

HEALING OF THE SOIL: WHEN THE LAND ITSELF DEFIES EVIL

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As odd as it may sound at first, many spots dedicated to remembering war are surrounded by gardens or parkland. This is true even in places where blood-letting beyond imagining occurred.

In front of Buckingham Palace there is a memorial garden where, during World War II, vegetable beds shared space with anti-aircraft guns. As I stood in that garden, I imagined the tender shoots of seedlings quaking with every

report from the guns and each bomb dropped by Hitler's Luftwaffe. Flowers grow there now, poppies for young men, as some people still say in the U.K. On the Continent, where memorials are surprisingly few for the terrible Spanish Civil War, I found under the often-toppled Roman walls of Segovia community gardening plots and ramshackle garden sheds. The gardens, in rich, lovingly tended earth, ran right up against the ancient, battered walls. It was ground hallowed by the deaths of thousands, a place where Roman and Vandal, Christian and Moor, Republican and Fascist had fertilized the earth with their life blood. Now cabbages and lettuce march in lines to the walls, again laying siege to the ancient city.

As a neo-pagan who works with gardens and environmental conservation, I was deeply gratified by what I'd experienced in London and Segovia. No finer war memorials could have been built of stone or metal. In fact, though the evil that stained the land was still palpable as a distant sadness, it no longer dominated the place as it does, say, on the grounds of Auschwitz. Now the land again sustains body and spirit.

Upon my return from England and Spain, however, I found that instead of remembering past violence and cleansing the stain of war from the land and our hearts, people at home seemed hell-bent on *more* violence. As I drank my first cup of home-brewed coffee in weeks, the first American voice I heard on the radio justified military action. Our enemies are irredeemably evil, and only war will fix this, the commentator blared at me. In another segment, both the President and his Secretary of Defense raised their voices to the point of screaming. And so it continued: war was the focal point of the several stories that followed, as it had been when I left the country, until the evils of violence and lust for it seemed to run together like one long, slow nightmare.

Most mornings I reach a saturation point and turn off the radio, warm my hands on the coffee cup, and look out the window toward the garden. I thank the Goddess of the Good Earth for the bit of peace I enjoy when I turn the soil. If it's not a workday the keyboard beckons me to write, unless there are gardening tasks to be done. With either writing or gardening, and with so much far beyond my control, I turn inward to reflect on the tiny island of sanity and order created by my words, or by the small patch of earth I cultivate.

In troubling times earth-wise people need to do more, however, than look to our rituals for escape. We might want to use ritual and action to acknowledge, and defy, the

evil done on (and to) the land and the evil of those who are too quick to call others “evil.”
And we should count our losses.

My gardening year usually ends at Samhain, when the spirits of the departed are said to be very close to the living. Every year at that time I gather with friends in our garden for a ceremonial last harvest. Last year it was sage, used to make smudge-sticks to bless our homes during the dark months ahead. We then shared a silent dinner, spiced with herbs from our gardens, at a table where one place was left empty for those who might care to stop in from beyond the veil between our world and the world of spirits. We placed photos and belongings of these folk in the room with us, and I invited two relatives who fell in battle during the Second World War to join us. Their presence, felt at least on that one October night, seemed to defy the cycles of time, of life and death, of the evil we do to each other. During our ritual meal we all sensed a hard-to-part cord connecting the present moment and eternity. It’s a connection we can also make when the seeds begin to sprout, or when the last rose blooms before frost.

These connections with the ancestors and the defiant spirit of the land can inspire us to personal acts that defy evil. Acts of gardening, of sacred ritual, of environmental work, like that empty-yet-full place at the Samhain table, can defy death, contest evil, and peacefully acknowledge what Nobel-prize-winning novelist Naguib Mafouz aptly calls “careening, unstoppable time.” So as others talk of war I’ll renew my spirit with gardening, starting seeds inside in late winter while watching the sky and the rain-gauge. While the garden sleeps I’ll have other tasks to do, such as raising the maul over my head all winter to dispel anger, splitting wood instead of heads. I will do these things even

though my actions offer no direct solution to wars we fight and wars we plan, our need to exert our mastery over others, our thirst for righteous vengeance.

The lessons I've learned from the patient earth are small: turning off the TV and radio, putting together workshops and columns about sacred gardening, writing a few letters to the editor and our elected officials. These gestures may change nothing, just as I've gotten breathless talking to friends who should know more and talk less about killing. But taking any reasonable action is better than silence in the face of evil or the inclination to it. So in Spring I rouse myself to write letters, columns, and share whatever scraps of wisdom that have fallen my way, even as I set out the first rows of plants that will march across my raised beds defiant of late frost, scorching sun, and evil.