Gardening for the Soul: A Sermon by Vicky McMillan delivered to the First Unitarian Society of Ithaca, 8-10-25

For most of my adult life, I've kept gardens -- large, small, some totally unmanageable -- disasters, really; other gardens reasonably presentable; a few actually quite lovely when at their peak.

Some gardens came along with whatever house my husband Rob and I were renting. Most of those were sprawling beds of ancient perennials, hopelessly overgrown.

Other gardens I created myself, hacking them out of our own rocky, clay soil. This was in Hamilton, NY, about an hour and a half from here. Gardening wasn't easy to manage back then, squeezed in with college teaching, summer field research, and raising four children.

But with time, of course, we all got older. The kids grew up, and about twenty years ago my husband and I retired to Hilton Head Island, off the coast of South Carolina. There, with more time on my hands, I created new gardens, now in dry, sandy soil, despite the sultry heat and occasional encounters with the

alligators patrolling our backyard lagoon.

In February 2023, my husband died after a long struggle with a rare and difficult illness. That spring I moved back to upstate NY to be closer to family. I left

everything behind – our home, the palm trees and the jasmine, the ocean beach, many good friends, and of course, my garden.

Now I'm adjusting to life in a sprawling house on four acres of converted farmland in Lansing, and my garden has the shape of a swimming pool, which in fact it originally was. In that sense this garden, too, came with the house, though it cost a small fortune to drain the pool (to the horror of the former owners), fill it in, and colonize it with plants.

Over the past two years, the transition from there to here, from then to now, has been exceedingly hard. Grief, anxiety, loneliness, despair – how does anyone deal with these? We all have to, at various times in our lives. How do we keep these emotions from taking up permanent residence in our souls? And how do we navigate our broader sorrow and outrage at what is happening in our country now, and in the world at

large?

During the darkest times of my own life, I've been fortunate in having the support of wise and caring family and friends. In addition, I've found solace and strength from my various gardens – even more so through the act of gardening itself. In this, I know I'm not alone. Many people see gardening not as a chore, but as an essential, positive force in their lives. This seems true regardless of knowledge or skill, time and effort, whether it's flowers or vegetables -- whatever.

Just tending to a private patch of land, making it one's own, can feel therapeutic, spiritual even.

Recently I've become interested in exploring the various ways in which this may be so.

It's not an original topic, of course. For one thing, therapists and other health workers have pointed to the value of gardening in enhancing both mental and physical health. Gardening can reduce anxiety and depression; increase one's life satisfaction; promote physical activity. While often a welcome solitary activity, gardening with others can also lessen personal isolation and foster new friendships.

Claire Sawyer, arboretum director at Swarthmore College, writes about the sheer physicality of it all: "I garden because I love the empty, exhausted, but satisfied feeling that comes from using a shovel or rake all day or from moving wheelbarrow after wheelbarrow full of compost. . . . There is a tangible result from the effort exerted. Gardening produces something I can reflect on, sometimes with satisfaction, sometimes with frustration, but always there is something by which to measure progress. I garden for the physical joy of it, for the pleasure of the rhythms of the process."

Garden consultant and lecturer Helen Dillon writes,

"Just being in the garden gives me incredible peace, like being in a foreign cathedral on a hot afternoon, when there's nobody around, only the sun beaming from high above, lighting up motes of dust. Somewhere I can gather all my thoughts and deal with them, slowly and quietly, one at a time."

My friend Margaret, a lifelong gardener, once said to me, "Gardening is about the future." Gardening teaches us patience. Seeds may take days, weeks, to

sprout. Buds take their own time to open. Trees seem to take forever to reach full size. Through their persistence, plants are good role models for us. They keep showing up every day, rain or shine, in one form or another.

Here in the Finger Lakes, plants have to wait out the winters just as we do. They're resilient. They adapt, they survive.

And all those unwanted plants gardeners call "weeds" are masters of resilience. I admit to pulling out weeds for hours, days, with considerable vengeance, but as a biologist and even as a gardener, I also admire their tenacity, their resourcefulness. Seeds lodge into tiny crevices in my patio, roots reach deeply into the ground; some plants thrive in the most unlikely places.

