

# Garden Gate

*Therese Schroeder-Sheker*

*“Everything depends on grace.”*

—THE MYSTICAL ARK<sup>1</sup>

*“I have been coming to this morning light since the day I was born.”<sup>2</sup>*

—W.S. MERWIN

**Beholding:** My apprenticeship to *beholding* was “begun” by virtue of an empty basket waiting to be refilled and the seemingly “chance” ringing of an old-fashioned desk phone. If my mother hadn’t stepped away to answer that phone call and take time to refill her laundry basket, I would have remained under the umbrella of her protective gaze and verbal instruction. As it was, by virtue of the seemingly ordinary, I discovered myself anew precisely because I was briefly entrusted to the wisdom of the garden.

**Perfect Largesse:** While sitting on the ground, some aperture occurred, and surely it was a sacred one. I received what was offered and found myself in a solitude unfolding by grace. In this condition, I became aware of being accompanied by a different order of guidance other than the one acknowledged by the roles shouldered by parents. The perfect largesse of Mother Nature’s protection and her vast curriculum introduced (me to) new rela-

tionships *not born of physical blood*. In retrospect, I can say now that beings and creatures were present for this encounter and in the aperture I witnessed their presences along with their movements and teeming life processes. My mother’s brief stepping away conveyed nothing resembling what one could call absence or negligence. It was the opposite. Presence abounded. Be that as it may, this event constituted my first conscious memory, or at least the biographical moment in which I began to be aware of listening-responding-communicating as an “I am.”

*“Marveling we venerate and  
venerating we marvel.”*

THE MYSTICAL ARK

*“the sound of it will  
make you remember.”*

W.S. MERWIN

**Garden as Ark:** The backyard of our home on Penrose included fencing on three sides, and a gate opening to a narrow alley where wild roses tended to spill out in profusion. A few mild-mannered bees hovered and hummed. This was not a manicured yard. The borders had abundant overgrowth that hadn’t been trimmed for

<sup>1</sup> Richard of St. Victor, *The Mystical Ark: Benjamin Major*, 149–370, translated by Grover Zinn for *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1979).

<sup>2</sup> W. S. Merwin, *Garden Time* (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2016).

some time. It was cozy that way, preferred, and the brightly colored tulips contrasting with the greenery disguised the physical fences. Instead of walls demarcating property lines, a child experienced a sweet haven or a simple, protected enclosure. Last but not least, the yard featured a magnificent oak tree, one whose girth exceeded the combined arm span of three squealing siblings when they circled it hand-to-hand. The canopy the tree provided created a shade that was regal and refreshing. The rustling of the oak's leaves on branches high and low wafted like sheets of humming voices. Sound congealed as if in a cloud formation being filled with overtones rather than rain. This resounding moved effortlessly, in the way that the sound of a choir in *pianissimo* might move from one shore to another if it were gliding over and across an inland pond.

*"We ascend to contemplation  
of invisible things by means  
of visible things."*

THE MYSTICAL ARK

*"there is no other voice or time."*

W.S. MERWIN

**Ordinary Time:** The aperture I want to describe required the ordinariness of a Midwestern morning, late enough in the season for the final traces of yellow, rose, and salmon colored tulips to speckle the greenery. Even so, the school term was in session. This meant that with my father at the research center and siblings in their classrooms, a mother and her youngest daughter were home together in a corridor of serenity. The

two of us were outside in this backyard haven where squirrels were scampering, and sparrows, robins, and blue jays flitted from branch to branch.

**Aperture:** My mother had been hanging freshly washed clothes on the line to dry. I had been playing nearby, sitting on the ground close to a sandbox, easily able to see both my mother and the oak tree. The two of us were fully occupied with our separate kinds of handiwork, and life seemed to be unburdened. I was happily doing whatever it is that little ones do with a small pail, a mound of last season's acorns, and bits of bark and twigs. My mother was just about to go back inside to wring out another load of laundry for the basket when the jingling phone perforated the quiet. **Sound!** Her summons and routine chores suddenly left me differently situated. **No adult!** After she stepped away it was as if the sky had metamorphosed so that another layer or world could gradually precipitate. A quickening began to infuse the enclosure. Even now, it is difficult to find a viable way to describe it, other than to say that a new condition *emerged*, permeated by currents of warmth and fire light.

*"aided by divine showings."*

THE MYSTICAL ARK

*"only once and only to look at  
...not to touch or hold."*

W.S. MERWIN

**Epiphany:** It was in this suffused tranquility that two spiritual beings precipitated alongside the oak tree. They

were silent and appeared to be composed of radiant currents in continual movement. They hovered in the air and together they held a scroll or a banner between them, allowing it to roll open. The scroll contained content that was alive rather than inert. I understood the “writing” on the scroll to be a message, but had not yet learned how to read or write the letters of the alphabet. This content wasn’t like the handwriting I had seen my sisters “do” on paper each night when they sat down at the dining room table to tackle their schoolwork.

