

“Lion’s Teeth”

**Homily presented to the
Unitarian Society of Menomonie (WI)
May 27, 2007 by
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Yes, that is a common dandelion I’ve contributed to this morning’s flower communion. *Taraxacum officinale*. We all recognize it because it’s as omnipresent and indestructible as love.

I’d like to tell you why I’ve included this weed rather than the lilacs and irises and peonies and other such more conventional flowers I’ve been putting real effort into. The dandelion is the cockroach of flora. They existed long before our species rose up from the proverbial swamp and after we return to the dust they will continue to be here.

The name “dandelion,” which I’d always assumed referred to the yellow mane of the flower and its propensity for vanity, actually comes from the French *dents de lion*, “teeth of the lion,” and refers instead to the deeply serrated rosette of leaves that poke up from billions of lawns, in abandoned lots, between the cracks in concrete, in the clefts of

mountain crags and skyscrapers, and sometimes tufting out of the useless chimneys of houses where no hearths have burned in decades. They are perennial and rely on bees and flies to pollinate, and when they're ready, the wind carries their seeds on tiny parachutes to new places. Sometimes they fly as much as several hundred meters. They do not need us at all.

Dandelions are often used as a medicine, usually involved with blood, the liver, and gall bladder. Its juices aids detoxification and bile flow, promotes lactation and the immune system, and helps reduce eczema and cough and asthma. The root can be dried and ground up and added to coffee, like its close relative chicory, and the leaves are often delicious in salads (although I'll admit I have to add a lot of butter to make them palatable). And most of us are of an age when we have had dandelion wine.

Had Jesus been born in, say, Kansas rather than in the Middle East, the Sermon on the Mount might have included the following:

No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon. Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? ...Consider the [dandelions,] how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O men of little faith?...therefore, do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Let the day's own trouble be sufficient for the day.

Now don't mistake all this information for anything like love for the dandelion. I relish nothing more this time of year than to walk barefoot among my lawns, swiping the heads off these parasites with a few well-aimed kung fu kicks. There is a deep, satisfying, bottom-of-the-gut joy that comes with yanking a 3 foot long dandelion root

from my gardens. Few things are as pleasurable as watching the beasts disappear under the deck of my lawnmower. I do not love the dandelion. I tolerate the dandelion.

Because, try as I might to eradicate it, the dandelion remains a part of my life as much as a part of my landscape. I cannot escape its existence. I mow and weed and even spray the lawns, and still they come back up.

That, you see, is their unique power. And that, you see, is what we must do.

There have been any number of conversations among us, both here on Sunday mornings and between individuals and in UU World and on websites and in newspaper columns, commenting on who and what we are as religious liberals in a time of religious fundamentalist ascendancy. The odds, everyone is quick to point out, are against us. The time has not come in which we are hunted down and killed for our pelts like mink or seal, but that time may come.

This is what we need to do. We are entering a period of our church history during which two possible things could happen: we remain in a standard orbit until the force of gravity pulls on us and we crash and burn in a decade or less; or we make important, painful, and, yes, even dangerous—dangerous in the sense that anything worth doing is dangerous—decisions that may—and I repeat may—keep us alive as a religion and a congregation that our children and their children will be proud to join. Like all good liberals, our natural reaction when threatened has been to turn on one another, to cluster more deeply into a core ball of the elect, the ones we trust, and the others we aren't so sure of. But my hope is that we emulate the dandelion—stubbornly resistive to any attempt to root us out, to burn us out, and even to the natural tendency of entropy to crumble us from within.

Our messages—that it is better to be alive than to be dead, that to treat anyone as less than the glorious being that he or she is is itself an evil, that children and the people we're responsible for need safe food and safe water and safe places to live, and that these are not starry-eyed ideals but necessities—must be heard. We must endure for these messages to be heard. We must become ubiquitous and obnoxious, unwilling to be pressed from our perch, willing to grow quietly beside the more beautiful and cozened strawberry and rose and lily so to suck up some of their excess nutrient and water until we can elbow those more popular petals aside to take the place we've earned. To endure we need to be as tough, as resilient, and as uncompromising as the common dandelion.