

## ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation:            OLDER GARDENERS AS KEEPERS OF THE EARTH:  
                                                            A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

Carole Staley Collins, Doctor of Philosophy, 2007

Dissertation directed by:      Professor Francine H. Hultgren  
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This study explores what the lived experience of gardening is like for older, community-dwelling gardeners as it is uncovered through conversations, garden visits, and written notes from seven older gardeners. Over a two-year sequence, multiple in-depth individual conversations at the homes of the co-researcher participants unearth themes reflective of their gardening lives. Drawn forward by the methodology of hermeneutic phenomenology, the rich text of our dialogue mingles like compost and becomes something newly created that shows their passion for interacting with plants and living habitats.

Using the existentials of lived place, lived body, lived time and lived relation we dig into how gardening is lived. Home and volunteer places for gardening keep these older adults curious and creatively engaged—characteristics of healthy agers. Their worn body parts go unnoticed in the presence of beauty they co-create, suggesting knowing the Earth through the senses is a source of tranquility and wakefulness that brings a renewed appreciation for the wonder of nearby nature. With interpretive literature, poetry, and cultural understandings of the gardeners’ lives, we relate to metaphors surrounding gardening; the seasons and the circle of life are ever-present.

Autobiographical stories of sustained volunteerism, land trusts, and conservancies for future generations reveal their caring for the planet and spiritual aspects of this physical activity, which they love. Reaching out beyond their gardens to share their bounty and wisdom about their relationship with living earth, the gardeners model a vision of respect for the planet and an ecological consciousness. Witnessing nearby nature, they blossom in the Fall of their lives.

As a community health professional, my task is to educate and raise awareness about nature for human health and well-being; thereby building on current initiatives to foster accessible nearby nature. The study also sheds light on the value of environmental activism through autobiographical notions. In supporting a gardening life for older gardeners, we advocate the importance of interacting with nearby nature that we long to preserve. Our planet needs more earth keepers like these to bring us back into balance.

OLDER GARDENERS AS KEEPERS OF THE EARTH:  
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

Carole Staley Collins

Dissertation submitted to the faculty of the Graduate School of the  
University of Maryland College Park in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
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Advisory Committee:

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this work of more than a few years to all my family, especially the ones who will enjoy homemade pot pies again in our Collins/Ramm household. Life happened along with the dissertation, often unpredictable but unforgettable, too. *Because* I love my family I slowed the pace: to be a temporary single parent while Paul served a long year in the Middle East; to be with my father, James Foster Collins, and learn from my mother, Cornelia Deming Collins's example; to celebrate two scholars' high school graduations (my niece, Amanda and my daughter, Ellie) with a trip of a lifetime with my sister, Lauren; to witness my son Nelson's spring and summer adventures in sailing and lacrosse; and to gather at Wolfe Island with friends and my extended family to remember and enjoy building a family sense of place that my grandparents began.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>CHAPTER ONE:</b>	
<b>COMING TO YOUR SENSES.....</b>	<b>1</b>
Being Brought into Plant-Lands .....	1
Growing up and Getting the Bug .....	2
Heritage Blessings from Those who Love Plants and Trees:	
My Questioning Begins .....	4
Starting Over: My Questioning Leads to New Ground .....	7
Seeing the Phenomenon through the Seasons of Life.....	10
The Gardens Tended by Keepers of the Earth .....	13
Finding Yourself Outside the Garden .....	15
Gardening from Memory into the Rusty Years .....	16
The Gardener’s Soul Work .....	19
Being-With these Keepers of the Earth: A Pathway through Phenomenology .....	21
The Gardening Culture .....	23
The Landscape and Plot Map of the Study of Oldsters who Garden.....	26
<b>CHAPTER TWO:</b>	
<b>AN EXPEDITION INTO THE PHENOMENON: CROSSING BOUNDARIES</b>	
<b>BETWEEN AND WITHIN OURSELVES, EARTH AND SKY .....</b>	<b>31</b>
Exploring the Garden for Its Wonders.....	31
A Beginning Search for the Seeds that are the Elements of Wonder .....	31
The Wonder of the Garden to Heal and Make Well .....	37
Imagining the Possibility of Balance as Successful Old Age	
Comes to Consciousness.....	39
Fruit from the Gods Above and Below: The Perennial Story of the Seasons.....	42
Lessons from Listening to Stories.....	45
Living and Letting Go.....	48
Lifeblood for the Soul.....	51
Encountering the Past: Finding the Soil.....	54
Growing Food for the Soul: Playing in the Dirt .....	58
Going Underground to Find the Self .....	62
Making our Way to Health by Touching the Earth.....	64
Weathering the Seasons of Life .....	67
Being Embraced by Old Man Winter .....	68
Remembering Springtime: Changing with the Winds .....	74
The Mortal Body on Planet Earth and the Life Spirit.....	78
Where Fantasy and Imagination Flourish in the Borderlands of Time.....	87

**CHAPTER THREE:  
 INTO THE THICKET: PHILOSOPHICAL GROUNDING AND  
 METHODOLOGY FOR THE STUDY .....92**

Finding My Way into the Lifeworld of the Keepers.....92  
 Philosophical Guideways.....93  
 Searching with the Builders who Dwell in Nature and Tend to the Sacred .....95  
 Phenomenology as a Pilgrimage of Discovery .....98  
 Standing in the Openness of Beings with Hermeneutic Phenomenology.....99  
 Verstehen, The Act of Understanding .....100  
 Perception and Questioning: The Repeating Rings .....101  
 Exposing the Roots .....103  
 The Trees in the Thicket: Methodological Structure .....106  
 Being Called: The Turning .....107  
 Investigating Experience as We Live it .....108  
 Unearthing the *Eidos*: Hermeneutic Phenomenological Reflection .....112  
 Exploring the Existentials.....115  
 Lived space or place.....116  
 Lived body .....119  
 Lived time .....121  
 Lived relation .....123  
 Writing to Understand: In and out of the Hermeneutic Circle.....125  
 Staying close: Maintaining a Strong and Oriented Pedagogical Relation .....128  
 Communing with the Keepers of the Earth: Collecting Lived Experience Accounts129  
 The Gardeners are Gathered: The Participants .....129  
 Moving into the Thicket: Details about the Study .....132  
 Reaching the Clearing in the Forest: Achieving Balance .....135

**CHAPTER FOUR: SEED-CARRIERS CALLED TO LAY HANDS UPON THE  
 EARTH: THE EMBRACE .....138**

The Resonant Call to be Seed-Carriers.....139  
 Introductions: Planting Date/Germination/Birth Date .....146  
 Sally .....148  
 Beth.....148  
 Jeannetta.....150  
 Barbara.....150  
 Selena.....152  
 Leo .....153  
 Marie.....154  
 A Planting Gene is Sown and Shared: Becoming Rooted .....155  
 Plant supports: Guides from the past .....157  
 An apprenticeship through remembrance of the ground.....158  
 Unfolding a Layer of the Seed Coat: Becoming a Seed-Carrier.....159  
 Encountering the circle of life.....161  
 Witnessing nearby nature.....162

Finding tranquility .....	164
Awakening in nearby nature .....	167
Composting Remembrances: Gardeners' Gold Amidst Rocks.....	171
The Co-Creation of Beauty in Seed-beds We Have Known and Loved.....	175
Opening to Beauty .....	177
A Longing for Life with Beauty .....	178
Evolving Boundaries while Co-Creating Beauty.....	181
Beauty to soften the edges of loss.....	183
Beauty to express yourself freely.....	192
Beauty to make a home place .....	196
Beauty to find balance .....	197
Metamorphosis.....	200
The Blossoming of Beauty.....	202
Creating a Life with Beauty: Garden Pictures .....	204
Creating art in the garden.....	204
Keeping beauty undefined .....	205
Dwelling with Living Art: Time to "Be" .....	206
Time for Being Outside .....	207
Time for "Mind-Resting" .....	208
Framing the View .....	211
Staying Curious and Creative: Gardening to Garden .....	213
Being Close to the Earth and Near Nature to Feel Well.....	217
Adaptation: Worn Body Parts.....	218
Knowing the Earth through the Senses.....	223
The gardener's touch.....	224
A taste for nearby nature's sights and sounds.....	226
The rich scents of living earth.....	228
Developing a "Sense Consciousness".....	230
Seeds of Possibility: "Looking Forward... Waiting 'Til..." .....	232
The Seed-Carrier's "What If?" .....	236
A Passion for the Work.....	239
Enjoying a Fall Blooming Way of Life .....	242
A talent for perspective.....	243
A talent for sharing of self and being a friend .....	244
A talent for teaching stewardship .....	248
<b>CHAPTER FIVE: CULTIVATING KINSHIP: GROWING THE VISION.....</b>	<b>251</b>
A Planetary View of our Role on Earth: All My Relations .....	255
Our Home in Plant-lands: Inside the Greenest Part of the Orb.....	258
Sharing Stories of Respecting the Land and Co-Habitancy.....	259
Re-Discovering the Land Ethic.....	263
Developing Courage for Stewardship with or without Ownership.....	265
Mapping the Swirling Aspects of the Communities of Earth Keepers.....	269
Seeing Public Gardens and Parks as Nearby Nature to Keep.....	271
Cultivating Community: Coming Full Circle .....	275

Speaking and Listening to Health Professionals and Social Scientists.....	277
Enriching Soul and Spirit Through Reconnecting with Nearby Nature .....	279
Clouds in the Sky: Journeying into the Vision with Earth Keepers .....	283
Understanding Metamorphosis and Transformation .....	285
Breathing in a tranquil dwelling place .....	287
Gaining a very special place to be .....	290
Rootedness for young and old.....	292
Finding the right place for our souls to dwell.....	294
Calling for Collaborative Research and Discourse.....	295
Pedagogical Musings about the Threads of Kinship.....	299
Carrying on the lessons of community service.....	300
Becoming the curriculum of environmental stewardship .....	302
Returning to Earth to Join the Circle .....	304
Appendix A: Invitation to Participate.....	309
Appendix B: Consent Form .....	310
Orienting Framework of Questions .....	311
References.....	312

## **CHAPTER ONE: COMING TO YOUR SENSES**

For love of gardening is a seed that once sown never dies,  
but always grows and grows to an enduring and ever-increasing  
source of happiness. (Jekyll, 1964/2000, p. 23)

### **Being Brought into Plant-Lands**

Between my fingers I crush the lavender from the heirloom plant I have tended so dearly. I crush the stems loaded with soft purple seeds that are ripe for harvesting. I inhale slowly and deeply as if taking a cleansing breath during meditation. A calm comes over me from deep within. I linger beside the leggy plant known for its history as much as for its power to bring back often long-lost memories. Consciously, I know as a nurse that the sense of smell can stimulate the limbic system and evoke a response that awakens the brain. However, like the plant dreamers who discovered this long before me, I have let my self go as the sweet fragrance transports me to another place and time. Within this sense experience I am with my grandmother. This kind of transcendence through time and space is intuitively known to others, and can have a healing quality for which they search. Kapuler captures the feeling well: “There are times when you look at a flower or take a breath of something fragrant, and it will rejuvenate your own sense of wonder at being alive” (as cited in Ausubel, 1994, p. 91). In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty might have named this a “sense experience” (1962/1996, p. 55); yet, for gardeners, gardening actually might be a coming to their senses about their lives.

Whether one is young at gardening and mature in life’s seasons, or full-grown into gardening and still young, plant persons delight in Mother Nature as teacher. One learns that the physical act of digging in the earth brings pleasure of its own making.

Then, time passes, sometimes so slowly, imperceptibly, until, somehow, the seeds grow, the plants mature and the gardener harvests the fruits of a creative effort. It is no wonder these plant persons say the art of gardening is beloved and joyous work! The creative act of gardening brings them in-to nature. Wilson (1984) calls this pull to nature “biophilia,” recognizing our innate need as humans to reconnect with nature (p.1). Is this a hidden, unconscious, bodily sense that draws us in to being with nature? How does gardening bring one in-to nature in this way?

For me, it is a wonder–this bodily felt sense experience called gardening. I like growing plants from seed–and yet I find myself being brought in, digging deeper into the experience. What seeds are sown in our early years as persons invited upon this planet with all its gifts of nature? It is as if I am beginning a different kind of seed work that is also joyous. This work begins in plant-lands with older gardeners as I find my way to an understanding of the lived experience of plant persons. It calls for an awakening and a new consciousness: one of merging an earth mother and a wannabe nature scientist. The smell of the lavender is powerful and I remember...

### **Growing up and Getting the Bug**

My earliest remembrance of a garden is a faint one, but it lingers like the perfumed air of flowers from the lush islands of Indonesia where I first learned the word, gardener. Although I was born in a most-American setting, the nation’s capital, as the daughter of an Embassy family, I traveled and lived overseas more than half my life until college. I was and remain a citizen of the world, enriched by the travel and world cultures. We were treated like royalty. We had a gardener in the Far East assignments, and fresh flower arrangements became a talent my mother put to good use at the constant

dinner parties with foreign dignitaries. We also lived in South America, where I became bilingual in Spanish. I studied the history and geography of each country in South and Central America where we lived, yet only recently have watched the activities in the forests of one particular part of the world with a more critical eye. How was I to know that destruction of the rain forest might take our breath away in this century since “these forests serve as the lungs of the earth?” (Ausubel, 1994, p. 84). Still a child, I was innocent in those days, and unaware. I was as care-free as a summer day.

Many summers during my childhood we came “home” to Wolfe Island from wherever we were. Like the Monarch butterflies that travel thousands of miles to return home, we were drawn to come back and be with our family of origin. I played where my mother used to play. We were outside all day with my cousins until the sun went down and we had to come in from the pasture. We played tag among the lilacs and collected buttercups to hold under our chins to see if we liked butter. There is a whole collection of memories from the 1900s farmhouse on Wolfe Island where my extended family gathered for vacation. Fresh flowers were on the antique nightstand. Actually, flowers adorned every nightstand, and decorated the massive dinner table where the adults ate and talked for hours. I remember Queen Anne’s Lace along the road, the sturdy thistle that grew wild in the pasture, and the vibrant day lilies my grandmother planted that announced themselves every July. An accomplished nurse, my grandmother was also a wonderful gardener, I am told. I wish I had known her. She died when my mother was a teen. Grandmothers and other loved ones sometimes live on in our stories. These stories contribute to who we are today. Let me tell a story about her husband, my grandfather.



Grandmother's devoted husband, the doctor, was also one of my role models. He mentored me well, for at age five I declared I would be a nurse. His influence continues into the present day—in me. He, too, was drawn to service in the community following his military service. He made house calls for years; in fact, he continued this practice many years after others would not make the time. I have heard others tell of how he would sit with patients and be with them, listening to their stories. This gentle man wanted to know us and hear our stories, too, so he took an ocean liner out to the Far East and turned the visit into a two-year house call. We were a close-knit group and he was part of our family in the most real way. He used to say he thought he would stay “just ‘til the next boat.” In those years he sat with me and talked of his years as a doctor and a traveler, and of life during the World Wars. I was an ardent listener and have never tired of listening to older people. They are my favorite storytellers! Might my grandfather have known I would become a community health nurse, perhaps? Am I reflecting his image making house calls to hear gardeners' stories as part of my professional calling? Maybe even as a seed's coat breaks open and has become transformed, so has my calling begun to reveal itself: I am a nurse who crushes lavender between her fingers and loves learning about and from older people. So my questioning begins to introduce this phenomenon called gardening.

### **Heritage Blessings from Those who Love Plants and Trees: My Questioning Begins**

“The Heart of the Tree”

What does he plant who plants a tree?  
He plants cool shade and tender rain,  
And seed and bud of days to be,  
And years that fade and flush again;  
He plants the glory of the plain;  
He plants the forest's heritage;  
The harvest of a coming age;  
The joy that unborn eyes shall see-

These things he plants who plants a tree.

What does he plant who plants a tree?  
He plants, in sap and leaf and wood,  
In love of home and loyalty  
And far-cast thought of civic good-  
His blessings on the neighborhood  
(Bunner, in Cook, 1981, pp. 141-142)

Are gardeners giving to humankind in their planting of the earth? And what of the blessings from the trees they plant? Is this planting so that others' spirits will be enriched in the places where the trees grow? The intent of this phenomenological study is to explore the lived experience of gardening for community-dwelling older adults. This would be older adults gardening at home and living on their own, in that they are not residents in an assisted living facility or nursing home. What is it about their lived experience of gardening that draws these older adults in and is meaningful to them? Is there an innate need to connect with nearby nature (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989), represented in a garden for its healing qualities? One only has to look in neighborhoods and community gardens to see individuals of all ages fervently working, often in the most adverse weather, or gardening despite physical limitations. Sarton writes from her own experience of being taken in-to gardening:

Making a garden is not a gentle hobby for the elderly, to be picked up and laid down like a game of solitaire. It is a grand passion. It seizes a person whole, and once it has done so he will have to accept that his life is going to be radically changed. (1968, p. 119)

The passion can be a personal journey for these older adults, perhaps a meaning-making within the experience of their gardening. One author aptly describes her mother in this way: "I notice that it is only when my mother is working in her flowers

that she is radiant, almost to the point of being invisible—except as Creator: hand and eye. She is involved in work her soul must have” (Walker, 1983, p. 241).

Gardening seems so familiar, well-worn, like favorite gloves easily forgotten outside, and is a pursuit that has been overlooked because of its everydayness. As a nurse and as part of the larger health community that has studied walking to great lengths, I am called to this inquiry with seniors that explores the meaning of gardening for them in later seasons. Aside from recognizing the benefits of physical exercise, little has been explored about the potentially health-promoting aspects of gardening, particularly for seniors who tend this Earth in their gardens. Conversations with seniors who garden can be the beginning for understanding this phenomenon of gardening within the context of their aging and its significance to their sense of well-being. There are many questions and some assumptions.

From a research perspective, does this seasonal pursuit encourage older adults to be more engaged in life? Does it rejuvenate them and provide hope in their later years? Will the descriptions from older gardeners’ lived experiences suggest they are aging well? How does their gardening bring them back to life? Here, within the descriptions of gardening in its everydayness, may lie valuable life lessons that gardeners have unearthed. Furthermore, as these seniors age, their gardening experience likely will transform and, as such, perhaps, gardening can be meaning-full in new ways for them.

The garden is a concrete connection to life and death. You could even say that there is a religion of garden, for it teaches profound psychological and spiritual lessons. Whatever can happen to a garden can happen to soul and psyche. ...In the garden we practice letting thoughts, ideas, preferences, desires, even loves, both live and die. We plant, we pull, we bury. We dry seed, sow it, moisten it, support it. (Estes, 1992, pp. 100)

In my own garden practices I have found new meaning as well. I have come to understand the energy it can infuse in me each Spring as I start seedlings by stealing time from other things. I, too, have found myself befriended, and moving with instead of against expectations in this work, both as a gardener and then as a nurse and researcher. Finding myself in this way is reflected in one of my writing pieces: “Intuitively knowing that contact with nature (as played out in gardening) enriches the human spirit—such ideas have deepened meaning for why I am pursuing the path I am...It feels like I am finding my place in the soil” (Personal journal reflection, April 28, 1999). Like these other gardeners, I find this passion strengthens my life and teaches me about life and death. I sense the power of the experiences I have had gardening and recognize the potential of the lessons, whether “profound psychological and spiritual lessons” (Estes, 1992, p. 100) or not, that we might learn from these seniors.

### **Starting Over: My Questioning Leads to New Ground**

In the same way a whoosh of air to a dandelion head brings forth a rebirth at the next growth season, so has my life as a nurse undergone a transformation to prepare me to start over. My transformation began with a career change from twenty years of active duty service in the Air Force to working part-time in academia teaching Baccalaureate nursing students in Community Health Nursing. Instead of working in home health, I chose the academic setting for its flexibility to be more available to my active duty husband and family of four children, ages 5 to 18. I was ready for something new and not directly connected with nursing. Friends recommended I take a class at the local botanical garden because I seemed most interested in the native flora of Utah and the Mountain West. This was true, as I had discovered our home would have been the typical desert

landscape without the secondary water system. As a result, gardening in this terrain was quite different from any other place I had lived and tried to garden, particularly the tropics.

With my part-time schedule, I found I finally had the time to stop and smell the roses, so I sought out the local Master Gardener program. I immediately liked that community service at the botanical garden was an integral part of the tuition. And so, the two-years plus adventure began. There were structured classes on growing, plant identification, diagnostics, pest management with and without chemicals, a greenhouse practicum, and, always, planting and tending of the garden with the fruits of our labor. There were many public events as well where tips and ideas were widely shared among enthusiasts of all kinds. Veterans and young gardeners also were major players. My younger children hung around a lot and helped out whenever feasible, particularly in the Children's' Garden where we grew fun things like purple beans, giant sunflowers and things with fun names or crazy properties. My kids knew every arbor and tree canopy with perfect shade. They started up conversations with visitors' kids and soon were showing them the best places to explore in the botanical garden. The whole Master Gardener experience was a little like being back in Girl Scouting where learning was not only fun and educational, but you earned your way to a certain level and then enjoyed being recognized for your service efforts in the community near where you lived.

Then, the inevitable happened to bring me more fully into plant-lands. After I was asked to go with a group of volunteers, I packed up the kids and off we caravanned into the great Northwest by following the Oregon Trail to a regional conference of Master Gardeners. At the atypically formal dinner session, I was present for the most fascinating

lecture I had ever heard. While I knew little about the presenter, the content of the session was mesmerizing. The whole talk was on the limited scientific research in the area of people-plant interaction. In that hour I found a way to bring together my new-found excitement about gardening and plant-persons with my commitment to service in healthcare in the community.

What in my life story has prepared me for this work? How is it that being the youngest daughter in a family of three favored children led me to an appreciation and a respect for the land and for the people I have chosen to study, “oldsters” (Flexner, 1982, p. 479), a term for senior citizens since 1848. Like many gardeners, as a child I had learned a deep respect for everything in nature that surrounded me. My parents modeled this reverence. I became an avid camper and Girl Scout. Still today, Girl Scouting places emphasis on respect for other persons, animals and the planet as a whole. The nursing profession also develops the philosophy of service in its education—which also has contributed to my being in this role. Indeed, there are similar lessons in the beliefs of many other groups I have been studying as well. These readings also have prepared me to do this work.

Native North Americans have much to teach us in their ways of shepherding the Earth. In the words of Chief Dan George, “The earth and everything it contained was a gift from See-see-am [the Great Spirit]...and the way to thank this great spirit was to use his gifts with respect” (George & Hirschall, 1974, p. 37). Like the descriptive writings of the many gardeners I am quoting, the writings by and about Native Americans are rich with such references. In reading these writings, I find myself situating this notion of being keepers of the earth in the larger universe of all humankind. From that vantage

point, well beyond the personal level, I am struck with the importance of exploring gardening and how the lived experience may enrich the human spirit in community rather than single persons. Berman (1991) presents this grander view I espouse by asking, “What does it mean to inhabit the earth so that all might dwell in communities that enrich the human spirit?” (p. 137). Once again, I ask, are older gardeners giving to humankind in their planting of the earth?

So with these considerations in mind, I pose the following as the question that initiates this phenomenological study of older adults: **What is the lived experience of gardening like for older gardeners?** In their gardens they witness the simplest, most elemental lessons of life. They see new life, renewed vigor and hopeful youthfulness along with the wilt, death and decay that creates a richness of its own: compost for new planting, new ground for others who will follow. How the older adults who garden make meaning of these lessons is central to my quest for understanding the phenomenon.

Olwell suggests:

Gardening is, at the deepest levels, a metaphor for life itself. ...To paraphrase Ecclesiastes, to everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heavens. A time to be born, and a time to die; times to sow and times to reap; times to tend carefully and times to painfully lop off. Times of rapid growth and times of imperceptible change. If the season or timing is missed, the consequences are irrevocable. I think that is part of why gardening can be so interesting, comforting, heartening, and heartbreaking, as well. (1990, p. 16)

As the phenomenon of gardening is explored, the seasons of life will continue to serve as a pathway from which to visit with the oldsters who garden.

### **Seeing the Phenomenon through the Seasons of Life**

The wonderment of life itself is played out for all gardeners in all the seasons they experience. Larcom (1826-1893) says it well in “Plant a Tree”:

He who plants a tree  
Plants a hope.

He plants youth;  
Vigor won for centuries in sooth  
Life of time, that hints eternity!

Boughs their strength uprear:  
New shoots every year, on old growths appear;  
Though shalt teach the ages, sturdy tree,  
Youth of soul is immortality.  
(in Cook, 1981, pp. 81-82)

These simplest of things—life, death, immortality, are addressed in the gardens of oldsters. Much of this reality comes to the surface and is unearthed when one is involved in nearby nature, and, as such, in this phenomenon of gardening. Gardeners seem to bring these deeper meanings forward when detailing the bittersweet in gardening.

For the joys a garden brings are already going as they come. They are poignant. When the first apple falls with that tremendous thud, one of the big seasonal changes startles the heart. The swanlike peony suddenly lets all its petals fall in a snowy pile, and it is time to say good-by until another June. But by then the delphinium is on the way and the lilies...the flowers ring their changes through a long cycle, a cycle that will be renewed. That is what the gardener often forgets. To the flowers we never have to say good-by forever. *We* grow older every year, but not the garden; it is reborn every spring. (Sarton, 1968, p. 125)

Gardeners often write and talk with emotion. Sometimes their lived language in describing their own seasons of life does startle one's heart with their poignancy. These stories speak of their movement back and forth in time, both in the past and the present. Sometimes, as they recollect, they realize what may have been hidden in the furrows. Intuitively, gardeners deal with this by digging in their gardens. They seem to know that digging in the earth of their gardens is a way of exploring and is a ritual to find their center, their roots. As they dig deeply, sometimes they speak about their aging in concert with their gardens.



It was five years before the plum trees I had planted flowered, five years before the oriole came back to weave his flame in and out of the clusters of white. I shall soon have been planted here myself for ten years, and I have a sense that the real flowering is still to come, and all I have experienced so far only a beginning. I have touched only the surfaces of the silences of Nelson [author's town]; they will take me deeper and deeper, I hope, to their own source, as I grow older. (Sarton, 1968, p. 179)

How does the experience of “being planted” somewhere affect gardeners? In what manner does learning to measure time in the number years before a tree flowers allow this gardener to be comfortable speaking about her own aging? Is it in an understanding of the seasons—through the planting—that gardeners learn to accept their own aging? What does the earth bring forward to change their perspective on life? Does their view of aging affect the way they see the details of life that others so often miss in the busyness of their present lives? Sarton speaks to this upon entering middle age. She is 50 when she writes this:

Life in and for itself becomes more precious than it could ever have been earlier...it is imperative to taste it, to savor it, every day and every hour, and that means to cut out waste, to be acutely aware of the relevant and the irrelevant. There are late joys just as there are early joys. Young, who has time to look at the light shine through a Shirley poppy? The outer world is only an immense resonance for one's own feelings. But in middle age, afternoon light marbling a white wall may take on the quality of revelation. (Sarton, 1968, p. 180)

The outer world of a garden seems to allow this resonance for the author's inner world. Younger gardeners also have described this sorting out of the relevant versus irrelevant in the detail of their lives after working in the garden. They learn to savor the sense experience that is brought out in gardening. This gardener purposefully stops to capture the scene in her mind for later.

(The next day when I am) working in the garden, I look up at the aspen tree growing above the spring. The breeze shimmies through the branches, twirling the shiny leaves that glint in the sun. ...I put down the weed bucket and open the shutter of my mind to absorb this tree. The details include the sweet smell of the

warm earth beneath my feet, the honey fragrance of wildflowers blooming in the spring, the touch of breeze playing on my cheek, and the sound of wind whispering among the leaves. The picture fixes in my mind, much richer than the Kodachrome, a treasure available for enjoyment at any time within the vault of my mind. (Boice, 1989, p. 22)

This meditative aspect described above is a valued end to the continuing labor associated with garden work, and is often spoken about by gardeners. It also is said that being with nature often is associated with healing, but more of that will be uncovered later. First, it is important to hear from some of the keepers of the Earth who tend the garden.

### **The Gardens Tended by Keepers of the Earth**

The space these keepers tend can be the same space that inspired the remembered treasure inside the vault of Boice's mind as revealed in the previous quote. Strategies such as these often are prompted by an outdoor space such as a garden. Young and old, gardeners seem to identify with these places and make them their own. They connect with their land and with each other in creating histories through their gardens. Perhaps this is why it is fitting that dictionaries define garden as both a place and a verb.

What is the root of the word, garden? It stems from "horticulture" which is defined as "the science and art of growing fruits, vegetables, flowers, or ornamental plants [and is derived from the Latin word] *hortus* garden and culture" (*Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*, "Horticulture," 2003). Yet while horticulture has evolved into a science, for those who garden, gardening appears to have evolved into a culture of its own. What is the culture of gardeners? What draws them in-to nature? Is it the healing quality of gardens? How is it different as one gets older? Is there a wish to have some

dimension of control when life is changing because of aging? Again, the dictionary provides some compass points.

The *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* defines horticulture as “the cultivating or managing of gardens, including the giving of flowers, fruits and vegetables” (1933/1961, p. 404). Managing gardens indicates control. Some say gardeners seek to control their land with their landscaping efforts; others see it as beautifying the land through the addition of gardens. It seems to depend upon whom you ask and on the times in which you live.

In fact, the idea of fields and meadows instead of manicured lawns, a trend seen somewhat today, is actually a return to the gardens of old. In medieval times, the lawn areas were meadows. And it remained this way until the English Tudor garden when separate garden plots became more common. By the 1600s, orderly, carefully planned gardens were typical and the land was understood as territory, one’s realm and domain to control. Historically, in early America, gardens were the responsibility of a caretaker on an estate. On the other hand, in England, the individual with these same responsibilities would be called a gardener. Some would consider these responsibilities interchangeable: “We gardeners are caretakers of a little piece of the Earth, nurturing growth and life” (Halpin, 1992, p. 6).

Are the gardeners in this century seeking care-taking responsibilities as land-lords of their own lifeworlds? Or are they searching for control of some sort while learning to accept their aging bodies? As a way of illustrating one story, let me introduce one of my preliminary conversants. Jessie is a proper English gardener in her late sixties. When we spoke, she joked about entering her “rusty years” because she not only moved more

slowly in the garden, she found she got stiff and sore more often. What is it like to get rusty as a gardener? Why do they continue their labors for so many years more if they are stiff and sore more often? Are these gardeners taking care to give to others who might benefit from the fruits of their labor, while they still can garden? Is it meaningful still to be able to give their fruit to others as this passage by Austen in 1653 indicates?

Oh how sweet and pleasant is the fruit of those trees which a man hath planted and ordered with his owne hand, to gather it, and freely to bestow it among kindred and friends. (as cited in Midda, 1981, not paginated)

Jessie chooses not to leave town during the summer growing season because her flowers, fruit trees and hanging baskets need her to care for them. So, despite the fact that aging gardeners begin to have rusty years, they still persist in caring for the Earth. What will happen to them as they get too rusty? Jessie speaks at length about being fearful when imagining a time when she cannot be outside in her garden.

### **Finding Yourself Outside the Garden**

Is the responsibility of taking care of the Earth a fundamental one? Is this a universal, human task that has its roots in Eden? Some would say humankind has forgotten its beginnings.

The earth is indeed a ‘Garden of Eden’ in the vast expanse of space. It is the ground, quite literally, from which we draw our being. From it we receive everything—every breath we take, every morsel of food we eat, every thing we touch. (Olwell, 1990, p. 17)

We are dependent upon Earth’s gifts, and some believe that gardening honors the Earth. If the Earth is not respected, we will, indeed, find ourselves outside the Garden. Ehrlich writes, “So much in American life has had a corrupting influence on our requirements for social order. We live in a culture that has lost its memory” (1985, p. 103). Where is the social order in what is being done to the land? Are gardeners the

cultured ones who can bring us back to the Garden? How are these stewards of the Earth going to be heard if the older gardeners who remember are left without soil?

Much symbolism persists from within descriptions of humankind's first Garden. First, in the language itself, from Genesis "A river went out of Eden, to water the garden, and from thence it was parted, and became into 4 heads" (Midda, 1981, not paginated). These four elements of the first Garden carefully were depicted in the Tudor gardens as four-fold plots. The number four continues to have a symbolic influence as it is the number of creation, the symbol of nature: "4 winds of heaven, 4 seasons and 4 corners of the earth" (Midda, 1981, not paginated). Are there four corners of the soul? How do older gardeners renew their spirits and complete their soul work if they are left alone and without gardens? How might their stories of the Edens in their lives refresh our spirits and heal wounded souls? At the very least, these older gardeners remember what has been lost—personally, locally, and globally. Surely they find both pain and joy within these memories.

### **Gardening from Memory into the Rusty Years**

Remembering can be healing, and sharing another's experiences with gardening overflows with memories. I am reminded of my conversation with Jessie. While she described her ways to protect the Earth, I found myself invited into Jessie's memories of her mother, who had passed on into Paradise. Jessie shared the words her mother wrote on her last day on this Earth, words that reflect the beauty and contentment of looking out at the spring garden so full of life. Was Jessie returning to her-story with her mother as she reminisced? She reflected upon her mother's joy gazing out the window at the created energy in the flowerbeds. All that was before was recreated in the telling, and the in-sight

had brought joy to both. First, joy to Jessie's mother who wrote of how she cherished her garden view despite being weakened by chronic illness, and, to Jessie, the young-old daughter through her mother's last words. Was this a chance for resonance of Jessie's innermost being? Levin writes:

Thus, when our hearing lets soundful beings return to the resonance of their ownmost being: when it lets them be and lets them go and lets them sound forth with a dimensionality they themselves open up. (Levin, 1989, p. 233)

Jessie opened her self as she told of her experiences with gardening. Gardeners do sometimes open themselves up in digging through the earth in their gardens. They uncover and rediscover parts of their lives. Often gardeners uncover their history when they tell a story about their gardening. So it was for Jessie, who had tears in her eyes as she retold the story of her mother's descent into chronic illness and the life in the garden outside the window—a view that sustained her mother for a while. Is this feeling of peace from being near nature more universal? Does nature, represented in a garden space, have a role in healing the body? What about healing the spirit?

What appears quite certain, is that gardeners have an understanding of both soul and spirit, and it often is realized through their memories. Do gardeners have more direct access to examining their spiritual self, their spirituality, through the enlivening of their five senses when being wakeful in a garden encounter? Levin writes, "The beauty of our spiritual life depends upon an incarnation which can bring it to fulfillment; it needs and uses our senses to complete its realization. This is the gift of the senses" (1985, p. 182). Does the peace that gardeners articulate actually describe some fulfillment? Their everyday language suggests this is so.

These same gardeners speak in terms of their gardens as growing and healing themselves. Handelsman (1996) even wrote a book titled *Growing Myself: A Spiritual Journey through Gardening* where she uses lived language to convince the reader about her transformation. In a different description, Maharam (2001) explains she was fertile and growing with her garden: “When I was six months pregnant, I laid the foundation for my first garden. As I planted the first seeds on our property it dawned on me that I was a seedpod myself” (p. 124). Maharam planted a Japanese Snowbell tree in honor of her infant daughter and carries the tradition forward.

Flowers have special meaning to many cultures. For the Japanese, the transient beauty of their national flower, the cherry blossom, mirrors life. Both are “to be celebrated without attempts to grasp their fleeting splendor. Emphasis is on the moment, a time of renewal, happiness and beauty” (Brawarsky, 2003, ¶ 3). Aware that the blossoms will disappear and the *hanami* (flower viewing) ends, like the Japanese, we know we will remember their bloom, and, as such, we find hope in the symbolism of flowers.

One of my other preliminary conversants, Gerry, a gardener in her seventies who was struggling with her health, talked at length about her earlier gardening years. She reminisced about the years she was “growing children” all the while tending a Victory garden as a patriotic contribution during World War II. Perhaps, for her and others, she was describing her garden in terms of a rite of passage. Paz (1999) writes that a garden is “not a place: it is a passage, a passion. We don’t know where we’re going, to pass through is enough, to pass through is to remain” (p. 139). Like others who speak about their lives in garden terms, Gerry revisited the passage of time through her garden stories

and related it to her own growth within her family unit. One wonders if one of the universal qualities in these experiences is the uncertainty of the path. How does one protect oneself if the path is unknown? Or is this a way of letting go to a larger, more powerful One? Is this letting go a way of healing?

Gardeners offer examples of healing through their gardens. Many who speak or have written about gardens introduce them as a place for nourishing soul and spirit. However, as these gardeners age they inevitably may reconnect these spiritual images with their physical bodies. Once again their human bodies necessarily become a part of the equation for understanding their lives. Allen (2001) chooses to use the mortal body as a tree metaphorically and offers this insight:

Healing the self means honoring and recognizing the body, accepting rather than denying all turmoil its existence brings, welcoming the woes and anguish flesh is subject to, cherishing its multitudinous forms and seasons, its unfailing ability to know and be, to grow and wither, to live and die, to mutate, to change. (p. 84)

Are gardeners learning to honor their whole selves—body, soul and spirit, so as to manage the seasons of their lives better? How do they cope? What surrounds them that supports them in their letting go? Some would insist it is the living green material, the life that is in the plants and the trees.

### **The Gardener's Soul Work**

The expression, “It does my soul good” is one I frequently hear associated with the gardening life. Such thinking, that a garden nourishes both body and soul, is often echoed in less likely sources, as in a *Parabola* journal cover where the entire issue was dedicated to the myths, traditions, and search for meaning about gardens (Applebaum, 2001). In written work like this, I find evidence that authors connect spirit, or soul, with the planet. “Spirit becomes a fleshly phenomenon of the entire Earth, communicated



among its members in rhythm and song” (Mazis, 2001, p. 132). Do gardeners speak this soul language? Clearly, gardeners employ a type of body language when they are out in their gardens, but might they also be communicating with Earth through another language, too? Arendt explains how soul and body feelings cross over each other:

Every emotion is a somatic experience; my heart aches when I am grieved, gets warm with sympathy, opens itself up in rare moments when love or joy overwhelms me, and similar physical sensations take possession of me... (1978, pp. 32-33)

I concur. Bodily sensations overflow when human emotions are involved. Furthermore, it does seem like the life of a gardener shows itself regularly as a somatic experience, particularly as we age. Is all emotion noticed by the body? Is our soul not speaking out as well? Does this kind of communicating transform through thought? Arendt continues, “The language of the soul in its mere expressive stage, prior to its transformation and transfiguration through thought, is not metaphorical; it does not depart from the senses...” (p. 33). How do gardeners’ thoughts/spirits/souls transform in their gardens? What happens if these thoughts are poured into the soil? Is this a form of healing, or is it perhaps a holding back? Some believe the earth itself is the spirit that infuses our souls with life. One believer, a monk from 1500 AD named Basilus Valentinus says:

The earth is not a dead body, but is inhabited by a spirit that is its life and soul. All created things, minerals included, draw their strength from the earth spirit. This spirit is life, it is nourished by the stars, and it gives nourishment to all the living things it shelters in its womb. (as cited in McLuhan, 1994, p. 21)

Does the being of a gardener transform when in the presence of living things it will shelter? Is this how they become keepers of the earth? From whom do they learn of this task—from the spirit of the earth itself? Casey (1991) might suggest the learning is innate and occurs because the soul delivers tasks to our physical body in the back and

forth movement that is remembering. “We re-flect ourselves through the remembering soul....Memory brings spirit down to feeling as to its own body...For soul seeks its own substance, its own bodily basis” (p. xvii). To recap, a spirit that inhabits the earth also nourishes the living things on it, including mortals. A number of these mortals, gardeners, in particular, draw strength from this life. Might this life force actually be what is healing to the soul? Maybe this is what happens with gardeners who are taken over in their relationship with the earth?

Casey offers another view of what happens to the soul as it becomes connected to a place (such as a garden). Casey describes soul as being taken over, or intimately connected with “the ‘in’ of the between” (1991, p. 301), a place where it cannot be contained. Is there such a place? Can it be found? Locating this in-between place where soul is found, may be more than a task of older gardeners; instead it may be one of the universal tasks of each human being. In truth, Casey relates this in-between inhabited place as Aristotle’s middle ground of the cosmos, earth, and the very place where humans exist. As I collect compelling ideas about finding one’s soul and relating it to how we inhabit our “place” on earth, I suggest there is much to learn from being-with and accompanying these keepers of the earth in their journey through the later seasons.

### **Being-With these Keepers of the Earth: A Pathway through Phenomenology**

What is meant by “being-with?” Heidegger (1953/1996) uses *Mitda-sein* or the translation “*being-with*,” to refer to the encountering of things and beings at hand (e.g., objectively present) and emphasizes it differs from the existential sense of being-there but is equally as vital to make visible. Also in our world are the “others” we come across, those things and beings who are there, too, in our everyday world, like other gardeners

“from whom one mostly does *not* distinguish oneself, those among whom one is, too. This being-there-too with them does not have the ontological character of being objectively present ‘with’ them within a world” (Heidegger, p. 111). Our surroundings are the world of human existence, or what Heidegger calls a “*with-world*,” but the “being-in [world] is *being-with* others... The innerworldly being-in-itself of others is [what is called] *Mitda-sein*” (p. 112). It remains my task, then, to learn about dwelling and “being-in” with the older gardeners rather than solely being in their presence.

What would it be like to dwell with keepers of the earth? How do they inhabit the earth? If the keepers are guards and protectors in that a keeper is “charged with responsibility for the preservation and conservation of something valuable” (Stein et al., 1969, p. 781), will the earth be the treasure? If so, then their gardens will be the setting for the guardianship. The gardeners belong in their gardens; they create and dwell in that space. It is a place for shepherding, caring and building life.

As I consider how I am to dwell with these keepers, Heidegger’s understanding of “dwelling” comes to mind; whereas, “Building is really dwelling; Dwelling is the manner in which mortals are on the earth. Building as dwelling unfolds into the building that cultivates growing things and the building that erects buildings” (1954/1993a, p. 350). In helping gardeners, who are the real cultivators, I encounter them as they dwell in their gardening lives and search for meaning. I safeguard their return to their being in their gardens. Heidegger explains, “To dwell, to be set at peace, means to remain at peace within the free, their preserve, their free sphere that safeguards each thing in its essence” (p. 351). Are these older caretakers of the land not also saving it in that “to spare and preserve means to take under our care, to look after...?” (p. 353). And so it seems these

keepers who nurture the things that grow are also building, in the Heideggerian sense, by staying with the natural world that surrounds them.

In and out of their gardens, the gardeners and I are in the world, encountering aspects of it together. The gardeners are plant people who are actively growing live plants that are in pots or outside in garden beds (raised beds or not). Whether they have a greenhouse or start seeds is not a condition nor is being drawn to one particular type of plant, like orchids or basil. They might have other interests, too, such as flower arranging or perhaps they admit to being in love with trees or birds. Yet, the critical element I am considering is that they have their hands in the soil regularly for leisure. To support their garden work, I am with them as a reciprocal presence and participating in an ethical relationship between us because of our mutual stewardship of the earth. The ultimate goal is balance. “All things of earth, and the earth itself as a whole, flow together into a reciprocal accord” (Heidegger, 1971/2001, p. 46). The harmony experienced in reciprocal accord would be welcomed by many of earth’s creatures besides mortals. Page believes “We will resonate at the deepest level with all beings of consciousness, whatever their status, who vibrate at the same frequency” (1998, p. 40). These are special connections that often are described by those who interact with nature—like gardeners do. They foster the connections between the natural world and humans. Perhaps this is their overarching purpose as keepers of the earth.

### **The Gardening Culture**

Pollan (2002) explains, “Gardening, like angling, engages us with the natural world, as actors rather than passive spectators, ... [It] put[s] us smack on the frontier between nature and culture” (p. ix). An interest in gardening has brought gardeners into a

culture of sorts. They seem to be thriving in this active role of being engaged with the natural world through their gardening lives. They have remained outside of the long-term care environments where many naively assume most elders will end up. The gardening culture seemingly has helped them avoid needing extended medical care such that institutionalization becomes necessary. At its worst, institutionalization is a passive setting, a spectator life. When they visit friends who have been hospitalized or institutionalized, do they see this as being “homeless?”

It is a major life change to enter into a living arrangement at a nursing home or assisted living facility. Friends of my parents who have undertaken this step have resisted it for “as long as possible,” they say. Yet this is a future many older adults envision. And the older gardeners I have spoken with echo this sentiment. What might be the potential contributions of studying these individuals in the gardening culture? It is a culture well worth exploring because of their love of life. In what manner can their stories illuminate the healing powers of their gardening in terms of how they are caring for themselves and others? And, most particularly for the helping professions, being-with these keepers offers an opportunity to understand the gardening culture as a prelude to healthy aging in its broadest sense.

I seek to explore the lived experience of gardening for older adults living independently in their communities, their neighborhoods. Somehow, these gardeners have managed to stay outside of long-term care, keeping their gardens. When they visit friends in nursing homes and return home, what do they think about? Are gardens a way of being “at home” with their aging? These keepers of the earth have special ways about them I wish to understand, and some of their ways embody healthy aging. How might I,

as a nurse, foster this transformation by being-with older gardeners? What might their lessons offer for others as they age?

The number of gardeners in the United States has increased. National studies document gardening is second only to walking as the favorite leisure-time physical activity of all adults in this country (Crespo, Keteyian, Heath & Sempos, 1996). From the perspective of a health professional, I know we have learned a considerable amount about the adults in this country who walk. We have measured their caloric energy expenditure, their blood pressure, their blood chemistries and self-rated health. Researching these parameters has been important because it validated the inherent value of physical activity to improved health outcomes. Such studies report the therapeutic effect of the activity in terms of blood pressure, pulse rate, and cholesterol level changes. In fact, some of these same studies also have gathered categorical information about gardeners. But what, really, is not yet known? What have these numbers covered over about the gardening experience? Pollan suggests there are many aspects we have yet to understand:

I am thinking of the power of plants to change us in mind and body, the gratuitous beauty of a flower, the moral lessons of the pest, the ancient language of landscape design, and the endlessly engrossing ways that cultivating a garden attaches a body to the earth. (2002, p. x)

A powerful way to be-with these older adults who choose gardening as their leisure experience is through a phenomenological study of their lived experience. “The phenomenological interest is not just methodological but existential as we come to the question of how a life ought to be lived with others” (Smith, as cited in Hultgren, 1999, p. 1). As a community health nurse, I am one who wishes to understand and support their choice to garden and hear their stories. What might we hear from the voices of the gardeners, themselves, about their transformation as they have aged?

How is being-with these keepers a way of opening us to new understandings? It is the way of phenomenology. Hultgren reminds us again, it is not a method but a pathway in phenomenology: “[We] describe, interpret, and begin to understand the lived experience of a phenomenon that is of interest to us through our writing and discourse about it” (1999, p. 2). So it is. Van Manen (2003) refers to this non-method as “a tradition, a body of knowledge and insights, a history of lives of thinkers and authors which, taken as an example, constitutes both a source and a methodological ground for present human science research practices” (p. 30). And, thus, in the tradition of human science research, this is the way I proceeded to map out the study.

### **The Landscape and Plot Map of the Study of Oldsters who Garden**

The gardener is only nature’s meddling assistant, at best a caretaker of the earth’s resources, connection to the process and part of the plan. (Van Hazinga, *The Old Farmer’s Almanac Book of Garden Wisdom*, 2000, p. xi)

As the researcher, I am connected—and I wish to be part of the plan from the beginning. It is about letting our *selves* learn. A phenomenological study requires this. “In the human sciences...one does not pursue research for the sake of research” (van Manen, 2003, p. 1), because both researcher and participants are engaged in reflecting about how they are in-the-gardening world as humans. To do this, we are encouraged to return to the beginning in some sense; to return to a “place of not knowing.” This might seem contrary to what one would expect in a research endeavor. Hultgren reassures my earlier work with these words: “Why might the resolve to always be a beginner be good advice? How is it that the beginner sees that which is a ripe place for phenomenology?” (personal communication, April 28, 1999). A beginner looks with fresh eyes and fresh ideas and finds the world all over again. It allows us to explore the gardening life in terms of its

meaning, in particular, as we age. It is a return to “not knowing.” The perspective is a means to let ourselves not only find the questions but to find ourselves while in the process of raising questions.

Van Manen (2003) offers the following guidance as a way to proceed in human science research activities:

- (1) turning to a phenomenon which seriously interests us and commits us to the world;
  - (2) investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it;
  - (3) reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon;
  - (4) describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting;
  - (5) maintaining a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon;
  - (6) balancing the research context by considering parts and whole.
- (van Manen, 2003, pp. 30-31)

Following the tenets of a hermeneutic phenomenological human science study as articulated by van Manen (2003), this first chapter has revealed my turning to the phenomenon. While describing some key aspects of the phenomenon and the potential contributions of such a study, I have introduced my self, my intentions, and the phenomenological question. Van Manen aptly describes doing this kind of research, human science research, in a phenomenological way. “The act of researching—questioning—theorizing is the intentional act of attaching ourselves to the world, to become more fully part of it, or better, to become the world” (2003, p. 5).

The researcher becomes the receiver, and as such, has to be a truth-teller of the discourse and conversations in which she becomes engaged. Our tensions, from being timid and at the same time, forthright in our honesty, are echoed in this timely quote: “Everything in nature invites us to be what we are. We are often like rivers: careless and forceful, timid and dangerous, lucid and muddied, eddying, gleaming, still” (Ehrlich,



1985, p. 84). We are called to find the balance by opening up the possibilities by asking questions and, then, writing in a way that helps us move beyond that very tension.

The second chapter, exploring the phenomenon, is intended to open up the phenomenon in as many ways as possible. How is this “opening up” accomplished? Specifically, van Manen explains this as a call for the researcher to search for the “data” in the lived language of a myriad of places. Some of these sources are

personal experiences, tracing etymological sources, idiomatic phrases, ...  
experiential descriptions from Others, interviewing ..., observing..., diaries,  
journals, and logs, art..., phenomenological literature. (van Manen, 2003, p. vii)

Throughout the chapter I cull the fruit from these sources and reflect on the words and lessons to raise additional questions and to challenge everyday givens within the words and phrases themselves.

In the second chapter it seems the voices of the gardeners sing. Just as there is no halfway place for gardeners’ love of plants, I am discovering their candor in both spoken and written language. Whether young or old, they have definitive opinions and often feel very strongly about many things, particularly their love of the plants in their gardens.

Kincaid describes this plant person characteristic quite completely:

Gardeners always have something they like intensely and in particular, right at the moment you engage them in the reality of the borders they cultivate, the space in the garden they occupy; at any moment, they like in particular this, or they like in particular that. Nothing in front of them (that is, in the borders they cultivate, the space in the garden they occupy) is repulsive and fills them with hatred, or this thing would not be in front of them. They only love, and they only love in the moment; when the moment is passed, they love the memory of the moment, they love the memory of that particular plant or that particular bloom, but the plant of the bloom itself they have moved on from, they have left it behind for something else, something new, especially something from far away, and from so far away, a place they will never live (occupy, cultivate...). (1999, pp. 216-218)

The third chapter is all about the process of writing and interpreting—and the doing of phenomenology. The philosophical underpinnings to my particular study are brought to light. Van Manen (2003) offers four existentials: Lived Body, Lived Time, Lived Space and Lived Relation that are introduced as a way of framing the discussion and interpretation. And, as always, the hermeneutic circle is present and, thus, is explained: “There is a manifest circle: the adequacy of our understanding depending on the adequacy of our questions, and the adequacy of our questions depending on the adequacy of our understanding” as Burch (1989, p. 212) puts it in his description of the practice of phenomenology. The intention and way of carrying out the study is explained in further detail; the reader will be brought into the unfolding of the study.

The fourth chapter is dedicated to the thematic interpretation of the conversations. One becomes engaged in the text, the conversations and the reflections of previously understood, and certainly, new sources, to try to capture the essence of the experience that is the center of the study. Allen and Jensen explain one aspect of this process: “The unique characteristic of this approach is its dialogical nature: the returning to the object of inquiry again and again, each time with an increased understanding and a more complete interpretive account” (1990, p. 251). Understanding the meanings conversants attach to their lived experience is the evolving goal of this section. New meaning about the phenomenon can alter perceptions—particularly those perceptions within the helping professions of which I am an integral part. It is my sincere desire that newfound meanings bring new understandings for being-with older gardeners, a focus of the final chapter. The voices of these keepers of the earth have much to tell us all about how to be

more in-the-world with those we serve. The honesty of their gardening experiences can inform us all.

Gardens are great teachers, not in words but in gentle or stunning life lessons. They teach faith and miracles, knowledge and wisdom, hope, and sweat. ... When our psyches reel from the rat race, when traffic is bumper-to-bumper and the clocks tick like whip-strokes inside our souls, we can take all the ... manure to our garden and leave it there. We reap perfect serenity of spirit, standing in a green island of peace in ... this crowded, speeding, wasteful, motorized civilization. (Taylor, 1998, pp. 3-4)

Perhaps these oldsters who garden have a universal humanity to teach us: how to live with each other. I close this first chapter with a landscape view of what is ahead. It is a summarizing quote that I feel captures the definition of gardening and hints at the potential of this search for the essence of the lived experience of gardeners in their later seasons.

Gardening, or the cultivation of fruits and flowers, may, in some sort, be regarded as the test of civilization. It diffuses peace, contentment, and happiness, stimulates and invigorates the mental and physical powers, promotes habits of industry and domestic frugality among the humbler classes, and places within their reach a large amount of luxury in the shape of delicious fruits and magnificent flowers. (in Van Hazinga, *The Old Farmer's Almanac Book of Garden Wisdom*, 2000, p. 5)

In the next chapter I go on an expedition into the phenomenon. I begin to explore the boundaries between and within ourselves as we age in our gardening lives. Within the richness of fables, myths and stories that surround the gardening experience I re-view cultural and linguistic interpretations to help me in my search to understand the lived experience of older gardeners in the winters of their lives.

## **CHAPTER TWO:**

### **AN EXPEDITION INTO THE PHENOMENON: CROSSING BOUNDARIES BETWEEN AND WITHIN OURSELVES, EARTH, AND SKY**

When I stand in a garden, I find myself in a scene intermediate between the completely constructed and the frankly wild...In getting myself into this cultivated land but not fully constructed scene, I have decommissioned myself with respect to familial and professional duties. I have become marginal, halfway between the sacred and the profane, yet have somehow gained a very special place to be. (Casey, 1993, p. 154)

#### **Exploring the Garden for its Wonders**

Having been called to the lived experience of older gardeners, I find myself on an expedition of sorts. A beginning search for understanding is the part of my expedition that is detailed in this chapter. The search takes me into the gardening experience, “a very special place to be,” as Casey says. It involves being in touch with the surface of the earth and its keepers, the gardeners, who live between the earth and sky, as well as being able to go under ground. For it seems the essence of the experience may be covered over by its everydayness, overlooked because it is seen as ordinary and predictable in the same way the fall foliage is expected to change color. This chapter is about digging deeper into the phenomenon and the epicenter of the gardening experience for these caretakers of the earth by re-viewing cultural and linguistic interpretations of the phenomenon.

