

Plant Seeds and Sing Songs: The Energy of Spring

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It's good to be here with you today, so soon after Spring Equinox. As some of you know, I practice earth-based spirituality, or as it's sometimes called, ecospirituality. Honoring the cyclical nature of life is an essential aspect of that.

The autumn and spring equinox are times of balance between light and dark. On those two days of the year, the night and day are of equal length. In autumn, we're moving into the darkness where the nights are longer than the days. At Winter Solstice, the daylight begins to lengthen. And now, at the vernal Equinox, we pause for a moment of perfect balance and then begin the shift to where the days are longer than the nights. So this is a good time to remember that dark and light each have their place.

In our dualistic culture, we are preoccupied with battles of good and evil, right and wrong. There is an illusion of absolutes, that light must defeat dark. And yet light and dark are part of the greater whole. They define each other. We know what light is because we have experienced darkness—and vice versa. In some sense, each contains the other, as in the Tai Chi or yin yang symbol of black and white where in the midst of the white, there's a drop of black, and in the midst of the black, a drop of white. In the natural world, there are no absolutes. And I say that absolutely! All things exist in relationship.



I believe that when we allow ourselves to move harmoniously with the rhythms of the natural world--the rising and the falling energy of a day, a season, a year, or a life--we are healthier in mind, body, and spirit. I've spoken here about the energy of winter as a time when there is a lot of darkness—especially here in Michigan, with all of our gray days! The cold weather and the long nights pull us inward. It's a time to slow down, look within, and sit with the silence.

At this time of the year, our energy starts to move upward and outward as we rise to meet the light. I'm sure you're feeling it just as I am. Our bodies respond when we have two weeks of sunny days, as we did recently, and we start to see the green tips of daffodils and tulips emerging in the garden. It's a time of planting seeds and singing songs—of making new beginnings and giving voice to our heart's desire. And as we look around, we see plenty of evidence of this rising energy in nature—the shoots poking through the ground, the buds on the trees bursting their protective coverings.

I heard an interview with a master gardener recently, and she was saying that you can't depend on a good harvest every year. Sometimes there's a strong beginning, but then things go wrong, your plans fall short, the weather doesn't cooperate, and the crop fails. So there can be great loss, but then there's always hope. Because what we can count on is that there's always the next cycle of the seasons. Whatever failures or disappointments

we've experienced, each spring offers the hope of new beginnings. So this is a great time for planning, envisioning what you really want to bring forth in your life. It's a time for imagination, of allowing your creativity to spring to the surface just as the new plants are bursting forth from the seeds. It's a good time to take a risk, in service of becoming more truly ourselves. And yet we may feel our vulnerability as we move into new ways of being. It reminds me of a quote by Anaïs Nin:

*There came a time when to remain tight in the bud
was more painful than the risk to blossom.*

In the ancient Chinese system, there are five elements. These are the elements you hear about in traditional Chinese acupuncture and in feng shui. They are wood, fire, earth, metal, and water. Each element is associated with a direction, a color, an emotion, and a season.

Right now, we're moving into springtime, which is the wood element. The direction is west, the color is green and the emotion is anger. This might surprise you, that the emotion of spring is anger. But think about the energy it takes for a plant to grow up out of the seed through the soil into the light!

As we humans are responding to the energy of spring, pushing forward with our dreams and desires, the emotion of anger shows up when we meet with obstacles, when our efforts are blocked in some way—whether it's a personal goal or working for a better world. Sometimes we need that anger to keep persisting. At the same time, nature teaches us to be flexible, as green growing wood can be flexible. Trees that are buffeted by a strong wind can survive if they are able to bend. Think about trees you've seen that encountered a fence as they were growing upward towards the sun. Or grass that runs into cement. The living plant finds a way around the obstacle. It keeps going. It may have to find a new route, but it keeps moving forward.

We tend to think of anger as a destructive emotion, and certainly it can be. And yet, as the seasons teach us, it's all about balance. There's the stereotype about men and women, that men get angry when they're hurt and women cry when what they're really feeling is anger. In my experience, there's a lot of truth to that—it's part of how we're socialized in our gender roles. It works better for all of us, I believe, when we can recognize our true emotions for what they are without inner censorship based on a culturally constructed idea of what we *should* feel in a given circumstance. Anger can be an important clue that an injustice is taking place. Anger can prompt us to assert healthy boundaries when someone is mistreating us, or to advocate for the rights of those who are suffering and can't speak for themselves.

I'll share some of my personal history with anger. I was raised in a small town in southwestern Ohio by parents who really liked to keep everything on an even keel. It was the 1950s, after all, and the general cultural tone was rather bland. I rarely witnessed my mom and dad having an argument—maybe three times in my whole life. I was actively discouraged from expressing so-called negative emotions—sadness, fear, and especially

anger. Unfortunately, that was a particularly unhealthy approach for me, because I'm someone who has very strong emotions. I'm just wired that way.

So I spent a lot of my early life feeling pretty checked out emotionally, cut off from joyful as well as painful emotions. Until I went to college, got involved with feminist and left-wing politics. I discovered that there was so much to be angry about—and still is! I was filled with righteous indignation about all the injustice in the world! On top of all that, I started therapy with a feminist therapist and began learning how to articulate and express all of my feelings. It was probably the single most liberating act of my life, going into therapy. It was exhilarating to discover that I could tell people what I was feeling and that the feelings could be released in the telling. I spent years honing my ability to express my emotions with maximum clarity and directness. Especially anger! Because deep within me, there was a strong need to balance all those years when the more difficult emotions could not be spoken. On some unconscious level, I believe I made a vow that I would always give voice to those feelings, no matter what the cost. And I did! I yelled, I sang, I cried and wailed, I threw plates at the wall. It was glorious!

