Experience the wonder of God through creation. Venture through the world with author Thomas Springer to see how ordinary outdoor experiences can encourage you to connect with God in an intimate way. Through four words—delight, fear, wonder, and care—you’ll learn how the Father calls us to holiness as we find the God of creation in nature.

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Get Outside
Creation’s Call to Holiness

THOMAS SPRINGER

The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
Day after day they pour forth speech;
night after night they reveal knowledge.
They have no speech, they use no words;
no sound is heard from them.
Yet their voice goes out into all the earth,
their words to the ends of the world.

PSALM 19:1–4a

Experience nature with Tom Springer as he retells how the created continues to teach him about God. In these pages he speaks words that communicate God to us as we get outside. Find Get Outside online at discoveryseries.org to read the full version.

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contents

introduction
Creation’s Call to Holiness ...................... 3

one
Delight .................................................. 6

two
Fear ...................................................... 11

three
Wonder .................................................. 18

four
Care ...................................................... 25

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Introduction

Creation’s Call to Holiness

When I was eight years old, our big, red family Bible was a thing of fearful wonder to me. I didn’t know it then, but its design harkened back to the “illuminated” Bibles of the pre-printing age, when medieval artisans would copy and illustrate each book by hand. The first words of each chapter were oversized, gilded, and festooned with twining scripts like vines around a tree. There were illustrations, too, of fiercely beautiful angels.

These glorified words and images made one thing clear: matters of God and faith, life and death, heaven and earth were not to be trifled with. Our Bible made that point in regal fashion, even if we did buy it with the S&H Green stamps we earned at a Publix grocery store in Florida.
The essays in this collection draw on the same reverence for words that I saw illumined in those sacred pages. The seven I’ve chosen are delight, fear, wonder, care, work, dominion, life. All figure significantly in Holy Scripture.

Most of us can recall a time when we strongly felt God’s presence in creation. Perhaps it was a sunset, shooting star, skein of honking geese against the moon, or cloud of starlings that turned and whirled as one with hive-mind precision. Why do these experiences delight us so? The best explanation I can give is that God placed in our hearts a holy appreciation for creation. It’s like a spiritual tap on the kneecap. When we’re smitten by creation’s grandeur, our first reflex (curiously, this even holds true for unbelievers) is one of gratitude. We can’t help ourselves. A good dose of creation makes thankfulness rise up in our souls like maple sap on a bright February day.

That said, we also live in a 24-7 culture, with our senses forever assaulted by ambient noise and electronic gadgets. It’s as if we’d all rather be somewhere else, anywhere else but here and now. The next social media tidbit promises fulfillment, but as with any addiction, leads only to more anxious yearning. It’s hard to be still and know God (Psalm 46:10) with our eyes and ears so beholden to things artificial and fleeting.

It doesn’t have to be this way. God can teach us through creation, if we but take time to wait and listen. When we do, we join a great lineage of prophets and holy men and women who have done the same. Moses, Ezekiel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hannah, and David all found God’s care and instruction revealed in the
temple of nature. Chief among them was our Lord himself. Jesus’s teachings and parables were grounded in the everyday natural lessons he learned as a boy and working man in rural Galilee. The Gospels tell us that Jesus often fled to wild places for rest and prayer, especially before times of great trial.

On one of his final sojourns, Jesus was transfigured on the heights of Mount Tabor. His countenance and clothes glowed white—illumined, one could say—in preparation for the closing chapters of his earthly mission.

I don’t expect that I’ll ever be transfigured by a summer evening spent hoeing weeds in the garden. But something in my countenance does glow afterwards and it’s not just from perspiration. After I’ve washed up at the outside spigot, a patina of grace remains. It will ease my sleep and profit my mind for the next day’s work at my day job. Somehow, in ways unknown to me, I too have been tended and cultivated in ways that will bear new fruit.

These essays describe moments from my life when the light of creation shined particularly bright. It’s my prayer that they will do the same for you in ways that I can’t imagine. How we live may differ in every respect, but to this we can both bear witness: God’s life force remains present in every molecule he ever created. He’s not some divine watchmaker who built this vast machine, wound it up, and walked away. He’s still digging the Grand Canyon. His rivers still clap their hands with joy; his heavens still proclaim the glory of God. Why should we wait any longer to join them?
one

Delight

It was a prayer a boy might say, not a grown man who knows the Almighty has bigger things to worry about. But up it flew anyway, to pierce the scalloped clouds above a little lake in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula.

