

My Father's Garden

Reflections on living with dying in the Christian tradition

Robert S. Paul

Beginnings

In the summer of 2011 I inherited my father's garden. To be more precise, my parents decided to move to a retirement center at the same time that I found myself out of a job. In this coincidence of life-changing events, my wife and I needed a place to live and my parents needed help disposing of their belongings. They graciously invited us to move into their house as they moved out, and we gladly did so. During the next year, my wife helped my mother sort through all the things that needed to be passed along in the family, or given away, sold, or thrown out, and I assumed my father's role as the gardener. Neither was a small task.

My parents had bought the house when it was brand new, just after my father retired. While Mom decorated the interior, Dad shaped the surrounding yard and garden. The first spring he contoured the land, planted shrubs and trees, and established a mosaic of flowering plants, bushes, and trees. It was a high-maintenance layout that he cultivated and maintained for the next twenty years, but eventually it became too much for him. The day he handed it over to me, he was palpably relieved and I began to learn what was required to maintain it.

There was always work to be done. During the following months I spent many hours weeding, mowing, trimming, and planting, following my father's direction. The work often was laborious, and I marveled that he had worked so hard for so long on this patch of the planet simply for the pleasure it gave him to do it. Indeed, he loved the garden. His handiwork was evident everywhere, and the investment he had made in the soil caused me to feel that I was on hallowed ground. It also inspired me to reflect on how I viewed my own work—or lack of it, since I was unemployed at the time. That was the beginning of this essay.

Several years later, a colleague at the Vancouver School of Theology, where I was teaching, issued a call inviting papers for an inter-religious conference on the theme of "Death and Dying." My parents were much on my mind at the time, both of them having died in the previous year. Thinking I might have something to offer for the conference, I began to revisit the reflections that had started in the garden, which crystallized around certain themes.

As I had tended the garden that year, I had come to see that my father's decision to hand it over was not due to the workload alone. There were other things he wanted to do, which had become more important because he knew he would not live forever. My father's garden, therefore, exemplifies in many ways how he lived, but also how he responded to the prospect of dying. I offer these reflections in honor of him, with hope that others may find them useful.

< < < < > > > >

Life before Death

My father retired as the chief executive of a scientific research company, but his beginnings were more blue-collar than boardroom. His immigrant father worked in the lumber industry of Washington and Oregon, and my dad worked in a sawmill as a young man. He had a big scar on one finger to prove it.

When I was growing up, I knew almost nothing of what my dad did during the week since much of his work was classified. But I remember him working around the house on weekends. He had a shop in the garage with lots of tools. When things broke, he fixed them. When we needed a dresser for our clothes, or shelves for toys and books, he made them. When my brother and I wanted a tree house, he built it. He even built a “helicopter” out of plywood and sundry leftovers with a seat large enough to accommodate two or three children. Pushing buttons, flipping switches, and turning the hand-cranked rotary blade, we would take flights of fantasy in the back yard.

When the time came to retire, my dad had no interest in playing golf or going fishing. He had never had much interest in recreation of that sort. For him, retiring meant having time to play the way he liked best, which was to work with his hands and to build things. His garden was part of that playful work, inspired no doubt by his parents’ lovely terraced yard on the Willamette river, near Oakridge, Oregon. In that paradise, my grandmother grew roses and pansies and snapdragons while my grandfather cleared away the forest undergrowth and built prodigious stacks of firewood. Their thick, lush lawn was a delight to our bare feet as children, and the trails into the woods led to many adventures.

The suburban lot my dad developed did not have a river running through it, but it sloped enough from the street up to the back fence to create a similar terraced effect. He did not aspire to a certain style of garden, or conform to some principle such as “low maintenance.” His vision was shaped, I think, by his hobby as an amateur painter. He contoured the land and installed most of the plants using nothing but a shovel, rake, and his old wheelbarrow, sculpting the garden with these instruments as a kind of three-dimensional painting. He chose plants for their vivid colors, with an eye for the contrast and focal points they would add to the whole.