*The Book of Nature:* Even the scroll itself appeared to be living. I say that for two reasons. First, because the “words” on it appeared to be germinating as if the fabric of the scroll were a medium like soil. Second, the “words” were quivering, pulsating and streaming, moving vertically, up and down, not “fixed” or static on the page as are our words today. I remember an urgency—a fire rising in my throat—I wanted to “read” the “words” and couldn’t, yet neither could I cry out. Perceiving my struggle, the remedy came in a singular gesture of kindness.

One of the two beings silently pointed away from the scroll and toward the oak. I looked to my left and saw that the outer layer of bark on the tree conveyed or broadcast not only a signature, but a living language: the bark too was vital, teeming, *in flux*, not unlike the blossoming content visible within the scroll. As my own straining dissolved, struggle was replaced by tranquility. Time became elastic. The tree became increasingly transparent and offered entrée to its own depth. I witnessed currents

inside the oak ascending and descending like a circulatory system whose heartbeat related to the sun. Sap was tree-blood, only this blood was variously colored amber and gold and green-gold, not ruby like yours and mine.

*“some of those things can be brought down for the understanding of all.”*

THE MYSTICAL ARK

*“lent to me for part of a season.”*

W.S. MERWIN

*Ensouled Acceptance:* That very morning, I understood that both scroll and oak offered a kind of otherworldly supra-handwriting, a living-breathing-spiritual handwriting, in that both scroll and oak presented worlds that were meant to be “entered” and “read.” Though sensitive enough to register subtleties, and still seated on the ground, I could not yet “read” either Nature’s tree or the celestial broadcast delivered by the two. Knowing no other way to respond, I surrendered to *resting inside a wide-awake beholding* that was permeated by awe. Decades later, I recognize that this surrender was not a passivity but an active and ensouled acceptance, an implicitly pure trust, and these initial responses set the tone for essentials that would bear fruit years later.

*Transmission:* After some or many moments—it is hard to say which—my mother returned and hastily brought me inside after I had tried to say something about the visitation. Though the aperture closed and stopped streaming, a deep internal

imprint or signature remained. The event *sealed* itself in me, into the fabric of my being, so it is safe to say that *beholding built the ark*. Though only a child, I knew in an unburdened way that the content shown was real. In retrospect, as an elder, that morning doesn't appear to me as a single seminal event, but, rather, within the quality of a transmission, one in which breathing mediates disclosure. In this case, the transmission pointed to the essential and eternal nature of covenant, and planted a variety of seeds in me that would rest for a necessary cycle of winters yet germinate in seasons to come.

*“neither a light nor an easy thing  
for the human soul to assume.”*

THE MYSTICAL ARK

*“they took their light with  
them when they went.”*

W.S. MERWIN

*Closing the Portal:* For quite some time after that, when my sisters sat at the dining room table in the evenings to do their school work, I would pull up a chair as if to join them. This wasn't mere imitative adoration of the big girls. I wanted to recall this beholding that happened near the oak tree and commit it to paper. Using pencil and color, I scribbled incomprehensibly across multiple pages, attempting signs and symbols that pleased no-one and made my mother nervous. Perhaps she understood the seminal origin of her daughter's hieroglyphs, and feared, pensively, what something like that could mean in a life if left to flourish unchecked. In her attempt to protect me from

anything uncanny, or maybe to make things manageable, my mother decided to do her utmost to close and lock the door to prevent the further availability of the traffic between worlds to her daughter.

She did it in an Irish way, with urgency, immediacy, and definition. She had been helping my sisters with their spelling and grammar, and so was at the table with us. There was a moment when I cried out in dismay and frustration, not being able to write or draw that other-worldly script. At this point, she furrowed her brow, came to my side and crumpled the papers. She held my face in her two hands and looked me squarely in the eye.

*“Hush, child! Hush! ‘Twas only a dream.”*

I knew it was not, yet instinctively sensed the wisdom of containment. What had happened had really happened and had come unbidden. It came amidst the ordinary, came in daylight waking hours and not while I was sleeping or dreaming. That being said, I most definitely chose to lay to rest any temptation to protest or argue. Those routes only attract unwanted attention and unleash more parental anxiety. Sometimes silence serves a condition resembling peace even when there is an undertow of unease. In this way, when talk ended and even echo died down, my very gifted mother might have been able to tell herself that the oak tree was a single bleed-through anomaly, and that Lethe had healed her child from a life of suffering and questioning. I was content to simply let things be. It may have looked like I had forgotten, but appearances and realities differ.

**Agency:** It is true that the tree became solid and opaque again, but beholding by grace had sealed itself into the beholder. A powerful voice of authority had insisted that something real did not happen and could not exist, and from this I began to intuit how trying it can be to be a loving and protecting parent. Still, the decree didn't cohere with the experience, so I chose to remember and honor both from a quiet ledge, a periphery, rather than from a fraying or imploding center. The collision between power and perception was something I would encounter again in adulthood, in studying the history of science, the history of biomedicine, and that of theology. Be that as it may, in childhood, voluntarily keeping mum at the right time and for the right reason, I had no experience of being silenced. Even a youngster has agency; I used mine to give assent to voluntary silence, and agency is a great mystery.

