

Earth Day 2011: May Our Garden Grow

A sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson

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In 1988, we bought our first house: a fixer-upper located, literally, on the wrong side of the railroad tracks. But it was dirt cheap and with four young children, the price and size were right for us. As well, though it meant a daily dance with box cars and locomotives switching back and forth to the rail yard a few hundred meters to the north, the house was within walking distance of work and schools. The house was built in the 1870s in what had been part of the original lay-out of the city. In fact, across the street on 4th North was a two story adobe pioneer home built in the early 1850s. But our neighbourhood long ago had fallen into neglect and decay; it has become an ad hoc ensemble of warehouses, rubble strewn lots, chain link fences, barking dogs, and abandoned homes.

But among the rough were some real 19th century architectural gems and two doors up, a small Mexican restaurant with a knock-out mole. *Cordova's* was known only to a select clientele brave enough venture into our rough part of town at night. It was a good neighbourhood, and on the mend—an ethnically mixed, working class part of town bouncing back and being reclaimed and rehabbed one house, one family at a time.

Our reclamation project at 569 West was carried out on two fronts—house renovation and the landscaping. Because we are talking about gardens and local food production, let me tell you about the yard and our adventure in gardening. The lot was almost a quarter of an acre; in the ample back yard, enormous box elder trees loomed on the east and south, trees of paradise to the west. The soil there had suffered from years of abuse—asphalt and shards of concrete littered the yard, vehicles parked for years on the earth had packed it hard. Countless hours went into

turning and composting the soil; we planted grapes vines and fruit trees. We improvised as best we could with the broken pieces of concrete and transformed a mound of rubble out back into a sandlot and rock garden crowned with a small Japanese maple.

What we really wanted to do though, was plant a good vegetable garden. Too much of the back yard was covered in shadows cast by the trees, so we turned our attention to the yard in front of the house covered with grass. I have to admit, I felt a grim, sublime pleasure in taking a big roto-tiller to the manicured front lawn and plowing it under. Thirty years earlier, my own parents had to dig up the stone strewn raw earth around their new brick house; and one shovel full at a time, they sifted out the pebbles from the soil through a framed wire mesh grate suspended on a tripod in order to plant their grass seed and thus make a respectable lawn—a fine sward of grass that would conform to unwritten but ironclad expectations and aspirations of neighbours, class and culture. I can still see that grate rocking back and forth suspended from the tripod, the cloud of dry dirt, the stones dancing on the wire mesh, my father’s begrimed sweaty face and arms, the sifted soil falling to the ground.

For years after that, I mowed, fertilized, edged, watered and weeded that turf. For a time, for us kids, those lawns were green islands of uncomplicated work and play, of innocence in the high desert. In the end though, it seems like a lot of our families, as well as our faith fell apart; we grew up and scattered to the winds.

Years later, as I plowed my own lawn into the dark dirt, as the teeth of the tiller churned the soil, I dug back through the mantle of time and culture, returned my parents’ hopes and failures to the earth, and reached beyond them to the gardens of my grandparents and great grandparents who gardened as they quilted—“We stitched the quilts to keep us warm,” a pioneer

woman wrote of her sewing, “we made them beautiful to keep our hearts from breaking.” My grandfather Arthur had a beautiful, lush vegetable garden and orchard out back of his house that he irrigated from waters from a mountain creek. It is an Eden in my memory; and he was an Adam. Step-by-step, as I walked behind the tiller gouging the ground, I strode through time, approached Arthur’s bright shadow and the outstretched arms of his fruit trees.

Didn’t know that a roto-tiller was a time machine, did you; or that plowing a lawn back into the earth was a spiritual practice? Or maybe you do. Well that roto-tiller was also a blunt archeological tool that churned up some of the checkered history of my neighbourhood—the earth yielded up antique bottles, the small legs and arms of an old porcelain doll, smashed chinaware, spent needles and syringes, and a set of brass knuckles; from the pioneer and domestic to the mean streets—the turned over earth brought forth quite a story of that neighbourhood.

And the soil that cradled it all turned out to be incredibly rich. Our sunflowers, corn and hollyhocks towered well over our heads. For five years, we harvested spinach, zucchini, chard and peas; red scarlet runner beans wove through the picket fence. We grew arm-length Armenian cucumbers, vine ripe tomatoes, bush beans, leeks, garlic, red potatoes, and a riot of pumpkins. To this cornucopia, we tossed in a palette of impatiens, lupine, Irish bells, larkspur, zinnias, Russian lavender, and cosmos.

It was beautiful; and hard work. I can’t say that we were happy gardeners all the time—there was weeding, hoeing, digging and watering—and plenty of it; and we all took our turn, children and parents. But surveying and consuming what we had pulled off—the fresh bounty and beauty of it, the vine and earth-ripe produce, the saucy impudence of ripping out a spacious

front lawn and replacing it with a riotous, ragged tangle of vines, vegetables and flowers, the towering body of corn, the heavy heads of sunflowers nodding good day and goodnight as suns rose and set—we knew that what we were doing, what we had done, was a rare and unforgettable chapter in our lives. I think it knit us closer together and planted seeds whose vines and fruit still flower within and between us. And it all took place outside our front door, and a ten minute walk from our garden to the very center of the city.

The Canadian literary critic Northrop Frye wrote that the two great archetypes of poetic imagery are cyclical and dialectic; that is, the cycles of nature, the generations of human life, and the contrasting states of mind that Blake calls innocence and experience, stretch across and inhabit the whole landscape of literature. (see Frye, *The Stubborn Structure: Essays on Criticism and Society*, 101) The same can be said of growing a garden; at least, I believe *that* certainly was the experience through which we journeyed redeeming and remediating the earth and growing vegetables, fruits and flowers in our gritty urban garden. There, with hoe and hose, trowel and spade, with bent backs and knees bent, we leaned into and touched the abiding, fecund, life-giving, bounty-bearing earth and its cycles—sun and moon, dry and wet, heat and cool, the waxing, waning and turning of the seasons—days like this very one—Beltane, May Day—the midpoint between Spring Equinox and Summer Solstice. And as we dug, planted and brought the harvest home, from doorstep directly to our kitchen and table, so too, we entered into a dialectic, a conversation with the past, with family and culture.

In our lives, we have traversed the epochal transformation of agriculture from local tillage and production to its alienating industrialization, its cost to the environment, the loss of local sustainable food production; and then, and now, before it's too late, we may yet “arrive

where we started.” “What we call a beginning,” TS Eliot wrote, “is often the end/and to make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from./We shall not cease from exploration...”

To garden is to explore; it is to participate in the cycle of life, and to enter into a great dialectic, a give and take conversation with cultural and economic orthodoxies, and with generations of the past and those to come. What I am describing is the threshold to one of life’s most enduring, challenging, and fruitful spiritual practices.

Though it’s taking its sweet time warming up and staying put—Spring is here; Summer approaches. May we find a pot, a window box, a patch of ground for a flower, a tomato plant, a pumpkin vine...you even have my permission to plow in your lawn and plant a garden. May it, and they, and us, grow to ripeness. May we be fruitful in body, mind and spirit. May our gardens grow this season and in the years to come.