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The Little Way of Gardening: Discovering Permaculture

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Looking out of the window I can see the hedge that lines the driveway and, beyond that, a mass of garden, weeds, trees, and shrubs. Threatening dark clouds loom on the horizon. It can't decide if it's going to rain or not. The gray and blue and black of the sky is punctuated by towering pines, honey locusts, and weeping willows. The chickens are snug in the coop with a rain tarp over them—just in case—and I hope that the woodchucks that seem to have taken up permanent residence here, in the Farwell Road garden, will stop dropping by for a salad bar lunch.

No matter how many years go by, the beauty of this place never seems to get old.

This is the place my parents bought when they were first married. They've never moved.

It was here, on this property, that my love for the outdoors and my first intuitions about “tilling and keeping” the land were fostered. It's not a farm. It's an old historic New England house that sits on a few acres of land: a large backyard, and at least as much forest, tipping down to the old Boston & Maine railroad tracks, right along the Merrimack River. Almost every weekend I can remember, my parents worked on projects related to the house (it was a real fixer-upper) or the landscape. My mother has a wonderful eye for flowers and always has lovely beds scattered around the property. My father started our vegetable garden. He always begins the seeds indoors, while the chill is still in the air.

When I was young, if I wasn't doing school work, I was almost certainly outdoors. Spring, summer, fall, winter—my four siblings and I always found a way to play, whatever the weather. Memories of hot summer days at a lake, adventures in the woods with my dad, sledding down the treacherous back hill (which was strictly forbidden, as it was full of trees, making the fun all the better in our eyes and deviating my brother's septum at least once). This is where New England got deep into my bones. The topography, the landscape, the colors, the smells. . . and it was all ours, it was what we had been given. Tromping down the railroad tracks, riding the “horse tree,” collecting “bootle-beetles,” spotting owls, foxes, raccoons, hawks and other wildlife, standing in the middle of the woods looking upward and around and feeling so small, so free and so safe: These were the impressions that captured my imagination and inspired my love for the world in its wild and unadulterated state.

It was probably in my early college years that my interest in cultivating the land (and not just enjoying its beautiful natural state) was first kindled. There wasn't any big or monumental reason for this. I just

liked it. I liked being outside and working after a long year of being in the classroom. I liked being a part of what my parents were working on. I liked feeling the ground under me—I hate gardening in shoes and unless there is poison ivy or chicken poop around, I am barefoot!—and the hot sky above me. I liked the quiet and the head space that it afforded to me. I wanted to learn everything I could about agriculture, the best way to grow things, and help make something beautiful.

Oddly (or not so oddly) enough, it was during my graduate studies in theology that my interest in sustainable agricultural models and humane animal husbandry practices blossomed. Everything that I was taught (particularly metaphysics and bioethics) made so much sense and helped me to articulate concepts that I had merely intuited before. If being is gift, that changes everything. God's creation is the physical, visible manifestation of His Love, and the forerunner of Incarnate Love Himself. "Heaven and earth are full of the glory of the Lord." God is always-already holding everything in existence, at every moment giving all being life. As the Byzantine Liturgy sings, "He is everywhere present and filling all things." Far from a strange form of pantheism, this vision brings creation to its rightful place in the hierarchy of being, and shows the supreme dignity of the role of man in bringing the things of the earth to their true final end. The world, and all of creation, is God's gift to humankind, to tend, keep, and till. There is a mutual relation of dependence (within a hierarchy) between man and the land. On the one hand, we are dependent on the land to bring forth our food. Yet in order to bring forth that food, the land is dependent on man to cultivate it and guide its growth. This is only one of many "theo-ag" concepts that made me passionate about agriculture. In a way, cultivating land is a participation in the ongoing work of creation, and, in that sense, it is an experience of the Divine.

It was a dear friend from graduate school who introduced me to the whole world of permaculture. After graduate school she and I both taught theology (though in different places) yet we both took every chance we could to learn more and be involved in agriculture. In fact, that summer I volunteered at a local organic CSA farm. After graduate school, we both taught theology but took every chance we could to learn and be involved in agriculture. That summer I volunteered at a local organic CSA farm. She called and asked if I wanted to join her in getting trained and certified as a permaculture designer. It would involve webinars, a textbook, and spending ten days in a tent in Illinois in the dead of summer. Of course I agreed.

Permaculture is defined in many ways, though the term itself originated as a combination of the words "permanent"^[i] and "agriculture." It is basically a way of going about agriculture in "closed-loop,"^[ii] permanent, sustainable systems—the idea being that the more permanent the structures, the healthier the soil, the healthier the land, the healthier the animals, and the healthier the people. One of its common catch-phrases is: "Care of Earth, Care of People, Care of the Future." There are several defining characteristics of a permaculture system: for example, the goal of maximizing yield while minimizing human effort. This requires attentiveness to the patterns of nature, the particularities of your place, and mimicking it as closely as possible for the benefit of all involved. It's important to note that much of what permaculture offers is simply a retrieval of wise, traditional practices that have gone on for centuries, and have been obscured by modern agricultural practices. However, permaculture also offers innovation in certain techniques and methods that better fit the contemporary situation, as well as providing principles that pave the way for genuinely original practices.

