

# Cultivating Ourselves

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*A Sermon preached at the First Unitarian Church, Albuquerque, New Mexico*

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One of the things I did on my sabbatical was to work with Alicia Hawkins on the third in our series of books of resources for covenant groups. We completed the manuscript in April and this week we learned that the title will be “The Listening Heart”. Yeah! As with the other books, I wrote the essays and Alicia collected quotations and did the thousand organizational tasks such a book requires. It’s a perfect collaboration! Lots of the essays started as sermons and got revised and shortened...this sermon started as an essay and got revised and expanded! Those of you who keep asking me to publish sermons....these three books, *Heart to Heart*, *Soul to Soul*, and now the *Listening Heart*, which we swear will be the last one...is as close as it gets.

Cultivating Ourselves

If you have a garden, you’ve probably noticed how fast things are growing at this time of year...especially before the temperatures soared. It’s that time of year. Warmth and sun abound, and this year, so has water abounded. Every morning I get up while it is cool and marvel at what’s happened in 24 hours. Tiny pumpkins, lots of beginning tomatoes, a harvest of squash already, lettuce and chard...more than we can eat, so we share with the chickens, bees on the lavender, cherries ripe and apples forming...

I’m an incorrigible gardener. And I think in gardening metaphors. Our lives are like gardens which we tend with care, working hard but knowing that the real work is the miracle of nature. Our lives cycle around; seasons of waiting, seasons of labor, seasons of harvest, seasons of rest.

And most of all, the idea that our vocation in life is to be the gardeners, the cultivators, of our own minds, hearts, and souls, doing the work of growing into our potential, rooting up our bad habits, fertilizing with is good and wise.

I didn’t come up with this idea by myself. The idea that part of the human vocation is to cultivate ourselves and nurture and grow our own character is found in the oldest of the world’s literatures, but it took particularly American form with the writings of the Transcendentalists, that body of (mostly Unitarian) early to mid 19th century thinkers which included Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson and William Ellery Channing. They popularized this idea of cultivating oneself and expanded it to include, not just the educated or upper classes, but everybody. By virtue of our humanity, they taught, everyone has a duty develop his or her gifts, expand his or her talents, add to human knowledge, and develop spiritually, and to do so throughout our lives. The Transcendentalists called this sacred duty, “self culture.”

In those days, the word, “culture” was not associated with concerts and art galleries, but rather with agriculture. Culture was encouraging or cultivating the growth of plants. The duty of self-culture was first articulated by The Rev. William Ellery Channing, early 19th century Unitarian minister. As a part of his ministry, he was a popular public speaker in Boston. His lecture, called “Self Culture,” was delivered in 1838 to an audience of manual laborers. One of his concerns was to enhance the self-concept of these men and women. He went to some pains to proclaim that each and every one of them was a child of God, and possess a soul which makes him or her great, no matter which trade they pursued. Channing told these manual laborers that self-culture is the duty we owe ourselves. This is our human calling: to care for ourselves and unfold and perfect ourselves.

When Channing talked about growth, he talked about both personal and ethical growth, that is, having to do with the quality of our own lives, our happiness and serenity and so on, and of our relationships to others and actions towards others... our ethics, values, and actions.

In that Christian milieu, it was not necessary for him to emphasize our duties to others, for that was very well developed in the culture. The idea that we had a duty to cultivate aspects of our inner lives such as self-respect, self-care, wisdom, and peace of mind was much more counter-cultural in that day. However, the side of self-culture which involves our ability to act ethically, understand, empathize with, and care for others, and attempt to influence society for the better was also very important to Channing, who was also a social activist and abolitionist, and in our present-day society, which tends to self absorption and even, “me first”, we need to emphasize the ethical and service side of self culture.

Channing went so far as to claim that self-culture is our salvation; the most important part of our lives, and the phrase, “salvation by character,” (which meant, finding ultimate meaning in life by developing our character) was one of the watchwords of 19th century Unitarianism.

