



GARDENING as MEDICINE

Restoring a Right Relationship with Food and the Land

It is obvious that the current cultural climate has serious consequences for all of us—though often more serious for those who have known nothing else. We experience disintegration and disconnection; we are distracted and bored. We form addictions. We are often not at peace.

For years I have suggested to my students that they start a garden over the summer. This year I am going to be more insistent. Gardening is not, in my judgment, just one healthy hobby among many others. Rather, I am convinced that this is the strong medicine directly fitted to address our worsening ailment.

We need to turn to the earth from which we were formed, and which we were commanded to tend. There we can seek reintegration and reconnection; we can seek healing.

Connections to the Land

Man cannot live without food that is grown from the earth. Nevertheless our current practice shows that a

large number of people can live without any competence in growing food and indeed with near complete ignorance of how it is grown. In truth this is a matter of national security. The vulnerability of such a society, especially in the current international situation, is quite remarkable.

But my interest right now lies closer to home. It seems to me that the ability to grow food is such a primordial human competence that it provides a unique fulfillment and peace—even when we are not actually doing it. There is a certain security in the possession of this know-how, even in its most rudimentary forms: we can grow food, we have grown food, we are connected to the source of human nourishment. Gardening enables a right relationship with food, with the land, and with our Creator.

Working the Land Calls for Prayer

So many of the most profound things in life call for this amazing combination: hard work, and prayer. The farmer knows that he cannot prosper without disciplined, persevering labor. And he knows just as well that

his disciplined, persevering labor is far from sufficient. So he prays, asking for divine mercy. To ask for mercy is to ask for something that is not due. Indeed, when working the land, the very fruit of our labor always remains a gift.

The gardener knows as he plants his seeds that great powers are at work: in the seed, in the soil, in the sky. He will see his absolute dependence, in his work, on powers that transcend him and his work.

The humble man is close to the earth, and the man close to the earth is humble. The word humble is from the word for soil—humus. But true humility never means aiming low. It means aiming high, with full understanding that we achieve what is great only by a power greater than our own, and by our being willing to plead, regularly, for assistance.

Gardening invites and even beckons us to good, hard work. And it always rewards it—sometimes even with edible fruits. But first of all the work itself is a reward. The pleasure of this work is palpable: the scents of soil and plants, the visual pleasingness of tilled rows, the fresh air and sunshine, and sometimes the comradery of the person or persons working next to you. I cannot think of another work that is both so wonderfully solitary and so profoundly communal.

Learning to Wait

Gardening is an art, and the attentive gardener grows in knowledge, skill and satisfaction even as his plants are growing. And he learns to wait. It really seems as if the earth knows just how to time things, for our sake. If the plants took much longer, we might despair; if they came much quicker, we wouldn't learn to hope. Putting seeds in the almost-cold spring earth can seem like folly, as the brisk wind blows. It is hard to picture this effort bearing fruit; warmer days and their fruits seem so far off. But the sun rises and it sets, rises and sets, as we go about our other daily labors. Then from causes unknown—unknown but not unaided by our own necessary labor—plants of wondrous beauty appear.

To learn to wait is to learn to be human. What else in life today so gently, so firmly, and so invitingly teaches us to wait? On the other hand, technologies of labor-reduction and of immediate gratification are constantly placed before us. Press this button, or use this app, we are invited, and be amazed at what happens right away. Why wait, if you don't have to, we are told in countless ways and contexts. And, if you can skip the work, by all means do so.

Gardening is Medicine

Growing food acts as a constant reminder that the most basic things in life are simultaneously the work of human hands and a gift from super-human hands. So garden-

ing acts as a call to worship, to turn our eyes upward, whence comes our help.

I do not mean to imply that gardening is an automatic cure-all. It might be a cure-all, but it is not automatic. Indeed, it is not a push-button solution to our pushing-buttons problem. But it is a very potent medicine, the instructions for which are very straightforward: self-application with patience and perseverance. And this medicine has neither a foul taste nor a phony cherry flavor. It tastes like real food, for it is real food. It is the food which has nourished the human body, psyche, character and community for as long as there has been human life. It is never just a fad, though remarkably it can go out of style.

But it is never out of reach; you cannot possibly be very far from soil. The simplest of tools will suffice. And the connection that we perhaps didn't know had been sun-dered, though we felt it, can even now be restored.

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