I got certified and—then what? Did I go on to buy fifty gorgeous acres of land, start my own permaculture farm, make my own soaps and dyes, run a CSA, and save the global environment? Nope. I packed my bags and took a plane back to Austria, to keep teaching.

Since finishing graduate school, I have lived a rather unusual and transient lifestyle: I live and teach in Gaming, Austria during the school year (living in an apartment with no land) and summer at my family's home (with a few acres of land, and an opportunity to garden). I love the land, but I am an educator at heart, and, for now, full-time agriculture is on the back-burner. But the point here is that if you love something enough, you make it happen, even if it is in "little ways" and on a small scale. This is a profound truth, with spiritual and ecological implications. G.K. Chesterton once said, "If a thing is worth doing, it's worth doing badly." I love that. It frees you from the pressure of perfectionism, and it doesn't give you room to hide under the excuse that you don't have the ideal conditions. I suspect that most of us will never have "ideal" conditions to pursue our dreams and goals in life. But if we wait for the ideal to come, we will never do anything. The questions we really should be asking are: what do I love? And, what have I been given? Then we can work our way out from there.

What does that way look like for me? Mostly, it's "the little way of gardening." No fifty-acre mega projects, no cattle or bees. But a garden. It's amazing what can be managed in a small space. This year it's berries, beans, zucchini, pumpkin, tomatoes, and peppers (everything else became lunch of the aforementioned woodchucks). We also have a variety of herbs that I've dried for teas and cooking. I love trees and shrubs, and have air-layered several from our property—that is, propagated them from existing branches using a special permaculture technique. A few of them didn't make it; they never quite took. I'm waiting on two hazelnut shrubs to produce nuts in the next two years. I finally have lupines for the first time and am currently saving their seeds to re-plant next year. Our kitchen scraps are quickly filling the compost pile we've begun for next year. I've been to great conferences on organic farming, found work on already existing farms, been consulted on a future farming project involving alpaca, and have become a permaculture designer—all while teaching full-time. The point is that it's important to do what you can, and to remember that even small projects are worthwhile and rewarding. This summer I am keeping my first flock of chickens, twenty-five meat birds that my family and I will process ourselves with the help of some neighbors and friends. I've become more and more convinced that if I myself cannot implement more humane animal husbandry, I should (to the extent I am able) support those who do. This is another "little way" for me to live what I love, and a useful rule of thumb: either do it yourself, or support someone who does it well.

One of the principles of permaculture that I love is that each element in your landscape (be it animal or vegetable) should have at least two or more functions that it performs in relation to the whole. This is not only for the sake of efficiency, but also something that forces us to slow down and look at the interconnectedness of all things. Let's take my chickens, for example. They require food, water, shelter, and dry conditions. In return, they give us meat, fertilizer, minor pest control, and the pleasure of working and caring for something. How can these requirements and gifts overlap to our best mutual advantage? When they are old enough, we put the chickens in an outdoor, movable structure, which gives them a bit of forage and fresh air, while allowing us to systematically fertilize an area that will be used in the future for an orchard and/or a gardening plot. We're getting compost and meat, and they get a happy life in the great outdoors. Even our hawk "problem" has its silver-lining. I can't let our chickens free-range unless I am watching them, otherwise they will get snatched. But their need for protection overlaps with my desire to enjoy and be with them (and my desire to sunbathe with a book and a cup of coffee)!

It's important to remember that no matter what you do, there will be epic fails. Just this week I killed some herb cuttings that I was trying to re-grow and pot. Our "smell-free" chicken tractor needed some adjustments and extra work in order to deliver. Our "fool-proof" berry net isn't, well...fool-proof (no blueberries this year!). By mid-July weeding had settled to the bottom of my priority list, and only got attention recently. But shouldn't we be brave enough to go for it anyway—despite the fails, especially

since the fails are really the learning-curves for future successes (how's that for a cliché)? This is why I am passionate about what I do, both in education and in permaculture. You don't have to have a corporate paycheck to do marvelous things. And that is one of the gifts I learned in my childhood on Farwell Road. The tremendous impact of simple and beautiful things. It all starts in small, humble, and less-travelled ways that are walked with great faithfulness.

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[i] Permanent refers to permaculture's focus on perennial—vs. annual—plants and vegetation. Re-planting annuals each year means that the soil is (traditionally) disturbed, which compromises the topsoil and requires the use of additives to keep it fertile. Perennials also typically have deep and stable root systems that bring vital minerals to the surface, thereby aerating the soil without disturbing it. Also, “permanence” brings to mind the future—a reminder that one should put structures in place that will benefit generations to come.

[ii] “Closed-loop” refers to the fact that what you need to give to the land/animals are things you yourself can produce. It means minimizing what you purchase off-site in order to sustain your system. A synonym could be “sustainable.” For example, if I keep animals, I should try to grow the food they need, as opposed to buying it, thus finding a way to overlap my needs with what I can produce.

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