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In a spring garden, life is stubborn

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A note from Susan: This is the heart of my thinking about life and death.

The pope is dead.

Terri Schiavo is dead.

But I have come alive.

And although Charles and Camilla's wedding has been postponed a day to allow the prince to attend the funeral of the pope, the rhubarb in my yard are right on time.

Their hard, shiny, rosy-red heads are poking through the dirt. I knelt this weekend beside them and rubbed them with my fingertips, anointing myself after a long, gray winter.

The garlic stand an inch tall. The sorrel is thrusting up. And at the base of the dead black-eyed Susans, which I left standing stiff all winter, new green leaves have unfurled.

Life trumps death every time, and we'll know that if we pay attention.

Terri Schiavo's relatives are all afuss about her final resting place. The pope's body will go into a vault, beneath a marble slab. No wonder death seems to most of us like the end. I'm writing this down so there's no uncertainty: Burn my body and scatter the ashes on my garden, to feed what I've planted, and what others will tuck into this spot.

Green and growing

In a garden, immortality is obvious.

Years ago, somebody planted comfrey in front of the house. I didn't know what it was, but I knew it grew three feet tall and bushy and its hairy leaves were bigger than my feet, and it produced bell-shaped purple flowers on a droopy stem, and it seemed to want to take over.

I've since learned that ancients used it to heal broken bones and wounds, and that if you pull off the leaves and lay them elsewhere, they decay quickly and fertilize whatever's around them.

So, I let it live.

Roses. Daffodils. Iris. Apple trees. Peach trees. Crabapples. Pears. The lilacs may be a century old, as old as the house. Someone planted them, and everything else, not I.

I tend them, but barely. The gardeners who loved them live on in them.

As much as I respect the life in my yard, this weekend I spent several hours in a killing mood. I tried to end the life of what must have started as demure grapevines. The person who planted them worried they would not thrive, and tied them to wires stretched between iron posts.

Now, they are thick as my wrist, long and gnarled and climbing high into the trees, strangling them. Some ferocious thorny berry entangled itself with the grapevine, and the two, of a type, don't want to be separated.

But life so strong and flamboyant is scary. Where is its respect? Where is its self-restraint? I do my best to kill them both.

But I know I will only tame them, temporarily. I know that though I cut them to the ground, they will regroup in the dark, rich soil, composed of centuries of decaying life, and will send out new shoots in all directions.

Nature's stamina surpasses my own, and my intellect wins me no points.

Life will win.

These are good lessons for us human beings, to keep us in our place on this earth.

Holiness all around

The pope preached "a culture of life," as if there's a risk it won't prevail.

But it does. We are each sanctified by the life that thrives around us. We called the pope "holy father" but mere men are holy, too, waking with their children in storms of

hunger or fear, rocking them back to sleep. When the children are grown, holy fathers watch from afar, ready with a hand, ready with whatever the life in that child requires.

We all become holy by paying attention and by celebrating what grows at our feet, no matter how small or shy or blemished.