

From Exile to Ecospirituality - Spiritual Lessons in the Garden

Sermon on Jeremiah 29:1, 1-4, 31:3b-5, 12

Trinity United, Ottawa

Sunday May 21, 2006 on 'Gardening Weekend'

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***“Plant gardens and eat what they produce...
seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you.”***

Our scriptures are seeded with images of gardens, from the Garden of Eden in Exodus to the Easter resurrection story where Jesus is mistaken for the gardener. Did you know that every one of Jesus' teaching parables is nature based - about growing things? His metaphors of seeds and plants, vines and soil spoke meaningfully to the life experience of people whose day-to-day relationship with growing things was fundamental to their survival. Just as our relationship with growing things is still fundamental to **our** survival - though we in the cities are prone to forgetting this!

Today's reading is a letter from the prophet Jeremiah in Jerusalem, to the crème of Hebrew society, who had been taken into exile by Babylonian captors. The prophet's advice to his people was to take root where they were - to "be here now". To work with for the good of Babylon - to "love the ones you are with" - even their enemies! To plant and grow and reproduce, trusting that the people would - in God's time - return from exile to plant on their own home lands once more. Jeremiah said: plant - and hope!

This is 'Gardening Weekend', when the wisdom of our Canadian agrarian tradition pronounces it right and good for us to plant in our own little patches of land. The frost is past. We can return after winter's exile to our hands-on relationship with the soil that surrounds our homes, or fills the pots of our window and balcony gardens. Gardening weekend is a time of return, isn't it? We too, are once again compelled to plant - and hope!

As we celebrate our return to our gardens this weekend, it seems timely to explore a biblical proverb quoted by Donna Sinclair in her wonderful book 'The Spirituality of Gardening: ***‘Speak to the earth, and it shall teach thee.’***

Jesus taught with images from the garden. What are the spiritual teachings and learnings for us in our gardens? Gardening itself is a spiritual practice. Don't we stand in our gardens and stretch up like climbing clematis toward the sun, in praise of the Creator? Don't we deepen our understanding of creation's foundation, by rooting in the soil like a new maple tree? Don't we widen our circle of interdependent relationships within creation, as we work toward finding our place and our balance amidst the flowers and the bugs and birds and the weeds? Faces to the sun, down on our knees, hands digging deep, gardening is a 'body prayer' that engages us as whole beings - body and mind and soul. Gardening engages us as co-creators with God in our human-sized patches of Eden.

'Spirituality' is dictionary defined as: "of, from or related to God, concerned with or relating to the soul". I think of spirituality as our capacity to relate with our Creator, through all manner of caring connections, creativity and compassion with all of Creation. Gardening is one of the many practises that can grow our spirituality. If we are aware and attentive, through the gentle, day by day rituals of watching and weeding and watering, we can continually grow along with our gardens. We can heal ourselves and stretch our capacity to relate more widely and more compassionately, with others and with all of Creation.

Gardening naturally elicits our awe and praise, doesn't it? Especially in this Spring season, the miraculous greening of the trees and the delicious hues of the tulips evoke our spontaneous poems and prayers of gratitude to the Creator.

Gardens teach us how to meditate, to focus our full attention in one place for minutes or hours. Our eyes are captured by one small shoot, fascinated by its day's progress toward the sun. On the usually brief and businesslike journey from the front door to the car door, we find ourselves slowing down to a stop, called out of clock time to kairos time, to be with this emerging green spray or that delicate purple bloom. 'Garden gazing' is a natural form of meditation that takes our minds off all else, while we stand, sit or kneel, attentive to God's glories in our gardens.

Gardens can slow us down, quieten our busy minds, displace chatter with silence, stress with peace, and fill up our vision with beauty. Thanks be to God!

The process of gardening bonds us with the rhythms of nature, a vital aspect of our

spiritual and psychological health. Morning glories and night fragrances, day lillies and evergreens, for everything there is a season...and the rhythm is God's, not ours!

For those city families who aren't blessed with access to cottage lakes or wilderness camping, the garden can be a vital bonding place with nature. We are meant to be in love with Creation, and to feel its sustaining friendship. After all, we are a part of it. In the new issue of *Mandate*, the magazine that shares the work of the United Church Mission & Service Fund, we read that "It takes only one summer for a child of under 10 or 11 to bond with the natural world, to know in her bones that the world is alive and wild and kin to her...to take the whole ancient biosphere into her soul, never to be forgotten." Humans who grow up without this 'imprinting' bond with the natural world can easily become 'autistic to nature.' They are unable to relate to the natural environment as anything more than postcard prettiness or natural resources to be exploited for profit. So the hope for our children's future may in part depend on their growing a loving connection with the gardens...where their ecospirituality can be born and take root.

Once you start looking for your own spiritual lessons in the garden, your awareness will grow like hollyhocks. Gardening teaches us patience, because all our haste will not fast forward the ripening of those tomatoes. It teaches us to let go and let God. No matter how hard we try, we discover that we cannot control the elements, much less the appetites of squirrels or groundhog. The garden teaches us about death -from compost to compost - and about resurrection every Spring.

Gardening pesticide-free is an important act of biblical resistance to evil...the poisoning of the Creator's gift to future generations. And gardening does eventually teach us even to love our enemies, or at least how to get along with them in God's garden. Each of the pests, like us humans, has their purpose and place in the web of creation.

Our gardens offer us a place to practise biblical hospitality when we invite others to come and rest in our backyard Eden. Good ecological gardening reminds us of our tithe, to allow that a portion of our bounty and beauty and produce be shared with others...the neighbours and the animals and the insects and the food bank.

Remember how Jeremiah - and later Jesus - advised people to seek the good of those they

lived with...even their enemies? Well that is my spiritual challenge in the garden these days. To think of the earwigs not as my enemies, but as earth's co-habitants who need some place to co-exist. I must learn to 'fear not' that earwigs will take all I have. Instead I can concentrate my attention on strengthening my soil and supporting the plants so they will not be such inviting prey.

And my dandelion war - it has to end! Alex McKeague has challenged me! So I shall pray for those little yellow flowers to bloom bright - and only then behead them! Instead, I will give all my positive attention and lots of organic gifts to the clover and the grass, trusting that Creation will, over time, find its right and healthy, mixed species balance on my front lawn.

But perhaps the biggest spiritual learning that we nurture in ourselves as we nurture our gardens is hope. Hope that as we relate in healthier ways with the natural world, we will be more whole as people and more sustainable as a society. Hope that humanity, though exiled to the cities, will one day learn to live with respect in Creation, and co-exist bountifully in the beauty of this Promised Land. So let us plant - and grow hope!

“Touch The Earth Lightly” Voices United #307, verses 1, 3 & 4.