Officially, vacation had started twenty minutes earlier. That’s when our van and trailer had pulled into the gravel parking lot of a no-frills house I’d rented with my brother’s family. Then with food and luggage hastily stowed, I fled down to the lake with my fishing pole.

For the fifteen years we’d stayed here, this had been my ritual. Shuck off the traveling shoes and wade barefoot into the shallows to cast for bass. It was my annual rite of re-entry into the sanctuary of
an Up North vacation. Cross that watery threshold and I was all in.

Except this time, I felt almost gravely tired. I doubted that even a week in the north woods could undo the knots of tension and fatigue. What I should’ve had was a pre-vacation to loosen myself up for the real one.

About then it spilled out: a half-embarrassed plea of a sort that the 11-year-old version of me would’ve made.

“You know, Lord, I would really, really, really love to catch a nice fish right about…”

Now.

But before I could say it, the now became flesh. The line zinged taut with a tensile twang. The rod jolted in my hand with feral energy. The hooked fish leaped twice, backlit by a corona of spray and light. After a few wild dashes, I reeled him close and hoisted him from the tea-colored water. Which was as it should be. On a summer evening in the U.P., a man’s hand should smell like fish.

From deliverance to delight, all this had come in a millisecond. From an unfinished prayer no less. It would be unbelievable had it not been so believable. I felt like the disciples in Simon’s boat who filled their nets at Christ’s command from the Sea of Galilee. For the record, I didn’t catch another decent fish for the rest of my vacation.

Such occasions of delight can feel like heaven on earth, or maybe earth as the heaven it was meant to be. Either way, given its intensity, delight need not last long to “achieve the purpose for which I sent it” (Isaiah 55:11). Delight gives us a new physical and spiritual
appreciation for beauty. It heightens our perception of nature’s genius and fills us with an upswelling of gratitude that ends in spontaneous praise.

But we can’t search for delight as if it were a four-leaf clover. We have to dispose ourselves to it and let delight find us when and where it may. “The world,” said Woody Allen, “is run by people who show up for meetings.” So too with delight. It favors those with quiet, attentive habits that keep creation near at hand. It may come to us on a route we faithfully walk in a park, field, or woods. It may appear unbidden in a hummingbird’s nest by the driveway, or as we contemplate the ruby alpenglow of a sunrise from a car windshield or kitchen window.

Whenever delight appears, its timing will be impeccable. It will provide what we need to learn from nature—in real or metaphoric terms—at that very moment. And while these experiences are usually personal, I believe we should also share them as testimonies of nature’s power and grace. Indeed, one of my favorite encounters with delight didn’t happen to me, but to my mother, Dolores Springer.

In March 1966, our family of five lived in a modest, concrete block home in an Eau Gallie, Florida, subdivision. Cape Canaveral was nearby and this was a bedroom community for NASA employees. Our neighbors were engineers, technicians, and scientists (then all men of course). With their slide rules and electron telescopes, they knew about space in ways that my high-school educated mother could not.

That night, however, creation spoke to my mother straight from the cosmos with no technological filter.
It was spring, and she’d spent the day on her knees in the flowerbeds. She’d planted and transplanted, weeded and seeded and watered. Then, with her husband and children asleep, she stepped out once more before bedtime to admire her handiwork. Although instead of looking down, she looked up… and saw a sight that made her prize bougainvillea seem of puny consequence.

I know this because my mother, who is not a poet, dashed back inside that night to write a poem about it. Decades later, she gave me a copy that she’d written in cursive on a sheaf torn from the lined yellow pad she keeps in her kitchen. If you dislike poems that rhyme, then this one isn’t for you. If you want to see what delight looks like when freshly encountered overhead, then it might be. Here is an excerpt:

*I glanced up at the evening sky and caught my breath
and thought
How beautiful it is, My God, what wonders you have wrought!*

*The sky so dark, the stars so bright—they seemed so very near.
It was so endless and profound I felt a stab of fear.*

*I felt so insignificant, so humble and so small,
My soul ached with the effort of comprehending all.*

*Science gives us weighty reasons for the stars and all the rest,*
*But I think the answer’s simple and MY reason is the best!*
It’s really very plain to see why the stars all shine so bright—
God made them for his children to enjoy on such a night!

