

# *Creative* **Transformation**

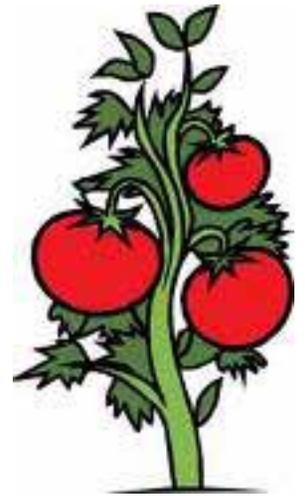
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# Seeds of DELIGHT: toward a spirituality of gardening



by STEVE HOLT

*What was Paradise?  
but a garden,  
an orchard of trees  
and herbs, full of pleasure,  
and nothing there but delights.  
~William Lawson*

Prior to taking up gardening four summers ago, I had experienced little of the agrarian life. I'd visited farms, helped out in others' gardens, and written about food and agricultural issues, but to me, the life of one who plants, cultivates, waters and harvests was largely lost on me. I couldn't understand why poet and farmer Wendell Berry ascribed great spiritual meaning to the cycles and practices of agriculture. ("The Grower of Trees, the gardener, the man born to farming / whose hands reach into the ground and sprout / to him the soil is a divine drug.")

Since starting our garden, I have begun to relate to Berry's poetic farmer and his "divine drug," the soil. The summer after we moved to Boston, we were given a plot in a neighborhood community garden. It was an experiment for both of us, having been raised in the suburbs. I recall not knowing what to plant where, and we ended up letting a more experienced gardener lay out our plot from beginning to end. What's more, with no local water source at the garden plot, we were forced to haul our water about a mile, giving us insights into the reality of many around the world who live in areas where water is scarce. That novice garden is a classic rite of passage for us non-green-thumbed. I'd be surprised if we got a carton's worth of cherry tomatoes the whole season. But here's the thing about gardening: there's always next year.

That next year, we indeed purchased and moved into one of the only houses in our urban neighborhood that came with a sizeable yard—a shared yard in a cluster of townhouses. When we moved in, the yard was underutilized and looking a bit ragged. We immediately envisioned a yard full of raised bed gardens growing delicious vegetables and beautiful flowers. We

envisioned our neighbors pitching in and enjoying the fruits of their labor. (This yard had not one, but two external water sources!) Still, as gardeners, we were as clueless as they come. Our education would come through reading books, Internet articles, and (most significantly) the hard knocks of watching plants die, pests invade, and seeds simply not come up. We would discover, like writer Kathleen Norris, gardening to be an "exercise in faith."<sup>1</sup>

We now have four raised-bed gardens (and a number of plants in pots and directly in the ground). We continue to learn much about maximizing food production in a tiny area, as well as what grows well (and what doesn't) in our sometimes harsh New England climate. Our garden has revolutionized our eating habits, to be sure. Most importantly (and, perhaps, most surprisingly), has been its impact on our souls. In this article, I attempt to lay out a cursory spirituality of gardening.<sup>2</sup> Read this like a series of reflections rather than a comprehensive theological work. No doubt I am not the first to make a case for a spirituality of gardening, nor is gardening a recent spiritual practice. Only in the last century, with the rise of the city and industry in the West, have the majority of Western Christians not gardened or farmed. My insights here are primarily intended for people of faith in the West, where widespread urbanization/suburbanization have created a wide chasm between most of us and our land. Even today, it is quite likely that a large percentage—if not a majority—of Christians engage in agricultural practices, what with the bulk of the Earth's 2.5 billion Christians living in Africa, China, and South America.

Here in the West, though, could gardening be conceived of as a spiritual discipline with implications for how we picture

God, ourselves, and our world? Could we return in practice to lives that embrace more holistically the natural world? And could we do this as an act of engagement with the Earth and humanity rather than one of disengagement (à la Thoreau)? I believe we can and must, and my hope is that this article conveys a few of the spiritual insights I've been digging up since becoming a gardener.

## *God planted a garden*

According to the world's three major monotheistic religions, history began in a garden. The Abrahamic faiths trace their ancestry back to an almost unbelievable story in which the Earth consists of two human beings living in communion with their creator in a garden, which we call Eden. The Genesis account is a poem that reveals that at the core of our being, humans are inextricably tied to the land. Indeed, a strong case can be made that we were, from the beginning, intended to garden. This was the design from the beginning:

<sup>26</sup> Then God said, "Let us make human beings in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

<sup>27</sup> So God created human beings in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

<sup>28</sup> God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

<sup>29</sup> Then God said, "I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food.<sup>30</sup> And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures that move on the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food." And it was so.

