

# Earth Teacher



FIRST UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST  
SOCIETY OF BURLINGTON

## COMPOST



## JOURNALING PROMPTS

- **Relationship:** What is my current relationship with this Earth Teacher? What do I like about my current relationship? What do I want to change about it?
- **Wisdom:** What wisdom/caution/lessons does this Earth Teacher have to share with me? What do I need to do to be receptive?
- **Deep Time:** What relationship might this Earth Teacher have had with an ancestor of mine? What relationship might this Earth Teacher have with a descendant of mine?

# QUOTES

Gardening is often a measured cruelty: what is to live and what is to be torn up by its roots and flung on the compost to rot and give its essence to new soil. ~ Marge Piercy



We have to look at our own inertia, insecurities, self-hate, fear that, in truth, we have nothing valuable to say. When your writing blooms out of the back of this garbage compost, it is very stable. You are not running from anything. You can have a sense of artistic security. If you are not afraid of the voices inside you, you will not fear the critics outside you. ~Natalie Goldberg



I have always looked upon decay as being just as wonderful and rich an expression of life as growth. ~ Henry Miller



There is no such thing as death. In nature nothing dies. From each sad remnant of decay, some forms of life arise. ~ Charles Mackay



Earth knows no desolation. She smells regeneration in the moist breath of decay. ~ George Meredith



The better part of the man is soon ploughed into the soil for compost. By a seeming fate, commonly called necessity, they are employed, as it says in an old book, laying up treasures which moth and rust will corrupt and thieves break through and steal. It is a fool's life, as they will find when they get to the end of it, if not before. ~ Henry David Thoreau



"Both suffering and happiness are of an organic nature, which means they are both transitory; they are always changing. The flower, when it wilts, becomes the compost. The compost can help grow a flower again. Happiness is also organic and impermanent by nature. It can become suffering and suffering can become happiness again."

~ Thich Nhat Hanh



Composting is like nature's way of telling us that even our mistakes can be turned into something valuable.

~ anonymous

# POETRY

## **Compost Happens** by Laura Grace Weldon

Nature teaches nothing is lost.  
It's transmuted.

Spread between rows of beans,  
last year's rusty leaves tamp down weeds.  
Coffee grounds and banana peels  
foster rose blooms. Bread crumbs  
scattered for birds become song.  
Leftovers offered to chickens come back  
as eggs, yolks sunrise orange.  
Broccoli stems and bruised apples  
fed to cows return as milk steaming in the pail,  
as patties steaming in the pasture.

Surely our shame and sorrow  
also return,  
composted by years  
into something generative as wisdom.



## **Earthworms** by Lynn Ungar

Imagine. The only thing that  
God requires of them  
is a persistent, wriggling, moving forward,  
passing the earth through  
the crinkled tube of their bodies  
in a motion less like chewing  
than like song.  
Everything they encounter  
goes through them,  
as if sunsets, drug store clerks,  
diesel fumes and sidewalks  
were to move through our very centers  
and emerge subtly different  
for having fed us — looser somehow,  
more open to the possibility of life.  
They say the job of angels  
is to sing to God in serried choirs.  
Perhaps. But most jobs  
aren't so glamorous.  
Mostly the world depends upon  
the silent chanting underneath our feet.  
To every grain that enters: "Welcome."  
To every parting mote: "Be blessed."



## **Rot** by Robbie Nester

The garbage reeks, full of leftovers and moldy lemons, mats of dryer lint, like a skin of algae on the surface of a pond. I ought to take the full bag out, but I'm reluctant to engage with the decay that's at the heart of everything.  
And yet, if one could study it impartially, without a trace of terror or repulsion, the vivid shades of dissolution rival the desert after rain, spilled paint spreading to the far horizon. Even the odors hover on the edge of almost beautiful, as full as perfume's ripe musk, purple as the jacaranda. It can even be delicious— at least to some. Consider the fragrant funk of some ripe cheeses, durian, or kimchi, thousand-year-old eggs, buried in the yard until the yolk marbles greenish black. Without rot, none of us could thrive.

Everything that grows feeds on what went before, ocean reefs seeded by a wealth of putrid whalefall, ancient cities stacked one atop another, rising from the same foundation, fertile ground for everything to come.