I stood enraptured drinking in the beauty of it all,
And then—across the sky a little star began to fall!

I watched it streak across the sky as swiftly as a dart
I think God meant to thank me for admiring his art!

Imagine it. A gift light years in the making, delivered to a tract house doorstep where the burdens of three children, all fed and clothed on a barber’s income, could sorely try a housewife’s faith and patience.

Some fifty years later, this ember of galactic dust still shines. It’s become a spiritual verity, a touchstone memory of faith that has entered the family canon of oft-told stories. For such is the versatile nature of delight: fleeting as a shooting star, but with a tail (fishy or cosmic) that can illumine a lifetime.
In my estimation, there are two primary ways that we can fear creation. An example of the first—and least pleasant of the two—would be the time when I struggled for my life on the backwaters of Lake Cumberland, Kentucky.

It was a hot afternoon in July, and my wife and I had gone there to spend a week on a houseboat. Houseboats are quite the thing on Lake Cumberland, whose 65,000 acres snake across 102 miles of mountainous shoreline. Given its sinewy shape and size, the lake has a seemingly endless number of small, isolated bays where one can retreat and feel lost to the world.

As our boat lay at anchor in a wooded cove, I decided to go for a swim. No one else was outside on
the boat. Some dozed or read, others had taken jet skis onto the main lake. No matter. I’d always fancied myself a strong swimmer, so I lit out from the boat to the shore perhaps one hundred yards away.

By the time I reached the far side I was sorely winded—yet there was no place to rest. The bank rose almost vertically and the water was neck deep just a few feet from shore. I couldn’t stand and catch my breath, because the splintered shale bottom was an agony on bare feet. In my reckless pride, I saw no way out but to swim back.

Near the halfway point, a wave of fatigue slammed into my chest like a pail of wet cement. I was a runner then, and when runners tire, they ease into a jog. Not so a tired swimmer. As I slowed down, I began to sink. And flail. And panic. With terrifying certainty, I realized that even if someone heard me scream, I’d likely drown before they could pull anchor and maneuver the boxy houseboat into position to save me.

I may have cried, “Help me, Jesus!” but nothing more theologically profound than that. Although seconds later, I did recall a long-forgotten lesson from Army basic training that I’d learned in a Fort Knox swimming pool. It was called drownproofing, a simple technique for staying afloat indefinitely. It had seemed ridiculous at the time. When would a foxhole-digging, road-marching soldier ever leave dry land? But in that moment of crisis on Lake Cumberland, it was drownproofing that saved me. I was able to stop and tread water gently, which defused the panic. After a minute or so, I caught my breath and swam to the boat safely.

The near tragedy left me a shaken, if wiser man. I
had new respect for how fast things could go bad in the water. More than that, I had a properly humble sense of my swimming ability: which was, in truth, mediocre. The verse, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (Psalm 111:10), never rang more true.

When we’re afield in the great outdoors, prudent fear serves a God-given purpose. It triggers our internal alarm system and reminds us that nature, for all its innate goodness, does not suffer fools gladly. It teaches us that we’ll pay the price if we backpack into the wilderness without enough drinking water; capsize in a boat without a life vest; split firewood while shod in flip flops, or—my favorite in the stupidity sweepstakes—use poison ivy leaves for toilet paper during an urgent moment in the woods. I should know as I’ve been guilty of all the above, most painfully the poison ivy incident, which earned me a summer camp nickname that I’ll not repeat here.

As for the other kind of fear, well, it’s not really fearful. I refer here to holy fear, which in the biblical sense is more akin to reverence. Holy fear attunes us to the glory and majesty of God and his creatures. It helps us treat them with a modicum of care that reflects God’s love for us.

Prudent fear and holy fear may seem like polar opposites. In fact, they can be complementary, as I learned a few years ago when I took up beekeeping.

I first became a beekeeper because I wanted some food-producing “livestock” for our rural home that didn’t need to be fed, watered, butchered, or nursed with a bottle on a chilly April night. At least that was my official reason. Although I never said this out
loud, I was also enamored by the whole beekeeper mystique: that of a Gandalf-wise naturalist who has sagely mastered a fear of homicidal, stinging insects from which lesser mortals flee.

