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GARDENING AS SOCIAL-SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

An Introduction to the Special Issue

In our troubled world, endangered by serious challenges of climate change, conflict, inequality, and violence, the garden may not seem to be the most urgent place of scholarly attention, and gardening not the most urgent practice to pay attention to. Nevertheless, the authors in this special issue, all academics who frequently turn to the garden and find themselves connecting to the natural world through gardening, do find something very meaningful and important in these little green and vulnerable spots.

This special issue started with a conversation I had with Brent Rodríguez-Plate, the editor of this journal. We met each other in a digital meeting on film and religion and we—both scholars working in the field of religion—found that we had much in common in terms of research interests: a lived religion approach, paying attention to the material side of religion, an interest in film, and even an interest in gardening. I told Brent about my little side-project on the spirituality of gardening and my worries about this project, including what I called its “lack of complexity.” I wrote that my research among gardeners kept coming back to a very simple idea (I even used the word “cliché”): people get stuck in their working lives, and in the garden, they find a way of coping with an accelerating culture. Brent then replied: “Living in the academic environments that we do, I can understand why you worry about your research, and that you fear some perceived lack of ‘complexity.’ To be honest, the older I get, the more I realize that so much of what is important actually does come down to some overused clichés.” Months later, we finished this special issue on gardening as a social-spiritual practice, together with a great team of authors who have actually managed to both carefully unpack so-called clichés about gardening and describe the complexity and multi-layeredness of a practice that is found all over the world.

Gardening is often perceived as a hobby and a leisure activity. People love gardening, and gardening has much to offer: being outside, a connection with nature, enjoying the beauty of flowers, contributing to acts of creation, physical labor, and the satisfaction of eating the fruits of that labor. For many people, however, gardening is much more than a hobby. Small-scale farming and local gardening can be activities for alternative socio-political action, as community gardens help people take some control of their own food sources, invest practitioners with a sense of dignity, and create public spaces for communities. In many religious cultures, the garden is a sacred and mythical place, and gardening a ritualistic act of connecting to the spirits.

Many of these more-than-leisure dimensions are discussed in this special issue. In our call for proposals, we asked for essays that “mix the personal and the political, the spiritual and the social, contributing to ways we might think through gardening practices in light of religious renewal, social justice, and public futures.” All authors, academics who know from experience what it is like to dig into the ground with their bare hands, have been faithful to this principle—not only thematically, but also in style: many contributions mix the personal and the academic; the rich and concrete language of personal embodied practices and the more abstract language of social and cultural theory; the individual experience of being in the garden and the analysis of gardening as a more than individual being in the world. For each author, writing about gardening and gardens is a way of relating to bigger issues: violence and peace (Jon Pahl), queerness and sexuality (Joost Emmerik), class and property (Kathryn Reklis), migration and identity (Meghann Ormond), capitalism and its “culture of speed” (Johan Roeland), and spirituality and regenerative agriculture (Michael Kotutwa Johnson).

Does gardening change anything in this world or offer an opportunity to deal with the big challenges of our age? Probably not. Or, at least not directly. Probably the old forces of domination, capitalism, and colonialism continue their devastating work on everything that is vulnerable in this world, including gardens and the practice of gardening. But quite likely something else is also happening right now: a silent revolution of people who are connected, like trees, invisible and underground. People who are able to communicate, because they are wired like roots of trees and they feel, like trees, the needs and vulnerabilities of others. People who are grounded and as such in tune with the earth because they know they are earth. People who know that human grounding and “earthing”

is complex and layered and that neglecting injustice and inequality does not create a healthy soil for the common flourishing of people and planet.

The garden is much more than a place of leisure, and gardening is much more than an innocent, apolitical, or anti-social hobby. While gardens are often pleasurable places and gardening can certainly be a pleasant practice, serious issues are at stake in the garden: issues regarding the way we relate to ourselves and our own humanity; to others and our shared humanity; to the planet and our shared vulnerability; to what is sacred in this world.

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