#### **A Beginning Search for the Seeds that are the Elements of Wonder**

The seed of the garden is the heart of the gardener, stirred into conscious connection with the land. As such, the goal of a garden becomes not an end product but an ongoing relationship, not a testament to one’s control, status, or expertise but a place of constant wonder. (McGreevy, 2000, p. 30)

The search begins with questions that develop into musings about the interpretations and perspectives I have gathered from diverse sources thus far about

gardeners' connections. They encompass everything from the scriptures in the Bible, 17th century authors, World War II magazines on American gardening culture to books on garden lore, poetry and descriptions of the gardening life from yesteryear to the present. All this and still, what is known about the gardening experience? It is, surely, about more than the place and the person! Absolutely. Roach (1998) connects gardening and life in the chapter "Conception" as she writes: "There is more to this gardening stuff than planting, I guess, more than step-by-step detail. No wonder, then, that the language of gardening and the language of life have so many words in common: words like *tend* and *cultivate*, words like *grow*" (p. 24). This is so true, that many words for gardening and life are rich with double meanings. The derivation of the word *cultivate*, as in *cultivation* means: an "act of preparing land and growing crops by plowing, planting, and necessary care" (*Thorndike Century Senior Dictionary*, 1941, p. 226). This is familiar ground; however, note that *cultivation* also means an "act of giving time and thought to improving and developing (the body, mind, or manners)" (p. 226). This other interpretation (of cultivation) seems perfect to one searching out the conditions of the experience in which gardeners thrive and find wonder.

Where are the borders, the edges of these places, and what constitutes the boundaries of the experience? How might the essential elements of the gardening experience transform these older gardeners in their later seasons? When persons grow older are there "fences" that appear because of disability, infirmity, or fear? Why would these elements be important for me, a health professional, to understand? And, how will I enter these spaces? Aside from asking the plant persons, themselves, where might one find the lived language of stories that open us to the gardening experience? A beginning

for entering this space comes through an exploration of poetry, verse, and myths surrounding gardens.

One might begin at the early beginnings by remembering the Garden of Eden and how the Bible offers an introduction to how some have come to relate to gardens. From the earliest days of creation we were connected intimately to the same earth we till and from which we grow fruit. The following verse, taken from the King James Version of the Holy Bible (1979), references that first garden, the Garden of Eden that set the seed for many of our understandings.

These *are* the generations of the heavens and of the earth when they were created, in the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens.  
And every plant of the field before it was in the earth, and every herb of the field before it grew: for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and *there was* not a man to till the ground.  
But there went up a mist from the earth, and watered the whole face of the ground.  
And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.  
And the Lord God planted a garden eastward in Eden; and there he put the man whom he had formed.  
And out of the ground make the Lord God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil. (Genesis 2:4-17)

It does bring a sense of humility to read about being created from “the dust of the ground,” encountering the “breath of life” and becoming “a living soul.” We became a living soul by being brought in touch with the earth, so are we humans returning to our beginnings when we till the soil and dig in the dirt? The Genesis reading about the Garden is how we are told that we are one of the first elements of the creation story. Other cultures have similar connections with religious meaning. Perhaps this is another reason why we recognize the Garden’s continued influence on human history. Midda (1981) assigns considerable weight to the importance of the biblical Garden of Eden in

the gardening experience. He asserts that since it was traversed by four rivers, later documents reinforce the symbolic number four many times over — in Tudor garden plots, the winds of heaven, the compass points and the seasons themselves. What helps these gardeners not lose their way in the world as they age and find themselves far away from their earliest beginnings, their own representation of Eden?

Is it the imagination of returning to another time that carries us into the wonder of the garden? Do we re-enter our beginnings when we are in that space? In a literary anthology of gardens of the imagination, Biriotti (1999) introduces a passage from the Song of Solomon that offers one more view into a biblical description. Biriotti painstakingly and delightfully captures some of the feelings in the following written verse from the Song of Solomon 4:12-16, 5:1:

A garden enclosed is my sister, my spouse; a spring shut up, a fountain sealed. Thy plants are an orchard of pomegranates, with pleasant fruits; camphire, with spikenard, spikenard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon, with all trees of frankincense; myrrh and aloes, with all the chief spices: A fountain of gardens, a well of living waters, and streams from Lebanon. Awake, O north wind; and come, thou south; blow upon my garden, that the spices thereof may flow out. Let my beloved come into his garden, and eat his pleasant fruits. (1999, p. 13)

The succulent aloe is a plant long known for its healing properties for open cuts and sores. What serves as the aloe plant for the cuts and bruises encountered in the sixth decade of life when the living spring begins to be shut down or sealed by circumstances beyond one's control? In the passage above it does seem that the living waters and the winds bring relief and respite. And this garden is presented as a place where the heady spices and fruits may be enjoyed, invoking a sense of well-being. The nurse in me also notices the passage suggests well-being may follow the eating of the pleasant fruits, and, if the winds blow the right way, the spices will flow. For adults who are aging, however,

life can go either way, can it not? Some may find their lives are filled with contradictions, just as in the Garden of Eden, “the setting for the very first human drama... [It was the lost paradise that] was simultaneously a place of safety and danger, innocence and temptation” (Biriotti, 1999, p. 8). As I gather stories, perhaps I will hear about these contradictions in the challenges and circumstances gardeners face in finding their own Eden in their day-to-day lived experiences.

Stories about gardens and gardening have been accumulating for hundreds of years, dating back to biblical times. Have these stories become covered over by the sands of time? If, indeed, the stories have been covered over, the passion for gardening has not been left untouched nor left under-ground (Relf, 1992; Williams, 1998). In the era of this new millennium, are gardeners—the plant persons of this century, unearthing these wonders through their experiences in gardening? How does this happen in a garden space? Or is it the space itself that is the wonder? “Space has a spiritual equivalent and can heal what is divided and burdensome in us” (Ehrlich, 1985, p. 14). Are the older adults who garden drawn to use their garden space to heal the burden of aging, or because they feel divided by what is happening to them in their later seasons of life?

Using a garden or gardening as a healing art is not new. This awareness of the value of garden spaces is documented in the healing gardens first associated with the monasteries of the eighteenth century (Hoyles, 1994; Taxel, 1995). These places are experienced with emotion, feeling and the physical senses. And, like the garden in the Song of Solomon, Biriotti (1999) believes gardens are places of human interaction with one’s full self and all lived senses. Often these senses are awakened definitively, as in the example of the winds carrying spices or, perhaps, by the emotional healing of being



associated with or held within these special places called gardens. Biriotti explains it this way: “The wonder of the garden is its ability to restore. Nature renews itself as if by magic, and gardens can heal and transform with miraculous effect” (1999, p. 9). Might there be healing qualities in the gardening experience itself that draw gardeners to this place of wonder? Some of these qualities are articulated in the many narratives of garden writings; however, often they are buried under the step-by-step details of “how-to” garden. In fact, one gardener admits to chanting out loud: “Gardening is a process” when feeling impatient (Roach, 1998, p. 108). But if the truth were told, some might say gardening is all about the process.

When one looks at gardening in terms of health, Williams (1998) is one who believes it is the process itself that brings the healing: “It is known that people who are ill have regained health in the garden; broken hearts have been made whole. But I think it is not the garden so much as the gardening that performs these miracles” (p. 6). If gardening is the stuff miracles are made of, does gardening unite parts of the self to be whole, or does this lived experience heal the parts that are broken? Are we looking at the self as being a physical, emotional, spiritual being desiring the “miracle” of wholeness? Ultimately, whatever elements of the experience are essential to the miracle of being made whole, gardeners and those within the borders of the places they inhabit seem to know this and seek out the experience.

People are turning to their gardens not to consume but to actively create, not to escape from reality but to observe it closely. In doing this they experience the connectedness of creation and the profoundest sources of being. That the world we live in and the activity of making it are one seamless whole is something that we may occasionally glimpse. In the garden, we know. (Williams, 1998, p. 7)

I suggest the essential parts of the healing experience of gardening have yet to be explored. Is the garden a profound source of being? Are gardeners thrust into this kind of being because they are in nature? Heidegger writes about encountering nature, but not nature, as it is usually understood—as objects like forests and rocks:

As the “surrounding world” is discovered, “nature” thus discovered is encountered along with it. ...But in this kind of discovery of nature, nature as what “stirs and strives,” what overcomes us, entrances us as landscape remains hidden. (1953/1996, p. 66)

The way humans would discover nature is by encountering it, confronting it as in experiencing it ourselves. Do gardeners confront themselves in their garden work? How might their gardening promote “wholeness?” And, from a macro perspective, or the gestalt of the lived experience, in what way are our gardens an expression of ourselves (Bennett, 1994)? In what manner does this experience touch the health and well-being of the gardeners themselves?

### **The Wonder of the Garden to Heal and Make Well**

Is gardening a way of making persons whole again? Perhaps so. The word heal originates from “*heilen*, to make sound or whole...to restore to health” (Mish et al., 1994, p. 535). Or is gardening more like experiencing *healing* (in gardening) as a way of becoming *well-balanced*, “having an orderly or harmonious disposition of parts [of ourselves]” (*Oxford English Dictionary [OED]*, 1933/1961, p. 289)? Does this way of being mend the separated mind, body, and spirit? Does an aging person need mending? And if not in need of mending, how does an older person stay *well*? There is much to try to understand.

Since I particularly am interested in the well-being of older adults, I find it helpful to peruse some of the many variations of the word *well* to learn about the lifeworld of

these oldsters. “Digging” into words helps illuminate common garden phrases such as what it means to be “well-planted or well-fruited,” or even, as in my case as a nurse entering a study, I see I am “well-placed” (*OED*, 1933/1961, p. 301) to explore the possible healing connection.

In some of the same ways the politically correct words for older individuals (like oldster) have changed over time, so have the understandings about the words used to describe health and, more specifically in this study, *well-being* and *wellness*. According to the *OED* online, well-being is derived from the French words, “*benter*, or *bene esse*, the state of being or doing well in life; happy, healthy, or prosperous condition; moral or physical welfare (of a person or community).” Wellness, on the other hand, is new word. In fact, the 1969 unabridged version of *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language* (Stein et al., 1969) does not include the word *wellness*. While this may seem unusual, it is actually a reflection of the times. The 1961 *OED*, however, does explain it: “wellness, or, well-ness” is “rather a nonce-word, than of settled status like *illness*” (p. 301). And the adjective “nonce” is defined as “made only once or for a special occasion” (Mish et al., 1994, p. 790). It is interesting that wellness might be considered so singular an occasion; but also, that well-ness is explained as not being in a settled state. In the light of day looking at older adults, this seems easy to believe, since their lives are probably often in a state of flux. So, if we have understood the reference to well-ness as potentially being a temporary state of being, what about contrasting it with *illness*? I make this point because only in more recent years has there been acknowledgement that despite some infirmity or disability a person can be *well* at the same time. In other words, there is more to consider than the presence of disease or ill-ness when establishing

whether someone is well. This kind of questioning challenges the helping professionals' assumptions about caring for the older population and is, somehow, a consciousness raising.

### **Imagining the Possibility of Balance as Successful Old Age Comes to Consciousness**

When I garden, earth and earthworm pass between my fingers and I realize that I am made of the same stuff. When I pinch the cucumber vine and the water drips from capillaries to soil, I can feel the blood coursing through my body. Man is a microcosm in whose flesh resonates and reverberates the pulse of the whole creation, in whose mind creation comes to consciousness, and through whose imagination and will God wants to heal and reconcile everything that sin has wounded and put in disharmony. (Guroian, 1999, p. 7)

I am certain the flesh of a gardener resonates and reverberates the pulse of the whole creation, as Guroian suggests. Is this balance seeking not a state of well-ness for any gardener, particularly older ones? Or, more broadly, what would it take for older persons to feel this way? Is it possible to be in balance and to be “well-aged [not only] advanced in years [but] of a good age” (*OED*, 1933/1961, p. 288)? To gardeners of more advanced age, what would “good age” be like? What would their understanding of “being in harmony” transform into once they are over age 65? What would it be like to lose the pulse of the whole creation? At some point you know you are no longer needed for production, no longer considered part of the work force because of retirement. In garden terms, what happens as the cucumber vine stops fruiting after the harvest and the field is ploughed under, or, left untouched? How do elders learn about the care of self as they approach retirement and the later stages of life? Is this “successful aging” to be able to care for the self? Are these individuals who garden “healthy agers”?

How might health professionals and consumers begin to imagine the possibility of balance and harmony in the sixth decade of life? From the lived experience of these

individuals we seek to understand more, but first, some definitions will highlight what is yet not captured in research to date. First, the evolved term “successful aging” must be explained. In 1998 Rowe and Kahn had conceptualized the path to successful aging as avoiding disease, maintaining high cognitive and mental function and sustained engagement with life as part of productive activity. By 2002, Kahn acknowledging Rowe’s contribution to their earlier work together in 1998, delineates its major components as:

(relatively) low risk of disease and disease-related disability; (relatively) high mental and physical function, and active engagement with life, including close relationships with others and continued participation in productive activities. (as cited in Kahn, 2002, p. 725)

These components are complex concepts that are part of an integrative perspective they are using to measure successful aging and well-being (Kahn, 2002). Their goal is to guide research that compares specific health outcomes and longevity in older populations. Indeed, in an earlier assessment, Ryff (1989) points out the lack of a guiding theory, negatively based approaches to older persons’ well-being and the inability to imagine the aging process “as human constructions that are open to cultural variations and historical change” (p. 35). Sometimes in healthcare we have forgotten to remember the individual in the desire to understand groups of persons, and as such, we have lost sight of how the aging process touches each human being personally.

In what ways is successful aging understood? According to *Thorndike Century Senior Dictionary* “successful” means “having success; ending in success; prosperous; fortunate,” but to “succeed” is to “turn out well; do well; have success” (1941, p. 919). Is it really such an all or nothing situation in aging? Perhaps some aspects of aging might be successful, while other aspects do not go so well. What is the result of lumping older

people into one or the other category (successful or not successful)? Some would find this a form of stereotyping which has a negative connotation. But, by definition, stereotyped means something has been “reproduced in or by stereotype plates, fixed or settled in form; hackneyed; conventional” (Stein et al., 1969, p. 1394). So my effort is to preserve individuality in this study rather than typecast older adults into categories. Grouping their activities and searching for similarities has been one way of studying older adults’ ways. By remaining focused on the individual ways persons experience their aging, I hope to avoid succumbing to stereotypes. Sensitivity toward persons as individuals lends itself to capturing the uniqueness of the ways each experience aging, whether successfully or not. Kahn cautions against an

unintended effect of defining the majority of the elderly population as unsuccessful and failing. ... We Americans seem locked into a dichotomous all-or-nothing, succeed-or-fail view of the world, in spite of the natural world’s constant reminders to think in terms of continua rather than dichotomies. (2002, p. 726)

This is timely advice considering the pigeonholing that occurs when trying to determine outcomes in any health research. What might be covered over in health research where persons are defined by set categories of outcomes? Instead we might seek to understand the individual ways of being and recognize that aging runs along a continuum, much like nature itself.

Older adults, whether gardeners or not, are living out their seasons of life in their seeding, sowing, harvesting and burying in the relationships they create. They seek balance in a life they can imagine as possible. In fact, their lives cannot be categorized. Their lives are full of continuity instead of dichotomy. Their lives are like nature, full of the ebb and flow of life itself, replete with success and failure, winters and summers and

all that comes in-between. Their lives have seasons that play out much like a story from long ago, a myth that is a perennial story of the seasons: the myth of Demeter and Persephone. It offers one understanding of how the four seasons came to be in the first place; at another level it helps reveal some of the experience of aging for oldsters. Similar to the story of the Garden of Eden, a forbidden fruit plays a pivotal role.

### **Fruit from the Gods Above and Below: The Perennial Story of the Seasons**

The pomegranate, introduced earlier in the Song of Solomon, has particular significance in mythology, and is featured in the myth of Demeter and Persephone. In this telling of the mystery of the harvest, the pomegranate holds center stage because of its seeds. The myth was offered as a way of justifying the four seasons that occur every year—forever. Because the seasons of life serve as a pathway from which to visit with the oldsters who garden, I re-tell this perennial story which is so well articulated in tales about Greek and Roman gods and goddesses (D’Aulaire & D’Aulaire, 1962; Hamilton, 1940/1969; Waldherr, 1993).

The joyous goddess of the summertime harvest, Demeter (also known as Ceres) had one beloved daughter, Persephone (Proserpine). Wherever Persephone danced, flowers burst forth, as in the spring and summer. Hades (also known as Pluto), the god of the foreboding underworld, fell in love with Persephone and stole her away. Only a water nymph saw the ground open up, and the weeping Persephone was carried off in Hades’ chariot. They entered the underworld kingdom through a deep wound in the earth that closed over forthwith, and so, Demeter did not know what had really happened. She blamed the earth, at first. After all, she only had heard her daughter’s anguished cry as

she was taken. After nine heartbreaking days Demeter finally was told the truth. All of nature began to grieve with Demeter, and the seasons we know as fall and winter began.

The ensuing twelve months were harsh to the earth, and because nothing grew, humankind seemed likely to wither and die of famine. The god, Zeus, recognized the situation as dire and sent other gods to plead with Demeter, but to no avail. She promised nothing could sprout anew while she felt such sadness. Finally, Zeus sent his brother, Hermes, to plead with Hades.

It was very dark underground. Persephone, as Queen of the Underworld, grew pale and longed for the sunshine and flowers, realizing she was living where there were none except for a pomegranate tree that was considered the food of the dead. Eventually she gave in to temptation and ate some of the pomegranate fruit. Finally, with Zeus's intervention through Hermes, Persephone was allowed to return to her mother and the world flourished like never before. However, because Persephone had eaten several seeds, she had to return to the underworld for the same number of months as pomegranate seeds she had eaten. Hence, there are four seasons, two of which coincide with the time each year she must stay underground with Hades (D'Aulaire & D'Aulaire, 1962; Hamilton, 1940/1969; Waldherr, 1993).

And so it is that humans all over the planet must live with the promise Persephone made to her King. For six months we endure the withering of trees and plants when fall arrives and accept the apparent death of most green living things. As such, we have come to understand that much of the planet must become brown and covered by ice and snow for us to experience, once again, the joys that spring and summer bring. Might it be that



we must experience each season for itself to appreciate the next? The trees offer one gardener some clues.

It is in winter that trees reveal what they most truly are—alien presences possessed of a stark and foreign beauty that owes little to the human race. . . . In other seasons we may almost deceive ourselves into believing that trees exist for our purposes, that they are extensions of ourselves, meant to serve our wants and needs. In early spring, when the willow twigs change from yellow-gold to pale green, we find a metaphor of hope in a world made new. In summer we find refreshment in their cool green shade. In autumn they so dazzle the eye that we forget the approach of winter’s harshness. And in their deaths, trees serve us in myriad useful ways, giving us fuel and shelter, pencils and paper, ax handles and broomsticks. (Lacy, 1986, p. 209)

Are living trees and plants extensions of our selves? Are the seasons a pattern that teaches us Nature’s ways of being; that all life has meaning and purpose like the trees after death? I find my expedition has brought me, once again, back to into the phenomenological question that calls attention to the seasons: **What is the lived experience of gardening like for older gardeners?** What does each season make possible for the oldster who gardens? Can one take comfort in the predictability of summer following spring? Do certain seasons bring some measure of peace, or rest? Robert Frost introduces the idea of a tireless sleep in his poem about summer.

“Summering”

I would arise and in a dream go on—  
Not very far, not very far—and then  
Lie down amid the sunny grass again,  
And fall asleep till night-time or next dawn.

In sleepy self-sufficiency I’d turn,  
I’d seek new comfort and be hard to please—  
Far in a meadow by an isle of trees,  
All summer long amid the grass and fern.

Forest would have to be all round about,  
And the mead silent, and the grasses deep,

Else I might not gain such a tireless sleep!  
I could not slumber if the wains were out!  
(Frost, 1981, p. 31)

Summer is a dreamy time of flowering, fertility, and regeneration. Stewart (2001) notices its arrival in her vegetable garden that makes no particular announcement. “My tomatoes didn’t all ripen at once, my flowers didn’t all start blooming. Up to that point, summer in the garden looked pretty much like spring in the garden, full of half-starts and new beginnings...” (p. 133). Summer develops, and becomes a time of productivity. If the creating of a garden is a foundation for new life, could this not also represent the building of a home or place for weathering the seasons ahead? Is not the place we call home both a place where we may enjoy the seasons or seek refuge from them?

Persephone experienced both summer and winter in her travels from the earth to the underground. Her gardens on earth allowed her to survive the winters below. While the planet is brown and asleep during regeneration, maybe certain elements of the gardening life allow elders to feel at home with their seasons? What can their stories of the seasons tell us about their aging and their lives?

### **Lessons from Listening to Stories**

What lessons are embedded within this simple myth about the seasons that we might unravel? Demeter is like the parent who loves unconditionally and, upon the safe return of her child from danger, she enjoys all happiness and forgets all worries. Soon, however, Demeter must accept that her beloved Persephone has made an unalterable pact. Because she ate forbidden fruit, Persephone must return to the dark underworld that became her kingdom for a while. The deal was struck and even the gods cannot alter it. The situation seems much the same for humans in the later seasons of their lives. For

upon experiencing joy there is a quiet realization that it cannot last forever; a time of sadness will certainly come to pass, times of inevitable loss. Experiencing loss may be part of the reality of maturity and growing older, or perhaps a lesson from nature for all to learn as Robert Frost (1969) writes:

“Nothing Gold Can Stay”

Nature’s first green is gold,  
Her hardest hue to hold.  
Her early leaf’s a flower;  
But only so an hour.

Then leaf subsides to leaf.  
So Eden sank to grief,  
So dawn goes down to day.  
Nothing gold can stay.  
(pp. 222-223)

Aside from nature itself, gardeners may be the best teachers of these life lessons from the seasons. So, while this poem illustrates “nothing gold can stay,” gardeners know, too, there is a time for every season; how natural this cyclical process truly is. In this way, the garden becomes a safe place for some people to grieve and regain hope.

At a conference poster session where I was showing some of the research connecting horticulture and health, a young woman made a point of taking me aside to share her private thoughts about her newfound experience in gardening. She explained she had been inconsolable after her two children died in an accident, but then had found herself inexplicably compelled to garden. “I had to garden,” she said emphatically; “It was as if by digging in the earth, it could somehow absorb my grief.” Her story matches others I have heard where non-gardeners found themselves turning to a garden during periods of grief, often after losing a parent who was a gardener. Somehow these individuals were able to find themselves in this garden space. Estes reminds us:

The garden is a meditation practice, that of saying when it is time for something to die. In the garden one is moving with rather than against the inhalations and expectations of greater wild Nature. Through this meditation, we acknowledge that the Life/Death/Life cycle is a natural one. (Estes, 1992, p. 100-101)

Gardening does seem to be a meditative practice and a place to learn to see when it is time for something to die. Within our gardens we rehearse moving with rather than against our life challenges. Through gardening, we learn of the natural rhythms of life and relate this to our experiences. Both “life-giving and death-dealing natures are waiting to be befriended, forever loved (p. 101).” Older adults understand that there is a time for everything, and time itself can be fleeting; the joy of the friendship or love cannot last forever. Older adults seem to discover this as they age. As they do, sometimes they wish to negotiate the terms of their pact with life. Following the death of her husband of many years, my oldest living aunt was feeling left behind, saying, “I have watched all of my friends die before me.” Although she was able to acknowledge the losses, I suspect she is moving against the expectations of greater wild Nature at this time. As others who are alone like her, where will she find comfort and solace? She once gardened. Maybe she should return to her Eden to make sense out of life by experiencing the seasons again.

Although a young woman, Thorp (2003) finds herself “The Garden Lady,” dealing with personal sorrow following the death of her father by working in two gardens, and offers encouragement about the path she took:

Where did the time go?  
As I back down the driveway and pull away, the pages of the memory book fly  
out the window caught on the winds of tomorrow. I must travel on faith now,  
but my frail faith is battered and dented, hardly a comfort.  
The needle on the compass spins.  
It is dizzying this life.  
But I am here to tell you that as sure as spring follows winter, the tears dry, your  
head clears and there off in the distance is an opening.  
It'll be there. I promise.

Just when you are about to conclude all is nonsense, the universe will throw you a lifeline. (p. 324)

Thorp finds her lifeline working two gardens. In McGreevy's words, you could say, "Sorrow is composted into possibility" (2000, p. xii). That possibility is created in Thorp's own garden, one that her father had been part of, and, again, with her schoolchildren in the other garden. She learned to let go and begin living again through the lessons of her garden experiences.

### **Living and Letting Go**

So, the garden can become a safe haven to practice living and letting go in much the same way Demeter must relinquish her beloved Persephone. And let go, she does, each Fall. Demeter takes comfort in knowing the cycle is just that, a cycle to anticipate and make peace with, every year. Demeter consoles herself watching the seasons in her garden and she finds hope and renewed energy. In my own recent loss of my father, I am finding I must look for new growth that can follow the sadness. Experiencing this has opened my eyes to the oldster's world of sadness. I am working to let myself experience the sadness instead of denying it. And in this authentic feeling, I am infused with the hope of finding the energy I thought I had lost. As I turn to my own garden, I remember, "Nature continually tells us what it needs, and we, being a part of nature, may sagely bring our own longings into the light and the nurture of the garden" (McGreevy, 2000, p. xii).

In the reality of losing loved ones, how might we be with these oldsters to foster an environment where they can live and let go so there may be hope for renewal? In what ways can the garden offer a meditative place to be with sadness so that there may be

healing? Heidegger's image of narcissi in a meadow suggests that in pain and sorrow there is healing, even "cheerfulness":

Pain gives of its healing power  
where we least expect it. (1971/2001, p. 7)

Persephone had to deal with unexpected pain. She never expected to find herself stolen into the underground kingdom to be their Queen. She was power-less and pulled away from the familiar when she was taken deep below where darkness prevailed. Where might the pain and the darkness exist for humans in their final seasons? The Englishwoman, Jessie, I had spoken with during my preliminary conversations with older gardeners, spoke with trepidation and genuine fear when she imagined herself into her future. She, unlike Persephone who was stolen away, already had been thinking about her future. Jessie could envision a future in an institution, away from her present home, and a future without her garden to love and tend. Would she have to enter a nursing home, she wondered out loud, and live, possibly, without her husband or her garden if she became infirm? She might have to let go of her garden.

Jessie is not alone in her wondering. She is part of the largest constituency of elders that has ever existed. "The aging of the population presents both a challenge and an opportunity for the [healthcare] profession" (Wootton, 2000, p. 925), with the oldest-old (85 years of age and older) being the most rapidly growing group of the 35 million Americans age 65 and older. This is largely due to better medical care and public health improvements along with lifestyle changes in diet and exercise. Ethically, the healthcare profession has an obligation to this population of elders, to meet them where they are. Whether this will translate to transforming institutions or adapting their homes is not clear at this point. In what ways can we make sure we hear what these elders need?

Certainly there will be some negotiating of the terms of the pact. Elders will let you know how much they will compromise as Robert St. John demonstrates by his own words:

When I had my ninetieth birthday, my wife suggested that I should cut down the flower and vegetable garden a little bit. I compromised. I cut down the vegetable garden by 10 percent and I increased the flower garden 20 percent. So each year, I'm more active than the one before. (as cited in Terkel, 1995, p. 182)

To understand their living and their letting go, we have to meet the elders where they are and discover how they re-negotiate their lives in compromise. We must listen differently, deeper, that is, beyond hearing their concerns in our usual socialized, interpersonal style. Levin calls upon us to enter the third stage of listening, where

we are essentially involved in developing our listening as a practice of compassion, increasing our capacity, as listeners, to be aware of, and responsive to, the interrelatedness and commonality of all sonorous beings. (1989, p. 47)

Compassionate listening is a way of being with older adults in this more complete way. Their life experiences have brought them to this point in their lives and they have become who they are. In explaining her worries about having to leave her home and garden, Jessie was telling me that gardening is a vital way of being for her. She knows this in the deepest regions of her soul. She feels connected to the earth through her gardening. Even though Persephone was young, it must have been the same for her, being the daughter of the goddess of the harvest. Persephone became pale and wan while being held underground. She was without the living plants and flowers that she loved. Being with these plants and flowers brought her life. Gardening was in her blood. Considering that the definitions for blood include “the vital principle; ...a fresh source of energy, vitality or vigor” (Stein et al., 1969, p. 159), the phrase may speak volumes for Persephone and other gardeners who need this connection to the earth to thrive.

## **Lifeblood for the Soul**

The need to be connected to the earth is echoed in another visit with a preliminary conversant, Charles. He is not an oldster, but a forty-something, urban gardener who seems to be saying something quite similar. At first he had insisted he was not really a gardener; it was just that he “played around with gardening, moving plants around” and the like. While he talked, he described how he gradually adopted more and more plants, and soon his surroundings were crowded with green, living things. He started using his patio space, too, and when that was outgrown they moved to a house with a yard. The yard gradually transformed from lawn to planting beds full of flowers, vegetables, a nursery for seedlings and more trees. Meanwhile, he continued to drive a good distance a few times a month to care for his mother’s plants and garden on the family farm. All this from the same man who had insisted he was “not a real gardener” at the beginning of our conversations. When he finally acknowledged the breadth of his gardening out loud while telling his story, I think it was the first time he realized, fully, how gardening really was “in his blood.” Had I not asked him toward the end of his story, I wonder whether he would have been attuned to what he had said. It was as if he had not listened to his inner self and his own story about his connection to the land; thus, he had not imagined that he was a real gardener. Charles’ gardening brings him into life and helps his world sing. He perceives his gardening as ordinary and not extraordinary. It has been covered over. His need to be in the dirt goes unnoticed at first glance. When something is so familiar, so everyday that it is covered over, we lose sight of its importance to us and we fail to recognize it as vital, as our lifeblood, an instinct.



Wilson, the noted biologist who explains our instinctual draw to be with other living organisms (the biophilia hypothesis), has gone a step further by explaining biophilia as “psychological phenomena that rose from deep human history, stemmed from interaction with the natural environment, and are now quite likely resident in genes themselves” (1996, pp. 179-180). Human history has brought us, through generations, into our present—where humans want a connection with the earth and the soil. Is this psychological instinct something of which gardeners are conscious? Or, is their gardening carried down over generations through their family tree, as it has for Charles? Whether it is in his genes or his lifeblood, gardening makes him feel at home. It is his Eden.

“God’s Garden”

God made a beauteous garden  
With lovely flowers strown,  
But one straight, narrow pathway  
That was not overgrown.  
And to this beauteous garden  
He brought mankind to live,  
And said: “To you, my children,  
These lovely flowers I give.  
Prune ye my vines and fig trees,  
With care my flowrets tend,  
But keep the pathway open  
Your home is at the end.”  
(Frost, 1981, p. 15)

How is the instinct of gardening, the lifeblood of elders, manifest in the aging years after pruning their vines and tending flowrets for so many years? What understandings would other, older gardeners have about keeping the pathway open, about their responsibilities as stewards of the earth? In the Spoon River Anthologies, an editorial about Samuel Gardner illustrates how another gardener’s observations brought him home to a consciousness of his own calling and his roots.

“Samuel Gardner”

I who kept the greenhouse,  
Lover of trees and flowers,  
Oft in life saw this umbrageous elm,  
Measuring its generous branches with my eye,  
And listened to its rejoicing leaves  
Lovingly patting each other  
With sweet aeolian whispers.  
And well they might:  
For the roots had grown so wide and deep  
That the soil of the hill could not withhold  
Aught of its virtue, enriched by rain,  
And warmed by the sun;  
But yielded it all to the thrifty roots,  
Through which it was drawn and whirled to the trunk,  
And thence to the branches, and into the leaves,  
Wherefrom the breeze took life and sang  
Now I, an under-tenant of the earth, can see  
That the branches of a tree  
Spread no wider than its roots.  
And how shall the soul of a man  
Be larger than the life he has lived?  
(Masters, 1914/1962, p. 250)

Often we have heard the phrase “The acorn never falls far from the tree,” and in this poem “That the branches of the tree spread no wider than its roots.” Is this true about gardeners’ early beginnings, their family of origin? What about our “family tree?” We talk about our family tree as if it is something that exists as a tree, not a piece of paper made from trees with lines drawn as branches, with our names and surnames gathered above each line. When we look at our family history collected on that paper, are we not coming into our past itself? The living members of our family come from our past and may be with us as part of our future, if we wish. We are always coming from our past; our family tree is unchangeable.

How does one come to consciousness about one’s early life, one’s beginnings? Our beginnings may create the life we live until we decide to change it. The preceding

editorial about Samuel Gardner explains how the roots of a tree dictate how the branches of a tree shall grow and that our soul reflects the life we have lived. As we age, we often become more aware of our family tree and its branches; we may even work on our genealogy and our family stories. Sometimes other family members will ask us for our stories. Once in a while the telling of one's story might bring out the hidden self. If only we would take the time to *listen-to*:

This *listening-to*- is a concentrated attention, silent, patient, willing to *take the time* to listen carefully. It is a listening that requires some discipline—to avoid being distracted, to fine-tune one's hearing, to *stay with* what is sounding long enough to achieve a real familiarity, or perhaps a certain intimacy. (Levin, 1989, p. 84)

If we were like the naturalist in nature, Levin's example, "We would listen with such care that even the different winds become familiar in their differences" (1989, p. 84). When articulating the first of four stages of self-development for the listening self, Levin highlights infants as an example of persons who hear with their whole bodies, an attunement in the hearing dimension. In Stage II we develop our ways of identifying a variety of sounds in context and become more skilled as we are socialized into adolescence and young adulthood. If we achieve the third stage of listening, a practice called "compassionate listening" as mentioned earlier, we have taken charge of what we hear (Levin, 1989). With the refinement of Levin's third stage of listening, might we hear oldsters' stories differently and witness gardeners uncover truths about their beginnings? Family memories are often part of their earliest gardens.

### **Encountering the Past: Finding the Soil**

Upon finding their beginnings, older adults will rediscover their memories and encounter their pasts. Some memories will likely be of family and their earliest days. This

remembering may take them to renewed understandings of how they came to be who they are. From a human development view of the nine stages of humankind, Erikson and Erikson (1985/1997) call this stage of life the time one searches for integrity or encounters despair. It is, then, when we might hear about their souls and their spirits, too.

In any stage in life, meaning-making may be embedded within our stories, and this is possible with older gardeners' stories about their gardening lives. Perhaps in the telling, their stories take them to new perspectives while confronting the past. By becoming more attuned to these older gardeners' evolving stories we may find ways to keep their hands in the dirt as they age. Then, we might hear about the darkness, the underground worries, their grieving, and sense of self.

From *being with* these older gardeners as they make meaning of their lives, we may gain insight about how well they are aging and how we might foster healing environments that extend beyond a garden plot. We need to listen to what they tell us. What sustains them during the dark months they experience, especially if they find themselves alone, without a companion? Might it be the nourishing fruit of friendship and a common understanding as Demeter enjoyed in her sorrow? A supportive family surrounded Demeter (the gods intervened on her behalf). What is the nature of the friendships enjoyed by the oldsters? As they traverse the boundaries of their aging are they surrounded by family and friends who will care for them?

We have much to learn about how to be with them during these years. The loss of their gardening life may bring some darkness. Some urban areas are providing land for community gardens. Other programs are centered on creating raised beds of plantings at institutions, nursing homes in particular. The Eden Alternative is one such effort that has

taken root in hundreds of long-term care facilities where the presence of children, pets and plants are transforming the buildings and workers into home-like environments (Thomas, 1996). Initiatives like these are providing one setting where older adults can sustain their “conscious connection with the land...[in] an ongoing relationship” (McGreevy, 2000, p. 30).

The meaning the older adults attribute to their ongoing relationship with the land has not been explored from a healthcare perspective much at all. It prompts more questions than answers; for example, is a conscious relationship to one’s garden similar to one with the land? Heliker, Chadwick, and O’Connell (2000) conducted a pilot study with 24 elder gardeners and looked at “perceived meaning and outcome on well-being of a structured gardening intervention” (p. 35). The themes that emerged from the semi-structured interviews included Successful Gardening, Legacy of Gardening, Gardening as Spiritual Healing and Therapy, and Remembering a Favorite Tree. However, the insight most pertinent to my study was their recognition that “the garden creates a space for these special relationships [with elders]” (p. 53). They also acknowledge the complexity of the garden experience for each gardener and the researchers.

Although many meanings of gardens have been documented, the garden is a living experience and one can never stand outside a garden and observe it to find meaning. A garden is a participatory experience and can only be truly understood from within. (Heliker, Chadwick, & O’Connell, 2000, pp. 38-39)

As in my preliminary exploration of the phenomenon, some gardeners were able to articulate their connections with the soil as something gardeners must do. Sometimes this came with an awareness of this ongoing relationship with the earth, while sometimes they remain unconscious to it until they are threatened with the prospect of losing it. I am called back to Jessie’s words: “I can’t imagine living without a portion of the earth that is

mine to take care of and nurture and make as beautiful as I can.” And she insists she will do this despite it being a time of “rusty years.” I hear her descriptions of how this activity lifts her spirit even as she copes with the physical changes as she ages. Gardening is in her blood, and as vital to her being as blood itself. When she gardens, her whole being “reverberates ...the whole [of] creation” (1999, p. 7) as Guroian says, because the garden brings Jessie back into the spring and summers of her life and she is, once more, as happy as Persephone on Earth.

In what ways do older gardeners rediscover their springtime seasons? Gardeners tell me they feel restored by being connected with the soil. Jessie, in particular, felt saved by gardening even though she acknowledged these were “rusty years.” In a preliminary conversation with one of my first conversants, Gerry explains that gardening is more than touching soil or planting; it is an attitude about life. “It’s like being a kid with a sand bucket and you turn it upside down and make little cakes or a castle. *Then* you go on dealing with...(life).” Gerry has some trouble with her legs these days but she has maintained her positive attitude about life. Like Russell Knapp, an 85-year-old interviewed in *Coming of Age* says, “You win a lot more ball games if you’re expecting to be a winner, and your life is a heck of a lot better if you’re looking at a half-full glass rather than a half-empty” (as cited in Terkel, 1995, p. 133). Did these oldsters learn this as they came of age, or was it the particulars of their life experiences that brought them such wisdom? Gerry retreats to her garden to recapture that “winner” feeling. The garden is her island of comfort, her place for being like Persephone in spring and summer. Is it so hard to understand she needs to be playing in the dirt? Let’s explore more about where this wisdom is learned, and who teaches gardeners self-sufficiency for their souls.

## Growing Food for the Soul: Playing in the Dirt

Standing in my garden with her, self-consciously snapping withered daisy blossoms off their stalks, I knew what I did have: a garden with soul. What's fun about an immaculate garden, anyway? I'd probably start to feel like I had to wipe my feet before I went outside. No, I had grown to love my garden for its character, for its failures as well as its triumphs. I had wanted a strong, wild garden, a place where I could work, and sweat, and get dirty, and that's exactly what I got. It was a *real* garden, flawed and temperamental, but it was mine all the same. (Stewart, 2001, p. 198)

Our gardens *are* places to learn to know ourselves, replete with our failures or triumphs. It can be a reflection of our psyche, our life spirit. No wonder we nurture it so tenderly and worry about it during the winter. Our gardens are part of our identity as a person connected to the larger universe and, thus, they feed our souls. Gardening also allows us to dig deeper into our souls while we are out there communing with nature's gifts. And so we dig, and sometimes we remember parts of our selves that have been left behind, forgotten.

At any point in our lives, the experience of gardening can bring us back to our childhoods when we were free to play in the dirt. The age it happens is not important. What is important is that it happened. Our souls learn something about feeding themselves.

I fell in love with gardening at age 8, when someone gave me two seed packets. I found a sunny spot in my backyard, turned over the earth, tossed in the seeds, watered and waited. Soon, tiny green sprouts emerged. In the weeks that followed, bare earth turned into paradise (and I had done it myself). (Foley, 1999, p. 81)

In gardening we are reminded of distinct childlike pleasures that bring joy: planting, seeding, and making mud pies. If offered a bare patch of earth, a seed packet, and the chance to make a garden, a child can be changed in ways we have yet to understand fully.

In a written childhood remembrance, one of my classmates recalled playing in the dirt next to her farmer father. It took her back to a different place and time. Her life was full of possibility and, like it was for Taylor (1998), “Gardens are great teachers” (p. 3).

#### “Playin’ in the Durt”

Playin’ in durt was my favorite thing when I was a child, and memories of my moments doing it resound across the days and nights of my fifty-two years. As early as two, I slipped my shoes into his tracks on our way to the furrows or weeds that presented us a chore each day. Down on my haunches, heels secured by the earth, I made a chair for myself from the air as I watched him call the earth into play. He’d plunge in, fingers first, and part the surface of the earth until the brown, sun-dried granules on top revealed the rich, black velvety particles below. My tiny digits stretched, doll-like, to help burrow a home for seeds. “Now we’ll put them right in here with their little noses up,” he’d say ... “Now we’ll put them to bed. Spread the ground covers over them. Gently. Not too tight.” I’d get to pat each bed myself and smooth its silky spread, marking each with a handprint design. He could have moved much faster without me...but he knew “playin in durt” was fun; he never rushed me. I know that I learned to read my first words back then. My word bank was small but powerful: Burpee, Peas, Lettuce, Corn, Beans. As I handed them over, I not only knew what the words were, but I knew what they represented and how they looked naked with their belly buttons pointing to the sky. (M. Hartshorn, April 1999, personal journal)

The childhood memories resonate with feelings of love and empowerment the author experienced in the presence of her father at the farm. Her little feet stepped into his shoeprints, and her tiny hands learned how to part the soil as he did. Her handprints marked the soil while she patted the seeds to bed. The imprinting that occurred in those fields has influenced who she has become. She is a patient teacher who is gentle with her students. When she remembers that time in her life, is she recapturing that sense of possibility? Where do these memories take us when we relive our connections with the soil and our past? Will she unearth a feeling of hopefulness toward the future that can enliven and feed her soul?



“The most valuable gift I’ve gotten from my garden is a sense of hope. No one can scatter seeds on soil or plant a bulb deep in earth and be a pessimist. A gardener believes good things will come” (Foley, 1999, p. 82). I find this to be true to my experience. Last fall, when I planted tulips and daffodils with thirty youngsters during a garden club service project, I had forgotten how eagerly we would keep checking those garden beds for signs of life. When good things came with the full flush of blooms, we were rewarded by a sense of accomplishment. Taylor concurs; “Gardening is an act of hope, an affirmation of what is possible. Read a newspaper. Then read a seed catalog. Which one makes you feel more hopeful?” (1998, p. 3). I suspect elder gardeners know a great deal already about patience; yet, imagination, hope and possibility have emerged as important qualities to nurture as one experiences aging in our society. And the activities where we touch the earth take us back to our beginnings.

Even without the images and artifacts of the past, I would be restless to dig in Spring. There is something satisfying and fortifying about digging, a feeling that mixes with the simple, childlike pleasure of stirring up the soil with the satisfaction of creation, which begins with that plunging of the spade or shovel into the ground. (Cooper, 1994, p. 4)

Sometimes when we continue to play in the garden we uncover ourselves in our gardens and realize we want to tell others our stories. We might be looking for common understandings. If we are digging deeply, we may rediscover vital parts of ourselves that we may be willing to share. Sharing is something gardeners do. Jessie tells me: “There’s a great affinity for people who do this sort of thing [swap cuttings], you know. You can easily make friends with a gardener. No problem at all. It’s immediately common ground if you pardon the expression” as she laughs. Maybe older gardeners are looking for common ground when they tell their stories about their lives and gardens? During an

interview for *Coming of Age*, Robert St. John, the World War II radio broadcaster (and a gardener) looked back on his life story and insisted he had not retired from life. He realized he had discovered a recipe for longevity.

Until the age of fifty, live dangerously. At fifty-five, stop smoking. At sixty, start courting a girl, preferably Jewish, who is sixteen years younger. At sixty-five, marry the girl (my wife, of course). ...At seventy-five, instead of riding in a small vehicle around a golf course, occasionally dismounting and taking a few whacks at an innocent little object, spend six hours a day, six days a week, two months a year, raking leaves. At eighty, because the trees grow larger and produce more leaves, increase the leaf-raking to five hours a day, three months a year. At eighty-five, begin planning how you would like to celebrate your ninetieth birthday. (as cited in Terkel, 1995, p. 187)

St. John created his own path to longevity. He celebrated his passion for gardening to stay physically active and feed his soul. His digging kept him younger than his years. The famous Gertrude Jekyll herself, who had traveled and desperately wished to enjoy her privacy at home as she grew older, wrote at age sixty-five that she “could still, when no one was looking, climb a five-barred gate or jump a ditch” (1964/2000, p. 18). She attributed this physical agility to her years as a gardener, and is quoted as saying: “I think it is because I have been more or less a gardener all my life that I still feel like a child in many ways, although from the number of years I ought to know that I am quite an old woman” (p. 18). Jekyll provides a wonderful example of how this physical exercise, this “labor of love...doesn’t feel like exercise” (Foley, 1999, p. 81). Gardening kept both Jekyll and St. John from “retiring from life.”

Do oldsters find themselves retired from life in their final seasons? Would touching the earth change this for them? It seems the physical experience of digging in the dirt can be important, not only for its health impact as physical exercise, but for its ability to connect us to the earth itself and allow us to feel part of the larger universe.

Touching the earth may once again make one carefree and child-like; then, one may play in the dirt and feed the soul while in search of the self, underground.

### **Going Underground to Find the Self**

“I find that a real gardener is not a man [sic] who cultivates flowers; he is a man who cultivates the soil. He is a creature who digs himself into the earth and ...lives buried in the ground” writes Capek in *The Gardener’s Year* (1931/2002, p. 23). This sentiment can be ageless. Bender (1998) writes about these “forever young” feelings that are unearthed by touching soil and quotes a 94-year-old named Shirley Walsh: “I feel sorry for people who do not like to grow things and get their hands dirty” (p. 110). Like many gardeners who love to be digging in the dirt, Shirley tells us what makes her feel alive, or, as some might say, feeling well, or experiencing a positive sense of well-being. This good feeling is so inherent in lived experiences of gardening that history repeats itself over and over, as seen in Walter Dyer’s commentary in 1914:

Oh, it is worth while to plant and tend and garner! I cannot understand the man or woman with a backyard who is blind to these morning surprises, and deaf to the call of his bit of the soil. I cannot understand the heart that will deliberately close its doors to these free and God-given joys. (as cited in Clayton, 2000, p. 286)

The search for a sense of well-being and, in some cases, unbridled joy about witnessing new life through cultivating the soil, continues as people age. It appears to be a fundamental human goal to want to be happy, to feel good about something new that relates to one’s life. And since older adults are living longer, their search for happiness and meaning in life extends well into the Third Age of their lives, a term for the years or decades following retirement. Patterson (1999) calls this period a gift, a person’s age of reason. I am particularly curious about this gift of decades more of life. A person who is 80 years old today has a life expectancy equivalent to that of a 55-year-old during the

earlier part of the last century (Rosenthal, 1997). I feel compelled to open doors for those who are called by the soil and searching in the dirt to experience better health with this gift of time.

The activity of gardening may be the exercise of life for these older adults. The notion that physical activity (to include gardening) is psychologically healthy is borne out in literature. Exercise is associated positively with well-being (Ross & Hayes, 1988; Scully, Kremer, Meade, Graham, & Dudgeon, 1998). So, for these individuals who cultivate the soil, gardening can be an activity associated with their well-being, and this may hold true even in the third age. Gertrude Jekyll, one of the most noted garden writers, continued to garden well into her later years, letting go of life at the ripe old age of 89 (1964/2000). Ninety-four year old Shirley (in a previous quote) also continues gardening in her third age, enjoying this activity that promotes her sense of well-being and makes her feel good.

Might this exercise of life be a gift that *brings life* to the gardener? What could this mean in terms of these gardeners? The word exercise offers a multitude of meanings, but two stand out: “something done or performed as a means of practice or training...a putting into action” (Stein et al., 1969, p. 499). For what might the elder gardener be training? Is he performing a practice in life itself as he watches the cycle of life play out in the cycle of the seasons? Perhaps the gardener is putting her own life into action by rehearsing through the ebb and flow in nature itself. This exercise could be hard work physically, but one which brings great satisfaction along with the usual fatigue at the end of one’s day. What of the mental work that follows suit? Is a gardener’s mind quiet in the garden, or full of thoughts? Does gardening exercise one’s mind, one’s spirit?

The etymological root of the word, spirit, dates back to the 13th century from the “Latin *spiritus*, literally, breath, from *spirare* to blow, breathe: an animating or vital principle held to give life to physical organisms, a supernatural being or essence” (Mish et. al., 1994, p. 1134). Few descriptions have been recorded in any integrated way about the spirit of gardeners, especially older ones. Is a gardener training his spirit in the garden, trying to breathe life into his physical body? What happens physically in the garden is perhaps easiest to see and describe; therefore, I start there with my focus on health benefits of this “exercise” which have become known to date.

### **Making Our Way to Health by Touching the Earth**

From the earth itself we can find a way to be healthy. “Our bodies are made of the same elements found in healthy soil and seawater, so it is nothing short of a homecoming when we touch the earth. Best we should do so reverently, because the earth sustains us” (Taylor, 1998, p. 4). How does the earth sustain us and make us feel at home when we encounter it? And, ultimately, in what ways does this homecoming influence our spirits and our bodies as we age?

If one looks at the physical aspects of gardening as an exercise, there is much to consider. Participating in gardening has become recognized as a healthy heart exercise, equal to aerobic exercise because it can “increase strength, lower blood pressure [and] cholesterol, [and] burn about 340 calories an hour” (Foley, 1999, p. 82). Ainsworth et al. (2006) explain gardening uses four to five metabolic equivalents (METs) of energy, also understood as expending moderate activity by using four to five times the energy of a person at rest. Hickey reports the number of calories burned in 30 minutes by a 180-lb person raking, bagging leaves or planting seedlings is 162 calories; for weeding, planting

a tree or pushing a power mower (182 calories); for digging, spading or tilling (202 calories) (Hickey, 2004, ¶ 8). In the end, “The more METs, the more calories burned per given time frame...and Americans in general are catching onto the idea...as a good form of physical activity” (*Tufts University Health and Nutrition Letter*, 2000, p. 3).

Yet, gardening is not solely about counting calories or energy use. Individuals may be expending energy in this chosen exercise; however, they speak of being empowered and re-charged by it and really missing it if they cannot garden. Jessie describes how she felt on rainy and cold days when the ground was too wet to work; “When days go past and you haven’t been able to get outside it becomes really draggy around here and I don’t like it.” Whatever the caloric expenditure, her spirit is powered by time outside in her garden and she receives energy from the experience. The word, power, is contained in several derivations of the word, energy, and the Greek root of energy is *energia*, which means “activity” (Stein et al., 1969, pp. 472-473). Thus, it is less of a surprise other gardeners say this activity energizes and brings power rather than the other way around.

Another approach to understanding the effects on the *physical body* asks, “What is happening during gardening?” Gardening, in the medical literature at large, has been examined primarily in terms of its effect as a leisure activity, much like walking or jogging. As such, the patients’ health outcomes are compared with individuals doing other activities, in order to identify differences. For example, at the University of Arkansas researchers surveyed over 3,000 women aged 50 and older and found those who gardened at least weekly had improved bone density when compared to those who swam, jogged, walked, or did aerobics (Rafkin, 2001). Such studies offer one view of the

phenomenon, one way of seeing what is known. On the other hand, there may be much about the experience that has been left unexplored, unspoken.

In a recent article about weekend gardeners on “two-day serotonin-uplift marathon[s],” Hamlin (2003) says gardening, “often cited as the nation’s No. 1 leisure activity,” is also a “revitalization therapy” of these

tillers of the soil ...beginning a five- or six-month immersion in the simple and profound cycle of nature. For anyone who has ever opened a seed packet, it is all good: the lifting, the hauling, the breathing of pure air, the burrowing into the soil. (2003, ¶ 3-4)

How are elder gardeners going to sustain this “revitalization therapy” in their later seasons? Is this popular leisure physical activity thought of as an older person’s healthy enterprise that should be supported during the third age? Should it be a priority? Any activity that keeps older adults engaged is worthy of study. Furthermore, Hamlin’s article underscores the fact that this burrowing in the soil, indeed, gives life to these gardeners. But is this euphoria sustained in the later years to the point where older gardeners attempt to keep physically active? I think so.

How does the prospect of growing older evolve and change gardeners’ lived experiences? They know the realities of life intimately from witnessing life and death in their gardens. These are persons who depend on the very soil of the earth for their daily activity. Is it their natural expectancy to be returned to the Earth? Does a gardener understand this process more completely than others who have not observed composting or the innards of humus?

Gardeners learn that what is planted or green today gradually will transform and move through its seasons, eventually to experience winter and decay, returning to the soil itself. The soil, that which is under ground and on the surface, is understood as both the

source of life and the end point as well. Bennett (1994) reminds us of this truth about what dirt really emerges from; it is created from the end of whatever was once alive. So all living creatures return to dust, or become the dirt, the soil itself. Bennett uses this line of reasoning to explain how persons are made from the soil of the earth, which is also Mother Earth. This introduces us to the Mother Earth image of many cultures, for example, “Pachamama in Peru ... Ceres by the Romans, Demeter by ancient Greeks—[and the image] is a personification of the ability of the earth to hold seeds, produce life and nurture living things” (Bennett, 1994, p. 63) to name a few. What happens when winter comes and our ability to nurture living things is changed by circumstance or by an age that steals us away from what we know about ourselves?

### **Weathering the Seasons of Life**

The seasons in nature are not unlike the bodily changes we mortals experience, and ultimately, there is no denying the changes as we age. How do humans learn to recognize their bodies and accept their aging? Do our perceptions change our reflected selves in the mirror as we age? Merleau-Ponty’s working notes provide a glimpse of what he names “so-called synopsis, the perceptual synthesis” (1948/1973, p. 262) whereby we are visible-seers who accomplish both projection [representing something] and introjection at the same time, with introjection being an “unconscious, psychic process by which a person incorporates into his own psychic apparatus an image representing an object or individual” (Stein et al., 1969, p. 744). Merleau-Ponty (1948/1973) adds that this perceptual synthesis, this understanding of ourselves, is *not* attributed to our psyche nor is it as a result of some action related to our vision; instead, it is a perspective of our



world. In what ways does an understanding of our selves affect our perceptual mirror?  
Might this alter our lived body's experience of our aging flesh?

Merleau-Ponty (1948/1973) tells us that although we are “sonorous” beings like other non-living elements, we are different in that we hear our own resonance from within, that which is invisible. Do gardeners learn to hear the vibrations of their bodies and relate this visible awareness of body to their understanding of self? Merleau-Ponty reiterates that “...this flesh that one sees and touches is not all there is to flesh, nor this massive corporeity all there is to the body” (1948/1973, p. 144). We are so much more than the physical reality we know as our fleshly bodies. He goes on to explain the complexities of “The bond between the flesh and the idea, between the visible and the interior armature which it manifests and which it conceals” (p. 149). What is revealed when we learn to hear the invisible and make sense of the visible body? Would this self-knowing allow us to honor our lived bodies more as we face aging?