I didn't know it then, but came to know later: If sustained, the heat of a voluntarily chosen silence concentrates itself and ripens over time. It gathers force and bears fruit. If given the chance, it operates from within a form and becomes an alchemical retort in which one's accumulated material can begin to change. Slowly, gradually, our leaden dross undergoes metamorphosis, creates an opening on the next level and centers one inside paradox: *the lead is slowly and quietly transformed into gold.*

There are times when the very thing that could be interpreted by another as a structure of diminishment or a structure of suppression can in fact gradually be disclosed as the source of an almost transcendent

opposite: *Strength! Protection! Aid!* Containment asked me to go inward and to go inward deeply: in and down. That was it. Or at least part of it.

**Resonance:** Over time, the sustained *praxis* of containment taught me much about the ways and means of transformation, of transformative currents, and of attunement. I learned that freely-given-assent anchors one particularly and broadcasts at a particular frequency. Each frequency range activates resonance in other beings, events, and conditions. These potentize openings and movements to and fro, betwixt and between, above and below, right and left. By the same token, any given frequency range can evoke nothing more than a dull "thud" in a differently tuned milieu. If it is possible to matriculate in a wisdom curriculum prior to donning a school uniform, I was, by virtue of the garden oak, an inadvertent early enrollee. The largesse of Mother Nature had indicated a resonance path for me that would mature in a future stage.

Metabolizing this into essentials has been generative.

It is clear (to me) that if at some turning point in life we forgo something *of the moment* in lieu of something *of the eternal*, we can be issued a metaphysical passport. This seems to be a thing of rose-gold, mysteriously granting passage, allowing one to move and communicate *and* to be clothed in multiple intimate relationships, one of them being with *Natura* as being.

*"some learn this by a showing  
while others believe and prove it  
incontestably by authority."*

THE MYSTICAL ARK

“*your note is the time of  
your radiance*”

W.S. MERWIN

**Noun to Verb – Event to Capacity:**

How often we enter into a life-changing experience without yet having a fractional understanding of its meaning or significance, message, or mantle. Just think of relationships and life events: a teacher, a book, marriage, parenting, fire and flood. In this way, a single enigmatic hour, even in childhood, can distill into focus and become a guiding light for years of future inner work, study, prayer, reflection, meditation, and contemplation. That gradual decades-long ripening is the process of metamorphosis<sup>3</sup> and, simultaneously, is when and how a noun can become a verb, and an event or an experience can blossom and become a capacity.

Be assured, Dear Reader: The childhood aperture on Penrose closed and closed for good reason, but the witnessing of *Natura* as *being* rather than Nature as a *thing* sealed itself into my personhood and shaped both memory and perception.

That which is known by heart is ensouled and embodied. That kind of knowing can constellate a metaphysical compass which provides trustworthy direction if we choose to call upon it. The fabric of beholding and witnessing formed in me the fundamen-

tals needed to develop the capacity for recollection. For me, recollection gradually became grounded, by choice, within the Eucharist.

“*They worried only about Immanent  
Disaster, so for the most part they  
were pleasant enough.*”

RENÉ CHAR<sup>4</sup>

“*The opposite of security is peace.*”

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER<sup>5</sup>

**Terra Firma – Terra Nova:** Written reflection on an experience of this nature entails an element of risk, to the degree that there are those who insist on the concrete by dismissing the metaphysical and spiritual. That being said, life has taught me that there are multiple simultaneous ways of knowing, that reality is textured and layered, and that understanding comes over time, gradually, as a sort of *costly grace*.<sup>6</sup> Returning to the memory of the Penrose aperture has remained a constant meditation throughout my adult life. Whether in silence, in speech, at harp, in prayer, whether in illness or in health, working inside or working outdoors, *beholding* is entrée. *Beholding* builds a metaphysical ark, a *currach* for earth, air, fire and water; a vehicle of land, sea or sky; liberating

<sup>4</sup> Rene Char, *The Smoke That Carried Us, Selected Poems*, trans. Susanne Dubroff (Buffalo, NY: White Pine Press, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Love Letters from Cell 92, the Correspondence between Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Maria von Wedemeyer 1943–45*, ed. Ruth-Alice von Bismarck and Ulrich Kabitz (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995).

<sup>6</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship* (Touchstone, 1995) is considered a Christian classic.

<sup>3</sup> See Goethe, *The Metamorphosis of Plants*, introduction and photography by Gordon L. Miller (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009). Goethe, *The Metamorphosis of Plants*, 2<sup>nd</sup> revised edition (East Troy, WI: Bio-Dynamic Literature, 1978). Gertraud Goodwin, *Metamorphosis: Journeys Through Transformation of Form* (Forest Row, UK: Temple Lodge, 2016).

perception of warmth, light, sound and life. Most essentially, *beholding* disclosed (for me) three distinct strata embedded in a single terrain.

The three together—Garden, Gardening, and Gardener—appeared *in new and living ways*<sup>7</sup> that are (for me) closely tied to the monastic vision of purity of heart.<sup>8</sup> By the time I became an adult capable of cultivating a garden, I had also become sensitive to clusters of three and to how and why they could support the emergence of purity of heart. Wherever this signature of three-ness appeared, whenever this *trinitarian quality* permeated an endeavor or a way of being, a person or a commitment, a dialogue or path of discovery, I trusted the three together as a sign of accountability leading to understanding. Stated differently, the trinitarian cluster indicated to me *solid ground* and *new land*.

