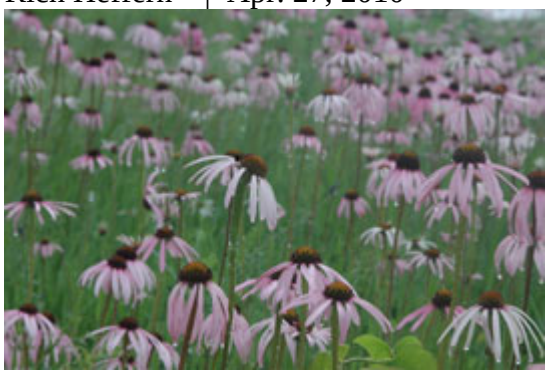
NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

The commonplace magic of Spring

Rich Heffern | Apr. 27, 2010



(NCR photo/Rich Heffern)

Earth and Spirit

In the Midwest, the shockingly red cardinals begin singing in drab mid-February, no matter what the weather. That?s when my spring hunger begins. Their hopeful songs bring it on. Migrant robins return. My yearning cranks up. By March, garden seeds are on display in the hardware store while hoes, rakes and spades are up front. That gets me salivating.

When I lived in the country I would take lots of spring walks. Each day I would find some new evidence of spring?s arrival, and kept careful records of its progress in my journal.

Entries looked like this: ?March 22: Warm night, first spring peepers heard. March 24: First hepaticas blooming in the ravine. April 2: Balmy evening. Whippoorwills back, and beginning to call. April 9: Some sunshine. Wildflowers like trillium and bloodroot flowering; behind the house, first morel mushrooms. April 14: Sunny day. Saw first indigo bunting in the pasture. May 10: Cool, wet day. Chestnut-sided warblers stranded in the midst of their migration, feeding in red cedars. May 16: Wild pink azaleas blooming in Mad Dog Hollow. The hillside is crazy with hues of pink!?

The next year?s entries would not be the same with variation in arrival and first blooming dates because of different weather, rainfall and temperatures. One spring would be particularly dandy for its wildflower profusion. Another would be memorable for the warbler migration; another for visitation by orioles or rose-breasted grosbeaks. Spring is a rich tapestry of renewal, recurrence and novelty.

And it?s all about beginning again out of the ruins of the year before. The first wildflowers to appear in Missouri every year are the purple hepaticas, and their dazzling beauty is nourished by last year?s dead leaves. Gardeners know intimately the close connection between last year?s demise and this year?s renewal; they can see it in the very fertility of their soil. Out of the mulch of last autumn, up from the detritus of seasons of decay, springs new life in infinite variety. Life is born of muck and rot. Nature does it this way. Spring is her conjuring trick, the cards she had up her sleeve all winter long. Spring is a quickening of forces as complex as a tree?s buds and as simple as flowing water.

By the simple fact of being alive we participate, for we are part of the community of life that responds to spring. Spring gives the lie to all philosophies of chaos and futility. After you?ve closely watched enough Aprils, Mays and Junes, you have confidence in soil and season; you distrust time less.

Recently I celebrated my 64th birthday. I got a few of those cards that offered condolences. Our culture heaps a half-joking kind of contempt on aging and it seems so wrongheaded, especially for people of faith. Faith asserts that decay and entropy don?t have the last word.

Our Christian liturgical traditions celebrate the ever turning, ever changing, ever renewing cycles of the Earth and God?s life. Our liturgi-cal year holds springtime up to us and shows it for what it is: the very deepest religious mystery. We have a rich heritage of symbol, ritual and ceremony to honor and explore the profound puzzle of spring. Our spiritual tradition offers these liturgical resources to help us. We can?t intellectualize ourselves into faith but we can experience mystery, which has a way of seeding faith within us.

?A creative and poetic church,? writes liturgist Gertrud Mueller Nelson, ?helps us pay full attention to what we might otherwise deem ordinary and commonplace. Rites and symbols use the ordinary and earthy elements of our existence and, by encircling them, ratify, sanctify, complete. The ordinary becomes the container for the divine and safely holds what is uncontainable.?

Spring is not made holy by the liturgy. It is already holy, and has been for billions of years.

What our rites and ceremonies do is help us find meaning in this season for our lives, drinking from the deep wells of the sacred manifest in the world around us. As the Lenten and Easter seasons unfold into Ordinary Time, notice how ordinary and earthy elements -- ashes, purple, water, lilies, candle flames, scents, songs, bread and wine, fastings and feastings -- marvelously accomplish this important work.

When we come to church, we make sense of, we engage, and we celebrate this springtime work, this paschal mystery, that is both entirely magical and completely commonplace.

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Source URL (retrieved on *03/10/2014 - 05:29*): http://ncronline.org/news/spirituality/commonplace-magic-spring