### **Being Embraced by Old Man Winter**

How might gardeners be honoring their bodies by learning of their own seasons in their garden work? What are the lessons for others who are aging? Gardeners, with their embodied knowing, may be the ones who can teach us how to manage the snowdrifts and fences of aging.

In winter we see the fragility of trees, and their pliant strength as they bend before the howling wind; we see them gleaming silver in a coating of early-morning ice; we see them changing in the changing light of late afternoon, reflecting the golden light of the setting winter sun. (Lacy, 1986, p. 210)

Perhaps, like the trees, the human spirit is both frail and strong during these harsher seasons. Maybe by learning about winter itself we can continue to grow in new ways during these harsher seasons of our lives. Perhaps the body may be frail but the

spirit can be stronger. We could begin by seeing ourselves differently during our own winters. Old Man Winter is afoot, it is said, when a person is aging. There is a Native American legend from the Northeast Woodlands of Seneca that tells the tale of how it came to be that Spring defeats Winter. It is readily understood that Old Man Winter was able to freeze rivers with his breath, dry up leaves and living plants and frighten away the birds and animals. He and his only friend, the North Wind, would gather in his lodge by the fire that gave no heat. One day a young man with a green staff appeared at his door. Finding it difficult to breathe inside with the ice and snowdrifts visibly melting around them, the North Wind abruptly left. Old Man Winter's magic, although powerful, was no match for Spring, who said:

I am young and strong. You cannot frighten me. ...Do you not feel how warm my breath is? Wherever I breathe the plants grow and the flowers bloom. Where I step the grasses sprout and snow melts away. The birds and animals come to me. See how long my hair is? Your hair is falling out now, Old Man. Wherever I travel I bring the sunshine and you cannot stay. Do you not know me, Old Man? Do you not hear my companion, the Fawn? She is the South Wind. She is blowing on your lodge. It is your time to leave. (Caduto & Bruchac, 1988, p. 131)

The legend provides us with a story of contrasts between these two seasons, reminding us of each season's strengths. It gives us one view of Old Man Winter. He is someone who takes life away, one who frightens birds and animals. Are oldsters frightened when they let go of their youth? Not really, apparently. A 1999 *Los Angeles Times* poll suggests we worry more about old age when we are younger, that the prospect of getting old is less frightening as we age (Richardson, 2000). Even so, it is of comfort that Spring and the South Wind come to the world's rescue; this is a continuous cycle. Nonetheless, we see that in the coming of Old Man Winter our magic diminishes along with losing our hair, our strength and our influence. It points out the tension that exists

when we humans move from youth (Spring) to old age (Old Man Winter). Once the different wind begins to blow, what happens to older adults? Have they readied themselves for the ensuing season, whichever it may be? Are they prepared? Should they still be frightened?

Similar to the legend's story of contrasts with its reflections on aging and identity, Turner (1995) says, "The crucial sociological issue in the aging process is the contradictory relationship between the subjective sense of an inner youthfulness and an exterior process of biological aging" (p. 258). St. John, the radio broadcaster who refused to retire and continued gardening, chose to ignore the signs of biological aging. Old Man Winter was confronted by Youth; he had no understanding of the seasons ahead. So, what are older adults facing in *their* final seasons; are older gardeners any better prepared to embrace Old Man Winter, or their biological aging? Is the healthcare community preparing older adults for *their* later seasons? The demographics, on their own merit, speak loudly.

In the world every month, close to one million persons enter their sixth decade of life, and women survive longer than men in almost every country (International Council of Nurses, 2004, ¶ 1). Globally, the nursing community, as voiced by the International Council of Nurses (ICN), aims to help "older persons achieve optimal health, well-being, and quality of life, as determined by those receiving care or consistent with the values and known wishes of the individual" ("Nursing care of the older person," 2004, ¶ 2). This language has its roots in earlier understandings in healthcare. Because it introduces the perception that one's personal choices impact or enhance well-being and effect longevity and one's quality of life, it is important to explain some of its beginnings.

In 1990, the United States Preventive Health Service established its Health Promotion objectives for the United States, placing new emphasis on health promotion strategies and the importance of individual choice in health/lifestyle decisions. This idea that persons can impact their own health was a new perception. It placed considerable responsibility upon the individual's shoulders, rather than solely upon the curative professional's shoulders. Subsequently, pressure was brought to bear on the healthcare community to inform the public about how to make better choices and live more healthy lives. This translated into a need to understand risk factors, attitudes and behaviors that might prevent disease or disability and, most pertinent to this study, *what environments can enhance well-being*.

Along with lifestyle and environment being considered important to health promotion research, some gerontological studies began to compare those factors that are associated with both longevity and better health. One health promotion research effort pertinent to my study compares older adults' functional independence and its relationship to overall quality of life. In this study Young (1996) surveyed older adults living independently in their homes, that is, those who were able to continue living on their own, remaining outside of institutions like nursing homes or assisted living homes, similar to my gardener conversants. Are gardeners somehow more able to remain at home functioning independently during the challenges of their later seasons of life? Are they making plans? I was heartened that my co-participants were willing to share their plans for the future. From a health perspective this idea of functional independence does suggest how older adults are getting around on their own, weathering their winters, so to

speak. Unfortunately, those who have lower levels of such independence often cannot live on their own anymore.

The other construct, quality of life, has become a popular term in gerontological research, and many attempts to measure this construct have emerged in the past decade. Thus, if you read a study whereby participants were asked about their “quality of life,” you may hear about their sense of well-being, their perception of their health, positive or negative affect, their satisfaction with life in general. Actually, any number of questions tries to focus on the participant’s “quality of life.” Once more is known, we can expect to see more intervention studies relating to a person’s “leisure history” as it is named in the literature—and this may be helpful in terms of promoting health. However, these elders who garden have chosen to continue gardening because they know what it does for their “quality of life,” and we have barely begun to gather *their* stories.

In her 1997 book, *Earth Works: Readings for Backyard Gardeners*, noted columnist and 30-year gardener Hugo asks, “How can we make them understand that for some of us, gardening is an imperative? We need it as much as we need water; we take our strength from the sun on our backs and our inspiration from watching things grow” (p. 64). Instead of being misunderstood, she wishes gardening could be elevated to the special status of motherhood, which always comes first. In my own gardening, when I slow down and grow plants from seed in my basement, I feel like a mother all over again. Every other day, at least, I must check the seeds, and later, the seedlings. I fuss over them. Are they getting enough warmth? Do they need misting? Have I provided enough light and food? I am a mother all over again and I feel good; I am satisfied. In the success

of nurturing my little plants, I experience happiness, an uplifted sense of well-being. I have created my own nurturing environment.

Hugo, like all gardeners perhaps, feels some days she is “called to nurture the earth” (1997, p. 64). “Is nurture the appropriate word?” I have been asked. I believe so. According to the *OED*, nurture is “caring or nourishing” along with the words “breeding and upbringing” (1961, p. 607). However the *OED Online* now includes a March 2004 draft revision:

to feed or nourish (a child, animal, etc.); to support and raise to maturity. . . In extended use: to care for and encourage growth and development of; to foster, cultivate. Also: to cherish or treasure within oneself (a hope, feeling, etc.) . . . To train, educate. . . to discipline; to chasten; to punish (Now *rare*).

The rare use is explained as associated with New Testament in Scots (1905) as in teaching biblical ways suggestive of punishment or discipline. Is the sense of nurture with gardeners at times a wish to control? Some gardeners insist on containment with physical controls like weeding or edging. Or is it more than that? If so, how is this accomplished? How are pesticides and herbicides used? What do the co-participants think about them? Are they concerned about toxicity for other living elements? This is explored with my conversants and addressed in Chapter Four.

What does this nurturing bring to our quality of life? Might this nurturing be a way gardeners learn to embrace Old Man Winter and the ups and down the seasons bring? Should there be special dispensation for all gardeners so their passion for gardening is not misunderstood, as Hugo (1997) suggests? Are these good years for gardeners, these years of the third age?

One of the continuing notions about gardeners is their nurturing role, their stewardship of the planet. It is an encompassing task, even in our own gardens. Yet, who

takes care of the gardeners? Who or what nurtures the gardeners in their winter seasons? Notice the plea to be cared for and held by Mother Earth, Mother Nature, Mother Soil (Monaghan, 1999)—or whichever name we assign her in this Roman prayer to the earth titled “Tellus Mater:”

Tellus, Holy Mother, source of nature  
you feed us while we live, you hold us when we die.  
Everything comes from you, everything returns to you.  
What else could we call you but Our Mother?  
Even the gods call you that. Without you  
there is nothing. Nothing can thrive, nothing can live  
without your power. Queen and goddess, I invoke you:  
You are all-powerful and my needs are so small.  
Give me what I ask and in exchange, I will give you  
my thanks, sincere and from my deepest heart. (Monaghan, 1999, p. 12)

Regardless of religious convictions, most gardeners would probably agree that nature is a source of much power and central to all life. Gardeners are persons who depend on the soil of the earth for their daily sustenance. “Our gardens are linked to ourselves by all the things that give us life, from the air that we breathe to the water we drink, from the light that enables us to see the warmth that allows us to move” (Bennett, 1994, p. 16). With these understandings, one could say gardeners belong to a community of believers. What is it like to belong to this community, its ways, and traditions about aging? While I have heard a bit about the beliefs of several preliminary conversants, I expect to dig deeper with the stories I have yet to hear. What has already become apparent is that each season brings its own challenges but everyone remembers their Springtime as a way to bolster against the Winds of Change.

### **Remembering Springtime: Changing with the Winds**

I see Springtime as a period of happiness when life is full of meaning and new life. Springtime would be the time of the best “quality of life” when Old Man Winter has

been held off for a little longer. Even in her sadness, dealing with the losses that seem inevitable in the winter of one's life, the following poem shows how the widow wistfully relives her Springtime.

“The Widow’s Lament in Springtime”

Sorrow is my own yard  
Where the new grass  
flames as it has flamed  
often before but not  
with the cold fire  
that closes round me this year.  
Thirty-five years  
I lived with my husband.  
The plumtree is white today  
with masses of flowers.  
Masses of flowers  
load the cherry branches  
and color some bushes  
yellow and some red  
but the grief in my heart  
is stronger than they  
for though they were my joy  
formerly, today I notice them  
and turn away forgetting.  
Today my son told me  
that in the meadows,  
at the edge of the heavy woods  
in the distance, he saw  
trees of white flowers.  
I felt that I would like  
to go there  
and fall into those flowers  
and sink into the marsh near them.  
(Williams, as cited in Hollander, 1996, pp. 190-191)

The widow is remembering her past thirty-five years with her husband, when she was as joyful as the cherry blossoms and the plum tree surrounded by the flames of the new grass. The sorrow is no longer distant but in her own yard, and she is cold and overrun with her grief. The sorrow has made her forget much of the past joys. Her son



tries, unsuccessfully, to console her. Perhaps she has not noticed the pain always, but on this day, it is acute and she wants to be taken away from these feelings. She wishes to surrender into the marsh. Osler (1998) wishes for the same escape, though not because of grief, but it is surrender in the garden just the same:

My ideal is to drift unquestioningly, lured onwards by what is just through the next opening, at the end of the path or across the bridge. It has nothing to do with intellect, with cerebral mastery or the naming of plants. The convenience of Latin passes me by. What I want on first entering a garden is submersion: to be sapped of identity, to look through narrowed eyes and, with luck, to end overwhelmed. (pp. 11-12)

Similarly, the widow wishes to lose her self and omit the details of life, like Osler, who ignores Latin names of plants. Narrowed eyes allow one's eyes to focus on a distant scene, but the scene remains, blurred from tears or not. Would distancing oneself change the emotion or lessen the pain for some? I think not. Distance only allows forgetting or covering over of the sorrow. Overall, surrender can be consoling, a form of respite, in and of itself. Besides, the surrounding beauty in nature is a welcome place for surrender, no matter the reason. Within springtime, nature's beauty is probably the most alluring. Spring "is the border between dreams and life" (Monaghan, 1999, p. 22). For the widow it must feel like a nightmare, as it would be for most who lose a loved one after thirty-five years together. Do others who bereave feel like falling into the flowers and sinking into the marsh? Has the widow wandered into this borderland alone? In the U.S. "about 30% (9.7 million) [of] non-institutionalized older persons live alone (7.4 million women, 2.4 million men)" (Administration on Aging, 2004, p. 5). Does the realization of being without a loved one feel like cold fire, as it did for the widow? Must the bereaved become skilled in the ways of forgetting for a time? Some rest is helpful, and it is hard to find

during such times, yet desperately needed. Is her wish to sink into the marsh a way of dying, or, instead, might it represent a wish for respite or a means to forget?

For older gardeners is loss experienced differently? Are they more attuned to the cyclical nature of life because of what they witness in their gardens every day? How do gardeners handle loss when it is so personal, so close? Some gardeners approach life as they approach their gardens and, yet, when the loss is close at hand, it is unlike any other. I have many musings. Perhaps, wistfully, gardeners watch how gracefully nature carries on and only hope to learn from it, as expressed in this passage about the rooms in the gardener's life:

Seasonal changes tell me that process, dynamism is what allies these disparate rooms of my life—kitchen, garden and soul. Always in change, always in flux. An old Polish proverb says that Spring is a virgin, Summer a mother, Autumn is a widow and Winter a stepmother, images that relate especially well to the garden, with the kitchen not far behind. Therein is my soul fed, even with September lessons in dying. But how gracefully the garden dies! (Sullo, 1999, p. x)

What makes up the rooms of the lives of older gardeners? Any gardener who cooks would add that herbs from the garden should find themselves planted close at hand; thus, the kitchen should not be far. Like the kitchen, the garden is always in transition, transforming itself with the seasons. As the seasons change, the images would be visible from both the kitchen and the garden. The witnessing of each season and the dynamic processes in the garden are what feeds the soul. Herein are the lessons of the garden, particularly the truths of Autumn and Winter. How do older gardeners not feel lost when the way they experience seasons keeps changing? Experiencing these seasons in life is probably quite different from watching them in the garden.

Monaghan says “Fall is fullness and emptiness all in one” (1999, p. 27). If this is true, how do gardeners manage the tension? How are their souls transformed during the

seasons, especially in widowhood (Autumn), if being a stepmother is to follow (Winter)? So, in what manner do older gardeners face these changes within? We know so little about their seasons of life, much less their later seasons. So far, little formal research has addressed older gardeners or the leisure activity of gardening itself. I have a particular interest in examining subjective well-being as we age, or what someone like the widow might be experiencing. The variables in such studies of older adults mention engagement with life, the role of physical and cognitive function, social roles and interactions, but there is much more to understand than the constructs themselves. As for the particular subset of work relating to older persons and their environment, the ones mentioning gardening center on the human body itself, or the ill body, rather than how aging is experienced.

### **The Mortal Body on Planet Earth and the Life-Spirit**

The body *stands* before the world and the world upright before it, and between them there is a relation that is one of embrace. And between these two vertical beings, there is not a frontier, but a contact surface... (Merleau-Ponty, 1948/1973, p. 271)

How does the mortal body experience Planet Earth as we stand before the world? It begins in infancy. Merleau-Ponty (1948/1973) explains how, even as children, we understand the world around us without knowing the words to describe what we see and without having the mouth form the intelligible sounds that encompass language. The sensible world is the one we experience fully with our five senses and our whole bodies—we are beings-in-the world. The same

sensible world is common to the sensible bodies...it is the same world that contains our bodies and our minds, provided that we understand by world not only the sum of things that fall or could fall under our eyes, but also the locus of their compossibility, the invariable style they observe, which connects our perspectives, permits transition from one to the other and—whether in describing a

detail of the landscape or in coming to agreement about an invisible truth—makes us feel we are two witnesses...(Merleau-Ponty, 1948/1973, p. 13)

This notion of the world as witnessed through our bodies and contained in our minds befits this study of the lifeworld of the older gardener. As the flesh of a gardener ages, what invisible truths are brought forward? For gardeners truly are bodies in full contact with Planet Earth. Gardeners often speak about the feel and smell of the dirt itself, but they move on to engage with the Planet in other ways. Like children open to new experiences, they seem to look for opportunities to interact with other elements of the planet, such as water and the animal kingdom. Is this what makes the relationship between the body and the world an embrace, as Merleau-Ponty (1948/1973) names it? Are there some insights that will emerge from embracing our relationship with nature over the lifespan?

We know little about a gardener's relationship with Earth during later seasons. What would older gardeners ask for if not a continued relationship with Earth as Mother in the way it is expressed in the following passage?

[Earth emerging] as one of the sacred planets in the Grandmother galaxy, we necessarily experience, each in our specific way, our share or form of her experience, her form... We are each and all a part of her [Earth], an expression of her essential being. We are each a small fragment that is not the whole but, that perforce, reflects in our inner self, our outer behavior, our expressions and relationships and institutions, her self, behaviors, her expressions and relationships, her forms and structures. We are not her, but we take our being from her, and in her being we have being, as in her life we have life. As she is, so are we. (Allen, 2001, pp. 81-82)

How much fuller our perspective becomes when we as humans allow ourselves to identify with the idea that humans are part of the earth itself. With their knowledge of compost, do gardeners understand how “we take our being from” earth, and later, will return our bodies to it? Just as the soil is part of the earth and plants are the living force,

“A garden has always been a place where people and plants interact, with transformation on both sides” (Bennett, 1994, p. 152). How do older persons transform themselves during their third age? What are the images brought to mind when elders think about their aging? How do the old perceive themselves?

Featherstone (1995) begins his book on the images of aging asking some of these questions, while noting how little has been written about the culture and self-image of the middle-aged and the old. Perhaps this study can add a new dimension that shows how gardeners recognize their mortal bodies. Many persons are neither comfortable nor accepting of their bodies. What about the aging body? How does one undergo the transformation of one’s own seasons? Featherstone’s discussions led me back to this notoriously defiant poem, “Warning,” by Jenny Joseph:

When I am an old woman, I shall wear purple  
With a red hat which doesn’t go, and doesn’t suit me,  
And I shall spend my pension on brandy and summer gloves  
And satin sandals, and say we’ve no money for butter.  
I shall sit down on the pavement when I am tired  
And gobble up samples in shops and press alarm bells  
And run my stick along public railings  
And make up for the sobriety of my youth.  
I shall go out in my slippers in the rain  
And pick the flowers in other people’s gardens  
And learn to spit.  
You can wear terrible shirts and grow more fat  
And eat three pounds of sausages at a go  
Or only bread and a pickle for a week  
And hoard pens and pencils and beer mats and things in boxes.  
But now we must have clothes that keep us dry  
And pay our rent and not swear in the street  
And set a good example for the children.  
We will have friends to dinner and read the papers.  
But maybe I ought to practise a little now?  
So people who know me are not too shocked and surprised  
When suddenly I am an old woman and I start to wear purple.  
(as cited in Martz, 1987, p. 1)

It appears the old woman is looking into her autumn and winter years ahead. She is transcending, seeing her life will change into a time when she can be freer and let go of promises and expectations. She will pick the flowers from other people's gardens without hesitation. What if she was a gardener? She would be bent on breaking rules and experimenting, probably to the point of growing prairie instead of a lawn. For certain, many gardeners are outspoken about their likes and dislikes, but whether they develop such freedom with maturity is not clear to me. I wonder about it though. Does our need for validation from others take on different meaning when we get older? Is the process of aging something one has to practice a little first? What will their priorities be, in and outside their gardens? How do elders make meaning of the different Winds from the North, from the South? The winds symbolize some of the challenges elders face: illness, disability, change and uncertainty.

Maybe because I am mindful of these winds myself, I especially am interested in the studies that focus upon meaning in life, or what I would call, a spiritual component. To date I have only found one qualitative study related to gardeners. Unruh, Smith and Scammell's (2000) qualitative, exploratory pilot was conducted with three women cancer patients and supported a perspective called Attention Restoration Theory (Kaplan, R., 1992; Kaplan, S., 1995; Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989). This theory suggests gardens are health enhancing in that they provide opportunities for fascination and escape, among other qualities deemed restorative. While it was a small study with only three conversants, Unruh, et al. (2000) found "the interactions between the gardener and the garden" were often accompanied by a sense of spirituality for two of the three cancer patients (p. 70), and considered it important work in that it supported previous studies. What should we

make of this? “Interactions between the gardener and the garden” is a phrase that seems to be unable to capture the richness of the experience of gardening life. Notice, instead, the image of the older gardener portrayed in Boltz’s poem called “Social Security:”

She knows a cashier who  
blushes and lets her use  
food stamps to buy tulip  
bulbs and rose bushes.

We smile each morning as I  
pass her—her hand always  
married to some stick  
or hoe, or rake.

One morning I shout,  
“I’m not skinny like  
you so I’ve gotta run  
two miles each day.”

She begs me closer, whispers  
to my flesh, “all you need,  
honey, is to be on welfare  
and love roses.”  
(as cited in Martz, 1987, p. 127)

This poem paints such a clear picture that I think I have seen this old lady or her twin, probably, in the cold on a misty morning. While she is out pruning the roses there is no notice of weather conditions outside; in fact, it usually is raining when I see this gardener. Gardeners know when it is time to prune the old rose canes during early winter. So, instead of being “married” to the rake or hoe (as in the poem), the wise gardener (like the protagonist in the poem) picks up the anvil cutters, or “nippers” and that is what you see in their hands. Like the old gardener in the poem, the gardener has moved beyond the boundaries of her physical body to be with her roses. Her life with the bulbs and the roses influences how she experiences her physical body and continues to be so alive. It is as if her aging body is of little consequence to her, or she has forgotten about it. Klein (1997)

contends “Our sense of how we inhabit our bodies, something so unremarked upon that it is utterly taken for granted, is actually an important factor in how we live our lives...” (p. 139).

The Englishwoman, Jessie, could be this gardener sometimes, as she and her neighbor are known to travel the back roads of their subdivision trimming the noxious climbing weeds on fences and poles lining the streets nearby. So, again, the phrase, “interaction between the gardener and the garden” is not adequate in explaining their passion, nor why the neighborhood flora need to be brought back under control. If doing a health assessment, I would consider Jessie to be aging well, seemingly fit and in remarkably good health. Is this “aging well” typical of gardeners, I wonder? Who knows? And what of the spirit of the gardener? The usual depression scale would not suffice, and wellness measures focusing on the spirit are largely untested. Besides grouped data in national studies that are problematic in that they consider gardening equal to yard work, no major studies offer any understanding of older gardeners’ experiences of the natural environment or their garden—if that might be seen as similar.

A few studies have attempted to describe what gardening is like during periods of illness, sparked by Ulrich’s (1984) landmark study. Ulrich did a retrospective record review of several hundred surgical patients and found those with a view of green plants instead of a plain building wall (the control group) had a significantly shorter hospitalization and needed less pain medicine. This classic study is widely quoted as proof of the healing quality of passive exposure to plants. Although a few follow-up studies have begun to explore passive exposure to plants, or *looking at* plants, I am



fascinated about the phenomenon of gardeners being with plants, or the gardener's active involvement with living plants.

Maybe being in the presence of plants changed my relationship with them; I am not sure. What I do know is that gardeners enter into relationships with their plants. Sometimes, gardeners worry about their plants: when the plants are young, growing, or ill. Jessie said to her Golden Delicious Tree "Listen, if you don't shape up you're going to be chopped down!" All this talking to the trees happens in concert with an acceptance if the tree dies. Bennett (1994) offers this explanation:

Plants are our calm earthly companions and, more than that, our complements. They are made from the same stuff we are. They need air, food and water. They use the same minerals we do. And they are composed of the same proteins, which break down if the temperature becomes too high, causing damage, then death. ...Plants are wounded and heal, they suffer from disease, they struggle, survive and die. (pp. 147-148)

One cannot help but notice the parallels between humans and plants from that passage. What is it like to have a plant as a companion when you are getting older? Is it like having a companion animal? Are the benefits of having a pet, or receiving pet therapy similar?

In much of the research on gardening so far, the emphasis has been on horticultural therapy or the healing environment itself associated with a health care setting (Gerlach-Spriggs, Kaufman, & Warner, 1998; Marcus & Barnes, 1999; Ulrich, 1984). The attention is on patients, whether institutionalized demented patients (Borrett, 1996), AIDS patients (Marcus & Barnes, 1999), or patients in nursing homes, as in the Eden Alternative (Thomas, 1996) or an Alzheimer's facility (Beckwith & Gilster, 1997). Sociocultural insights from Stein's (1997) horticultural therapy case study of older women residents in a nursing home included recognizing individual personhood, the need

for friendship among the institutionalized, and how the process of the garden project fostered meaning-making for these women. When not based on hospitalized or institutionalized patients alone, other studies examine the ways people (patients, visitors, employees) feel about being in gardens situated in healthcare facilities (Marcus & Barnes, 1999). Moreover, what has been questioned often pertains only to institutional settings, those where older patients are subjects of the study, not conversants participating fully in the discussion. In these institutional environments, the healing garden ideas have survived since medieval times, despite some periods of inactivity (Warner, 1993; Warner, 1994).

And how does this connect to nursing research? In *Notes on Nursing: What it Is, and What it is Not*, Nightingale (1859/1946) writes about the importance of patients getting fresh air, light, and, having a view from the window:

In watching disease, both in private houses and in public hospitals, the thing which strikes the experienced observer most forcibly is this, that the symptoms or the sufferings generally considered to be inevitable and incident to the disease are very often not symptoms of the disease at all, but of something quite different—of the want of fresh air, or of light, or of warmth, or of quiet... (p. 5)

Nightingale (1859/1946) advocated for patients' minds, too, insisting one's spirit affects the physical body. She openly disagreed with the prevalent medical opinion of the era by welcoming flowers or a living plant as safe and welcome additions to sickrooms. Widespread scientific evidence today confirms plants, indeed, improve and clean the air. Of particular interest to my study of gardeners in their gardens, Warner (1993) credits Nightingale for believing in the merit of patients having nature at hand and being given an opportunity to work outside in a cloister garden. Her lead has provided an opening for unearthing the lived experience of non-institutionalized, "well" older gardeners who have

chosen gardening. In their gardens, the gardeners' lives are filled with "nearby nature" (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1990). In *The Harmony of Nature and Spirit*, Singer (1996) offers "the possibility that we can get beyond the suffering in life either by play, or by accepting our mere existence, or by consciously living in accordance with nature" (p. x). These gardeners have chosen this as their "leisure history."

What meaning does this creative act of gardening bring to ground-keepers in their final seasons, and what are the fences, or barriers to their doing this? As older persons, these gardeners move beyond their bodies and gardens. In concert with Merleau-Ponty's writings, they use their experience of the garden itself for a perceptual presence of the world. "It is ...[their] experience, prior to every opinion, of inhabiting the world by ...[their] body, of inhabiting the truth by ...[their] whole selves" (Merleau-Ponty, 1948/1973, p. 28). The gardeners seem to know, almost intuitively, that this is good for them. Might they be experiencing truth through their world of gardening?

They are often courageous about continuing this activity when many might retire from it. Instead, they climb on out of that winter snowdrift of increasing age and remain committed to working on their relationship with the Earth and others, re-minding us with lessons from traversing the boundaries of aging in today's adolescent society. Perhaps what Klein (1997) suggests is true: "Wherever nature is no longer viewed as sacred and alive...boundaries between our bodies and the external world seem to harden" (p. 139). What strengthens and gives them support to overcome these barriers, to cross the boundaries before they harden?

## **Where Fantasy and Imagination Flourish in the Borderlands of Time**

I am not sure what came first. Maybe children led gardeners to the magic in their gardens, or, perhaps the gardeners invited the children into their gardens to enjoy the magic. It hardly matters. Clearly it is the stuff of fairylands. Whether real or imagined I am told that garden fairies abound in today's backyards as perhaps in yesteryear. Some of these fairies may be garden ornaments; some may instead be the fruit of an active imagination, but it appears these musings have some measure of support in garden literature. Embedded within passages of garden wisdom in the 1850 *Old Farmer's Almanac* (in Van Hazinga, *The Old Farmer's Almanac Book of Garden Wisdom*, 2000) are hints at the presence of a crossroads, an intersection, between the things of medicine and fantasy in the form of fairy tales. Apparently this is partly because of the superstition about finding fairies "on the bank where the wild thyme blows" (p. 149). The *Almanac's* advice continues. To protect oneself from their mischief, the remedy (or medicine) was to collect certain herbs (yarrow, vervain, speedwell, eyebright, mallow, and self-heal) for a nosegay. Instructions were specific, insisting it be midday in full sun when a full moon is expected. Another option is "leaving cookies in a bed of thyme on Midsummer Night, one night they're sure to be out dancing" (p. 149). Is this not magical if it works to a human's advantage and we still get to see the fairies dancing?

Instead of focusing on the fairies, what would it be like to be dancing in one's later years? Is the fantasy life surrounding gardening a way of being able to dance again? Is the richness of the surrounding sights, smells, and sounds a way of returning to the freedom of being able to dance unabashedly, and care-free as the fairies do? I know gardeners who can attest to, or, more importantly, identify with such stories! Jessie, the

Englishwoman I spoke with, was articulate about being enchanted when involved in her gardening. She totally loses her self in her gardens, forgetting how long she has been out there. Because the hours are extensive and go well into the evening, past her husband's idea of a normal dinner time, she says she wishes the fairies would come and cook for her so she could be allowed to stay outside longer during the summer evenings. She readily admits her rapture, saying her husband would ask politely, "Might we be having supper sometime this evening?" Jessie truly is under a spell out there in her garden and for her, the daily life interruptions, like mealtimes, are merely "a disturbance," as she puts it. And this feeling is not just in her garden, either. She is an active volunteer in a local garden, London Town, near her home. At this historic site she takes visitors on tours of the gardens. As often as she traverses those paths with groups, she still speaks about the garden as being "magical."

Surely these gardens of mystery are where both fantasy and imagination can flourish. Might these gardens be places of wonder where fairies and humans can coexist happily together again as in the very beginning of time? Apparently time was inconsequential at the very beginning of time. However, once humans became obsessed with time keeping, everything changed. Time was transformed into "an ogre that had to be obeyed. With time, ...they [humans] grew old—too old to believe in fairies. This is why humans start fairy tales with 'Once upon a time, a long time ago,' so that they can remind themselves of a time when time was just a small boring thing" (Gardner, 2001, p. 3). Jessie would agree wholeheartedly with these fairies, self-proclaimed escorts from the beginnings of time. Is the lesson for humans just not to grow old? This is not possible. Humans as they age, enter the borderlands of time.

The fairy tales describe the early beginnings of time as that of great unknowns, much like the times experienced by elders entering the borderlands of time in today's world. The borders of these other worlds where fairies travel are not well marked, not well defined or recognizable sometimes. Maybe elders, too, think they have gone back in time, sometimes. They have drifted across an unfamiliar boundary into aging. Do some older persons feel they are at the mercy of the seasons they experience in life, especially Old Man Winter? Gardeners know Mother Nature maintains the seasons of the natural world; however, this borderland may be different. Facing the unknown could be dangerous, and definitely, unsettling. Mortal time and mortal space (are) connected via cracked seams that are passageways to places where the rules disappear. And fairies are one way of crossing over into new realms. I would like to think the garden and its fairies might offer elders an escort to new adventures that exist between earth and sky, to the Faerie Islands:

...lands where all is happiness, peace and plenty. There are no frosts or droughts for it is always Spring, There is no ageing or disease or work. For all things grow in abundance without need of ploughing or sowing and there is always fruit in the trees. (Froud & Lee, 1978, not paginated)

Sounds like forbidden fruit that hearkens back to the other Garden; but then again, in a garden of wonder anything is possible. Midsummer's eve would be a good time for an expedition beyond the boundaries. Maybe experiencing life through gardening is one way to cross the boundaries of aging and not be alone or disheartened. In *Coming of Age*, Brower, who clearly crossed many boundaries in his life, spoke about witnessing his students being caught up in the imaginings of what could be:

A student I once had at Stanford...told the class she had planted a garden, and one day they saw the seeds had sprouted and the first shoots were appearing and they applauded. They experienced a sense of wonder. It hadn't been squelched out of

them yet. They are enjoying something that we all are forgetting how to enjoy: how the world works and the beauty of it. It still moves me. (as cited in Terkel, 1995, p. 5)

Might older people who garden retain the sense of wonder by keeping their hands in the dirt as they cross the boundaries of age? Will the healthcare profession *be with* these keepers of the earth as they continue on their journeys? Nurses and others in healthcare have much to learn from these gardeners. Gardeners not only enliven their spirits in their garden work, they create a place of beauty and simply enjoy being with plants. They also are present to the world with their whole being: through their senses and their bodies—even aging bodies. What are the grounding practices we could learn from them if they experience their gardens as caring, nurturing places from which to cross between and within themselves as they age?

The expedition in this chapter has allowed for digging deeper into the epicenter of the gardening experience for the caretakers of the earth. By reviewing cultural and linguistic interpretations through poetry, myth and stories I have had a glimpse of the elements of wonder, healing and the borderlands of the seasons that gardening may bring to these older persons. Upon being taken into the gardening experience, the phenomenon of the lived experience of older gardeners has been opened up to show some of what they may have experienced.

To move forward, I may have to “de-distance” myself from the phenomenon itself, so that I may come closer, as in “a circumspect approaching, a bringing near as supplying, preparing, having at hand” (Heidegger, 1953/1996, p. 98) so that I may come to understand it better. At the same time, I have had to come to terms with using Heidegger’s writings as a way of learning phenomenological traditions. The Heidegger

we know from our readings has much about him that remains concealed. Yet, like Ryle (1978), I admire the complexity and depth of the many contributions he brought to the search for one's place in the world. Heidegger's early beginnings in theology clearly helped him to want to look at the "root workings of the human soul" (Ryle, 1978, p. 64), and for this, many of us are grateful. However, I find it important to add that his apparently brief association with the Nazi party, however misguided and unfortunate it was, stains his reputation as an authentic being. De-distancing myself from the person of Heidegger, I use his writings in the way I believe they were intended, to help with the search for understanding in the everyday lifeworlds of those for whom we care deeply.

This next chapter provides the philosophical foundations for my phenomenological study of the older gardeners who take care of the Earth. The writings of the several philosophers, including Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Casey and van Manen serve as guideposts on this phenomenological path and lead to new understandings of these keepers of the Earth.



**CHAPTER THREE:**  
**INTO THE THICKET: PHILOSOPHICAL GROUNDING AND  
METHODOLOGY FOR THE STUDY**

How calmly and genially the mind apprehends one after another the laws of physics! What noble emotions dilate the mortal as he enters into the counsels of the creation, and feels by knowledge the privilege to BE! His insight refines him. The beauty of nature shines in his own breast. Man is greater that he can see this, and the universe less, because Time and Space relations vanish as laws are known. (Emerson, 1836/1991, p. 34)

**Finding My Way into the Lifeworld of the Keepers**

Entering into the lifeworld of the keepers of the Earth is to enter in-to the counsels of the creation, that is, to be with nature. And nature, as part of the creation, brings these gardeners knowledge that is lived rather than conceptualized. Finding my way into this lifeworld cannot be hurried; rather it must be a contemplative pace. Emerson asks, “Who looks upon a river in a meditative hour, and is not reminded of the flux of all things?” (1836/1991, p. 23). We are reminded that in nature every being is connected and part of the flow of Living Earth. I had forgotten these truths in my haste to enter into the lifeworld of the older gardener, that is, entering the thicket.

When standing at the edge of a dense forest, we think it is difficult to know how best to move through the thicket in front of us. However, if one proceeds more slowly, taking note of the Living Earth’s surroundings, the trees seem to have allowed enough room so as not to obstruct the pathway. You find yourself moving toward a clearing somehow. As you meet the trees—up close—you see the trees are more like saplings that are spreading roots and taking hold, yet they allow space for others to pass by or, perhaps, linger awhile longer. So it has been with this dissertation journey into the lifeworld of the keepers of the Earth, where the process is akin to contemplating the river

of life itself. In the slowing down of the pace, we are allowed to meet our selves on the pathway of life. “Unless the soul goes out to meet what we see we do not see it; nothing do we see, not a beetle, not a blade of grass” (Hudson, as cited in Seton, 1998, p. 16). And this finding of my way, this slowing down, has brought me to want to “see” the lifeworld of the keepers all the more clearly and up close through the philosophical guideways of hermeneutic phenomenology.

### **Philosophical Guideways**

This chapter took me into the thicket as I moved between the philosophical foundations and the methodology for this research which compelled me to ask, **What is the lived experience of gardening like for older gardeners?** In Chapter One I trace the beginnings of my path, how it is that I stand next to older gardeners at the edge of their world full of nature. I describe my own gardening life, and become drawn into the narratives of other gardeners, young and old. The writing of Chapter Two is a gathering time, a chance to explore the phenomenon even deeper through a collecting of cultural and linguistic perspectives that have influenced our understandings of gardens and gardeners. Spending time with gardeners’ words, I recognize the metaphor of the seasons, the true cycles of life where seeds become saplings, and then trees, that create life so another circle of the seasons begins. With reverence I reflect and write my way into a renewed valuing of this work. I am struck by how much we do not understand about the lifeworld of older gardeners and Living Earth’s role as teacher in this later season of the gardeners’ lives.

My path in Chapter Three is inlaid with the bricks of hermeneutic phenomenology from which I build a foundation for the research. The philosophers’ works come with me

along the way. I also introduce the participants, my partners in this study, the setting for the conversations and name the human rights protections that will be afforded the participants. For while Planet Earth is the setting for gardeners, phenomenology and philosophical perspectives provide the earthly foundation, the rootstock for building my study. For “Earth is the building bearer, nourishing with its fruits, tending water and rock, plant and animal” (Heidegger, 1971/2001, p. 176).

Building this study requires digging deeper into the words themselves and their interpretations. It depends upon language that is lived, spoken, and written, for language can speak to us about the essence of a thing if we learn the language (Heidegger, 1954/1993a). For example, picking up on one of the words in the above quote, I think about what gardeners do; they are “tending plant and animal,” taking care of their piece of the earth. The word, “tend,” however, differs in meaning from Heidegger’s notion of “care” which can have multiple meanings. I notice this studying the philosophers’ writings. Heidegger adds, “The care for seeing is essential to the being of human being” (Heidegger, 1953/1996, p. 160). This insight holds a special meaning in terms of gardeners, who are known for their attention to *all* the senses. In ways such as these, philosophical writing and exegesis can illuminate new meaning about a phenomenon.

In *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language*, “tend” not only means “ministering to, serve” but it is also “to be disposed towards an idea, emotion or way of thinking” (Stein et al., 1969, p. 1462). In digging deeper into these meanings, I note that as a human science researcher, I am disposed toward the idea of phenomenology as a framework. Hence, I draw primarily upon the writings of the philosophers Heidegger, Gadamer, Merleau-Ponty, and Casey, and place considerable

emphasis on Max van Manen's work to elucidate the purposes and methodology I live with in this phenomenological study.

### **Searching with the Builders who Dwell in Nature and Tend to the Sacred**

In the phenomenological tradition described by van Manen (2003), human science researchers are searchers. They seek out the common, everyday experiences that are the "grounding of human existence" (p. 101). The word, *research* means, "to seek" (Stein et al., 1969, p. 1259). It also means "to go around again" (Hultgren, personal communication, February 13, 2006). In my research I am returning to gardening with the conversants, thus going around again by entering their world. I search for the builders and take "the care for seeing is essential" (Heidegger, 1953/1996, p. 160) for these gardeners as human beings who dwell in nature and tend to the sacred in life.

What is it like to be a Keeper of the Earth? My choice of the word "keeper" brings to mind not only one who protects and surrounds something, but one who cares for, tends and provides for something, or offers nourishment to living things, much as Planet Earth does. Have these older gardeners learned about being keepers from dwelling with the very living green plants and trees themselves? As gardeners tend to the earth, till the earth, they are builders; for Heidegger explains that in building something, we have already come to dwell there.

The way in which you are and I am, the manner in which we humans *are* on the earth is *Buan*, dwelling... To be a human being means to be on the earth as a mortal. It means to dwell. The old word *bauen*, (means to build)... *also* means at the same time to cherish and protect, to preserve and care for, specifically to till the soil, to cultivate the vine. Such building only takes care—it tends the growth that ripens into fruit of its own accord. Building in the sense of preserving and nurturing is not making anything. ... Building as dwelling, that is being on the earth, however, remains for man's everyday experience... we inhabit it. (1954/1993a, p. 349)

From this we can say the everyday experiences of these mortal persons dwelling in their gardens and nurturing green living things suggest they truly *inhabit* Planet Earth. They tend the growth that ripens into fruit of its own accord. What calls them to do this? Are gardeners called to “caring” as a way of thinking and being? Fundamental questions about the way they are on the earth are the way of phenomenology.

Older gardeners have learned how to move into the thicket with gratefulness and care. It is as if through their experiences with Mother Earth, they know how to move through life taking note of their surroundings. In their lifeworlds, gardeners come to know Planet Earth, Mother Earth, Living Earth, Gaia, or *Gaea*, the “ancient Greek goddess of the earth” (Stein et al., 1969, p. 579). Although it is known by many names, it is our home and gardeners know it from dwelling on the earth, that is, inhabiting the planet fully as beings who connect with the living elements in nature.

In their interaction with nature, the gardener builds a home, a dwelling place on Planet Earth itself, a small part of which may be experienced in the garden. Casey (1993) refers to these places where we reside as ways we identify our selves, that our residence or “dwelling” place is more than our home. “Built places, then, are extensions of our bodies. ...Places built for residing are rather an enlargement of our already existing embodiment into *an entire lifeworld of dwelling*” (Casey, 1993, p. 120). For gardeners, their residence, their built place is *the garden*. This is their home, their extension of the human body.

E. O. Wilson reminds us with this larger perspective: “Earth is our home in the full, generic sense, where humanity and its ancestors existed for all the millions of years of their evolution” (1996, p. 190). The genetic material inside us mortals instills in us a

calling to dwell on Planet Earth. Gardeners have discovered this. They describe their feeling of completeness while in sacred natural places, their gardens. Perhaps, in part because of these sacred places, gardeners have more opportunity to experience wholeness because of these ways of knowing. Dienske (1987) suggests the experience of wholeness in itself is a way of knowing.

Gardeners' ways of knowing have a profound influence on their pilgrimage through life's thickets. Maybe they have learned to discover life by seeing in different ways, without rushing. Heidegger offers this example of how a building is experienced as a way of seeing in a different way, realizing everyone sees things in their own realm.

The building stands there even if we do not observe it. We can come across it only because it already is. In addition, the Being of this building does not at all seem to be identical for everybody. For us, as observers or passers-by, it is not what it is for the students who are inside, not just because they see it only from the inside but because for them this building really is what it is and how it is. (Heidegger, 1953/2000, p. 36)

Looking at gardening from the inside, or from the gardener's vantagepoint, is a seeing that is part of an interpretive research approach. Discovering how their lives are individually interpreted in terms of their experiences is part of phenomenology, with "the world as we immediately experience it pre-reflectively rather than as we conceptualize, categorize, or reflect on it" (van Manen, 2003, p. 9). In using phenomenology, which places an emphasis on the individual's reality, one's everyday experience of a phenomenon, the process will "let that which shows itself be seen from itself, just as it shows itself from itself" (Heidegger, 1953/1996, p. 30). Van Manen calls this kind of research a "primal telling...to discover what lies at the ontological core of our being" (1984, p. 39).

## Phenomenology as a Pilgrimage of Discovery

This descriptive methodology, phenomenology, becomes a pilgrimage of discovery for the participants and the researcher. It brings me into the lifeworlds of the participants, where they dwell and experience what Heidegger calls a “primal oneness...earth and sky, divinities and mortals—belong together as one” (1954/1993a, p. 351). This is a place of sacredness. McLuhan describes another pilgrimage of discovery, one of encountering states of sacredness, which belong to all beings:

The sacred is in the coming together, an un-covering of what we've known before, a turning to the infinite treasures that rest within the human spirit...It behooves us to become more attentive to the potential of spiritual and cultural alchemy in the retrieval of what has always been our—the living experience of the ultimate unity of the human spirit, the biosphere and the cosmos. (1994, p. 15)

If the coming together is also a coming to understanding, it also could represent a moving into light and a clearing—an open area, “or into its openness” (Heidegger, 1954/1993b, p. 442). In my mind's eye, I return to the example of entering a thicket in the forest, hoping to make my way, perhaps to find a clearing.

What makes a clearing possible? Heidegger tells us that a clearing may be a place free for brightness and darkness but also [can be a place] for resonance and echo, for sound and the diminishing of sound. The clearing is the open region for everything that becomes present and absent...The phenomenon itself, in the present case the clearing, sets us the task of learning from it while questioning it, that is, of letting it say something to us. (Heidegger, 1954/1993b, p. 442)

In order to be open to the phenomenon itself, letting it speak to me as the researcher, I must return to the thicket and walk into it. I learn about the phenomenon; in fact, I discover by being with it while questioning it. The questioning comes as I “look around” the lifeworld of the older gardener, to “contemplate the narrower and wider sphere within which we dwell, daily and hourly, knowing and unknowing, a sphere that

constantly shifts its boundaries and suddenly is broken through” (Heidegger, 1953/2000 p. 37). The contemplation of both the narrower and wider sphere demands a heightened awareness. This holds true linguistically, because according to *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language*, part of the definition of phenomenon encompasses “an appearance or immediate object of awareness in experience” (Stein et al., 1969, p. 1080). As questioner, I focus on this awareness in experience.

### **Standing in the Openness of Beings with Hermeneutic Phenomenology**

In hermeneutic phenomenology, the interpretive inquiry process brings us to a questioning that helps illuminate “the meaning of human phenomena (such as in literary or historical studies of texts) and...[the] understanding [of] the lived structures of meanings (such as in phenomenological studies of the lifeworld)” (van Manen, 2003, p. 4). History credits Husserl with the founding of twentieth century phenomenological philosophy and the term, “lived experience.” Macann elaborates, “Whatever is actually lived out—perceived, thought, imagined, remembered—is, in so far as it is a lived experience, free from doubt” (1993, p. 17). It is through this lived experience that one gains natural knowledge—this is “knowledge based on facts that become known through experience” (Macann, 1993, p. 25). Thus, embodied knowledge and intuiting are the hallmarks of phenomenology. Embodied knowledge is part of being human; “Our bodies as well as our minds are knowers, and this embodied knowledge enables us to move through situations and encounter situations in terms of meaning” (Benner & Wrubel, 1989, p. 42). Phenomenology is about finding meaning as a way to discover and understand human issues.



## **Verstehen, the Act of Understanding**

A phenomenological study is not about description alone but the act of *Verstehen*, or understanding. Polkinghorne refers to the work of phenomenology as reflection in action, a posing of questions, while knowing there may be an answer that is not visible (personal communication, June 26, 2003).

Phenomenology makes a place for discovery and opens up possibility for what might be—with renewed understandings. Gadamer writes, “Understanding is never a subjective relation to a given ‘object’ but to the history of its effect; ... understanding belongs to the being of that which is understood” (1960/1989, p. xxxi). Gadamer believes in the universality of the hermeneutic perspective, the goal being understanding. The objective of the knowledge sought from this human science aims at “all human experience of the world and human living...[to get to the question of]...How is understanding possible?” (1960/1989, p. xxx).

Gadamer, like Heidegger, places the emphasis upon the intention to understand the experience of the participant.

However much experientials are involved, the aim is not to confirm or extend these universalized experiences in order to attain knowledge of a law (e.g., how men, peoples, and states evolve) but to understand how this man, this people, or this state is what it has become or, more generally, how it happened that this is so. (1960/1989, p. 5)

To understand something to this degree, or “how it happened that this is so” as said above, we must put ourselves in another’s situation, Gadamer says. He names this awareness of the otherness a “transposing [of] ourselves” by having a history from which to gain more understanding in another’s situation (1960/1989, p. 305). This notion of transposing is exemplified in the following quote: “What would I discover about the

cottonwoods if when I walked to the mailbox I listened to them instead of looked at them?” (Prather, 1972, not paginated). Prather has transposed himself. Emerson gains similar insight: “When I behold a rich landscape, it is less to my purpose to recite correctly the order and superposition of the strata, than to know why all thought of multitude is lost in a tranquil sense of unity” (1836/1991, p. 59). Is there the same sense of unity for older gardeners who recognize how to behold nature in their surroundings?

Have gardeners a heightened sense of otherness from being in the presence of nature? This study can bring forth such questioning, as phenomenology allows for “stand[ing] in the openness of beings” (Heidegger, 1953/2000, p. 23). This way allows for the discovery of truth in the everyday understandings of the phenomenon, and thereby, brings to light a knowledge that is much more than pure information. A phenomenological study of older gardeners brings participants and the researcher back into the surroundings, whether forest or garden, to set aside our prejudices and see with new eyes. “The methodology of phenomenology...posits an approach toward research that aims at being presuppositionless” (van Manen, 2003, p. 29). Hence, this approach asks the researcher to consider the assumptions and perceptions about the phenomenon and the reasons for beginning the study.

### **Perception and Questioning: The Repeating Rings**

Set aside the learned ways of perceiving the world as dead matter for your use and see if you can recover again your actual perception of the world as a community of beings to whom you are meaningfully related. (Kohak, as cited in Sewall, 1995, p. 201)

Perceptions over time exist like the concentric rings in a tree’s living core. For gardeners, what perceptions have been stored or, as in Kohak’s recommendation, set aside? Have gardeners recovered their communal perceptions of the world by being in it

so fully? Gardeners have awakened perceptions; their senses are alerted to being in the world. These same gardeners speak about their intuitive senses that orient them toward the earth. Is it the digging in the flesh of the earth that orients their bodies, or their intuition?

Abram speaks to the role of the senses (for perceptions) and their interaction as bringing the human body into connection with the Earth. “This interplay of the different senses is what enables the chiasm between the body and the earth, the reciprocal participation—between one’s own flesh and the encompassing flesh of the world—that we commonly call perception” (Abram, 1996, p. 128). Subsequently, from our perceptions we assign meanings to our surroundings. Burch (1990) uses the example of his awareness of moving his pen against the backdrop of other related objects as being meaningful only in relation to the larger understanding of this being part of his writing process. Like a gardener who perceives the world as living green beings, Burch’s perceptual awareness is always affected by the context in which that experience is lived.

Our perceptions lead us to a questioning of what we know, an altered kind of meaning making. Heidegger suggests we are led into questioning. “Thus the leading into the asking of the fundamental question is not a passage over to something that lies or stands around somewhere; instead this leading-to must first awaken and create the questioning. Leading is a questioning going-ahead, a questioning ahead” (Heidegger, 1953/2000, p. 21). It is with this in mind that I proceed with a questioning of my own assumptions. Gadamer suggests, “To understand a question means to ask it” (1960/1989, p. 375). In the simple asking of questions, we find a freeing from a certain way of interpretation.

A question places what is questioned in a particular perspective. When a question arises, it breaks open the being of the object...Posing a question implies openness but also limitation. It implies the explicit establishing of presuppositions, in terms of which can be seen what still remains open. (Gadamer, 1960/1989, pp. 362-363)

Thus the start to an understanding of my assumptions—my pre-understandings and presuppositions—came with a questioning of them and, as Heidegger names it, becoming “willing-to-know” (1953/2000, p. 23).

### **Exposing the Roots**

What constitutes my assumptions in this work? My overarching assumption is that gardeners have implicit knowledge about life and surviving in it. This means many older gardeners are “healthy agers.” They are healthier for it—in all aspects of health. Sometimes, the gardening life heals them *because* they continue to garden.

Gardening is health promoting for many reasons, most of which have not been recognized by the health community. For those who know gardening, our understandings differ from the medical community perspective that views gardening primarily as a means of encouraging a physical activity that “counts,” like walking. Gardening is so much bigger, so much more than a physical activity. It can be a spiritual experience, an awakening to a way of being with the Earth and connected to all of creation. Farmers also may know this but have not been asked about healing aspects of their work. Actually, large-scale health outcome studies have not brought out any particular health issues specific to non-occupational gardeners (Crespo, 1996, et al.), either. I expected chemical exposure to fertilizer or pesticide might be a health issue with gardeners; yet, this has not surfaced in my work to date. Nor do gardeners mention allergy-related symptoms as a health concern. This surprises me because I thought pollens would wreak havoc with the seasonal allergy sufferers who garden. It appears these are non-issues, that the pluses

associated with gardening either outweigh the potential problems or, possibly, my suspicions are to remain unfounded.

The lifeworld knowledge a gardener owns is not something gardeners recognize openly. Their musings about their experiences in the garden are sometimes hidden, even from their own view, obscured from the self. The knowledge they own is both an embodied and intuitive knowledge. What they know comes from being close to nature for extended periods. Their understanding of life's seasons is one example of how they have learned from their association with Planet Earth.

The point has to be made, though, that gardening has a positive health effect if the individual wants to garden. Perhaps being with nature enhances overall health, but the activity of gardening is not for everyone. So say the non-gardeners sprucing up their landscapes to sell their houses! In that case, gardening is just hard work and painful. Speaking of pain, gardening can cause some discomfort. The post-gardening soreness from overextending is mentioned every Spring season. Most of the fatigue is considered acceptable among gardeners. How this changes as gardeners get older is not yet known. Even those who garden wisely, that is, warming up beforehand and using the right tools, discuss their future gardening in terms of reaching a point where it will be more and more important to get help with heavier tasks and to pace their garden work. This recognition seems to arrive at different points, but it is part of what gardeners talk about in later seasons.

Some of my assumptions are grounded in my experience; yet, as I have learned more about gardeners, I hesitate to retreat to these ideas. Instead, I wonder all the more. For example, in November 1998 I mused in a reflection: "There may be a gender

difference in the way people garden. Men seem drawn to tress and larger landscape projects, which actually may be their interest in product and ability to control—like Bonsai cultivation. Women, on the other hand, often seem interested in crafts and floral aspects of gardening.” The women I have met join garden clubs and do some of these horticulture-related activities, but rarely are men directly involved. The men, however, do join in with women participating in more formal educational and service efforts if Utah’s Master Gardener program is typical. My neighbor tells me Maryland Master Gardener attendees’ gender is more typically quite equal. The adult gardeners I have met have multiple interests and full lives. However, no matter what the hardiness zone, somehow they make time to be out in the garden a great deal, and the prolonged contact with the soil and natural, living things transform them.

Elders in my study who stay physically active in their gardening remain more engaged in the life that surrounds them—be it family, friends, or the community where they live. Staying connected with the basic elements of the living earth: soil, plants, trees, these activities brings the spirit back into balance in spite of infirmity or slowing with age. It is healing to touch the dirt, so gardeners find a multitude of ways to do this. There are lots of informal plant swaps, garden tours, and plant events that provide opportunities beyond one’s own garden space. The collaboration that occurs in the name of gardening is understated because gardeners are offering advice often, giving and receiving plants, and lending a hand. Community service is the standard. The gardening community exists; it is a real community of believers. I think this same community has the potential to support the older gardener in later seasons.