The deck at the back of the house was bordered by a generous planting bed of tall native grasses, ground-covering plants, and a variety of annual flowers. A long row of red geraniums defined the perimeter, and a lush green lawn spread out from there until it met a line of railroad ties he set precisely in place. These defined another planting bed, filled seasonally with bright orange nasturtiums that mirrored the red geraniums. Framing this on one side was an apple tree, and on the other side a plot for vegetables. Beyond the lawn and bright flowers, a micro-wilderness of shrubs and evergreens rose gently to a backdrop of tall fir trees.

The overall result was stunningly beautiful. At peak season, a feast of terraced colors greeted the eye. The lawn hosted croquet competitions and wedding celebrations, and outdoor meals were enjoyed with fresh vegetables from the garden. In the fall, my mom turned the apples into her exquisite apple sauce, much of it frozen to be enjoyed throughout the winter. If this sounds rather idyllic, it was, for more than two decades.

The Life of Work

Years before, as a seminary student, I had learned that the biblical Eden was not a pleasure palace nor a resort. In the biblical story, the Creator forms the prototypical human creature (the 'adam) out of earth ('adamah), places him in a garden, and gives him work to do (Genesis 2:5). The theology presented here in story form is that work is part of the Creator's plan for the human species, reflecting the dignity and responsibility of being made in God's own image.

In my father's garden there always was work to be done, but the hours spent there lent themselves to rest as well as labor. I was in a pensive mood at times due to my loss of employment and uncertainty about what the future held, but for the time being I was free of deadlines to meet and the other obligations of being employed. A pause to catch my breath from digging and weeding, therefore, could extend into a longer period of meditation without penalty. These thoughtful interludes allowed for weeding and pruning of the spiritual and psychological kind.

Surrounded by natural beauty and given a rhythm of work and rest, I reflected on the fact that my dad had not stopped working when he retired. He did not see "work" merely as paid employment, or as a necessary evil, nor did he regard retirement as a chapter in life when he was entitled merely to play, or to sit around doing nothing instead of having to work. His play in retirement was the freedom to choose the work he would do, and the work was his play.

I was bruised from what had happened in my previous job; disappointed with myself, but also with how I was treated at times. As I reflected on my father's attitude towards work, I began to see my own situation differently. Painful as it was, losing a job had not deprived me of the opportunity to work, but gave me freedom to approach any future employment differently. My dignity did not depend on the expectations of an employer, nor was my value nullified by my shortcomings. I realized that God had placed me in a setting of extraordinary beauty, and had given me meaningful work to do with ample time to rest. Slowly but surely, he lifted me from the mud of discouragement and began to make me new again. The garden was a gift of restorative grace.

Faith as Framework

My father was not ignorant about Christian doctrine or theology, but he was not terribly interested in faith as an intellectual matter—especially not as a set of abstract beliefs to be disputed or defended. His training as a nuclear physicist had something to do with this, I suspect. The notion that reality can be fully described in theoretical terms is difficult to sustain when one has reckoned with quantum mechanics and Heisenberg's uncertainty principle. Faith for my father was not a closed system. It informed his life in a different way.

Times were hard during the depression years when he was growing up in Olympia, Washington. His father, the avid wood stacker, was a dedicated Baptist Sunday school teacher. Being Christian was part of the family identity, and what he believed led him to compassion. Grandpa felt he was fortunate to have steady work while others did not, and it meant he had the ability and responsibility to help others. The family home was a refuge for relatives as my father was growing up, and even strangers who had fallen on hard times as grandmother gave meals to

homeless men out the back door of the kitchen. My dad also worked, delivering newspapers from a very young age. By high school he had acquired several routes, and hired younger boys to help cover them. Being Christian was all about helping others—something that was done, more than it was talked about.

My dad's concept of how to live as a Christian was shaped through these experiences. He was highly moral, but in my memory never moralistic. His values were not articulated as a set of cramped rules to be used in judgement of others, but were evident in his sense of gratitude, kindness, and the inclination to good whenever he could.