“Poetry will rob me of my death.”

RENÉ CHAR

“The Word in the desert.”

T. S. ELIOT<sup>9</sup>

**Exemplars:** “Try to recover your natural unity,” the Trappist Cistercian Thomas Merton<sup>10</sup> taught. These six words are so brief as to be easily overlooked. They may appear as mild

admonition or may be received as quiet encouragement. Regardless, they constitute a very fundamental and tall order, one which Thomas Berry<sup>11</sup> called *the great work*, meaning: the work of a life-time.

And then we have Hans Urs von Balthasar,<sup>12</sup> who urgently advocated the wisdom of *keeping the three Transcendentals of Truth, Beauty and Goodness together; to separate any one from the other two*, he taught, *unleashes a kind of interpretive violence in the world*. This conviction offers a model of holiness and wholeness that is neither doctrinal, dogmatic nor abstract; it is however intrinsically agapeic and Sophianic.

Because of exemplars like Merton and von Balthasar, the imagination I began to hold as a personal ideal formed as an amalgam of their two insights. To take both seriously, meaningfully, integrally and authentically, I had to begin to cultivate a greater sensitivity and responsivity to trinities and then also apply that trinitarian tuning into daily life. First, I had to

editor Shannon clarifies that *The Inner Experience* was written in 1959 and that Merton edited and made minor corrections in 1968. “Try to recover your basic natural unity, to reintegrate your compartmentalized being into a coordinated and simple whole and learn to live as a unified human person. This means that you have to bring back together the fragments of your distracted existences that when you say “I” there is really someone present to support the pronoun you have uttered.”

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (Three Rivers Press, 1999). Also, Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (Oakland, CA: Sierra Club 1988).

<sup>12</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Bernanos: An Ecclesial Existence* (San Francisco, CA: Communio-Ignatius Press, 1988).

<sup>7</sup> *Letter to the Hebrews*, chapter 10: 19-25 from the Pauline milieu, NASB.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Silent Life*, essay “Puritas Cordis (Purity of Heart)” (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1957).

<sup>9</sup> T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, “Burnt Norton V” (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1943).

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation*, edited by William Shannon (Harper: San Francisco, 2003). However, the

grow to appreciate that not all dualities constellate complementarity. Good-bad; black-white; Christian-Jewish; blue collar-white collar. Some dualities activate resistance, can be polarized into opposites, one sparring for primacy over the other: *self-limiting*. Later, I grew to observe that a trinity presents a different energetic and communication dynamic: *Balance!*

Trinities are not confined to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit of Christian Tradition. Once the scales fall from the eyes, it is natural to see how available, awakening and frequent trinitarian clusters are. From this, I began to understand that there is such a thing as *trinitarian perception*. A few of the trinities that light up for me arise from different levels of being and foci, such as: body-soul-spirit; truth-beauty-goodness; thinking-feeling-willing; inflammation-homeostasis-sclerosis; love-lover-beloved; prayer-meditation-contemplation; salt-sulphur-mercury; awakening-purgation-illumination; loving-knowing-sensing; giving-waiting-receiving; excess-proportion-deficiency; soundboard-harmonic curve-pillar.

Wherever your eyes rest or thoughts land, attention and intention cry out to protect the unity of these trinities in order to move or live in balance. To separate the sound board of the harp from its pillar and harmonic curve is to destroy the instrument and silence its voice. In the same way that separating one from the other two unleashes a kind of violence against sound, preserving the interconnected and balanced unity of a trinitarian insight offers the beholder a re-imagination of wholeness that is more stable than tottering.

*The Genius of Benedict*: The insight about the virtue of a three-fold balance was lauded by St. Benedict as early as the sixth century and integrated into his monastic vision. He knew about the failures of religious ascetic extremes<sup>13</sup> from observing human foibles within religious community life itself and from reading Cassian's *Conferences*.<sup>14</sup> Both Cassian and Benedict understood that one cannot grow spiritually by avoiding the body or by bypassing the soul. Within the shelter of *purity of heart*, praying ceaselessly models an attitude, gesture, consciousness and praxis and yet differs greatly from an "ascetic one-upmanship that pursued physical disciplines<sup>15</sup> as if they were ends in themselves." To the extent that any fasting, prayer, or vigil effort emerged as a disembodied extreme, the elders noted that those choices fueled competition and/or resentment in community as well as self-deception, vanity or inflation in the heart of the individual practitioner. Benedict advised practical, tranquil and proactive solutions in *structures* of balance and structures of proportion, ones that, if integrated, are astonishingly creative and generous. He advised that the day be structured so that each of the three kinds of dimensions were faithfully lived and practiced, all in the spirit of service. Each person engages

<sup>13</sup> The Symeon the Stylite and Syrian stylite asceticism both come to mind.

<sup>14</sup> John Cassian, *Conferences*, translation and preface Colm Luibheid and Introduction by Owen Chadwick, in *The Classics of Western Spirituality* series (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1985).

