It is almost garden season! My mom is obsessed with her garden. She’s one of those people who takes you on a tour of her back yard pointing out the new perennials and the new garden ornaments she buys. She takes pictures of her flowers every year and posts them on Facebook.

She thinks about it all year. Are some of you like her? Gardens seem more loved and valued in this part of the country—we only have a few months to enjoy them. We tend to them and talk about them and spend time futzing with them all spring and summer. I remember thinking how futile it seemed to plant a garden. I’d tell my mom this every year. These flowers are just going to die in a few months, I thought; why bother? So much work! We could just go to the beach or, I don’t know, put out some plastic pink flamingo lawn ornaments and look at those.

It took me years and years to figure out that the flowers dying is the whole point. The flowers will die. And the flowers won’t just die. They will come back. They’ll come back. Every year they will come back. Every year we get to experience this death and rebirth.

The Garden of Eden

I can imagine that the springtime euphoria that some of us will soon feel must have been something like it felt all the time in the Garden of Eden. The flowers never died, so they didn’t have to come back. You all remember the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden? I imagine that garden was lush, filled with aromatic fruit and flowers and butterflies and it was summer all the time. Warm, breezy air. I mean, it was paradise, and Adam and Eve were naked, so it must have been warm.

The thing that was so great about that garden--before Eve was tempted by the serpent and ate an apple--was that there was no pain; no suffering. Have you thought of it that way? There was no pain. I mean, there wasn’t even pain in childbirth until after Eve ate the apple. And let me tell you, childbirth hurts like hell. Thanks, Eve.

But in addition to no-pain childbirth, there wasn’t any killing or meanness or power struggles or inequality or racism or language barriers, or religious war, or war at all. There wasn’t pettiness and jealousy and family fights. There wasn’t any bullying or gay bashing or terrorism. There wasn’t cancer or heart disease or car accidents or sickness or divorce or betrayal or other deaths. There wasn’t any death! There wasn’t even any rotten fruit, I imagine.

And Adam and Eve were seemingly discontent to live in paradise. Pain was covered over. Pain was stuffed. It was paradise, yes, but Eve, at least, still yearned for something more. She ate that
apple despite God’s warnings not to. Living a pain-free existence, I suppose, is not as idyllic as it sounds. She was willing to risk it all simply because she was curious. I imagine her naivete must have bored her senseless.

My mom grew up in Ohio in the upper-class suburb of Cleveland called Shaker Heights. Her relatives there are all wealthy, and they live in Eden. Well, if you can call an endless golf course, country club world Eden. Some people do! This is a place where it is easy to stuff pain. Stuff pain with money and beautiful things and beautiful landscapes and people who don’t talk about the bad things. Maybe you know of places like this from your own experience. Little private Edens.

My mom loves her family deeply. They are extremely kind, friendly, loving, salt-of the earth people. Pious, self-made millionaires in their own right. And my mom has some of these positive, optimistic tendencies, too. It can be annoying. I call them her “Ohio moments.”

However, she rolls her eyes sometimes when she describes her overly positive conversations with her family. “How ya doing, Beth?” “Oh, I’m OK.” “Terrific!” They exclaim. Everything’s terrific. They love the word “terrific”. “How’s your son?” “Well, he dropped out of school this year, and we are worried he has depression.” “Oh,” they say, an almost imperceptible trace of concern across a slightly furrowed brow. “But is he still playing his music?” they will ask. “Um, yes…” she’ll say back. “Terrific!” They exclaim. Conversation over.

And in some sense, in this culture, we all have Ohio moments, don’t we? We all stuff pain when we can’t bear our own. We are content to live on our golf course Edens, or perhaps we are too fearful to leave them.

And I worry about us. I worry that when we encounter our own suffering we won’t be able to put a terrific spin on it. I worry that our Edenic tendency to stuff pain will lead to the inability to acknowledge the depths of it all; to ask for help; to go to the bottom.