Although at the start, it was fear that mastered me. For the first two years, I’d suit up for the bee yard as if steeled for mortal combat. And it wasn’t just the protective gear: the head veil and jacket, the leather-palmed gauntlet gloves, and the bee smoker that puffed away like a miniature steel dragon. Rather, it was the tough guy attitude, the “breast plate” that I put on to compensate for my fearful lack of know-how and experience.

I was at that time more apiary Stormtrooper than beekeeper. I’d yank off the hive’s top cover—basically, a roof to the bee’s house—with little consideration for the 35,000 startled tenants inside. With anxious haste, I’d pry out the frames of comb and leave in my wake a gooey litter of smashed bees and ruptured honey cells. Oh well. Wasn’t a little collateral damage the cost of doing business? Weren’t the bees and their honey my property? Hadn’t I paid good money for them? In my profiteer’s treatment of creation, I’d supplanted God’s open-handed generosity with a tyrant’s greed for plunder.

My comeuppance came the day that I dropped two full frames of bees and honeycomb on the ground. In an instant, a cloud of buzzing malevolence engulfed me. Had I stood still the protective gear would’ve kept me safe. Instead, I ran off like a scared six year-old with my arms flailing overhead in chicken-dance fashion. (Not unlike my panicky
swim moves on Lake Cumberland). Despite all the thrashing, two bees managed to find an opening in my pant leg and promptly stung me on the knee. Can’t say that I blame them.

For the next two weeks, I was too humiliated to go back in the hives. I’d just stand off to the side a few feet away, and for 15-20 minutes simply watch the bees come and go. As it turns out, I should’ve been doing that all along. For once I was able to relax in the bee yard. There was nothing to subdue or dominate. I began to see how factors such as temperature, cloud cover, and humidity affected the bees’ moods and activity level. I began to think more like a beekeeper, and less like a ham-handed tyrant who bought some mail-order insects to function as his personal honey slaves.

It was on a Sunday morning as I watched the bees come in go in the June sunshine that I first felt a sense of holy fear well up like a fresh spring of grace.

There was a “honey flow” on. This occurs when the bee’s favorite flowers are in peak bloom. Enraptured by so much abundance, the bees are too preoccupied to notice much of anything else. For a few anointed hours, they become as docile as butterflies.

I saw a beach-ball-sized cloud of bees, perhaps fifty or seventy-five, wait their turn to alight on the one-inch-wide landing board at the hive’s entrance. It struck me as a divine trance of motion, an ancient harmony that hummed with the same mystery and power as an ocean or universe. On the incoming bees, pellets of gaudy yellow and orange clung to the pollen baskets behind their rear legs. Some were so overloaded that they wobbled into the hive. There, in wordless synchrony,
these short-lived insects with brains the size of a dust mote were making the purest food this side of eternity.

Outgoing bees, unburdened of their loads, zoomed out for another round trip. They had learned the flowers’ location, which could be up to three miles distant, from a complex dance that other field bees perform in the hive to provide navigational cues. A dance they somehow learned to perform when they were all of fifteen days old. (It occurs to me that were I an atheist, beekeeping could prove dangerous to my disbelief.)

When I returned Sunday evening, a sentient hum emanated from the hive, where worker bees fanned the raw honey inside. Their myriad wings beat in such unison that drafts of nectar-perfumed air poured from the entrance as if from a hot air register. You could smell it from fifty feet away; a sweet effusion that could have wafted from the very gates of heaven. All night long, in the depths of the darkened hive, they’d fan away until the honey’s moisture content evaporated to 17 or 18 percent. Only then would they cap the finished comb with a skin of creamy white beeswax.

That was four years ago, and my hive-tending strategy has since become simple. After I’ve suited up in the barn, I pause for a moment and center myself with a simple prayer to the Holy Spirit. Once my work’s done, I offer thanks that no bee has seen fit to sting me and thus lose her life because I did something clumsy and hasty.

I haven’t been stung in three years, a safety record I attribute to luck and to those tranquil hours spent in observation. I’ve since learned what things
aggravate bees, and I no longer do those things. When the hive’s buzz escalates into a certain angry pitch that all beekeepers know, it’s time to gently close the top cover and let them be.

Which is as it should be. Just as God has ordered the bee’s defensive nature, so has he ordered our higher nature. He’s given us the faculty of reason, perfected by grace, that we may know, love and care for creation. And “perfect love drives out fear” (1 John 4:18), a verse every beekeeper should write on their hearts—and maybe paint on the side of their hives. For that same love can steady the hand as it removes, with due care, the amber frames of capped honey, still furry with the gentle bees of the Lord.

