Close to God's heart in the garden

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Introduction

'THEN THE LORD GOD PLANTED A GARDEN in Eden, in the east; and there God put the human being whom God had formed' (Gen 2:8). As I turn the pages of the garden catalogues that migrate into our home in early spring and fall, I frequently come across a picture of a lawn ornament proclaiming that we 'are nearer God's heart in the garden than anywhere else on earth'. Why does this sentiment ring true to most gardeners? Is it because lovely gardens evoke the luxuriance of Eden in the story of humanity's home before Adam's fall? Is it merely because gardens are such pleasing places? Or is it because we, made in God's image, discover something about the mind of God when we work in our gardens?

It has become clear to me, since I began a garden ten years ago behind our newly purchased home in northern Ohio in the United States, that the process of creating and tending a garden can become an ongoing discovery of spiritual reality. The truths implanted by the Creator in the natural world have their echoes in the human psyche as well. In the garden, I cannot avoid the inevitable patterns of earthly life. As I kneel to tend my plants, plunging my hands into the soil and wondering at the beauty and complexity of growing things, I discover that I am growing in knowledge and love of the One who imagined such a world. For me, the garden has become one of the bearers of God's revelation to the world, like an alternative Bible – or perhaps an alternative Spiritual Exercises, with chapter headings such as 'Soil', 'Seeds', 'Water', 'Compost', 'Pests' and 'Patience'.

Soil

Good gardeners have long known that the key to a healthy garden lies in the soil. John Jeavons, a guru of the organic farming movement, once said to a gathering, 'I want you all to *stop* growing *crops*. Instead, you must begin growing *soil*.'[1]

When we arrived at our new home in Ohio, the back seat of our car resembling a green jungle ready to be transplanted, we were faced with the nearly impossible task of digging hard clay soil during a summer

drought. Our plants had to spend the summer in pots, while a friend rototilled the garden beds, so that we could add manure and compost. Finally our plants, accustomed to the rich loam of the east coast, would be able to reach deep roots into the earth for their nourishment.

It is easy to forget about the need for our spiritual roots to reach deep, but we can neither blossom nor bear fruit unless they do. The foundation – the soil – upon which our growth is based is, above all, an understanding of who we are in relation to God. Our Hebrew ancestors told a story about human identity which is encapsulated in a single verse in the second chapter of Genesis. 'Then the Lord God formed a human creature of dust from the ground, and breathed into the creature's nostrils the breath of life; and the human creature became a living being' (Gen 2:7). God is pictured as a sculptor, scooping up a handful of soil – in the Hebrew, *adamah* – and shaping a human form. But that form is lifeless until God breathes life – *ruach* – into the form. Then the form becomes *adam*, literally, an 'earthling'.

The physical effort of gardening reminds me that I am created from *adamah*. I am not 'apart from' the earth; I am 'a part of' the earth. My body reminds me of that truth as I tug at weeds, dig a hole for a new shrub, or rake leaves in the autumn. The gravity that pulls me downwards, and sometimes makes muscles and joints ache, reminds me, 'I belong here'. I am an 'earthling', a part of the web of life which I am tending. But that is only part of my identity.

For all my efforts cannot make my garden grow. God's *ruach*, nature's grace, comes to the garden in the form of rain and sunshine. In the same way, the interior garden that is my soul is brought to life by God's *ruach*. I am not only *adamah*; I am also the bearer of God's life-energy.

The garden is the result of our collaboration: nature's gifts, and my effort. Both the mystery of the garden's growth and of my own are a result of what the Greeks call *synergia*: a synthesis of God's grace and human response.

Seeds

If we had planted no seeds in the soil we prepared, the forces of nature would have done the task for us all too willingly, and the beds my husband designed by laying an old clothesline in graceful curves would have sprouted dandelions, plantain and thistles, to name just a few weeds. When we first imagined our garden, we had to ask ourselves, 'What do we want to grow?' Our choices were based upon both necessity and beauty: basil with which to make pesto, lettuce to pluck

fresh for a dinnertime salad, lupin and lavender and clematis because of our love of blue and purple. But we also planted buddleia to please the butterflies and coral bells to lure the ruby-throated hummingbirds.

What seeds will I nurture through my prayer? What values, what images, what narratives, will shape the way I grow in knowledge and love of God? If we do not choose, the culture will do the task for us. In its catalogue – the media – we recognize selfish individualism, the desire for instant gratification, and addictions to material wealth, success, excitement, or various substances. These seeds are blown on the wind of marketing, and bombard us daily. I need to be attentive to their subtle infiltration into my interior garden, weeding out those impulses which will crowd out the life God intends for me.

