

To Make the Wasteland Grow...

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There are moments in human history where the actions of individuals and small groups have the potential to change the world, affecting the manner in which human beings think and act towards each other and the planet. Consider the consequences of a young Jewish Rabbi teaching in the Roman Province of Judea two millennia ago. If that seems too far in the past to clearly dissemble cause and effect, I'll give you another example. Think back a mere 50 years ago to an elderly African American Woman refusing to give up her seat on a bus in Montgomery Alabama, and consider where her country is today.

Of course, not every human action can have such wide-ranging implications. Through the lens of history, some individuals and groups seem doomed to failure by being in the wrong place or the wrong time. In our own Unitarian tradition we need only look to the life of Micheal Servetus ended though an edict of Calvin in 1553, or the brief existence of the Unitarian city of Racovia, centre of learning and liberal thought in Europe in the 16th and 17th century to recognize that being ahead of your time is an often dangerous position to be in.

Roughly contemporaneous with these Unitarian examples occurred a revolutionary movement in England, alternatively known as the True Leveller or

Digger movement. In 1649 a small group of displaced farmers and ex-soldiers led by Gerrard Winstanley planted the common land at St. George's Hill in Surrey.

During this Labour Day Sermon this morning, I thought it would be appropriate to consider this movement and its implications for our current time and place.

Consider the England of 1649. A bloody 7 year civil war had ended with the unimaginable: King Charles 1st had been beheaded. The world had turned upside down. Oliver Cromwell had established the Commonwealth to govern the land, with himself as Chairman of the Council of State. There seemed, for a brief moment, the potential for real change and reform. Enter Gerrard Winstanley, who had moved from his native Wigan to London in 1630, only to lose his business in the Civil War. Forced to become an agricultural labourer, Winstanley also began writing pamphlets calling on the poor to rise and reclaim their land. In 1649 Winstanley took his ideas one step further and led a group to the wasteland surrounding St. George's Hill and began to work the soil and sow seeds.

Winstanley described the project in a pamphlet called *The True Levellers*

Standard Advanced:

The work we are going about is this, To dig up Georges Hill and waste Ground thereabouts and to Sow Corn, and to eat our bread together by the sweat of our brows. And the first reason is this, That we may work in righteousness, and lay the Foundation of making the Earth a Common

Treasury for All, both Rich and Poor, That every one that is born in the Land may be fed by the Earth his Mother that brought him forth, according to the Reason that rules in the Creation. Not Inclosing any part into any particular hand, but all as one man, working together, and feeding together as Sons of one Farther, members of one Family; not one Lording over another, but all looking upon each other, as equals in the Creation; so that our Maker may be glorified in the work of his own hands, and that every one may see, he is no respecter of Persons, but equally loves his whole Creation...

The central arguments of the Digger movement are all contained in this passage.

The Earth is a common treasury. We work and eat together. All are equal before the Maker. The foundation for these actions is Winstanley's interpretation of Christianity. The Diggers were also a staunchly non-violent movement during an incredibly violent period. "*We shall not do this through force of arms*" he writes, "*we abhorre it.*"

But before I bring us up to the present day I should tell you how the story of the Diggers ends. Local landowners and authorities sent mobs to disperse the group within a year. Winstanley faced deaththreats but continued to advocate for reform until his death 25 years later in 1676. The early promise of the

Commonwealth was lost as Cromwell's name became synonymous with oppression and tyranny, naming himself "Lord Protector" in 1653.

You could take any number of "isms" and apply them retroactively to the Diggers. Socialism. Communism. Pacifism. Universalism. But perhaps the argument that most speaks to me is the one that argues for the relief of the poor: *"Take notice, That England is not a Free People, till the poor that have no land, have a free allowance to dig and labour the Commons, and so live as Comfortably as the Landlords that live in their Inclosures."* Compare this to the line in Matthew in which Jesus says *"ye have the poor always with you."* It is one of the sentiments attributed to the young Rabbi which has never rang true for me. That the poor and hungry are an inevitable part of human society didn't make sense to Winstanley 350 years ago and it doesn't make sense to me today.

Why consider a failed revolution 350 years after it ended, an historical footnote which rarely gets mentioned in history books? For me the the writings of Gerrard Winstanley and the actions of the Diggers represent a number of ideals which are still valid today. **1) Food and land use are justice issues. 2) There is enough for everyone if we distribute resources equitably. 3) This can only happen if we work together to make the literal and figurative wastelands grow.**

The other reason I wanted to speak about this today is my firm belief that the ideas and ideals of Winstanley are no longer ahead of their time or place. As I pondered the writing of this sermon throughout the summer, I became more and more convinced that while the Digger's promise remained unfulfilled we are now as a society on the cusp of being ready to listen to its message. We are at a tipping point to make the wastelands grow and make the Earth a common treasury for all. We need only see the signs around us and continue to work together.