Is there any reason for unholy fear when you’re thirty minutes away from a supper of venison chili with honey-slathered cornbread on the side? On a good afternoon in the bee yard, I am afraid not.
One of my favorite examples of the human ability to wonder at the glory of creation comes from a woman who lived much of her adult life indoors. As in, “shut-me-away-and-throw-away-the-key indoors.” She was Julian of Norwich, a 13th-century English mystic. Some believe that Julian’s call to ministry came after her husband and children died from the black plague. Whatever the source, hers was no ordinary vocation. She was an “anchoress” who resided—voluntarily, mind you—in a small room
that had been bricked off within the sanctuary of a church. There, with her meager sustenance passed in through a small window, she devoted herself to a life of unceasing prayer (1 Thessalonians 5:16–18) and sewing clothes for the poor. Yet rather than feel cut off from creation, Julian’s spiritual visions kept her immersed in it. In the most renown of what she called “showings,” Julian saw the whole world revealed in something resembling a hazelnut:

With this insight, he showed me a little thing, the size of a hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand. It seemed to me as round as a ball. I gazed at it and thought, “What can this be?” The answer came thus, “It is everything that is made . . . . It lasts, and ever shall last, because God loves it. All things have their being in this way by the grace of God.”

An occasional escape to a bricked off room for some prayerful peace and quiet does sound tempting, as impractical (and illegal per the building code) as that may now be. Yet despite lives that are noisier and busier than anything Julian could’ve imagined, we can still see God’s wonders in the most basic elements of creation.

I realized this when I came to see a mountain range revealed in a pile of dirt—all from the confines of my Ford sedan.

The dirt pile was the remnant of some endless Michigan road construction project. It stood near
a traffic light where I stopped on the way to work, and for several weeks I had no reason to give it a second glance. You know how it is with the everyday landmarks of life. After a while, we don’t as much see them as see through them.

It took a business trip to California to change my perspective. On my flight into San Francisco, the weather had been clear. As the plane made its descent I had seen the contours and crevices of the Sierra Nevada Mountains revealed in unusually vivid detail. It reminded me of those plastic relief maps that I loved to touch as a child, the kind that displayed all the earth’s terrain in bumpy hues of green, brown and blue.

From the airplane’s window, I could see how the Creator had similarly caressed the earth below. He’d planted conifer forests to hold fast the flanks of the mountains. He’d sent rains and snows to carve streams, creeks and canyons into the granite slopes. He’d robed the peaks in snowpack and glacier so that rivulets from summer thaws would fill rivers and reservoirs. While each mountain had a distinct character, each followed the same unified principles of natural design. And you could see a master’s hand in all of it.

On the Monday morning after the San Francisco trip, I stopped at my usual red light and stared absentmindedly at the dirt pile. This time, I began to see something else: the pile was more than an anonymous mound of misplaced earth. There’d been a hard rain in my absence and fresh gullies had gouged the pile’s flanks. The runoff had forked
into tiny streams that carried the lighter sand to the bottom where it spread into an outwash plain. Grass had sprouted in a little valley where the eroded soil accumulated.

The pile had in fact become a matchbox version of a mountain, a scale model of God’s immutable laws in action. Maybe it was the jet lag, but I began to picture a tiny white farmhouse in the valley. I imagined a miniature red pickup truck and a flock of sheep in the “meadow.” Now granted, the pile was eight feet tall instead of 8,000. Yet one could plainly see that the same principles of gravity and physics—as applicable here as in California—had shaped it all.

It was so fascinating that I didn’t notice when the light turned green. Until, that is, a guy behind me honked and made a certain gesture to suggest he wasn’t as smitten by the pile as I.

Yet that’s what’s wonderful about wonder. It doesn’t care if we’re idling at a stoplight or studying a quasar with the Hubble telescope. Wonder kicks in whenever we stop to ponder an aspect of creation that our human senses find significant. Wonder grows as we cultivate a sense of holy amazement about how any creature—terrestrial, aquatic, or galactic—came to be. Wonder also lies at the heart of scientific inquest, even for unbelieving scientists who don’t yet understand the source of their questing nature.