The values I want to carry within me are life-giving ones, although society may consider them counter-cultural; they include love, commitment, compassion, truth and humility. You can find this alternative seed list in many places: catalogued in the Beatitudes (Mt 5:3–12), demonstrated in the life of Jesus, or exemplified by the saints of the Church who are such dazzling specimens of what Irenaeus of Lyons called 'the human being fully alive'.

Water

When I become preoccupied with my professional life, spending most of my time indoors writing at the computer or travelling to teach or preach, I sometimes forget some of our garden's needs, especially its thirst. The hydrangea in the front border is my conscience; it is better than any rain gauge. When I notice its leaves drooping, I turn on the hose or fill the watering can and once more spend time in the garden, reviving it, as it revives me.

The great mystic Teresa of Avila gives me some gardening advice:

> A beginner must think of himself as of one setting out to make a garden in which the Lord is to take His delight, yet in which the soil is most unfruitful and full of weeds. His Majesty uproots the weeds and will set good plants in their stead. Let us suppose that this is already done – that a soul has resolved to practice prayer and has already begun to do so. We have now, by God's help, like good gardeners, to make these plants grow, and to water them carefully, so that they may not perish, but may produce flowers which shall send forth great fragrance to this Lord of ours, so that he may often come into the garden to take His pleasure and have His delight among these virtues. Let us now consider how this garden can be watered, so that we may know what we have to do . . .[2]

Volumes have been written on spiritual practices which water our interior gardens, but all of them are based on the one truth that is so easy to forget: that we are thirsty for God. In the midst of the busy-ness of life, it is easy to forget our thirst, just as I sometimes forget the thirst of our garden. Caught up in the urgent demands of the present moment – housework, office work, childcare, travel, giving energy to interpersonal relationships, dealing with illness – we find, at the end of the day, that we have not spent time in prayer. We have created our own drought, by neglecting to drink in the life-giving *ruach* of God.

Compost

Because we garden organically, we depend heavily on our compost piles. They include a variety of vegetable material: carrot peelings, strawberry hulls, tomato prunings, the weeds I have dug before they have gone to seed, grass-clippings, coffee grounds, eggshells, corn husks, dry leaves, melon rinds. Although some people might consider the contents of our piles to be 'garbage', this material is not garbage. As it decays, assisted by earthworms as well as by organisms I cannot even see, the compost becomes 'black gold', rich humus that will contribute to our garden's future well-being.

Composting teaches me that nothing in life is, in fact, 'garbage'. The way of nature is the way of use and re-use. When this lunchtime's carrot peeling is dumped on top of the compost pile, it enters into the slow process of becoming fertilizer for next summer's crop of carrots.

I learn, from observing nature's economy, that God intends me also to use all that I am given. I am meant to use not only my gifts and skills, but my sorrows and all the random happenings of life, spreading them out before God to be transformed so that they can become life-giving, both for myself and for the world around me.

I learn from my garden that we are both growing and dying at every moment. Change is as integral to the human condition as it is to the perennial bed or vegetable plot, or even to an indoor collection of house plants. I once asked a friend whose home contained a stunning array of green plants to share her secret. 'My secret?' she replied. 'When they begin to die, I throw them on the compost heap.'

Throwing away plants, whether they be houseplants at the end of their lives or vegetable seedlings at the beginning of theirs, is a struggle for me. The back of the seed package directs me to 'scatter seed in the row at the rate of three to five seeds per inch'. Then come those terrible words: 'When seedlings have three leaves, *thin* to stand two inches apart.' I usually cheat a little, hoping that they will grow equally well if

they are a little closer together, since pulling so many from the ground feels like horticultural homicide.

But the garden tells me that their dying contributes to living. Death is the keystone of nature's life-cycle. If the deciduous trees in the woods behind our house stubbornly clung to their leaves, there would be no black loam at their roots to nurture next year's greenery. Seeds which contained potential life are devoured by the small vole who scampers beside our house, who in turn meets its end when spotted by a hawk's keen eyes. Each death gives life to something else. The things of the earth give themselves for one another and for future generations.

The garden reminds me of Jesus' words, 'Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it' (Mt 10:39). Perhaps the garden wisdom of Jesus will help me overcome my reluctance to let die what needs to die, and to make peace with change. Most of it I cannot control, after all. Our bodies shed dead cells, and new ones take their place. One kind of family life – life with young children – dies, so that it can grow into another kind of family life in which young adults and their parents discover a new mutuality. Our work changes, our friendships change, we move, we age, we lose dear ones. All of the dying is the compost of our lives, even as we resist it. It is, in the end, the way we live.

