

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Rappahannock  
May 8, 2016  
Sara Mackey©

## “Maximize Your Manure”

*This headline found in a farming newspaper’s ad section was somewhat startling, but it has some remarkable theological implications. Come join us and Sara Mackey to reflect on what it might mean to maximize our manure, and how the Universe might be calling us to literally and spiritually change our world by doing that.*

At the seminary where I work, all the mail that isn’t addressed to a specific person comes to me. One thing we receive once in a while, for reasons that are mysterious to me, is a newspaper called The Delmarva Farmer. Occasionally we get notices saying our subscription will run out if we don’t renew it. We don’t have a subscription to The Delmarva Farmer and have never renewed the subscription that we don’t have, and somehow, in spite of all that, The Delmarva Farmer continues to land on my desk from time to time. Recently when I was skimming through it, I found a full page ad with a headline that said. “Maximize Your Manure”. Well, I thought, that is not a bad idea, and beyond that, I suspect there are some profound theological implications buried in that command: maximize your manure.

Naturally, I read the ad, and it assured me that manure is a valuable source of fertilizer, which I already knew. It also explained that I could buy a product called More Than Manure Nutrient Manager, whatever that is, to protect my manure from phosphorous lock-up, whatever that is. The ad said, “That’s turning waste into potential!” and I said to myself, “That will preach”.

Before I could proceed, I had to look up phosphorous lock-up, which became a distracting endeavor. There’s a lot of information about phosphorous

on the internet, but in essence, what I gleaned was that phosphorous can somehow get bound together with other elements—that is, locked up, I suppose—so that it can't get used in the soil. Using More Than Manure Nutrient Manager prevents that waste, so the ad tells me.

We know that manure has the potential to become fertilizer, and we know that fertilizer can nourish and sustain growth. What on earth do we do with the metaphorical manure that is a natural part of every life, and which we have to manage all the time? What do we have in our lives that serves as our own personal More Than Manure Nutrient Manager? What causes lock-ups that keep our manure from becoming effective fertilizer? The more I thought about this, the more I realized that my engagement with this topic involved a lot of lock-up and not so much fertilizing. Maximizing manure can be done in two ways—one positive, one negative. I knew I *should* be able to come and talk about all the ways that we can transform our metaphorical manure into nourishment that we can learn from, but I kept noticing ways that I maximize manure by stomping around in it until it is spread all over the place and all over me.

Let me give you an example, in two parts: I was with my grandson not long ago, and that visit gave me some ideas about what I could make for him. I love to make things, and I hope he will love to make things as well, and I want to show him at an early age that you can make good stuff out of things that you would normally throw away. I hope that can be part of his experience now, so that his imagination can be formed by playing with such things.

Okay, that was background, now let's switch gears: not long after my visit with my grandson, I had a conversation with somebody at work about something she wanted me to do that was more important to her than it was to me. Our

perspectives did not mesh, and I became somewhat frustrated about the conversation and its results. It seemed that afterwards I was constantly having imaginary conversations with this colleague inside my head, making my point and reacting angrily to the points she was fictitiously making, becoming more and more angry and agitated over an event from the past that was already finished. Eventually I realized what I was doing and asked myself why. My brain and my thoughts are within my control—I have other things to give my attention to besides this one event that has made me angry. I can switch my perspective and think about things that give me pleasure—making things for my grandson to take with me when I visit, for example, or an upcoming visit to friends, or going to the yarn store. When I find myself having one of those imaginary frustrated conversations, I am maximizing my manure in the wrong way. I don't have to stay there, though; I can unlock that discontent and shift my attention. There's no need to walk around in that manure of anger and frustration until I'm covered in it, when it's often mostly imaginary and when it does not provide anything that I need.

There are other, more positive, ways to maximize our manure—to turn it into fertilizer that will enhance our growth. Going back to our original question, what do we do with the metaphorical manure that is a natural part of every life, and which we have to manage all the time? What in our lives serves us as our own personal More Than Manure Nutrient Manager? How do we turn our manure into fertilizer, so that it can help us grow or deepen or change? As I have been thinking about this topic, I've become more aware of when my own brain is keeping my attention on negative concerns and emotions, and I can remind myself now when I all of a sudden realize it: "I'm maximizing my manure", I tell myself, when I'm fuming or worrying or having those imaginary conversations

about annoyances that are already in the past. I'm not maximizing my manure in a positive way, so the first step is noticing what I'm doing. Then I can be intentional about seeking fertilizer instead of using my energy embracing negativity.