It seems that humans are predisposed to wonder. To ask “why and what if?” are essential for a species that seeks to grow and advance, materially and
spiritually. Nonetheless, even if we’ve been equipped to wonder, we still have to heed its calling in ways large and small.

The prophet Elijah did as much when he waited in his cave on Mount Horeb (1 Kings 19:11–13). The word of the Lord had instructed him to, “Go outside and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord; for the Lord is about to pass by.”

You may know the rest of this passage, with its call-and-response rhythm that’s a favorite with children. How there came a strong crushing wind—but the Lord was not in the wind. How after the wind came an earthquake—but the Lord was not in the earthquake. How after the earthquake came a fire—but the Lord was not in the fire.

What comes next, after this great tempest of environmental theatrics, reminds me of what poet Carl Sandburg wrote about fog: how it rolls across the harbor, with silent unfolding, “on little cat feet.”

The revelation that came to Elijah on Mt. Horeb was of the quiet sort that only a person attuned to wonder could perceive.

“After the fire came a gentle whisper (some translations call it a ‘small, still voice’). When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave.”

Few of us can withdraw to a mountain and pray as Jesus and the prophets often did in Scripture. What we can do is look anew at our surroundings and wonder at something that’s been waiting there all along.

As a ready example, look now at the back of
your hands. See the veins that branch and pulse just beneath your skin? They have faithfully done so since an avocado-sized version of you stirred in your mother’s womb. They quietly carry all the oxygen and nutrients you need to live and move and have your being. They are both evidence and constant reminder that you are truly “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psalm 139:14).

Picture next an aerial view of a great river delta: the Nile, the Mekong, the Mississippi. See how it distributes the outflow of water and sediment with such artful yet mathematic efficiency? More to our point, see how the delta’s fan-shaped network of lesser streams resembles the roots of a great tree? Or our veins, for that matter?

For me, it’s this faithful repetition of divine patterns that invites wonder of a most prayerful sort. When I see the spiral shape of the snail shell I hold in my hand duplicated by the spiral shape of the Milky Way galaxy overhead, that’s wonder. The millions of light years that separate the two could never contain it all—no more than all the world’s books could contain all that Jesus did during his time on earth (John 21:25).

Wonder, thus observed, provides a springboard for further discovery. Once developed, our sense of wonder can become a spiritual muscle that helps us see divinity in any natural circumstance.

In the book Praying with Julian of Norwich, there’s an excerpt from a one-woman play about her by J. Janda. In this scene, I picture an aged holy woman near a narrow slit of medieval window
that overlooks a little courtyard on a drizzly March
day. See how she marvels at the greatness of a world
so small:

*Listen.*

*Birds sing.***

*Cedar and shrub
gleam
with raindrops.*

*(She puts out her hands to
feel the rain)*

*Everything is being
bathed, washed—*

*you can hear the rain
splashing off the eaves
the fat drops are
the size of herring scales,*

*there is a smell
of wet earth
in the cool air
a mother robin
is nested
in the hawthorn . . .

*she is brooding
with wings spread
over the nest.*

*she is warming
the new life,
the shelled promise . . .

*‘God is all that is good
as to my sight,
and the goodness
that everything hath
it is he.’*

*And the Christ
he came to make
all things new,*

*and his death,
it was for love; . . .

*It runs plenteously
as rain off the eaves.*
“In spring, at the end of the day,” said Margaret Atwood, “you should smell like dirt.” Which is why, for many of us, spring doesn’t officially begin until we bring home packets of seeds and flats of plants from the nursery store. For me, it’s a short, but fragrant trip, buoyed as it is by the green dreams of a new season. The heady aroma of basil and tomato leaves fills the car, and the pint-size makings of an entire summer garden can all fit neatly in the backseat.

Of course, our purposes at this point are entirely mercenary. We’re not much interested in the plants’ spindly adolescence. It’s the fruits of maturity we’re after: beefy tomato slices for hamburgers; wax beans to steam with new redskin potatoes; baby carrots to dip
in homemade hummus; and kale—well, a half-dozen plants will yield enough leafage to make a Mayan fertility goddess happy, so watch what you ask for. Then, after the plants go in the ground all you can do is water, weed, and wait until they produce something edible. That said, an admirable thing can happen when even a self-centered person begins to care for a new garden. Before long, you become less of a produce manager and more of a caretaker.

