

Live with the Brown

Ash Wednesday. A Christian Holy day of prayer and fasting. The first day of Lent. A day when ashes, made from the burnt palm leaves of the previous year's Palm Sunday, are smudged on the forehead, while the celebrant saying something about from dust you came, from dust you shall return. It marks the beginning of days of sacrifice for some Christians as they vow to give up some creature comfort, be it chocolate, or TV, or alcohol.

For me, Ash Wednesday marks the day to plant caladiums, a ritual I had observed for nearly three decades. If I don't finish planting all of them on that Wednesday, after all 100 bulbs take a bit of time, then without fail I'd have them in the ground the following weekend.

I do not know why this became my tradition. Even though caladiums, a perennial, should come back each year in warmer climates, mine seldom did. So, I planted, knowing that by Easter, tiny plants would have broken through the soil, prepared to grow and spend the summer delighting me with color.

Ash Wednesday, 2021, was different. On that day, most of Houston was without power or water. It was a once-in-a-lifetime event; never before had an Arctic storm reached so deep into Texas nor stayed so long. The aftermath of Winter Storm Uri had left Houston looking brittle and brown. Bushes, plants, trees, even the evergreens had all frozen during those five days of subfreezing temperatures.

Surveying my back yard, I knew enough to remove the mushy parts from damaged plants. The once six foot tall, and equally as wide, philodendron was now bare of its huge, showy leaves and nothing but brown tubular stubs sticking out of the ground.

Sickly looking, yellowed bushes lined the beds, their branches breaking at the slightest touch. They stood as an insult to a landscape once glowing in green. Their lifeless state begged to be pulled out of the ground or at the least cut back to their base.

"Learn to live with the brown." A well-known master gardener advised on his weekly television show cautioning listeners to resist trimming anything for a while. He said it could take a month, maybe more, before we would know if the plants were dead. The green will return, he assured us, but for now, live with the brown.

A month or more? After so many days of cold and gray, that seemed like a lifetime. I wanted my live plants back, I wanted live, growing plants to fill the beds again. I wanted my lawn back, usually green even in the winter, was now reduced to a blanket of thatch.

Dead everything was dead!

Learn to live with the brown. Maybe it was fitting statement to mark the end of twelve months that had been filled with so many deaths. Over a half a million people had died, the results of another once-in-a-lifetime event, the pandemic of 2020.

Learn to live with the brown, I repeated aloud, and then a strange thought invaded my mind:

Just as Mary Magdalene had, just as all the disciples had, during the hours and days after the crucifixion.

Ash Wednesday was the beginning of weeks filled with events leading up to Good Friday. The world must have seemed lifeless and brown to the disciples then, as they struggled with fear and grief, dreading the years ahead without their teacher. Did they weep in loneliness? Did the reality of what had happened crush their spirit, leaving them desolate, without hope?

I have never left a Maundy Thursday service without wondering what that time must have been like for them. The service, which is held the night before Good Friday, recounts the last supper and includes the profoundly moving ritual of washing the feet, just as Jesus had lovingly washed the feet of his disciples.

The end of the service was always somber, and the participants leave in silence. By then, naked and stark after the stripping of the altar, the church was dark. Even the sanctuary candle is removed. The church's emptiness stood as a reminder that Jesus was gone. He was no longer with the disciples. How they must have ached to hear his voice. I remembered a heaviness and sadness that lasted with me long after the days ahead; even Easter Service never totally erased those feelings.

The noise of dog barking snapped me out of my reverie of days long ago and brought me back to reality. I returned to the task at hand: planting caladiums.

It was ten days past my usual time of planting. I spent the afternoon cleaning and refilling pots with fresh soil, digging holes and carefully placing the bulbs in their new home.

Willing them to thrive and bring life back to this place, I prayed that they would soon overwhelm the brown with their brilliant colors of red, pink and white.

I never knew until recently that caladiums are often called the Heart of Jesus.

Perhaps that is why I feel compelled to plant them at this time of year.

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