

Summoned Toward Wholeness—
The Community Garden as Locus of Reconciliation

A Valparaiso Practice Grant Proposal
Written by Fred Bahnson

Farming is an altar on which only the bread and wine of truth can be placed¹

I. Purpose:

Where does your food come from? This is a question the majority of American Christians cannot answer. And sadly, most aren't really bothered about their ignorance. America is a country blinded by the delusion regnant since the end of WWII and the ensuing proliferation of cheap agro-chemicals that food is a product rather than a gift; our relationship to food is that of the ungrateful, unthinking consumer. A friend of mine living in Bolivia calls the U.S. "The Great Northern Feedlot"—we just eat what's put in front of us. Food here is abundant, cheap, and therefore doesn't require any thought on our part as to how it's produced. Let the farmers and the government that subsidizes them worry about that. We needn't worry ourselves with anything pertaining to agriculture.

Against this blissful naïveté Wendell Berry has famously asserted that "eating is an agricultural act." Because we eat, we are all—whether we know it or not—inextricably involved in agriculture. That involvement is not a question of *if*, but *how*. More to the point for Christians, food is a theological issue. We believe that eating Christ's body and blood is one of our most important practices. Yet we don't give a second thought to the hamburger we eat after we eat the Lord's Supper, how that hamburger was produced, or what kind of wages its producer was paid. Indeed, the fact that I just referred to a person who raises animals for consumption as a "producer" is

further evidence of how mired we've become in the linguistic trap of talking about food as commodity instead of gift. It may not be too far a stretch—especially when we acknowledge that we Americans often eat too much when others don't eat enough—to say that, like the Corinthians, we are eating to our damnation.

In our own community of Cedar Grove, NC where tobacco has long been the staple source of income, the need for healthy, organically-raised food is ever more pressing. From older white farmers who can no longer raise tobacco, to incoming Latino migrant workers, to fifth-generation Black share-croppers' descendents, people in Cedar Grove, NC need to see a model of farming God's fertile soil that is sustainable, healthy, and most importantly, faithful to God's Kingdom.

The need for a healthy agriculture is not limited to Cedar Grove. Most urbanites are two or three generations removed from the land, and have therefore lost the life-sustaining connection to the soil. This is truly a loss. God has entrusted us with stewardship of the fertile soil (Gen. 2:15), yet most of us—because we eat mostly food that has been raised with harmful petro-chemicals and pesticides before it was trucked to our Food Lion from thousands of miles away—support a form of agriculture that abuses rather than nurtures the fertile soil. We no longer know how to, in the words of Wendell Berry, “break the body and shed the blood of Creation” in a manner befitting of a steward.

I have a hunch that most people harbor a deep yearning to grow food. I am not alone. Consider the following from Gene Logsdon, one of America's foremost agrarians:

It seems to me that the garden is the only practical way for urban societies to come in *close* contact with the basic realities of life, and if that contact is not close, it is not meaningful at all. To feel the searing heat as well as

¹ Catherine de Hueck Doherty. *Apostolic Farming* (Combermere, Ontario. Madonna House. 1991) p.24

the comforting warmth of the sun, or to endure the dry wind as well as the soothing breeze; to pray for rain but not too much rain; ...to know that life depends on eating and being eaten; to accept the decay of death as the only way to achieve the resurrection of life;...to grow in personal simplicity while appreciating biological complexity, so that in the garden there is time to sit and think, to produce good food for the mind—these are all part of an education that the industrial world hungers for but cannot name.²

If Logsdon is correct, that these are things “the industrial world hungers for but cannot name,” and that the garden is the place to fulfill those desires even as it transforms them, then this is breaking news for the church.

Add to this discussion of food the issue of race. As Wendell Berry has shown in the new afterward to *The Hidden Wound*³, the issues of food and land are inextricably connected to this country’s racial problems. Cedar Grove has a high percentage of African-American farmers and landowners, which sadly is something of an anomaly in America. A recent murder here brought to the surface the fear and distrust here between Blacks and Whites; the prayer service following that murder, however, demonstrated the power of the Holy Spirit to bring Blacks and Whites together in prayer and worship. What if the church, we asked ourselves, were to take up the issues of race, land, and eating, and talk about them in terms of an organic reconciliation?