<sup>15</sup> William Harmless, S.J., *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).



in some form of manual physical labor along with some form of intellectual or artistic work along with specific forms of inner work and prayer. There was nothing disembodied, unensouled or spiritually anemic about Benedict's ideal. However short of the mark individuals and communities have historically fallen and will surely continue to fall from this three-fold ideal, aiming for body, soul and spirit balance remains one of the strongest traditional aspirational characteristics of Benedictine life.

**Challenges and Obstacles:** In my experience, Benedict's three-fold balance is a staggeringly difficult path of commitment to inhabit in a highly technological post-industrial, post-modern corporate world. I say that because the contemporary maladies of fragmentation and compartmentalization are rampant regardless of work environment, community, vocation or career. Not everyone is intimate with the grounding and metabolizing gifts that can accompany physical manual labor. On the one hand, I know few doctors, lawyers or abbots who work in a garden, large or small. On the other, we read daily of millions of people toiling under demoralizing conditions that accompany the treatment of the earth as a commodity, a source of profit. In between the two extremes, we have the new wave of individuals and communities who are living a sustainable vision that aspires toward balance.

**Walking the Talk:** With these layers in mind, Garden became a linchpin for me in light of incarnational spirituality. It was as much a focal reality

about balance as the hearth is to the warmth of the home. For John Cassian, the monastic vocation didn't defer beatitude to an afterlife but sought to see God<sup>16</sup> *here and now—to get a glimpse, however brief, however tentative, of heaven on earth.* Garden: an archetypal reality, never a hobby, perhaps a Transcendental, a constant inspiration, a path of beauty, a well-spring of nurturing health, a path embracing *Natura*, a sacramental path offering further participation in the Mystical Body, and finally, an extension of Eucharist.

So this is how and why Garden (noun, verb and being) became a critical element in my own grounding—intrinsic to an incarnational spirituality, in the contemplative life, in the capacity to walk the talk, to demonstrate what we hear and say about the most essential messages of the Gospels: the Word of Christ. Everything we know and love is on loan, and surely the privilege of gardening could be lost or taken away in times to come; but at this point, with Garden, with the inclusion of manual labor into the fullness of daily life, I am able to live more fully and move more genuinely toward the Benedictine ideal of balance.

*“Love does not dominate; it cultivates.”*  
GOETHE, *Das Märchen*<sup>17</sup>

**Citizen of the Planet:** It has been a blessing to have had the opportunity to live and work in many different places and situations in several parts of the world, and to experience a wide

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Maxims and Reflections* (General Books Club, 2010).

spectrum of ecosystems—remote forests and inland rivers; mountains and prairies; shorelines and brooks; scrublands and grasslands; metropolitan cities and obscure hamlets. Travel can allow us to experience gardens tended by humans and gardens born of unsung elements and invisible hands.

Having cherished both, I have lived, worked and gardened in hermetic hideaways free of noise and light pollution—and these acres were further protected and amplified because they bordered miles of environmentally protected greenbelt. I have also lived and worked in the noisiest and most populated of European and American cities, places that had been bombed during World War II, places where cement rules the day, places where one works hard to get an afternoon off to walk in a city park designed by landscape architects. Life has allowed me to live, learn, work and flourish on large and small farms and in large and small gardens and to root and thrive in an opposite: the one-room, third-story apartment nook where a single gabled window ledge serves as the altar for a potted plant. Each situation offered its own kind of heaven and apprenticeship. These days, and for the previous decade, I garden in a small enclosure in a quiet village.

**Outdoor Physical Labor:** I am less physically strong now than when younger, but remain inspired by all the garden has to offer and teach. It has been a joy and a privilege to be healthy enough to continue to work outside in a physical manner and to be able to alternate that physicality with the more interior (and indoor) activities of music, scholarship, clinical work,

teaching. That being said, prayer is integrated into both indoor and outdoor ways of being. When in the priory garden, I am able to do some intensely physical manual labor outdoors almost daily, carrying soil or rock by the sweat of the brow; planting, watering, pruning, transplanting, cultivating, harvesting, and caring for an oddly shaped garden and a humble orchard. Even in the winter, the Pacific Northwest with its Mediterranean climate allows for a mild amount of outdoor work. However great or humble the patch of earth being tilled, to be able to work and garden seriously *outdoors* while also maintaining a second work-life *indoors* has evolved (for me) as a much needed complementarity. It has provided me with a rich set of contrasts and learning tools. Intimacy with both choices has helped me form vital questions and make new connections that could not have arisen (for me) in abstraction. The inclusion of physical manual labor into the opus has helped me re-imagine life, holiness, health and wholeness in ways that tend to upend and dissolve widely held assumptions about success. I can't take credit for this, as the re-imagination did not arise unaided. It has been mediated by the wisdom of exemplars.

*“All at once there arose in my hearth a battle of embers never to subside again.”*

RENE CHAR

*“throw roses at everyone”*

EDITH SÖDERGRAN<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Edith Södergran, *Complete Poems*, translated by David McDuff (Bala, North Wales: Bloodaxe Books, 1984).