**Garden of Gethsemane**

We can only stick with others’ pain if we can stick with our own. If we are to accompany people in the depths of their pain, we need to admit to ourselves that things aren’t always “terrific,” and that this here world ain’t nothing like Eden. This is hard to do! It means facing up to our own mortality; our own brokenness; our own wounds; our own bottom.

So I want to talk about the bottom for a while, because everyone has a bottom, except maybe God. Even my relatives in the country clubs of Ohio. Even you. Certainly me. So let’s talk about the bottom. It is Lent after all, a season in which we go into our deserts, hopefully coming out and realizing that the whole world is a garden.
Thankfully, our metaphorical gardens are a little more varied than just the Edenic version. There are a few times in the Christian Bible when Jesus is so inescapably human, particularly in his times of greatest suffering. So, travel with me, if you will, to a different garden: the garden of Gethsemane. It’s a famous garden -- the place where Jesus was the night before he was killed. I’m going to read about it to you from Matthew 26:36-50.

Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, “Sit here while I go over there and pray.” He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.”

Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.”

Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. “Couldn’t you men keep watch with me for one hour?” he asked Peter. “Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.”

He went away a second time and prayed, “My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done.”

When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. So he left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing.

Then he returned to the disciples and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and resting? Look, the hour has come, and the Son of Man is delivered into the hands of sinners. Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!”

The significant part of this text for me is that Jesus doesn’t go into the garden to face his greatest suffering alone. No. He brings friends. And he asks his friends one simple thing. He asks them to stay awake. Stay awake -- that’s it. He doesn’t ask them to wrestle with God with him, to pray for him, to help him hide, to fix what’s about to be broken … no. He just asks them to stay awake for ONE HOUR. And for whatever reason—maybe they are too scared, too selfish, too defended against their own pain—whatever the reason…they fall asleep not once, but three times. And we see that Jesus is in great distress, not just because he knows he will suffer and die, but because he will have to do this alone—to face this fate alone. His friends can’t stay awake. Can you not stick with my pain for one hour? He asks. And the answer is “no.” His friends do the equivalent of putting their fingers in their ears and saying “la la la.”

Perhaps you have had this experience before. Perhaps you have been to your Gethsemane and have asked friends to stay awake—friends who just couldn’t. Perhaps you have lost a child or a parent and someone tried to paint it pretty by giving you a platitude like “maybe God just needed one more angel.” Or perhaps a friend of yours has asked you to walk with her into the garden of her breast cancer diagnosis, and you have put off calling her, frantically checking yourself for lumps in the shower daily, terrified you’ll be next.
But all we need—all these friends need—is for us to stay awake. Not solutions, not fix-its, not pain-reducers; just to stay awake. To sit at a bedside; to keep vigil; to hold a hand; in silence. This is how we bring God to one another.

Edward Frost of Princeton puts it, "We have heard that God is all the goodness, all the sweetness and light and joy in the morning. But God is the cries we do not hear. The depth of hell the other suffers. The darkness and confusion of the permanent night. God may be the chaos—missed in our neatness and order—who shuns the glistening temple to walk the gray repositories of twisted and divided souls. To seek such a God is to seek discomfort, to walk in another's broken shoes, through the eye of an inner storm, and be bent and broken with him. God is the one who cries, 'Know me!' through the mouths of those we choose not to know. We have heard that God is love, but God is the demand to love, a demand unheeded, thus a God undiscovered. Press through the grown-over path, to another's loneliness, and there, with him, the pain and the bearer of pain ... is God."

A New Garden

And as representatives of God, as bearers of pain, the church can really be the friends who fall down on the job, too. We know of so many churches that are interested in easy answers about suffering—you suffer because it is God’s will—you suffer because you are being punished. And our UU tradition isn’t immune to falling asleep to suffering. We can dismiss so easily the pain of others when they need something more than we can give. Our lack of answers, or our tendency to dismiss answers we don’t like, can be just as damaging.