<sup>31</sup> God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day.<sup>3</sup>

Genesis 2 describes how God breathed life into humankind in the same way that he sent rain on the earth to raise up the shrubs. It goes on to describe the garden, Eden, that God planted in the east:

There he put the man he had formed. The Lord God made trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

It's interesting to note that even before God punishes the humans for their sin, Adam and Eve are tending to the garden and ruling over the livestock. In this light, "work" (at least in God's garden) wasn't a product of human rebellion, but rather a part of the delights of perfect Eden. It is clear from this text that there is something intrinsically human about gardening—the kind of gardening that produces fruit that is both "pleasing to the eye and good for food." One apocryphal Armenian tale even suggests that when Adam & Eve were expelled from the garden, they were so distraught at the loss of their former life—of gardening together in communion with God—that God had pity and gave them our world, with its trees and plants, in which to live. Building on this in *The Fragrance of God*, Armenian Orthodox theologian Vigen Guroian writes:

Some of the early Christian writers speculate that in Paradise gardening was not drudgery but sheer delight. When Adam gardened, he imitated his Maker in a purely recreative act of cultivation and care. He did not need to subdue the earth in order for it to yield fruit. Rather, the plants were Adam's palette, and the earth was his canvas. There was nothing but delight in the Garden, for Eden itself means "garden of delight."

As we all know, the "garden of delight" would last only a short while. How quickly the first humans lost sight of their humanity, which had been deeply rooted in constant communion with God. Against this backdrop, we can safely conclude that the further from we drift from the natural world the less human we become. This statement calls into question

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the inherent righteousness of endless progress throughout human history and especially critiques the "advancements" of humanity in the last two centuries. And today, in an age in which information and communication come instantly through computers that fit in our pockets, in which "food" we eat has been genetically modified beyond recognition, and in which waiting has become an antiquated pastime, we remain disconnected while experiencing the illusion that we are connected.

One of the symptoms of the disconnected lives we lead—both from our Creator and from each other—is our disconnect from the garden. The land, it seems, has become something to pillage and exploit in our incessant pursuit of progress. Most of us no longer know the origin of our food, if most of it can even be called that. Most of us eat what we want when we want it, and waiting is not even an option. Most of us rarely, if ever, venture into nature to simply marvel. Each of these is a part of God’s original intent for humanity, revealing or manifesting important truths about God and ourselves.

### *Gardening as an act of creation*

We live in the city. Almost anywhere we can travel by foot, bus or subway, we are surrounded by concrete, asphalt and steel. Like almost every urban area, little remains of the natural beauty that originally characterized the land where our city now resides. To be sure, the architecture, shadows, created landscapes, and plazas of the city possess a beauty all their own, but we humans still long for the natural splendor that embodied Eden.

In the same way, even the earth cries out for a return to its unmolested state. As Wendell Berry writes, “the soil under the grass is dreaming of a young forest, and under the pavement the soil is dreaming of grass.”<sup>4</sup> We were fortunate enough to have found one of the only houses in our neighborhood that came with a fairly large (for the city) yard. With triple-decker homes, metal fences, concrete parking lots, and brick highrise buildings on all sides of us, we venture into our yard each spring with seeds or seedlings in hand to re-create a piece of Eden’s lushness and promise. When we garden, we join God in an eternity-long act of remaking that which has been broken. Or, to put it in agricultural terms, we participate in replanting that which has been uprooted.

What should become of our existing cities, then? Well, the biblical narrative points to an eschatological existence that conjoins garden and city in a perfectly symbiotic relationship. In Revelation, the holy city that will come down out of heaven from God possesses all the trappings of the “concrete jungle,” with one notable difference: a river flows through it, and on either side is the fruit-bearing Tree of Life. In this biblical vision, writes Paul Escamilla in *Longing for Enough in a Culture of More*, we’re given “a garden and a city conjoined, a marriage of farm and factory, soil and steel, green and gold.”<sup>5</sup> I like to

think that when I kneel at the base of a 100-year-old highrise apartment building and tenderly place lavender in fresh compost, I am foreshadowing the completion of the new heavens and new Earth—the culmination of God’s ongoing creation.

### *Gardening as a reflection of God*

Our ancient ancestors would have found an article lauding the virtues of agrarian life curious, to say the least. After all, they depended on bounteous harvests each season to simply survive. What’s more, their very survival rested on factors far outside their control, making many farmers acutely aware of their place in the universe. Whether they believed in gods, a god, or simply the majesty of nature, these men and women of old understood at their core that forces existed beyond their temporal lives. Not surprisingly, the humans of scripture are, by and large, agrarian. Many of the stories, divine instructions, parables, and illustrations—no fewer than 140 Bible verses—are agricultural, because that was the world in which they lived.

