanted summer night. Living water can flow in the lips of a lover or the giggles of a child or a full moon on snow-covered mountains. It can gush from your dreams, spout from your memories, spurt from the touch of a hand.

Nor is living water limited to our feel-good experiences. Living water flows easily in times of pain. We tend to dam it up with our fear and anxiety. But it takes only a little blast of compassion or kindness to blow a hole in our dam and allow the waters to flow again.

Since we and all so-called living beings are made of water and require water for existence, it's not too much of a stretch to imagine that we are each and all capable of giving and receiving living water, as well. However Loopy-La-La that may sound.

VIA CREATIVA: THE SPARK

March 14, 2004: THE SPARK OF MYSTERY

Isaiah 42: 14-21

Hear, you deaf; and look, you blind, that you may see.

John 9: 1-12

They said, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know."

Frederick Buechner is a theologian who writes in bumper-sticker-ese. If brevity is the highest art, Buechner is a consummate artist. When he speaks of his disdain for the new mega-church auditoriums, he says, "They're too bright. You can see everything." Give me the old, poorly-lit stone chapels where shadows and flickering candles remind us that we cannot know it all."

All religion is organized mysticism. The problem, of course, is that you cannot organize mysticism. You can dance it, sing it, drum it, ponder it; but when you begin to organize it or make any attempt to codify or spell it out, the mystery slithers away under our doctrinal doors or floats out our well-ordered windows.

The spark of mystery is what keeps the game alive. It's what keeps us coming back to the table to play another round. The awareness that we haven't got all the answers – that nobody has all the answers -- gives the game an exquisite appeal and calls for ritual rather than reason. Dance rather than dogma. Party rather than piety.

In the Hebrew/Christian tradition, God is described as love. And the faithful are called to love. And, Sweetcakes, when it comes to mystery there ain't nothing that can beat out love.

VIA CREATIVA: THE SPARK

March 21, 2004: THE SPARK OF GLORY (Howard away)

Hosea 4: 15-19

They love shame more than their glory.

Matthew 20: 20-28

Whoever would be great among you must be your servant; even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve.

Is glory all glitz and glamour? Is it all gaudy, glittery and grandeur? That's what we are led to believe. When we hear of the "glory of the Lord," we tend to think of dazzling sunset images. Hallelujah Chorus on steroids. Pearly gates and streets of gold. Traditionally speaking, glory is far above the common human experience. It's beyond our day-to-day happenings. Far outside life on earth as we know it.

Which is where we usually posit God, isn't it? Far above our goofy poop. Far beyond our day-to-day mumbling and stumblings, our groping and grabbing. God is up there where the rich folk live. Up there where trouble can't get in the gates. Up there where they have room service and maid service and everything is clean and tidy and expensive.

What about the glory of laughter? What about the glory of shared tears? What about the glory of a silent moment under the stars? What about the glory of the taste of a mango or an orgasm with a lover? What about the glory of children's laughter? Or a budding tree in spring? What about the glory of jonquils pushing up through winter muck or birdsong at sunrise? What about the glory of your beating heart and its ability to carry you into the day?

Maybe we need to redefine "the glory of the Lord."