What was once inevitable in aging is no longer a given, and the medical community is just beginning to understand the importance of “community” for our older adults living independently. The current institutionalized responses to disability are not the only answer to the frail oldster who is alone; many alternatives are possible and new ones that are even more nurturing must be created. An oldster need not be so troubled about losing a garden. Many living alternatives can be created whereby plants and earth are made accessible. This is why there is much potential in community gardens for their ability to bring together diverse persons who need to be gardening; however, these spaces have not yet been fully acknowledged for their contributions, particularly in the case of traditional neighborhoods. The “being-with,” which is what happens in those settings, is the source of much more value than has been recognized as yet.

In the preceding chapters I have shown what I believe about the phenomenon of gardening in later seasons. I have highlighted a few assumptions here, but these are only the beginning of my musings from exposing my roots in this phenomenon. Additional wondering emerges as I continue to question and unearth the roots of my assumptions as I proceed.

### **The Trees in the Thicket: Methodological Structure**

Van Manen’s (2003) methodological framework for human science research offers a helpful structure for hermeneutic phenomenology. It involves six research activities that provide a practical approach for the “doing” of phenomenology, the scholarly activity involved in this kind of research. In a sense I have entered into the thicket by way of my writing process that is the tradition of phenomenology itself. The writing and re-writing becomes the way to enter the forest, whether opening up a part of

an interpretation, like poetry, or moving into a clearing with questioning, or articulating a description. Whichever activity it is, it translates to an interaction with the methodology because the intent is to use the methodological structure as a way of moving deep into the thicket. If done ethically and with care, the structure for the study will do just that and the resulting insights may be meaningful. This interpretive research needs the guidance of particular signposts, or the path would lead to a research endeavor without direction. So, I step out with a brief explanation of each of these research activities, relating them to my pilgrimage into the phenomenon that is the lifeworld of older gardeners.

Van Manen (2003) offers a way to move along the continuum in this back and forth research process through the following activities:

1. Turning to a phenomenon which seriously interests us and commits us to the world;
  2. Investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it;
  3. Reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the study;
  4. Describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting;
  5. Maintaining a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon;
  6. Balancing the research context by considering parts and whole.
- (van Manen, 2003, pp. 30-31)

One way of articulating the research activities is to narrate my own journey through the doing of phenomenology.

### **Being Called: The Turning**

Van Manen (2003) notes phenomenological research begins with a passion for studying something important to the researcher and the larger world. He uses the word, “project,” as if it were that straightforward. Instead, it is all encompassing. Typically, the phenomenon is one that affects the researcher in a profound way as I articulated in Chapter One with my autobiographical turning piece. My personal history led me to want to do this study. Similar to my co-participants, I learned gardening first from my mother.



Early in my years as a gardener I enjoyed my commitment to community service through a Master Gardener program at a local botanical garden. The learning was the initial draw, but I became entranced once I heard about research making the initial connections between gardening and health. The seed was planted, and the outgrowth moved beyond my personal sphere once I entered doctoral study. Hence, my professional life allows a branching out and connecting between what had been personal work, transformed into professional efforts, namely, my research direction. Van Manen might call this becoming “full of thought” (2003, p. 31), because I remember the situations that brought me to this point and it made me all the more sure I want to proceed.

As a gardener myself, this has been a re-turning to the green world—a coming home to being with gardeners while I did the study. As van Manen (2003) directs, this interpretive research investigates the experience as lived. I am in the local garden club, have volunteered in school landscape clean-ups, and support all the local historical society’s gardens that I can afford: Colonial Williamsburg and London Town, for starters. Meeting gardeners where they are translates to visiting arboreta, attending the annual Philadelphia Flower Show and frequenting nurseries and plant sales while attempting to ration my buying of plants. Seeds are less expensive and take up less room, so for this part of the inquiry activity I collected seed packets galore. My personal experience is an integral part of how I approach this work, and make my pre-understandings transparent so as to be open to others’ experiences.

### **Investigating Experience as We Live it**

Returning to the green world for some of my work for this study put me back into the gardening experience as *lived* rather than *thought* about. Van Manen (2003) suggests

my personal collage of gardening experiences and those of others form the substrate for the study, since what I have experienced may connect to the gardening lifeworld of others. The subsequent phenomenological descriptions can take the reader to the center of an experience if the descriptions evoke a sense of the real, rather than just our conceptual “thinking” about something. Merleau-Ponty offers this explanation:

Phenomenology is here the recognition that the theoretically *complete*, full world of the physical explanation is not so, and that therefore it is necessary to consider as ultimate, inexplicable, and *hence as a world by itself* the whole of our experience of the sensible being and of men. (Merleau-Ponty, 1948/1973, p. 256)

In this research I engaged the whole of my experience, too, while in the green world and with the gardeners’ words in my writing. Their words are personal narratives of their “experience of sensible being” to use Merleau-Ponty’s explanation, and from the lived-experience description a powerful phenomenological interpretation is possible (van Manen, 2003).

I look at my garden journal and relive the experiential bits, my autobiography of sorts. Van Manen suggests that such writing, as well as biographies and art, can be other sources for collecting lived experience material about a phenomenon (2003). My journal records the latest Cylburn Arboretum Tulip Dig when I had my hands in the soil, finding bulbs by feel. My daughter was nearby and I can almost catch that unmistakable smell of the earth and think I am there. Van Manen would remind me, though, that re-lived recollections, either oral or written, are “already *transformations* of those experiences” (van Manen, 2003, p. 53) and form the basis for beginning reflections and questioning of the phenomenon. The gathered transcriptions and narratives bring out such experiences.

“Phenomenology always addresses any phenomenon as a *possible human experience*. It is in this sense that phenomenological descriptions have a universal

(intersubjective) character” (van Manen, 2003, p. 58). Is there be a crossover between what older persons experience and how older gardeners experience aging? And will there be connections that can be made about the universal nature of the gardening experience for others, besides gardeners? Thus, phenomenology has us use our personal experience of a phenomenon to move the inquiry beyond our individual understanding by tapping into the experiences of others, where the real discovery is made possible.

In addition to written experiential descriptions, etymological tracings inspire new directions for questioning aspects of the phenomenon. The Latin roots or linguistic derivatives sometimes illuminate parts of the whole that have gone unnoticed. Or, the words themselves help sort out fresh associations. For example, the two words *earth* and *bodies*, when combined into one word in the following passage, elicit novel ideas for me: “At any moment, you are much more than you probably imagine yourself to be since you are an earthbody. An earthbody isn’t ‘yours,’ it’s the world’s” (Mazis, 2002, p. 1). Gardeners do appear to have earthbodies that belong to the world, bodies whose senses awaken them to the world and shape their experience of it. They often speak of how they go “digging in the dirt” to handle their daily stresses of life. One of my preliminary conversants speaks reverently about her “wheelbarrow full of good dirt, composted stuff” and expresses great annoyance about having to be interrupted for mealtimes. Having bare hands in the dirt seems to suit the gardeners’ being, perhaps confirming what they already know, that they are indeed earthbodies. Following where the words take me sometimes opens up new horizons of meaning about the phenomenon just like that.

To locate idiomatic phrases that help show the experience, I use dictionaries from different time periods. I found the phrase “oldster” (Flexner, 1982, p. 479) this way. I

thought this a delightful discovery, and proceeded to use the word. About a year later I was asked to explain such language at a conference, where middle-aged hobbyist gardeners in attendance thought older gardeners would take offense at the term and consider it derogatory. However, it produced a new interpretation and brought me to appreciate the power of a word that implies being “old.” Was it unflattering to the elder person in the decade it was first used? Does the word “old” bring out associations of unwanted memories? How the words are used in the present and what they meant before becomes important to clarify. Additional sources of experiential accounts are found by being in the presence of other gardeners. My neighbors who garden gave me the chance to try this on. Gerry, one of my preliminary conversants, showed me around her garden. Being among her plants while we talked is one example of van Manen’s “close observation” method (2003, p. 69). Without a tape recorder in hand, I had to rely on after-the-tour notes, wondering at first whether it might be more gardening-like to have pulled weeds. In the end, I think the garden tours worked well because tours are what gardeners do when someone visits. Gerry talked about what she had here or there as we moved through the garden space. She thought back through the years as I listened to her recollections.

Memories are turnkeys that let me enter the gardening experience with my preliminary conversants. This became clear during our conversations as I notice I am interested not only in what they remember, but what brings the remembrance forth. In *Remembering: A Phenomenological Study*, Casey (2000) writes about moving beyond intentional memory, “on into the heart of our existence as rememberers” (p. 85). I heard a story recently from a thirty-something woman who had never been a gardener nor

showed any particular interest in her mother's garden. The summer after her mother died, however, she felt herself compelled to start a garden of her own—and began transplanting her mother's favorite plants. Although the storyteller remembers some aspects of her mother's garden from before, for sure now she finds herself totally taken in-to remembering every detail about it. These thoughts arrive unannounced, unconsciously, and transform her way of being. The memory calls “into the heart of her existence” (Casey, 2000, p. 85). Without realizing it, she has gone beyond intentional memory back into her mother's garden as remembered. Embedded in her story are insights about her life, and in the telling she begins to know her self anew.

Listening to gardeners' stories and reading gardeners' descriptions have brought me into memories of my own gardening life, and the words pull me back into the living green world with my preliminary conversants. During our taped conversations, I needed few questions. We were entering into sense-making about the gardening life.

### **Unearthing the *Eidos*: Hermeneutic Phenomenological Reflection**

Exemplars of the phenomenon come to light from within these conversations, my musings, and literature readings. Reviewing what has now become collected text I am particularly drawn to sections addressing body images. Is this not because I am interested in how the gardeners feel their aging? I notice many phrases with expressive words about feelings and the five senses, and nearly always, the physical surroundings are detailed. These sections seem to sing out to me as I search for meaning, “uncovering themes...the stars that make up the universe of meaning we live through” (van Manen, 2003, p. 90). The phrases in these sections are part of unearthing “the essence or *eidos*” (p. 86) because

they are particularly related to the gardening lifeworld having been hidden from view. I have begun hermeneutic phenomenological reflection.

This unearthing is not unlike the gardener exploring the garden bed in the spring. It is a process of discovery. We know there were delightful perennials dropping seed, so where are the new plants and their parents now? Merleau-Ponty might call this “open wondering,” where “philosophy does not take the context as given; it turns back upon it in order to seek the origin and the meaning of the questions, and it thereby gains access to the interrogation that animates all the questions of cognition” (1948/1973, p. 105). In this search for meaning that characterizes phenomenology, I see how the collected descriptions lead me to reflect on the text itself. The “open wondering” leads to sense-making about the experiences, and the phenomenological thematizing process of “seeing meaning” (van Manen, 2003, p. 79) begins when the researcher starts to work with the text.

Van Manen explains three avenues for teasing out thematic aspects from text. The holistic approach creates expressive phrases which seem to “capture the fundamental meaning...of the text as a whole” (2003, p. 93). The second approach involves re-reading the text repeatedly, highlighting sentences or phrases that seem especially pertinent to the phenomenon. The third approach uses detailed reading as each sentence or paragraph is examined for what may be revealed. I am most content doing all three. For the next step, looking for experiential themes that are present in more than one text, it required some note taking and leads to a significant beginning, that is writing, from these and the other readings in order to find meaning behind the text. This last phase is the most challenging aspect.

Going back to literary sources, for example, poetry about gardening and autobiographical work by gardeners offers additional insights into potential themes. This leads me closer to my goal: writing interpretations that reveal the phenomenon of gardening in later seasons. So how does a poem about gardening differ from the poetic, interpreted text? Van Manen (2003) explains that literary sources detail the themes implicitly and emphasize plot line while phenomenological text “attempts to systematically develop a certain narrative that explicates themes while remaining true to the universal quality or essence of a certain type of experience” (van Manen, p. 97). Human science research aims to explore the human lifeworld, as we know it. By interpreting text and identifying potential themes or “structures of meaning,” the researcher is speaking about human existence (van Manen, 2003, p. 101). For example, in the following literary passage, the implicit theme might be the connectedness of all creation, which in itself is powerful to reflect upon. However, I include this piece because in my phenomenological work relating to the gardening experience it speaks to the reality of the complexity of our lifeworlds. It introduces the deeper questioning and reflection that the methodology calls forth. Van Manen calls these fundamental lifeworld themes, the four existentials.

All things in this creation exist within you, and all things in you exist in creation; There is no border between you and the closest things and there is no distance between you and the farthest things, and all things from the lowest to the loftiest, from the smallest to the greatest are within you as equal things. In one atom are found all the elements of the earth; in one motion of the mind are found the motions of all laws of existence; In one drop of water are found the secrets of all the endless oceans; In one aspect of *you* are found all the aspects of *existence*.  
(Gibran, 1947/1982)

The sentiment reflected above is not a typical Western perspective, rather an Eastern one. Some of the Taoist teachings have been recommended as an opening to understand this

from another worldview. It deserves the deeper exploration that will follow in Chapter Four; however, it needed to be introduced here. After considering the text in that passage in the context of gardening, I ask, “If, indeed, all things are existing *within* each other, would all persons reclaim their sense of caring as part of being human, because of this interconnectedness?” The tone of that passage leads me into the explication of van Manen’s framework on existentials that is so critical to phenomenological reflection.

### **Exploring the Existentials**

The four fundamental existential themes (lived space or specialty, lived body or corporeality, lived time or temporality, and lived human relation or relationality) in phenomenological writing are appropriate for the exploration of the lived lives of older gardeners. I have found a poem that touches on these aspects and can serve as an introduction.

Remember your place among all living beings  
Embrace with joy the changing seasons  
For each yields its own abundance  
The Energy and Birth of Spring  
The Growth and Contentment of Summer  
The Wisdom to let go like leaves in the Fall  
The Rest and Quiet Renewal of Winter  
(Shamir, 1999, p. 29)

Shamir’s poem moves us through time and to a certain space we know as our gardens, yet there is a universal message in the idea of being part of all living things. Gardeners, too, recognize their place among all living things and that the seasons are one manifestation of the life cycle both in and around us always. The poem humbly reminds us of nature as teacher, but it also opens up each of the fundamental existential themes so we can relate them to the gardening experience. It is a good introduction to the deeper questions, the existentials that guide phenomenological reflection.



The first line mentions our place, or lived space among living beings. The embrace, growth, rest and renewal represent lived body. Lived time is heralded in the reference to the seasons and the inevitability of the cycle of life for all living things. Toward the end of the poem there is the remembering: a reminder of one's relation to all living things, or lived relation. While it is obvious the author enjoys a special relationship with forests, trees, and plants, we also can make the connections from the poem to human life. Humans, too, "surrender to the seasons, to give in to nature's way, to cherish what we have, knowing it will pass" (Shamir, 1999, p.14). Within the simple voicing in that poem and by relating it to examples, we notice pieces of each of those four existential themes. I enter into them to be able to begin the "process of phenomenological question posing, reflecting and writing" (van Manen, 2003, p. 102).

**Lived space or place.** The concept of place is essential to this phenomenon of gardening, but Casey reminds us that "We must, in postmodern times, begin to appreciate once more the intrinsic ingredience of place in our time-bound and spaced-out lives" (Casey, 1993, p. 8). Garden as a place holds untold meaning for some. It may be a gardener's sanctuary, sought out for its restorative powers after life's challenges. "A garden is more than a place of beauty, it is a sanctuary for your spirit," says Handelsman (1996, p. 40). For others it represents a vital place of energizing or letting be. "Perhaps a garden is best considered as a precise point of connection between a human and the earth—a psychic umbilical to the earth's spirit. I know mine is just that for me" (Thayer, 1999, p. 197). Are gardeners at home in their gardens? What is it like to be losing one's home? Some older gardeners must leave their homes. The reasons vary, but are they, then, home-less? Is returning home after being away a time of joy, such as after vacation?

Or is it a return to reality and responsibility? Casey (1993) says the power of a place is more than its spot on the map, the *where*, but place is also about *who* is together with us in that place, or lived relation. What part of the gardening life relates to the feeling of being together with others?

Is gardening about being at home with one's life? A garden is "a place of intimacy, meditation, and family solidarity—as well as a place for the production of essential herbs, fruits, and vegetables" (Casey, 1993, p. 158). Home is a central idea that connects to place. Casey offers this wisdom about the home place: "Places built for residing are rather an enlargement of our already existing embodiment into *an entire lifeworld of dwelling*" (1993, p. 120), and the more time in a place the more an extension of our bodies they become. Is the garden an extension of the gardener's body and a place to feel "at home" with life?

Van Manen (2003) also writes of the space experience of home in varied ways. Being home means being in a space where one can truly be authentic. Being home means being there in the place, which may not really be our home, that also serves as our lived space, "the existential theme that refers us to the world or landscape in which human beings move and find themselves at home" (van Manen, 2003, p. 102). What is it like to inhabit that place, or be "*in it*" as Casey says (1993, p. 120)? When Casey speaks about place, he refers to natural settings, which include cultivating a garden. He warns us that as our bodies become accustomed to being in buildings we sometimes exclude the natural world, offering gardens as one answer.

When I stand in a garden I find myself in a scene intermediate between the completely constructed and the frankly wild. For I am then in between a monument (e.g., a house) and a boundary (that of the property in which the garden is located). I have edged out of domestic enclosure and am moving toward

exposed fields of uncultivated land. In getting myself into this cultivated but not fully constructed scene, I have decommissioned myself with respect to familial and professional duties. I have become marginal, halfway between the sacred and the profane, yet have somehow gained a very special place to be. (Casey, 1993, p. 154)

Gardens have been places of care, or as Casey offers, “Caring belongs to places” (p. 175), and people build their lives with them. So, gardens may well be special dwelling places, in fact, to be aging. In what manner is the aging gardener cultivating outside the imposed boundaries of the world? Some gardeners do lose their gardens, their built dwelling places. If living in anticipation of loss, older gardeners may be living on the “edge of dwelling” because “gardens take [them] to the edge between built and natural places, or rather, *are* that very edge” as Casey muses (1993, p. 170).

How do older gardeners retain their lived experience of nature if they are losing ground, literally and figuratively? What a sense of loss they must experience. And are they, then, forgotten?

If you’re intimate with a place, a place with whose history you’re familiar, and you establish an ethical conversation with it, the implication that follows is this: The place knows you’re there. It feels you. You will not be forgotten, cut off; abandoned. (Lopez, 2004, ¶ 17)

If indeed, as Casey suggests, “The cultivation of built places [including gardens]... *localizes caring*” (1993, p. 175), then perhaps, there really is inherent power in this particular place, one’s garden. After offering the reassurance, Lopez goes on to recommend:

The key (to occupying a place and having it occupy you), I think, is to become vulnerable to a place. If you open yourself up, you can build intimacy. Out of such intimacy may come a sense of belonging, a sense of not being isolated in the universe. (Lopez, 2004, ¶ 19)

Gardeners do become intimate with their backyard places, their plot-maps. Have older gardeners intuitively known, perhaps in a bodily sense, about building this sense of “being home,” having a dwelling place for them to become intimate with so they belong to it and feel part of the universe? Are they drawn to this activity to improve life here on earth so they might be “at home?” How does a gardener feel “at home” with the varying stages of life in and out of a garden? In an exploration of gardeners’ lived experience, and in light of this being an inquiry into aspects of wellbeing, the reference to lived body is natural because of the aging process.

**Lived body.** What is felt in the human body during gardening? Are there particular areas or zones where the essence of the lived experience resides? In *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind*, Roszak quotes Paul Shephard’s description of the self as one “with a permeable boundary...constantly drawing on and influencing its surroundings, whose skin and behavior are soft zones contacting the world instead of just excluding it” (as cited in Roszak, Gomes, & Kanner, 1995, p. 13). Gardeners, with their hands in the dirt and caring for the earth, have these same soft zones that do make contact with the planet. And human skin contacting the earth’s skin is their preference. The myriad of gloves gardeners seem to have around are set aside because touching the earth’s skin changes when gloves are worn.

Armstrong tells of the Okanagans, a Native people, who say they become a part of the living world (that it unites with their flesh). “The soil, the water, the air, and all other life forms contributed parts to be our flesh. *We are our land/place*” (1995, p. 323). Gardening is experienced physically, through the lived body; that understanding is clear. How will this embodied knowing show the phenomenon more? Once again, it is useful to

call upon Lopez's lived language; however, this time the text illustrates the power of the lived body to show the experience.

Actively use your ears to imagine the acoustical hemisphere you occupy. How does birdsong ramify here? What kind of air is it moving? Concentrate on smells in the belief you can smell water and stone. Use your hands to get the heft and texture of a place—the tensile strength in willow branch, the moisture in a pinch of soil, the different nap of leaves. (Lopez, 2004, ¶ 11)

In understanding the experience of the lived body, the physical body of gardeners, I am hoping to find an uncovering of their other selves, their souls, their minds, and their spirits. Perhaps others who have this understanding of lived body will teach us how to understand this aspect more completely. The Okanangans speak of their ultimate survival in life by

how our body interacts with everything around us continuously. Only in part are we aware of our intellect, through our senses, of that interaction. Okanangans teach that the body is the Earth itself. They say that our flesh, blood, and bones are Earth-body; in all cycles in which the Earth moves, so does our body. We are everything that surrounds us, including the vast forces we only glimpse. . . . Our word for body literally means “the land-dreaming capacity.” (Armstrong, 1995, pp. 316-317)

What other life lessons are covered over in the experience of gardening for older adults who are land-dreamers? What of the wisdom that comes from attuning to the natural cycles of life around us? Would it help us learn to honor our aging bodies?

Friedan (1993) tells us that in our middle-age years the fear of aging is heard the loudest in our youth-oriented, pluralistic society. The evidence is there, in the plastic surgery to our flesh and the generalized negativity associated with advancing years; the tendency is to deny changes that come in later seasons of life. No wonder older adults feel caught in an in-between, between the past and the present. Shapiro (1988) reminds us that the lived body “prelinguistically co-constitutes the structure of situations” (p. 9). Our

body contributes to the manner in which we structure our lifeworld, or in Merleau-Ponty's words, "Our life is inherent to the perceived world and the human world" (1964, p. 25). In aging, where we have to live with our perceptions, we continue our search for connection with the human world to counteract the negative expectations that seem to be inevitable.

So, what if older adults were able to change their perceptions about aging, that is, believe in becoming a "healthy ager?" Imagine a life worth living even as the body ages in our later seasons? Such would mean a change in their perceived worlds, which, in turn, imbues their lifeworlds with context and meaning. Shapiro adds, "To perceive something is to live in it, to bodily inhabit it...to bodily inhabit an object in the world and thereby co-constitute its structure or meaning" (1988, p. 8). With a changed perception of how aging bodies can inhabit earth, could older gardeners not be re-constructing their lifeworlds through their gardening? "How much lived time is there?" some might ask upon seeing their aging bodies. The sense by which older gardeners dwell and inhabit their bodies in their lifeworlds, then, is connected intimately to their perceptions about time. I find I enter this through their remembering.

**Lived time.** Van Manen (2003) describes lived time, or temporality, as mediated by our experience of it, and clarifies it is not the time on the sundial or the timepiece. Lived time happens in the present in the ways we are living, yet also incorporates our hopes and expectations about the future. Therefore, to ask how older adults co-constitute their being in the world is to call upon their lived time through remembrances of their early years on this Planet. When asked, older adults respond by explaining that the inside of them is who they always have been. For lived time is not linear, nor chronological;

rather, the past folds into the present and spills over into our future. So it is that our remembrances and historical past connect us to our life as lived, past present and future.

We are who we have become but we also are who we were in the past. The past makes us into our present, that is, it reaches into the present. As such, we are made up of parts of our selves from the past and these become part of who we are now. Heidegger explains, we all carry our past within us... “A potentiality-of-being is always projected in the horizon of the future, ‘already being’ is disclosed in the horizon of the having-been, and what is taken care of is discovered in the horizon of the present” (Heidegger, 1953/1996, p. 334). How do gardeners experience time in their gardens? Having created compost and understanding what it represents, are older gardeners’ eyes open to the reality of their lived time in later seasons?

Gadamer explains the concept of lived time by using the word “horizons.” For example, “The horizon of the present is continually in the process of being formed because we are continually having to test all our prejudices” (1960/1989, p. 306). In other words, in life, the horizons of the present and the past are always merging, or undergoing fusion. What are the older gardeners’ experiences of their own horizons where their history, their traditions, bring them to understand their present being? When we are in the presence of nature, do we discover an open place where time is of no consequence?

After September 11, 2001, the act of gardening was one way New Yorkers brought themselves back to life, back to their lived present after having time suspended by the surreal tragedy. “Gardening is an affirmation of life in times of crisis. During these times, it is really important to find your own center. A lot of people find peace and hope in a garden” (Dreher, as cited in Dardick, 2001, p. I-23). Being in nature brought New

Yorkers back into the present to deal with the recent past. Gardening gave them the means to cope with the immensity of the loss of human life. Time itself became their companion in their gardens, temporarily allowing time to be with self. Humans belong together; they need each other, particularly in times of transition. Is aging not a time of transition that can be transformational? This brings me to discuss lived relation.

**Lived relation.** Heidegger speaks about “mirror-play,” the reflection of earth and sky, divinities and mortals that belong together (1971/2001, p. 177). This would be one way of articulating that all living beings are indeed, *in relation* to each other. Lived relation is also called lived other in that humans have a relationship with other humans (van Manen, 2003). However, it is much bigger, more universal than this.

In a larger existential sense human beings have searched in this experience of the other, the communal, the social for a sense of purpose in life, meaningfulness, grounds for living, as in the religious experience of the absolute Other, God. (van Manen, 2003, p. 105)

Langeveld takes this a step further (1983) and adds, “From a phenomenological point of view, we seek the essential meanings in the human encounter” (p. 6). What about gardening serves to bring gardeners in relation to the rest of the world? Many gardeners are highly social beings who share a serious interest in service-related efforts and volunteer work. Is this why they choose to be keepers of the earth? Their “work” gives them a profound sense of purpose with which I can easily identify. Older gardeners also have gathered many of life lessons from being-in-relation with their heritage, their extended families and significant others. And gardeners are not all from farm families, I might add; the wish to be in contact with the earth can happen at any age, and it overtakes you.



The experience of nature, as represented in gardening, has been likened to a religious experience in that it can give us “our most intense sensory experiences and memories from childhood” (Cumes, 1998, p. 91). This restorative quality is what some researchers theorize is the dimension all humans need and search for in some way. As a result of this common desire, many people choose a natural environment or exposure to a natural setting whenever possible. This is one area of considerable research. On the other hand, a phenomenological study has great potential for exploring the existential of lived relationality because of the communal urge, or what E. O. Wilson (1984) calls “biophilia,” our innate need to be with living things.

And gardeners seem to be comfortable going beyond the human encounter as well. Routinely, gardeners speak of themselves in relation to other living beings. They create habitats for other living creatures to visit their gardens. Gardeners belong to the living world, in a sense. In *To Honor the Earth*, Maclean (1991) says:

You are the children of the elements, composed of and part of the elements. The world and your bodies were made so that you may find and express the joy of all creation, but you are destroying yourselves because you think you are separate from the rest of life. How can you possibly think you are separate? How can you not know that when the wind blows, it is part of you? ...Love all of life and become one with it. All of life is part of you. (p. 28)

This clearly is existential thinking. Is feeling oneself as being-with or a part of the universe something deeply sought after because of our humanness? One researcher echoed this sentiment when explaining the meaning behind horticultural therapy (of which gardening is a piece). The reason for the art and science of horticultural therapy is for “...demonstrating the interconnectedness of the living world and to improve the beauty and quality of life here on earth” (Janick, 1992, p. 27). Is it a universal need to be connected to each other in this world, just as we exist within each other (Gibran,

1947/1982)? Have older gardeners learned to be connected to the living world they experience in their gardening?

Having entered, briefly, the lifeworld of older gardeners by way of explaining the four existentials of “*lived space* (spatiality), *lived body* (corporeality), *lived time* (temporality), and *lived human relation* (relationality or communality)” (van Manen, 2003, p. 101), I continue with the rhythm of the research activities. “Staying with the rhythm of the ...[work] ...doing it to be doing it and not just to have it done” (Prather, 1972, not paginated) is the work of phenomenology.

It is as Gadamer has intimated: “The concern with things which are not understood, the attempt to grasp the unpredictable character of the spiritual and mental life of human beings, is the task of the art of understanding which we call hermeneutics” (1996, p. 165). In the final analysis, all these paths into the methodological thicket lead in and out of the writing process. Thus, I enter the hermeneutic circle in this exploration and interaction with the textual sources.

### **Writing to Understand: In and out of the Hermeneutic Circle**

What happens when we begin to write our way into the understanding of the phenomenon? Van Manen (2003) emphasizes that sensitivity to the power of language combines with an acceptance of appropriate silence, or the taken-for-granted aspects. The act of writing “separates us from what we know and yet it unites us more closely with what we know” (2003, p. 127). As the researcher’s personal history gets placed aside to allow a recognition of other voices, often the reverse occurs, and “we are quite blind to the depth of meaning in our own writing” (Krall, 1988, p. 475). In explaining what happens as we write our way in, Krall points out similarities between personal history

research and phenomenological writing. The work has the same kind of researcher involvement. It is “a way of thinking (that is) a passionate endeavor that demands commitment, perseverance, and single-mindedness” (Krall, p. 476). It is, for certain, considerable work, this kind of writing and re-writing that is the phenomenological project.

Ueland (1987) encourages all writers to undertake the challenge: “Try to discover your true, honest, untheoretical self” (p. 178). Writing to reveal this truth is the call of the phenomenologist. So, how do we find the truth in ourselves and for the interpretation of text that surrounds the work in this research? Rosen (2001) suggests that to write, writers have to remove themselves from the world and make a journey within self. We question more and become more open, contributing to our self-discovery. In journeys that lead within, we are sometimes called to re-constitute parts of our selves. Might this also be called re-vision?

Cheney (1994) introduces a key part of phenomenological writing, revision, which can often bring out new ideas. “It is serendipity at work again in the mind of the creative person—the notion that when searching for one thing, the alert and receptive mind will often find something not sought, but better” (p. 3). Revision might prompt more accurate representation and prevent misunderstanding. It is as van Manen (2003) says, the research is the writing and “to write is to exercise self-consciousness” (p. 129). This phenomenological writing is a complex undertaking.

We come to know what we know in the dialectic process of constructing a text (body of knowledge), thus learning what we are capable of saying. It is the dialectic of inside and outside, of embodiment and disembodiment, of separation and reconciliation. (van Manen, 1989, p. 239)

The phenomenological undertaking is full of point and counterpoint, and is a reflective activity that takes the researcher into the project. Heidegger reiterates we are pulled in to the lifeworld (1953/2000), and yet, the writing makes us distanced (van Manen, 2003). It is, no doubt, a real paradox since to write about something we have to get close to it. It is like the hermeneutic circle, after all, whose principle is that understanding is always a moving back and forth between the concept of the whole and the part. This circle is always undergoing changes and has an “ontologically positive significance” because every new understanding changes the fore-conceptions all the more (Gadamer, 1960/1989, pp. 266-267). In gardening, as in other areas in life, we need both the distant and the up close perspective to stay on track in the forest of the phenomenon.

Phenomenological writing is a poetizing activity that takes me into interpretation and understanding almost unconsciously, as I show in my poem of “unusual margins” in response to some preliminary work. In creating a poem without margins as boundaries I was becoming free to enter fully into the act of writing.

‘Round like a circle in a spiral  
Like a wheel without the rim to contain it...

Free-flowing yet patterned in such ways that you were pulled into their unconscious talk and the words just came. The real life words of the real live people we studied, or did we enter into their lives for a time and share with them what they had been speaking of? Margins went away for a time.

It must be we were both studying, researcher and person as one, learning  
from and with each other,  
each in our own space of the experience, but sitting close together at the  
end of the page.

Won't she love to read her words I asked for! Will she re-live those moments in seeing how I crafted pictures on paper from her story? He will laugh again at .....himself, and she might cry again, remembering her mother looking out to the flower garden.

This was a solemn responsibility, a reverent act of creating, with  
my  
knowing them more in their openness with my questions, the lushness of their

answers. Some details of the conversations are overgrown into my memory as if  
I will notice them in the meadow of my mind – forever.  
It is good to know that if the fragrance drifts away because of heady new  
details...I can return to that time by visiting my respectful thoughts collected like  
a summer bouquet in this phenomenological essay, a treasured sachet.  
(Collins, personal journal, May 1, 1999, spacing deliberate)

In reality, I was entering the hermeneutic circle.

### **Staying Close: Maintaining a Strong and Oriented Pedagogical Relation**

Merleau-Ponty's definition of phenomenology may help reveal more about the critical nature of "staying close." For phenomenology "(is) a method for getting closer to present and living reality, and which must then be applied to the relation of [persons] in language, in knowledge, in society and religion..." (1964, p. 25). Such is the ethical responsibility of the phenomenological researcher, "to write...in a deep, collective sense" (van Manen, 2003, p. 132), which asks that the text not only be rich in meaning but thoughtful in ways that inspire action. This is how the pedagogical aspect of the methodology shows itself as the researcher is called by the text.

In my case, I am called to action because of the text and its pedagogical potential. I chose to re-search what is meaningful to my world at this point in my life. A writer, Rosenthal exemplifies this ethical caring for self, and explains it this way: "Wanting to bring together a geographical place in which I could be at home...that would nurture my inner world so that my inner and my outer life could fit into one another and not be reciprocal" (1999, p. 1). Staying true to my pedagogical calling, as articulated in my poem without margins, we will be "sitting close together" and I prepare to stay with the Keepers and listen.

## **Communing with the Keepers of the Earth: Collecting Lived Experience Accounts**

In the following section, I illustrate the plot map, or my method of entering into the study. Since I set the bricks of the path using hermeneutic phenomenology as the philosophical perspective, now I explain the details of collecting their lived experience accounts. Gardeners do this kind of detail work every year when planning for the next growing season, and in this inquiry my decisions are equally as varied. They include specifics about who the participants are, how to invite them in to this exploration and how often we will sit together in dialogue. Being attentive to my ethical responsibility, how best to collect and preserve their stories? In the final part of this chapter I share my initial expectations about the contributions of my phenomenological study of older gardeners, or, ultimately, what might be gained from this human science research undertaking. Perhaps it may be as the nature essayist Lyon (2001) believes, “We may be on a halting journey toward understanding the world, and ourselves in it, as one [communal] system” (pp. x-xi).

### **The Gardeners are Gathered: The Participants**

How to decide who would be most suited for the study? I asked my friends, my garden buddies, to find those who have “perceived, thought, imagined, remembered” their gardening life. These individuals are the most suited for getting close to the experience. Maybe the best read garden expert would have the most factual knowledge, but I wanted the experienced gardener who is not solely dependent upon “how-to-garden” books. Merleau-Ponty clarifies further: “We experience a perception and its horizon ‘in action’...rather than by ‘posing’ them or explicitly ‘knowing’ them” (1964, p. 12). In finding older gardeners I wanted to meet with those who actively are gardening at this

point in their lives. Thus, the world (of gardening) is perceived and experienced as a whole and understood.

Not as a [sic] object only in the sense of the mathematician or the physicist give to this word—that is, a kind of unified law which would cover all the partial phenomena or as a fundamental relation verifiable in all—but as the universal style of all possible perceptions. (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 16)

The descriptions in conversants' stories become the way the researcher can enter that world “regardless of whether they are about immediate experience or about experience that has already been reflected upon and interpreted by the person doing the describing” (Caelli, 2000, p. 369). Perhaps this reflecting is also a “re-learning,” as van Manen (2003, p. 184) names it. I found that I was also re-learning. Like the participants, I was partaking in a listening and a relearning about gardens.

In order to listen I will have to listen without obligation,  
will have to give up my intention to hear.  
If I will let the meaning flow through me like wind  
blowing through leaves, then I can open up loosely to  
what is being said, instead of howling it down with  
my intensity. (Prather, 1972, not paginated)

When we listen and conduct this kind of respectful conversation, we open up the opportunity for each of us to construct meaning out of our real lives and everyday experiences. As a phenomenological researcher, however, I am learning that there is no straight path to the center of the experience:

What is given is a route, an experience which gradually clarifies itself, ...and proceeds by dialogue with itself and with others. Thus what we tear away from the dispersion of instants is not an already-made reason; it is, as has always been said, a natural light, our openness to *something*. (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 21)

The circuitous route takes me toward an opening, a clearing in the field where gardeners wait so we could meet. What were the gardeners like? I thought I knew, at first, but then I

saw they are all different, distinct individuals. What makes them able to be called a gardener? Stein writes to an imaginary gardener group:

I want to suspend judgment on what qualifies a person to join that group and open the door to whoever stewards the land, whoever digs, whoever plants, whoever by even raking leaves tinkers with a system of which, sad to say, horticulture is shockingly ignorant. (1993, p. 2)

The gardeners in this study were at least 65 years old or older with at least one season of experience. Any group of gardeners has different interests in their horticultural tendencies, so that was interesting to note. There was only one plant-related requirement, however; for individuals to enter the study they had to be interacting with living plants or trees on a regular basis. The expectation was they had to be drawn to this rather than paid for it. In other words, these particular gardeners would not be landscape architects, farmers or nursery workers selling plants or produce.

I planned for at least six conversants and ended up with seven who live in different regions and hardiness zones in the United States. This was not arranged on purpose. Most of their names were given to me by family or friends who knew about my research interest.

One gardener lives in California near the Pacific coast where the seasons are long. One lives in Pennsylvania (or Africa, depending on the year). Two are in Massachusetts, one near Boston and the other near the Atlantic coast. The conversants living in Massachusetts are near some of my relatives and on the way to the summer home where I travel several times a year. Both of these gardens have been featured on garden tours. The remaining three gardeners are local, close by to my home in Maryland. One of the local Maryland gardeners is the mother of a nursing colleague, another is one I met through the Naval Academy Garden Club, a service and social club that has been part of the



Maryland gardening club strata for over 50 years. The last Marylander came from the London Town (Maryland) botanist who suggested one of their favorite volunteers.

### **Moving into the Thicket: Details about the Study**

After an initial introductory telephone call, I hand carried or mailed the invitation and consent for participation forms (Appendix A and B). Three conversations took place in the conversants' homes or a public library. After two separate audiotaped conversations with two of the local Marylanders we met at the library as a group. For the third Marylander I had one face-to-face and several phone sessions. Her husband became seriously ill and was hospitalized several times. With many medical appointments and visiting health professionals during follow-up periods we had problems getting together and I was reluctant to push. The conversations went quite smoothly and transcripts were completed before each subsequent meeting. The next conversations usually didn't get accomplished until several months later. The length of the sessions varied, but all the first ones were at least 90 minutes each and subsequent ones were an hour or more. I tried to make some notes during the sessions but that did not always work, especially if we were walking around their garden with a handheld recorder. I initially transcribed the audiotapes and when that began to take so much time (22 hours), I paid to have it done. Typically I listened to the previous audiotape again right before the next session. Re-reading the transcripts while listening again came later. The audiotapes and written transcriptions are kept in my home in a secure place. While only my advisor and the transcriptionist had access to the transcribed material, all of the participants were offered anonymity in published findings. Only one chose that option.

Van Manen (2003) suggests establishing an orienting framework of areas to be explored in the study. This informs the preparation for the conversations. In this study, those areas are as follows:

1. Collecting pertinent information about the gardeners (their age, their current activities related to gardening, family members who are also involved in the garden work). If their involvement was changing, were there particular stories they would like to share as a way of elaborating?
2. Asking for a brief history of their initial entry into gardening—in the form of an anecdote or written personal story, particularly if other family members or relatives were a part of a first garden. Family pictures and documents of the garden (journals, plot maps) were sometimes offered and served as a means to open the conversation. What meaning resides in the space that is the garden (or in other spaces experienced earlier).
3. Gathering some of the garden details (what type of flora does the gardener grow? Is it flowers and/or vegetables, or trees?) What descriptive stories explain some of what has happened in and around their gardening? I regularly took a tour of the garden, no matter the season. What influences have shaped their involvement in the garden? How do they see this evolving, if at all? What does the garden bring to the participant's way of life, their way of being?
4. Asking for a return to past experiences through the power of stories; perhaps the participant has learned specific lessons in the garden. Are there some lessons that have touched the gardener's life outside the garden? What would

the participant offer as advice for other gardeners—particular triumphs and special challenges that have become understood differently looking back in remembrance?

5. Asking to see their favorite plants or trees and why these plants or trees the chosen ones. Sometimes the favorites were gifts or living reminders connected to important persons or times. If the seasons affect their usual life as well as their gardening life, in what ways is this manifest? Do certain seasons resonate differently in terms of their usual life outside the garden?

While these questions served as prompts, they were not scripted conversations.

Rather, the dialogue just developed based on their responses. Other questions surfaced in our exploration of the phenomenon together. Weber (1986) explains:

Through dialogue, the interview becomes a joint reflection on a phenomenon, a deepening of experience for both interviewer and participant. It becomes a conversation relation between two people; one in which they come to learn as much about each other as they learn about whatever is the topic of conversation. (pp. 65-66)

So, the five areas of questions became starting points for our conversations rather than some survey list. For, in the give and take of a conversation, the researcher uses both intellect and intuition to stay abreast of the conversation. Polkinghorne calls this organic monitoring, while actually, it is a way of using intuition to inform our interaction (2004).

The advice served me well, and by the time of the second conversation, I had allowed enough time for the transcription and some reflection. Once each transcription was done, I reviewed the content and sometimes wrote about what I was noticing. In several instances I shared it with them. The content sometimes suggested we might address another aspect of the gardening lifeworld, or that we should return to some area

already touched upon which could be explored more. In the intervening time between conversations, each participant was asked to record any follow-up thoughts or stories related to their gardening they wish to include in the next meeting. Each were asked to write a reflection or descriptive story. Three chose to write a short piece and one offered me a copy of a special family poem. I had third conversations with six of them and found this to be helpful to my interpretations.

### **Reaching the Clearing in the Forest: Achieving Balance**

The uncovering of self is fundamentally part of this form of phenomenological inquiry. In the process of writing about the experience under study, new insights surface and become what we know and believe, particularly with the conversants' feedback. The conversations, the writing, the learning and re-writings change us, change our being.

Phenomenological research is more than a method, more than accomplishing certain research activities. It is a means to bring voices together in written descriptions and interpretations that can change the way something (the phenomenon in question) is understood.

Phenomenology does not simply iterate what is already given and understood in lived experience in the way that it is given and understood. It seeks a transcending theoretical understanding that goes beyond lived experience to situate it, to judge it, to comprehend it, endowing lived experience with new meaning. (Burch, 1989, p. 192)

What I do with the interpretation is at the core of this research, for “writing decontextualizes thought from practice and yet it returns thought to praxis” (van Manen, 2003, p. 129), another reason phenomenology is considered “a critical philosophy of action” (p. 154). Even after this phase of the writing was done, the task demanded more reflection, re-writing and re-work to make something that would result in praxis. Human

science research strives not only to bring new understandings; it aims to make a contribution that will make a difference.

The major contribution of the study would be a deeper understanding of older gardeners' lives and their transformations during later seasons: "All life manifests [itself] through the movement of cycles...the interplay of Heaven and Earth, Yin and Yang, changing through time" (Beatty, 1999, ¶ 1). Matteson attests, "There is something about the soil, the living, growing plants. There is an energy and it interacts with our human energy" (in Evans, 2003, ¶ 12), and the insights from this study could be translated into praxis with other elders and non-gardeners, too. New knowledge disseminated from the study can influence health policy and the social sciences, specifically by encouraging contact with natural environments and living plant materials in and outside institutions. Long term implications include public support for a continuation of "nearby nature" (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1990) for its many benefits (Kaplan, 1973) for all persons, and in particular, through parks and green spaces accessible to all.

I also would consider this study a part of a community consciousness-raising initiative for healthy aging, at least, and an advocacy paper adding to other guidance fostering the creation of nurturing indoor and outdoor environments related to health (Gerlach-Spriggs, Kaufman, & Warner, 1998; Marcus & Barnes, 1999; Marcus & Francis, 1998; Tyson, 1998). Ultimately, the study may support continued ecological awareness on a larger, more global scale through the exemplars about these stewards of the land. Like the Native Americans who have known all along, about "land being sacred" and that "we are born of both spirit and place," so, too, we must recognize that "landscapes in space become places by human action" (K. Kavanagh, personal

communication, June 27, 2004). Further, the message might be told far and wide that they are “in relationship” with the land, touching mind, body and soul. There is much to explore, as Shoemaker offers by this explanation about people-plant relationships:

Plants have been part of human culture since the beginning of time and will more than likely continue to be. Plants [and gardens full of plants] are part of the social world as well as the physical world. Therefore, it is not surprising that they have influence on human behavior and that human culture is imprinted with a botanical reality. (1994, p. 6)

As I close this chapter of methodological traditions and philosophical guideways, van Manen (2003) reminds me that one of the principal characteristics of phenomenological research is its centering to achieve a balance. It is centered on the real life experiences of real persons, and their lifeworld as human beings. From my work with the older keepers of the earth, maybe many lives can be changed. With the keepers and the philosophers, I have broken into the rich, dark covering of Gaia, and proceed “not thoughtlessly but with gratefulness and care” (Shamir, 1999, p. 90). It is a journey I enjoyed so thoroughly that settling into the interpretation seemed always just over the horizon. Similarly to my response to the end of Fall and the arrival of Winter, I found myself slowing down during Chapter Four. I was always sure there was more to think about in this pilgrimage of discovery with the gardeners who helped me accomplish this study.

## CHAPTER FOUR:

### SEED-CARRIERS CALLED TO LAY HANDS UPON THE EARTH: THE EMBRACE

In this chapter I invite the reader into the lived experience of older gardeners, seed-carriers, who lay their hands upon the earth—sometimes healing the land and themselves in the process of embracing the earth. The seed-carriers are gardeners who have chosen to be caretakers, helpers who carry this way of life to others in a multitude of ways. I consider them *seed-carriers* perhaps as much because seed-carrier envelops the word, seed, which comes from “to sow” (Mish et al., 1994, p. 1057) and because when seed is hyphenated with the word, carrier, it harkens back to the care-taking within garden work. Care-taking is a recurring activity that occurs in and out of the gardeners’ immediate reach, and often I am reminded that gardeners also are called caretakers (as explained in Chapter Two). According to the *OED Online*, a seed-carrier is an assistant who replenishes the seed baskets of the sowers. All seeders are also sowers; therefore, all gardeners are sowers because they plant seed or drop plants into their rightful place in the soil. Knowing the origins and meaning of each word, it seems *seed-carrier* best captures the older gardener’s way of being. The participants metaphorically are carriers by carrying the seeds beyond their gardens and performing stewardship as they continue to fill baskets for sharing and replenishing. The seed-carriers in my study are gardeners who have come to their own way of being through touching the earth and reaching out to other living beings. Their touching the earth is in response to an invitation, a calling.

Oriah Mountain Dreamer writes about our need to “touch intimately what is real” (2005, p. 1). I also am called to gather their stories. The older gardeners’ lived language beckons me to participate in the exploration of older gardeners’ later seasons. Using

hermeneutic phenomenology as the pathway we walk and talk in their dwelling places—their gardens. From within the narratives there seems to be a re-call of a partnership in the greater whole, the synchrony of all beings. Such remembering lends itself to consider an embrace of all beings and to wonder about what might be possible in our association with Living Earth.

Merleau-Ponty (1948/1973) suggests the relation between our bodies and the world is an embrace, and that the embrace begins in our earliest perceptions. So, perhaps it should come as no mystery that the etymology of embrace is extensive. Both a noun and a verb, it originates from Old French: *embrace-r* (F. *embrasser*) according to the *OED Online*. Many of its meanings are pertinent to aspects of the phenomenon and Merleau-Ponty's reference to an embrace: "folding in the arms, to clasp in the arms in fondness or in friendship, to accept as a friend, submit, to worship, to take to one's heart gladly or eagerly" among others (*OED Online*). Older gardeners embrace living earth in their partnership with all elements they touch in their gardening ways: persons, plants, seeds, and the soil itself. They are called to take part in the greater whole of life through this embrace. Let us enter this embrace as offered up by the gardener participants as we meet each one and listen to their stories.

### **The Resonant Call to be Seed-Carriers**

The older gardeners, the seed-carriers, answer a resonant call to be in relationship with the elements, in particular, land and earth; so in this chapter of interpreting conversations with these older keepers of the earth, I explore their lived experience of gardening: their first gardens and their later ones, their successes as well as challenges. They describe the embrace in their eagerness to have their hands in the dirt, showing a



genuine fondness for soil. Perhaps this touching also allows them to be cognizant of their place among living beings, true to the purpose they take to heart as seed-carriers. Their being *called* is also a being “drawn or pulled with force” (*OED Online*) with religious underpinnings as in worship. I use that word, worship, carefully, as it offers a powerful image. The image suggests that calling is also a connection with the holy, the divine, and in the supreme garden example, the beautiful paradise of Eden. Again, from the *OED Online*, the noun, worship is comprised of “worth” and “ship,” “the condition (in a person) of deserving, or being held in esteem...; honour, distinction, renown; good name.” But as a verb, it means to “honour or revere as a supernatural being or power, or as a holy thing; to regard or approach with veneration; to adore with appropriate acts, rites and ceremonies...to regard with extreme respect or devotion; to ‘adore.’” The gardeners’ sense of worth, their well-being, their general attitude about life—all of these are revealed in their descriptive accounts of gardening.

In reflecting on these words and possible interpretations, I wonder: Is the gardener’s fondness for gardening not a form of devotion with its own rites and ceremonies? Their garden clubs, their sharing in plant societies, their rites of each season are ceremonial works in a sense. Perhaps, over time, gardening becomes an exemplar of a holy relationship for the seed-carriers and, in that way, gardening is more than a felt experience; it has spiritual aspects. Their gardening breathes life into them. I am reminded of Lauren de Boer’s (2006) rock climbing at Mt. Zion National Park where “each step is a breath” (p. 72) in a place where “aligning my breathing with the pulse of the Earth’s breath, the Sacred Wind, steadies me in the realization that I am essential,

needed, that my role is integral to the story of planet Earth” (p. 73). A spiritual relationship with the planet is nurtured through such experiences as it is in gardening.

Indeed, gardens have become sacred spaces for the seed-carriers, that is, from the definition of “sacred,” places which are “protected by some sanction from injury or incursion; hallowed (blessed)” (*OED Online*). Seed-carriers reach beyond their own gardens and devote themselves to protecting the land as part of their caring relationship with Living Earth. In fact, it follows that religion comes from the root word, “*relegere*: to read again, to bind” (*OED Online*) with the gardeners being inextricably bound to “be” gardening in one form or another. Looking further, I note the definitions of religion include:

the state of life bound by...vows, recognition...of some higher unseen power as having control of his destiny and as being entitled to ...reverence and worship; the general mental and moral attitude. (*OED Online*)

How does all this relate to an exploration of older persons who garden, or what might be considered the call or vocation of gardening? In this vocation, the seed-carriers are “bound” to a gardening life. Palmer (2000) writes about vocation as “something I can’t not do, for reasons I am unable to explain to anyone else and don’t fully understand myself but that are, nonetheless compelling” (p. 25). For seed-carriers, gardening is something they must do. Gardening is as compelling and vital as breathing. They are called to a reverent relationship with Earth that shapes their attitude about gardening and, of course, is tied to their attitude about life. I suggest gardening is much more like a religious calling to a vocation than not. Subsequently, I am very interested in the seed-carriers’ well-being: their attitudes about life and gardening as possibly that “state of life” introduced above in the etymology of religion; so, I look further. One might say I am

following the breath of the seed-carriers, knowing the word, breath, emerges from “spirit” (*OED Online*) as I uncover elements of spirituality embedded in their gardening lives.

After delving into where some of the words identified with “being called” (like religion, worship and vocation) lead me, I recall that, in the past, such terms were not typically a part of most professional studies (except for clergy). Even as a nurse, discussing an individual’s religious perspective was simply not part of the usual language unless it was a time of crisis for the individual. This clearly has changed. Since the mid-1980s in the gerontological literature, as in medicine and nursing, the understandings of *religion* and *spirituality* have continued to evolve among professionals studying the well-being of older adults (Sapp & Ellor, 1999). By 1992, the Forum on Religion and Aging, part of the American Gerontological Society (AGS), became the Forum on Religion, Spirituality and Aging, reflecting their wish to be “more inclusive of the diversity of individual expressions” (Sapp & Ellor, 1999, p. 7):

One way of thinking about these concepts is to see spirituality as that which gives one a sense of connectedness—to oneself, to others, to the natural world—and that which transcends all of these categories (commonly called the sacred, the divine or God). Spirituality, therefore, is often associated with questions about meaning and purpose in human existence, particularly in the later years of life. (pp. 7-8)

From beginning discussions until this later publication of collected works, the AGS intent is “affirmation that there is a spiritual dimension to human existence and that this dimension is profoundly significant in the lives of older persons” (Sapp & Ellor, 1999, p. 8). This spiritual connection allows professionals to broaden the understanding of “religion” as it plays out in our lives. I see the spiritual dimensions of the seed-carriers become more visible as I learn about the ways seed-carriers live out their later years. The

seed-carriers are gardeners who, as spiritual beings, seek that sense of connectedness to the natural world and, in their gardening experiences they find purpose for their lives. The seed-carriers are “spiritual” in the way Thompson suggests: “Human spirituality is the way in which people connect the activities of their daily lives with their wellsprings of deepest meaning. It is the place where spirit and flesh consciously meet and interact” (2000, p. 52). Thus, I try to come to terms with the meaning of this call of the land about which these stewards of the Earth feel so deeply. In Huebner’s understandings (although about teachers) the calling “is not simply being called forth; it is also being called by” (1999, p. 380). Perhaps, for seed-carriers, the call to garden actually is a calling by the Earth? The calling is their invitation to a transformation, as a seed coat breaks open and germinates in the soil.

#### Invitations

O come with me and through my gardens run,  
And we shall pluck strange flowers that love the sun,  
Of which the sap is blood, the petals flame,  
The sweet forbidden blossoms of no name!  
O splendid are my gardens walled with night,  
Dim-torched with stars and secret for delight;  
And winds breathe there the lure of smitten strings,  
Vocal of the immensity of things!

I have a secret garden where sacred lilies lift  
White faces kind with pardon, to hear my shrift.