Every event can become a means of growth for us. When we know this, we can dare to let go of past sorrows and resentments so that we can move on. Like the plants in the garden, we are dying and growing all the time. There is no garbage – only compost.

Weather

The most unpredictable element of gardening is the weather. We have no control over it. The weather makes our attempt to grow a garden an ongoing drama, sometimes collaborating with our efforts and sometimes sabotaging them.

The year we moved to our present home, the earth was cracked and hard, lawns were parched, and the few storm clouds that sailed over our neighbourhood brought rain to the next town, but never to us. The next spring, we decided to install an irrigation system consisting of two hundred and fifty feet of hose made from recycled rubber tires, which I snaked through the beds and buried under an inch of soil. I was ready.

That summer, it poured. Water stood two inches deep at the edge of each flower bed and in the aisles of the vegetable garden. Rain beat down the petunias, the tomatoes and the cucumber vine. Rain beat

against windows. Rain ruined picnics. The only time I used the irrigation system it rained the next day.

There is very little one can do to prevent such ravages of weather. Someday, perhaps someone will figure out how to *dry out* a garden, but it hasn't happened yet. Usually, when the weather does not suit us, all one can do is wait for a better time.

Changeable weather is but one aspect of the apparent chaos that scientists tell us is fundamental to the functioning of the universe. That is as true in spirituality as in physics:

> We are face-to-face with a fundamental change in our view of creation, triggered by new understandings across the scientific spectrum. A natural order which seemed as predictable as Newton's laws has been replaced by one full of 'the heresy of chance.' Freedom, turbulence, and chaos surround us, and we are here to open our minds to these new discoveries.[3]

I know about freedom, turbulence, and chaos from the weather that dries or drenches our garden. But I also know it from other weather patterns over which I have no control, the patterns of life that seem to swirl around all of us. They come in the form of accidents, illness, ageing, financial problems, stressful professional situations or family crises.

Physicists suggest that randomness, or chaos, creates a place of opportunity. It is the place of creation, for if everything was predictable, nothing new would be likely to occur. Our garden reminds me of this fact every spring, when 'volunteers' surprise me: columbines appear in the rose bed, twenty feet from where I first planted them, impatiens and pansies poke up between the flagstones of the patio, and the sunflowers accidentally planted by the birds we have fed during the winter begin to sprout.

The plan I drew on graph paper during a moment when I felt I ought to *organize* the garden never works. Plants spread, plants die, plants move. Yet the garden never fails to be beautiful. Nature, obviously, is a better organizer than I am.

When life's chaos surprises me, I need to remember that God created a universe in which randomness carries the potential for creation. While I would like to be in control, I cannot be. There is only one constant in the universe: the One in whom there is 'no variableness, neither shadow of turning' (Jas 1:17). I need to remember the prayer for travellers, which has made its way into more than one contemporary prayer book, which invokes God's protection 'among all the changes and chances of this mortal life',[4] and then live as if it is true.

Pests

We are not the only ones who enjoy our garden. A large brown rabbit with four offspring, whose nest is directly behind our rose bushes, has taken residence. They content themselves with nibbling on the clover in our lawn, but the hordes of insects who enjoy the garden plants and vegetables are another thing. We prefer not to exterminate any of them, for fear of banishing beneficial insects as well, especially those busy pollinators who fill the air with their perpetual hum. I do make an exception of the Japanese beetles which congregate on my David Austin roses, and which I have been known to crush in my bare hand on occasion. As for the other hungry insects, we either spray the plants with soapy water or decide to share our bounty with them. Deterrence is our preferred strategy: chicken-wire fencing, when needed, to keep the spring bulbs and the rabbits apart, an army of marigold plants bordering the vegetable garden, and the hearty appetites of the insect-eating birds who congregate in our garden. We are perennial optimists that, somehow, the balance of nature will prevail.

This kind of quasi-pest control is complex. How about its equivalent in our daily lives? The longer we live, the more we realize that good and evil are subtly intermingled within ourselves, as well as in the world outside. One way of identifying the difference is to ask ourselves what eats up, dries out, inhibits or poisons God's purpose for us and for the world. Once we have recognized the 'pests', we can choose appropriate means of pest control.

It is clear, as we look at those ills that face us as we begin the twenty-first century, that the seven deadly sins of pride, envy, anger, covetousness, gluttony, lust and sloth are not remnants of the past, but alive and well, eating away at our inner peace and outward effectiveness. They may go under different names – self-righteousness, greed, burnout, depression, despair – but they still consume our resources.