Weeds constantly thwart my efforts to curate tidy, ordered spaces, but if I weren't out gardening I

wouldn't have noticed the rogue milkweed, in full bloom, growing from a pavement crack next to the house. I wouldn't have seen the dame's rocket flourishing in the driveway just in front of the garage

door. For two months I watched it duck its head every time my car passed over it.

Fragments of gardens can persist long after they've been all but abandoned. A red rose bush, in full bloom, in a neglected corner of someone's yard. A ragged patch of daffodils at the edge of some woods. Who planted those? What are their stories?

When I was a child, my friends and I played in a wooded area at the end of our road. It was actually part of a big, fancy estate dating back to the early twentieth century, and there was a large, grand house set way back across a massive lawn. In the woods, amongst maple and pine trees and dense shrubbery, we found a small reflecting pool with resident frogs, and clumps of phlox and other flowers. There must had been a formal garden here once. It fascinated us. If it had been surrounded by walls, it could have been our version of the secret garden in Francis Hodgson Bennett's famous book of the same name.

Think of all the bits and pieces of neglected gardens everywhere! In that sense, our gardens are gifts, our legacies. For a while they may bear our original vision, but they'll continue on their own, with or

without us to tend to them. Few things are as dynamic and life-affirming as abandoned gardens.

Gardening can also teach us humility. Here's an incident from many years ago that I find still painful to think about. I had planted some lupines on the bank of one of our ponds, hoping they'd gradually spread naturally into the meadow. They did. One summer there was one plant in particular that was magnificent—huge and robust, and the deepest, richest blue I'd ever seen. But it was growing way over by the pond, and I wanted it where I could see it from the house.

So I decided to move it – gardeners often do move plants around for various reasons – but I did this despite the fact that it was in full bloom, hence using most of its energy right now, and it was also the middle of a hot summer day. I did this even though this breathtakingly lovely plant was thriving exactly where it was.

Within half an hour, the transplanted lupine had begun to wilt in the blistering sun. I kept watering it heavily, but that didn't help. Over the next few hours, I

bore witness to its slow, withering death. I was devastated at losing this gorgeous plant, but more importantly, I felt unspeakable shame. Like most gardeners, probably, I've inadvertently killed countless plants over the years. I've made many

honest mistakes, but I did try to keep the best interests of the plants in mind.

But the lupine incident was different. How appalling it was that my own selfishness, my arrogance, had led me to disrupt this beautiful plant in its prime, doing what it was programmed to do, just to suit my vision of my little piece of the world! I've often wondered if others have had humbling experiences similar to mine.

I've known a great many gardeners over the years, some men, many women. Most of them trace their involvement with gardening to someone important in their lives, a parent, perhaps, or a grandparent, or a spouse. Gardening connects them to people whom they love. I'm reminded of Rod Howe's wonderful sermon last June about altars – places, large or small, that bring us peace, solace, and connection to those

we have lost. Some of my gardens have truly been altars in that sense.

So have those of some of my friends. My friend Ted, for example, who lost his wife, Chris, a couple of years ago. Her garden was her special world, and it was spectacular. After Chris died, Ted took over the garden. Now, when her hundreds of daffodils bloom in the spring, he shares them widely with his friends and coworkers. The peonies, too. He weeds, he prunes, he spends hours in Chris's garden, where he feels her presence every moment. I would venture to say that

her garden, for him, is a sacred place, and tending it speaks to both his grief and his love.

My connection to gardening originates with my mother, whose own mother -- my grandmother -- had been a gardener, too. During my childhood, my mother's garden was a large, ambitious flower bed wrapped around the back of our Old Westbury, Long Island home. In contrast to my mother's quiet, shy spirit, this was an unwieldy, exuberant cottage garden with an agenda all its own. Tall spider plants marched across the back, vying for space with ungainly

masses of phlox, campanula, lupines, foxgloves, lilies, and gloriosa daisies. Candytuft sprawled across the path to the outdoor faucet. Even her tidy border of annuals eventually took on an independent life, invading the lawn.

During the summer, my mother spent most of the day in her garden. Wearing Bermuda shorts and sporting oversized sunglasses, she devoted hours to weeding, pausing for an early lunch of leftovers, followed by a nap, before returning to deadhead the pansies, or fill in a bare spot, or snip a bud from her prized Peace rose.

