



Propagating Life

Tahmina Shayan

Affiliation: Capilano University

E-mail: tahminashayan@capilanou.ca



Propagating Life

One day, I visit a home-based tailoring business to alter one of my dresses. The tailor and I exchange some brief conversations about the pandemic and life in general. As I am walking out of her house, on one of the shelves by the exit door, I notice a metal pot with jade plants. The tailor snaps one of the leaves of her jade plant and says: “Take this leaf and grow it. It brings good luck. I got it from my friend. She’s from the Philippines. She told me that it brings good luck and money!”



Photo credit Yasmin Shayan

Crassula Ovate, commonly known as the jade plant is a succulent plant with small pink or white flowers. This plant has spread good luck since traveling from its native place, the KwaZulu-Natal and Eastern Cape provinces of South Africa, and Mozambique.

I need this jade plant more than ever before. In the past few months, news headlines, social media conversations, and my family phone calls began with the toll of death and sickness from Covid-19 virus, death and injuries of Afghan children and families from the suicide bombs, the United States drone attacks,



gunshots, and now the re-occupation of the Taliban. Sometimes it feels that the world is giving up on us and time has come to an end. Sitting down in my living room and scrolling down my Instagram account, I find out that one of my friends just lost her father. Not everyone shares their loss and stories of grief on social media. I wonder who else died today and what would have been their life stories.

The fear of the pandemic and the news of close relatives passing away in Afghanistan and Canada imprisons my thoughts and my world into a small bubble, taking my attention away from the signs of life and perceptibility of other realities. I experience time differently. I question what is affecting my relationship with my world. Perhaps, not being able to anticipate how the future may unfold is creating fear and anxiety. Can I let go of predicting my days and begin the day with no previous history, afresh and anew? As I linger with these thoughts, I begin to realize how everything else still lives. Time moves on, seasons still changes, flowers blossoms, rain drops, leaves fall, and birds continue to make nests. I have yet to meet two new babies who were born during the pandemic in my extended family.

I bring *Crassula ovate* home with me, and I search for some soil and a planting pot. I find a dead plant with dry soil inside a plastic pot on my balcony. I go to my room to look for one of the ceramic pots I have made before. I come across a small broken one. This bowl has once fallen from my hand and transformed into a collection of shards. I take the pieces and glue them together to revitalize them. I say to myself that there is still life in this bowl. There is an art to reusing discarded, broken, unwanted, recycled items to create something beautiful, useful, desirable, and valuable.





I fill the bowl with old potting soil from a plastic pot. The sun has dried the soil so much that when I pour water, it soaks it all. I dig a hole in the center of the bowl and place the jade leaf in there. Pouring a bit more water on it, I leave the plant in a bright place away from direct sunlight. A broken bowl now holds the soil and becomes home to *Crassula Ovate*.



While everything seems to fall apart in the world, this little succulent leaf gives life and spreads good luck. After a few weeks, this enigmatic and mysterious plant, grows plantlets from its edges. I start to feel joy as I witness plantlets transform into leaves. One small leaf gives birth to a stem and other leaves. I witness existence, reproduction, evolution, and transformation. I notice that, for anything to exist transformation is a must. Trees lose their leaves so they can blossom again. In the same way, I begin to change with the birth of a leaf and other small events.



Photo credit Yasmin Shayan

As time passes by, one day, I hear the news that my uncle is admitted into the emergency hospital, and he is having surgery. As my parents are about to leave home to visit him, I gently wiggle free one succulent leaf from the bowl, to grow for myself, and I give the bowl to my mother to gift it to my uncle. I continue to propagate more good luck and share it.



Photo credit Yasmin Shayan



This plant's propagation resembles resiliency. It is sad to hear stories of relatives suffering in Afghanistan and their fear of the Taliban, or the new variant of Covid-19, or my parents' great worry about my uncle's surgery, but, like a small leaf's rooting up from the dirt, I also hear stories of resilience, hospitality, care, empathy, and affection. A still and rooted jade plant asks me to pause and become more conscious of my surroundings. The art of propagating of this succulent invites me to see the growth and existence of life and that this piece of jade plant needs to be nurtured with care and knowledge of its life for it to grow. Caring for *Crassula ovata* plant requires attentiveness, sensitivity, devotion, time, and ongoing observation. Looking after her and ensuring that it lives well, invite me to attend to something beyond myself and my job. Placing the plant in an appropriate pot, knowing how and when to provide the right amount of water and sunlight, and periodically attending to it, are some of the ways to begin to take care of it. Whenever I visit homes where I gifted my propagated jade plants, I take a closer look at them, smell and touch them. I wonder if this ongoing act of caring for my plants will build my relationship with it and allow me to develop my care-taking instinct. To take care of things means to see value in them and to devote oneself to them. Often things that are broken, fractured, and have suffered, like the broken bowl, need more care to heal, to become alive and to nurture lives. Care is a practice that needs to be extended to others. I hope to spread the good luck I received from a caring tailor. In retrospect, I realize that both fear and hope are infectious, both having the ability to frame our visions and views about life.

At times, my days may feel longer, foggy, cold, and lonely. Yet, at other times, I feel joyful, grateful, and content. This dichotomy of feeling is beautifully articulated by Jalal ad-Din Mohammad Rumi's poem.



The Guest House

*This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.*

*A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.*

*Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.*

*The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.*

*Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.*

Translated by Coleman Barks



I learn that suffering brings hope, and hope propagates lives. It is this feeling of sorrow that teaches us to appreciate joy. In my experience of propagating succulent leaves, not all the leaves reproduce. One of the jade leaves did not reproduce, became dry, changed colour to a lighter green, and died. It reminds me of how life is temporary and bound to time. Nothing is eternal, neither plants nor humans and our feelings. I observe that these jade plants are not always green and colorful. Over time, they dry and become fragile to my touch. I wonder what causes this leaf’s senescing? As the leaf slowly decomposes in the soil, it turns into dust and becomes fertilizer for future jade leaves and contribute to their upkeep. Leaf senescence shows that death is not in vain. Jade leaves never die; they live on in different forms.

This small leaf holds the potential to rejuvenate life and to create and maintain significant cultural meanings. The process of propagating this plant cultivates cultures of sharing, caring, reciprocity, good luck, renewal, and healing. It is infectiously nurturing joy.

Artist Bio

Tahmina Shayan is an instructor in the School of Childhood Studies at Capilano University in North Vancouver British Columbia, Canada. She is a former early childhood educator. She is interested in children’s artistic practices, cultural studies, globalization, teacher education, curriculum, and pedagogy.