### **Enriching the Earth** by Wendell Berry

To enrich the earth I have sowed clover and grass  
to grow and die. I have plowed in the seeds  
of winter grains and of various legumes,  
their growth to be plowed in to enrich the earth.  
I have stirred into the ground the offal  
and the decay of the growth of past seasons  
and so mended the earth and made its yield increase.  
All this serves the dark. I am slowly falling  
into the fund of things. And yet to serve the earth,  
not knowing what I serve, gives a wideness  
and a delight to the air, and my days  
do not wholly pass. It is the mind's service,  
for when the will fails so do the hands  
and one lives at the expense of life.  
After death, willing or not, the body serves,  
entering the earth. And so what was heaviest  
and most mute is at last raised up into song.



### **Feeding the Worms** by Danusha Laméris

Ever since I found out that earth worms have taste buds  
all over the delicate pink strings of their bodies,  
I pause dropping apple peels into the compost bin, imagine  
the dark, writhing ecstasy, the sweetness of apples  
permeating their pores. I offer beets and parsley,  
avocado, and melon, the feathery tops of carrots.  
I'd always thought theirs a menial life, eyeless and hidden,  
almost vulgar—though now, it seems, they bear a pleasure  
so sublime, so decadent, I want to contribute however I can,  
forgetting, a moment, my place on the menu.



## **Compost** by L. Mark Finch

When I've left my husk and you've had your weep,  
Toss me out on the compost heap.  
Mix me in with the leaves and such  
And sprinkle some water -- it won't take much.  
Stir well with a fork, or whatever you've got,  
Do what it takes to help me rot.  
And when I've become a rich, dark soil  
Plow me in, and I'll start my toil  
Of nourishing worms, and likewise roots  
And pushing up some tender shoots  
Of grass, and veggies, and bushes, and trees  
Perches for birds, and banquets for bees.  
I'll make plants fruit! I'll grow food for critters!  
I'll raise up some corn, and you can make fritters!  
It'll be lots of fun -- I can just hardly wait!  
To nurture new life will really be great.  
And I'll laugh at you some, if I get on your shirt  
And you get annoyed and start calling me "dirt."  
When dogs track me in Winter, my name will be Mud  
But when Spring comes around, I'll be in each bud.  
Hug a tree in the Summer, and pat on its bark,  
Rest yourself in its shade -- say, "You're looking good, Mark!"  
If you miss me in Autumn, well heck -- look around  
I'll be in the leaves, the river, the ground.  
Sprinkle me some where the wildflowers grow, and  
I'll be in the trilliums, pushing up through the snow  
And I'll be in the worms when the young robins feed  
And provide a soft cradle for each dying plant's seed.  
When a fish eats a worm (if the robins are sharin')  
There's a good chance I'll fly in the wings of a heron.  
Whatever you do, don't build me a tomb --  
I haven't been bad! Don't lock me in a room!  
I want to be free -- instead of riding my bike, I'll  
Go out and pedal on Life's great cycle

And I'll get around, all over this Earth,  
Following the path of life, death and rebirth.



### **Compost** by Dan Chelotti

There is magic in decay.  
A dance to be done  
For the rotting, the maggot strewn  
Piles of flesh which pile  
Upon the dung-ridden earth  
And the damp that gathers  
And rusts and defiles.  
There is a bit of this  
In even the most zoetic soul —  
The dancing child's arms  
Flailing to an old ska song  
Conduct the day-old flies  
Away to whatever rank  
Native is closest. Just today  
I was walking along the river  
With my daughter in my backpack  
And I opened my email  
On my phone and Duffie  
Had sent me a poem  
Called "Compost." I read it  
To my little girl and started  
To explain before I was three  
Words in Selma started  
Yelling, Daddy, Daddy, snake!

In the path was a snake,  
Belly up and still nerve-twitching  
The ghost of some passing  
Bicycle or horse. Pretty, Selma said.  
Yes, I said. And underneath my yes  
Another yes, the yes to my body,  
Just beginning to show signs  
Of slack, and another, my grasping  
In the dark for affirming flesh  
That in turn says yes, yes  
Let's rot together but not until  
We've drained what sap  
Is left in these trees.  
And I wake in the morning  
And think of the coroner  
Calling to ask what color  
My father's eyes were,  
And I asked, Why? Why can't  
You just look — and the coroner,  
Matter-of-factly says, Decay.  
Do you want some eggs, my love?  
I have a new way of preparing them.  
And look, look outside, I think this  
weather  
Has the chance of holding.