At the root of the problem is the emptiness that is part of the human condition. We are desirous creatures. Empty lungs gasp for oxygen and empty stomachs rumble for food. Empty hearts and spirits are meant to long for God, who alone will satisfy them.

But seductive voices urge us to look for eternal satisfaction in the things of this world, mostly through buying things. The result has disastrous consequences for the garden that is the earth, breeding the overconsumption that creates such terrible patterns of injustice and misery for the world's poor, as well as environmental destruction.

How do we control these alluring pests? They can be controlled only by an antidote traditionally called the 'theological virtues': God's gift

of love, hope and faith. These have been called the 'first-fruits of the entrance of divine grace into the soul'.[5] Slowly but surely, these gifts eradicate the pests which consume our souls, and transform the way we look at the world around us.

We may begin to recognize the wisdom of other cultures, for example. My friend Carol, a Maryknoll sister, has worked for many years with the indigenous people of the Panamanian jungle, teaching in several small villages more than a day's journey on foot from any town. The people live a simple life in conditions we would be likely to describe as poverty. But Carol tells me that there is no word for 'poor' in the peasants' native language. They share what they have with one another, and their needs are satisfied. When she visits the United States on leave, she speaks of her life in the jungle with nostalgia – 'at night, you can see every star in the sky'. Such a simple life, close to the earth, arouses my own nostalgia, although I have never been there. The nostalgia is for something that perhaps I knew in childhood, a kind of Eden in which life is not as complex as I know it now. Kneeling in the garden, digging in the dirt, watering our thirsty plants, may be as close as I can get.

Patience

But I also know sadness in the garden, when I realize how this earth in which I delight suffers because of human civilization. There are too many of us, and we have too thoughtlessly invented a myriad of technologies that pollute and degrade the natural world. Our garden is an oasis and I fiercely guard its integrity, to the best of my abilities. Yet acid rain can fall there, and pollutants can drift from industry a hundred miles away. Changing weather patterns have created winds that tear the branches of the trees and bend the foxgloves to the ground. Climatologists tell us that the flutter of a butterfly's wings in Tokyo has an eventual effect on the weather in London. It follows that the felling of the rain forests and the fumes of fossil fuels will ultimately affect not only our garden, but all life.

How can I respond to this anguishing thought? The garden teaches me that I need to begin *here*, with the way I undertake each task. Do I perform it thoughtlessly, with the intention of just getting it done, or do I perform it consciously, as my gift towards the healing of God's world? I find that, more and more, my gardening time is prayer time, a kind of horticultural t'ai chi expressing a desire to contribute to earth's harmony.

Our garden is thus my conscience and my comfort. It connects me not just intellectually but somatically with the earth. The nurturing instinct I draw upon as I work there is heightened, increasing my concern and compassion for all creation: the rivers and mountains, fields and oceans, meadows and deserts, humans and all other species.

Yet gardening comforts me as well, giving me perspective on time and my place in it. It teaches me that, while what I do is important, it is limited. I can plant and weed and water, but then I have to wait. For then God takes over. It may seem an eternity between the time I plant the tulip bulb in October and the time the blossoms appear in May. It may seem as if the nasturtium seeds I plant will never sprout. But then the miracle happens – the miracle of growth, of new life, of *ruach*.

Above all, the garden teaches me joy. It helps me notice the small things: the wondrous world inside a tulip blossom; the heady fragrance of a lavender border; the spider web sparkling with morning dew; the branches of the crabapple tree, angular as a Chinese watercolour. Each element in our garden exults in merely being itself, and I hope I am gradually learning to follow suit. Like the miracle of the garden's growth, this will be the gift of God, and will take time.

Meanwhile, I cultivate, sow, weed and water my life, trying often to seek God's heart – God's creative, aching, compassionate, loving and life-giving heart – in the garden that teaches me how.

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NOTES

1 John Jeavons, 'Sustainable microfarming', an address at the Earth and Spirit Conference in Portland, Oregon, 15–17 November 1991, on Audiotape XT-9 (Boulder, CO: Sounds True Conference Recording).

2 Teresa of Avila, *The life of Teresa of Jesus* (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1960), p 127.

3 Frederic Burnham, 'Telling a new story' in *Trinity News* 38:2 (1991), p 9.

4 *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: The Church Hymnal Corporation, 1977), p 832. This prayer, originally from the Gelasian sacramentary (mid-eighth century), was a collect in a votive mass for travellers.

5 F. P. Harton, *The elements of the spiritual life* (London: SPCK, 1960), p 30.