

Growing With My Garden

GROWING WITH MY GARDEN

THOUGHTS ON TENDING THE
SOIL AND THE SOUL

ROLLAND HEIN

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By Hein, Rolland
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To Dorothy

My wife and gardening companion

. . . and what's the earth
With all its art, verse, music, worth—
Compared with love, found, gained, and kept?

— Robert Browning

Other books by Rolland Hein:

Life Essential: The Hope of the Gospel, ed.

*Creation in Christ: The Unspoken Sermons
of George MacDonald, ed.*

*George MacDonald's World: An Anthology
from the Novels, ed.*

The Miracles of Our Lord, ed.

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George MacDonald: Victorian Mythmaker

The Heart of George MacDonald, ed.

*Christian Mythmakers: C.S. Lewis, Madeleine L'Engle,
J.R.R. Tolkien, George MacDonald,
G. K. Chesterton & others, 2nd Edition.*

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. . . the first thing the casual critic will say is "What nonsense all this is; do you mean that a poet cannot be thankful for grass and wild flowers without connecting it with theology; let alone your theology?"

To which I answer, "Yes; I mean he cannot do it without connecting it with theology, unless he can do it without connecting it with thought."

—G. K. Chesterton

The plant does not have any control or choice in the matter of its own growth. As for us, we are like plants that have the one choice of being in or out of the light.

—Simone Weil

INTRODUCTION

In the middle of a bed of magenta geraniums and golden coreopsis a wrought-iron plaque offers the verse:

*The kiss of the sun for pardon
The song of the birds for mirth;
One is nearer God's heart in the garden
Than anywhere on earth.*

Doggerel, yes, but it's true: in my garden, more than any other place, I feel something of the presence of God. To say so is not to reduce Him to the life of trees and plants. He is not an amorphous deity but the living God, the Ultimate Person, the ineffable One who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy. He is the Great Creator: He called into being all things, and in Him everything finds its purpose and reason for being. There is no place where He is not, but there are some places where He can be more quickly felt, a garden preeminent among them.

The Bible suggests as much. When God first made man and woman, He put them in a garden, telling them to tend it, and in the cool of the evening He looked for them there. John tells us Christ was accustomed to meeting His disciples in a garden. In His darkest hour before the cross He went to a garden to pray, His body was laid in a garden tomb, and it was in that garden

on the first Easter morning that the astounding truth of the Resurrection began to dawn upon the disciples. Mary mistook the Risen Christ to be a gardener. When the Hebrew prophets express their vision of a fully redeemed and restored society—that future state in which redeemed people will be fully “at home” and content—they picture it like a “well-watered garden.”

“I come to the garden alone, while the dew is still on the roses,” a familiar hymn relates, “and He walks with me, and He talks with me, and He tells me I am His own.” Romantic sentiment to many, perhaps, but happy is the person who finds such an experience to be a precious part of life. The beauty in nature has been placed there by God as a means of calling our attention to Himself. Simone Weil observes that since a genuine love of our fellow beings and of religious practices is almost entirely absent from people today, “the beauty of the world is almost the only way by which we can allow God to penetrate us.” Speaking of beauty in its totality, she continues:

The beauty of the world is the co-operation of divine wisdom in creation. “Zeus made all things,” says an Orphic line, “and Bacchus perfected them.” This perfecting is the creation of beauty; God created the universe, and his Son, our first-born brother, created the beauty of it for us. The beauty of the world is Christ’s tender smile for us coming through matter. He is really present in the universal

beauty. The love of this beauty proceeds from God dwelling in our souls and goes out to God present in the universe. It also is like a sacrament. (*Waiting for God*, 102-4)

As we meet God's Spirit in nature He nurtures and enhances the joys of life, He strengthens our spirit and we find wisdom to face our difficulties.

Whether I'm planting bulbs, pulling weeds, or picking berries, my mind seldom dwells long upon the repetitious movements I'm making. Rather, it is preoccupied with the affairs of my life. I may be wrestling with a particular problem or planning some activity or considering the implications of some idea. Anything can and should be shared with the Spirit of God, and I can do it there. Solutions and inspirations come in an atmosphere of peace and an aura of joy.

If this line of thought seems curiously out of harmony with the ideals promoted by our materialistic age of fast-paced busyness, artificial intelligence, and genetic engineering, perhaps we need to rethink what it means to be truly human. Because God created nature as the best context for man, it would seem wise to consider our humanity in terms of it. The breathtaking intricacies and unfathomable mysteries of earthly life all have their source in His divine ingenuity, and their wonders increase our awe of Him. The natural world is ideally suited for our true needs. Great wisdom lies in being rightly related to it.

The Bible states that “by faith we understand that the world was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was made out of things which do not appear” (Heb. 11:3, *Revised Standard Version*). Things unseen are ever trying to come to us through things seen; their readiest vehicles are found in the garden—its flowers, its fruits, its forms. The person without faith sees only the things that do appear; the person of faith sees nature informed and shaped by things that do not appear, the spiritual realities that have a direct relationship with one’s inner being. “A fool sees not the same tree that a wise man sees,” William Blake wisely observed. (*The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, 35)

One way the unseen world communicates to us is by offering a myriad of metaphors for living. For instance, a dahlia as a young plant has within it the promise of a glorious bloom, the final expression of its unique nature; but that promise will be realized only as I give it the nurture and care that will take it successfully through its various phases of growth and development until at last it buds and flowers. Removing redundant buds and lateral branches must surely be distressing if not painful to the plant, while watering and fertilizing encourage it to do its best. The plant must know both joy and apparent hurt, all necessary for it to produce its best bloom. Is this not the way with every human being? William Blake wrote:

*Joy and woe are woven fine,
A clothing for the soul divine
Under every grief and pine
Runs a joy with silken twine
It is right it should be so
Man was made for joy and woe
And when this we rightly know
Through the world we safely go.
(Ibid., 494-95)*

Any goals a person pursues require discipline and invariably involve self-denial. No life is without pain. God as the Great Gardener of our souls prunes our natures and sends us circumstances designed to bring out our best. This is a book about the truths my garden has shown me of God, of life, and of myself and how I have grown with my garden.

CHAPTER ONE

LET'S MAKE IT NEW



As I sit at my study window, I look southward some sixty feet past a Norway maple and down a gentle slope of lawn to Knoll Creek that serpentines its way from west to east the length of our property. Our ranch house sits parallel to the creek and not quite at the top of the knoll, which means several of our flower beds are on an incline. The beds are recent.

We've lived here only a few years, since I retired from full-time teaching. The previous owners were not gardeners; while they kept the lawn nicely trimmed, they also allowed an odd assortment of brush and