When my mother died, she was living a few miles from us down the road, and I was in my forties with a home, children, and gardens of my own. As we prepared to put her house up for sale, my sorrow focused on her garden. One dark, wet April afternoon,

I went out to her small back yard. Stalks of assorted perennials projected here and there from the half-frozen ground, sodden and bent over by a cold, driving rain. It was hard work, but I managed to dig up representative portions of whatever plants I could

identify while leaving most of the garden behind—my mother's legacy for the new owner.

That May I planted a new garden, my mother's garden, next to our porch and bordered by a low stone wall. The transplants settled in as the weather warmed, and I added the same annuals as my mother would have done, and my own Peace rose.

Now, over thirty years later, that garden is owned by another family, who are not themselves gardeners, but a few of my mother's plants still survive, with vigorous trajectories of their own.

And here in Lansing, I grow a few plants that evoke my mother's garden of long ago, including Nicotiana, or flowering tobacco. When I was a child, I watched for the large hawk moths that visited the flowers in the early evening, once they released their lovely scent.

I also have a nondescript little plant called dwarf snapdragon, which my husband and I discovered decades ago while walking along a little-used railroad track in Poolville, NY. Later he went on to do research on the species. The plant grows in the dry, gravelly soil along the rails. When a train thunders by, its

vibrations help shake open the seed capsules and disperse the seeds.

Some years ago, we found dwarf snapdragon growing near railroad tracks not far from Lansing, and I've managed to establish it now in patches of gravel around my garden. Our children call it "Dad's plant," and we think of him every time we see it.

Just as plants connect us with people, and with the past, routine gardening tasks themselves can fix us solidly in the present, drowning out internal noise, blunting the hard edges of daily life. There's the simple satisfaction of grubbing around in the dirt, being at eye-level with growing, breathing plants, entering their heady, photosynthetic world. The rich scent of the earth. The buzzing of bees. The surrender of thought to sensation, to being fully in the moment.

John Koenig, in his unique book, Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows, says this: "There are those rare moments when you manage to tune out the chatter in your head, look around, and remind yourself of the meaning of things. . . a trace of emotional clarity, a moment you experience for its own sake. . .

[Everything] seems to mix together, and you can't tell the difference between the ordinary and the epic. . ."

Koenig wasn't talking specifically about gardening, but I wonder if other gardeners, like me, experience those rare transcendent moments when you glimpse a world much larger and deeper than yourself. Maybe the trigger is something unexpectedly beautiful -- the first moonflower just opening, perhaps, or a scatter of glistening water droplets on a leaf. Or maybe it's as mundane as an old shovel. But there's this bizarre rush of insight, when for a few seconds you lose that encumbering, worldly sense of yourself. It's like a portal opens up, and this one sight holds all the heartbreaking mysteries of the cosmos.

Well, realistically, I wish I could claim that my garden is a reliable door to another universe. Most of the time, though, gardening is simply hard work and I don't expect or receive any existential or transformative wisdom.

Sometimes, when I'm feeling really broken, even gardening doesn't help. It just seems about the only

thing at the moment left to do.

But my friend Betty sent me this haiku by Zee Zahava:

some mornings just watering
the plants is enough
and breathing
and remembering
and waiting

I wish I could talk to my mother now about gardening. Certainly her garden was beloved by our family, but it wouldn't have won any prizes. Like most gardens, it was forever a work-in-progress and it was (literally) pretty ragged around the edges. But it was a place where my mother found peace, and where she nurtured what she felt was beautiful.

Looking back on it all now, I think when my mother put on her gardening gloves and picked up her trowel, she entered a mental space where she could set her own rhythms and confirm her own truths.

Let me close by inviting us to think more deeply about the unique activities we each rely on to restore balance in our lives, to recover perspective and

strength. Whether it's gardening, or playing music, or writing screenplays, walking in the woods – whatever -- how do these things help us be our most authentic selves? How do they bring us in closer touch with our own humanity and, perhaps, with a world larger than ourselves?

Or, simply, sometimes, how do they help us get through a hard day?

Thank you.

Vicky McMillan