

Earth Care Reflection for January 2023

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What do Jesus and the compost pile have in common? The promise of everlasting life!

My partner Ruth and I love making compost. The idea that our spoiled leftovers and our cooking scraps can be made into new earth seems nothing short of miraculous. We used to have a small farm with a herd of goats, some chickens (layers and broilers), large veggie gardens, and fruit trees. Our compost pile then was gigantic, composed mostly of soiled hay from the barn and droppings from the chicken coop, as well as garden waste. Our kitchen scraps mostly went to the chickens, who conveniently pre-composted them for us into nitrogen-rich poop. In the winter, our big mound of compost would get covered in snow, and a small hole would open on the top with steam billowing out, like a volcano, letting us know that living microbes were at work transforming that “waste” into rich soil that we would use in the spring to nourish our garden.

Nowadays we live in town and we make compost in a handy compost turner that lives in our small greenhouse. We’ve gotten so into composting that we now have a compost thermometer, like a meat thermometer but with an extra long metal spike that you can insert deep into the composter to see how active your pile is. “How Hot Is Your Pile?” was a joke on the box that the thermometer came in, which kind of grossed me out at first, but the more I thought about it I came to appreciate the humor. After all, everything poops, right? That’s how animals live. We eat, we use the nutrients from our food as energy to help us work, love, think, and move, and then we excrete what we can’t use. The waste from all living things can become food for another living thing. According to the [EarthMatter](#) website and its Compost Learning Center, animal manure is high in the basic building blocks of plant nutrition--nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium. Chicken poop has a 1.1 percent nitrogen content, compared to .6 percent for cows, .7 percent for horses, and a whopping 2.4 percent for both goats and rabbits. Human waste, believe it or not, can also be composted quite easily into “humanure” by way of composting toilets and outhouses, where air and other carbon-rich additives (ash, leaves, straw, etc.) are added to help in the composting process. Everyday kitchen scraps and coffee grounds are also high in nitrogen. My partner and I use our vegetable scrap compost in our veggie gardens, but use our humanure for trees, perennial beds, and other non-edible plant nutrition.

I’m not trying to be rude or sacrilegious when I write about Jesus and the compost pile in the same sentence. What I’m trying to do is make sense of Jesus as a very powerful symbol of hope and renewal. When I take communion and I imagine partaking of the body of Christ (or the bread of life), or drinking from the cup of ever-lasting life, (or the cup of blessings), it’s not the

last supper that always comes to mind. What I sometimes imagine is preparing a meal in my kitchen, say, an omelet. I chop the ends off an onion and peel away the outer layers. I might also add part of a green or red pepper, maybe even kale, tossing the parts that I can't use into the compost pail on my counter. The shell from the egg I crack goes into the compost pail too. In a typical day in my ordinary house the compost pail gets all that and more, including the spaghetti and rice from weeks ago that have started to grow mold, citrus peels, apple cores, rotten lettuce, bruised parts of potatoes, chunks of moldy bread, coffee grounds, tea leaves, you name it.

Composting is a spiritually potent act. It's also an act that honors the beautiful world we live in by conserving the precious energy inherent in our world. The law of the conservation of energy states that energy can neither be created nor destroyed, only converted from one form of energy to another. When we compost we are helping to convert energy into another form; we are renewing life. According to Energy-Shrink website, "Composting food scraps, plus all the remaining organic waste from one US household, equates to removing 1.5 cars from the roads or 75% of an average home's energy use per year." Wow, talk about transformation!

The Christian story is that God sent Jesus to dwell on earth among us as a teacher—someone like us humans whom we could recognize and relate to. Then he was killed. Then he arose from the dead. I've heard it said that Jesus's resurrection conquered death. Rather than conquering death, I prefer to think of it as revealing the myth of death—nothing dies, everything is always reborn as something else. Even the eggshell from my omelet will provide food for microbes and red wiggly worms that will create the soil that will create the vegetables that will create new chickens and new eggs that will feed me and those I love.

The miracle to me is that by composting, I become a link in the circle of life. A circle is a sustainable sacred shape, a loop; it never ends, it is ongoing, it is everlasting.

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