These values were reinforced by his participation in a Boy Scout troop. He took pride in his Eagle scout badge because of the principles it represented. When he talked about his adolescent years he did not recount stories of youthful shenanigans, though there may have been some. He told stories about backpacking trips in the Olympic mountain range, diving into freezing lakes, and scaling high peaks. He loved the Pacific Northwest, and he often expressed his wonder at the beauty of God's Creation. From the retirement center on a clear day, where he and Mom lived their final years, he could see the peaks he had climbed as a Scout and seemed wistful for them.

He also explored the world through his work as a scientist. My father trained in nuclear physics as an experimentalist, not a theorist. He understood the work of theorists such as Einstein, Nils Bohr, Heisenberg, and others, but his interest was in turning theory to practical uses. He saw no conflict between science and faith. In the same way that he had enjoyed expansive views from mountain peaks, he marveled at the ever-expanding view of the sub-atomic world that nuclear physics opened to exploration. He welcomed every glimpse into the mystery of unseen realities with a sense of wonder and awe. His experimentalist training and approach carried over into other aspects of his life.

In projects of all kinds, he would first make a rough sketch and then move directly to the physical work of creativity, making adjustments as he went. To a visitor, his garden appeared to be very orderly, but for my dad it was always a work in progress. He never hesitated to dig something up and throw it away if it did not work out, or to replant it elsewhere and try again. Because of the variety of plants he nurtured, and its continual evolution, his garden stood out among the more static, low-maintenance yards of the neighborhood.

Continual creativity, though, takes a lot of energy and perseverance. As his physical stamina declined, keeping the garden going eventually became too much for my dad. The framework of faith that defined his values, however, remained intact. He was not so much bringing his work to an end as he was turning his remaining energy in a new direction. There was still work to be done, new experiments to undertake, and more opportunities to do good for others.

Walking and Waiting

Moving to the Skyline retirement center in downtown Seattle, my dad dove into the new situation with the enthusiasm of a Boy Scout jumping into a mountain lake. He seemed energized by all the people around, and was quite gregarious in relation to the staff and other residents. Perhaps it recaptured for him some of the enjoyment he had known interacting with

colleagues and co-workers as a corporate executive. My mother did not react to the move in the same way. She missed her home and her autonomy, and was not particularly interested in the social activities on offer in the retirement center. She accepted the move to the retirement center reluctantly, as a kind of capitulation to the inevitable march of time. She made a few good friends in the first years, and enjoyed playing piano for various events in the center, but she chafed against the controlled environment to the very end. She especially disliked the end of life that living there represented, even as she appreciated the benefits it provided.

My mother did not fear death, but she saw it as an unwelcome stranger whose approach was an affront to everything she loved and valued. Her attitude was consistent with the expression of St. Paul, who described death as “the last enemy” (1 Corinthians 15:26). She loved the life she had lived, and wanted it to continue.

My dad approached the matter in his typical manner, by objectifying it. The approaching end of life was a phenomenon to be studied analytically, with himself as the experimental subject. He busied himself with projects that reflected his sense that things remained to be done in whatever time he had left. He wrote a brief family history, and he compiled a notebook full of information we would need “when he died,” he said—bank accounts, passwords, phone numbers, and so on.

He also became interested in actuarial tables, and would update me periodically on the odds that he would live another year (or two, or three), and how he had factored this into his planning. He was living on “bonus time,” as he called it, but was unperturbed by that fact.

He did not act like a dead man walking, but attended to his health. Every day he went for a walk in the neighborhood, or in the parking garage in wet weather. His walks steadily grew shorter as he aged, but he stuck to the routine. When he could no longer walk, he rolled up and down the hallway in his wheelchair. More telling than what he did for himself, though, is how he found new ways to do good for others.

Not long after moving to the retirement center, he volunteered to serve as a chaplain’s assistant. After the requisite background check, he was assigned to visit men in the “memory care” section of the facility. He was unhurried by other things, so he had time to listen to the recollections of men who were losing their memory. He cultivated a relationship with them, despite their limitations, and his scientific instincts made him curious about the experience of memory loss. He observed that losing memories of the past seemed to release some of the men from burdens of regret, while also lessening their anxiety about the future. He reasoned that becoming unable to project one’s thoughts into the past or the future compresses a person’s perceptions into the present moment. The resulting sense of “timelessness,” he thought, was a kind of grace for those nearing the end of life.