There through my spirit kneeling the silence thrills and sings  
The cosmic brother feeling of growing, hopeful things:  
Old soothing Earth a mother; a sire the shielding Blue;  
(Neihardt, 1991, pp. 5-6)

The seed-carriers are answering an invitation to be smitten, thrilled, and hopeful, words that resonate in the poem. Most of my conversants were smitten in their youth as they followed in the footsteps of their heritage. Some of their passion lay dormant for

years before germination and finally, emerged in their new being as a gardener. Each seed-carrier hears the call to gardening at different times in his/her life. What does it mean to be called to embrace “old soothing Earth” as in “Invitations?” A call suggests one will respond or act in some way—as these seed-carriers will—in answering through their relationship with Earth. *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language* has multiple definitions for “call,” the root word. Several seem appropriate to the seed-carriers as gardening does seem to be “a summons, invitation or bidding,” to include “to summon as if by divine command” (Stein et al., 1969, p. 221). To take the definition further, it is similar to the call of the sea or the call of the wild, that is, “the fascination or appeal of a given place, vocation, etc.” (1969, p. 221). The given places are their gardens and the land itself.

How might the call be a vocation? “Vocation does not mean a goal that I pursue. It means a calling that I hear...Vocation does not come from willfulness. It comes from listening” (Palmer 2000, p. 4). How do we listen to our lives, the invitations we hear? Upon exploring his own response to vocation, Palmer learns that if the self seeks wholeness it insists we each hear our own particular voice, our own truths. In attempting to understand our meaning and purpose in life, we ask ourselves questions that connect back to that definition of call: What is the source of my fascination? What brings joy to my life? These are the questions of a discovering self. “Our deepest calling is to grow into our own authentic selfhood...As we do so, we will not only find the joy that every human being seeks—we will also find our path of authentic service in the world. True vocations join self and service...” (Palmer, 2000, p. 16). As I do, Palmer chooses the metaphor of the seed, and, like the conversants I introduce, he acknowledges a “seed of

true self...was planted,” and speaks of the call to “live responsively, accountably, and joyfully with beings of every sort” (2000, p. 17). Echoes of this summons to serve the larger community on Mother Earth continue to show in the stories I am privileged to hear.

It is the call of the land, Mother Earth’s bidding. Being-with Mother Earth, and that would include being in a garden of any dimension, gardeners see things in new ways. The given places of their gardens allow a deepening of their selfhood and the call to purpose. In these natural settings with “our spirit kneeling” to reflect Neihardt’s sentiment, we may gain a new perspective about ourselves. Perchance, Mother Earth nudges us to consider our place in the cosmos. Kneeling is part of the garden experience, no doubt; however, in this image one thinks of being humbled at the power of nature, the immensity of the universe, the miracle of newness in living, growing things in our presence. Neihardt’s descriptive stanzas hint at humility in the presence of nature, a sentiment that is a component of the seed-carrier’s act of Embracing. While words or a description is unable to bring us back fully to the experience, there are times, as in this poem, when poetic language can be a powerful way to understand something (Merleau-Ponty, 1964). In the presence of natural surroundings, Neihardt acknowledges this possibility:

Perhaps that is what an outing [in nature] is for—to strip one down to the lean essentials, press in upon one the glorious privilege of being one’s self, unique in all the universe of innumerable unique things...Once again you feel the bigness of your world, the tremendous significance of everything in it—including yourself...Living in the flesh seems so transient...But somehow you feel there is something bigger—not beyond it but all about it continually.  
(Neihardt, 1991, pp. 63-64)

The invitation to sacred places of nature where you feel unique in all the universe is a secret no longer, as echoed in Lauren de Boer's (2006) "bringing myself back" (p. 73) into union with something larger, our living Earth, but what may be novel is the idea of the ordinary garden surroundings providing a gateway into feeling "the tremendous significance of everything in it (your world)—including yourself" (Neihardt, 1991, p. 63). This sentiment begins to explore why the seed-carriers are called to this passion, why they are stewards of the earth who speak of hope and possibility, of sharing with others and being in community. After the call to stewardship, how do they respond and what will their answers be in future years? While I learn about my participants, I begin to see their responses to the call on display. Their answers are visible in their gestures, their talk, and their ways of taking care of the land. It is in the response to the call, Hultgren (1994) suggests, that "concerns what we *do*, whereas our response to our questions concerns who we *are* as humans. In all questions, it is we ourselves, our having and doing, thinking and being together that is at issue" (p. 24). Mother Earth has put out the invitation, sometimes as a soothing presence, and sometimes reminding them that they are changing like the seasons—growing, transforming their ways of being.

### **Introductions: Planting Date/Germination/Birth Date**

In preparing the details of introducing each of my participants, I find myself identifying with planting and germination dates instead of birth dates. Plants don't recognize or celebrate birthdays, of course, and in the greenhouse the plastic tags record planting date or moving date (to a larger container). As humans, we usually know our birth dates because our parents told us, but when are we firmly planted in a seed-bed? Surely our planting date occurs some time after accomplishing the tasks of childhood and

adolescence, or about the time we feel ready to face our adulthood. In Chapter Two, I wondered about the gardeners “being planted.” Being planted is one of several periods of germination and growth in our lives, and I suppose being firmly planted in a seed-bed is when we settle into our first home away from our parents. Casey would call this finding our place in the world, settling into our place-world (1993). At some point after they become gardeners, they become seed-carriers who dwell in the place-world of their gardens. The participants introduce me to the place-world of their gardens so that I may discover their ways of “being home” in a garden, finding themselves in their seed-beds.

Being at home with oneself, finding oneself are tasks of adulthood. To accomplish this identity quest, one must come to know the “Who am I” question. When we arrive at adulthood and look in the mirror, do we really see the person looking back? It is a time of self-discovery. If this coming into ourselves, finding our home, is germination, I suggest as humans we have several periods of germination. The origin of germinate is “to sprout, bud,...to come into being” (Mish et al., 1994, p. 489). Therefore, it follows that germinating occurs when the seed coat is ready to sprout. Thus, germination for us as persons begins with adulthood, and the subsequent seasons of growth are part of our growing into personhood, or the maturity of having found oneself. Simultaneously, growing older brings changes in our view of the world as well as physical changes. Sometimes our eyesight as well as hearing abilities change. Some might expect the resonant call to the older gardeners would be falling on deaf ears, or at least ears of those who are hard of hearing. It is not so. Whether in the presence of hearing aids or not, the resonant call continues for the seed-carriers who are germinating. Let me introduce them.



**Sally** is in her seventh decade. Like my darling mother who is still very active, Sally also defies any categorization by a set number of lived years. Their life as they know it, how well they exist in their worlds, is considerably more complex than something as simple as a birth year. At first I had written Sally's age down casually in my notes, and because I was off by more than a few years Sally gently chided me; however, the real message is that I had not considered her age, only her vitality.

Sally gave up a yen for tennis matches because she found morning was the best time to garden. She gardened some during her young adulthood; however, she returned to gardening "fulltime" once her two children were grown. She is married and they have six grandchildren. Her husband gets involved in much of her gardening work. After their early morning lap swim at the local pool, she usually spends many hours gardening. A snowbird that leaves her usual residence during winter, she gardens in two climate zones. Both Massachusetts and Florida have plants she enjoys, and it means she can be living with plants essentially all year long. They are always enjoying the growing season. It makes me wonder about her sense of time with seasons blending into one another all the time. Is this not stealing from time itself to savor every day anew? Sally is living extra days each season and cheating old age at the same time through her vitality for planting in pots and garden beds everywhere she lives.

**Beth** is still an active garden volunteer in historic London Town near her home. Gardening is a way of life for Beth, who always wanted to be a horticulturalist. She received formal education in floraculture. This meant she learned all that knowledge without the horticulture degree by name. Women were not typically in horticulture then, she explains, "only now is it about 50/50." It does not surprise me that she was ahead of

her time and took this road less traveled. After college, she gardened when she could; horticulture was not a possible career path in those days.

Then I decided I had to get a permanent job and support myself for a while. So I hired on with Boeing and was a data transcriber and then became an engineering aide. And then I got married (she laughs) and moved here. (Beth)

Later, Beth spent more than fourteen years as a horticulturist in a federal government program called the Comprehensive Education Training Act. Her personal hands-on style served her well as she is a do-er, not the administrator type. Her responsibility was to train a crew to work in the county's landscape service department. She led these work crews outdoors all over the county in all kinds of weather. While it was hard work, this was hardly her beginning of gardening. Her father was a horticulturalist who had a greenhouse at home and one in town, and gardening was a family event.

Beth, like many gardeners, learned to garden from a parent, her father, and so she grew into being a gardener. As was brought out earlier, gardening almost is a generational trait; all but one of the participants gardened as a youth. Beth began taking cuttings in second grade. She germinated early into this way of being, following in her father's footsteps. A widow with two daughters, she is pleased that her niece is a horticulturalist. Now 78 years old with aches and pains she chooses not to dwell on because "people don't want to hear about it," Beth prefers gardening that requires less physical effort. She says she does not necessarily feel any less the gardener though. Beth continues to take cuttings and start new plants; the evidence is everywhere in her home full of new cultivars of plants. The gardens at Historic London Town are lucky to have this seed-carrier as a volunteer replenishing their baskets with new plants.

A rose garden aficionado, **Jeannetta** calls herself a social scientist. At 72, she is a not-so retired independent nursing faculty member using her Masters and Ph.D. degrees in Public Health to teach community health nursing, epidemiology and international health in Africa three months every winter with her husband. Having rediscovered a special classmate at their 45<sup>th</sup> high school reunion, Jeannetta married him at age 63. Philanthropic in their perspectives, they live simply in an older, 250-unit apartment complex. When back home in the U.S. they raise funds through their church to be able to leave and teach part-time overseas. “We are given a house on campus [in Kenya]. I’ll gather some pictures [to show you]” (Jeannetta).

Jeannetta has had a garden every year since she was four. She has adjusted her ways somewhat and, instead, gardens in other people’s gardens. She travels out of state sometimes to get her hands into a garden and help someone while helping herself by being in the dirt. This began a long time ago when she lived over twenty years in the caretaker’s house on a Baltimore estate where she happily mowed the lawn, gardened and tended roses. Now she makes do with a balcony of plants and the woodlands near their apartment. In Africa, she is delighted to help grow vegetables like Swiss chard and brings in fertilizer for a resurrected rose garden. She has developed that neglected rose garden into twenty-two thriving bushes at this point.

**Barbara**’s husband calls her the “Goddess of Gardening.” Other than the tour of duty in Italy with her husband, Barbara can remember only one time when she was without a garden. She was living in an apartment and was too busy working in San Francisco while her husband was overseas. She also worked for National Geographic and had a summer job she liked as an illustrator. She and her husband have been married 64

years. As was the case in those days, they chose not to marry until their finances were established. Their family of two, a son and a daughter, is grown up now. Barbara has four grandchildren.

They began summering in the Annapolis area in 1939 and finally bought their two-and-a-half acres homestead just over twenty years ago. “It was an old sort of farm house I guess, built in 1893...I didn’t plan my garden like I should have,” says Barbara. No one would have guessed that. The first thing I notice at their home is the long road leading to the house framed by potted plants on the stoop. Numerous garden beds border the driveway, and something is usually in bloom. Here is a gardener whose mother got her started when she was three years old, and apparently, there are pictures of her planting Wisteria. Even at age 86, Barbara keeps her gardens blooming. I know personally that the Naval Academy Garden club members visit regularly and snip blossoms for arrangements at the chapel or a special event. To the side of the shed are two large vegetable garden plots that must have fed the neighborhood. These days they let others use that space. Well-executed plans translated to having a spigot out there for general use. What a great idea. Barbara probably figured that out.

A Daughter of the American Revolution member, Barbara is a realist who takes all that life has to dish out. She says she has felt better but she seems to keep going nonetheless. She gardens in spite of asthma and arthritis. She loves pulling weeds. I met Barbara through the Naval Academy Garden club, and one of the Board members recommended I include her in the study. Yet, I think we were destined to meet. Although she has lived and visited many places I am familiar with, we have two more coincidences that are interesting. I first learned how to be a nurse at the hospital where she was born,

and both our fathers went to the same college. When we share our stories, we uncover layers that are the same, and yet they await discovery. It reminds me of when Barbara described digging the garden beds and finding oyster shells underneath. This was an unexpected find left by Indian settlers. They figured they must have had campfires and had been eating oysters over the campfires, “cause there are just layers of them” (Barbara). Gardeners have shared layers in the places they have visited and the plant material they have enjoyed growing. It amazes me how many stories about plants and history I have heard.

Rising Sun Inn...was a real inn on back before pre-revolutionary times, and during the revolution Lafayette was supposed to have stayed there. And, the story goes that the Scotch Broom [plant] that is almost disappeared now along General’s Highway, but used to be [plentiful]... That was supposed to have been from the feed that Lafayette’s horses ate. (Barbara)

Gardeners tell plant stories connected with history, but often the history is their own. Barbara has a history of planting gardens wherever she has lived. Sharing the flowers is one of the ways she has continued to connect with both her past and present. It is her way of keeping time. Kavanagh explains, “Gardeners keep place and time—renewing, invigorating, attending to (and letting go). So it is not ‘keeping’ in the sense of holding on to but ‘keeping’ as caring for, and about, being present, watching over, learning from” (Personal communication, 21 June 2004).

“My garden and I are both mature” (**Selena**). Enjoying sitting on the deck overlooking the Little Tree farm, Selena smiles as she says this. She is 75, a widow of about three years. All four of her children are gardeners, and both her parents were gardeners. “Since the second World War, when I was a little girl and my parents used to hire me...to work in their gardens, I worked for the highest bidder” (Selena). On the

other hand, although a gardener as a young girl, she does not think one comes to gardening until after they have their own piece of property. Selena has a good business sense and stays very busy with non-profit activities out in semi-rural Massachusetts. With a handyman, she manages the property she and her husband developed piecemeal. The property consists of a cottage and main house, a barn, several large sweeping lawns and two garden areas besides the tree farm and adjacent land, including about 12 acres of protected land on either side of a stream called Angeline Brook.

Her sight is a precious commodity she fully appreciates in this seventh decade of life. The past three years she developed macular degeneration and suffered a detached retina. She used to read garden catalogs in the wintertime. However, even with a special reading aid that magnifies printed materials Selena finds it too difficult to bother nowadays. Selena and her husband, the headmaster at a prestigious boarding school for several decades, lived the academic life and the rigors that accompanied it until retiring fulltime to the farm and home they had sculpted to be their own. Her husband was a gifted writer and scholar; both enjoyed reading in a wide range of subjects. They were married 52 years. Thank goodness for her love of music and the availability of books on tape! Selena herself easily could write several books. The first might be about activism in garden clubs, and the second book could be titled: “How to make friends and influence community development.”

**Leo** is 77, married with two grown sons and a daughter who lives 300 miles away. The couple considers San Diego their home, although by way of introduction, Leo mentions a sign just outside his hometown in Illinois that always read, “Population: 251.” Growing up in that small town, his dad was a house painter and his mother worked as a

hairdresser in another town nearby. People describe Leo as “a slow talker,” he tells me. He adds that he hopes if “not a fast thinker” he hopes he’s “a deep thinker.” Leo came into gardening on his own back in 1957 when he and his wife first lived in the California desert. It just happened that while at a gardening shop where they sold tools and other things, he bought some Spring-blooming bulbs. “On a whim,” he says, because he had not gone there specifically to buy flowers or anything. He followed the instructions and put the daffodil bulbs in the ground. The next Spring he found it “kind of exciting” when he saw something coming up and “was hooked at that point.” Leo’s front and back yards are proof that he finds gardening “pleasurable.” Actually, since he retired from teaching, he has made a career of it. He has numerous flowerbeds and pots that show off a wide variety of flowers and vegetables plus trellises, wandering pathways, a dry riverbed effect with a footbridge, benches and a kind of greenhouse with orchids. It reflects his yen to experiment.

There was a time, of course, early in my gardening career that I tried everything, or it was my intention to. If I would go through a seed catalog I would order everything and finally I have, recently I should say, I have settled on just a few plants that seem to work well. (Leo)

On the other hand, he does not go for the easy, everyday, typical choices even now. He does have a fondness for Gerbera daisies though, and still has a “hot” garden, a Japanese area and a few fruit trees to keep it interesting throughout the year. The longest time he has been away from his garden in recent years is about 10 days and proudly, he notes, his drip irrigation system keeps watering manageable.

**Marie** is 70, and only recently retired from the county. Married for 49 years, she enjoys her four daughters and seven grandchildren. Her husband has been ill but is doing better these days. They live right at the waterfront in what used to be a tenant farmer’s

house on the edge of a back creek leading out to South River. “It is an old house,” Marie explains; they added on and fixed the old house as best they could. “We did what we could pay for,” she explains. Today they manage a business renting the dock space on the piers jutting out from their property. It is a family-friendly operation. Marie knows all the boats and their owners well. She notices them coming and going as she watches from the porch or the deck and greets each one.

One could say Marie’s biography is a true blue Maryland treasure trove. Her history covers familiar ground for me. I am a frequent visitor to the site of the Lost Towns project that includes the 23 acres of London Town. It is the site of eight acres of woodland gardens and several late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> century historic buildings. I have toured the former Almshouse structure in London Town where Marie lived with her mother when it was a boarding house. Born nearby, Marie delights in telling the stories from those years in the Publik house when it was “an old folks’ home.” Her sister liked to clean house and Marie liked to be outside. She gardened with her father, who had a green thumb: “He could make a weed look pretty,” but it was probably her grandfather who got her “into it.” He sold arrangements and produced flowers for a florist in Annapolis. Both Annapolis and London Town are full of such history. Learning about their history brings such places to life because we remember the people who made it so. Moreover, I revel at the connections. For I am a Historic London Town member and supporter who is learning about gardeners’ lives and stories in and around the same places where Marie was raised to garden and Beth works as a garden volunteer.

### **A Planting Gene is Sown and Shared: Becoming Rooted**

Now my granddaughter is really getting into gardening...at twenty-one or two. So that it just seems to be something, a gene that is in the family, you know. (Beth)



With the exception of Leo, all my conversants grew up with a planting gene from their family tree with either a greenhouse or Victory gardens nearby. Selena, Sally and Beth were doing seeding as youngsters. Strong family connections to planting are in their life stories. The roots are visible. “I went out and picked the beans and yes, I shucked the corn or did whatever needed to be done” (Sally). In the *Tao of Teaching*, Nagel reminds us, “Know one’s own roots to embrace others” (1994, p. 53), encouraging us to know ourselves and not forget from whence we came. Unlike the visible roots of the conversants’ planting genes, the *OED Online* explains that a root is usually under the surface; however, a root is also the “part of anything by which it is united to something else,” and to take root is “to settle properly into the ground.” The seed carriers are united to their families through a history of planting and gardening. In becoming gardeners when their time is ripe, they are settling properly into the ground of the seedbed. The gardeners have settled into an earthly way of being-in-the-world they inherited.

One of my preliminary conversants, Charles, came into his gardening life over a period of years; he is the son of a Maryland farmer. His father inherited the family farm from a long lineage of farmers. The family’s farm and its story are quite renowned. In fact, the story is in the local history books of that period. Therefore, Charles comes from a long-lived tradition of farming in Maryland’s Broadneck peninsula. Yet, although the family connection is certainly present in his history, Charles was unsure whether he was a “gardener” at first. In his fifties and somewhat unaware his rootedness in gardening had come from his heritage, he reflected on his own story of care-taking on his parents’ land when they gradually became unable to manage it themselves. He talked about his entry into gardening at length, and we walked around his garden for over an hour while he

named plants and described how each one came to live there and which ones he moved around to find a happier place. The apprentice was becoming teacher, entering into a relationship ripe for mentoring. Such conditions, although commonplace, are precious in the gardening world.

**Plant supports: Guides from the past.** The conversants' histories invariably include at least one individual who played a key role introducing them to the plant world or supported them in their learning. Such individuals are like support stakes are for plants; they create conditions that help the plant thrive. Often that person, their guide in the apprenticeship, is part of the gardener's family tree. The seed-carriers carry on the traditions of their teachers and seem comforted by doing so. "I handle a plant like he did. How carefully he would handle a plant...and don't step on the flowers! Watch where your feet are...Don't you look where you are walking?" (Jeannetta). For Jeannetta, who has had a garden since age four, it was her father "who dug this little place for me and taught 'flowers first, then vegetables'" (Jeannetta) and an old German farmer, Paul, who were her guides. Beth and Marie each give credit to their father's influence and gift of a plot when they were very young girls. In later years, Beth finds another mentor in the form of a London Town landscape architect.

The seed-carriers learn from their past guides how to support less knowledgeable plantpersons. From their family tutelage or other guides from the past, the seed-carriers learn to share their love and knowledge of plants, and it shapes their own becoming. A 2001 draft revision of the *OED Online* furthers our usual understanding of the French originated noun, mentor, as one who teaches a younger person by adding "an experienced and trusted counsellor [*sic*] or friend." Jeannetta, a teacher her entire life and one who

offers apprenticeships in all things gardening says, “There was kind of a trajectory from the garden where I grew up, the farm...” She was entering a path for life. Did she realize this at the time? It is likely she did not. The guides in the gardeners’ lives apparently set in motion a trajectory of involving others in a love of the earth and its gifts for all its creatures. Though unrecognized forces for the seed-carriers, the guides had begun their mentoring work by readying the path. Chinese teachings suggest the pathway is “calling humans back to the remembrance of the ground for the peace and harmony of all beings” (Chen, 1989, p. 24). Are the seed-carriers learning ways of becoming that will sustain them for a lifetime? I believe so. As youngsters and apprentices, perhaps they did not realize they would become teachers of nature and soil as a route to heal, yet they were already becoming seed-carrier apprentices.

**An apprenticeship through remembrance of the ground.** Whether taught by a parent or trusted friend, the seed-carriers love the soil and touching the earth as a way to live more fully. Pratt (1998) names this form of teaching apprenticeship, “modeling ways of being” (p. 42), where tutor and the subject material intersect with student. This “alternate frame of understanding” goes beyond the content itself, and students learn perspectives that allow them to enter into a reality-based, socialized community where the knowledge gained is part of a way of being (Pratt, 1998, p. 42). The gardening world, in fact the community of those who cherish the earth, would have to wait awhile for the apprentices to metamorphose into seed-carriers. At times, the gardener did not become a gardener for many years—but the early relationship, that family connection, still holds much significance. We remain connected to those we have loved and lost. I wonder if this family connection is what stands behind the call, the invitation to experience the green

world in the context of family. In life, our family influences who we are and what we become. In the same way, we carry our past with us into the garden and create meaning. “The past becomes the means by which the individual can project his own potentiality for being” (Huebner, 1999, p. 139), and the past is brought forward in the becoming. Since a child is rooted from the parents’ genetic make-up, a child is the parent’s fruit; and subsequently when we grow up it may start all over again with our own children. We re-seed.

Thus, in the process of becoming seed-carriers, we shed another layer of our seed coat and yet, we remember our genetic roots and our family ways. In our way of being-in-the-world of gardening, we stay near our parent; we live with our family history; we acknowledge our family tree is part of who we are. It determines, in part, who I am. Heidegger says “ ‘*Ich bin*’ (I am) means to dwell, I stay near ...the world as something familiar in such and such a way” (1953/1996, p. 51). Our way of gardening reflects what we know, what is familiar. Yet, that which is familiar may be dust from the comet that is the trajectory of our family or from our first teachers of gardening ways. Whoever they were, the seed-carriers’ mentors started them on a destination, a pathway to the green world where they began to unfold a layer of their seed coat.

### **Unfolding a Layer of the Seed Coat: Becoming a Seed-Carrier**

Dwelling in the garden is also a remembering of our gardening roots and a return to our family remembrances as part of our process of becoming. From the ancient Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu’s discussion of the natural process of change, I find wonderful poetic language to explore the notion of dwelling in our becoming. First, I

learn about the pathway, something which every thing experiences. It is called the Tao, “the Way.” The translator introduces it as

[A] pathway,...a kind of generative ontological process through which all things arise and pass away,...[that this way is] to dwell as part of the natural process. In that dwelling, self is but a fleeting form taken on by earth’s process of change. (Hinton, in Tzu, 2000, p. x)

In dwelling with the natural process they learn in the garden, the seed-carriers in my study know earth’s process of change firsthand. Change is what aging places in front of us, and change in itself is never a simple task. Having their “hands in the mud” (Beth), the life cycle is what they know best. “We see what is down there, meaning your roots, [we understand] what is...elemental, life forces, returning to soil” (Sally). These seed-carriers witness “the Way,” the natural process of life, and it brings a knowing understanding that this is what life is about. I wonder if this allows them to be more comfortable with change than others coping with aging. Being in-tune with the change of seasons allows the seed-carriers to know intuitively the cycle of life from bearing witness to it in the garden. Perhaps it is why Marie preferred to help with the work outside the almshouse at London Town while her siblings worked inside. She was at home in the gardens, and not alone at all outside. It was a different kind of witnessing; she was learning to value and love the natural world that grew around her. “When we encounter those things we truly love, we become awake, alive. We open ourselves to the gifts of wisdom and beauty of these things” (Muller, 1996, p. 71). As a new gardener, Marie was finding her calling. In that early garden, Marie was unfolding her seed coat, learning about becoming whole in the presence of the natural world. She was starting out on her own path to becoming a seed-carrier.

**Encountering the circle of life.** “Gardening connects you directly to nature—I really think [what you are feeling in that connection] is your own thing” (Beth). While apprentices, the seed-carriers learn about themselves and the circle of life, initially they perhaps do not realize their role in this larger circle. They are either following in their parent’s footsteps or taking their mentor’s lead. Except for one seed-carrier, who says, “I am a ‘child of the soil’ and will return to the soil” (Jeannetta), such insight takes more time for humans than animals. Unlike other living beings, we have to grow into our realization about our role in the cosmos. Some discover their role in adulthood. Is it maturity and experience with composting and creating humus that teaches this? “It is a rebirth [we see], the miracle of creation while communing with the soil” (Paul, Sally’s husband). In a phenomenological study of re-vision for student writers, Bass uses the metaphor of composting to create something new, and adds, “The value of composting is not the organic matter itself, but what is *left behind* when the process is complete” (2000, p. 64). Hopefully, all seed-carriers, although apprentices at first, realize their contributions are the something of value left behind.

The reference to “cosmos” is purposeful and has several meanings: “order, world or universe, the world as an ordered and harmonious system” (*OED Online*). How does one come to recognize a possible role in the cosmos? Hogan (1995) suggests it begins within us, that even as we come to have a “relationship with ourselves, . . . we [realize] we are part of something larger” (p. 41). The notion of being part of a larger whole or the cosmos is not part of all cultures; yet “...people of such cultures [that support the idea] often reflect a sense of kinship, even union, with the earth and its creatures and a sense of harmony within themselves” (May, 2006, pp. xxi-xxii).

How is this role of kinship with the earth learned if not discovered from within as in the example of the seed-carriers? For the seed-carriers, it is an individual response to the call to be with the natural world through their gardening. Some cultures teach their youth about that sense of kinship through nature's examples. The Lakota Native Americans are reminded daily of their place in the world by using the phrase "All my relations," as both a preface to any celebration and a prayer that acknowledges the interdependence of all things on Mother Earth, inanimate or not. A passage from a 1972 translation of Suzuki's *The Japanese Spirituality* says it beautifully:

The spirit of the earth is the spirit of life. This life always unfolds itself within the individual, who is a continuation of the earth—he has his roots there, there is where he appears, and there is where he returns. The spirit of the earth breathes at the inmost recesses of the individual...(in McLuhan, 1994, p. 146)

Each individual must work at self-discovery to find his or her inmost recesses, as the poem suggests. The process of learning about the circle of life begins with learning about our selves, a task of youth.

**Witnessing nearby nature.** The perspective we learn from witnessing nature does help us. Witness, or *witnes*, according the *OED Online*, originates from Old English: "knowledge, understanding, wisdom, attestation of a fact, event, or statement; testimony, evidence" (1989). We gain untold knowledge from witnessing nature. I ask if gardens kind of shut down in winter.

Well, there's only such a short time, really. There are things of interest in the winter. In my case, I am watching some camellias out back, to see how they are doing. How cold it has been—I can tell by the buds. You know, there's not as much of interest, but there are still things to look into and to watch for. Just because it is winter does not mean there is not still stuff out there of interest!  
(Beth)

The seed-carriers develop an understanding, a kind of wisdom, about life. “Witnessing is the technique for centering,” writes Neiman (2001, p. 71), and centering is about knowing yourself and your roots. The experience of seeing the circle of life firsthand grounds us, centers us in life lessons. We learn that as surely as Winter comes, the Spring follows and so on. Like many, I am reassured by the cycle of the recurring seasons

The apprentices work at these sorts of lessons in their first gardens. During the process of becoming and learning about change, their mentors offer them a head start to wakefulness through bearing witness to life in a garden. Almost all the seed-carriers in this study had their own responsibilities in gardening as a young child. As Mary Ann describes in her reflection (Chapter Two), where she steps into her gardener father’s footprint in the soil, the fledgling seed-carriers grow up doing the seeding. One might say the garden offers one ready-made example of the circle of life. Jones writes:

Who loves a garden  
Finds within his soul  
Life’s whole;  
He bears the anthem of the soil  
While integrates toil;  
And sees beyond his little sphere  
The waving fronds of heaven, clear.  
(as cited in Hogan, 2002, p. 31)

The seed-carriers’ inherited love of gardening often begins as children. Children make sense of the pieces in their lives in the stages of becoming and growing into whole individuals beyond the “little sphere” they know. And, later as parents, the seed-carriers are there to teach if someone is interested.

My daughter Margie is going to be doing it. She’s gotten into gardening. I did not really either encourage or discourage my kids in gardening, I just let them be. And now both of them are interested in gardening. I think it is better that way. (Beth)



I wonder if by knowing wholeness during these early experiences in natural settings the seed-carriers seek the same feeling of being rooted later in their gardens. Perhaps it influences them to teach others if they show interest, as in Beth's situation. Jeannetta reminisces:

I remember an old neighbor of my mother's who was "a tree man." For many years he worked with trees with a business. And he said when he was learning the business of working with trees, one of the first things that all the new recruits had to do was stand right at the tree and just look up. And be aware of the magnificence and the size and how small we are with respect to those trees. And I've always remembered that, especially with the redwoods. I mean you look up at those...(Jeannetta)

Jeannetta describes rootedness in the presence of trees while being awestruck at the same moment. Her remembrance reminds us of how natural settings open us to something beyond ourselves where we capture a sense of our place and purpose on Earth that somehow nurtures us all the while it humbles us.

Hogan (1995) describes finding life's whole following the healing and restoration that often begins with experiencing a ceremonial sweat lodge, and the description resembles the experience of being alone in nature, or a garden: "There is no real aloneness. There is solitude and the nurturing silence..." (p. 41). Do the seed-carriers learn to enjoy this silence, this tranquility of wholeness in the presence of change? Like many gardeners, many of the seed-carriers work alone—yet this may not be solitude as it is usually understood. What is the silence offering them besides a place of quiet and respite? Is silence different from solitude or tranquility in a garden?

**Finding tranquility.** The seed-carriers often are alone in their gardens where it can be peaceful, even tranquil. In Latin, *tranquillus* means "quiet" (*OED Online*) while in French, *tranquille* means "free from agitation or disturbance; calm, serene, placid, quiet,

peaceful” (*OED Online*). The setting inspires contemplation and unconscious problem-solving according to Jeannetta, who tells me she looks for opportunities to garden because she emerges from gardening with a newfound solution to whatever has been on her mind. Perhaps, at times, she is in pursuit of solitude.

I’ll often work in a friends’ garden while they are doing other things...So I will sometimes go and work in their yard for two days straight. Digging and trimming, hacking and hauling stuff away...I have to have dirt, I have to find dirt to play in. (Jeannetta)

Jeannetta makes a path to solitude through digging in nearby nature. In a philosophical study of solitude, Koch (1994) finds it is highly unusual to find pure solitude, noting “how commonly and pervasively solitude and encounter are threaded with each other” (p. 92). Probably that is how it is in Jeannetta’s situation described above. What is solitude?

Koch considers solitude as

Simply an experiential world in which other people are absent...Other people may be physically present, provided that our minds are disengaged from them; and the full range of disengaged activities, from reflective withdrawal to complete immersion in the tumbling rush of sensations. (1994, p. 15)

Why is solitude important to understand? Koch suggests our interest “is motivated by our ongoing stumbling project to discover the best way to live...[Still], one good that solitude provides is indisputable: it gives respite and restoration, a time and place to lick the wounds of social strife” (1994, p. 5). Most pertinent to this study, Koch cites Henry David Thoreau’s written work as an example of how solitude often occurs in nature’s presence. Aside from John Muir and Walt Whitman’s work, one particular example Koch offers is a good fit, “The mind has disengaged itself from other people and is absorbed elsewhere, in the earth being shoveled, in the ripples on the river...” (1994, p. 44). It strikes me that nearby nature is a likely setting for both solitude and encounter. The

couples in my study would probably agree. “Well, my husband knew a red rose was a red rose when we were first married. Before he died, when somebody called with a [gardening] question for me, he had started answering their questions!” (Beth). Their friendship developed a “sacred connection” (O’Donohue, 1997, p. 19) through their encounters in gardening.

When Palmer (1999) speaks of solitude, it is not the “being alone” as represented in saying “he/she is working alone.” In Palmer’s understanding of solitude the person may or may not actually be alone but is living a life of integrity and meaning, hence, feeling true to self. Thus, the person is free to give of himself/herself to others, all the while preserving a separateness that makes them feel fully alive because they are engaged in what they love to do.

When my husband (Bryan) helps, he says, “But don’t tell anybody I’m doing this. Don’t you tell anybody that I’m here raking leaves.” Bryan knows that I have to be in the dirt and we have worked it out that he absolutely does not have to be involved. It was really funny. Especially before we were married, I remember one time he was out there digging holes for trees and stuff like that because that is what we were involved in. We worked it out that he does not have to do that. He can take a book. (Jeannetta)

In similar ways, the seed-carriers’ interactions with gardens foster a climate where they can enjoy the gifts of solitude and silence that nurture their love of gardening and support their call to be sharing and giving to others through their “work.” Oriah Mountain Dreamer (1999) considers such interactions a union, a “sharing joy” during times in our usual lives “when we know that we belong—to another, to ourselves, to the world, to the Mystery that is larger than ourselves” (p. 51). The Mystery could be any supreme being we acknowledge and may feel comfortable naming.

I see this gift of tranquility in Marie, who, like several of the others, loved being out in the garden as a child. She was developing a handiness for interacting with all things green and developing an understanding about the cycle of life. More than learning how “to make a weed look pretty,” Marie’s father modeled a returning to the root of life forces. For seed-carriers, their mentors often show them a garden serves as a pathway to meaning and purpose in life. What would it be like to return to our roots, our center?

Returning to the root is called *tranquility*,  
tranquility is called *returning to the inevitable unfolding of things*,  
returning to the inevitable unfolding of things is called *constancy*,  
and to understand constancy is called *enlightenment*.  
(Tzu, 2000, p. 18)

The gardeners return to their roots in continuing to garden, unfolding one more layer of themselves, their seed coat. Sally writes, “Gardening is the most fulfilling, satisfying and challenging type of activity...I feel closer to God in the garden than in church.” As adults, we need reminding to return to our roots and those particular moments in time where joy is lived or, move forward to create those moments in our own everyday lives today.

**Awakening in nearby nature.** As a young child, each seed-carrier, except Leo, helped on a farm or had their own garden. “I have had a garden since age four” (Jeannetta). Neiman (2001) tells us those who interact with nature—farmers, gardeners, carpenters, even painters—are attuned to their surroundings and awake, like the elements of nature. In this connotation, being awake translates to being alive, a way of being in tune with the world around us.

I was the one, for some reason, I guess because I was agreeable—that would get up and help Dad plant strawberries at five o’clock in the morning or when we put in the big vegetable garden, why I was very much involved with that...(Beth)

Beth learns to be in tune with early morning planting activities. She is awake, in the fullest sense, to the elements of nature and remains so in these later seasons. She discovered this as we all do—when we are ready. While individually experienced, the self-discovery helps us find our own song within the rhythm of life in the larger world within which we live.

Sometimes when I am working with fragile plants or things that need special attention, I'll be thinking about how I need to care for them and how carefully I put them in and all that sort of stuff. (Jeannetta)

Often a particular place brings that mindset nearer and we can unfold, re-discover or experience joy. As a teacher, Jeannetta is also one who cares for her students in Kenya, yet gardening offers her another chance to take care of something—the world of living plants in gardens and woodlands. Momaday (1997) encourages a return to special places of meaning in order to keep the landscape “in the mind’s eye” (p. 118). As children, or seedlings that were to become seed-carriers, the gardeners experienced a centering that would continue and develop. In returning to such special places, we may be reawakened to the natural world and the newness within the seasons of life.

What I was describing was *survival* [by gardening]. [I had] a desperation for how I was going to manage to have enough garden available in order to survive. It is a life- blood kind of thing. Life-blood, for me, is being in the soil. (Jeannetta)

While the seed-carriers and older gardeners may have already known this, others may not yet be fully awake to the possibilities that nature holds for our lives. Abram (1996) writes of our cultural tendency to forget entirely about our sensuous relationship with the natural world and its wonder that fosters our aliveness. I know Paul and Sally have not forgotten. During one visit, he says to her, “You get totally transported out there,” to which Sally responds, “It is the most wonderful, stress-free environment I can

think of.” Finding a stress-free environment is likely a universal wish. We might all need to take note of the power of nearby nature to be transported into a wellness setting such as a garden.

Kingsley offers a perspective that perhaps there is some shifting in our cultural awareness regarding nature:

We are going through a period of huge transition from what used to be Western culture into something new...A return to the essence is required. ...Birds call and sing not only to quicken the plants: they also call to awaken the human seed that we are. If we can start to listen to them, really listen, they will draw us into this greater consciousness... (2006, pp. 29)

How wonderful to be developing this new awareness and joining such a circle!

Selena, too, is transitioning to a different sense of wakefulness with her trees. With failing eyesight, she perceives the beauty of the trees through another perspective. She enjoys trimming the trees by hand while standing very close to the tree and noting its outline against the sky. She listens to nature on her own terms and finds a new balancing point. Koch (1994) would say Selena speaks the language of nature—a language recognized by individuals with developed senses. Her story of unfolding reminds me of a stanza in a Native American prayer:

All beings on earth—the trees, the  
animals, the wind and the rivers—  
give away to one another—  
So all is in balance.  
We give away our promise to begin  
to learn  
how to stay in balance—  
with all the earth. (as cited in Goldman & Mahler, 2000, not paginated)

Somehow, these older gardeners, the seed-carriers, achieve balance in their later years of gardening. What lessons have they carried forward from their early years nurtured by mentors? Each could name their mentor(s) without skipping a beat; typically,

their parent showed them the way of gardening. “My dad had a greenhouse on our home property, but he also had a greenhouse in town...” (Beth). Sometimes another name surfaced as an important person. “During my field work in the Masters program...I drove by ‘Paul’s Garden’ and I saw all these flower beds. So, when I came back I stopped and asked, ‘Could I come and work here? I mean, just for fun?’” (Jeannetta). Jeannetta did just that most weekends in the summer for four years. “I would go there in the winter and we would transplant microscopic Petunias...I still learned much from Paul, an old German gardener, age 99, now” (Jeannetta).

For older gardeners the time *when* they become gardeners is not so critical but, rather, that they did come in-to gardening, having been called into this constancy. Unlike the others, Sally and Leo waited through some years of adulthood and young parenthood before fully becoming gardeners. The ideas had not heated up enough to begin another unfolding. One could say the compost was not ready, not hot enough to transform them into the richness of who they were to become.

“Now I am aware of gardens everywhere. I am very interested in what kind of gardening they are doing, comparing my own experience with theirs” (Leo). This enlightenment was not possible before; the seed-carriers were not ready. “Without understanding constancy, you stumble deceived. But understanding constancy, you’re all-embracing” (Tzu, 2000, p. 18). In becoming gardeners who are seed-carriers, they embrace their histories and eventually create the gardens that become a way to embrace their future. “The awakening of individuality is a continual unfolding...” [of who we become] (O’Donohue, 2004, p. 176). The individual stories about their gardening reflect the many ways they have found themselves as seed-carriers.

## **Composting Remembrances: Gardeners' Gold amidst Rocks**

Family memories float into consciousness as we remember our past and carry it into our present becoming. Casey reminds us that “Memory takes us into things...It is not something that sustains a *status quo ante* within human experience...The situation is such that remembering transforms one kind of experience into another” (2000, p. xxii). The remembering itself is a complex process that unfolds into the present experience we describe, narrate or record. Like a compost pile, our gardening builds from countless layers of remembrances. All the collected material eventually evolves into something that although different, contains the remnants of layers of our past. After the transformation, compost regularly becomes a gardener’s gold and these collected memories form the basis for the next plantings.

Success in gardening requires preparing seedbeds; hopefully, the seedbeds have decent dirt (gold) comprised of more humus than rock elements. Gardeners mix dirt and compost to enrich the soil and overcome any imbalance in the ratio of rocks to soil. In a similar fashion, the seed-carriers’ memories enrich their present becoming from the past remembrances into their future—some of which include gardening insights, of course. The seed-carriers, too, transform from what they once were. As all of us do, they are continually under development, preparing for what lies ahead. All the while, they also are composting their memories.

Sally knows the rewards of composting because she insists, “Preparing the soil is the most important part for growing [something].” You have to get the right ratio of soil to rocks.

My mother never had a problem sticking anything in [the ground] because she did not have rocks! This is all rocks here. Anytime I dig a hole, I take a bucket with



me...or two! And I get all the rocks out and then start adding the soil or the compost or the whatever. (Sally)

Gardening is soil-dependent. Inevitably, the seed-carriers discuss working the soil, moving rocks and how best to improve the habitat for growing through making compost to prepare for planting. Wistfully, Sally remembers her mother's rich farmland and, like Leo, speaks at length about composting and the critical importance of amending soil. Sally cannot get all the rocks out and decides, instead, that some must become permanent fixtures in the design. Sally alters her plan to deal with those rocks. She amends her life plans, too, as she faces the future in concert with her husband, an agile senior who also happens to be an amputee.

What are the rocks in the lives of older gardeners entering later seasons? How have they managed to adjust to the changes, and move ahead with their life's design? "We have a little stool and sometimes he [Paul, Sally's husband] sits on the stool and then starts between us to get the stump out. And that's a lot of digging, digging around..." (Sally). Despite his prosthetic leg, Paul is determined to help her. Together they tackle life's challenges. For the first time, I see how this kind of sharing physical work strengthens their relationship as they work toward common goals. As they work the garden, they are nurturing the soil of their relationship.

Jeannetta shares her life with her husband, Bryan, in their travels to teach in Africa, and at home. She has learned to make a place for him in her full day.

I have to make some compromises. I chose at age 64 to be married rather than to continue by myself and be out gardening by headlamp 'til 3 in the morning or whenever. I chose to live with this other person and I have to devote time to him. I have to really consciously remember *that* when I am tempted to go over in the woods and [then] I think, you know, we have not spent any time together today. (Jeannetta)

Cultivating a life together requires compromise for her as for anyone entering into a relationship. Now she gardens when it fits in to their life as a couple, so on a recent trip they toured gardens only some of the time. Gadamer (2001) might say their movement to and from each other is a precious encounter, one where they relate to each other's needs. These couples are creating a life together, evolving as they find rocks in the soil. They discover ways to compost the soil of their relationships successfully. Their relationships continue to nurture through conscious relating to one another; thus, each pair grows together as a couple.

Sometimes the relationship is less direct. For example, Leo appreciates that the neighbor with a perfect lawn drops off grass clippings into Leo's composting area. The nearby neighbor gardens in a way that seems foreign to Leo, but their leaves and grass mingle in the compost bin to create that gardeners' gold. Over time, the different styles of gardening become less clear and lose importance. Gadamer says "...there is always something about which we are not correct and are not justified in maintaining. Through an encounter with the other we are lifted above the narrow confines of our own knowledge" (2001, p. 49). Is this creating of compost, whether in friendship or in relationship, one of a gardener's best lessons?

Indeed, to compost means "to convert" (Mish et al., 1994, p. 236), and gardeners know a richness develops from leaf mold composting, not unlike the richness from our own converting into a different person from whom we were when younger. Each stage in our lives offers an opportunity to be changed, to grow as persons. As part of the "converting" we come to know ourselves and enter into nurturing relationships with others. O'Donohue explains, "Knowing calls [us] out of [ourselves]" (1999, p. 19) and

this innate joy of discovery begins when we are children. As humans, we yearn to find newness out of something already present. This continues as we mature. The significant relationships in our lives also evolve and undergo changes, too, and thus, also are converted.

The building of relationships is not unlike building a compost pile, layer upon layer of understanding. Bass (2000) comes to a similar interpretation in noting the deepening of relationships between student writers and teacher that is made possible through a re-visioning of their engagement with each other while writing and revising. What is created when we add layer upon layer of understanding within a nurturing relationship? The newness that results is a source of strength and new energy. From dealing with my own compost bin, I know that compost also attracts life, specifically, earthworms, the animate part of the compost pile. The energy from composted material, in some sense, fosters new life. In the compost pile, the new life is earthworms, which rejuvenate the soil. The earthworms and compost bring texture and life to the soil, aerating planted areas to foster growing newness. Is growing newness not a “being lifted” above ourselves in Gadamerian terms (Gadamer, 2001, p. 49)? By being lifted above our own self-knowledge, our usual ways, we build new understandings about life as individuals and as part of the larger world to which we belong.

One could say the seed-carriers find a new way of seeing the world, a composting that energizes nurturance of each other. Their relationships are being composted into gold. This is no small lesson. In a gardening life, one quickly learns that making compost is time well spent. Sally’s husband runs their diesel leaf shredder, and together they rake and shovel from bin to bin religiously to have the gold for new growth and established

plantings. I stand in awe at the 20 by 20 by 6 feet high pile of shredded leaves that is on its way to becoming near perfect compost from their efforts. Barbara tells me that although 90, her husband still helps her in the garden “when he feels up to it.” I see the gardeners’ work together bringing texture and life to their connections to each other. They create meaning and connect to each other in the sharing of their lives in and out of a garden.

Buber (1970) describes relationships like Barbara names as precious, an I-You. They share a series of moments of connecting deeply, engaging fully with each other in their encounter. “I-You involves a sense of being part of a whole. The ‘I’ is not experienced or sensed as singular or separate” (Buber, 1958/2006, “I-You, I-It” ¶ 7). Encounters like these create newness in their relationships of care for each other. What is converted are their relationships as they continue to grow in nurturing ways. This is their gold, their amending of soil despite rocks.

The gardeners in my study come from established plantings and carry these lessons in richness forward to others. Their mentors and teachers’ composted lessons are close-at-hand and, lest we forget, ever present in the form of Mother Nature. I sometimes say the spirituality of gardening is as regular as having a Sunday school for gardeners, only these devotions are practiced much more during the week, too. The whispered prayer is about creating beauty.

### **The Co-Creation of Beauty in Seed-beds We Have Known and Loved**

The experience of the beautiful, and particularly the beautiful in art, is the invocation of a potentially whole and holy order of things, wherever it may be found....In any encounter with art, it is not the particular, but rather the totality of the experienceable world, man’s ontological place in it, and above all his finitude before that which transcends him, that is brought to experience.  
(Gadamer, 1977/1986, p. 32-33)

Seed-carriers, co-creating beauty through nature and its mysteries, encounter beauty in the experienceable world of nearby nature. Is beauty in nearby nature not an encounter with art? Does the garden become a seed-bed for living art that brings to light the whole of nature and the holy order of the universe? My conversants lead me into their experiences of being embraced by the beautiful that Gadamer introduces so eloquently. “To me, gardening [is]...something that gives me joy and complete peace” (Sally). More questions surface as I hear about being in the presence of the beautiful through their gardening. Beauty encircles the seed-carriers and holds them close. We are called and embraced by beauty, and in becoming aware of beauty, we take “a divine breath that blows the heart open” (O’Donohue, 2004, p. 7) and are changed.

Do they, as co-creators, recognize their participation as artists with their living, beautiful art? Being in the presence of the beautiful profoundly humbles everyone, I dare say, and is it not similar to being in the presence of art? In the gardens, the seed-beds we have known and loved, beauty is found, and, in the encounter, seed-carriers know beauty as a “transforming presence wherein we unfold towards growth almost before we realize it” (O’Donohue, 2004, p. 8). Yet, are they too humble to consider themselves artists while speaking of the beautiful in nearby nature as that where beauty resides?

Reflecting back, the encounter with the beautiful experienced as an embrace is what seed-carriers bring to light in their conversations. I recall sometimes that the encounter with beauty is full of energy, and sometimes it is a quieting of the heart, thereby allowing a “going beyond” as in the meaning of the Latin verb, *tran(s)scend-ere*, “to climb over or beyond (*OED Online*). Sally writes a response describing her husband, Paul:

Since his physical activities have been somewhat lessened [following unanticipated heart surgery] he's had more time to 'smell the roses' and enjoys sitting out back, watching the hummingbirds sip nectar from the Cardinal flower and [thus] enjoys the garden, its varied foliage and the serenity it gives.

To sit in the garden and soak in the beauty of life around him is, indeed, "climbing over" usual gardening ways. For Paul, the experience of the quiet is also strengthening his healing heart in the presence of the beauty of life itself. Paul answers the invitation to be embraced by beauty. Bolen (1995) understands that an experience with the beautiful opens the "windows of the soul" (p. 3) and inspires "a prayer of appreciation, a moment of gratitude [in] behold[ing] beauty and [being] one with it" (p. 3). In the quiet after an unplanned life challenge, Paul opens his heart wide to the beautiful, and the garden with its surrounding fullness of life becomes a place of transcendence.

### **Opening to Beauty**

You're doing something, creating something I guess, by doing some good for something,...digging out weeds... (Barbara)

From the wisdom of the Earth's teachings, seed-carriers open their hearts to the possibilities of what may come. Drawn toward life through the beauty that surrounds them in their garden places of nearby nature, the seed-carriers experience the Beauty of the Creation shown unconditionally around us. They are co-creators making meaning through their garden work, "doing some good" as Barbara says.

Oriah Mountain Dreamer (1999) invites us to walk with Beauty and be open to receive it, seeing how this outward manifestation of Beauty in our world symbolizes the Mystery, or whatever the Divine represents to each one of us. In beauty, we discover and co-create. Even when the scene is not a result of the artist's handiwork, we are sincere in our appreciation, almost reverent.

On a walk the other day down one of the lanes we came across a whole bunch of Lady Slippers, which are quite rare... You are not allowed to touch them... They are protected. (Selena)

Seed-carriers protect what they can, knowing others may follow. In protecting these rare species, they revel in finding them growing wild again. It is a reason for rejoicing. In our gardens, too, we participate in the “holy order of things” as Gadamer (1977/1986, p. 32) suggests and make sense of our world. The garden encounters bring a sense of accomplishment the artist as seed-carrier experiences as wholeness.

“Nature is an organizing presence, the deepest dimension of the universe” (Berry, 1999, p. 27). Like the seed-carriers, Native Americans already know this beauty; they are familiar with its power. Their stories reflect an understanding of the interconnectedness of all manifestations of life. Ancient wisdom reminds us the beauty of nature restores our sense of belonging to the community of all other beings in the universe. We not only need to embrace Earth to experience the beautiful, we long to belong to the Earth community through our interactions with nearby nature. Buber (1970) would say the interactions are encounters with nature whereby the form of the art presents itself to us. The seed-carrier is the beholder of this art form whose spell we have fallen under, and thus, we yearn for more.

### **A Longing for Life with Beauty**

“All beauty in animals and plants is a silent and enduring form of love and longing” (Rilke, 2000, pp. 36-37) that is part of a seed-carrier’s openness toward life. As such, we yearn for the beauty of natural surroundings, and being with animals and plants. Beauty in nature reminds us that order and wholeness are possible, that the world can be beautiful and full of resonance and meaning. For the seed carriers, their longing, their

devotion to gardening began anew when they created their own garden space, their seedbeds, whether they were young or older gardeners.

Heidegger (1954/1993c) might say the seed-carriers encounter their place and discover *themselves* as they co-create with life's beauty in garden places every day.

My fall blooming iris, this is the first year that I had bloom...and they're beautiful, they're beautiful! Everybody comes in the house and says 'Oooh, look at that iris!' (Barbara)

Barbara's eyes light up as she says this and Beth nods in understanding. I saw that iris on display in a special vase, and the color was spectacular, so unusual a specimen. Barbara waited several years for the plant to finally bloom. "It's wonderful [the iris]. It would be nice, I thought, if I had enough energy—I think it would be nice to have a Fall blooming garden (Barbara). All the work involved fades away when the plants bloom.

Like all beings, we humans are on a journey of transfiguration, always undergoing changes (O'Donohue, 2004). Gardens allow seed-carriers to create sacred space for being tranquil and staying rooted in the presence of change, among other joys. Not unlike a divine summons, their garden places call the seed-carriers to be present to life whirling around them through beauty. Jeannetta is dreamy-eyed as she talks about growing 150 test roses a decade ago and reporting on the best, the most beautiful and most hardy. "It was such fun to have the new rose of the year [during] the year or two before for its final year of testing. Gorgeous, gorgeous things!" Jeannetta was entranced with the whole process of transformation. She grew some of the very best roses from unmarked rootstock, thereby identifying roses which could excite other people who love having roses. Jeannetta is a self-proclaimed rose aficionado, but, in reality, she is excited about anything she grows. She is animated in the presence of life in her gardens.



Being present to life whirling around us is movement, an energy some of us can feel only after experiencing it.

Unknown to us there are moments  
When crevices we cannot see open  
For time to come alive with beginning.

As in autumn a field of corn knows  
When enough green has been inhaled  
From the clay and under the skill  
Of an artist breeze becomes gold in a day.  
(O'Donohue, 2001, pp. 11)

Jeannetta is an artist, sometimes a breeze of movement and an energy to which plants respond. One might consider this understanding of beauty in gardening as the beginning of an opening to an embrace of Mother Earth, a world where living things respond to us.

A feel for the mysterious and the unseen is thus entirely proper to our experience of the material surroundings. Invisibility is not, first and foremost, an attribute of some supernatural domain beyond the sensuous, but is integral to our encounter with material nature itself. While there exist around us many shapely and richly colored things that we can point to or specify with some precision, the relations between these visible things—the ways that they influence one another, and influence us—remain hidden. (Abram, 2006, p. 9)

Abram continues with examples from the plant world. I have no doubt that we do not yet understand much of what happens in nearby nature. I hear stories about this from gardeners all the time, and the seed-carriers echo it.

“When plants move you have to tame them” (Jeannetta), and thus, create order from chaos. Is the creative act of gardening only making order of nature? I believe it is more than that. It is an engagement with the visible and invisible things of which Abram writes. Invited by a singular encounter or some sense developed following many interactions, seed-carriers are wonderful examples. They have this feel for the influence of the visible and invisible in nearby nature.