This question has led us to start Anathoth Community Garden. During the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem, God told Jeremiah to buy a field. Jeremiah’s world was crumbling around him. Yet this small field in Anathoth became a visible sign that God would restore Israel, that “houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.” (Jer.32:15) Anathoth became a sign of hope, a continuation of God’s earlier message to the exiles already living in Babylon: “plant gardens and eat what they

² Gene Logsdon. *The Contrary Farmer* (White River Junction, VT. Chelsea Green, 1994.) p.50-51

produce...seek the shalom (peace) of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for it in its shalom you will find your shalom.” (Jer.29:5,7)

Anathoth became a visible sign that God’s faithfulness to Israel was rooted in the land.

Our own Anathoth is a church-supported garden that provides a place to learn how to be stewards of God’s fertile soil. Here people can learn how to grow healthy, organic food grown without harmful pesticides or chemicals. But Anathoth is more than a garden that grows vegetables. Anathoth seeks to nurture a rich soil for the Gospel to take root. It will give the Good News—as well as fresh arugula, sweet potatoes, and snap beans—to a hungry world. Here the church can practice its mission of shalom. We will seek shalom between black, white, and latino, between urban and rural, rich and poor, citizen and illegal immigrant, friend and enemy, and between ourselves and the fertile soil that sustains us all. Anathoth will be a place not only for growing plants, but for growing people.

II. Activities:

Once a well is put in, a deer fence installed, and we get electricity, we will invite people to help dig the garden beds. We will use the biointensive organic method of agriculture, which relies almost entirely on hand-tools. This method uses hand-dug raised beds, manure for fertilizer, close-crop spacing (which produces 4 times the vegetables out of the same space as conventional techniques), and a passive-solar greenhouse for a longer growing season.

With this method of farming there is no need for tractors or mechanized equipment, which means decreased dependence on the oil economy, increased human

³ Wendell Berry. *The Hidden Wound* (New York. North Point Press, 1989).

participation in every step of the growing process, and better use of scarce resources.

The farm will run almost entirely on sunlight and human hands.

We want to encourage community-wide participation, and participation from city dwellers, in as many ways as we can. Our focus will be getting the rural poor, especially migrant farmworkers, involved in the garden. The overall aim is not only to provide healthy, tasty vegetables, but to help usher in God's shalom by creating Christian community across racial, economic, and geographic boundaries.

We will have a number of programs, including but not limited to:

- **a children's program** where kids can learn how food is grown, learn biblical ecology (how to practice stewardship of the fertile soil), how to relate to one another, and how to have fun in the garden.
- **"Just Eating" classes.** In March, June, and September (Spring, Summer, Fall) we will host a class, each meeting weekly on Saturdays for a month. We will use the workbook "Just Eating" as our guide. The idea for these classes is a spin-off of the "Agronomic University" envisioned by Peter Maurin, co-founder of the Catholic Worker movement. The idea is to combine study with manual labor, let the two cross-pollinate and inform each other, and see what fruit is born of the mix. Each class host an area organic farmer, and will culminate in a feast combining local organic food with food grown at Anathoth by participants. On these Saturdays we will work in the garden in the morning, then have study groups in the afternoon on topics such as:
 - What does the Bible say about environmental issues?
 - How can we eat in a way that's faithful to the Gospel?
 - How can we practice Christian reconciliation with one another?
 - What would God's shalom look like in Cedar Grove?
 - How can I grow my own garden at home?
- **Duke Divinity School Field Ed. Placement for Divinity Students**
- **Prison work program**—bringing prisoners in for work release
- **Global community building.** Anathoth would be a mission site for volunteer and mission work teams, a place where Christians from around the world can come to nurture international Christian friendship.