There’s this song that is really popular in evangelical and fundamentalist circles; we heard the soloists sing it beautifully for the offertory just now. It is a garden song...a song about Jesus walking in the garden with us in our suffering. I grew up UU, so I never heard it until I YouTubed Elvis Presley singing it. But maybe you know it.

The refrain is:

And He walks with me, and He talks with me,
And He tells me I am His own;
And the joy we share as we tarry there,
None other has ever known.

I want to tell you a story about this song, because I believe it is a cautionary story for us liberal religious folks. Carl Scovel, the minister of King’s Chapel for 30 years, and a UU saint in his own right, delivered the Berry Street Essay in 1994—an essay delivered each year for the ministers at our General Assembly. Carl delivered his essay called Beyond Spirituality. In it he said that at the heart of all reality lies a good intent, a purposeful goodness, from which we come, by which we live our fullest, and to which we shall at last return. This is the supreme mystery of our lives, he said. This goodness is ultimate—not fate, not freedom, not mystery, energy, order nor finitude, but this good intent in creation is our source, our center, and our destiny. Our work
on earth is to explore, enjoy and share this goodness. “Too much of a good thing,” Mae West said. “is wonderful.” Sound theology.

One of Carl’s two chosen respondents was a longtime friend and UU colleague and iconoclast humanist, Deane Starr. Deane disagreed with Carl’s statements in his essay, but in closing Deane led the group in a spontaneous singing of the hymn “In the Garden” with the words ‘And He walks with me and He talks with me and He tells me I am his own.” Deane had grown up fundamentalist and he picked that song part in tribute to Carl’s theology and part, as he was soon retiring, to bring his own life full circle.

A few days later Deane called Carl and said “did you notice how many of the UU ministers that were in the audience were crying as they sang the hymn?” He said he found out that earlier in the day, while he and Carl were in their rooms busy working on what they would say, Tex Sample was addressing the other UU ministers. He was telling them about how he, a liberal Christian, looked down on fundamentalists and used to make fun of their ways of talking and singing and in his presentations would mock-sing that hymn, “In the Garden.”

Until one day a woman came up to him afterwards and said “I want to tell you something about that hymn. From the time I was about ten years old until I was about fourteen, my father raped me almost every day of my life. After he was finished I’d put my clothes on, and I’d go out into the backyard, and I’d walk slowly about the garden and I’d sing that hymn. It was the only thing that kept me sane, the only thing that kept me from killing myself. Because when I sang that hymn, I knew I was somebody. I hope you’ll remember that the next time you sing it.”

We are so used to poking fun of theologies we don’t agree with—so used to shutting out this need for someone to walk with us in our pain—so scared of our own need/our own pain/our own fear of our own finitude. We forget that we are needed. We forget that we are needed to hold one another in love, to walk in the garden of our own suffering, bringing companions with us on the journey, telling each other that we are each other’s own.

So, I want to talk about a new garden. A garden in which we walk with one another and with the Love that holds us and makes us whole in our suffering; a garden that allows us to go deeply into our pain and have companions on the journey—companions who don’t turn us away, who don’t try to look for a “terrific” in our suffering, who don’t mock the way we make sense of it. A garden that is open for all of us.

There is an old Eastern legend which tells us that "The gods became jealous of humanity, and they were fearful that the gift of divinity would be stolen by them, so they had a council. And some said, 'Let us place our gift in the skies.' Others said, 'No, they will search the skies; they will even fly.' And others said, 'Let us put our gift of divinity in the depth of the ocean.' And the reply was, 'No, they will plumb the depths of the ocean. Someday they will be on the floor of the seas and they will find the gift.' And the wisest of the gods said, 'Let us hide divinity WITHIN them. That is the last place they will look.'"
Let us look for the divinity within ourselves so that we might offer it to one another, in the depths of our deepest need. All we need to do is stay awake—to our own suffering, and to the suffering of the people who we are called to serve, which is every person we encounter.

May we wake up and walk.