Self-culture is an old-fashioned sounding phrase, but the idea it points to is worthy and important. Personal growth is a critical part of the meaning and satisfaction we find in life, throughout our lives, and so is ethical growth, or our willingness to extend ourselves for others and for the good of the world, either in the private or public realm. While individuals will naturally find different balances between these two foci, both are critical. The person who has only attended to their inner growth and is content to tend their own garden or enjoy their own wealth with no thought of making a contribution to the human enterprise is living an impoverished life, as is the person whose only concern is saving the world but who has not developed the wisdom to manage their disappointments with human nature.

Since self-culture is now a somewhat misleading phrase in our urban world, this idea that growth is a critical part of our lives might better be termed, “cultivating ourselves.” When we engage in this activity, we are in the interesting position of being both the garden that is being cultivated AND the gardener who is doing the cultivation. This ability to use our minds to mold our minds (all the while being a mind and having a mind) seems to be the greatest gift of higher consciousness, and using our greatest and most human gifts brings great satisfaction to our

lives.

Channing told the laborers to whom he lectured that we humans have two powers which make it possible for us to cultivate the garden of ourselves: our ability to watch ourselves, notice patterns, remember our past (which he called self-searching), and the ability to decide to change directions, break habits, form new ones, take ourselves in hand and try something new, which he called our ability to self-form. We can figure ourselves out, in other words, guide our own growth, curb our own behavior, control our own passions, and impel our own learning.

So we decide, perhaps, that we are going to come out of our naturally introverted shell and make friends in a new community. We notice, perhaps, that we tend to choose solitary tasks and activities which do not serve that goal. (That's the self-searching.) So, wishing to change that, we make a plan, pick out events to attend, or projects to work on with others; require ourselves to speak to the people we meet. We learn how to make small talk, and get in the habit of asking others about their lives. As we experiment with these strategies, we celebrate small successes and check the things we have tried off our list of tasks. (That's the self-forming aspect of cultivating ourselves.)

Or, perhaps we decide we are going to do our own taxes this year, get involved in politics, get out of the debt habit, learn to manage our anger, or slow down and really listen to our spouse or children. We search ourselves for the actions, habits and patterns which might impede our chosen goal, and make a plan, getting help if we need it. We become gardeners of our own lives and souls.

No doubt most people through the ages have believed that we are able to make decisions, break habits, and so on. Channing's particular contribution to human thought was to convincingly state that self-culture is spiritual growth. Channing believed that the impulse in us to grow and develop is a holy impulse and that when we go with its flow, whether we are quitting smoking, caring for others, or requiring ourselves to do what we think is right, we are doing the spiritual work of cultivating our moral self, and this work is what connects us to the divine.

Channing believed that cultivating oneself requires intellectual skills, for it uses the mind's powers to seek, reason, judge, and learn. Objectivity and the ability to seek truth no matter how uncomfortable is a crucial trait of the person dedicated to self-culture. He told those laborers to whom he lectured in 1838 that education is not simply the acquiring of facts but the cultivation of the ability to think. He felt so strongly about education that he finished his lecture by remarking that the foundation of self-culture lies in a basic education in childhood, without which a person is crippled for life, and commended to his audience the "recent exertions of our legislature and private citizens, on behalf of our public schools, the chief hope of our country." He then suggested that some part of the public lands of the nation be consecrated to the education of youth, which indeed, they were, in the land grant colleges of our nation.

It is to be imagined that his audience of laborers went home that night lifted in spirit; newly aware of themselves as worthy beings, participating, as they worked their jobs, read their

newspapers, ruminated over their lives, grieved their losses, cared for their children, and conversed with their buddies, that they were not simply indulging themselves but cultivating their characters. Dr. Channing had taught them that they were not only living, they were finding salvation – the wholeness and health and moral growth that points us to what we are meant to be.

Channing's choice of the language of cultivation for our human capacity of self-directed growth and development is very apt. As a gardener, I know, for instance, that while I must plan the garden and perform the tasks of cultivation, the growth that happens is one of those natural phenomena which can only be called a miracle. The gardener helps along a natural process, and can look at the harvest...that basket of tomatoes or armful of flowers, as a wonderful collaboration between wisdom, labor, and the great powers of growth and renewal which no gardener can create and for which gratitude is the only appropriate response. Nor is a gardener in control of the process. The most well-tended plants sometimes just don't do well, and the gardener must continually adjust to nature.