Why am I so convinced we're now ready, apart that I'm naïve by nature and optimistic despite all rationality at times? Let me share some of the signs I saw around me this summer...

It started with a memory and a realization. I remember when I was growing in small town Ontario, I knew of only one household that maintained a compost heap. My friend Steve Mataija's family lived on the edge of Bracebridge and maintained a huge vegetable garden and worked their land not as a farm, but to supplement their own food. Croatian by birth, Steve's father was staunchly socialist in small "c" conservative Muskoka. I have never to this day enjoyed greater hospitality than I did in their home, and my memories of that place remain among the fondest of my childhood. My realization is that today many of us keep compost heaps, and even more so, the Green Bin program provides a municipal sanction for the practice of reusing organic waste materials. As citizens in this

city we now have access to free compost and mulch to replenish the soil in our gardens and around our homes.

It was also the summer of apples and tomatoes in the Versteeg household. It's pretty obvious that we have just come through a phenomenal growing season in Southern Ontario. I have an apple tree in my backyard which some years has barely provided enough for the squirrels to chew on then throw at me in derision...yet this year I've been overwhelmed by the sheer biomass that has been produced by this **one tree**. I've made cider, apple crisp, apple sauce etc. It has been difficult to keep up...my only lament is that more apples have gone in the composter and green bin than have fed my family and those around me...I wasn't ready for the apples.

Nor was I ready for the tomatoes. Many of you are aware that across the road from the church here this summer a community garden was established. For a small fee you could rent a plot and plant a garden. We share a plot with our next door neighbour and some of the kids down the street have joined my children in planting and caring for quadrants in the garden. Cathy has been the real force behind this in our household bringing home first lettuce, then zucchinis then a veritable onslaught of tomatoes...big, little, yellow, red, basket after basket. We brought them to church for the CYRE snack, we gave them away to neighbours,

to strangers on the street. We made salsa, spaghetti sauce and during the summer ate our weights in fresh tomatoes.

All this in the middle of a city of 600,000 people.

Then I began to think about some of the signs in this church. I did not live in Hamilton when an old True Valu hardware store was transformed into a Unitarian Church. But I've seen pictures of the building and grounds as they were...talk about making the wasteland grow! We have the physical legacy that surrounds us every Sunday to remind us of the possibility for change.

Then there's our current involvement as a drop off point for Plan B Organic Farms...a commitment to eating locally, without use of pesticides, providing the community around us with yet another reason to come through our doors related to the essential need of feeding themselves...can we take the next step to connect the feeding of their bodies with the nourishment of their spirits. I think we can...we need only offer freely the sustenance with which we feed ourselves each Sunday.

We're doing it for ourselves. Over a year ago the Caring Community Committee said we needed a casserole ministry to provide for members in need. I'd be curious to know how many tupperware containers of food have gone through that small freezer in the lobby as we've fed each other in body and spirit.

Then there was the day I went to the Laking Garden at the RBG and looked at their display which outlined how to transform lawns into sustainable oasis of alternative plant life, drought resistant and oxygen rich...and I looked around my neighbourhood and realized about a third of the front lawns on my short dead end were doing just that. We are on the cusp...

The local efforts of making the wasteland grow have international implications...think of the Blooms for Africa group centered in this church providing garden tours to raise money for that troubled continent...or the 65th anniversary of the Unitarian Service Committee, the USC, which heads up the “Seeds of Survival” program, working with communities worldwide to create seedbanks, ensuring that bio-diversity can be maintained locally through good years and bad, without depending on the Mosantos of the world.

I’m sure everyone in this room can think of other examples that I’ve missed at every level. Food is a primal part of the way in which we live and interact. The closer we are to it, its production, its harvest, its distribution, the closer we are to each other. To Green the world grow something green. Make the wastelands grow: the rooftops, the brownfields, the unused parkspaces, perhaps even that questionable use of arable land: the golf courses.

So as we embark on this new chapter of our life as a church, with a new minister, I'd ask you to consider how we can take these pieces...these parts of an answer and leverage our voice and presence in this community to help bring about real change. Working together. Eating together. Feeding each other and the world.