The rise of rationalism and skepticism corresponded with the start of the modern industrial revolution, in which humans began their gradual separation from the land. An influx of time- and energy-saving inventions and fewer humans (especially in the West) relying on the agricultural cycles for their very lives contributed, I believe, in no small way to the dissipation of supernatural belief in the West.

This very well may be why God chose to begin the grand labor of love in a garden. It’s a place where we must relinquish control to that which is more powerful, and yet the garden is one of God’s favorite canvases on which to showcase creativity and resplendent beauty. In Eden, God would forever do what God does best: create. And boy, was that creation *good*. After all, not only was the food Adam and Eve ate nourishing, it was also pleasing to the eye.<sup>6</sup>

Gardening reveals much about God’s nature. For one, God creates. God is a giver of good things. God’s ways are mysterious, higher than our ways. The appearance of God’s presence varies from season to season. God desires communion with us, the workers who have been placed as stewards of creation. And the list goes on.

At its most basic level, gardening connects humankind with its creator. If we give ourselves over fully to the practice of gar-

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dening, we must give ourselves over to the mysteries therein. Of daffodils back year after year, of a tiny seed that becomes a great pumpkin, of the unmatched taste of a basil leaf. These are mysteries—miracles, even—that human ingenuity had little to do with. Sure, we plant, weed, water, and harvest—but the increase, well, that’s given to us by God.

### *Gardening as a mirror of ourselves*

In his little book *Inheriting Paradise: Meditations on Gardening*, Vigen Guroian gives us some of the most important insights available anywhere into the spiritual significance of the garden. His Armenian Orthodox heritage, whose observance of the liturgical calendar meditates on the everyday stuff of life alongside the Divine, will allow Guroian to do nothing less. At its most basic level, Guroian writes that the garden teaches him much about himself:

When I garden, earth and earthworm pass between my fingers and I realize that I am made of the same stuff. When I pinch the cucumber vine and the water drips from the capillaries to soil, I can feel the blood coursing through my body. Man is a microcosm in whose flesh resonates and reverberates the pulse of the whole creation, in whose mind creation comes to consciousness, and through whose imagination and will God wants to heal and reconcile everything that sin has wounded and put in disharmony.

Somewhere along the way, we’ve forgotten that we humans—like every tree, blade of grass, forest animal, and clod of dirt—are fragile, carbon-based creatures. From dust we came, and from dust we will return—an inevitability we share with every plant that sprouts from the earth. But . . .

The garden also reminds us that death and decay eventually give way to resurrection and new life. Wendell Berry writes that the farmer “enters into death yearly, and comes back rejoicing. He has seen the light lie down in the dung heap, and rise again in the corn.”<sup>7</sup> This is, at its essence, the Christian story. We quickly forget that when the dust settles, love wins the day.

Sixteenth-century mystic Teresa of Avila compared the human soul to a garden in which God delights to walk and rest.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, she asserted that the garden of our soul requires pruning and care when we lose our center and forget that our Beloved lives within us. Dwelling in the love of God through spiritual practices will result in a soul that is fragrant and fruit-bearing.

“ . . . nearer to godliness . . . ”

Vigen Guroian writes that “gardening is nearer to godliness than theology.”<sup>9</sup> He may be right. Theologically, history is bookended by gardens. In the beginning, the garden is where humanity went wrong. But a garden is also where God set into motion the rescue plan to make things right by raising Jesus from the dead. And we are shown a vision in Revelation of a new heaven and new Earth comprised of a garden within a city. The theological significance of gardening cannot be understated.

But maybe Guroian means something much earthier, more *ordinary*. The practice of gardening itself is a spiritual discipline, revealing much about God, ourselves, the beauty and brokenness of the world, nature, death, and life. Like life, it is thorny, messy, ritualistic and lovely, a practice that holds the potential to make us more human—more *godly*.

### *Endnotes*

1. Norris, Kathleen. *The Cloister Walk*. Riverhead Books, 1996.
2. This would include farming as well. However, since most readers are not and will never farm full-time, I am simplifying it to gardening.
3. Genesis 1:26-31, Today’s New International Version.
4. Berry, Wendell. “In a Country Once Forested.” *Given: Poems*. Counterpoint, 2006.
5. Escamilla, Paul. *Longing for Enough in a Culture of More*. Abingdon, 2007.
6. Genesis 3:6, Today’s New International Version.
7. Berry, Wendell. “The Man Born to Farming.” *Farming: A Hand Book*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1971.
8. St. Teresa of Avila. *The Life of St. Teresa of Avila*. Digireads.com Publishing, 2009.
9. Guroian, Vigen. *Inheriting Paradise: Meditations on Gardening*. Eerdmans’s. 1999.

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