

The Bounty of Ordinary Times

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By Lucia A. Silecchia

My grandfather was a gardener.

Over a hundred years ago, he was a young farm boy in the sunny hills of southern Italy. A long journey later, he found himself shining shoes on the street corners of New York – the city that would become his hometown and mine.

But, once a farmer, always a farmer. When he grew up and settled in Queens, he recreated a farm as best he could in the yard surrounding his home. I remember well how, in a small piece of land under the watchful supervision of his dog and my cat, he eked out a rich bounty of tomatoes, lettuce, Swiss chard, rhubarb, squash, sweet peas, green beans, grapes, quince, figs, persimmons, mint, basil, hot peppers, sweet peppers, strawberries .. and ever more tomatoes!

One of the highlights of my childhood was the day my parents bought a swing set for my siblings and me. But, as it emerged from the Sears Roebuck shipping box in all its red and white gleaming glory, it must have broken Grandpa's heart a bit. He knew that, until we all outgrew swings, a prime piece of his garden became our turf. If ever there was tangible evidence of his deep love for us, it was his willing surrender of at least four rows of tomato plants for the joy of his grandchildren.

I have been thinking of his simple, ordinary garden often these weeks. It seems as though more and more people tell me that they have tried their hand at gardening this summer. They are now seeing the bounty of their backyard harvests. In the trials of these past months, the simple appeal of a garden seems to be in full bloom. To plan a seed and tend it, to watch it grow and bear fruit (or vegetable or flower), and to cherish the bounty of that small harvest is the most simple of human acts – one undertaken year in and year out since human life began.

Yet, in this ordinary activity is much profound and hopeful truth. Gardening starts when someone looks at a humble seed and sees in it possibilities that are unseen but hoped for. It continues when that seed is planted and hidden away for a time when there is no outward sign of anything good to come. It advances when the first sign of a stem or a leaf or a blade timidly comes forth from the dirt with the promise of new life. It involves some disappointment when seeds planted do not emerge or when they shrivel and die soon after they peek out from the soil. It requires a tenacious battle against weeds that somehow, inexplicably, always seem hardier and healthier. It takes the gentle care of watering and tending young plants as they tentatively mature. It generates frustration

when birds and insects help themselves to the ripe new bounty and exasperation when wind or weather prematurely ends the growing season.

But, after a summer that has been both too long and too short, the intrepid gardeners I know now speak of their ripe tomatoes with deep satisfaction and their herbs with unexpected enthusiasm. They already plan more ambitious gardens for 2021. With both generosity and pride they offer to share the harvest from their backyard gardens – or from the planters that blossom on their windowsills and porches.

There is much beautiful hope in the ordinary planting of a garden.

So many of the parables of Christ were parables of plants and gardens. I have always been told that this was because Christ dwelt among us in an agrarian time and place when the stories of the soil would best resonate with his listeners.

Yet, I think they also touch our hearts today when so many in both city and county turn to the simple, hopeful joy of planting a garden in a summer of uncertainty. The deep trust, the unspoken optimism, and the joyful hope of waiting for a harvest all marked the summers of my grandfather's life. I hope that this will also inspire the search for trust, optimism and joyful hope in all of the non-agrarian corners of our lives in these often troubled days. With gratitude for their example (and for bringing back some happy memories) I hope that all who are rediscovering the joy of a summer garden will be blessed with a rich bounty to fill their ordinary times.

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