

Coming from the earth: humus, humanity and humility



Douglas Kindschi *director of the Kaufman Interfaith Institute*

It is gardening season again, and as we till the earth we are also reminded that the whole Earth is our home. We have a responsibility to live in our homes in relationship and reciprocity. We wouldn't trash our personal home and must live in our common home with the same kind of respect. I would like to pursue this further into the actual dirt, or earth, that is the base for gardens, as well as the source for what it means to be human.

We know this image well. We are created from the dust of the earth, according to Genesis. And the first man is named Adam, from the Hebrew word *adamah*, meaning earth or ground. At funerals, the committal rite often includes the phrase from the English Book of Common Prayer, "earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust."

The word human comes from the Latin word *humus*, meaning earth or ground. In a meditation, the Franciscan priest and author Richard Rohr wrote: "Being human means acknowledging that we're made from the earth and will return to the earth. We are earth that has come to consciousness. ... And then we return to where we started — in the heart of God. Everything in between is a school of love."

Humus is also a gardening term that refers to the components of soil that are rich in organic matter. It is the final result of mixing yard material like leaves with leftover plant food products and leaving them to decompose into what is called compost. It is the recycling of plant material. Think of it as "earth to earth" for the plant world.

Author and educator Parker Palmer also uses these images in an essay titled "Autumn: A Season of Paradox": "I find nature a trustworthy guide. ... As I've come to understand that life 'composts' and 'seeds' us as autumn does the earth, I've seen how possibility gets planted in us even in the most difficult of times."

THE 'MAJESTY' OF MUD

Philosopher Brian Austin, in his book "The End of Certainty and the Beginning of Faith," tells of hiking with his family along the trails which parallel stream beds in the Great Smoky Mountains. They often return with mud-caked hiking boots. While he finds himself impressed with the majesty of the mountains, it is also (in his words) "the mud, still glistening with the mist that makes dust come to life (that) harbors mysteries as magnificent as the mountains. ..."

"From that mud, from its carbon, nitrogen, hydrogen, oxygen, and assorted metals, a child can be woven. The atoms in that mud, the same kinds of atoms that comprise my children and you and me, have existed for billions of years. ... This mud is spectacular, and we believe that God made it so. This mud is rich, pregnant with

possibility. ... To see ourselves as made of the same stuff that rests under our boots as we journey a mountain path is no insult to human dignity, no affront to the image of God in us; it is rather a reminder of the majesty of inspired mud, a reflected majesty that gives us but one more fleeting glimpse of the blinding brilliance of the maker of the mud."

These authors remind us that in the cycle of life we are closely related to the earth. We have much in common with compost and mud, which contain the chemicals that also make up our bodies. They affirm that we are God-breathed dust, made from the humus. We are mud balls who have been created in the image of God.

A COMMON ROOT

Another word that comes from the Latin root *humus* is humility. We see it expressed by Abraham when he bargains with God to spare the righteous people in Sodom. In Genesis 18 he expresses it thus: "Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes." Likewise, Job in his lamentation refers to God as the one who "throws me into the mud and I am reduced to dust and ashes." (Job 30:19)

Eugene Peterson put it this way: "The Latin words *humus*, soil/earth, and *homo*, human being, have a common derivation, from which we also get our word 'humble.' This is the Genesis origin of who we are: dust — dust that the Lord God used to make us a human being. If we cultivate a lively sense of our origin and nurture a sense of continuity with it, who knows, we may also acquire humility."

Fully understanding who we are requires the realization that we are indeed part of the earth, the soil, the humus, to which we will return. It is only by God's grace that we have life. The confidence and faith that we have is important to affirm, but we must also be humble in recognizing that there is so much more that we do not understand or possess.

As we plant and tend to our gardens this spring and early summer, let it be a reminder that the whole Earth is a garden and our bodies are made of the same dirt and humus that sustains the plants.

Let us also be reminded that every person in our community, be they refugees or immigrants, people who are different in race or class or political persuasion, or persons of a different faith or of no faith, have all come from this same soil. The humus that comprises our bodies also calls us to humility as we interact with all people comprised of the same earth components. We are called to recognize our common humanity with humility.

interfaith@gvsu.edu

Fully understanding who we are requires the realization that we are indeed part of the earth, the soil, the humus, to which we will return. It is only by God's grace that we have life.