About six years after moving to the retirement center, my mother died at 93 after a brief illness. Prior to her death, my dad told me more than once that he thought God was keeping him around for her sake. My mom thought she was being kept around for the sake of my dad. They both were sure that he would die first, being male and a year older than my mom, but it did not happen that way. So much for actuarial tables.

After my mom's death, my dad's abilities faded rapidly, perhaps from a sense that his work on her behalf was done. He lost the ability to walk (but not to roll, in his wheelchair), and eventually both his long- and short-term memory diminished. His wit still appeared in flashes, though, and he recognized family members to the very end. He lived his final year on the memory-care floor where he once had visited other men—present in the moment, undisturbed for the most part by burdens of the past or fears for the future, peacefully waiting to depart.

Life after death

Christians believe in life after death. As the Apostles' Creed says, we believe in "*the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.*"

Popular imagination locates "life everlasting" in a pearly-gated community where streets are paved with gold and a mansion awaits every person admitted by St. Peter. This vision of heaven seems to focus on endless leisure, which strikes me as hellishly boring.

Scripture is actually not so definitive as the popular imagination. The Bible provides no detailed prospectus of life after death, though there are tantalizing hints and solemn promises. In John's Gospel, for instance, Jesus comforts his disciples by saying, "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?" This text offers comfort and hope to families who are grieving the loss of a loved one, and whatever might comprise those dwelling places, the promise has credence on account of Christ's resurrection.

Indeed, the New Testament offers very little about what life after death is like, but reverberates with testimony about the resurrection of Jesus. The four Gospels unanimously present Jesus as crucified, dead, and buried, and then raised from the dead—not as a ghost or a zombie, but alive and fully himself. Other New Testament witnesses add that hundreds of people saw him alive. This claim—that Jesus was raised back to life—was as preposterous in the first century as it is in the twenty-first century, yet there it is. The Apostle Paul says the Christian faith as a whole hinges on the reality of the event (1 Corinthians 15:14).

Given the centrality of the resurrection of Jesus, one might expect Christian believers to be oriented towards life after death more than life here and now. This does not seem to be the general pattern, however. I visited a friend of mine, a minister and theology professor, when he was bedridden and dying of cancer. I asked him if he was thinking much about what he would experience beyond death. "Oh, yes," he said. "I'm thinking about it more and more. It is so exciting to contemplate!" My father, by contrast, expressed little interest in the subject, but not because he lacked faith. He was content to wait and see what would come next, whatever it might be. He believed he was in God's hands, and that was enough.

In fact, in my experience as a pastor, I do not recall any Christian who was fixated on what happens after death unless, like my friend, their own death was imminent. But even at that threshold, some are more curious or concerned about it than others. The basic pattern I observed is that Christian belief in life *after* death does not seem to draw the energy and concern of people towards the hereafter. Rather, a sense of assurance that our lives are in

God's hands, whether this side of death or the other, seems to focus attention on what can be done in the here and now.

This was readily apparent in my father's case, but it was also the case with many others I knew in the churches I served. The pattern is so consistent, in fact, that it has caused me to reflect on why this should be. What is it about Christian belief in life *after* death that inspires a focus on *this-world* rather than the *next-world*?