By early summer, as you inspect the garden after a day’s work, a spring of affection wells up in your heart. You become solicitous about the tender charges in your care. Did the wilted cucumber leaves regain their shape after last night’s watering? (Only in full leaf can they function like little umbrellas to protect tender cukes from sun scorch.) Should you cut more broccoli before the florets turn to flower buds? (After the first big heads of broccoli come on, the plants send out clusters of little heads perfect for stir fry.) Before you know it, your heightened sense of husbandry becomes second nature. The color and tilt of each leaf and fruit signals which plants need attention and which are ready for harvest.

Such feelings of affection for creatures that we care for and later kill and eat isn’t restricted to gardening. I’ve seen my brother do the same in his stewardship of sheep, chickens, and turkeys. His animals live a healthy life, largely out of doors, with ample sunshine, rain, and pasture. Except, as organic farmer and writer Joel Salatin says, “with one bad day at the end of it.” I’ve helped my brother with the bloody necessity of butchering. And I don’t
find it contradictory at all to see him saddened by his animals’ death, even as he relishes the barbecued cutlets and Easter lamb to come.

Our deep-seated need to care for creation, and the satisfaction it brings, shouldn’t surprise anyone who professes belief in one God. All the Abrahamic faiths believe that humanity had its origins in a perfect garden, where full harmony existed between God, man, woman, and all creation. While tomato worms and squash bugs have since muddied the picture, we still sense something of the divine in gardens, be they flowerbeds, a vegetable plot or herbs in a kitchen windowsill.

As with most human endeavors, to care for a garden well requires that we undergo a period of apprenticeship and discipleship. At first, we rely on advice from books, fellow gardeners or whoever staffs the plant aisle at Home Depot. Gradually, we replace secondhand knowledge with firsthand experience, born of trial, error, and patient observation. We learn that the only garden we really need to understand is our own.

The good news is that even a garden that’s unproductive in the bushels-per-acre sense can point us toward the divine center of things. Indeed, in his parables Jesus often used agricultural failures to prove his point: the cursed fig tree that wilted; the good seed sown unprofitably on rocky ground; the tares and thistles that grew up among the wheat. He seems to suggest that even in a mediocre garden there’s much we can learn that’s good. Plus, with the humility born of wisdom, we’re less prone to the build-a-bigger-barn-to-hold-it-all hubris (Luke 12:18) that can afflict those
who reap bumper crops. Here’s a sample of what I’ve gleaned from my seasons under the sun.

**Expect Surprises**

In spring, it’s easy to regard the garden’s dried stalks and withered, moldy leaves as an unholy mess that must submit to rigid organization. It’s tempting to pulverize the top soil with a rototiller until it reaches the milled consistency of cocoa powder. Then, with symmetrical tyranny, take a yardstick and plant each seed and plant at an exact distance as if the garden was some sort of geometry problem. After that, any stray sprout that you didn’t plant gets the yank, posthaste.

Yet we’re called in Genesis to till and keep the earth—not to micromanage every inch of it into scorched-earth submission. Just one pass with a rototiller, for instance, is enough to turn last year’s debris into useful organic matter. All those chains of rhizomes and microbes, if given breathing room, can then send some unexpected gifts your way.

That’s nowhere truer than with what gardeners call volunteers: the little shoots that sprout from seeds left behind by last season’s plants. I’m especially fond of volunteers, because they’re second-generation immigrants. They’re the hardy offspring of last year’s plastic-pot, department store imports. No more phony vermiculite and grow lights for them. They’ve slipped the shackles of commerce to rise of their own volition in the April sunshine, freeborn into the lassitude of good earth. Just don’t expect volunteer broccoli seedlings to come up in a tidy row. That’s your fixation, not theirs.
**Practice Generosity**

Care for a garden and it will make you generous, whether you like it or not. Those ten tomato plants that fit so neatly in your back seat in May? By early August, they can churn out ten extra pounds per week, which you will eagerly foist on unsuspecting friends and coworkers.

At first, it’s not generosity that makes you do it. You’ve worked so hard to grow all this stuff that it kills you to see it wasted. Likewise, it’s not just altruism that makes you give away your best. You won’t share the small, lumpy green peppers (i.e., 85 percent of those in your garden) because that would mark you as a hapless rookie.

Over time, however, our self-serving generosity can develop into something more spiritually fruitful. Gradually, you realize that to give your best is its own reward.