### **This Compost (excerpt)** by Walt Whitman

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Behold this compost! behold it well!  
Perhaps every mite has once form'd part of a sick person—yet behold!  
The grass of spring covers the prairies,  
The bean bursts noiselessly through the mould in the garden,  
The delicate spear of the onion pierces upward,  
The apple-buds cluster together on the apple-branches,  
The resurrection of the wheat appears with pale visage out of its graves,  
The tinge awakes over the willow-tree and the mulberry-tree,

The he-birds carol mornings and evenings while the she-birds sit on their nests,  
The young of poultry break through the hatch'd eggs,  
The new-born of animals appear, the calf is dropt from the cow, the colt from the mare,  
Out of its little hill faithfully rise the potato's dark green leaves,  
Out of its hill rises the yellow maize-stalk, the lilacs bloom in the dooryards,  
The summer growth is innocent and disdainful above all those strata of sour dead.

What chemistry!  
That the winds are really not infectious,  
That this is no cheat, this transparent green-wash of the sea which is so amorous after  
me,  
That it is safe to allow it to lick my naked body all over with its tongues,  
That it will not endanger me with the fevers that have deposited themselves in it,  
That all is clean forever and forever,  
That the cool drink from the well tastes so good,  
That blackberries are so flavorous and juicy,  
That the fruits of the apple-orchard and the orange-orchard, that melons, grapes,  
peaches, plums, will  
none of them poison me,  
That when I recline on the grass I do not catch any disease,  
Though probably every spear of grass rises out of what was once a catching disease.

Now I am terrified at the Earth, it is that calm and patient,  
It grows such sweet things out of such corruptions,  
It turns harmless and stainless on its axis, with such endless successions of diseas'd  
corpses,  
It distills such exquisite winds out of such infused fetor,  
It renews with such unwitting looks its prodigal, annual, sumptuous crops,  
It gives such divine materials to men, and accepts such leavings from them at last.



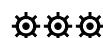
### **Geocentric** by Pattiann Rogers

Indecent, self-soiled, bilious  
reek of turnip and toadstool  
decay, dribbling the black oil  
of wilted succulents, the brown  
fever of rotting orchids,  
in plain view, that stain  
of stinkhorn down your front,

that leaking roil of bracket  
fungi down your back, you  
purple-haired, grainy-fuzzed  
smolder of refuse, fathering  
fumes and boils and powdery  
mildews, enduring the constant  
interruption of sink-mire  
flatulence, contagious  
with ear wax, corn smut,  
blister rust, backwash  
and graveyard debris, rich  
with manure bog and dry-rot  
harboring not only egg-addled  
garbage and wrinkled lip  
of orange-peel mold but also  
the clotted breath of overripe  
radish and burnt leek, bearing  
every dank, malodorous rut  
and scarp, all sulphur fissures  
and fetid hillside seepages, old,  
old dependable, engendering  
forever the stench and stretch  
and warm seethe of inevitable  
putrefaction, nobody  
loves you as I do.

## JOKES / PUNS

What did the compost say to the gardener? “Thanks for giving me a second ‘chance’ to  
shine!”



What did the compost say to the earthworm? “You really wormed your way into my  
‘heart’!”



Why was the compost always invited to the party? Because it's great at breaking down barriers!



Life is like a compost pile – the more you mix things up, the richer it becomes in the end.

# MEDITATION

“All conditioned existence is of the nature to come apart,” observed the Buddha twenty-five hundred years ago. Although this may not be corroborated by the Pali canon, I am confident not only that the Buddha’s teaching was stimulated by upright sitting beneath a sacred pipal tree, but also that in the vicinity of enlightenment there is always a smoking dung heap alive with bobcat bones and rotten melons, arranged to become the deep, black ground of awakening. ~ Wendy Johnson

## IMAGES FOR CONTEMPLATION



