

Faith in the Furrow: Farming as devotion Nick Schuurman

The problem with our role in creation is that we don't remember it. In our fallen state we have forgotten our place, both within God's will and love and also in our love and care for creation. We need to be reminded of who we are and what we are about. Practices and disciplines are our primary way of learning to remember, of being recollected to our place and call as creatures. I would like to offer farming, done well, as one of those disciplines.

Ragan Sutterfield, *Farming as a Spiritual Discipline*

Standing at the front of the sanctuary each week, I am witness to a peculiar sight. I notice it even more so now that it is winter, and the sunlight that normally filters through the stained glass into our little gathering space is gone by the time I open up my Bible. Little glowing lights rest on the laps of several of my congregants, usually with little wires strung up from the source of illumination towards their ears. Last week, I preached by candlelight, joking that it was so I would be able to catch everyone who was playing games or listening to music on their iPod or smart phone.

I work with the first cohort to have been born into an entirely media-saturated world. Generation Me, iGeneration, Generation Net, whatever you want to call them, they were the first batch of newborns to enter into a world that never was without computers or the internet. They are known for fast-paced information overload while at the same time suffering from an acquired attention deficit disorder. So, before I can finish saying "I'm going to invite you to turn to Isaiah 9: 2," they've scrolled to it on their Blackberry, and within ten minutes, they've almost certainly lost the ability to focus on what I am saying.

We live in some of the most connected societies the world has ever seen, and yet we are so profoundly disconnected – from the earth, from each other, from God. We can communicate faster, more often, and over greater distances than any civilization the world has ever known, and yet I am confronted on a weekly basis with individuals who feel alienated, alone, longing for community and distant from their God.

Sometimes I wish I could take them to help feed the horses or pick rocks out of the vegetable gardens.

I work with a little church that was born out of a community of first and second generation immigrants and refugees. Because of a lack of resources, I also work during the week at a small equestrian and organic vegetable operation to help pay the bills. I have lived and worked on farms for as long as I can remember. As much of a stigma as the work carries with it around here, I take a lot of pleasure and pride in it, and have found in it a certain spiritual nourishment that I often think members of my community – and followers of Christ in general – could learn from.

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Theologian and ecologist Norman Wirzba¹ suggests that a terminological shift occurred at some point when the modern English word ‘culture’ moved from being a noun laden with agricultural connotation to a term dealing with societies, economics, and fields of politics. Accompanying this semantic change, he argues, came a paradigmatic shift marking the beginning of a divide between civilization and nature.

Simply stated, in the western world we find ourselves increasingly disconnected from creation. There is, alternatively, a profound immediacy to the labour of agriculture. While other work involving one’s hands manipulates some far-removed by-product of the earth, the farmer rescinds the separation fabricated by the industrial revolution and driven by sloth and greed, and stoops to the dirt to lay down seeds. It is the same joy and pleasure that is found when one wanders through a forest: the beauty of God’s glory displayed in creation uncluttered by the work of our hands.

Gardening is a way of slowing one’s breath, so to speak. In an age of quick fixes and short-cuts, I celebrate this sort of slowness. In a world driven by, and in many ways dependent on, cultures and systems of immediacy and instant gratification, gardening and small-scale animal husbandry are in many ways utterly unthinkable tasks. They require patience and attention that the average, modern westerner living in the age of Google knows nothing about.² Serving in a position of spiritual leadership, this is one of the most important lessons I have learned. While at times it comes dramatically, suddenly, and with a great display of force, change most often happens gradually, the way the snow peas and sweet corn inch their way skyward. And so, when I am discouraged at the pace of transformation – in my life and the life of those in my community – I stoop down and look at those plants which take months to grow but will, after my patience has been tried, eventually produce fruit.

Agricultural work also serves to make us aware of our limitations. Even with the astounding advances made in the science and technology of modern agriculture, there are things simply out of our control. There is, in fact, a lot of money that moves around in the business of crop insurance, which exists to protect against these kinds of things that are beyond human control.³ The spiritual parallels here are obvious. The apostle Paul, in the tradition of Jesus, who spoke often in the language of the fieldsmen of his day, said that we can only plant seeds when it comes to advancing the kingdom; the rest lies in forces of spiritual nature directed by Divine hands.⁴ Both kingdom and agricultural work require a commitment to faithfully do everything we possibly can on our own right while being at peace with the fact that much lies out of our control.

Maybe it all sounds romantic – a thoreauvian cry for simplicity, independence, and the ‘good

¹ Norman Wirzba, *The Paradise of God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), pg. 2.

² There is a growing body of research that suggests that we, as a Western culture, have a sort of “acquired attention deficit disorder”, as Dr. John Ratey, associate professor of Psychiatry at Harvard, describes it rendering most individuals incapable of concentrating for any significant period of time:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/22/weekinreview/22richtel.html>

³ Similar programs have been introduced and more are in the works for livestock producers.

⁴ “I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow.” 1 Corinthians 3:6:

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old days' – but maybe there is really something deeper here, a way of reconnecting with Creator and creation. Unlike Thoreau, a Harvard graduate made most famous by his memoir of his time spent living alone in the woods in northern Massachusetts,⁵ I am not proposing agrarianism as a means of independence or virtue. Simplicity is admirable, and there was a lot of good in the old days, no doubt, but I think there is something even more profound in the labour of agriculture.

I recognize that if the statistics are right, you are probably reading this from a densely populated urban centre, where working on a farm is not exactly an option. And if other statistics are also right, working on a small, family-run operation is an even less likely possibility.⁶ Try to do what you can with the dirt around you, and see if it brings about any change. Start an indoor herb garden, participate in an urban gardening project, plant some tomatoes in your flowerbed, and prepare your own food from scratch. These are simply things that we can do with our hands that in turn can transform our hearts.

-Nick Schuurman lives in Ontario, Canada, where he serves pastorally, works agriculturally, and writes. While himself Dutch, he works with an ethnically Hmong congregation, as well as on a small, family run organic farm.

⁵ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden, and Other Writings*, (New York: Modern Library, 1950).

⁶ Findings from the latest Canadian census indicate a dramatic decline in the number of reported farms since the previous census, approximately 17,550 to be precise: <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/ca-ra2006/articles/finpicture-portrait-eng.htm>

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