Well, at this point, you might have some idea of where this story is going. Just as the natural world moves in cycles, so does a human life. Finding balance is not something we can ever achieve once and for all. It requires continual tuning, assessing, and making adjustments. In my drive to counteract all the years of repressing my feelings, I got out of balance. It came to a head when I met the love of my life, the woman who became my life partner. She grew up in a family where there was a lot of yelling. When I raised my voice at her, it evoked painful sense-memories of her childhood. It became clear that I was causing harm when I just let my anger fly. As this awareness increased, I realized I needed to develop more discernment. It wasn't working to pursue self-expression as an absolute. I needed to pay more attention to the context, the relational aspect, the balance between my personal needs and the bigger picture of what was going on.

So, it's probably fair to say I spent my 20s and 30s learning how to express my emotions directly and cleanly. And I have spent my 40s and 50s learning to recognize the times when it's more appropriate to keep those feelings to myself, or tone them down, or be less frontal! My partner has helped me develop those skills, when the situation calls for tact and discretion, just as I have helped her to be more out there with her wants and needs. In expanding my toolkit, I have found a different kind of freedom—the freedom of choice. The freedom to assess what serves my own highest good and the good of the all in any situation and act accordingly.

As we look at the world today, there's a lot to be angry about. I personally feel very angry and frustrated that our government continues to wage war in Iraq, as we pass the four year mark. As a lesbian, I feel angry at being told that my beloved life partner of 20 years will no longer be covered under my health insurance through the University of Michigan as of the end of this calendar year because of the recent court of appeals decision about same sex partner benefits. I'm angry about human short-sightedness and greed that has resulted in so much harm to the earth, our only home. At the same time, I strive to be mindful about what I do with that anger—to channel it into constructive

action rather becoming bitter or aggressive. Because I see the danger of self-righteous or blind anger, or anger that is a mask for grief or self-hate. Increasingly, I feel that kind of rage around me, on the highway, in a check-out line, on the street. And I don't want to feed it with my own blind anger.

So going back to traditional Chinese medicine: when a practitioner assesses a client in terms of the element of wood, one of the factors she considers is the client's relationship to anger. When it's too much, she might see a person who tends to be on edge, irritable, wanting to pick a fight. If it's too little, the person might be unable to express anger or frustration, all bottled up inside. The place of balance is one where we can notice anger, experience it, be informed by it, express it in a way that's appropriate in a given situation, and move on.

There's another aspect of balance that I'd like to explore today. That is the balance of being and doing. Here's a poem by the Rumi that speaks to this. Rumi was a 13th century Sufi mystic, born in what is now Afghanistan.

*Today, like any other day, we wake up empty and afraid
Don't open the door to the study and begin reading--take down the dulcimer.
Let the beauty we love be what we do
There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground*

I love that phrase "let the beauty we love be what we do." To me, it's a reminder to let our actions be guided by our heart's intention. As in my favorite Gandhi quote, "You must be the change you wish to see in the world." As a conscious person who cares passionately about social justice and restoring balance in our world, I am called to give my best, in the context of my own flawed humanity, and to acknowledge my commonality with all sentient beings, indeed with all of creation.

When I'm feeling overwhelmed by the injustices in this world, particularly those perpetuated by our country's government and corporations, it's often tempting for me to fall into a "them and us" frame of mind, to take an attitude of hostility and contempt for those who got us into this mess, whichever mess it is that I'm contemplating at that particular moment. If only the world would listen to me, do it my way—obviously I'm right and the others are wrong. It's a very human response. And yet—the minute I start to separate myself in that way, I actually doing the same thing George Bush does when he says "you're either with us or against us." It's a polarized, oppositional position, a right or wrong, win/lose approach. And I can't do my part to create the change I want to see when I'm taking that stance.

So as I think of Rumi's words, "let the beauty we love be what we do," I think of the qualities that are beautiful to me: compassion, honesty, self-respect integrity, humility—as well as courage, fierceness, even inspired silliness. I believe it takes all of those qualities to create the just and peaceful world that we long for and dream of.

Rumi also says in his poem, “Don’t open the door to the study and begin reading. Take down the dulcimer.” To me, this is a reminder that we need time for play and recreation (as in re-creation) in our lives to balance the demands of work and productivity. I’m continually astounded by how busy we all are, and how little time most of us allow for contemplation, creative play, and other non-goal-oriented activities. As our technological development accelerates, there is increasing pressure to cram more activities into less time. As our stress levels sky-rocket, I have to question the value of producing more no matter what the cost. I fear that what we’re producing is a generation of people who require constant stimulation from technology, who have no idea what to do with unstructured time. Spring can be a wonderful antidote to all that. It’s a great time to recalibrate ourselves by spending time in nature, re-connecting with the slower, deeper cadences of our mother earth. I hope that you will find time to do this, even if it’s simply witnessing the changes in the natural world. The robins are back. The sandhill cranes have returned. The land is coming alive again.

So in this time of equinox, as we move upward into the light, may each of you experience balance in your life. May there be both speaking and listening, work and play, anger and forgiveness, rest and activity, clear endings and strong beginnings. May you become more fully the person you long to be. May you walk the path for which you took birth. From the fertile darkness of winter, may you spring forward into the next season of your life, in power and in beauty! I will close with part of a poem by May Sarton:

*Help us to be the always hopeful
Gardeners of the spirit
Who know that without darkness, nothing comes to birth
As without light nothing flowers.¹*

Thank you. I hope I’ve planted some seeds. Now let’s sing a song!

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