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A Spiritual Defense of the Garden

When contemplating how to feed oneself in today's industrially dominated world, where seasonality and soil can appear irrelevant to the production of food, the rationality of growing one's own vegetable garden can be questioned. Why should I labor for hours to produce a limited output when there are technologically-based professions dedicated to cheaply providing me with any type of food from anywhere in the world at any time? Restricting oneself to the seasons and soils of one's place may initially seem to be a sacrifice of one of the modern age's greatest luxuries, as participating in the globalized food system means that one's palette is unlimited by time and space, and one is freed from the burdens of food production. While there exist certain logistical benefits to a globalized food system, I believe the spiritual benefits of maintaining one's own place-based garden, however small, to be nearly limitless.

As a human being, a creature of this earth, I feel a primal desire to connect with the earth in some way. Millions of years of evolution have created me as I exist today. My cravings, passions, and fears are the culminations of experiences, not only those within my personal lifetime, but also those of my ancestors: human ancestors, primate ancestors, and even ancestors extending back to the origin of life. Only in very recent history have we built concrete jungles to replace

the lush forests and prairies that preceded them—the same forests and prairies within which evolution has structured our minds.

The primal desire to get out of our buildings and back to the elements from which we came can be satisfied in a variety of ways. While I do find value in hiking and camping in the wilderness, which acts as a museum of natural history that we can connect with and find compassion for, the concept of “pristine” nature inherently excludes the participation of humans in the ecosystem. The seemingly untouched landscape of an old-growth forest inspires lessons on how we think about and relate to the natural world, but not on how to interact with it; for these lessons, I turn to the garden.

I believe the lessons of the garden to be extremely important because we can't live on this earth without interacting with and participating in it; unfortunately, this interconnectedness is easily veiled by the processing and packaging that occurs within the modern food market. When one's only interaction with one's food is purchasing it in the grocery store in its transformed states and glossy packages, one can easily interpret that food comes only from the grocery store, not from the earth; in this setting, the food's connection to the earth can go unnoticed because the visible link between food and earth is missing. In the words of Aldo Leopold, “There are two spiritual dangers in not owning a farm. One is the danger of supposing that breakfast comes from the grocery, and the other that heat comes from the furnace.” Working in the garden helps to dissolve the barrier of time and space that provides an illusion of separation from our environment. By actively participating in and observing the natural process as a seed grows into a plant, produces fruit, and is harvested to

officially become food, I am able to realize that humans and the earth are inextricably linked. We are co-dependent partners in the relationship called life.

Even the smallest of hobby gardens can teach the lesson of interconnectedness, serving as the basis of a spiritual bond with the rest of the natural world; the realization that I am inseparable and completely dependent on this earth has played a large role in founding my respect, compassion, and love for the natural world. In the garden, I have observed that the manner in which I treat the earth is directly reflected by the harvest that I receive from the it; if I prevent erosion, return nutrients to the soil in the form of compost, and keep toxins out of the garden, I will be rewarded with a healthy and sustained bounty from the land. But if I erode the soil, leach its nutrients, and bathe the land in toxic pesticides, the health of my produce will decline and the bounty of the harvest will be ephemeral. Land is a limited resource that must be treated not as a commodity but as life itself.

I've come to realize that not only does each of my actions have complex rippling effects throughout the rest of the world, but I am a physical extension of the natural world itself. The skin that appears to distinguish me from my environment is merely a false illusion of separation. Because I cannot survive without the rest of earth's beings—the trees that decomposed over time to form soil and exhale the oxygen that I breathe, the crops and animals that I physically consume to sustain myself, the bacteria that allow me to digest my food and remain healthy—I am not an individual, but a single cell in the greater being of life.

As I work in the garden, I feel this illusion of separation disintegrating. My hands, coated in the brown soil of the garden, become an extension of the earth, doing its work and reaping its benefits. I believe that the acts of working in the garden and consuming its produce are the two most intimate ways in which I can interact with my environment. What grows out of the garden's soil is what I will become; as I eat the kale from my garden, I am literally assimilating the earth into my body, the life of the garden becoming my own. As the gardener, the caretaker of the patch of earth from which this food came, what I take into my body reflects exactly what I put into the land.

There exist many ecological reactions to each action, and from the garden I have learned that I, as a human, am not only a major player in the ecosystem, but also a unique one; due to my state of consciousness, each of my actions is intentional and guided by morality. Thus, an individual can classify each of her actions as either moral or immoral, which for me—as my morality is majorly based around the value of life as a whole—essentially means environmental or anti-environmental.