*The Litany of Descriptors:* During many years of scholarship, I discovered evocative terms<sup>19</sup> that emerged from different historical cultures spanning a large arc of time. Listen to their names ring! *Enclosed garden, temple garden, Druidic garden, monastic garden, Cistercian garden, rose garden, culinary garden, herb garden, medicinal garden, Ficino's garden, Goethe's garden, alchemical garden, memorial garden, Zen garden, manor garden, country garden, urban garden.* As I encountered the descriptors, they resounded and appeared like welcoming heralds. Each descriptor shed additional light on the sources of inspiration and motivation that kindled manual labor through the ages, coupled with a relationship to Natura as being. Together, the various heralds fired my own imagination of healing, holiness and wholeness, and offered a different way of participating in the Mystical Body of Christ.

*"Be accustomed to walking in heavenly places with dwellers in heaven."*

THE MYSTICAL ARK

*"stars gone into another life"*

W.S. MERWIN

*The Memorial Garden:* The enclosed garden in which I work is intentionally small and beautifully intentional. In it, over a hundred kinds of fruits, flowers, herbs, and vegetables flourish in a small area. The most mysteri-

<sup>19</sup> See *Medieval Gardens* edited by Elizabeth B. Macdougall (Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection at Harvard, 1986), but especially "The Medieval Monastic Garden" by Paul Meyvaert.

ous voice amongst the prolific greening comes from a section I call the memorials, and in this case, the alchemical priory memorials.

During the Last Supper, and in our contemporary celebration of the Eucharist, we cherish the fact that Christ tells the devoted to "do this in memory of me." If we think about doing anything in memory of Him, or something in memory of any beloved person *let alone the Master*, the act of remembering has the potential to emerge as a sacramental bridge, linking heaven and earth.

*"That difference which is between wood and gold is the difference between the historical and spiritual senses of Scripture."*

THE MYSTICAL ARK

*"Memory alone is awake with me."*

W.S. MERWIN

The monastic customs show that the traditional Benedictine Cluniac *charism* of connecting the communities of the living with the communities of the dead was an important contribution to every dimension of culture.<sup>20</sup> It was natural then for me to pray in that tradition, praying daily in memory of loved ones and apparent strangers, all of whom Joa Bolendas<sup>21</sup> calls the Risen Ones. Sometimes

<sup>20</sup> Therese Schroeder-Sheker, *Transitus: A Blessed Death in the Modern World* (West Scarborough, ME: St. Dunstan's Press, 2001). Also, Frederick Paxton, *Christianizing Death* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990).

<sup>21</sup> Joa Bolendas, *So That You May Be One* (Great Barrington, MA: Lindisfarne Books, 1997) and Joa Bolendas, *Alive in God's World* (Lindisfarne Press, 2001).

this prayer expresses itself as pure thanksgiving, characterized by listening and waiting. Other times it also includes all those gestures related to asking a question, or to forgiveness and healing. With time, as if prayer prepares the garden bed, I do my best to enter silence. Only then does the choosing and planting of the memorial rose, lily, olive tree and more occur, one primary choice for each individual being remembered. A single intentional plant, bush or tree is chosen and cultivated in memory of each of their lives and life-works, each teacher and mentor, each of those who have gone on ahead of us, and for whom I am filled with gratitude. This has occupied years of inner work and manual labor, and the memorials grow in number each year as so many make their *transitus*. The memorial garden may seem like a courteous thing to do, but it is more. Being with each memorial through the seasons and years teaches me as much about spiritual alchemy as it does sacrament.

*“Mystical understanding is tripartite.”*

THE MYSTICAL ARK

*“Memory walking in the dark.”*

W.S. MERWIN

*“I cannot tell you how readable the book of nature is becoming for me.”*

GOETHE<sup>22</sup>

Early in the morning, it is possible to visit and hand water or prune each of the memorial plantings while praying and listening. Yes, that means I stand close to that which has been planted

for my mother, father, grandmother, family members, dearest friends, and loved ones, all my beloved teachers, especially the music teachers, several saints and consecrated individuals, and yes, Mary and John, Merton and Von Balthasar, Bach and Finzi, Hildegard and Mechthild, Plotinus and Ficino, and quite a few more. I say their names internally and out loud, to let each ring in my soul as well as in the physical air, and each memorial is labeled with the individual’s name. These “labels” are specially made by a local sign-maker who understands that his work is contributing to a prayer praxis. He told me once that he too is praying internally when he creates each sign for this garden. Usually at the foot of a memorial tree, there will be a secondary choice, almost always an herb. Each plant is intentional and alchemical, often unlikely but not arbitrary. The total effort might combine a berry with a labiate, or a drupe with a *rosaceae*.

To the extent that the bridge between worlds has been cultivated and cherished as a sacramental possibility, a certain expressive communion can take place in these quiet dawn and dusk hours devoted to memorial garden prayer and to the vocation of gardening. Something is emerging that has the quality of an office of hours for the manual laborer.

