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Search for an Ecologically Responsible Living: Garden  
as Metaphor

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CARMEN DITZLER: I grew up on a farm in Central Alberta and from a young age listened to what the wind had to tell me. The blowing grass and the wide open sky is still a vivid experience for me. When I went to university I had a lot to learn and experience. I was lucky enough to meet Harvey Scott and enter on a journey of exploration. That journey led me to a new understanding of the Earth and my place and my role. I fell in love with canoes and water. I worked as an outdoor educator for a while, lived in St. Vincent in the Caribbean to experience life in a developing country, came home and started a master degree and eventually completed a thesis that qualitatively looked at the process of living ecologically. In many ways the writing of the thesis was part of the process of weaving my own web. I care and question and make connections, and make choices and exhibit paradoxes in my life. I'm working on the action part. It's difficult. One year ago my partner, dog and I had the opportunity to escape out of the city and live on a wonderful 1/4 section of mature spruce forest. We are still here and beginning to dwell and put down roots. The fresh air, the freedom to walk outside at night without fear of attack, the green, the trees, the creatures, and yes my garden.

I find it useful to play with the idea of a garden and gardening to guide me in my search for an ecologically responsible living. A garden is a place to grow some food and flowers. A garden can be a place where humans and nature can interact and foster one another's growth. The garden fits in with the place one lives, frost free days, sun, water, heat, soil. I garden all year round. I select and keep seeds and bulbs, dreaming a vision of what the garden will look like. In the spring I begin with preparing the soil by digging in the dirt. I use our wastes that have become compost to provide nutrients for the plants. I plan the beds and plant the seed and wait. Some things don't germinate. Some things don't work out the way I planned. The garden needs nurturing. Some plants and areas need more time, attention, water, nutrients, while others flourish on their own. Being in the sun and feeling the earth and seeing the plants grow nurtures me as well. Plants that grow well together, that get along, help each other, protect each other, are planted together. I too surround myself with like minded gentle people as much as possible.

Hoeing and weeding seems to be never ending. A weed may be useful or beautiful or lovely all on its own, but somehow interferes where it's growing. Pulling weeds out of my garden, hoeing, hand pulling, is like getting rid of bad habits in my life, like driving too much or buying overpackaged food. I don't use herbicides, so I need to think of creative work with the land, ways to get rid of weeds, or better yet to use them to my advantage. The thing about weeds is that they come back again and again. They creep in from the edges, making our garden smaller. They grow in the rows and take away nutrients, water, and sun that

the vegetables need. They reduce the harvest.

If I let the weeds get out of control then I've lost. My garden smothers, withers, doesn't produce, becomes ugly, unsatisfying. I end up working for money to buy food. We all have weeds in our lives. Weeding takes patience, perseverance, time and learning, all of which are lifetime processes. Harvest happens all year long, from the first tender lettuce, spinach and radishes to the peas, beans, carrot thinnings, beet greens, tender herbs, to new potatoes, carrots, corn, squash, sunflowers and the endless zuchinni. The garden extends beyond the yard out into the fields and valleys, connecting a web of living things. For example, there are the wild berries that are a surprise on a walk, or a treat when my favorite patch in the gully has a great year. The harvest is the fruit that gets canned, the cucumber pickles, the root cellar brimming full, the dried herbs and braids of garlic and onions all squirrelled away for a cold winter's supper or a big family dinner. There are other less tangible benefits of the garden. Soil gets between my toes, under my fingernails and ground into my knees and connects me to the earth. The sun, water, soil and seeds combine to create food for my body and my soul.

The left over parts of the garden, like stems and leaves go into the compost to become food for next year's garden. The perennials get mulched and things are ready for winter. Some herbs get moved indoors to last the winter and I begin growing sprouts in a jar for salads, instead of lettuce in the garden. The wonderful thing about gardening is that there's always the winter to rejuvenate, plan, dream and next spring to start all over again. This year I think I'll plant this and try this and move this over here and start these plants inside in March. That variety of carrots wasn't great, so I'll try another kind this time. I get ideas from other people, talk about gardening and visit their gardens, and we trade cuttings, bulbs and seeds. I read and see the ways others are living and provide support and hope for one another. Gardens are never the same from year to year, we change, the garden changes. People and projects and interests move in and out of our lives. Every one of us can think of many things that could be done to create a vision of a new world on some level. And that change is up to you and to me. Preferably we can begin the process of change from the grassroots or beet roots.

...top down solutions are often inflexible, destructive, and unworkable. Even if this were not true, the best policies in the world will not save ecologically slovenly, self-indulgent people who are not likely to tolerate such policies in any case. In other words, the constituency for global change must be created in local communities, neighborhoods, and households from people who have been taught to be faithful first in little things. (Orr, 1992, p.31)

Planting tiny seeds is having faith in little things. It is with faith and hope that the potential for growing and living fully, richly and full of flavor and nutrients

will be realized.

My life, like gardens, has changed and grown, evolved and become a process of dwelling in my place. I am in a process of discovering what works for me and with the place where I dwell. Dwelling becomes a process, like gardening, that is about doing it and doing it and doing it over and over in spirals and circles and cycles. Gardening with myself as one of the plants I nurture and the Earth as a partner who is full of surprises.

## Reference

Orr, David W. (1992). *Ecological Literacy: Education and the Transition to a Postmodern World*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

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