III. Theological reflection:

Our theological reflection on our gardening practices will involve discussing how the garden is both metaphor and locale for learning how God reconciles himself to

creation. There is a mystical element inherent in any practice of farming or gardening, one that Catherine de Hueck Doherty alludes to when she writes:

He who works with the earth from whence he came and to which he will return gets healed of his wounds. In a strange way he is somehow deeply reconciled with God again and walks at eventide with Him while they both look over the creation of their hands.⁴

This mystery of the garden points us toward the bigger mystery—the story of God’s Salvation Drama. In that drama as told in the Biblical narrative, God calls us continually to renewal, both in our communion with God, in our communion with our neighbors and enemies, and in our communion with the fertile soil. In Berry’s words, God’s “divine love, incarnate and indwelling in the world, summons the world always toward wholeness, which ultimately is reconciliation and atonement with God.”⁵ That we are summoned toward wholeness means that we must be both stewards of the fertile soil with which we have been entrusted, and reconcilers with our neighbors and enemies.

We will draw people into theological reflection on our garden work primarily through *narrative*. We will ask people how they see themselves as participants in God’s grand Story of reconciliation, and how they can take the practices they learn at Anathoth and use them for service in the Kingdom of God. Scripture and the Christian tradition are replete with story that revolve around eating, food, and land. We will ask people to reflect, for instance, on this story from the desert fathers:

A young man wants to become a monk. When he arrives at the monastery, he approaches Abbot Silvanus and declares his intention of becoming a pure contemplative. No work for him, just prayer and study. Silvanus agrees, and the next morning sends the young monk off to his cell to read his codex. All the other monks go out to work in the fields. At midday the young monk emerges from his

⁴ Ibid. p. 12

⁵ Berry. “Health is Membership” in *Another Turn of the Crank* (Washington, D.C. Counterpoint Press, 1995) p. 89

cell to inquire after lunch. In what I imagine to be a deadpan voice, Silvanus tells him: “Thou art a spiritual man and dost not hold food to be necessary; but we being carnal have need to eat and to that end we work—but thou hast chosen the good part, for thou readest all day and hast no wish for carnal food.”⁶

How are we like that young man, especially we Christians with an intellectual bent? Does having an office job excuse us from manual labor? Why does our society devalue such labor? How can we reclaim manual work, especially growing food, as a holy practice? What does the fertile soil and the earth’s abundance teach us about hospitality?

We will also ask people to reflect on the sacramental nature of everyday food. We will ask people to consider a quote such as this one from Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann:

Centuries of secularism have failed to transform eating into something strictly utilitarian. Food is still treated with reverence. A meal is still a rite—the last “natural sacrament” of family and friendship, of life that is more than “eating” and “drinking.” To eat is still something more than to maintain bodily functions. People may not understand what that “something more” is, but they nonetheless desire to celebrate it. They are still hungry and thirsty for sacramental life.⁷

By engaging in theological reflection on our gardening practices, we can help people discover what that “something more” is about. How can the way we eat “everyday” meals help us to practice a healthy sacramental life? Questions such as these can serve as springboards into reflecting on what we’re doing in the garden, and what we’re doing in our lives.

IV. Resources needed: see budget (not included with this document)

⁶ my paraphrased retelling of this story comes from Dom Rembert Sorg O.S.B. *Holy Work: Toward a Benedictine Theology of Manual Labor*. (Santa Ana, CA. Source Books, 2003) p. 2

V. Evaluating the project—what will you learn—how will you spread the word?

This garden is a big experiment in learning how to integrate practicing our faith with practicing land stewardship. We will evaluate as we go through feedback from participants and advice from our Board of Advisors. We will spread the word of what we learned through written articles for national publications (*Christian Century, Christianity Today, Sojourners, etc.*), as well as website, printed fliers, and speaking tours. We want to use Anathoth as a model to get other churches involved in agriculture & reconciliation.

VI. Timeline: we will begin working in September 2005, and the work will be ongoing with no projected conclusion to the project. Indeed, if things work out the way we hope, the project will grow and flourish for decades to come.

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⁷ Alexander Schmemmann. *For the Life of the World* (Crestwood, NY. St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2004). p.16