The thing that amazes me is that plants move. They move themselves. They were here last winter and [now] they are over here. How'd they get there? (Barbara)

They weren't happy where they were. The Ides of March came along. (Beth)

Gardening offers a chance to experiment with unstructured or structured natural order—the visible and the invisible sensuous world of nearby nature. The depth of involvement and the experiments are up to the gardener, and how seed-carriers interact with nature is at the root of what they take so personally in their garden work. Sorin (2004) believes as I do, “Creating a garden, at its very best, is a very personal endeavor that can be an outer reflection of who you are in your heart and soul” (p. 52). Beth tells of one resourceful gardener friend: “I went to his home one day, came around the outside to the back and on the corner he had a little plot...and he had an umbrella over it! ‘Well, it’s just too hot on that corner!’” Selena continues to interact with her garden and enjoy it, but she arranges for help nowadays.

Nobody touched any of my gardens but me [before]...I have always been a gardener. I just do it. I was just out in my big garden...We did this big patio here. We had a wonderful time doing it...There’s a big history here. (Selena)

The garden and surrounding areas respond to us and through our devotion become a place for adventures. For Selena, it is both a place for sharing and remembrance in these years without her life partner. What is co-created reflects who we are in our heart and soul, and allows us to enter the sensuous world of the visible and invisible. The interaction with nearby nature is the source of the adventure of being alive, living out of “heart and soul” as Sorin (2004) suggests. Paul tells Sally: “Your garden, it is *you*; it is an expression of *you*.” The encounter with nearby nature feeds our creative soul.

### **Evolving Boundaries while Co-Creating Beauty**

Paul gets a kick out of the fact that he does the lawn. He and I do the compost—he is clearly in charge of the compost—but he gets a kick out of the fact that this grass

is getting less and less because my garden is marching out a little further every year. He likes it too. He really gets pleasure out of seeing what I've done or what we've done together. He loved taking those trees down [to make more room for plants]. (Sally)

For this couple the shrinking lawn stands as a boundary edge of an ever-expanding woodland garden. The boundary just keeps evolving. After a few seasons, a damaged or diseased tree may need to be taken down before it falls on something in a dangerous way.

Eiseley (1987) writes that we sense the authentic, the real in our association with nature, and as we try to name it, we use it to place boundaries on our world. Are the boundaries well-defined? Does it matter if they are not? Indeed, the gardener sometimes has a plan, and sometimes not; yet, we believe we are making order. We wish to create something to hold the beauty close-at-hand. Guroian (1999) writes, "My garden is not the walled garden of the new Eden that exuberantly holds every living and breathing thing. The fence that keeps the creatures of the field out of my garden is a reminder instead of my exile and alienation from Paradise" (p. 61). We attempt a return to Paradise by holding onto beauty in our gardens. Somehow, in spite of this, gardens remain as open boundaries for beauty and life where every living and breathing thing is nourished just by being there.

We were encouraged to take seeds from *Cousa* in Florida. Lovely [tree]. We were studying propagation by seeds, and so I followed the same directions that everybody had. [That is] to put them in refrigeration for a period of time and then you bring them out and plant them just so. I did, and, by golly, nine of them produced! (Selena)

Gardens begin with tiny seeds; whether cultivated seeds or loose seeds the wind blows in. Or sometimes the animals or other creatures bring seeds in. Many woodlands and gardens, too, have loosely defined boundaries, particularly at first. We watch in awe as the gardens evolve, and we marvel. We wonder how seeds survive to become plants in

the first place. Ultimately, the plants seem to survive and may “move around the garden” as the seed carriers say, and this adds to the great mystery of life in gardens. No wonder Heidegger (1954/1993c) reminds us how little we do know and understand about things, the plants, animals and beings we encounter. More importantly, Heidegger admonishes that “Beings are never of our own making, or even merely our representations, as it might too easily seem” (p. 178).

So, how is it we think we are creating a garden? In truth, I consider it a co-creating. Evolving boundaries surround unfinished work, or work in progress—a co-creation. Pollan (1991) muses, “Accept that a garden is never finished, that though [one] may tame nature for a time, mastery is temporary at best” (p. 156). Therefore, we are only co-creators—and facilitators.

Always the weeds are there. You can count on that. I can’t resist them. And yet, I say as I pull them, “I know in the end, you will win. You are not what I want here, but you are also alive, green, reliable, persistent, and in the end you hold the soil, the world together...Alas, I am not in control, and you are the more persistent.” (Huffman, 2006, p. 30a)

Not being able to tame nature, we find ourselves learning about being in the *presence* of nature and its beauty and we are humbled. We are well aware of the persistence. Without our feeble attempts at taming and borders, “it would revert back to woodland” (Sally). Some gardeners would prefer woodland; others wish to sculpt the borders. We each are called to find beauty in our own ways, co-creating in our gardens. Connecting with the beauty of nature in our first gardens, we learn to see beauty by interacting with living things and being present to our universe.

**Beauty to soften the edges of loss.** Probably many of us remember our early gardens and hold special memories of those years of discovering beauty. That same

garden that was tamed in our childhood, changes and becomes something different, something lost in time. Sometimes, in one fell swoop, another person, or another thing takes it over and radically alters its boundaries. Sometimes the place where we learned to garden may be too far away to visit. In some cases, the garden place itself no longer exists. Several years ago, the place of my childhood, that is, where I lived the longest, disappeared. For me, a traveler who thought of that house and garden place as home, the loss brought a real emptiness. I wept at first about lost azaleas and the tree with the swing. I remembered my mother's gardens for giving food away through church. I thought the wonderful family memories must have gone, too, just as abruptly. Yet, slowly I have come to understand the memories are composted. I remember the living things that surrounded my house, and I reconstruct my wonderful family memories. I count the Christmas trees to see how many remain as sentinels to the property line and feel relieved to see they are still there. "It gets very personal when you take a tree down or [even] any one of these large limbs" (Sally). What is it like to let go of something you loved, something that is a part of you? McGreevy writes, "Whatever grows, evolves...A gardener may spend whole seasons observing the daily progress of a tomato plant" (2000, p. 17), and still we identify with the plant, the tree, the beautiful blossoms that bring us into remembered gardens and past memories.

It is sentimental [to keep a garden bed full of this particular plant] because it was [started with heirloom plants of] a gardening friend of mine who died and everybody was trying to decide what to do with her plants—and I rooted them. And then, I also rooted a cactus that she had and I have that. (Sally)

At the core of being human is our ability to make sense of our lives as we continue to change and evolve as people who remember what was. Like a garden, we have seasons where we experience grief and loss. While we mature as persons, we also

learn how to let go, and yet, we remember the beauty of a past time. It is the way of all living beings to experience the ebb and flow of life as nature shows us. Humans sometimes recognize it in themselves and call it aging. Kastenbaum (1999) makes a connection to the process: “What we call aging flows from what we call developing. What we call dying flows from what we call living. What we call grieving flows from what we call loving” (p. 155). In much the same way, we all continue to evolve or flow into later seasons. The seed-carriers, as older gardeners, also compost their remembrances, particularly when something endearing is gone, or missing. While grieving for relationships past, we nonetheless recognize that loss is both a normal and necessary part of life. What would it be like to be present to nature as a means to learn how to deal with the loss and sadness of friends and family who have died? In loss, too, beauty exists.

I would not trade early spring for anything because watching little plants come up allows me to visit with the people who have given them to me. You know, you think about Mary and all the trillium she gave me and anyone else who handed me something and said “Give it a try and so on” and [seeing their plants in my garden is] revisiting with their friendship. *That* is really special. (Sally)

Sally’s remembrance of Mary’s many gifts makes it possible for Sally to experience new joy and remember each season of her garden. Sally harvests the fruits of her experiences with Mary, a soul-friend, to echo O’Donohue’s (1997) naming in *Anam Cara*. Sally’s grief flows into the garden and emerges as a friendship remembered joyously. Gerontologists concur that individual attitude plays a significant role in quality of life, which leads me to wonder about the world of gardening’s culture surrounding loss. Do the seed-carriers teach others these lessons through their gardening clubs and circles? Or, is it usually done one-to-one as a private lesson, as I experienced? As Sally

shares her story, she lets go of the sorrow to begin a circle of friendship that begins with me. O'Donohue (2004) explains, "The art of memory is its secret weaving, how it weaves together forgotten joy and endured sorrow" (p. 196). To a gardener, sometimes it is about letting go, and sometimes it is about remembering.

In gardening, the cycle of life is ever present and in the forefront as we experience each season. We understand death is an expected part of the unspoken message that the beauty of flowers offer each year. New life arises from the compost of flowers and other plant material that brought such joy in the past. A recent widow, Selena is fully cognizant of the parallels. She opens her heart and shares her family's favorite poem titled "Wild Peaches," which was read at her husband's memorial. It serves as both an inspiration and remembrance:

When the world turns completely upside down  
You say we'll emigrate to the Eastern Shore  
Aboard a river-boat from Baltimore;  
We'll live among wild peach trees, miles from town,

All seasons sweet, but autumn best of all.

Down to the Puritan marrow of my bones  
There is something in this richness that I hate.

That Spring, briefer than apple-blossom's breath,  
Summer, so much too beautiful to stay.  
Swift Autumn, like a bonfire of leaves,  
And sleepy Winter, like the sleep of death.  
(Wylie, 1932, pp. 11-13))

Reading the poem together, knowing it was Selena's husband's and their father's favorite poem, the family gathers strength as they remember him and work through the loss of their loved one. "Jim always carried that poem with him...It was hard for all of them [the family]. It has become the family poem. It's very important" (Selena). The stanzas help

them express some of what they feel. Perhaps the words remind them of the natural rhythm of the seasons and they take heed.

In much the same way as echoed in Celtic poetry about nature, Selena's family and the seed-carriers recognize the "world of nature is both a presence and a companion" (O'Donohue, 1997, p. 3). Each season we experience has elements that serve to comfort and nourish us, especially our spiritual selves. If we acknowledge the wisdom from ancient traditions in our journey through life toward death, we know we all have a continuing need to experience love, through family or friendship, and this is our deepest need (O'Donohue, 1997). Hence, these encounters with nature ultimately teach us about belonging to the universe and all its mysteries as a spiritual returning and a coming-home to Paradise.

Beth reminisces about times in Virginia with her husband and family:

We had a cabin up in the mountains. Out by the back door we had a little garden. We would wander all over the mountains and I would find an area where some particular wildflower grew. We'd bring the plants back and put them in this little garden. Later, we would make a special pilgrimage to the area to see those wildflowers in bloom. (Beth)

When Beth shares her story, I connect with her words. Casey (2000) identifies this as reminiscing, a remembering shared between us—an example of Heidegger's *Mitsein* (being-with-others) and, in our case, a two-person activity of remembering together. This sharing is possible even if I was not part of the original story. Special places, particular landscapes and gardens heighten our memories of loved ones, and we may feel wistful by the "non-retrievability of the experience" (Casey, 2000, p. 111), as I did when returning to the site of my first home. Nevertheless, to reminisce is a positive action, "an effort to deal with it constructively" (p. 112). To borrow Casey's descriptor,



we are “mindful” with remembered scenes from our gardening world. In reminiscing with another person we enjoy the memory while softening the loss of person or place.

There was a wildflower I didn't even know existed—when it was, probably, around Mother's Day. I was up in this lovely little glen, this little stream running through, lots of moss. First, I found orchids, then I found those [wildflowers] and I had no idea what they were. It is a memory I'll always keep with me because they were so special. (Beth)

Casey (2000) notes that memory holds an “indispensable, overt position in the world of perception, signs, and communal discourse” (p. 144). Among gardeners, there is much remembering in our story telling and a blending of the bitter and the sweet. Casey calls this the “communal-discursive aspect” (p. 113) of memory where we find ourselves immersed, sharing like experiences. Like many gardeners would, the seed-carriers look for a chance to share their stories and tour each other's gardens. Sally shows me pictures of one special group of friends.

So, those people [are gardeners] I share a lot with, and their backgrounds are very different. All three of those came to California and then Wellesley and became acquainted with one another as newcomers...I became part of that splinter group. So, we try in some way or other to share experiences with gardening as well as family life, but a very once-a-month type of situation. (Sally)

For seed-carriers, often the remembered space itself is the trigger of powerful memories. In a phenomenological study of remembering, Casey (2000) finds that space remembered is “not visual alone but also auditory, haptic, gustatory, etc.” (p. 71), and implies gardens as possible places where memory and place interconnect. I recognize the power of memories of place in the context of gardening and turn to Casey's insight once again:

To be there—to be truly *da-sein*—is to be in place, which cannot be reduced to site (the *just where*) any more than time can be shrunken to date (the *just when*). Being-in-place is a main modalization of being-in-the-world. Having been in places is therefore a natural resource for remembering our own being in the world.

It is indispensable for knowing what we are (now) in terms of what we were (then). (Casey, 2000, p. 215)

We have to let go of places, too, just as we let go of loved ones and our gardens each season. Sally's original family homestead is up for sale around the corner; in fact, her parents are no longer living. She reminisces about her mother's successful gardens where Sally, like others, learned about vegetables and offered produce to neighborhood kids, much as the kids today still sell lemonade and give some of it away. She speaks gently about losing her sister this past year. I see pictures of beautiful floral bouquets that fill rooms, and Sally shares that her sister was famous for floral arrangements. Sally is understandably nostalgic. From a December 2003 draft revision of the word, nostalgia, the *OED Online* etymology lists a Latin root, *nostalgia*, and one from ancient Greek, *nostos*, which means, "return home." I feel privileged to be with Sally to better understand her "sentimental longing for" (*OED Online*) returning home by being with her sister again. As Sally speaks, I wonder if her loss is softened, or better yet, given away through the sharing of the loss with someone who listens?

Is the sharing of loss through story a practice of the art of memory, "weaving together the forgotten joy and endured sorrow," which O'Donohue (2004, p. 196) explains? In their weaving through stories, seed-carriers often reveal their histories of entering gardening, and loss is inevitably a part of the background fabric. The memories are no longer secret. Their gardening brings remembrances close-at-hand once again after having been composted and shared. What is revealed through memory is the forgotten joy, and the endured sorrow is softened through the story weaving. In such ways, gardening is a present-at-hand tool for sharing remembrances. It is Heidegger (1953/1996) who reminds us everyday tools become so familiar to us that we may

overlook their value. I wonder whether this happens to gardeners and the seed-carriers? The seed-carriers rarely speak of personal loss in any direct way; only in these weavings of gardening stories are these histories and memories shared.

There is that Spring, that promise of trying again, even in great hardships. I have had more knots lately...I still wake up each morning grateful to be alive and for my family and everything. (Selena)

I listen to Selena and hear how she is coping with widowhood. Woven into stories about their gardening, the seed-carriers' losses are more fully revealed. It is as if they hold the memories dear and choose to keep them closely woven and nearby, but not in front of them.

What are the tools that help us deal with loss when it is in front of us? Are there garden gloves in our regular life to soften the hurt that accompanies loss? Most of the seed-carriers reassure me they have thought of their future and made plans for continuing to enjoy their gardens from home when I ask what is next for them in gardening.

I am delighted my daughter and her husband have moved in because I was getting to the point of realizing I was going to have to make some decision as far as living here alone. Now that decision has been put off indefinitely. (Beth)

However, is this possible for most older gardeners? Just to put it in a larger perspective, looking at the analysis of the most recent census data, the projected living arrangements of elders in the U.S. paint a varied picture of kinship and living arrangements, terms used in examining culture and aging trends (Luborsky & McMullen, 1999).

In 2003, older Black, Asian, and Hispanic women were more likely than non-Hispanic women to live with relatives. Older non-Hispanic White women and Black women were more likely to live alone (about 40% each) than were older Asian and Hispanic women (about 20%). Older Black men lived alone more than three times as often as older Asian men (30% compared with 8%). Older Asian men were most likely to live with relatives (23%). (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005, p. 3)

The data are changing, too, as the Baby Boomer generation faces retirement. Yet, we get some sense of what to expect in noting, “Women 65 and older were three times more likely as men of the same age to be widowed—44 percent as compared with 14 percent” (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005, p. 3). Remembering that the seed-carriers are part of the adult population who garden for leisure, what are the implications for older gardeners whose living arrangements may change?

How do we balance the sense of loss and still find completeness without our beloved gardens as a source of wholeness, or, as some have intimated, a way to stay active and well? Must our gardens become only memories and forgotten joy?

Well, knowing what I know now with my gardening experience, if I were to be confined to an apartment where all I had was a balcony I think I would probably get some pots and do some gardening. I’d keep my hand in gardening as much as possible...I think I might go to a community garden and do some work, but I wouldn’t go to somebody else’s and do their work for them. (Leo)

Must we notice our beloved gardens are a source of wholeness only when we anticipate missing them? I think about wholeness as wellness when I ask Leo about what it feels like to *not* garden, such as when he has been away from home on a trip. He says he hasn’t been away for more than 10 days and during that time away he found himself looking at how everyone else gardens! Beth explains she chose not to maintain a garden at home once she was traveling more. She volunteers at Historic London Town and gardens there instead while still keeping up with many houseplants at home.

Well, not a lot of projects [happening] at London Town. I just do whatever needs to be done...They don’t have the greenhouse this winter. It was taken down because they are building a new visitor center. We will have it [greenhouse] again. (Beth)

Heidegger (1953/1996) speaks about not paying attention to what is at hand, of coming to a realization that something we have had is now missing. Heidegger asks us to

be aware of that which is close at hand in order to return to seeing our real world of the elemental things that make everyday living meaningful. Jeannetta knows what she needs.

Currently I have no rose bushes except in Kenya. And that's the one thing I haven't worked out—how am I going to have rose bushes where I am, where I can see them, where I can cut a bouquet when I want to? I keep eyeing a sunny spot at the top of that strip of woods, but I cannot see them. (Jeannetta)

Later, in a subsequent year, Jeannetta and her husband stay in the United States for his radiation treatments instead of traveling to teach overseas. She writes:

I am missing being in my Kenya flower gardens very badly. The three months there playing in the dirt for the past 6 years really kept me happy and OK with apartment living here. Hopefully, we can return as usual next year. (Jeannetta)

For gardeners, the real world occurs in their garden places, their seedbeds, their plants, and the landscape with which they become most familiar and love so deeply. The seed-carriers almost cannot imagine being without these living things, their landscapes. In their gardening, they experience the beautiful and realize they are waking up to experience life. I wonder if they realize how deeply all humans might long for it.

Seeing beauty in a flower could awaken humans, however briefly, to the beauty that is an essential part of their own innermost being...The first recognition of beauty was one of the most significant events in the evolution of human consciousness. The feelings of joy and love are intrinsically connected to that recognition. (Tolle, 2005, p. 2)

Like the seed-carriers, there isn't one of us who would not benefit from realizing the importance of something close at hand before it is missing or overlooked. Perhaps the experience of the beautiful through our gardens is no different—and the seed-carriers already know about looking closely.

**Beauty to express yourself freely.** Gardening can be about freedom of expression. The rules are there if you look for them—but many gardeners ignore them. Seed-carriers make their own decisions and co-create to their heart's content.

There is a call. This place was a call because of the way it was such a jungle and it was so full of vines. There was no sense, no rhyme, no reason to any of it. And, so you felt like you needed to tame it a little bit. (Sally)

Sometimes the gardening way is as full of mystery as it is full of wonder. The garden announces itself and yet offers us a way to express ourselves artfully—to be happy. Often there appears to be no rhyme or reason, probably little attentiveness to the art in our gardening work and preparations. Instead, it is a creative work in progress using individual expression, combined with an attention to the plant’s happiness or survival. Often, we are not thinking about boundaries or borders.

“Let me tell you, I don’t have a plan. I have often thought I would be a lot better off if I had a plan...I plant things I like” (Barbara). How critical is it to have a plan in gardening, or, for that matter, in life as we age? Do we omit the planning and forethought because life itself is unpredictable and, like the gardeners, we want to change our minds? In gardening circles there are differing opinions about the need for planning a garden. Some believe the creativity is lost when a garden is over planned, as in life when we lose our flexibility to take what comes. By holding too tightly to a landscape plan, we risk losing the mystery and enjoyment of what surprises may emerge. Letting go of too much concern we can enjoy the process more and see the beauty of living without a pattern.

I love my riotous garden,  
Its unconcern gladdens the heart  
No method whate’er in its beauty,  
For nature supreme reigns in art.

Here beautiful thoughts without pattern,  
Where God sheds His blessing divine,  
Form poems on nebulous nothings  
In this riotous garden of mine.  
(O’Hara, as cited in Hogan, 2002, p. 46)

Barbara would agree. I ask Barbara about attending to color scheme and she says, “Oh, once in a while.” And I add, “Of course, that takes planning. You are not much of a planner.” “Oh, I’m not much of planner, no, hit or miss” (Barbara). I ask about moving plants around and she agrees and explains: “Some plants are happy in certain places; some are not. You have to find a place they like—find a place they like, they’ll thrive” (Barbara). Gardeners respond to the plant to interpret its happiness. By relating the plant’s happiness with where it is placed, gardeners learn how to make a plant feel at home as in this example: “Let me see if I can get one out of here. Come on, little fella. There” (Sally). In much the same way humans might settle in and feel at home in certain places and not in others. Plants teach gardeners about thriving and making their own happiness. We all do not need the same things to thrive, but the call to beauty is universal.

Do we have to like the same look in a garden? No, beauty loves variety. Do older adults act the same and like all the same things? No, that too, is an incorrect assumption. As older adults age, their individuality is more visible, and as such, different abilities and talents develop or show themselves, and likely, our gardens reflect this diversity as well. We all have different gifts. Why would we not express them differently? Our longing for the order in beauty may be a desire for continuity, a wish to slow change or take hold of it. I wonder if the taming of the garden is one way we think we can take back control of something in our lives? Sometimes we forget to return to the lessons of the seasons that constantly follow each other and teach us that each day is new. The lesson may be about continuity. Continuity means each day is full of moments that preceded it, yet each day is open to a possibility we may not have imagined (O’Donohue, 1999).

Nevertheless, gardeners often consider part of their world is about controlling landscape and weeding, thereby allowing plants to show off their best features. How are the weeds of our aging tamed so our best features show and we feel happy with our home place? Rather than controlling weeds or landscape, is it, instead, about making a place our own? Nisbet imagines an open space as a paradise to create and learns a lesson from nature.

Paradise [is] a landscape on the wild side, utterly my own. A mini-meadow and secret grove, vines that wander through dilapidated fences, a pond for salamanders. I [have] always been partial to natural gardens. They were the abandoned orchards and grassy hillsides, oak groves and hidden creeks of my childhood wanderings. I [want] those places back. (2004, *NY Times Online*, ¶ 1)

At some point, as in life, we realize that what we were free to create or express might not work out to be what we thought we wanted, nor as we imagined. Nisbet adjusts and comes to appreciate the native red oak the birds must have delivered. This was not what he had planned. Ultimately, Nisbet accepts the place the garden has become and finds beauty in what wildness nature has to offer—unsolicited. As sometimes happens in life, we do not receive what we imagine, and yet, we learn to find beauty in that which has been created around us. We accept what is unfolding even if the boundaries appear to be in flux. When we remain open to discovery, boundaries dissolve or fall away.

O'Donohue advises that life is a journey where we “will be called to step outside the comfort barriers...that [our] soul loves the danger of growth” (1999, p. 19). The unexpected brings some of the most treasured moments in gardening. Leo knows about imperfect boundaries and cherishes each morning of discovery. Such it is for the gardener who dwells in the garden and thrives with the unexpected.



**Beauty to make a home place.** The “placing” of plants in a garden takes on new significance when we think about what it would be like to be moved from our home place during our later seasons. The seed-carriers tell me that remaining in place with our gardens is an age-old wish for gardeners in their remaining years. The wish is not unique to gardeners, however, so what about making a home place is special to gardens? While reflecting on gardens written about in history, Lange (2001) writes about “wisdom of place” in naming the truths encountered in gardens:

[There is a] wisdom of place that has revealed itself over the ages to humankind both through tilling the soil and gathering native plants in the broader gardens of the wildlands. The prolonged, earnest practice of tending growth and harvest finely tunes a particular quality of attention that enables intimacy with wisdom inherent in the land. (2001, p. 21)

What makes a seed-carrier feel tended to and at home if not the nearness of nature in a garden and being at home at the same time? Selena feels totally committed to staying in place; she is wedded to her home with its gardens, woodlands and tree farm acreage. She says explicitly, “I don’t think you come to gardening until you have your own piece of property” (Selena). Clearly, this is her home place and she would not choose to leave it—a situation that many older persons have to face just as the seed-carriers do. Must our gardening in later seasons involve moving away or being dis-placed from our home place? Once again, I return to the gardening example.

A seed-carrier’s satisfaction grows upon recognizing that a plant seedling is happy in its place. The seed-carriers notice when plants begin to falter and need moving. As a result, the seed-carriers move or re-place those plants or put in new ones. Alternatively, sometimes, as Charles says, the plants seem happy so he does not move them! Like the seed-carriers, they settle into place and thrive or need help to move

elsewhere to make a new home. In Jeannetta's situation, she first garnered "wisdom of place" by observing the public woodlands just outside her apartment. Her fascination brings her beyond her balcony into the hidden beauty of the woodlands. She does not ask permission; she just co-creates a showing of plantings. Jeannetta uncovers the beauty of life in the woodlands for others to enjoy. Jeannetta co-creates a home place of shared space.

"Even if I am not yet in wilderness, in a garden I am in the presence of things that live and grow" (Casey, 1993, p. 154). In the presence of life, there is beauty and thus, we may thrive in new places where our gardening can continue. I am fascinated that Casey (1991) suggests gardens are interplaces because they maintain something like a dotted line border between built places and nature itself. A garden can be a place of dwelling, associated for centuries with paradise (Casey, 1993), and *containing* paradise in such a way that it offers a way of being present to the natural world. The paradise is established by the presence of life and growth in balance—also where beauty resides. So, is there a possible interplace that can also be a home place as we continue to age and garden? This could turn the phrase "aging in place" upside down.

**Beauty to find balance.** In essence, Sally's early doing of gardening was by direction (her mother's); it was not until Sally married and had a home of her own that she chose to garden. She creates a garden that reflects her philosophy about life. She develops a relationship with the place that is her landscape, and in a way, gives her self over to it. She guides without taking over; she lets it be.

I edit the landscape, change it a little bit. It is amazing. You really cannot change a landscape that much. It will only tolerate just so much fiddling around. It says, "*Here I am.* This is the way I am. This is the kind of soil I am." Unless you do something to dramatically change something, the areas out back pretty much want

to stay where they are. And I can introduce stuff, but certainly if I were not here as a gardener to look after them, it would revert right back. (Sally)

Sally understands there is no real owning of the landscape. You can build the soil, tame the vines and introduce what you will; however, at some juncture you realize you must be in a relationship with the land or it will revert to woodland. This controlling requires balance almost as much as it is a regulating of native species of flora, plantings and woodland. The seed-carrier respects the need for balance, knowing that for everything there is a season.

The earth is where one experiences the blending of man and nature....If the sown seed's season does not come, the sprout does not appear. Without the appearance of the leaf, the branch does not lengthen, the flower does not blossom, and therefore the fruit does not come forth and ripen. It does not disrupt this order in any way. Man learns this from the order of things, and is taught the need for patience. (Ekken, as cited in McLuhan, 1994, pp. 145-6)

To establish balance in one's garden requires nurturance. Reflecting on the *OED Online* definition of nurturance, I recognize Sally is a living example of a nurturer. She is "rearing" the landscape much like a woman "brings up" her child. I hear an occasional reference to plants as if they were children. This anthropomorphizing is evident in my preliminary conversants' stories: "How come his daylilies make babies and mine don't?" (Jessie). Like the seed-carriers, the plants undergo a process while entering the next stage of growth. They need nurturing. Often it involves a struggle to find that balance between nurturance and controlling, especially during the change of seasons.

What does it take to balance later seasons of life? We know that there is likely some struggle involved, perhaps even disability and illness. Jeannetta writes about making balance in the midst of their unexpected challenges:

Bryan is doing OK so far with radiation treatments for vocal chord cancer. He is a short-timer now with 18 down and 15 more to go. Speaking of just being with

family, how about having five grandkids and their parents with us for 3 days when their power was off? We had arts and crafts big-time!

Much about our lives is not predictable. It comes at us unplanned, too, as we each discover ourselves in maturity. Rilke (2000) reminds us of the human task we face in embracing struggle: “It is clear we must embrace struggle. ...Everything in nature grows and struggles in its own way, establishing its own identity...We can be sure of very little, but the need to court struggle is a surety that will not leave us” (pp. 62-63). How do we prepare for the unplanned struggle that arises? I suggest we must prepare the soil for change.

I think back to Sally’s statement that “Preparing the soil is the most important part [for growing something].” I cannot help but recognize our society must prepare, too, for helping our older population find balance through struggles, such as where they might live. Beth is excited that her daughter and son-in-law are now living with her so she will be able to stay in her home in the coming years. By phone Selena and I chat so she does not have to try and type, and I learn one of Selena’s gardening daughters is building on the 12-acre family property. Selena is thrilled; I can hear it in her voice. She will be able to remain at her home for many more years, despite the challenges of living in a rural setting with macular degeneration. I cannot help but think that while my focus is on the individual seed-carrier, at the same time I know many older gardeners can thrive in later seasons if they can find balance. Therefore, I look to the seed-carriers’ living examples for the lessons in balancing change. I also consider it my preparation to enter the discussion about our society’s mandate regarding older gardeners.

## Metamorphosis

The seed-carriers teach me that change is coming, as surely as the seasons. The seed-carriers are undergoing a continuing metamorphosis. The noun, *metamorphosis*, originates from Latin and Greek *meta-*+ *morphosis*, to transform, meaning “the action or process of changing in form, shape, or substance; especially transformation by supernatural means” (*OED Online*). While the biological understanding of metamorphosis involves post-embryonic change to full maturity, for humans it likely is more of an active process of adjusting to our changing age and circumstances in life. At the same time, the seed-carriers witness transformation in their gardens as part of experiencing beauty.

How does one get ready for metamorphosis? The seed-carriers first ready the soil, something that occurs in many stages of their garden. Similarly, they nurture and care for the new seedlings. I also see they nurture their families and often teach their children a love of gardening so they understand this form of art. For example, Sally’s son is a biologist in a non-game wildlife environment. The seed was sown perhaps? Or, was the soil finally ready for the seed? What a marvel to be a witness to the possible transformations. After all, gardeners become who they are and grow into their way of being only when their soil is ready for the transformation into the next stage.

### Seeds

I never cease to wonder how these seeds,  
Each smaller than a full-stop on a page,  
Can find in this dull soil, sufficient needs  
To metamorphose into seedling stage.

I never understood how this full-stop  
Contains so much within its tiny shell;

The leaves that wait to shoot and roots to drop  
And phantom flowers, all sealed in a cell.

How in drab seeds and soil even duller,  
Can purples, reds and yellows, greens and gold  
Be contained, until they spill their colour  
Into flowers, like treasure from a hold?

I never cease to wonder year by year,  
As I plant new seeds and watch them growing,  
And consider as leaves and buds appear  
If a wonder is improved by the knowing.  
(Moon, 1993, p. 16)

I consider myself a part-time gardener, one who knows a little, and yet, loves the seeding part and the metamorphosis that occurs with growing things, plants included. Like me, Leo loves the sense of discovery, “the new buds as treasure from a hold.” He enjoys finding surprises in his garden beds so he goes out several times a day. “My favorite time of day is early in the morning when I go out for my newspaper and spot some weeds or something... Sometimes I reach for the tiniest little fine weed.” From experience Leo knows he just will spend a while and then go back inside. He is called to find the mystery of what has metamorphosed since the last time he looked! It is what he loves about gardening.

Seton (1998) believes being with green plants is our search for a connection to nature, and I wonder if it also is a wish to suspend time. For gardeners, the search to connect with the timelessness of nature is ongoing and lifelong. “A human life is never fixed but always emergent as the past and future become horizons of a present” (Huebner, 1999, p. 137). Leo is enthralled with the wonder of discovery that is “improved by the knowing” as Moon offers in the previous poem, and Leo loses all sense of time. This is not unusual, as gardeners are notorious for losing track of time, much like my

preliminary conversant who forgot to come in for afternoon tea once she was gardening. Time is changed somehow when we are out there. The very everydayness of gardening is the reason for the time being suspended, or experiencing lived time; “Everydayness reveals itself as a mode of temporality” (Heidegger, 1953/1996, p. 216). For all human beings, temporality does not belong to us as a solitary individual; instead, “It is a characteristic of being-in-the world” (Huebner, 1999, p. 137). In the world of the garden, the past and future capture our present as we become present to the wonders of the garden. Being present in this lived time is full of surprises and possibility.

### **The Blossoming of Beauty**

You know what the blossom looks like? Comes up really early in the spring, it’s the reason I insist that Paul and I get back here by April first from Florida (and he comes back kicking and screaming). But the reason I do is because the bloodroot is blooming...very early in April. It comes up like a little green package. The little bloom looks like a little pond lily...absolutely beautiful with just the most pristine, crisp little white petals. And when it finishes, which is all of about a week, at the most, if you are lucky, then, the package itself comes up over [itself]. (Sally)

The early delivery in April is short-lived glory in Sally’s garden, but an inspiration nonetheless. We hold out for what appears in the green packages, do we not? Beauty invites the seed-carriers into a blossoming of their lives in maturity. The seed-carriers who dwell in and out of their gardens have intimate glimpses of life as beautiful; all the while, they enter into their own metamorphosis during later seasons.

During the growing seasons they devote many hours to their garden—almost every day. Hence, the gardening life is more than a casual activity for Charles and these others. It is an opportunity to be in the world, to be present to it. Actually, for Leo, it is a career of sorts. He loves getting up early to see what has come up, “to be aware of any beauty that you might find. Sounds sentimental...I like it [gardening]. I have other activities that

I do but it's been my favorite" (Leo). He is in search of beauty in the newness of each day. He experiences an awakening through the unfolding of living plants and forgets himself for a while. He experiences what Levoy named "a divine presence" (1997, p. 65) through his passion.

Seed-carriers spend innumerable hours out in their gardens. While Leo manages three or four sessions of twenty minutes at a spell in California, Sally spends all day outside. "I don't mind the heat, I really don't. I work all summer, I don't mind getting dripping wet" (Sally). She is in her garden from the first of April until the end of November. In April, she works the garden no matter what the temperature, adding, "Oh yeah. I will be in my little wool hat and my down coat and my boots and be out there, working away! I work all day, is what I usually would like to do. It gives me great pleasure" (Sally). Their gardens, those seedbeds, are symbols of the larger whole of their life work. Their gardens are their works of art to share and, most critically, a way to be in relationship with the land and soil. Benson describes it this way: "Much of the great joy is doing it yourself, or at least being a major participant with a yearning to be involved with the earth and plants" (1994, p. 3). For Jeannetta and her husband, it encourages them to stay well. It affects their physical and mental well-being.

Both of us work at staying healthy. Partly I do that—I mean I am very intent on staying healthy—because I have to be in the dirt. And education and everything else is just pasted on top of the dirt farmer [part]. (Jeannetta)

Their love of gardening enriches their way of being and is a means to growth. Gardening is a way of being transformed through creativity, too, for "Imagination and creativity call beauty forth" (O'Donohue, 2004, p. 162). In being involved with the earth and plants, seed-carriers are fulfilling the universal desire for creative expression. I catch



a glimpse of the *self-care* that is gardening, and its ongoing healing qualities. The seed-carriers' gardening fosters opportunities for "renewal of creative powers..., moving toward a condition that is vital, stirring, strong and whole..." (Sullivan, 2004, p. 27). For the seed-carriers, the creativity of gardening is a wellness initiative in the midst of beauty.

### **Creating a Life with Beauty: Garden Pictures**

Benson asks, "Which is the area that will make the best canvas for your... garden picture?" (1994, p. 13). Sally sees herself creating pictures through her gardening. Her hands put every plant in its place in her woodland garden and she says:

The fun for me, the pleasure of gardening for me, is creating a scene. That is really, what gives me pleasure. And it does not have to be a big scene, it can be a rock, a fern, and maybe a little bit of wild bleeding heart or something. Whatever. It is an arrangement of things that will give me pleasure. It is the most pleasure that I have ever had...[It is] creating a picture. (Sally)

Sorin (2004) encourages imaginative creativity in gardeners, suggesting we play while creating pictures within our garden. Play sparks the imagination and the concept plan gradually becomes clearer. Visions do more than inspire creativity. Visions make way for living an "authentic, self-directed life...Creativity isn't just about making things prettier or wittier; it is a key element in determining whether you are designing your life, or life is designing you" (Sorin, 2004, p. 43).

It really, essentially, is our design, or my design...an evolving thing, it still is. And I guess it's because I like to create a picture that certain things go together. And I may or may not like it after I've put it in and I will rip it out and re-arrange. (Sally)

**Creating art in the garden.** Many gardeners love the creative aspects of gardening. Sally, and others, create art through the beauty of their gardens. Heidegger and Gadamer's discussions about works of art lead me to that understanding. For it seems the garden's natural elements themselves are the "beautiful," and as such they are integral

parts of the work of art which constitutes the gardener's way of life. These creative encounters with beauty define their lives. Creating is, after all, a vital part of being human.

The form may vary, but [creating is] the experience of life-sustaining truth and beauty, of discovering meaning and connection [in our creative work], of touching that which is larger than us no matter what we call it, of unfolding our essential nature. (Dreamer, 2005, p. 16)

I, too, experience a joy when gardening, which O'Donohue (2004) names encountering Beauty in the presence of life. Being in that presence is what Gadamer would name "the sensuous experience which we always attempt to relate to the universal, [and] there is something in our experience of the beautiful that arrests us and compels us to dwell upon the individual appearance itself" (1977/1986, p. 16). Nonetheless, whether in a constructed garden where some aspects are produced through hand-work *with* nature, the conversants' descriptions lead me to believe they indeed experience the beautiful and find it meaningful.

**Keeping beauty undefined.** Part of the invitation to be a seed-carrier is the call to find beauty in co-creating one's own work of art. For each individual it may differ. Gadamer acknowledges each person defines what is beautiful, adding, "The only things that can simply be called beautiful without qualification are either things of nature, which have not been endowed with meaning by man, or things of human art, which merely represent a play of form or color" (Gadamer, 1977/1986, p. 20). If seed-carriers were to define beauty, it would be through their encounter with it in nearby nature; that is, they give meaning to the experience by that understanding. Each seed-carrier experiences beauty differently, or would name it differently, so it remains undefined, just experienced. For example, I notice Sally prefers the artwork of a drift of wildflowers and

native plants, while Leo is drawn to interact with ordered areas of bloom. Yet, both have creatively constructed a picture within nature by being with it. For most gardeners it is not all construction; it is a living, growing process of creation with nature, again, the encounter with Beauty.

Sorin (2004) appreciates the chance to pause during an encounter, recognizing that “immersing [one]self in beauty can have a profound effect on how [we] live [and dwell]” (p. 172). In the lingering one can savor the experience all the more. This is what it would be like to dwell in our gardens and be embraced by beauty. So we pause as Sorin recommends—so as not to allow “inattentions, distractions, and preoccupations shield us from the shock of the glory in which we are immersed” (2004, p. 5). Indeed, we ought to dwell in our nearby nature. To dwell in the garden is equivalent to the same understanding that originates from the Old English word, *dwellan*, as in “to lead astray, hinder, delay, tarry, or stay” (*OED Online*).

### **Dwelling with Living Art: Time to “Be”**

Dwelling involves the process by which a place in which we exist becomes a personal world and home. Dwelling incorporates environments and places but extends beyond them, signifying our inescapable immersion in the present world as well as the possibility of reaching beyond to new places, experiences and ideas. (Seamon & Mugerauer, 1989, p. 8)

The seed-carriers are persons who dwell in their gardens, places they love. Wherever the settings and in whatever form, the gardens are built creations that are extensions of “home” at some level. Heidegger (1954/1993a) writes, “Cultivating and construction are building in the narrower sense. Dwelling, inasmuch as it keeps the fourfold in things, is, as this keeping, a *building*” (p. 353). Their gardens, like landscapes,

serve as welcoming environments where seed-carriers *build* a home and “immerse themselves in the present world” (Seamon & Mugrauer, 1989, p. 8).

Through gardening, the seed-carriers build their living art, that is, they dwell with the art and reach beyond it. Gadamer writes about a work of art, and considering the garden as such, we would do well to heed Gadamer’s recommendation. “We must learn how to dwell upon the work...[so] there is no tedium involved, for the longer we allow ourselves, the more it displays its manifold riches to us” (1977/1986, p. 45). In the dwelling, time is suspended. In co-creating her garden plant by plant, flower by flower with nature, Sally gives her life to it. Beth is drawn to volunteer at London Town instead of her own garden now. She stays busy during preparation for the yearly plant sales. I have no doubt that sometimes the tedium is forgotten, for gardeners describe losing themselves in their gardens, thereby forgetting about time and fatigue until they are totally exhausted.

I go out there and go until I am totally exhausted...and then you come back in to maybe rest awhile, and go back out, and maybe not. There’s something out there...(Barbara)

Barbara does not notice the particular hour, the specific time she is outside—she only knows she loves to make her garden beds a showplace.

### **Time for Being Outside**

Above all, I like being outside in winter. (Beth)

As children, we helped my mother with chores at the Publik House. My sister liked to clean house but I wanted to be outside [working in the gardens]. (Marie)

How do we understand the passage of time to the extent that we lose ourselves out there in a garden? “The passage of time, according to Einstein, is in the eye of the beholder...and Einstein wrote: ‘...the distinction between past, present, and future is only

an illusion, however persistent” (Greene, 2004, ¶ 5). The subjective time we personally experience in a garden—or in any way of being in the world—is called lived time and differs from our usual understanding of the concept of time. The idea originates from a 1924 lecture, “The Concept of Time,” when Heidegger challenges us to re-examine how we understand time. Heidegger suggests human existence primarily uses the regular cycle of night and day as a measure of time, that is, what is nature’s way of acknowledging time. Instead of conceiving it as such, Heidegger describes how what we experience everyday is the now, the present, that is continuing to evolve for us as human beings and incorporates both past and present. *Dasein*, as used in the summary Heidegger offers, may be considered “a condition into which human beings enter, either individually or collectively, at a historical juncture when Being becomes an issue for them” (1953/2000, p. xii). I review Heidegger’s understanding of time to place it in the context of the gardening life.

Time is Dasein. Dasein is my specificity, and this can be specificity in what is futural by running ahead to the certain yet indeterminate past....Dasein is time, time is temporal....Dasein is its past, it is its possibility in running ahead to this past. In this running ahead I am authentically time, I have time. In so far as time is in each case mine, there are many times. *Time itself* is meaningless; time is temporal. (Heidegger, 1924/1992, pp. 20E-21E)

Thus, how we experience our world, our everyday lived time, remains open, always full of possibility, “running ahead” as Heidegger says.

### **Time for “Mind-Resting”**

Typically, the seed-carrier spends considerable time on task outside. Whether in silence or not, we often find ourselves in an altered state of mind. I wonder if this is not what Heidegger calls meditative thinking. “Meditative thinking is thinking which is open to its content, open to what is given” (Heidegger, 1959/1966, p. 24). Heidegger speaks of

this as challenging, requiring a revealing of ourselves, a “kind of dwelling in Being” (p. 26). “As energies wane, it gives me time to reflect...to consciously do a little re-focusing” (Sally’s husband, Paul). Van Manen explains the re-focusing may go even deeper: “As I make something of myself I may reinterpret who I once was or who I am now” (2003, p. 104). In a garden, perhaps it becomes easier to understand the blending of past and future that Heidegger refers to when describing the concept of time. Heidegger encourages a re-examining of our own existence in the process. How does our experience of lived time alter our focus? Might the garden be a place to re-focus and re-think about who we are now?

When we get home this afternoon, if it is not raining, I will water over there again. It is totally mind-resting...Sometimes I will work on a problem. Sometimes I will set a problem to work on and I will do that. But, otherwise, if I’m just going along, it is totally mind-resting. I am focusing on exactly what I am doing.  
(Jeannetta)

During such occasions, time disappears for Jeannetta as it does for Leo in the morning, and Selena during her morning walks along her property line. In the gardening activity, their minds find rest as they forget themselves and lose track of time, but perhaps they are actually entering a period of meditative thinking. In *Search for Silence*, O’Connor (1972) offers exercises for silent meditation, explaining that meditation is not about incredulous thinking but listening for the words you will hear and “letting them shape you” (p. 137). Quiet moments within nearby nature can be a gateway to the calming reflective time that could also be called meditation. Gardens are ideal retreats for solitude, silence, reflection and/or meditation.

Typical of many gardeners, Sorin (2004) recognizes she has entered a special state of being when she gardens. In a *Special Report on Happiness*, Csikszentmihalyi

(1997) describes what experiencing joy means in the context of his “flow theory,” which typically incorporates creative energy, little worry of negative outcomes, and movement and sensation becoming one. “I don’t get defeated by a stump or a rock. Some way it is going to work. I am going to get it to work. It may take a while” (Sally). Gardeners passionate about what they are doing or experiencing in the garden are in a state of flow. In gardening as in other creative, complex human activities, flow also can be a period of quiet. In the earlier passage about watering in the woodlands, Jeannetta describes “mind-resting,” yet flow could also be a silent meditative period within movement, as in the case of seed-carriers in the midst of their labor of love.

Seed-carriers, being students of nature’s time in the seasons, are wonderful observers. It is as if by observing nature they learn “time is more careful in sequence than we often notice...ripen[ing] according to its hidden rhythm” (O’Donohue, 1999, p. 122). Seed-carriers capture time to work in their favor, whether for somewhat tedious activities like weeding, or for planting anew and re-thinking their lives. My thoughts turn to Barbara, who, for years, stays involved in this living art to show the beauty of the garden and its flowers to others. How is she experiencing time in her activities? Her lived time may seem dominated by tedium to some, but removing spent blossoms and tackling the weeds is what enlivens her. Although not an early morning type, she is out there at 7 a.m. just because it needs to be done. Similarly, Sally too, becomes a morning person to garden because her gardens are part of a garden tour now and then. It does seem that “time dominates experience” (Greene, 2004, ¶ 2), and hence, we make choices about how we dwell with our gardens as our living art.

If one accepts gardening as a living art, it follows that every person may adopt his/her own gardening style. To explain her style, Jeannetta quotes Claude Monet, “Always, always, I must have flowers. More than anything I must have flowers!” She adds, “And I love flowers...I have the Monet calendar here. And you will have to look in the hall...bookcases...So many gardening books....A lot on flowers” (Jeannetta). Gadamer credits the English garden style in its “new kind of truth to nature or naturalness, [a departure from] the eighteenth-century garden [that] was constructed geometrically as an extension into nature” (1977/1986, p. 31). In American gardens, there are many styles, something for everyone. With the exception of the unwritten expectations about lawns in this country, the rules have gone by the wayside. Therefore, if you wish to have a garden with topiary, it is as acceptable as a big bed of ground cover. To suit their own styles, seed-carriers construct or choose to “let it be” when interacting with living art, and sometimes it is all about dwelling to enjoy the view.

### **Framing the View**

Right now, [those trees] need some pruning, you know, but to me the [Chesapeake] Bay is much more interesting in a framed picture than just straight water with nothing until the other side. And it is a personal preference I am sure, but I enjoy my little frame. (Beth)

As articulated in the quote, Beth enjoys her nature view both in and outside her home. Research on the restorative benefits of passive exposure to plants (and trees) continues to accumulate (R. Kaplan, 1992; S. Kaplan, 1995; Relf, 1992; Ulrich, 1984). For older persons in particular, passive exposure to trees and plants may be a wonderful method for enjoying the restorative aspects of viewing nature. Relf (1992) further clarifies that, amazingly, we need not even be particularly aware that we are viewing nature to receive the bonus of lowered blood pressure or stress reduction, either. For



others, having a garden view is enough. As described in a recent *New York Times* article, “Art in the Garden, A Monet Brought to Life,” two architects created outdoor rooms, even a secret garden.

We created outdoor rooms without question. It’s part of your well-being. If you are in the house and you can see the outside, it calls to you. For me it recharges my batteries. If you don’t get out there, just seeing it and knowing it’s there, it makes me feel good. (Smiros, cited in Fischler, 2006, p. 4 ¶ 3)

Mr. Smiros enjoys respite in having such a place, regardless of whether able to experience it directly. A garden’s beauty is individually experienced and defined by the observer. At times, the observer is not the gardener, yet the landscape takes on importance and may be experienced as joyfully as beautiful art. Landscapers have learned the value of yearlong palettes, too, in fashioning a look. Here is a lifestyle that includes garden nursery shopping to feel inspired and to enrich the view.

Perhaps beauty in some instances is best experienced as a surprise, a secret that is kept from others for a while. Rosenblatt (1998) looks out on a pine tree and finds reassurance seeing that a favorite pine is still there as part of a familiar view from which to observe nature. Taking solace from the view, Rosenblatt does not take it for granted, describing how seeing the ever-present tree is always a bit of a surprise somehow. Nor does Rosenblatt keep it secret; he writes about it. Rosenblatt chooses to awaken to nature by returning to books of preeminent nature writers, “to pick up some sensory information through their wide-open eyes” (1998, p. 92). What would it be like to use our senses to experience beauty without assuming it will always be present?

The seed-carriers assume nothing. They leave the beauty undefined in that they sharpen their senses for whatever lies ahead and remain curious about it. They get ready in case of a surprise since the definition of curious includes “exciting attention to the

strange, novel, or unexpected” (Mish et. al., 1994, p. 284). Pollan, a noted garden writer, speaks about his transition to California from Connecticut and remembers the unexpected “I didn’t count on missing [it] quite as sharply as I do...when the spring rains and strengthening sun are raising some astonishment from the formerly dead earth virtually every week” (Pollan, 2004, p. 3, ¶ 1). Pollan remains curious about the unexpected while living out his life as a transplant to California desert. It leads me to wonder: Why else do the gardeners garden besides to find new life for themselves?

### **Staying Curious and Creative: Gardening to Garden**

Well, I think another thing [about wanting to be a gardener] is the curious mind...If you plant this seed what is going to grow? Can I take a slip or a cutting off that plant and root it? Partly a scientific curiosity, I would have to call it.  
(Beth)

In the same way beauty remains undefined, each person develops his/her own style of relating to nature and gardening, and the notion of co-creating beauty recedes into the background of awareness. For the seed- carriers, often it seems they become more like Handelsman (1996), who claims, “I was gardening not to create a garden; I was gardening to garden” (p. 87). This sentiment reiterates that whatever brings one to gardening, curiosity or creating—whatever, the gardening process itself often is the reason for pursuing the work of it. “My gardens in Kenya...save my life because the whole three months there is tropical. I can be out every day if I have time—digging in the dirt. I have a rose garden there” (Jeannetta). She is gardening to “be” herself. The work is the transformative part, and dwelling with it is another mode of continuing, perhaps even another beginning each season.

To transform as a person takes work; it is not all garden work. Underneath their gardening activities is the wish—the continuing effort—to learn and grow as persons.

“When we bring all of who we are to our creative work, our souls unfold, consciousness is cultivated, and we cannot help but co-create the meaning that comes from touching truth” (Dreamer, 2005, p. 25). The seed-carrier is continuing to unfold as a creative person.

“I used to start lots of seeds in the Spring, carry them on...In later years I still take cuttings and try different things” (Beth). I pause to reflect on the role of creativity and imagination for older persons, and the seed-carriers. Because gardening during later seasons represents continued individual growth, seed-carriers are living examples of individuals facing aging and incorporating creativity in their artistic expression of gardening. Research on aging continues to report that creativity is a form of transformation in later life and is central to the human experience (Kastenbaum, 1992). Through the creative aspects of gardening, we nurture our human need to continue to develop as persons with individual tastes and preferences. The creative work develops our abilities to cope and to respond to our world through changed perspectives (Dreamer, 2005). In addition, the gerontological interdisciplinary perspective acknowledges the emerging role of the self in the study of adulthood and later life. Researchers move beyond the theoretical assumptions that metamorphoses of personality and self are limited in adulthood and our years as older persons (Labouvie-Vief & Diehl, 1999). The seed-carriers are undergoing metamorphoses in later life. It is as Muller explains, that, like every living thing, “[Our] self...evolves, strikes a different balance with every new breath” (1996, p. 7). Like all other older adults who are lifelong learners maintaining a creative life, the seed-carriers breathe in the newness that surrounds them.

“That one—this whole area, since we took that big huge tree down, now this is where I get the most sun. So that is why this garden is not aging” (Sally). The seed-carriers flourish in the sunshine and newness that comes with staying curious and creative. They respond to the call to be seed-carriers, appreciating beauty and dwelling with the art of their gardens. Their gardens, while living art, are a place of dwelling. The same spaces they inhabit “bear the essence of the notion of home” (Bachelard, as cited in Moore, 1996, p. 77) because the gardens serve as both the tether and anchoring place for seed-carriers in the embrace of being at home. The garden is home, a place of created history and a landscape for “being.” Raver, in a review of the Messervy and Susanka book “Outside the Not So Big House” published in 2006, explains the authors’ use of a Japanese ideogram for “home,” *ka* being house and *tei* being home, and suggests “Paying attention to the history of a site, to those who came before, is part of the deep sense of place in a landscape” (Raver, 2006a, ¶ 34). This resonates with me. Gardeners *do* claim the landscape as home.

Remember how Selena only considered herself a gardener when she owned land? Ownership is relative for some gardeners, but in any case, seed-carriers proceed to and from the inhabited spaces that are their gardens, and they make a home. Bognar (1989) writes that “The ‘spirit of place,’ or *genius loci*, arises from the special character or synesthetic quality of a particular locality” (p. 187). It is “the spirit of place” that makes gardens a dwelling place for seed-carriers to “be.” Apparently, for Sally, it is also a haven for their cats to move about in the hidden back parts of the garden. Nearly every garden book recommends incorporating a bit of mystery with something hidden. I learn what this means during a behind-the-scenes tour with Sally.

This used to be our garden in here, way, way back. It was one of the first places I put anything. So that's why there was a path, but the path didn't come all the way over here. It just stopped because this area was not here. ...And since then, it got totally overcrowded...so it was always called the cat path. So that's what I call it now, because, essentially, nobody walks in there except [us, as] the gardeners. And the cats do use it, so it is kind of fun. (Sally)

When Sally chooses, she takes the cat path that meanders through the back areas of the garden. If we are lucky, we are included in that part of the tour. I feel privileged because sometimes those parts stay hidden. Where are the cat paths in our lives that showcase mystery or, perhaps, reassure us that what we are doing is helping us to age well? How does our landscape reflect the changes of our lives, as it does with the seed-carriers coping with aging? Sally and Paul are coping creatively with the changes, but what are others able to do about the changing landscape of their lives? More needs to be explored about landscape relating to place, so I look further.