There is also a section reserved for those who have committed suicide, for as the years pass, from my own time as a college student to the present, we see that suicide<sup>23</sup> rates have increased dramatically. There are

<sup>22</sup> *The Metamorphosis of Plants*, op. cit.

<sup>23</sup> See the David Leonhardt and Stuart A Thompson opinion piece published in *The*

several such lives and souls remembered in the memorial garden. We love and cherish these people, without hesitation, and surely they benefit from being remembered faithfully. Observing each of their memorials allows me to say generally that their processes seem to unfold outside of time. When one of them suddenly flowers, or exudes a glorious fragrance, particularly after years of dormancy, my heart just about leaps in my chest and I am down on my knees in praise and thanksgiving.

Sometimes there are individuals who struggled with one another during life, or hurt or betrayed one another when they were alive, and if or when their two individual memorial plants or trees suddenly blossom or fruit on the same day, even though different species, planted far apart or close together, I know in body, soul and spirit that something powerful and alchemical is being expressed and communicated. It is important to witness this kind of potential, not to explain it or define it. Just witness it and marvel. These bits no doubt constitute an elder way of reading and entering the *Book of Nature*, and an elder way of praying, hoping, and keeping the two communities connected.

I also hope the priory garden is even a tad bit Dorothy Day subversive, because each hour bridging with the our beloved exemplars and loved ones doesn't only connect the verticality of the community of the living with the

community of the dead, it is also an hour liberated from the clutches of technology.

And what about the hours that are not so rarified? There are times when you and I might only see the literal garden, joying in the fragrance and color of the herbs and fruits. These so nurture body, soul and spirit, and this is in itself already more than enough.

*“unseen among the waking doves who answer from the sleep of the valley there is no other voice or other time.”*

W.S. MERWIN

### *The Presence of the Risen Christ:*

Because I am writing during the Coronavirus pandemic, houses of worship are closed and entire cities are on lock down. Many are grieving the sudden death of a family member or loved one. We have been told to stay home and center in solitude. We have received word of services being streamed by the various traditions, and in a precedent setting corridor, no Eucharist has been available to the Christian faithful, at least at the physical level. The sacramental caesura exists for governmental reasons, and yet I have wondered if it might also serve a great unknown, even a mystery. Individuals who are socially distanced are describing a return to essentials. The solitude is encouraging individuals to enter into or experience a different quality of prayer and interiority *and* to express love and care in newly tender ways.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps this moment contains the potential to open more doors (mystical and spiri-

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*New York Times* on March 6, 2020. “How Working-Class Life is Killing Americans.” In this piece, the authors discuss the Nobel Prize winning work of Anne Case and Angus Deaton (deaths of despair).

<sup>24</sup> I am thinking of the singers singing across balconies.

tual) than the physical ones the pandemic has padlocked.

There are times and conditions in the garden when the quality of the quickened air and uncanny breeze suggest that additional layers and dimensions might be available for entrée. We have always read that He will come again in the clouds. This means many things, among them: Resurrection currents permeate and potentize the very intersection of earth and sky. *The humble little square foot where you are digging right now might be nothing less than potentized ground, sacred ground, nothing less than altar.* Surely He is close at hand—*so very close.*

You startle and inhale deeply. A lone mourning dove landing at your feet, a sudden fragrance wafting without source, the lily speaking next to the rose, a hummingbird lingering at your cheek, the berries surrounded by greens, the sudden bowing of an apple tree or olive when there is in fact no wind: these arrive and invade the fertile liminal pathways in order to startle, awaken and rekindle the human heart.

*“saying to myself Remember this.”*

W.S. MERWIN

***Epiclesis:*** At this stage of my life, when thinking about the alchemical garden or the priory garden, I cherish both mystery and miracle. Nor can I distance any of this miraculous beauty and mysterious fecundity from the part of the Eucharistic rite referred to as *epiclesis*. At the consecration, matter and spirit interpenetrate and congeal and especially so when one turns in priestly humility to thank, to raise, to offer and bless. I am more elder

now than younger, gardening in the ephemeral hours of changing light—dawn and dusk—yet always gardening in solitude. It is a joy to do so, because the garden is not a center for irritating or burdensome chores but rather a very pure context in which to pray and to share life. By extension, cultivating a garden or an orchard year after year through the changing seasons offers the gardener an embodied school of prayer. It has taken me a long time to appreciate how and why consecration occurs, whether we are acknowledging the consecration of beings or of spaces. It is possible that some receive the Risen Master in His Resurrection body more deeply while working in the garden amidst the brambles and quivering buds than when in our finest dress, while sitting indoors in a chapel or even in a Whit-sun-imbued cenacle. I accept that.

*“Nowhere else will you find what you can marvel at more worthily; nowhere else will you find what you can love more rightly.”*

THE MYSTICAL ARK

***The Resurrection:*** These dimensions being risked in written form, no matter where I have been living or where I have been going, one vision in particular has colored and sculpted my own perception of the word “Garden,” whether this Garden speaks of noun, verb, or being. The Johannine Gospel narrative describes how Jesus had been buried in a newly-hewn tomb situated *in the garden*. The word garden is repeated twice in close proximity, once to locate the crucifixion and a second time to describe the placement of the burial tomb. John further recounts

Mary Magdalene's solitary encounter with the Risen Christ early on Sunday morning. She is standing right outside the tomb. The word garden is not repeated a third time, but the way in which John places Mary, we know that Christ reveals Himself to her there *in the garden*. She is the first to whom the Master appears; He inhabits a new form, and for a moment, she mistakes Him for *the Gardener*.