Of all people, it was a wealthy, powerful woman who helped me see that.

She (I’ll call her Colleen) served on the board of directors for the multibillion-dollar organization where I worked. Colleen had grown up in the country among a family of gardeners. Then she climbed the corporate ladder and moved to elegant places where one simply doesn’t till up the backyard and bring in a pickup load of cow manure to sweeten the soil for green beans.

One day, in a foray out of the executive suite, Colleen noticed the jars of honey I sell from my desk. We talked about beekeeping some, then gardening,
and the upshot was that I would give her a bag of tomatoes the next time she was in town.

When I did, Colleen was deeply grateful—and not just in the socially polite way you’d expect from a perfunctory hostess gift. No, this leader of a multinational corporation, a millionaire many, many times over, acted as thrilled as a homeless guy who’s just been handed a $50 bill.

I didn’t know how to square this in my mind. I’ve long thought that in retirement I’ll plant a bigger garden, and donate the surplus to a food bank or shelter. But serving the wealthy corporate class was not part of my philanthropic business model. What could anyone so loaded with stock options possibly need from me?

Well, in this case, perhaps just one more special delivery. And this time, packed with all the variety my garden could muster. Colleen was scheduled to return in mid-August, when every plant was in full production. The herbs had especially thrived that summer, so I filled plastic sandwich bags with oregano, basil, thyme, cilantro, and rosemary, all misted to stay fresh. Along with tomatoes and green peppers, there were fresh onions and bulbs of garlic. All this bounty was packed in a paper shopping bag that fairly oozed with the aromatherapy of summer.

At this, she teared up. And not just from the garlic. The whole sensory package, and the way that a fragrance can connect so strongly with emotion and memories, scored a direct hit. While I’m not sure why, I can hazard a guess. Nothing in that building, so self-contained with its acres of plate glass, spotless
restrooms and corporate omnipotence, could rival the natural allure of a thing homegrown.

**Let Good Things Die Well**

It’s hard for some gardeners to let their gardens go to seed in the fall. It’s unsanitary, they say. The wilt and mold of plants in senescence creates a breeding ground for insect pests and disease. True enough, but I also suspect something else: that in the turning of the year they see the cadaver of summer left uninterred. It’s sad to see a thing once so abundant enter the throes of corruption. So they uproot and haul away each plant as soon as it turns even a moderate shade of yellow green.

I’m not sure how to phrase this, but I’d rather let my garden kill itself. Or more accurately, die to itself, if that’s what it truly wants to do. If this makes me more hospice volunteer than garden-variety caretaker, then so be it.

Bear in mind that even hothouse-raised plants with mongrelized genes are living things, each with their own destiny to fulfill. They’re divinely encoded with a deep, sacrificial need to further their own kind. They want their fruit to ripen, and spill its seed on the ground below. Why deny them this last profligate act of generosity? Must we contracept the carrots or euthanize the dill, for heaven’s sake? In a fall garden gone wild, we can let natural fertility and decline run its intended course in ways that our synthetic society hastens to squelch.

The most memorable lesson I’ve learned in this regard came not from a time of plenty, but from a season of drought. One summer, from June to August
there’d been ten weeks without rain. Our lawn had turned crispy brown. The dogwood and maple trees had dropped their leaves early to reduce water loss by evaporation. But not so the blue spruces: the two in our front yard had instead grown an uncommonly thick mantle of pinecones. Of all years, this seemed like a time when they should’ve conserved their energy. The spruces were clearly heat-stressed. Their needles were dull and dry, like a Christmas tree left indoors next to a heat register. That they should expend themselves on a bounty of cones seemed a foolish extravagance.

Later, I learned from a botanist friend that this was in fact an act of supreme altruism. The trees were indeed stressed, he said, almost to the point of death. And that’s precisely what triggered their reaction. They’d grown an extra-heavy crop of seeds (pinecones) to ensure that more of their kind would live on after them. To think that a mute, mindless tree could show such care was a heartening and humbling thing.

Unless a grain of wheat shall fall (or even a pinecone) then it remains but a single grain. But if it dies, it will bear great fruit. And if we have cared for a thing well, some of the fruit it bears may be our own.

These are four words that call us to holiness as we find the God of creation in nature. To read more words that speak of God’s power and goodness, find Get Outside at discoveryseries.org.
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