Tilley (1994) reminds me of how vital such grounding is to interpreting the lived experience of older gardeners, and, frankly, to understanding home and landscape for all persons. In *A Phenomenology of Landscape*, Tilley (1994) writes:

A landscape is a series of named locales, a set of relational places linked by paths, movements and narratives. It is a 'natural' topography perspectively linked to the existential Being of the body in societal space. A cultural code for living, an autonomous 'text' to be read and interpreted, a writing pad for inscription, a scape of and for human praxis, a mode of dwelling, and of mode of experiencing. (p. 34)

As a researcher, I am "reading and interpreting the text" to learn about the mode of dwelling and experiencing the "spirit of the place" that is their home. I notice Moore (1996) titles the section about being home "Homemaking" (p. 127) in *The Art of Dwelling*, and I identify with the word choice. It reminds me that seed-carriers truly are builders who make a home place where they create living art, remain curious and, most

significantly, can “be.” If only, as Moore (1996) wishes out loud, “we could [all] be better at making our homes...[because] all of life is a rhythm of coming and going from home” (p. 127). Ultimately, seed-carriers teach me about making a home within living art as a dwelling place. Perhaps, in part, the garden is a “relationship to a place through the body” (O’Donohue, 1999, p. 69). No wonder the seed-carriers feel such a kinship with being close to the earth.

### **Being Close to the Earth and Near Nature to Feel Well**

My body continually *takes me into place*. It is at once agent and vehicle, articulator and witness of being-in-place. ...Without...our bodies, not only would we be lost in place—acutely disoriented and confused—we would have no coherent sense of place itself. ...Our living-moving bodies serve to structure and to configurate entire scenarios of place. (Casey, 1993, p. 48)

Gardeners long to be close to the earth and near nature. They experience the natural world for what it is and how it is, while others of us only come across Living Earth because it already is what it is and we are merely observers and passersby. In being close to the earth through gardening, the seed-carriers build a sense of well-being, perhaps, their way of “staying well.” Within the embrace of the natural world of their gardens, seed-carriers create a dwelling place. Once again, Heidegger’s words strike a chord : “Building is really dwelling. Dwelling is the manner in which mortals are on the earth” (1971/2001, p. 146). The seed-carriers make their way in life, in and out of their gardening world that sustains them—in body and spirit. My understanding of health closely follows Lavin’s (1993), who considers “mind and body as a dynamic unity, a path of energy...where the life force in each of us...[is] able to flow freely” (not paginated). I take this to mean the coherent whole of the seed-carriers’ life flowing freely is what “feeling well” means. In one conversation, I ask, “What more would you say about an

older gardener's outlook on life?" Sally smiles and says, "That would be the important part!"

We might reconsider "the Florentine view [where] the human body was a manifestation of the soul" (Moore, 1992, p. 171). Would such thinking not change how we honor our bodies and how practitioners take our history? Klein (1997) takes it a step further, "Our bodies bring forth our spirituality precisely because our bodies form a bridge between 'inner' and 'outer' [worlds]" (p. 80). So, to know of the seed-carriers' longing to be close to the earth, I wonder about their bodies as well as their souls, recognizing that "In relat[ing] to our bodies *as having* soul[s], we attend to their beauty, their poetry and their expressiveness" (Moore, 1992, p. 172).

### **Adaptation: Worn Body Parts**

During the Fall of their lives, the seed-carriers dwell as they age and deal with the mechanics of their bodies, the worn body parts. Johnson (1999) reiterates:

We are creatures of the flesh. What we can experience and how we make sense of what we experience depends on the kinds of bodies we have and on the ways we interact with the various environments we inhabit...Through our embodied interactions...we inhabit a world. (p. 81)

Although we inhabit our worlds through our bodies and souls, the accompanying thoughts are not usually discussed outside of family circles. Jeannetta shares openly about her health and that of her husband, and adds:

It is our intent to be healthy [in our] eighties people. We'll see...because you can't count on it, as body parts wear out. Especially worn body parts. We're both healthy [right now] and we'll keep on trucking.

Jeannetta survives and stays grounded by working the soil of overgrown gardens or neglected woodlands, and occasionally ignores the part of her self that is her physical

body. Her husband is in total remission following several rounds of chemotherapy. On the other hand, the seed-carriers also make tentative plans for when the body parts fail.

We will put up with whatever happens to ourselves. We are not interested in going to a retirement life. So, we will probably have nurses come in or whatever needs to be done. It may not work but that is what we want to do....I just love this place and I don't want to go anywhere. We have friends in one of those retirement places with extended care...it is just not for us.

The seed-carriers develop a sense of freedom about how they wish to live. They act on what they learn about themselves and put that wisdom to use. In his later seasons, having experienced aging, Erikson, the noted developmental theorist, understands the elder experience differently. Instead of concluding that older adults experience despair, theorists re-interpret the task of later life as generativity, and a time of possible transcendence. Older adults desire to remain vital and involved with others. They wish to leave something of themselves. So it is with the seed-carriers, who adapt to their limitations to entrust to others a part of themselves through their gardening. It is, once again, part of "preparing the soil." In an interview with London (2006), Abram helps us put this in context:

For most oral cultures, the enveloping and sensuous Earth remains the dwelling place of both the living *and* the dead. The "body"—human or otherwise—is not yet a mechanical object. It is a magical entity, the mind's own sensuous aspect and at death the body's decomposition into soil, worms, and dust can only signify the gradual reintegration of one's elders and ancestors into the living landscape from which all, too, are born. (Abram, as cited in London, 2006, ¶ 41)

The seed-carriers, as gardeners, are never far from an awareness of that reintegration. They have their compost pile and understand the concept of becoming living landscapes; yet, the body as a magical entity would not be something they would likely discuss. I suspect they do not feel old. In one study of the process of aging, Ethel, at age 84, explains:



I feel the same now as I did then [age 60 or 65], oh yes. The only way I know I'm getting old is to look in the mirror. But I've only *felt* old a few times—when I'm really sick. You know, people say that all old people do is talk about their memories and the past. Well, I don't do that. Don't say that about me. I think about the future and tomorrow. You can't do anything about the past. (cited in Kaufman, 1986, p. 12)

The gardeners in my study reflect a similar view. When I made efforts to pull them into a discussion of their bodies in gardening, their responses fell short.

I don't know what is going to happen. [Physical challenges that impact getting out into the garden.] We'll just have to deal with it this Spring. In a way, a denial. We figure we will always feel good and then if not, we'll cope [with it]. Right now I don't want to pay attention to it, only the getting into the garden. (Sally)

Like the other conversants, Sally does not dwell on discussions about her physical body.

At 86, Sally is part-metal from three hip surgeries and a knee replacement. She speaks about being a “different kind of seventies” than the folks who lived in her home before them. Her vitality defies her actual age. Sally envisions the landscape she wants to produce. She calls it her design. She ripped out the original foundation plantings in the almost 1 ½ acres of their land, and wanted to see what she could do with the property.

Sally continues to show her determination to persevere as Moore (1992) suggests, “Aging brings out the flavors of a personality. The individual emerges over time, the way fruit matures and ripens” (p. 140).

What keeps these older gardeners doing this hard work when others their age are slowing their pace, facing up to the realities of their aging bodies? Jeannetta comments, “One day I was over there [in the woodland] pulling weeds for four hours,” but she has yet to mention aches or pains associated with the work. This contradicts all I have known or read about the aftermath of weed-busting. As they garden in their later seasons, do they leave their aging selves behind for a time? Hultgren comments, “Perhaps, rather,

they are more present to their bodies while in the dirt” (Personal communication, 12 May 2006). I look to Leder’s (1990) phenomenological investigations of the body for some insight, specifically, considering the concept of a “Dys-appearing” body where the forgotten body symbolizes a healthy state. This is reassuring. On the other hand, Leder also tells us that aging is one of the periods when self-interpretation can totally upend our sense of self, or self-image and worldview. So, how does this influence our bodily engagement in the world? Are we likely to persevere despite discomfort or pain that gardening may bring in later seasons?

I am witnessing how the seed-carriers adapt to barriers and limitations that show up—usually in their physical body, not their spirit. Sally’s husband admits he is learning how to step back and hire a 15-year-old to help. After all, gardening can be strenuous, especially with extremes of outside temperatures and humidity on top of the exercise itself. Barbara has had to adjust her time in the garden and talks about the difficulty of getting decent help. I ask Leo about how he is managing his gardening as he has gotten older.

Well it [gardening] does combine a little exercise, and I have thought that probably with my stiffness—my progressive stiffness in the joints and limbs, I have been slowed down somewhat. It’s still there, but I find that if I go out in the morning and just have a good experience, I’ll enjoy feeling the sun and even bending over and pulling those little weeds, which most people say is the worst part of gardening.

Leo is in touch with how his body is responding and what it needs. He has a garden helper these days, but, more importantly, he listens to his body so he can stay active in gardening, just doing it for shorter periods. He is learning to prevent wear and tear. I consider this self-healing in the most health promoting sense. Abram (2006) explains we are so embedded in our community, that the individuals who are in tune with the

interactions between themselves and their surrounding environment are the best diagnosticians, as Leo seems to be.

The pleasure in gardening activities takes the gardeners out of their everyday world where one might notice the aches and pains of weeding or stooping. They move beyond the challenges, pain, or aches. Sally admits to a backache occasionally, but she rejects using a cane.

Oh, yes, this hip thing, you go from crutches to a cane...Six weeks that you have to put up with the whole business. And I was trying a cane—I would go out in the garden and pretty soon I'd look around for my cane and it would be way across the yard! I didn't find that too limiting, really...So, the only thing [is], I had to be careful—I still do. (Sally)

Sally remains careful and uses a special pick instead of trying to keep track of a cane in the garden. She finds now she is not working as long at a time as she'd like. When I ask her if she means a couple of hours in the morning, she answers she still works all day; that is what she likes to do but cannot manage with her foot trouble now. How does Sally manage to ignore the metal in her body? "The body is always a place of vulnerability" (Leder, 1990, p. 98), yet Sally has found a means to self-understanding and sees beyond her body. Is this way of being a lifestyle that keeps gardeners young?

I *am* more aware of the physical changes [in later seasons]. ...It was great to discover this house is almost like a greenhouse. When I was younger and a housewife, I used to start lots of seeds in the Spring, carry them on...but in later years [she took cuttings instead]. (Beth)

What Beth is not saying is that her physical ability to move has changed. She is limber but has had to use a cane for a time. Most often, however, Beth attributes the garden changes to traveling during retirement rather than a physical slowing down. The plants have trouble in her absence so she gardens at London Town. Leo paces himself now and still enjoys it fully, for the most part. "Sometimes it is not difficult to bend over,

but difficult to get back upright” (Leo). Like Leo, seed-carriers have a need to continue their contact with the earth in the face of advancing age and some physical changes. Is it a healing of themselves they experience?

In her seventies, Beth admits she has cut back on her gardening at home, but not solely because she retired from the landscape services. She has become busy with another landscape. She works in full swing as a volunteer at London Town Gardens south of her home. She delights in telling stories about her other gardening buddies. She has an eighty-six-year-old friend who “still gardens like crazy...still gardens the fifty-foot plot [of land]. ...And now, you know, she wears herself out, but she still keeps going.” She is clearly a role model for others who want to remain engaged with the natural world.

We all might take heed. Living beings need to be involved with life and each other, particularly in today’s society. We need to pause, Wallis says, “To sense in the natural music of a meadow what a seed or plant senses, to feel the interdependence of south wind, granite, rock, mist and a robin’s chatter” (as cited in Raver, 2005a, ¶ 21). Along with learning about interdependence, we might then relearn our sense of wonder, of possibility. It deserves repeating that what gardening offers, what it can give us, in Merleau-Ponty’s language, is a “sense experience” (1962/1996, p. 55) from being close to nature. The sense experience can also bring hope and wonder about the future.

### **Knowing the Earth through the Senses**

My joyful love/passion for gardening nurtures my soul at a deeply felt, non-verbal level. I don’t really think about it—I just feel it, below the surface, so it’s not easy to articulate. (Email from Jeannetta)

Jeannetta, the “Child of the Soil,” as she names herself, is aware of her relationship with the Earth, yet finds it difficult to put into words sometimes. Merleau-

Ponty (1948/1973) perhaps would call this the intertwining, an expression representing how the body is in-the-world. In gardening, we come to know the world through our body, more specifically our flesh, which Merleau-Ponty reminds us, is integral to our sense of place and being present through our senses. Thus, we seek experiences that fill up all the senses. Morningstar (1999) recommends getting close to nature for its stress reducing effects:

Go outside and listen to the music of running water, the whisper of wind in the trees. Stop and touch the living Earth with your hands or bare feet...When you're stressed, experience Mother Nature's beauty; her song and her touch are extraordinarily healing. (p. 19, ¶ 18)

Why wait for times of stress for a dose of this good medicine? Seed-carriers already know becoming a gardener is a straight route to filling the senses and the wellness that follows purposeful exposure to nearby nature. Those who do not garden, “may wake up one day and see what they missed!” (Beth). Seed-carriers want to be in contact with living things and the earth in any way they can manage to do so. As Carson (1956/1998) asks, “Is the exploration of the natural world just a pleasant way to pass the golden hours of childhood [or adulthood] -or is there something deeper?” (p. 100). It clearly is something deeper. From a scientific perspective it is complex, as summarized in a recent health article on how our senses flow from the brain. While the senses of sight, hearing and touch originate in the dominant sensory regions of the brain, they converge, and the result is a combined perceptual response. The reunion translates into a multisensory process that builds our perceptions of the body as it moves through the world (Blanke, as cited in Blakeslee, 2006, ¶ 9). Let me offer some examples from gardening.

**The gardener's touch.** Seed-carriers want to touch the dirt itself for as long and as often as they can. They have a feel for the Earth in much the same way a seafarer

knows the ocean and its living creatures. What would it be like to connect with the living and breathing elements of the Earth and the phenomenon of gardening so deeply as to experience them viscerally, “below the surface,” as Jeannetta does? Gardeners understand this engagement of the body with the elements of earth because they focus on the “totality and uniqueness of the phenomena that [they] encounter” (Huebner, 1999, p. 6) through their senses—even if sometimes we grapple with how best to put it into words. It would be no different for seed-carriers.

We [our family] just can’t seem to stay away from getting our hands in the mud.  
(Beth)

What does it feel like to have your hands in the mud? I mean, can you talk about that a little? (Staley)

Well, it just feels right, and I don’t like to wear gloves. I don’t want to, other than when I am pruning holly or something. (Beth)

I, too, fill up my senses through direct contact with plants and soil, so I easily recognize the totality of the bodily experience in gardening. I see how I literally need to ground myself periodically, and how it certainly does “feel right” to have my hands in the dirt. A quick check of someone’s hands can reveal they have been digging in dirt, gloves notwithstanding. Maybe the garden gloves symbolize an ambivalence about being caught with dirty fingernails or, more practically, not wanting to take extra time cleaning up after gardening. All I know is sometimes getting my hands dirty is irresistible. In walking by something growing or green, I find I meander over, almost without realizing it, and either sniff a blossom, examine a branch or pull a weed. I know I am not alone as I remember one of my earliest conversations with an older gardener whose clippers almost never left her hands while on her usual walk in the neighborhood. In similar fashion, Beth snips her neighbor’s poison ivy. Is Beth building neighborliness by protecting the unsuspecting

passerby from the painful blisters that follow contact with that noxious plant? Or, is it also about taking care of others? Since all but one seed-carrier volunteer outside their own garden, I suggest the action is an extension of their wish to nurture others in this small gesture of friendship.

Barbara still is independently doing most of her own work. The garden veteran of the study, having had so many gardens, she has the gardener's touch. Her husband, now 90, used to help any way he could manage—usually by spreading mulch. The everyday expression, “It is what it is,” suits the discussion of the lived body. They use tools to make the work easier. Looking at his “gnarly hands,” Leo remembers his father's hands and is pleased to be doing so well in spite of arthritis. He admits he is not sure what it is exactly, and I wonder if perhaps, not knowing is on purpose.

Welch would concur that, for most gardeners, touching dirt is extremely important. “I feel sorry for people who do not like to grow things and get their hands dirty. I think it was intended for us to keep our hands and bodies close to the earth” (as cited in Bender, 1998, p. 2). Somehow, the seed-carriers have been able to keep their hands in the dirt *and* be close to the earth.

**A taste for nearby nature's sights and sounds.** “The act of cultivating one's food is so anciently a part of who we are. Nothing gives that back better than pulling one's food from the earth” (Eck, as cited in Raver, 2004, ¶ 4). For thousands of years, we were a hunting-gathering society. With our rapidly increasingly urban lifestyle, many of us long to return to growing our own food.

One thing I'd always wanted to do was go to the harvest, and [thus] I got a job that summer picking strawberries which was just perfect because I loved strawberries and I'd always wanted a chance to eat as many as I could. (And I still love them.) I stayed on and picked through the blackberry season. (Beth)

Beth continues savoring the fruits of her labors, only nowadays she gives back by transplanting rootstock of heirloom plants at historic London Town so others can grow food and flowers using plants from earlier times. In the first chapter I ask, “Are these gardeners taking care to give to others who might benefit from the fruits of their labor, while they still can garden? Is it meaningful still to be able to give their fruit to others? It is my sincere hope that their caring work continues to be meaningful and pleasurable. We owe a debt of gratitude to plant nurturers like Beth and seed savers everywhere for their contributions.

I must mention taste briefly. All my conversants grow some cultivar of tomatoes, just as I do. Would that all of us make a point of doing the same to enjoy the taste of a real fruit of the garden instead of the mealy ones at the grocery store! Jeannetta goes considerably further. She grows a few vegetables in Kenya for the locals. Whether growing them for their consumption or others, the forethought and planning involved in carting the plant nutrients from the United States to Kenya clearly is a giving back of huge proportions.

Our ears may have forgotten what the sounds are like because of the competing noise in our usual world, but Schafer (1989) reminds us, “In nature something is always sounding. Frogs may begin, the swallows arrive, geese may fly over... This is the soundscape of my farm” (p. 93). For most of us, we retreat to our gardens and ponds to find sounds of nature once again. Why must this simple sense experience be so elusive nowadays? I visualize Selena on her tree farm in rural Massachusetts.

Recall that Selena felt she had to own “a piece of property” to transform into a gardener, adding, “I just found myself doing it.” When we walk around in her gardens,



Selena still knows where almost everything is in spite of her vision impairment. She still is bodily connected to her garden places, and she hears everything. When fully sighted she used to trim the trees without much thought. Now she describes how she accomplishes it and shows me, too. She stands close enough to each tree to feel it and “sees” its outline against the sky to determine where she should break off part of the new growth to shape its form. She finds a unique strength from her passion for living and continuing to garden.

Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth are never alone or weary of life. Whatever the vexations or concerns of their personal lives...[They] find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts... There is something infinitely healing in the repeated refrains of nature—the assurance that dawn comes after night, and spring after the winter. (Carson, 1956/1998a, p. 100)

You might say Selena lives through the seasons of her life—some Winters, some Summers—and finds healing. She is teaching her grown children and grandchildren the value of the gardening life where, as Carson suggests, nature cultivates a joy that is universal. Just as Carson did with her infant grandson, Selena stands at the ocean’s edge, thereby nourishing the sense of wonder about the mysteries of life by sharing the sights and sounds of the ocean.

### **The rich scents of living earth.**

The last Saturday in April...we went out [to collect specimens for the London Town plant sale], the perfect time with the amount of moisture in the soil—we could pull the garlic grass right out. Those little bulbs...(Beth)

If you walk outside after a rainstorm your nose knows it rained because the soil says so. Beth would smell the garlic in those plants, or notice the smell of grass when it is cut. Most likely we all can identify with a particular scent we love that emerges from our history and brings us to remembered places in a heartbeat. Klinkenborg writes:

I forget how complex that farm scent is when I've been in the city for a couple of days. But when I get home, just after dark, it hits me all over again. I stand in the twilight, looking out over the pasture, wondering how such smells—blending in the night air—can seem so vital and welcoming. (2004, ¶ 6)

In describing the scent of the farm, Klinkenborg vividly reminds us of the importance of scent in anchoring our sense of place. At my extended family's summer home the lilacs were late bloomers in the northern climate of Canada. If you are lucky, in your room you will find freshly cut lilac blooms from the side yard. The perfume is magical. Did all grandmothers plant lilacs for their grandchildren like mine did? I am delighted she did.

As we sit out on the deck near her gardens and breathe in the summer air, Selena remembers when she and her husband worked the tree farm. Now-a-days, Selena experiences the trees by touch and by their distinctive pine scent more than by sight. She exemplifies a seed-carrier with awakened senses that are fully developed. Enlightened, she and the other seed-carriers, can teach new ways of seeing to those of us who have “unconscious eye[s]” (Rosenblatt, 1998, p. 92) from not attending to our senses. Abram (2006) encourages us to “wake ourselves from the long delusion of our detachment from the bodily earth, to find ourselves included, once again, in the breathing body of this world” (p. 12). One could say there is so much more to sense and see out in the living world than we realize. We have forgotten about our senses. Or, at least some of us have.

A special master gardener friend describes simple, sense-filled joys of having hands and tools working in the dirt. Goldberry writes an essay about “holding a dibble stick [to make holes in the soil for seed], having Perlite under fingernails and the soft warm air of greenhouses” (Personal communication, August 15, 1997). Goldberry misses those volunteering days of sense experiences that accompany the delights of growing plants. The culture of master gardeners requires one to volunteer in the company of

growing plants and friends, but, in reality, it is to enjoy the sights, sounds, and smells that accompany the sensuous experience of touching the Earth. Abram (2006) relates how humans are “corporeally embedded in the sensuous cosmos” (p. 6). In nearby nature or far away, we experience lived time that contracts or expands during an experience of the visible or invisible body with the elements.

In addition, Huebner (1999) suggests some of these interactions, as manifested in our touching other living, natural elements, help us capture the wonder and adopt a more holistic stance about the world in the present. Heidegger would say this is being-in-the-world. To participate in life this way, human beings “reach beyond self” (Hultgren, 1994, p. 25). In describing ways of responding to such a call, Hultgren (1994) writes that “An analysis of human existence must start with Being-in-the-world. True understanding is the result of human engagement in the world” (p. 25). How do the senses help the seed-carriers to cope? I note that, for the seed-carriers, their purposeful actions related to being-in-the-sensuous world of gardening and nearby nature become the pathway to meaningful life for the seed-carriers, who *cannot not* garden. In coming to appreciate the sense experiences of their gardening way of being-in-the world, they have much to teach others.

### **Developing A “Sense Consciousness”**

When we can listen to what the birds have to say, what nature has to say, and when we perceive the beauty of nature, then we are completing the circle and returning this physical world to its source through our own consciousness. (Kingsley, 2006, p. 30)

Seed-carriers develop a sense consciousness about their opus, their role in the surrounding world. For gardener and writer Sarton (1973), it is a personal goal to touch others through nature writing, “discovered by a few people with all the excitement of a

person who finds a wildflower in the woods that *he* has discovered on his own” (p. 67). Is this consciousness-raising not a role for seed-carriers, too? Sarton writes of the beauty of nature following a reading of Teilhard de Chardin and makes parallels with building the soul to bring meaning to one’s life. I think of the seed-carriers’ actions. As Sarton writes to complete the world she experiences through her gardening, the seed-carriers, too, are finding their way to make a contribution.

As a child, Beth says she spent “every Sunday up in the Black Hills, the mountains, and communed with nature which in our own way was our religion; You don’t have to sit in a church to have your feelings.” These experiences in nature touched her and still sustain her.

I think it really is your own thing [gardening as a way of life] because I think you see the world through different eyes. Like when I walk outside, I see that the *Stuartia* has this exceptionally pretty exfoliating bark. And someone else might look at it and say, “Gee, that looks diseased.” (Beth)

Her senses are open, unlike what Greek philosophers intimated about the usual human condition. According to Kingsley (2006), “Actually, we are seeds and have not yet become plants. We have not budded yet, have not yet started to open and blossom. We have the potential to become full human beings” (p. 25). Beth listens to nature either in stillness or wakefulness and, like the other seed-carriers, acts on it by promoting sound horticultural practices that do no harm at London Town. In Kingsley’s frame of reference, she “germinates,” and professes her preference to “hand pick potato bugs,” for example, to avoid using poisonous chemicals. When the conversation turns to the use of toxins and pesticides, Beth adds:

My dad had a greenhouse on our home property, but he also had a greenhouse in town, and we played in the greenhouse. I kind of get a horror when I think about it because, available to us was arsenic and Paris Green and all those [chemical

poisons], and we would mix them up and make mud pies and frost them with Paris Green. (Beth)

It is difficult to envision a role for the seed-carrier that includes pesticides if their sense consciousness includes “returning the physical world to its source” (Kingsley, 2006, p. 30). While not an activist, Leo prefers organics and stays true to the principles of good stewardship:

Well, I gradually have diminished or curtailed my use [of pesticides]. I suppose I do prefer using the organic, I do. I do as much with composting as possible. (Leo)

And do you use your compost, spread it out, or is it just the process of it that you do? (Staley)

Oh no, I use it. (Leo)

I relate Leo’s response to the gardener’s experience where choices like this surface regularly. I see that the seed-carriers choose to be respectful of all life in the garden, the soil and the rocks in the paths throughout, recognizing it is a living earth. As stewards, they are vigilant about preserving the earth for others who will follow. If the seed-carriers look ahead with promise, what are we curtailing to sustain hope for the tomorrows that lie ahead in terms of Earth?

### **Seeds of Possibility: “Looking Forward...Waiting ‘Til...”**

Why do you plant tulip bulbs in the Fall? ’Cuz you hope they’re going to come up in the Spring (Beth).

I was going to say it depends on what type of person you are. There are some people who don’t look forward and who always look back. And some who just say, “Oh, there’s no use.” (Barbara)

Some people look at the sky and they see that there is a cloud coming. And others look at the sky and say “Oh, it’s sunny out there.” And so, I think a lot of it’s a basic personality. (Beth)

I think so too, and a lot of people who don’t garden, they don’t want to, they don’t look forward. (Barbara)

How is it that the seed-carriers convey hopefulness during a time when many older adults do not share the same feelings about the future? To be hopeful is to be full of expectation and possibility because the definition of hope includes “to cherish a desire with anticipation” (Mish, 1994, p. 558), while an *archaic* understanding includes the word often paired with hope and charity—trust (p. 558). Barbara trusts that her plants will emerge as proof of life after her loving attention along with Mother Nature. The rare irises are supposed to bloom in the Fall, which is unusual enough.

I don't know whether they'll live or not [purple iris bulbs a friend gave her], I planted them, so I'm waiting 'til...(Barbara)

She nods when I ask if this is the life of the gardener, “waiting to see what happens.” Although there is weather to consider, gardeners keep seeding and planting anyway. For according to Barbara, “Yeah, most definitely, you're always hoping it's going to get better next year—things are going to look better.” She remains full of hope, expecting good things will happen. Because the iris did not bloom in the first year, Barbara wonders if it will survive. She reports she went so far as to say to herself, “Well, what in the world's the matter with this iris?” However, she waits and is rewarded.

The seed-carrier is one who trusts in the future and hopes for a sunny day.

I know that I am an incorrigible optimist. I know that I can sort of get to other people. Gardening or no, we are optimists about life in general. I must admit that that sort of sense of always being hopeful about tomorrow seems to ring true with people I have talked with and even after the doldrums of winter or the peaceful death or the sleep of death, there is that sense of something beyond. (Selena)

What encourages an attitude of being hope-full, albeit optimistic? The constancy of the seasons brings reassurance, some would say. The lesson of the seasons following one another, others would say. In one conversation where Paul is present with us, I enjoy

Sally and Paul's understanding of the lessons of the cycle of life through the seasons, as Sally finishes Paul's sentence:

Every ending is the cause for a new beginning. (Paul)  
It opens up a whole new possibility. (Sally)

Paul and Sally face serious medical concerns that they tackle together, in the same manner their labor of love transforms into healing energy. While talking about trees falling due to lack of moisture and overcrowding in the landscape, Sally mentions,

There is always something good that happens when something bad happens. And you look at your whole area again and say, "Oh, well, now I can do something different!" And, so, anyway that is what I really wanted to explain to you. ...And, then I gambled [with what came next].

Life is a gamble. Somehow, we have to learn how to transform what may not be good happenings into healing energy. This we learn from Sally and Paul.

I recall a *New York Times* article about a part-time actor turned gardener who made a conscious decision to turn the sorrow following September 11, 2001 into plants, flowers, and vines. Using pots for the plantings, Wong spreads fragrance and beauty with his five-hour-a-day gardening initiative for the Upper West side streets. His neighbor, Molloy says, "There is a frequency here that takes you out of the city and onto another plane [of existence]" (as cited in Gill, 2005, *NY Times Online*). Huebner (1999) writes about interactions of humans with other phenomena, typically, those in nature, and uses the example of watching a butterfly that seeks out the milkweed plant to show how we become aware "they have an existence alongside [our] existence. Then the two of you [independently] are in relationship, participating in life together, journeying down through time" (1999, p. 5). Like Wong, the seed-carriers are "looking forward" as they journey through time—encouraging hope. I think especially of Paul and Sally journeying

down through time—in relationship with hope. I receive my San Diego Hospice newsletter about “Living with Loss ” after my father’s death and take heart that Paul and Sally remain hope-full in spite of coping with some unexpected medical issues. Indeed, they are a living example of what Alviz writes in a 2003 San Diego Hospice newsletter, “HOPE is hearing the melody of the future. FAITH is dancing to it today” (in *Living with Loss*, not paginated). I see Paul and Sally metaphorically dancing in their garden, making their time together full of hope and faith.

On the other hand, is being optimistic a basic personality trait, that is, being confident we can cope with whatever may come, such as the hardships Selena gracefully overcomes? Fueled by a belief in the circle of life, that ever-present circle, seed-carriers trust they can deal with whatever may come. Is it the anticipation of connecting with that “something beyond” that Selena mentions, somehow participating with the life presence in our gardens? No easy answers show themselves. I listen further.

I kept thinking things were going to get better. I am basically an optimist. (Beth)

Do you think that’s something gardeners generally are? (Staley)

I think so—because you have to be an optimist. (Beth)

McGreevy (2000) believes gardeners, individually or as a group, have an optimistic outlook because who else would place a miniscule speck of seed underground and expect so much? “As a gardener, all my todays are the seeds of tomorrow’s bloom” (McGreevy, 2000, p. 181). I look at Leo’s “philosophy of rose gardening: Doing less and leave it alone.” Being practical, Leo resists interfering with the insects: “I used to spray the roses once a week, and I found out if I didn’t spray them, they looked just about as good.” Yet, it is more than that. He explains:



I have a built-in pair of rosy colored glasses and I don't look at the bugs, for example. Talking about roses, [my wife] Jan will go out and see the roses have been...leaves have all been chewed up by whatever. I think it is spiders...Maybe I just see what I want to see. (Leo)

Maybe Leo's rosy-colored glasses are important to well-being. Could the spirit of optimism be at play in longevity among gardeners? McGreevy (2000) disagrees with the psychologists who tout gardeners' belief in a sense of control as one important ingredient explaining the benefits of gardening. Instead, as in Leo's example, McGreevy says it is more about letting go and letting be (Leo's philosophy).

Gardening speaks to a deep-seated desire to experience the real, the essential, the astonishingly possible. To garden is to gradually give up control, to fall literally to one's knees and come into closer and closer contact with the tremendous and often bewildering beauty of the living world. (McGreevy, 2000, p. 183)

Once again, we come up with an image of kneeling while gardening, suggesting perhaps the gardening life encourages optimism accompanied by faith and hope. To be with beauty, as we are in nearby nature, is a mode of being in a spiritual encounter; thus, "an awakening of real presence, [forever] not even inches away from the divine presence...Real presence is natural...you are always already within the divine embrace" (O'Donohue, 2004, p. 227). No wonder we are kneeling.

### **The Seed Carrier's "What If?"**

Beth, in her seventies, approaches life realistically. In one of our conversations about her life and gardening, she simply says, "It's a big *what if?*" Beth talks about the "what if," expressing her feelings after planting seeds. "Well, it's possible that's the way you are [optimistic] and that gardening is...[about being hopeful]" (Beth). We both relate to the excitement, the anticipation when growing from seed. We are hope-full. In the gardening world, each gardener looks at those rows of planted seeds, or the soil-less

medium indoors where each gardener plants and waters and waits, and hopes for the best. Non-gardeners can identify with this thinking. Probably all of us in our world need the excitement and anticipation of more “*What ifs.*” To have that sort of mindset requires that we be open to possibility. Sometimes that means we have to be willing to wait for possibility. “This magnolia has yet to bloom. I am so looking forward to it, it has some little buds” (Sally). Seed-carriers model patience.

Last year I planted that Wisteria and in the spring it didn’t sprout and I thought it was gone. It had some sprouts at the very bottom and two blossoms and still nothing ever happened. I guess it is not going to have the blossoms on the rest of them. So, it’s almost up to the sun now. I trust that next year it will bloom again. Last year it was gorgeous. (Selena)

Selena is content to see two blossoms. Seeing the emergence of new life gives her enough inspiration, or perhaps it is encouragement—to wait in hope until the next year. Is this stance, a balance between reality and hopefulness, a personal characteristic of a healthy ager? Being hope-full, are seed-carriers modeling spiritual aspects of the multidimensional concept, healthy aging? Robert Frost’s poem, “In Time of Cloudburst,” captures this feeling about a field for planting where hope and reality mingle.

Let the downpour roil and toil!  
The worst it can do to me  
Is carry some garden soil  
A little nearer the sea.  
Then all I need to do is run  
To the other end of the slope

And on tracts laid new to the sun,  
Begin all over to hope.  
(1969, p. 258)

What would it be like if older adults could feel hope-full and grateful each morning with newness instead of what our usual image of aging offers? The seed-carrier’s philosophy of life might be one that others could adopt. Enjoying aging as a

harvest season where patience is cultivated might make time for soul-full solitude, and subsequently, reflection. In *Anam Cara*, O'Donohue writes "A Blessing of Solitude" is where "your soul connects you intimately with the rhythm of the universe...May you realize...that you have a special destiny here" (1997, p. 125). To experience the reality of aging while fulfilling one's destiny may, indeed, be what the harvest season brings to older gardeners who have found meaning and purpose in their lives through gardening lessons.

Goldsmith (2004) writes about studying those who practice "creative aging" in difficult times and asks, "Might it not be that, as the light fades, many people discover that there is something beyond them that they had perhaps not noticed earlier, in the brightness of their day?" (p. 40). Like Selena, older adults can experience gratefulness for even two blossoms while they last and go on to carry out their destiny in new and different ways. With emphasis on the descriptor, "creative," in creative aging, the seed-carriers are also healthy agers and laudable role models.

In the following verse, Tzu (2000) challenges us and warns about lost hope and the possibility of failure that humans face in everyday life. The mixture of reality and hope is not unlike what a gardener faces. Yet, it takes on more significance in the broader context of the older person. In beginning once again to hope, seed-carriers try to improve life and simultaneously they recognize that at times you must let go.

*Longing to take hold of all beneath heaven and improve it...*

I've seen such dreams invariably fail.  
All beneath heaven is a sacred vessel,  
something beyond all improvement.  
Try to improve it and you ruin it.  
Try to hold it and you lose it.

For things sometimes lead and sometimes follow,  
sometimes sign and sometimes storm,  
sometimes strengthen and sometimes weaken,  
sometimes kill and sometimes die.  
(Tzu, 2000, p. 32)

Reflecting on the meaning in Tzu's poem and Rilke's (2000) verses in *The Possibility of Being*, I remember it is the seed-carriers who must learn how to be ready for anything as a hope-full person is, in order to appreciate the larger mysteries in life. As Sally and Paul speak of every ending opening up new possibility, I hear their awareness of the cycle of life, the transitory aspects of working with plants that "sometimes strengthen and sometimes weaken...[and] sometimes die" (Tzu, 2000, p. 32). I cannot help but acknowledge seed-carriers perform a balancing act between optimism and realism, witnessing birth and death in soil.

A doctor, a friend of mine, raises the healthiest roses I've seen...It is almost as if the scientific mind goes hand in hand with gardening. Or, maybe because doctors see and feel death and want to see something at the other end of the spectrum, I guess I should say nurture. (Beth)

Balancing endings and beginnings, as Paul and Sally are doing, might be one of the best lessons the seed-carriers can teach others. By living a life that seeks to nurture the earth and each other, seed-carriers also show us their passion for life in all its forms.

### **A Passion for the Work**

The seed-carriers are passionate about their gardens and it drifts into their way of looking at life. Levoy (1997) suggests having a passion for something not only leads us, it moves us in countless ways: "Passion is a state of love, and hunger. It is also a state of enthusiasm, which means to be possessed..." (p. 65). The seed-carriers relate their passion for gardening, and some of them definitely seek garden time almost as a mandate for survival. "Well, anyway, to me the labor of gardening is nothing, I love it" (Sally). Doing

gardening gives life to the seed carrier's routine and ignites a passion for the labor, "a labor of love" as Sally regularly says.

Jeannetta, at 74, says she is an "insatiable" gardener. She is an apartment dweller with scores of potted plants on her balcony and only grows what she can fit into the trunk of their car because of their nomadic lifestyle of volunteer teaching in the Fall and early Spring. Jeannetta refers to gardening as her "dirt fix" and goes to great lengths to get to the work, particularly since most of the year she only has her balcony garden.

But now I limit myself to what we can get in the car [for care when away]...I've kind of come to terms...with what I have available. I will come and work here for a day...I have a friend in Baltimore whose grounds I know as well as she does. When I need a dirt fix, I'll go there.[Or, to] a friend in Cooperstown, whose grounds I tended twice a year for thirteen or fourteen years...[Or,] if I'm desperate sometimes I have a friend twenty minutes away, who I'll call and say, 'I need a dirt fix and you're elected. I'm coming to work in your yard whether you're home or not.'

Selena, upon hearing the term, "dirt fix" prefers that gardening not be called an addiction, even a positive one. Instead, Selena chooses the word: call. For both of them, it is a calling *to* something. Hence, Jeannetta keeps her plant appetite in check so she can deliver her potted beauties to someone who will take care of the plants while they are away. It was not always that way. At one point, she grew over a hundred rose bushes. Most of them were test roses for a famous rose distributor because her reputation for a commitment to her plants had grown to that level. While working fulltime she made time to take fastidious care of those flowerbeds. Her friends remember she would start her garden work at 9 p.m., fully prepared by wearing a headlamp! I find the notion of "passion" intriguing. What does it mean in this circumstance?

Jeannetta speaks of gardening as that which "saves her life." I reflect on Palmer's (2000) idea of being called and I consider it in terms of "passion." As Palmer writes,

“Something that I *couldn't not do* [is] vocation at its deepest level” (p. 25). What is it like to be passionate, truly in love with gardening, as a vocation, as I think the seed-carriers are? As Leo says, the gardener needs to be

someone who spends time doing it willingly, or with enthusiasm, instead of being forced by some circumstance. ...If spending a lot of time, but hating it...maybe that person should not be defined as a real gardener.

Palmer (2000) suggests at times the calling, the vocation, is not easily explained nor understood. It is, however, from listening to our own calling that we may choose to act, thereby bringing joy to our lives and, perhaps, to others in our surroundings. “Every journey, honestly undertaken, stands a chance of taking us toward the place where our deep gladness meets the world’s deep need” (Palmer, 2000, p. 36). Leo’s journey began in adulthood, yet he has the most diverse garden, and it seems to fulfill his need.

I think I have always been more interested in the kind of gardening where you put something in the ground like seeds or bulbs, and then notice the bulk of them...that is always kind of, what is the word, pleasurable. (Leo)

For seed-carriers, their passion is to be in contact with the soil and what emerges from the work of gardening each season. Each season a gardener has an opportunity to witness change firsthand, and it makes for a familiarity with life’s changes, including aging. The lessons come with each passing of the seasons.

Time stops at the end of a season. For just a moment it stands still, suspended before everything starts to change again. ...It all happens, of course, when we’re not watching, trees turning color, children growing up, parents growing older, seasons changing, years passing. (Vanderbilt, 2003, p. 141)

How might the garden experience teach seed-carriers to be more at ease with change?

Have the seed-carriers found simple sense experiences that ready them for facing aging?

Perhaps the garden experience with its accumulated history from past lessons allows

seed-carriers to stay focused on their goals in life. They have cultivated their sense of wonder.

*In Learning to Fall*, Simmons (2002) speaks of our human capacity for wonder: “This ability to break the bonds of ordinary awareness and sense that though our lives are fleeting and transitory, we are part of something larger, eternal and unchanging” (p. 152). Sally’s husband tells her during one of my visits, “Gardening is an experience where you can be totally transported...” They speak of garden work, the cycle of plants and, yet, they are learning together to be open to what lies ahead for them. Even in everyday routine they are “thrill[ed with] each newly delivered moment” (Greene, 2004, ¶ 24).

What would it be like to grow in a relationship that is making way for the challenges of aging? Perhaps within their gardening experiences they have come to recognize how they nurture and tend to each other and, subsequently, gain the strength to face those new beginnings. Rilke (2000) writes about remaining with the questions, and standing before beginnings. Surely as Summer follows Spring, we are all faced with aging and its challenges. I wonder if perhaps we ought to think of these struggles, these challenges, as beginnings—paths toward becoming. It need not be a solo journey.

### **Enjoying a Fall Blooming Way of Life**

Is the love of gardening defining the seed-carriers’ blooming in these later seasons of life, enriching a way of being that invites them to germinate, to bud once again? I turn to Beth for a straightforward answer by asking, “Is it like other hobbies, gardening? Is it a hobby?” and she replies, “It is. Basically, it’s almost a way of life.” In the group conversation, I hear about simply accomplishing the work as a path toward enjoyment. They say gardening is a talent. They speak of those who do not garden.

They think they don't want to bother... It's nothing but work for them. (Beth)

Too much work. I think some people are gardeners, like some people are athletes. (Barbara)

Right, yeah! (Beth)

Like some people are musicians—built in. (Barbara)

Hearing their creative ways of being in the plant world, I know they are more than a passing-along-plants community who play at gardening. They are gardeners who are seed-carriers replenishing the baskets of the sowers and carrying traditions forward. I recall Selena needed ownership to feel like a gardener. “Then, I just found myself doing it.” I wonder if it is built in, and I proceed.

**A talent for perspective.** Beth clarifies the idea that “It’s your talent, so to speak [becoming a gardener].” What talent is modeled in being close to nature as a way to learn balance in our routine of life? Is developing the talent for gardening not offering us a different outlook on what is important in our lives?

To kneel in the straw-bedded pathways, to pluck lamb’s-quarters from among the kale, is a powerful form of submission. The first time I surrendered to my garden work this season, I remember thinking that none of this seemed very important, the weeding, the watering, the planting. It is such a tiny gesture, after all, to pull up a mallow or an oxalis before it gets away from you. (Klinkenborg, 2004b, ¶ 2)

Does gardening allow for a re-focusing, a re-thinking of our own life and a different perspective? Do seed-carriers model a talent for re-focusing upon what is growing right in front of us—or getting away from us? Like the other conversants who get up at first light to beat the weather, Klinkenborg comes to recognize not only how the garden pulls us into the work itself, but how the simple gesture of weeding enlivens the imagination, clears our thinking and invites new perspectives. The anecdote reminds me of Leo. “I like to see something there that I had not noticed before” (Leo). He admits to



plucking the teensiest of invasive weeds from his planted moss-like ground cover between the stones. Yet, the same day he rechecks his gardens and finds an unseen weed that is as tall as a week's neglect! How could this happen? Leo's vision has no stray weeds in the design he imagines and brings to reality. Like Rosenblatt (1998) looking at the pine tree, Leo has to look beyond his ordinary awareness to really see what is in front of him. He develops a talent for perspective.

**A talent for sharing of self and being a friend.** Like most gardeners who carry out the expression, "pass-along plants," seed-carriers share generously. "Basically, I just did [volunteering and] home gardening for probably eighteen years before [the county job with the extension service]" (Beth). To get a head start, Jeannetta pays a local gardener to start seeding the Swiss chard before the academic term begins. Once established, she gives away most of the produce and flowers they grow while in Kenya. Years ago, Jeannetta did the same with most of the roses from the 150 roses bushes. Now, unsolicited, she plants the public woodland spaces near the apartment complex. She is not alone for long...gardeners tend to gather around each other.

I was carrying a bucket and sprinkling can to the woods because it was very dry...And so out comes Ethel [80-year-old neighbor] with a one-gallon pitcher to help me...a good city block from her house down to where I was working.  
(Jeannetta)

Jeannetta and Ethel are happy taking care of the plants and are fully engaged in that practice. Gardeners often group together—sometimes without the structure of a particular social group or club.

Sally makes time for garden tours of her home and shares her knowledge with local groups at the non-profit Native Plant Society where she regularly volunteers.

It is called "Garden in the Woods."

One other person and I...spearheaded it [getting permission and retrieving rare native plants]. We got the Garden in the Woods staff to come over and give us as much help as we could get. And we dug and banked the plants for the Society [and to preserve them]. (Sally)

As is typical, she has several groups of gardener friends who support these kinds of activities and causes. She describes her favorite group:

There are four of us. We call ourselves the “4 Cs” because each of us, our last names begins with a “C”... And all four of us meet Friday once a month and we go for breakfast [early] because every one of us has a busy schedule during the day. We have a good hour and a half before anybody has to be somewhere...And we just sort of share our lives. (Sally)

Seed-carriers accumulate a history about their gardening lives and share that, too. What is it like to be in a relationship exemplified by sharing? The verb, share, intrigues me and I connect through the definition, “to divide one’s service, devotion, etc. between two different objects [or persons]” (*OED Online*). I also see it means “to participate in (an action, activity, opinion, feeling, or condition); to perform, enjoy, or suffer in common with others; to possess (a quality) which other persons or things also have” (*OED Online*). I return to Sally’s example of sharing, “As far as my friends, I think what you do is you find people that have this bond of gardening and you work from that and that can be the only part of their life that you touch” (Sally). Is this so?

Gadamer (1960/1989) explains that “An individual is never simply an individual because he is always in understanding with others” (p. 304). Gardeners usually are part of a gathering space where they “enjoy or suffer in common with others” (*OED Online*), as in the real meaning of “sharing.” In cultivating friendships and inviting others into our world, we develop our souls. Humans enrich their lives by embracing soul work. We need to develop these inner traits which connect to soul, because “soul creates, shapes and peoples our inner life” (O’Donohue, 1999, pp. 138-139). Sharing our inner life is part

of the blossoming of friendship, and sometimes the friends become soul friends along the way (O'Donohue, 1997).

In my garden club, I see friendships constituted and nurtured to last for decades. The club members chauffeur the oldest members who no longer drive or live alone and need that connection to come to the monthly gatherings. Or, some only attend social events or fund causes rather than participate in the work parties. In any case, I never cease to be amazed at the gatherings and how they share their lives with each other, in or out of the formal club setting. To illustrate this, here are some excerpts from a recent welcome poem our garden club president authored. It gives a snapshot of the seed-carriers' talents for friendship.

Have you been to a meeting lately?  
Seen old friends and new  
Walked about a garden  
Picked a flower or two?  
Put them in an arrangement  
To share with me and you  
Have you been to a meeting lately?

What to conserve  
What to throw away  
Have you been to a meeting lately?  
Worked on a craft  
Made a fancy pot  
Helped someone less able  
Arrange flowers, why not?

Sharing is good for you and me  
Have you gone on a tour,  
Seen historic sights  
Heard a speaker on  
Historic garden archaeology?  
Wondered what happens  
To the garden at night

Have you heard about the Chesapeake?  
What we can do

To help to conserve it  
It is up to me  
And it is up to you

Show that you care  
Give it whirl  
We can do anything  
We can change the world.

(M. Lee, personal communication, September 11, 2003)

The activities in the president's invitation hint at their relationality and explain how their friendship is made visible. Their sharing is a "transposing [of] themselves...putting [themselves] in someone else's shoes ...rising to a higher universality that overcomes not only our own but also that of the other" (Gadamer, 1960/1989, p. 305). The club members find ways to be reciprocal in their sharing of learning and service together.

In the seed-carriers' lives, I see parallels. On the last visit with Paul and Sally, the couple in their middle seventies, I am cognizant, perhaps for the first time, of their way of being present to each other. Like the faithful garden club membership, they commit to sharing their lives together and the relationship grows out of that promise. The place it plays out is through their sharing in the garden. They are living out interdependence where old and new experiences "are always combining into something of living value" (Gadamer, 1960/1989, p. 306).

In *The Power of Place*, Gallagher (1993) explains how humans come to know the places that affect us deeply. I identify with this, relating to nearby nature, as many of us do. Gallagher suggests the recognition of our role in the surrounding world is made up of a multitude of gathered sense experiences that originate in the places we inhabit. Since we continually interact with the places and settings that surround us, those same

experiences shape our future relationships with the Earth and prompt deeper questions about our purpose on Earth.

**A talent for teaching stewardship.** One question keeps surfacing: Do the seed-carriers have an idea about their role in teaching others about Earth and all its creatures? Sally knows a great deal about native wildflowers and maintains lists of plants she has—twelve pages worth! As a volunteer, she directs tours at the Garden in the Woods and teaches many others as part of groups who visit both her garden and the public garden. I am delighted to learn her ways of gardening, especially her way of being-in gardening, the sharing of self she exhibits so easily. Sally teaches us much more than the plant names. “I look at the garden as a thing of beauty rather than an information list” (Sally).

Of the conversants, Jeannetta is currently the only formal teacher, although Leo taught high school. Marie is teaching her daughters how to garden, and Beth, also now retired, is proud of her past occupation, training county workers about landscape and such around the state.

Yeah, they were interested enough to ask a question and so on. And it made me feel OK, we are doing some good here....And they [work crew] found they enjoyed it....I am just always so proud about the fact that [the crew] obviously was thinking about things and was curious and felt comfortable enough to ask me. I felt it showed a lot of things. (Beth)

Her volunteer work at London Town surely involves teaching the less experienced, but she does not mention it. Most of them do not mention teaching others in any direct way. Instead, they find their own niche of service.

Actually, I have never wanted to be President of anything...Just a worker bee.  
(Barbara)

Well, busy doing other things. (Staley)

Yeah, and there is a lot of work to be President of something. Some people like it but for me—that is not my cup of tea. (Barbara)

Barbara has been a member of her garden club for decades. Her flowers have decorated a local church probably at least that long. Barbara is a doer—the kind of gardener who digs up extra plants to share with everyone. Beth has done that, too, and arranges flowers.

I have a friend who is having a wedding reception for a daughter that got married. She wanted to know if we could come down a day early and help her do the flowers. Of course, that will be fun...it is very social. (Beth)

Seed-carriers and gardeners support each other. Might they model this mode of caring and stewardship to others? I eagerly listen and marvel at their talents, their outlook on life, their commitment to friendships and volunteer service. The seed-carriers are truly blooming and full of possibilities.

As the chapter comes to a close, I acknowledge the richness of the stories and reflect upon the generosity of the seed-carriers. In sharing their stories with me, they have literally and figuratively shared their ways of being in their gardens. As we walk through their special places, I fill my senses with beauty. In their relationships using landscapes, flowers and plants, seed-carriers reclaim care for self, earth and others. I am witness to a bit of self-healing, perhaps, when they place their hands on and in-to our Earth, to feel well. Connecting with nearby nature helps them feel good and they welcome this because sometimes their bodies have gotten “rusty,” says Jessie, one of my preliminary conversants who introduced me to the physicality of her gardening.

As a health professional, I wonder how we might help them continue gardening with worn body parts? With a renewed sense consciousness I learn from the seed-carriers, I feel compelled to attend to promoting the health of the larger community of beings and the earth, too. This idea fits with Casey’s (1998) suggestion in *Body and Flesh* that our

“natural world and cultural world are always already so completely assimilated with each other” (p. 209). Perhaps it helps explain how we are ill-equipped to care for ourselves unless we acknowledge the synergy of all life on the planet. Perhaps we should return to considering the I/Thou relationship (Buber, 1970) with a larger vision that includes our communities. These are some of the ideas I will address in the next chapter as I consider the contributions of the study to the research community and the world at large.

In this chapter of interpretation and bringing my conversants’ voices to light, I am present with their stories of their gardening world and being embraced. We stand together sharing our understandings about the phenomenon of gardening for older gardeners. I hear their resonant call to be seed-carriers who co-create beauty and dwell in the living art of their gardens. They courageously continue their work, strenuous work punctuated by passion and service. They put aside their bodies and enrich their souls in their sense experiences with the natural world they enjoy in full awareness. The seed-carriers are definitely blooming in the Fall of their lives. Somehow, the seed-carriers remain hopeful, nurturing the seeds of possibility encountered in the embrace.

I close this chapter with Sucher (1999), who writes about “sens[ing] a consciousness out there, a living earth spirit that appreciates our efforts and reaches out to heal us [the gardeners]” (pp. 4-5). In exploring their lived experience of gardening we have a glimpse into the world where magical healing and wonders are present with other living creatures. In the final chapter, I discuss how the insights might bring a new consciousness about our relationship with Earth, and how the seed-carriers might teach us enlightened ways of being-with others as nurturers and environmental stewards of the earth.

## CHAPTER FIVE CULTIVATING KINSHIP: GROWING THE VISION

With a sense of wonder we see revealed before us a picture of the magnificent universe, a universe whose separate parts are interconnected by the most subtle threads of kinship, forming the harmonious whole which the ancient philosophers surmised when they viewed the world with their integrating, intuitively perceptive gaze. We are part of the ecological environment and it is a part of the universe. (Spirkin, 2002, ¶ 1)

As a phenomenological researcher, I look back at this dissertation process and what has been unearthed. I begin this last chapter contemplatively, imagining I am gazing at that familiar, yet magnificent view of our home world from space. In the preceding chapters are the details within the plant-lands, showing how the seed-carriers' lives are rich with service and purpose—enlivening their spirits and nurturing them to bloom in the Fall of their lives. In this chapter, I move away from being in direct contact with the soil per se, and look at the energy of the phenomenon in terms of the bigger picture. For example, I visualize the land mass we see from space, imagining how each green or brownish area might include plant-lands of some seed-carriers. The connection brings us back to the particular question that frames this study: **What is the lived experience of gardening like for older gardeners?**

If the phenomenon of being close to nearby nature in the gardening life is where seed-carriers find meaning and hope to transcend the later seasons of their lives, what are some of the other lessons and what comes next? After all, those same plant-lands comprise the same landscapes and home-places of us all, and what has been revealed about their experiences might inform our future as participants on the planet. I am especially interested in older adults who garden, as in my phenomenological question, yet what also has shown itself is how a respect for the plant-lands and being close to the



earth—with all that such a relationship offers—are a possible homecoming for us. It can be a homecoming to re-join a community, a kinship of keepers of the earth.

We sometimes associate that famous National Aeronautical Space Agency image with having a global perspective of Earth as our home, and the environment we know best as being that orb. It also is on the cover of Tolle's (2005) bestseller, *The New Earth*, and I invite the reader to keep hold of the image with me as I partition the contents of this chapter into several areas dominated by an abundance of swirling movement and layered colors. The colors blend and mix a bit because that is what our aging is like, our continual unfolding, evolving and adapting. As humans, we must learn to flow with change, as it is as certain as the seasons that follow each other. I would like to think as Moore (1992) believes that aging makes way for our ripening; that the wisdom gathers and allows us to show our values more bravely, and authentically be more than we were.