In my quest to be a responsible and intentional steward of the earth, I've often found myself *not* doing things—*not* driving my car, *not* eating meat, *not* leaving lights turned on, etc. While I do believe that these actions are valuable, as it is important to take only what one needs from the earth, I also craved a tangible, active relationship between the environment and myself; I wanted to give back. This is where the garden added a quality to my spiritual relationship with the earth that I don't believe I could have gained elsewhere. Working in the garden, I am *actively* doing good onto the earth. There is an entirely different

sentiment involved in avoiding harmful actions, such as not leaving the lights on, versus partaking in a beneficial action, such as weeding a garden. I am fortunate to have an able body, and putting it to work for a good cause—for the earth—gives me the deepest sense of satisfaction. There's something about working until I am exhausted, having made a physical change in the landscape, that just feels right. It feels like that's what I am here to do, and I believe that in a way it really is; the success of *Homo sapiens* is founded on innovations in altering one's environment in order to survive, and by working with the land to improve its health, surviving is exactly what I am doing.

While a sense of accomplishment can come by making change through non-physical fields such as social sciences—changes that are valuable and necessary—I believe that the tactile experience of working in the garden makes it especially rewarding. Touching something, and being so careful in doing so, is an intimate experience that allows me to know each plant as an individual. With my bare hands, as I take a seed—each one the promise of life, part a crevice in the soil, set down and cover the seed, and return to water and weed each day, I become invested in seeing each life to its fullest. As these seeds grow into seedlings and then into mature plants, I am observing the manifestation of a long, loving relationship; I am seeing my babies grow up, and we couldn't have done it without one another. This is the reason that I feel so much more elation as I pick a tomato in my own garden than when I buy one from the farmer's market. These tomatoes could be grown by identical processes, and could have identical environmental impacts, but the sense of accomplishment of the latter is much

greater. *I* did this. *I*, in partnership with the earth, actually created something of value. *We*, the earth and I, did this together.

Not only does working in the garden lend itself to a working relationship with the earth, but with a unique place on the earth. In this age, we are often on the road (or boat or plane), traveling to places outside of what we would consider our “home”. While this is one version of a sense of place, it is a wide-reaching, surface-scraping sense of place. But the sense of place that the garden inspires in me is a direct, deep, localized sense of place. By digging in the dirt in my backyard, I am connecting more intimately with the place I call home than I otherwise could. As I dirty my hands with the soil that my home rests upon, I am connecting with the core of my existence in this place. My home lies in and on this very soil. This soil provides me with the food I eat and the shelter in which I live, and I get to know the soil as I work with it over time; I can *see* its pH in the color of its hydrangea flowers, I can *feel* its composition in the texture of its dirt, I can *smell* its productivity in the earthiness of its aroma, and I can *taste* its health in the juiciness of its fruits. As a sense of place is established in the garden, I am accumulating a collection of experiences that emotionally tie me to this specific place on the earth. Just as the memory of one’s first kiss is relived as one stands in the place where it occurred, the memories of creating life on a piece of land tie me emotionally to that place, making it unique. These memories, thanks to the remarkable experience of creating life, are ones that will always reserve my home as a special place in my heart.

In giving me a sense of place, the garden also gives me a sense of time. As I look at my flowering cucumber plants, I realize how much has passed since these

were started from seed; I can remember when I planted these seeds and grasp, with the cucumber plants' visual display of the passage of time, how both the plants and I have grown in those past few months. As time passes, the seasons change, and because each species has a unique seasonal time frame in which it can grow, the garden is a reminder that nature, like life, cannot be controlled; tomatoes don't have a chance of growing in the winter just as the delicate leaves of spring lettuce can't tolerate the brutal summer days. While gardening, I am not controlling nature, but working with the power that nature has over me in an attempt to coax out a mutually favorable result. Even when I treat the earth with as much care and meticulousness as possible, Mother Nature still retains a mind of her own. This is yet another manner in which I believe the garden is a wonderful metaphor for life; like a garden at the end of a growing season, I am the reaction to a culmination of uncontrollable events that have occurred throughout my life. I am no different than the insects, fungi, plants, or bacteria of the world in that we are each players in the natural world, whose forces are out of our control, constantly affecting and reacting to one another.

The greatest strength of a well-founded spiritual guidance, I believe, is that it serves as the basis for a moral compass by which one may live her life. For me, the well-kept garden is a symbol—and an example—of how the human relationship with the natural world *should* be. The garden epitomizes my human obligation to act as a responsible citizen of the earth. In order to feed myself and maintain my health, I must treat the physical environment, on which the growth of my food depends, with care. By harming the land with poisons, erosion, and climate change, I am only starving myself. Agriculture teaches an extremely

important lesson that life is not all about competition and survival of the fittest. It can't be, because if one species were to outcompete all others, life would no longer be possible on earth, just as I would not be able to grow food without the health of the soil and its microorganisms. This is a lesson that I have taken from the garden and into my relationship with the rest of nature, including my fellow humans. If I am to survive and find happiness, my relationship with the earth must be symbiotic. To act otherwise would be to inflict not only physical but also spiritual pain upon myself.