Sometimes the manure isn't important enough or plentiful enough to try to turn it into fertilizer, and in that case, once I've noticed it, I can walk away from it and give my attention to other, more positive, thoughts. There are times, though, when it seems as if we're dealing with fields of manure, and I expect each of you can think of some situation in your own lives that represents more manure than you can walk away from. That's when intention becomes useful and serves as an ingredient in our own personal More Than Manure Nutrient Manager. We make a decision to transform this negative situation in our lives by searching for what it has to teach us.

Noticing and intention come first, and engaging the metaphor also serves us well when we need to deal with the negative situations that threaten to overwhelm us. When we can say to ourselves, "I need to maximize my manure here," we can then ask ourselves how to turn it into fertilizer instead of stepping in it and tracking it around. In my own experience, I can approach turning manure into fertilizer through what I call prayer, but by that I mean something other than what may be generally considered prayer. Some may call it meditation, but it's not exactly that, either. It involves silence, breathing (remember how I say we can change the way we feel by changing the way we breathe?), and invoking peace. And, let me be honest, it involves waiting—sometimes lots of waiting. Sometimes all I can do is open myself to the option of transformation and then wait for the Universe to do whatever it's going to do, while I patiently keep watch

and make sure I don't miss any of the signals. Or, maybe I do miss some of the signals, in which case I wait around for the next set of signals. The lessons keep coming to us, over and over again, until ultimately we recognize them. Then the manure becomes fertilizer, and we grow.

If prayer doesn't serve your need, you can maximize manure in a positive way by turning it into stories. Remember I mentioned my visit to my grandson earlier? The day after I left, my daughter in law fell down the steep, narrow steps in their old apartment building while she was carrying him. He was not hurt, but she broke her ankle. There is no way of knowing what it felt like to my grandson to fall down the steps in his mother's arms, and no way of knowing if that experience of the fall, and his mother's hobbling around in a cast, will stay with him, deep in his memory, beyond the point where he can reach it. If it *is* there, though, and if it ever comes to the surface, he has completely by accident created something that will unlock that manure so that it can become fertilizer.

Not long after that fall, my daughter in law posted a photo online: baby's first photo, she called it. The baby had taken the picture with her phone. It was an entirely random accident; he did not even know he was taking a picture and certainly did not plan for it to tell a story. It does exactly that, though—at the bottom of the photo, two baby feet in bright, goofy socks. Then a small expanse of floor, and at the top of the photo, part of Mom's foot, with a couple of toes showing, and the tip end of a crutch next to it. I'm keeping that photo, very deliberately, so that some day we can talk about the story that lives in it:

Do you remember that day, we can eventually say to my grandson, when you were a baby and you and Mom fell down the steps? See, your feet are OK,

nothing happened to you. Your mom kept you safe. And look, she hurt her foot, but see that stick? That's a crutch, that's what she had to help her walk. And look at her foot now—it's all healed, and she doesn't have to have a crutch to help her walk. That was just for a little while.

The story in that accidental baby photo can be the More Than Manure Nutrient Manager that unlocks the grip that the fall may have on my grandson, so that he can learn from his own random action that safety and healing are the end result of that fall.

Some people will tell us that we find meaning where there is no meaning, just as I found meaning in that photo, and it is therefore of no value--not real. I disagree with that perspective. *Seeking* meaning is what lets us find meaning, and we find it because we *are* seekers, and because it is there. One of the most powerful and effective ways to seek meaning is to tell our stories, and by doing so, unlock the fertilizer within them. By telling our stories, we put our own More Than Manure Nutrient Manager to work in our lives and in our challenges. We maximize our manure so that we can use the fertilizer contained in it, so we can find the meaning in what seems to be just mess. We open ourselves to the possibility of fertilizer, we tell our stories, and we wait for the meaning to unfold, so that we can maximize our manure in a positive way. And also, while we're at it, we watch where we step.

And so may it be.