

Spring is mud and miracle – Parker J Palmer

I'll wax romantic about the splendors of spring in a moment, but first there's a hard truth to be told. Before spring becomes beautiful, it's plug-ugly, nothing but mud and muck. I've walked through early spring fields that will suck the boots off your feet, a world so wet and woeful you yearn for the return of snow and ice.

Of course, there's a miracle inside that muddy mess: those fields are a seedbed for rebirth. I love the fact that the word *humus*, the decayed organic matter that feeds the roots of plants, comes from the same word-root that gives rise to *humility*. It's an etymology in which I find forgiveness, blessing, and grace. It reminds me that the humiliating events of life — events that leave “mud on my face” or “make my name mud” — can create the fertile soil that nourishes new growth.

Spring begins tentatively, but it advances with a tenacity that never fails to touch me. The smallest and most tender shoots insist on having their way, pressing up through ground that looked, only a few weeks earlier, as if it would never grow anything again. The crocuses and snowdrops don't bloom for long. But their mere appearance, however brief, is always a harbinger of hope — and from those small beginnings, hope grows at a geometric rate. The days get longer, the winds get warmer, and the world grows green again.

As my personal winters turn slowly toward spring, I find it hard enough to keep slogging through “the mud within.” I find it even harder to credit the small harbingers of new life to come, hard to be hopeful until the outcome is secure. Spring teaches me to look more closely within myself and trust the green tendrils of possibility: the intuitive hunch that may morph into a larger insight, the glance or touch that may start to thaw a frozen relationship, the stranger's act of kindness that makes the world seem like home again.

Late spring, with the world in full bloom, isn't easy to write about. The season becomes so exuberant that it caricatures itself — which is why it has long been the province of poets with more passion than skill. Their poetry is sappy, but maybe that's the point: why not embrace spring's hyperbole? Life is not meant to be forever measured and meted as winter compels us to do. Most of the time it can and should be spent in a riot of generosity as we, like spring itself, throw caution to the winds.

Spring is potlatch time in the natural world, a bounty of blooming beyond all necessity and reason — animated, it would appear, by nothing other than the sheer joy of it. The gift of life, which winter threatened to withdraw, is granted once again, with compound interest. Rather than hoarding life, nature gives it all away. There's a paradox here, one known in all the world's wisdom traditions: when you receive a gift, the only way to keep it alive is to pass it along.

The realists tell us that nature's extravagance has the practical function of increasing the odds of survival, and of course they are right. But ever since I read Annie Dillard on the immoderation of trees, I've been convinced that practicality is not the whole story.

Dillard begins with an exercise to help us understand how unnecessarily complex the structure of a tree is. If you doubt that claim, she says, first try making a detailed scale model of the next tree you see. Then, taunting the realists, she writes,

You are God. You want to make a forest, something to hold the soil, lock up solar energy, and give off oxygen. Wouldn't it be simpler just to rough in a slab of chemicals, a green acre of goo?

From autumn's profligate seeding to the great spring give-away, nature teaches a steady lesson. If we want to save our lives, we must spend them with abandon. When we're obsessed with bottom lines and productivity, with efficiency of time and motion, with the rational relation of means and ends, with projecting reasonable goals and making a beeline toward them, it's unlikely we will ever know the fullness of spring in our own lives.

By the way, where did we get that "beeline" thing? Just watch the bees in the spring — they flit all over the place, flirting with both the flowers and their fates. Yes, the bees are productive. But no science can persuade me that they are not dancing for the joy of it.

I'm guessing that deep inside their monastic hives, the bees have read Thomas Merton, who wrote,

We are invited to forget ourselves on purpose, cast our awful solemnity to the winds and join in the general dance.

So let's listen to the music, catch the beat, get out on the dance floor, and bust some moves. It's spring, people, and the general dance will soon be in full swing!

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