Our self-cultivation is similar. We may set a goal of making a contribution to our world by becoming politically active, and choose the school board election as the one closest to our hearts and seemingly most accessible, but find after some attempts that that avenue is not open to newcomers or needs talents we don't have or in any number of ways be a disappointment. Instead of continuing to try to force our decision to bear fruit, the flexible gardener of the spirit changes focus. Just as the good gardener learns from the plants that don't thrive, but doesn't indulge in self-blame, neither should the cultivator of their own self. When it comes to taking new directions in our lives, an attitude of experimentation and an awareness that, like the gardener, we're not in control of most of the crucial factors will keep us able to gracefully back off of what's not bearing fruit in our lives and try new directions.

The good gardener gardens with reverence for nature's gifts, including the gifts which come through the gardener: labor, knowledge, perseverance and hope. The person who has embarked on cultivating themselves will do well to have a similar reverence for both sides of the cultivation equation: the natural impulses we humans have to learn, grow, and better ourselves, as well as the love and consideration of those around us, and for the gifts and strengths that we have developed with hard work in our own lives.

A good gardener is also realistic, adapting plans to reality and working with nature. It's nearly impossible to grow blueberries in the soil of the southwest or oranges in northern climes. There are avenues of self-culture that are probably closed to us as well. We have to understand and work with the personality, body, skills, and past that we have and make realistic plans for our self-development. If math has always come hard and numbers are a mystery, it would be foolish to attempt to embark on an engineering career. The person whose childhood has left them with a scarred heart may find that their contribution to the world must be made with animals, or as a lone scholar. Finding the right goals and best containers for our personal growth is part of what a good gardener learns to do.

Finally, the good gardener takes a holistic view of the situation in planning the garden. Even if eggplants grow wonderfully in her climate and she herself loves their beautiful color and variety, if nobody around her likes eggplant, a lot of eggplant will go to waste if she plants every variety in the catalogue. Gardening, like self-culture, requires balancing the gardeners satisfaction with the needs of the world. Similarly, as we choose our own goals as we cultivate ourselves, it's important to think about what the world needs from us right now as well as what goals will give us the most satisfaction. The author Frederick Buechner put this duty best when he said, "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

These days community organizers talk about "capacity building" as they help groups of people figure out how to make their communities better. The gardener's work could also be considered as capacity-building. No matter what he plants, he will work the soil to make it more fertile, make wise and careful choices of crops and varieties and planting conditions, be diligent about watering and weeding, and even take out plants which are not thriving. A good gardener tends not only the garden but the compost pile, and cares not only about the plants but the soil and the needs of those who will eat the food. A good gardener will not spray poisons when the bees are out, because she knows that her plants and the world's food, depends on pollinating insects. Our gardens are not isolated from the ecology, and neither are we. All this thought and care builds the garden's capacity to produce more food, products, or beauty, and it builds the character of the gardener as well, and through that, a better world.

Similarly, we have a duty to ourselves as humans to always be about building our own capacities: to learn, to keep our hearts open, to discover the ethical way and follow it, to develop our creativity and our ability to care. Whatever specific goals or products we tend, we will be noticing the whole ecology of our situation, and appreciate both the goodness of nature and the needs of the people around us. When we are about that, we are truly cultivating the garden of our lives.

What new growth are you tending in the garden that is yourself? Are you working on changing a habit, learning a new skill, putting down old baggage and leaving it behind, empathizing with someone you find challenging? Are you hoeing the hard row of adjusting gracefully to change, or recovering from grief?

Are you asking yourself about how you are living your values, about what the world needs from you, about how you can give to others, about the ethics of your life style? That's self-culture too...growing the ethical side of the garden that is yourself.

If you are doing some of these things, know that this is holy work, spiritual work...work that accrues not only to your own satisfaction and life's meaning, but to the world at large.