Practical and Purposeful

According to Don S. Browning, Christian communities commonly make decisions by *phronesis*, a term that refers to a type of intelligence. It means acting wisely, knowing what to do and when to do it in practical terms. Browning states it this way:

Some will say that religious communities are bearers of the revelation and will of God and this revelation sets aside all use of human reason. Others will say that these communities are anachronistic custodians of superstition and ignorance and certainly not carriers of practical rationality. It is my conviction, however, that these communities can and often do constitute powerful embodiments of practical rationality. Furthermore, their religious meanings can free practical rationality to function all the better. It is not that they exercise practical wisdom in spite of their religious symbols and convictions; they exercise practical wisdom because of their religious symbols and convictions. (*A Fundamental Practical Theology*, 1991:10)

The Christian faith has accumulated a very long tradition that is expressed in creedal statements, ritualized practices, and sacred places, among other things. The vitality of the faith, however, does not arise spontaneously from the artifacts of the tradition. The generative source of the faith are unnumbered acts of personal trust in God—the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the narrative of the Hebrew scriptures, who in Christian understanding is the same God revealed in Jesus Christ and experienced through the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Trust in God may involve an inner disposition, or some subjective sense of God's presence. It may involve a general sense of dependence on God, in the same way we depend on the air we breathe. But the act of trusting that generates the vitality of faith does not consist of subjective experience or generalities. It happens in relation to the concrete circumstances of a person's life. For Abraham, the biblical icon of faith, trusting God meant leaving his home and journeying to an unknown destination in response to God's call. Trust was not a feeling, but an action without certainty of the outcome. Christian faith might be called experimentalist in that regard. Simply put, whether God is trustworthy is discovered in personal terms by trying it. "O taste and see that the Lord is good," says Psalm 34:8. "Happy are those who take refuge in him."

By trusting God in specific circumstances, believers learn to regard life more generally as a gift from the hand of God. To receive the gift implies responsibility for what is given, and invites creativity in how the gift is utilized. Within this framework, the promise of life beyond death does not diminish the importance of life before death, but illuminates its immense value. The promise of the future shines light on the present, revealing this earthly life as sacred ground where the gift of life is first planted, where the human spirit is cultivated, where we can bear the fruit of good and beautiful things done for others, and where seeds of eternal significance

also may be sown. Those who believe in Christ's resurrection, therefore, do not despise this life for the sake of the next, but find it full of purpose and meaning, rich with opportunities to respond with gratitude in practical ways.

Seeds of the Garden

On a dusty shelf in the corner of my father's garage one day, I came upon a small plastic container filled with pods of some kind. My dad explained that those were nasturtium seeds, which he had gathered up one by one and saved so they could be planted in the spring. I wondered why he did not simply go to the nursery and buy a packet each year, but that would have been incongruent with his loving nurture of his garden. He told me earnestly when they should go in the ground, and how far apart to space them. I knew how beautiful they looked in full bloom, so I conceded to his wisdom on the matter.

When it came time to plant the pods, however, the soil was compacted from the winter rains and a crop of bothersome weeds had sprouted. I dutifully chipped away at the weeds and the soil, and placed the seeds in the ground one at a time. I admit I did not find a lot of pleasure in the task. In due time, though, young plants appeared, and by mid-summer there were glorious orange flowers framing the green lawn.

Some of the nasturtium seeds fared better than others, especially those that were planted alongside the vegetable plot. Their roots reached soil my father had annually enriched with mulch from his compost pit. That extraordinarily rich soil was his secret for growing beans, carrots, lettuce, and zucchini of unusual size. It worked for flowers as well. The nasturtiums that bloomed there were double the size of those I had planted in the harder, less fertile ground. Jesus told a parable once, which likened God to a sower, the word of God spread about to seed, and human hearts to different kinds of soil (Matthew 13:1-23).

My father was like many other people of Christian faith I have known who are receptive to the world of life everlasting, to which the resurrection of Christ bears witness. When the "soil" of their hearts is cultivated and enriched, seeds planted within them grow with vigor and beauty. The faith that blooms is expressed in the practical and purposeful approach they take to life, including the inevitably approaching end of life. Because they have learned to trust God in this life, they trust him also for whatever comes after death. In the meantime, they plant seeds of their own as long as they have the ability to do so.

Literally and figuratively they cultivate ground, enrich it with nutrients, save seeds for the future, and plant trees and flowers and crops they will not live to see themselves. They focus on what they can do in the present to express gratitude to the Giver of Life, and in so doing they leave gifts of love to future generations who will be born long after they are gone.

My father's garden was such a gift to me; his life of faith, even more.