Does not her "mistake" offer a timeless mystery? A blessed paradox? The strongest possible indication of what is to come? The Risen one did not choose to appear as a king or a prince or a star in the sky, but as one whose humanity could momentarily be mistaken for a gardener. The Risen Christ mirrored something precious to us about the luminous nature of work while appearing in His own radiant light-body.

And what about the mystery of perceiving the Risen One in an early morning hour? Before the hustle and bustle of the tyranny of the urgent begins to stir again? It is all there, simplicity shining through complexity.<sup>25</sup>

To this day, each time I work in the garden, hair askew, face surely splotched with soil, and skin dripping in perspiration, I pray in this new-old way: carrying a hope that it is embodied, ensouled, fresh, rhythmic, and knowing that it is imperfect but hope-filled, love-filled, inside joy.

This is the recollected moment where the Magdalenian possibility leaves me trembling. Who amongst us

knows how to love the way she did? Surely not I, and surely no one I know, and yet this potent model is there for each of us to approach. Surely any who might be capable of perceiving and receiving *Natura* as *living being* instead of Nature as transactional commodity is drawing near to the altar of the Eucharist and to something of Easter Sunday morning.

*"it can be given but can never be sold."*

W.S. MERWIN

The Claude Monet painting from 1879 entitled *Orchard in Bloom* (*Verger en Fleurs*) speaks to me of the great delicacy and the condition required for something like Mary Magdalene's seeing, Mary's Easter Morning perception. Her gaze was born of an increasingly awakened and enlarged heart torn asunder. In the painting, the blossoming of trees proliferates, and we inhale the most delicate possible fragrance and color of white petals tinged with the palest rose-hued veins. Monet's orchard hints at how it is He might have made Himself known to one nearby.

The Magdalene was with Jesus at the Cross till the very end, and when she was most disheveled, exhausted and begrimed, after two nights of sleeplessness and confusion, she saw Him, the Risen Christ, pre-dawn on Sunday morning, in spring air that is quivering in the fragrance of the blossoming trees.

In the Gospels, the Magdalene sees Him before the apostles do, demonstrating a Sophianic expression of metanoia, and showing a way of standing utterly unmasked. In the following years and millennia, many

<sup>25</sup> See Raimondo Panikkar on the monastic archetype in his Holyoke lectures of 1980 later published under the rubric of *Blessed Simplicity* by Seabury Press in 1982.

unknown others have surely followed in her perceptual footsteps by treating the Earth and Garden as sacred ground. If we enter the Monet in the spirit of prayer and or contemplation, something akin to morphic resonance occurs and the presence of the past shimmers through again. The world of blossoming petals hints at the context

in which Mary might have perceived Him. A distracted or pre-occupied person would not be able to notice *Some One* standing nearby, in spirit, nor would he or she have been able to receive his or her humanity mirrored back as an archetypal gardener, one modestly engaged in manual labor.



*Orchard in Bloom*, Claude Monet, 1879

*“Above reason yet not beyond  
reason . . . by means of a divine showing.”*

THE MYSTICAL ARK

*“This is precisely the crux of it . . . provided I myself don’t forget.”*

IMRE KERTÉSZ<sup>26</sup>

*“here and now – to get a glimpse, however brief, of heaven on earth.”*

JOHN CASSIAN

<sup>26</sup> Imre Kertész, *Fatelessness*, a new translation by Tim Wilkinson (New York: Vintage International, 2004).



*The New Jerusalem:* One day, when least expected, every paradox will surface and break through to higher ground. It will happen when you are most tired and yet strangely capable of radiance, perhaps you are even a little crooked and worse for the wear. You will find yourself in the garden.

Despite all your partials, something whole is bleeding through your afflictions. You are recollected and cannot separate the digging and pruning from the silent praying, from the pulsing glory or thanksgiving. You are full body-soul-and-spirit praying, connected to the Mystical Body of Christ. There is an opening, either internal or external. Long ago a Magdalenian moment ushered in the new. Could something happen again?

Catching some subtle movement out of the corner of your eye, it seems, you will find yourself turning ever so slightly, your trowel caught aloft in

mid-air. You are open. Turning to see and hear. Turning to witness. The quickening air. Worlds within worlds. Currents of moving light and pulsating warmth. The fragrance from the far country.

You might even hear your name.

You fall to your knees and your eyes are wet. The *Book of Revelation* suggests that the church of the New Jerusalem has no doors or windows. No walls. Open. The inside-outside dichotomy is long gone. *Natura* can receive the appearance of the Risen Christ. The chapel, the tabernacle and the garden are one. The question then is a heart-breaking mixture of humility and astonished joy: When *hasn't* He been there, so close to home, standing at the end of this flower-strewn path?

*The Chalice Well Priory Garden*