In the first section, I relate our human connection to the land and its inhabitants—people and living creatures, including plants and trees with which we share this portion of the orb. Between the iridescent blue oceans teeming with marine life and patches of white cloud cover of ever-changing weather patterns, I fix my eyes upon the deep greens of land mass that may or may not be fertile or green at all, and I wonder about what kind of earth keepers we have become or might be. The plant-lands of the seed-carriers are not visible from space, so why take this vantage point as I move toward the end of a phenomenological study? I do this as a means to introduce my stance at the end of this work where I incorporate some of the lessons from the multiple perspectives of how we relate to the planet and each other. In our multicultural, complex society, I sense this

inclusion is necessary because ultimately, as humans, we all share the orb and its land mass.

I use the visual of the swirling movement throughout the image as a means to reflect on the state of the world community. Whether in relation to the scientific community or the neighborhoods, there is much movement as we consider the ecological perspectives in our relationships with earth's inhabitants. I return to some of the original sources of the environmental philosophical movement as a way of situating our seed-carriers and ourselves today. I expand our perspective beyond the limits of one study, and, instead, I "throw open the interpretive space" (Kavanagh, 2005, p. 69) by gathering with other disciplines, while musing about the underlying message informing policy and practice. How well do we collaborate? How can we cultivate community to support environmental stewardship? Here again, the image in the orb is swirling and shows movement in the context of this multicultural, post-modern society to which we belong.

I plan to share my insights with all who care about older adults' well-being. Older adults teach us from the wisdom of their years; older adults who garden have lessons for us about the hope and renewal they enjoy in the presence of nature. Being-with the older gardeners in their plant-lands is a special privilege, a unique peek into their gardening world, so I also offer some projects I believe might support continued blooming for older adults. There are many examples from which to choose. In "throwing open the interpretive space," metaphorically inviting the whole world into the discussion, I invite us to co-mingle the different insights of varied disciplines and, thus, find common ground for active collaboration that will make a difference.

Finally, gazing at the cloud cover that drifts high above Earth, I do some land-dreaming about what might be. From Old English, the etymology of “land” also indicates the dreaming is about “a definite portion of the earth’s surface, home (my emphasis) region of a person or a people, territory marked by political boundaries” (*Online Etymology Dictionary*, 2007), which reminds me land-dreaming involves community. Those communities are local, national and global. Borrowing Beth’s phrase “What If?” from Chapter Four, where possibility and hope “show up” thematically, I offer some thoughts about curricular aspects to consider for increasing awareness of our relationships with Earth and each other. As part of that inquiry, I ask myself about my own journey as my conversants have. I ask spiritual questions: How did I get here? What is it like to be called to act—now that the study is completed? I also outline my response to the call for additional research—based on a review of the literature that has surfaced since beginning this dissertation process. To extend the dialogue into other disciplines is to answer a call to action in the midst of the swirling movements of global warnings about climate change.

Not only are gardeners directly in touch with the earth, they also identify with the state of their surrounding environment. They have a connection of relatedness to growing old and being with the earth. I fully recognize that only bits and pieces of each gardener’s worldview are uncovered in our dialogue and sharing in their gardens, and yet, much has been unearthed that hints at how they feel as seed-carriers, and now, also earth keepers. For according to Comito (1978) a humanist scholar, “Gardening is the art of environment, and we should expect to find in a garden some evidence of its planner’s sense of how he is related to the world” (p. 25). Of this, I have little doubt. It is good to

return to the conversants who have been so forthright about being at home in their gardens and the plant-lands. Where and how our participants spend their lives tells us how each relates to the world, or, in phenomenological language, the lifeworld (Kavanagh, 2005). How they are in their home environment mirrors their relationship to the planet. As I see it, their garden represents the planet in the phenomenon of gardening. So it is that I take the lead from the keepers, the artists who are seed-carriers, and with their voices and mine, I seek to make these connections clearer, more in focus. I invite the reader to join me in a deep, cleansing breath as I step back from what has been closest to me during this exploration of older gardeners in later seasons in order to make sense of the whole and the parts of the phenomenon. I consider how new understandings might bring me to act, the ultimate purpose for phenomenology. Remembering how, during our earliest years as children, our human experience is one of spontaneity and wholeheartedness, perhaps even fearlessness, I do follow suit re-visiting the study, visioning my part of the whole and the future I am called to cultivate. I proceed with the echo of my transformative teacher's words singing to me: "Be brave [as you write this ending of a beginning]."

### **A Planetary View of our Role on Earth: All My Relations**

Often we forget that we are inter-connected to everything, the mechanics and music of life pulse and echo in [each of] us. Our life experiences layering around us like tree rings. It often takes a moment of quiet during gardening, walking or humming that allows us to think and count our rings. (Shaunna Olsen, personal communication, July 15, 1997)

As Shaunna does, my co-participants also belong to a community that is deeply committed to staying connected to the earth through their planting of it. These gardeners learn a different way of being with Earth and each other. "I see it in the couples [in the

study]; I see it through their giving, their sharing, and the ‘going out’ to other people, wanting to teach anyone who will listen, sharing their plants... [They are] generous, generous” (Collins, personal journal, January 25, 2007). The Native Americans have already figured this relatedness out, their responsibility for a reverent relationship with Earth and its creatures. In *The Singing Web*, Rain (1999) answers a question about whether clear-cutting of trees has a negative impact on the forest to which they belong: “Sure it does. All living things have consciousness (energy) and that consciousness is what makes up the great Web of Life. Interconnectedness. Relatedness. All of life is inextricably intertwined” (p. 112). Within this ecological worldview, we are all related; our actions affect others. From the etymology of kinship which I select as a starting point of reference, all of earth is at least “near of kin” (*OED Online*) with all that is interdependent on Planet Earth. Furthermore, a kinship, as “a recognized tie of relationship... [includes a] system of relationships traditionally accepted in a culture and the rights and obligations which they involve” (*OED Online*). As the reader discovers throughout the study, I see kinship and community unfold as threads in the seed-carriers’ web of life.

How do the gardeners see themselves in relation to the world and nature? The query is prompted by Kavanagh (2005), who casually asks me, “Where would your conversants place themselves in relation to their view of the world? Would they be anthropocentric or biocentric?” (Personal communication, March 5, 2005). I would have to guess most would be biocentric, that is, seeing humans as part of biological nature, not separate, nor above other life. In 1963, Carson explains:

To understand biology is to understand that all life is linked to the earth from which it came; it is to understand that the stream of life, flowing out of the dim

past into the uncertain future, is in reality a unified force, though composed of an infinite number and variety of separate lives. (1998b, p. 193)

Biocentrism suggests humans are separate but “near of kin” and not at the top of any hierarchy per se. Today, I again answer Kavanagh’s question about the conversants.

“Ecocentric. They would see themselves as part of nature, respectful of how they interact with the creatures and the elements, always aware they are not in control, nor conquerors but aiming for partnership.”

So, perhaps rather than either/or, the choice is both/and. Writing over a decade ago, Perrin moves us further into the question by asking, “Is man himself part of nature? Our remote ancestors were: They evolved without planning to. But we ourselves? Well, I think we’re partly in and partly out of nature—and the balance varies...But for the moment...we’re outside of nature” (1986, p. 15). Perrin reflects the belief that nature was coping with man’s interventions, yet there was an expectation that man could cooperate with nature while being the ruler. However, it was a different time. Our headlines did not shout, “Humans faulted for global warming” (Eilperin, 2007, ¶ 1) as agreed upon by over a hundred nations of scientists. Such scientific consensus by a United Nations-led Intergovernmental panel on Climate Change is totally new. Nonetheless, Perrin did foreshadow one mandate that deserves our attention twenty years later: we must closely examine our relationship with nature to find a better way. In my view, that mandate still exists and asks us to return to the relationship itself, and this study is one step toward finding our way into understanding that relationship and spreading the word. Gardeners like the seed-carriers in this study are in nature; they help to shape it. The journey leads us into the greenest part, the plant-lands.

## **Our Home in Plant-lands: Inside the Greenest Part of the Orb**

Home is a place that people inhabit;...both a repository and witness of one's life...Home is where a person finds identity, and one's own home is most often the place where the person and environment's identities overlap most. (Bognar, 1989, p. 189)

During this exploration, I walk the boundaries of gardens, nearby woodlands or fields of my co-participants, the seed-carriers who build their gardens as home.

Heidegger (1954/1993a) writes of "inhabit(ing)...or dwelling" and a previous understanding of "bauen" which also can mean "to cherish and protect, to preserve and care for, specifically to till the soil to cultivate the vine" (p. 349). How well do we respect this notion of care for the greenest part of the orb, the living earth, today?

The greenest part of the orb is the plant-land area, the land mass. For gardeners the greenest part is where they develop their ecological identity or what Thomashow (1995) explains is how the gardener sees herself/himself "in relation to the earth as manifested in personalities, values, actions, and sense of self" (p. 3). In these green sections of plant-lands is where the gardening in nearby nature occurs, and in this chapter, the garden is but one example of all green life on the earth. I recall, too, the saying that "Beautiful to the senses and nourishing to the soul and body, a garden was our first home" (Bamford, 2001, p. 10). So, one of the most vital parts of the orb may not actually be green, but since it is our home, I figure I might consider the land mass section as green Nature with a capital "N" since it includes all land mass circumnavigating the planet.

Movement inside the green part of the orb suggests that life exists there, that the habitat is in-habited. Plant-lands are the habitat for seed-carriers, but also plant-lands are places where we reside, a fertile dwelling-place to learn about ourselves (*OED Online*).

We consider earth our home, and the green areas of it are shared places for life on earth, and its original inhabitants we should not forget. Without a green habitat, much of the life we know would not surround us. It makes good sense that we choose practices that are care-full of land and plant life, too. In reflecting on this notion, I see I am in the swirling part of the orb. I learn of environmentalism, or “the unfolding, evolving, active development of an ecological worldview, a perspective that is at once dynamic, diverse, and radical” (Thomashow, 1995, p. 5). Gardeners already know this through their sense of place through their gardens. Others have to learn about relationship with the earth within this context. Casey (1993) urges that we be ethically “place-sensitive” and considerate of the ways of the original occupants of our home planet so that we support “co-habitancy” (p. 197). I would suggest this thinking would be considered a biocentric leaning, where we create or support conditions where relationships with both land and plant life are respected.

### **Sharing Stories of Respecting the Land and Co-Habitancy**

“Our land is more valuable than your money,” said a Northern Blackfeet chief when approached about land treaties near the northern edge of Montana and the Northwest territories (McLuhan, 1971, p. 53). Beth participates in the creation of a neighborhood buffer zone and thinks about doing more to guard against overdevelopment and loss of wildlife habitat. Jeannetta tells me their family is in favor of saving the open space on the farmland they share. They are in the process of getting an easement, or having their land in conservancy. “So the two nephews, who are never going to use it, they can still sell it for a horse farm or a little organic farm or vineyard or something like that. . . . We won’t lose it” (Jeannetta).



Earth keepers manifest their nurturing in these land-preserving initiatives at the local and state levels. Similar to the older gardeners in the study, Native Americans have a reputation for honoring Mother Earth, the life host; in particular, believing that their land is sacred and is to be respected as part of the community of life. Earth keepers follow suit, mentoring and guiding others.

Berry (2006) believes, “We cannot be truly ourselves in any adequate manner without all our companion beings throughout the earth. This larger community constitutes our greater self” (p. 83). Native people, whose narrative accounts sing of respect for land for many hundreds of years, are our earth’s first land-dreamers. As in the Native American story, the soil of the land carries the history of a community and its companion beings. For land is part of a community’s identity, as we hear when Chief Seattle speaks plainly in response to the treaty that established Indian reservations and began the displacement of his territory’s tribes and others.

Every part of this country is sacred to my people. Every hillside, every valley, every plain and grove has been hallowed by some fond memory or some sad experience of my tribe. ...The very dust under your feet responds more lovingly to our footsteps than to yours, because it is the ashes of our ancestors, and our bare feet are conscious of the sympathetic touch, for the soil is rich with the life of our kindred. (as cited in Clarke & Cortner, 2002, p. 70)

This understanding echoed in the Native American tradition surfaces in discussions of respect for the earth and its living elements. Seed-carriers know this; whereas, others have forgotten or never realized land and plants and trees have value. By their example, the seed-carriers teach stewardship and earth keeping. I listen intently.

It’s a respect for a land and a caring for the land. I have been very much involved in trying to preserve land, at the Land Trust. Last year I gave all of ten acres to the land conservation first. I didn’t give...with a conservation restriction. I get very angry at the way that land gets gobbled up by development and pavement. It almost hurts me, erasing land. (Selena)

When we walk and talk in their gardens, respectfulness for Mother Earth and her companion beings shines through in their actions and is made visible. The seed-carrier aims to save land from development and other encroachment as Beth's neighbors collaborate to set land aside as a shared community space that is protected from development. Their actions speak for the land. Respect and caring for the land is an attitude they embody because to respect means to honor. Furthermore, respect is "practical engagement and presence in the world" (Hester, McPherson, Booth & Cheney, 2002, p. 260). If we are not responsible inhabitants, how do we learn different ways of being-with? If our society is not in balance with the natural world, who might teach us how to find harmony?

Degradation by Mother Earth is not done by spirits but by humans who have ignored the original teachings. It is believed by Native American teachings that sickness, both of the mind and the body, can come from spiritual forces, and can be directed to those who are out of balance and harmony with the natural world. (Monture, 1993, p. 34)

I believe that gardeners teach the lessons of being in balance and harmony with the natural world. Could they not plant the seed of respect for the land? I am hopeful, for Thoreau said, "I do not believe that a plant will spring up where no seed has been, I have great faith in a seed...Convince me that you have a seed there, and I am prepared to expect wonders" (Burk, 1986, pp. 68-69).

Who, then, would be better than the seed-carriers, older gardeners, to share the message about respect for the land? Jeannetta, already a teacher, knows about being careful with soil and writes about it in her "scattered thoughts on gardening" email. "There is a kind of reverence involved in caring for and properly working the soil, being careful not to compact or puddle it (spoils the structure by tilling or plowing when it is

too wet).” Caring for the soil is one aspect of caring for the land, and with such lessons the older gardeners are modeling how to treat the land as precious. Their stories make the point.

Land is precious. I, of course, lament as more people need more land for parking lots and lawns that we seem to be losing. The percentage of land left to nature is diminishing. I grew up in Illinois about the time of the strip mines. But I thought, “What a horrible thing!” even as a kid of seven or eight. “Why are they doing that?” I have been against degradation of land for a long time. (Leo)

Leo experiences, in a slightly different fashion, the all too familiar “erasing of the land” that Selena describes. We use land for human purposes. However, why not ask, “Who decided how, when, where and why?” This aspect of earth keeping addresses us as a community, or a nation.

Garden columnist Raver (2005b) observes that while our country is becoming aware of efforts at preserving historic edifices, the ground that surrounds those sites or the planting material that co-exists has not yet been recognized as worthy of safeguarding. Raver reports that two organizations now exist that examine the state of historic buildings and landscapes: the National Register of Historic Places (with 80,000 properties only 1,900 are landscapes), and the Cultural Landscape Foundation. Perhaps it indicates that part of our society is re-visiting the concept of a land ethic. As one of the crusaders of early environmental thinking, Aldo Leopold would be pleased. Once again, I feel compelled to make a connection between our saving and caring for the land and the lessons brought forth through gardening. The land we speak about here is further out of reach, outside our gardens. These are the places where the land is also nearby nature—the closest, most accessible wilderness for most of us in today’s world.

## **Re-Discovering the Land Ethic**

Nollman (1994) believes the act of gardening, as a direct means of experiencing nature, offers promise for developing an ecological lifestyle through a sense of place. That sense of place develops as we involve ourselves in learning our local ecosystem. An ordinary garden is where we learn through experience to reconnect with natural processes and learn to participate in nature in ways that benefit nature and ourselves. As of late, the language surrounding “sense of place” leads us to consider our ethical responsibilities, or a returning to promote a “land ethic” and what that might look like.

“The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively, the land” (Leopold, 1949/2002, p. 196) as a complex community with interdependent members. That ethic cannot insure the land will continue to thrive in its natural state. However, there is recognition that outdated assumptions of man as controller and conqueror are no longer as widely accepted, and land is far more than property for our use. During an interview with *Parabola* editors, Berry (1999) speaks to the anthropocentric view about how humans must proceed in our relationship with the natural world:

Nature could tell us, “You used me. I’m not here to be used, primarily; I’m here to bestow blessedness, to bestow beauty, to bestow joy and healing, to communicate a sense of the divine. ...I will serve you, I will heal you, I will shelter you, I will feed you, but don’t approach me simply from the standpoint of use. (p. 31)

Having a land ethic implies the understanding that human beings are part of a biotic community where each part is valued. To put this in a time context, Leopold introduces the concept of a land ethic during the post World War II era when my conversants were young adults. They enjoyed outdoor recreating and vacationed by

visiting funded national parks with visitor centers. Post-war gardens faded away as abundance loomed large. Did the appreciation for land in its natural state persist in the seed-carriers alone? What do the stories tell us about disrespect? For years, Jeannetta regularly treats an oak tree used for target practice. She is doing her best to save it.

Terrible, but then we're doing a lot of horrible things. And it is people with more conscience. Developers—they don't think beyond the almighty dollar and of what they're going to get as a result of what they're putting in. I do not think it is because they don't care. It is just that it doesn't occur to them that if land keeps getting gobbled up like this, there soon won't be any open space. (Selena)

Might our culture return to consider enacting a land ethic? Who might teach this value? If, as some suggest, we are undergoing a culture change in our perspective of earth (Tolle, 2005), how should we structure our musing about valuing Earth? I choose to think of the change in terms of Broome and Selznick's 1968 definition of a cultural value: "a widely held belief or sentiment that some activities, relationships, feelings or goals are important to the community's identity or well-being" (as cited in Palmore, 1990, p. 72). I would surmise that most earth keepers, farmers and gardeners, find their identity intertwined with the health of the land and its co-habitants. Jeannetta suggests it is "A true affiliation with plants, the plants that you handle, trees that you just admire and respect." She feels an ethical responsibility for their well-being, and that guardianship extends beyond land alone.

I mean that oak tree on that farm; I respect that big old baby. That's the granddaddy and I can't stand it that there's this terrible problem. ...And so some of the roots are out and uncovered and if you damage the root, the branch fed by that root will die. So, a long time back, my father essentially farmed with a teaspoon, so carefully...So protective of all the growing things. (Jeannetta)

Through the seed-carriers' stories, we learn of their protectiveness, their guardianship, their identification with the earth's well-being as "near of kin." My

gardener conversants express concern over the use of insecticides and pesticides, aware of overuse and seepage through the soil to the water beneath. Most of them go organic. In other words, they primarily use organic products, biologic agents, composting or hand-work to avoiding harming the whole ecosystem. Their stories imply a more inclusive understanding of land as part of a world community we share, a kinship with the planet. As earth keepers, plant-lands are of value in the Leopold way, in spite of earth keepers not being familiar with the language embedded in the ecological “land ethic.” In re-discovering a “land ethic” perspective, recognizing it is increasingly being supported in our culture, we can redraw the map and “enlarge the boundaries” of the community as Leopold recommends. This is significant because if more of us come to understand trees, water and land as home for living things that need protection, it makes an opening for us to act on our ethical responsibilities toward the planet.

### **Developing Courage for Stewardship with or without Ownership**

To own a bit of ground, to scratch it with a hoe, to plant seeds, and watch their renewal of life—this is the commonest delight of the race, the most satisfactory thing a man can do. (Warner, as cited in *Little Books of Quotations: Garden Lovers*, 1999, not paginated)

I suggest owning is not as vital as feeling satisfied with the process of doing gardening. From Middle Low German, to own is “to have and to hold as one’s own; to have belonging to one, be the proprietor of, to possess” (*OED Online*). Jeannetta likes the concept of earth keeper. Although “realtor types” approach her every few months, her siblings have begun the process of setting aside 33 acres of farmland as open space. It is the last piece of open land in the whole area that was farmland. Perhaps it is especially meaningful in that they live in a rented apartment, but it still fits because from Old English, the verb “to keep” has affinity with “to hold” (*OED Online*). Jeannetta holds all

gardens she becomes guardian of, no matter where or owned by whom. She holds them close and cares about those gardens even when she is away. When planning for Kenya, she remembers, “bare places, water bans at the end of dry times.” In Africa, one has to think about such things.

What can I plant next? Even the damned up springs on campus, they were about dried up when we left...essentially dry. So, I have to be sensible about what I am going to water. Because I am going to water the Swiss chard no matter what I have to do to accomplish that. ...I am always looking to see what I could plant over there that is really drought hardy. I don't like that bare place out there. (Jeannetta)

Jeannetta is an earth keeper, protecting land for others. As Selena has established land trusts, Jeannetta is acting as protector in the sense of guarding water for produce to share. Jeannetta clearly is not an owner. Ownership is just not a crucial aspect of it if she has permission to be a guardian. In occasions where land and living things are not cherished, seed-carriers do not understand such care-lessness. Caring for plant-lands and protecting them brings purpose and meaning to their lives. Their voices become strident, inspiring us to listen. We should listen. As one of my preliminary conversants asks,

If you've got this land around why aren't you making the best of it? Why aren't you loving it and why aren't you making it as beautiful as possible. (Jessie)

Through the powers of being in place, humans feel rooted, that they belong, and thus, develop the courage to act in ways that bring meaning to their lives (Tilley, 1994). Jessie speaks out about her frustration and acts on it by clearing out the litter that finds its way to their community byway. As one of the neighborhood residents, Jessie feels a responsibility to maintain the roadside.

At the wooded entrance to the community, people feel free to chuck things out of the car window. What did they learn at their mother's knee? Nothing! I mean I don't understand how anybody can throw garbage out of a car window and feel right about doing it. I mean they don't think, do they? (Jessie)

Jessie and her friends pick up “cans and bottles and things like that” without even thinking about stewardship in the neighborhood or their role as volunteers at the woodland garden. I doubt she considers herself embodying stewardship. However, she and the other earth keepers are being guardians of places, protecting them from harm. Furthermore, do persons become responsible for a place through their actions of stewardship, or is it appointed, like guardianship? Also, is being in place similar to owning a place? Selena’s gardening life seems to have started once she owned a piece of property. I wonder about owning land and how that aspect shapes our thinking about a place. Or is it having the freedom to interact with a plot of land that empowers and makes it our “own?” It does not seem to concern the seed carriers when they do not own the land; it is about the relationship. How might we carry this beyond our gardens as the seed-carriers do?

Sucher (1999) speaks of gardens becoming our own as we come to know them: “Once we have brought them forth, deep and intimate bonds develop between the maker and the garden” (pp. 2-3). Jeannetta is not content with her balcony of plants, her adoption of the woodlands starts innocently and no neighbors seem to mind her loving the woodland.

Oh yeah, and see? I keep clearing a little more each time – the ground covers move. And in the woods, (which I’ll show you maybe on a dry day), I’m just making it like a park. I’m pulling the weeds that have gotten a start there, pulling dead branches off the trees and stuff like that. (Jeannetta)

Enamored with the idea of saving land, the seed-carriers continue plans that reach beyond the tasks of tending and keeping. The Lakota teaching says the pull to nature is strengthened as a person ages. The seed-carriers are setting the example for cultivating a



community of earth keepers. These Keepers of the Earth nurture the wilder places as extensions of their gardens to protect them and teach others about being transformed by beauty. Advocating these actions honors the ideas about the power of place and the magic settings where we have experienced our natural world.

Sally takes her energy to another level with the “Garden in the Woods” where she is a dedicated volunteer. She has no ownership there, only membership. Yet, she feels a part of the stewardship that sustains their efforts to preserve native wildflowers. So, is formal ownership a necessary requirement for stewardship of the planet? I think not when I look firsthand at examples in cities like Philadelphia and New York and read about other initiatives. Apparently, in the community gardens in Philadelphia, the urbanites who plant them feel pride in what they have done to contribute to the transformation from the plain, vacant lots to flourishing gardens of activity. Nor do the support organizations note any less commitment from the participants who are not formally “owners” of the land entrusted to them as part of a “greening” grant.

Moore (1992) warns, “If we do not feel any general sense of proprietorship toward the earth, then we can think that it is someone else’s responsibility to keep the oceans clean and the air free of poison” (p. 191). Instead, we must re-examine our values as a community to alter this expectation as nations, cities, neighborhoods who share responsibility in what surrounds us. How can we strengthen our resolve? Where is the history of U.S. commitment to take responsibility?

I find myself back in the library stacks reading classic environmental texts. I find Supreme Court Justice William Douglas’ efforts in environmental law and believe they deserve mention as a backdrop to this brief historical discussion delineating how

environmental issues relate to this study and its participants. Douglas' work supporting minority rights and civil liberties is well-known, yet I discover a 1954 initiative where Douglas was instrumental in preserving a personal landmark from my college days in the nation's capital, the 189-mile Chesapeake and Ohio Canal. The entire trail is a national historic park, now dedicated to him. I am grateful. However, I am most struck by his argument in the 1972 *Sierra Club v. Morton* case that proposed safeguarding and conserving natural resources to keep an ecological balance. In the back of my mind, I identify parallels with the way keepers of the earth are stewards well beyond their gardens in Douglas' (1972) brief:

Inanimate objects are sometimes parties in litigation. A ship has a legal personality,... An ordinary corporation is a "person" for purposes of the adjudicatory process, whether it represents proprietary, spiritual, aesthetic, or charitable causes. So it should be as respects valleys, alpine meadows, rivers, lakes, estuaries, beaches, ridges, groves of trees, swampland, or even air that feels the destructive pressures of modern technology and modern life. The river, for example, is the living symbol of all the life it sustains or nourishes—fish,...and all other animals, including man, who are dependent on it or who enjoy it for its sight, its sound, or its life. The river as plaintiff speaks for the ecological unit of life that is part of it. Those people who have a meaningful relation to that body of water—whether it be a fisherman, a canoeist, a zoologist, or a logger—must be able to speak for the values which the river represents and which are threatened with destruction. (as cited in Clarke & Cortner, 2002, p. 267)

Acknowledging how this takes Aldo Leopold's work further, Clarke and Cortner (2002) conclude that this perspective speaks to an ethics of land, and that the stilled voices of natural places and creatures should be heard before the wonders of everyday and glorious nature are gone. This is our challenge.

### **Mapping the Swirling Aspects of the Community of Earth Keepers**

A human being is part of the whole, called by us "Universe,"...[We] experience [ourselves], [our] thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest—a kind of optical illusion of [our] consciousness. ...Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by [striving to] widen our circle of compassion to

embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty. (Einstein, as cited in Wholey, 1997, not paginated)

Gazing back at the earth, I ask what the swirling might represent. Is it an optical illusion? Not being certain, let us say the swirling aspect implies movement within the sphere, that beautiful orb we view. It is unsettling to write about. Perhaps this is because, like the motion seen in the swirling of the view from out in the universe, that part of the earth keeper world community is still experiencing constant motion. The situation suits hermeneutic phenomenology because “Hermeneutics is the play of the between, never to be settled because this play is always already running ahead of us...There is always a surplus of meaning” (J. Diekelmann, personal communication, February 16, 2005).

Who are the persons who make up the community of earth keepers? To begin to answer, like the earth keepers, I must look beyond the gardening experience to consider a more holistic view. It has me musing again about Douglas’ poetic rendition of the persons a river might represent. I respond by reading Bell’s (2004) *An Invitation to Environmental Sociology* where the rights and beauty of nature lead into a discussion of environmental justice. I cannot help but wonder about the community of earth keepers caught up in the swirling of different ideas about how to save, protect and preserve land that connects us to earth’s wildness and its creatures. Then, I wonder about other unheard voices of the public and governmental institutions that belong to the community of earth keepers, too. I figure this would include the naturalist, the conservationist and the park rangers, to name a few...and I ponder about what they might bring forward. What are the shared territories of the professions like these? They are persons who share a love of the natural world and explore it for various, quite different reasons. Yet, I believe they each wish to save aspects of the natural world for others to learn that love and experience its

life-enhancing wonder. We need to seek out common ground. Community gardens, while not a part of this study, are worthy of study because they take us beyond gardening. As Gannon (2005) explains in *Urban Impact 2001* (linked to The Pennsylvania Horticultural Society online newsletter), “A community garden can be a gathering place for neighbors... [where] residents become empowered...Ultimately the garden becomes a catalyst for change, improving a neighborhood’s quality of life” (p. 5, ¶ 1). It is as if we return to a discussion of the relationship of part to whole as in *I and Thou* (Buber, 1958) where acknowledging a tree leads to becoming affiliated and in community with the tree. In this example, the tree stands for the green world that may be our source of rootedness and common ground to dialogue about environmental issues and earth keeping.

### **Seeing Public Gardens and Parks as Nearby Nature to Keep**

A vocal participant of the early environmental movement, John Muir is credited with heralding the creation and subsequent preservation of national parks as a conservationist. Muir fought to protect Yosemite from developers before the National Park Service was founded in 1916. He applauds

The making of gardens and parks [that] goes on...all over the world...They increase both in size and number as their value is recognized. ...[and there is] growing interest in the care and preservation of forests and wild places in general, and in the half wild parks and gardens of towns. (Muir, 1901/2000, pp. 102-3)

The fate of the national parks and forests is a political issue; however, it deserves mention in this study of earth keepers precisely because it is a place of “swirling” and subsequent turbulence around the globe. Although this section heading is about promoting “nearby nature,” the increasing need *for* nearby nature is precisely because many of the wild places are either disappearing or inaccessible for thousands.

The cover of the October 2006 issue of National Geographic reads, “Places we must save: World parks at risk.” The entire issue is devoted to the subject. The stories about saving land are not only local, or national, but global ones. The discourse is worldwide and what follows impacts the entire planet. How is this so? I turn to a scientist’s analysis. Mitchell’s (2006) interview with biologist George Schaller is titled, “Parks: Where the spirit soars” (p. 33) and showcases parks and preserves as gene pools for animals and plants that face extinction, vital to historical record-keeping in our world, and invaluable tools for tracking change, “so people can see the splendor of their past, before land was degraded” (p. 34). From the perspective of land for human use, the piece also reminds us that globally such places produce critical foodstuffs and medical ingredients. All of us need take note. Schaller closes with:

It is tremendously worrisome that we don’t talk about nature anymore. We talk about natural resources as if everything had a price tag. You can’t buy spiritual values at a shopping mall. The things that uplift the spirit—an old growth forest, a clear river, the flight of a golden eagle, the howl of a wolf, space and quiet without motors—are intangibles. These are the values that people do look for and that everyone needs. (as cited in Mitchell, 2006, p. 39)

How will others learn to love the natural world if piece after piece is lost? Where will additional keepers of the earth come from if we are to develop and nurture that vision of community? It comes back to what we, as a society, choose to value. As seen in this study, the natural world offers its own reward, as Muir (1901/2000) writes well over a century ago in *A Voice in the Wilderness*:

The tendency, nowadays to wander in wildernesses is delightful to see. Thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilized people are beginning to find out that going to the mountains is going home; that wildness is a necessity; and that mountain parks and reservations are useful not only as fountains of timber and irrigating rivers, but as fountains of life. (p. 102)

Wild nature is not as accessible for most of us as we would wish. Many individuals may not be able to afford travel to the shrinking places of wild nature we have come to take for granted. We need to return to the examples of accessible nearby nature instead. A variety of national areas and public spaces meet the qualifications for nearby nature. The places of nearby nature are an intersection of garden and parkland that everyone can own and enjoy.

Some organizations have major impact as earth keepers saving wild and accessible nature. The motto and vision of the National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA) announces its intent on its website. The agency's president, Kiernan, explains, "We believe that America's National Parks and historical sites embody the American spirit. They are windows to our past, homes to some of our rarest plants and animal species, and places where every American can go to find inspiration, peace, and open space" (2006, "About NPCA: Protecting parks for more than 80 years"). Nearby nature in parks and public gardens also offer an alternative to those who can no longer garden or who choose not to garden for other reasons. The main point is that such places become welcome substitutes for those who cannot travel to real wildness.

Looking again at these issues from a national perspective, the good news is that many volunteers accomplish significant work either maintaining or rehabilitating gardens, under funded parks and trails. The volunteers come from all age groups and types of organizations: public, non-profit, private or a combination. One example is the 50-year-old Student Conservation Association that sends undergraduate or graduate students on 3-12 month deployments where they partner with state and federal agencies (Zezima, 2006, ¶ 4). Another example at middle-age and younger, I witness many

individuals (like my pre-conversants and fellow garden club members) doing continued service as educators, master gardeners, and docents for historical gardens, natural landmarks and trails. Some volunteers, like Sally, support plant societies preserving heirloom and endangered plants. This must be encouraged because of the requirements of plant biodiversity. Also it allows for specialty areas and favorite plant societies to flourish.

I recall Jessie's and my other conversants' many contributions to several of these organizations over many years. As with many of us, Jessie would sometimes prefer to have the fairies make dinner so she could continue being outside. For Jessie and others, London Town and these other sites represent an intersection of garden and parkland that is a magical place co-created by committed volunteers.

Visitors to London Town say it's such a natural-looking garden, nothing is contrived there. It looks like Mother Nature has done an absolutely spectacular job of all these flowering trees that appear as you turn 'round a corner. It's a woodland garden, you see, and that's an absolutely enchanted place, is a woodland garden. (Jessie)

Jessie's story carries forward from conversations early in my dissertation journey and although from a preliminary conversant, Jessie's story enriches our understanding of how magical such places can be. These are soul-filling places that uplift the spirit. She is the "enchanted person [who can]...give expression to the voice heard in nature and deep within the heart" (Moore, 1996, p. 382). We only need to hear that story to recognize how service changes her way of being. We realize the magical quality, the gladdening of the heart, is not dependent upon a garden—but it often is associated with joy through the very activities earth keepers choose.

“When you serve, you see life as a whole. From the perspective of service we are all connected. The impulse to serve emerges naturally and inevitably from this way of seeing” (Remen, 1997, p. 225). Volunteering is a crucial aspect of the gardening life, as it is for other activities important to older adults. Lavin explains, “The act of service pulls us out of ourselves, generates in us the power of charity and love, and perhaps most important of all, makes us feel good about ourselves” (1993, not paginated). One study of the long term impact of volunteering on older persons’ physical and well-being (using a life satisfaction and perceived health scale for persons over age 60) shows that high rates of volunteering translate into positives in terms of perceived health and life satisfaction (Van Willigen, 2000, S308). This in-depth qualitative study adds to that work and contributes to a fuller understanding of the well-being of garden volunteers.

### **Cultivating Community: Coming Full Circle**

The circle, or ecosphere as it has become to be called maintains a delicate balance of life, in which all elements are connected. (Clarke & Cortner, 2002, p. 260)

Immersed in the circular pattern of the study, I identify with the universal experience of belonging with the earth keepers, of being “in community” as I proceed. Interacting with plants and trees in nature, I would suggest, invites us to enter into a community of believers, represented here as the Earth Keepers. Earth keepers spend much of their time in nearby nature, and in the doing of gardening. They belong to a community that they create. The kinship expands.

We realize that our community is not limited to just our family, friends, colleagues...it is a community of all living things. (Sorin, 2004, pp. 10-11)

How might the circle of community be cultivated through this study? The co-participants teach us. The larger world is their community, or more accurately, the



universe is their community. Gardeners of all ages belong to the Earth and the universe at several levels and the relationship sustains them as they trade wisdom about co-existing with all living things, even non-animate things. We learn gardeners evoke a welcoming sense, this ease with others, this instant blending that promotes community. Thus, gardeners might share with us how to go about co-creating community in our “fractured world” (Thompson & O’Dea, 2005, p. 11). A fractured world is in need of social healing—among other needs. Furthermore, earth keepers also might use their rituals and practices surrounding nature and conservation efforts much as gardeners do. Anyone may enter the community and learn from each other.

There are important stories of progress to share. At the beginning of the 1970s, biologist Barry Commoner is named the “Paul Revere of Ecology” by *Time Magazine*, following the publication of *The Closing Circle: Nature, Man, and Technology* (2002). Commoner writes optimistically about the environmental crisis that came about from

social mismanagement of the world’s resources; it can be resolved and man can survive in a humane condition when the social organization of man is brought into harmony with the ecosphere. ...[Nature’s lesson is] that nothing can survive on the planet unless it is a cooperative part of the larger, global whole. (p. 264)

Commoner believes “Human beings have broken out of the circle of life” (p. 264) by our efforts to control, that is, “conquer” nature...rather than learning “how to restore to nature the wealth that we borrow from it” (p. 264). It is up to us to change our perspective and cultivate the community of earth keepers. Moore (1996) introduces the concept of enchantment to inspire collaboration. I think it depicts swirling, too, as politics and science have rarely mixed.

The artist works with the scientist, the politician with the priest. A philosophy of enchantment assumes that political strife and street crime result from an anxious loss of home and homeland, or a drying up of the imagination and the spirit that

offers hope. Enchantment inspires deep and unconditional compassion, while disenchantment blinds a person to all but superficial notions of community. (Moore, 1996, p. 381)

If we are to consider a philosophy of enchantment for its message of deep and unconditional passion that cultivates community, then we might look to gardeners to participate and recruit others. Potentially, in the U.S. at least, membership would come from the 83% of all U.S. households (approximately 91 million households) who reported doing some form of gardening, according to a 2005 market research survey by the National Gardening Association. The number of participant households in lawn and garden activities was nine million greater than the previous five-year average (Garden Market Research, 2007, ¶ 1).

### **Speaking and Listening to Health Professionals and Social Scientists**

Ecopsychology holds that there is a synergistic interplay between planetary and personal well-being, [with synergy's] contemporary ecological translation...be[ing] the needs of the planet are the needs of the person, the rights of the person are the needs of the planet. (Roszak, 1992, p. 321)

Having used the image of the orb as the earth among other planets, in this section I wish to address the health professionals and social scientists who might benefit from listening to this story of the earth keepers. The number of gardeners continues to grow, and thus, the health community needs to understand gardening and interaction or viewing nearby nature's benefits to soul, spirit and body. As a health community, we certainly wish to assist this population in promoting their health. With gardening as one of the leisure-time physical activities (LTPA) gaining in popularity, certainly gardening and any appropriate physical activity performed regularly by older adults must be encouraged as part of healthy aging. In fact, maintaining any level of physical activity continues to hold much promise for improved health outcomes. With regard to walkers and runners, much

has been studied. It follows that health professionals could endorse the use of another popular physical activity as preventive health. It seems to make good sense because increased physical activity in young and middle-aged persons did improve psychological well-being (Brown, 1992, p. 185).

Is psychological well-being enhanced with physical activity (whether for leisure or not) in older adults? In an overview of the physical activity and aging research linking psychological well-being to physical activity in older adults, Brown says it is inconclusive, that there is only an association between physical activity and mental well-being, and experimental studies might clarify the conundrum. I am not willing to make the same conclusion. This study's message is that gardening and being in contact with the soil can be understood as a preventive measure in promoting health. A recent study conducted with 100 adults in a British lab found "green exercise," or exercises with a view of nature did have positive effects on mental and physical health as recorded by blood pressure measurements, self-esteem, and mood scales (Pretty, Peacock, Sellens & Griffin, 2005, p. 334). While Pretty et al. primarily looked at effects of passive exposure; the researchers also reported that the difference between rural and urban "green" scenes was not significant. As research continues to accumulate, health professionals should consider supporting the gardeners' wish to stay involved in touching the soil in some fashion. As the gardeners get older, they will need support and encouragement from outside their own circle to keep interacting with plants and the soil.

When we are at home in the garden, tending and nurturing all its plants, animals and minerals, living with them through all the seasons and days, then healing comes upon us like a gift and makes us whole. (Bamford, 1995, p. 16)

At a conference where I presented some initial interpretations of my research, a middle-aged nurse asks me about healing aspects of the gardening phenomenon: “Do you think the aging person is broken? You talk about them becoming whole...” I wonder what the role of the nurse is in such a situation. What assumptions do we make about aging? Each semester I make a point of opening up the discussion about students’ perceptions about spending time with older adults in the community settings we frequent. Always there are surprises and issues fruitful to share. I would love to delve deeper in this area as ageism seems to persist in many arenas. The phenomenological questions persist in the forefront of my mind and seem important to pursue.

What assumptions do we make about what older adults prefer to have in their surrounding environment and their living arrangements? A recent *American Association of Retired Persons Bulletin* tells of residents in one San Francisco nursing home where 80% of the residents wished to live on their own—and could afford to—with assistance (Basler, 2007, p. 30). Such stories suggest we have work to do in re-envisioning environments where older adults might thrive. I would expect having nearby nature would be a factor to explore. Kaplan (2007) reports this kind of research is underway (R. Kaplan, personal communication, February 24, 2007) and available for referencing.

### **Enriching Soul and Spirit through Re-Connecting with Nearby Nature**

How are older adults’ souls and spirits nourished? Theorists might say this brings us to the theoretical realm of “gerotranscendence,” which Tornstam (1999) suggests is the advanced phase of older adults achieving maturity and wisdom. “The gerotranscendent individual experiences a new feeling of cosmic communion with the spirit of the universe, a redefinition of time, space, life, and death, and a redefinition of

the self. (1999, ¶ 8). It does seem that as we age our priorities change and our values may shift. Braam, Bramsen, van Tilberg, van der Ploeg and Deeg (2006) found that older adults in their Netherlands study do ask the existential questions all humans ask. These questions lead us to reflect upon our life and its meaning and purpose in the world. The earth keepers seem grounded and at peace. Their serenity pervades their being. I expect they are entering gerotranscendence.

Is nearby nature in gardening representative of connecting with the Other? In a study of children's spirituality, Hyde (2005) uses hermeneutic phenomenology as a means of "entering the realm of mystery" (p. 31) discovered through the interpretive process using van Manen's lifeworld existentials as a compass. Similarly, this study offers insight into the meaning of the gardening experience for older gardeners in suggesting the importance of the spiritual dimension to the earth keepers. Additionally, mystery is present in the world of the garden and nature at large. In Hyde's (2005) study, as in this one, sometimes the experience of being present with the sacred, a feeling of connection to something beyond, or however it is expressed, remains unspoken, perhaps undescribed because ordinary language does not suffice. Through the senses, however, the encounters are so real that Jeannetta, for example, shares her passion to get her hands into the dirt and thus, to be at peace with her world. The longing is also described in O'Donohue's (2004) treatise on beauty.

I relate the realm of mystery in gardening to Dienske's (1983) study on the experience of the ineffable. Dienske explains how the inexpressible (that which is beyond words) can only exist in the presence of the expressible yet would be a part of everyday

life—as gardening would be for the earth keepers. The example Dienske offers is one of a leaf being crumbled and how that simple action engages four of the five senses:

This kind of physical knowledge...silently present on the background as long as our attention is not fixed on it, can never be fully make explicit because at the same time we are always submerged in our body and cannot dissociate ourselves from it completely. (1983, p. 4)

Dienske continues by connecting the experience of wholeness with experiences of participatory knowing. “It is a way of knowing which apparently has a healing influence...[and is] restful” (p. 13) because it is a healing way of knowing—a participatory way of knowing whereby person and world become closer. In our culture, we have yet to appreciate that earth keepers possess wisdom such as this participatory knowing. Still, I am heartened that becoming older may also bring this knowing that is beyond words. It is another reason to follow the example of other cultures who revere their elders for their wisdom.

Nelson (1986) puts honoring of elders in the context of the natural environment. On most occasions, as a participant, we are on the receiving end of the enrichment rather than the other way around, particularly in the case of elders. Nelson adds, “I have heard the elders say that everything in nature has its own spirit and possesses a power beyond ours...” (p. 130). The elders have much to teach us. In the horizon of the present they hold our past and future when we consider the environmental challenges we encounter. “There are vital lessons [to learn in] the light of wisdom taken from the earth and shaped by generations of elders” (Nelson, 1986, p. 130). Gadamer (1960/1989) reminds us to challenge our pre-conceptions to move toward understanding.

Understanding...is always the fusion of [historical and present] horizons supposedly existing by themselves. ...For there old and new are always combining

into something of living value, without either being explicitly foregrounded from the other. (p. 306)

I choose to work with older adults as a community health professional; however, that is sometimes not the case for the nursing students and so we work at finding meaning in this alternate choice of populations, the elderly client in community. It helps to share with students on the first day that listening to older adults is more than merely hearing personal narratives. It is a reaching out toward understanding. Something is exchanged when persons sit together and converse. The students quickly learn this lesson.

Subsequently, in student journals or our small group discussions, we begin to explore some of the assumptions and foreground about caring for the elderly client. Greene (1978) would call this exploring “the moral life [through]...reflectiveness and care, a life of the kind of wide-awakeness associated with full attention to life” (p. 152). Greene uses particular works of art and the humanities in her teaching to foster this attitude. I try to follow that example by opening up the history of environmental health hazards and healthcare worker protection through a movie, *Silkwood*, which speaks to concerns about those topics through one woman’s powerful story. As Greene would say, we search for meaning.

Thus, we learn to question some of our pre-conceived notions about others’ way of being—whether old or young, gardener or not. Often we are surprised by what we learn. Is this not a swirling of sorts? As one listens attentively to another, a fusion of horizons can lead to a fuller understanding of another person and the situations they encounter. One recent idea I would like to explore is having students be present to older adults in the community by using current computer and video technology that might bring these two generations together. Already online entities such as iVillage

(<http://nature.gardenweb.com/forums/sustain/>) exist and are part of a developing presence on the World Wide Web. These interactive websites invite gardeners and other individuals to get involved in learning about sustainable environments and could serve as forums for introducing discussion and sharing across generations. One more idea to explore is to interact with the community high-rise residents in our clinical setting through the work they undertake in their individual garden plots.

### **Clouds in the Sky: Journeying into the Vision with Earth Keepers**

In a poetic essay about the light across the sky and the magnificence of Yosemite's mountains after a two-day intense storm. Muir (1872/1997) writes:

Visions like these do not remain with us as mere maps and pictures—flat shadows cast upon our minds, to brighten, at times, when touched by association or will, and fade again from our views, like landscapes in the gloaming. They saturate every fibre (sic) of the body and soul, dwelling in us and with us, like holy spirits, through all of our after-deaths and after-lives. (pp. 591)

In this study, the conversants share where and how they are in nature through gardening, and, as Muir describes, the visions saturate body and soul. With all these voices in mind, I begin to consider the clouds in the sky above the orb. I enter the land-dreaming aspect, the vision-making with Earth Keepers.

We bring to bear our previous life experiences, our memories of childhood and travel, our family relations, our reading, our dreams and aspirations, our moral standards and character flaws, our sensuality and grandiosity and spirituality. (Sucher, 1999, p. 7)

Interacting with plants and trees shapes the conversants' lives, similarly to the lives of those whose written narratives reflect a similar passion for nature and land. Plant-lands, trees and forests, and gardens are intimate parts of our life journey alongside the living creatures and plants who are our partners in nature. I delight in accompanying the conversants while on my own exploration through the dissertation. I see that my life



landscape, too, is re-shaping during the passing years immersed in the study. Casey (1993) writes that to be in place frees us to move between places and proceed on our journeys in life.

Being-in-place brings with it actualities and virtualities of motion that have little if anything to do with speed and everything to do with exploration and inhabitation, with depth instead of distance, horizon rather than border, arc and not perimeter. Therefore, just as places make journeys possible...places themselves engender and encourage journeys in their midst. (Casey, 1993, p. 289)

When I think about it, our gardens are a source of journeying for us, where we experience being-in-place and the depth of which Casey speaks. During our gardening lives, our gardens serve many roles. They can be places that are peaceful (as in homesteads), places of reconnecting (as in homecoming) or, places to remember celebration or loss. The act of gardening is to be close to the earth and, in that touching, we answer a call of the land by being in relationship with Earth as we gain strength. Contact with the soil, sitting on bare ground, going barefoot, these are known ways to be close to the mothering power of the earth host reflected in Native American culture. For Lakota, “To sit or lie upon the ground is to be able to think more deeply and to feel more keenly,...and come closer in kinship to other lives around [oneself]” (McLuhan, 1994, p. 6).

As humans, we are all journeying, engaged in sense-making about our lives. I recognize my conversants are at home in the myriad of places they garden and find meaning. In gardening, they are implaced in habitats where they feel at ease and, at least near of kin to other lives around them. For me, my journey signifies I am homeward bound to finding my self and my future in nursing and human science research. Through reflection, the pieces of my story come together and I make deeper connections in this

dissertation about the message of relating to the earth and each other more thoughtfully and with care.

We are in relationship with the rest of the planet, and that connectedness tells us we must reconsider the way we see ourselves and the rest of nature. A change is required of us...Caretaking is the utmost spiritual and physical responsibility of our time, and perhaps that stewardship is finally our place in the web of life, our work, the solution to the mystery of what we are. (Hogan, 1995, p. 115)

Hogan urges us to change. My beginnings are returning to surface in the ending of the dissertation as I come full circle as researcher and educator.

### **Understanding Metamorphosis and Transformation**

In this part of the chapter, I attend to the fact that in this kind of re-search, re-vision draws me, the phenomenological researcher, into an open field where the writing process unfolds and becomes ground for thinking about policy and practice issues.

Exploring the phenomenon during this particular season of responding to the call, I ask, “Where does the pro-active, inquisitive and open mind-set of human science research situate itself?” How best do I enable the voicing of older persons who garden in these plant-lands and the stories and lessons that can speak to gerontology, ecopsychology, ecology, nursing and health? I choose just a few from a potential list I have begun to develop, fully cognizant that there are more audiences I will reach.

Knowing ultimately, that human science research calls us to take our new understandings and consider policy implications of the work, I begin in earnest here. Where to start, as who will be listening to begin with? What is the language of public policy in the human science areas? Where are the answers we might find together in our collaboration? Oskamp (1997) offers one intention for social research, as “for conceptualization or enlightenment” (p. 313), and I grab hold and dig into what I aim to

do. How about collaborating with listeners to be “thinking about policy issues [brought out]...and [unvoiced] agendas, sensitizing [others and] officials to new [possibilities], or re-defining...” (p. 313). Once again, through hermeneutic phenomenology, I am returning to language. Useful public policyspeak, I say silently, agreeing that the process of enlightenment unfolds as understanding accumulates from voices and interpretive sources co-mingled within the re-search. In particular, sharing the language of the discourse with other disciplines would be fruitful work. I see the concept of “nearby nature” in such light and feel ready to bring my own story to voice.

I finally know I am “in place” as Tilley (1994) explains it, and the “Aha” moment came recently. In the context of my writing and rewriting, the very act of re-visioning the study leads me back into my own story and illuminates how I came to be fascinated with older gardeners’ lives. My autobiographical renderings in the discourse that is this final chapter bring me to the realization that I am situated in these plant-lands with my conversants by my identity and actions. The experiences which began in childhood bear fruit at this time through the journey of this path.

*Time and the Garden*

The future gathers in vine, bush and tree:  
Persimmon, walnut, locust, fig, and grape,  
Degrees and kinds of color taste, and shape.  
These will advance in their due series, space  
The season like a tranquil dwelling-place.  
(Winters, in Hollander, 1996, p. 87)

In exploring our relationship with the living earth, I have, indeed, found a dwelling place where my future lies. In associating with gardening and older persons within natural places, or what we name “nearby nature,” I find my breath, or spirit. I join with a community of earth keepers who have many lessons to teach me. The first teachers

are the conversants in this study, who share the seasons of their lives through experiencing their dwelling-places, their gardens. In turn, I carry their teaching forward, that is, honoring the gifts of Living Earth by their example and encouraging a relationship with the plant-lands and our surrounding environment that brings a healthier, renewed way of being.

Within my role as a community health nursing professional, I continue to share the wellness aspects of becoming an earth keeper myself, in creating a nurturing, respectful relationship with other beings, and each other (or, actually, the whole planet). Like others who yearn to be-with nature, I am a traveler journeying toward finding a tranquil dwelling place where I will thrive. And, like my conversants, looking back into my own life story, surprisingly, is how I unearth my autobiography. Where the gardeners achieve this in their gardening life, I accomplish this work through the writing process. Others can learn from our varied ways of experiencing a tranquil dwelling place through the natural world. I find May Sarton's personal example a powerful one. During a difficult period following the publication of *Plant Dreaming Deep*, Sarton (1973) journals of achieving peace by being-with the natural world. It is earth keeper Sarton's autobiographical writing that mentors us about her self-care through interacting with the living world. The gardening brings her pockets of peace in the midst of work and life.

**Breathing in a tranquil dwelling place.** In some aspects of my life, the work of "finding my breath" creates the tranquil dwelling place. That is, in a tranquil dwelling place, I breathe in sweet, fresh air; while in other situations, I breathe out, even show others physically what I mean. Ah, yes, there is a definite rhythm there to it. How did I come to this understanding? Only of late, I admit, have I found the words to express this

visual image of finding myself. I credit my phenomenological mother, Dr. Francine Hultgren, a transformative teacher, for encouraging me to reflect and write about the process. Let me pause here to explain why I am working on my breathing.

This part of my story begins in college. I am quite the experienced traveler, having spent more than half my life overseas when I first went to college. My parents schooled me to seek out the natural wonders that surround us, whether grand or simple ones. During trips back home, we crisscrossed the United States visiting family, yet made time to see many of the national parks. I wanted more. So, after graduation, my college roommate and I tent-camped our way across the USA for nearly two months. On that odyssey, I first learned how the natural world calls out to me. I discover others feel the same call, like Muir, who writes:

Getting in touch with Mother Earth; jumping from rock to rock, feeling the life of them, learning the songs of them, panting in whole-souled exercise, and rejoicing in deep, long-draws breaths of pure wildness. This is fine and natural and full of promise. (1901/2000, p. 103)

Reflecting back on that odyssey that brought the promise of the natural world into focus, I recognize we saw wild nature, constructed nature (Casey, 1993) and its inhabitants in many forms. Initially, we were not attuned to seeing what was there, present to us. Sometimes we only had glimpses of that “pure wildness.” We slowed down regularly. Slowing your pace allows for more relaxed breathing, and hence, your vision sharpens. With slower movements and an occasional pause, breathing is lighter and seems to come more easily. Perhaps we lingered longer at an overlook; perhaps we paused on a trail. I do remember most overlooks are designed to capture breath-taking views that alter your perspective of human time. I recall thinking, “How young we are,

how full of possibility.” I was awestruck considering how long the Grand Canyon has been in existence.

Momaday (1997) writes, “You touch the pulse of the living planet; you feel its breath upon you. You become one with a spirit that pervades geologic time that indeed confounds time and space...” (p. 114). We did not actually touch any animals we saw in nature. We smelled and heard them. And, most definitely, we saw nature’s landscape. So, I am certain when I say we experienced the living planet. Usually it occurred when we traveled off the beaten path in areas accessible only to hikers. “Is that really a mother moose and her calf? Look at those magnificent wildflowers all over that valley.” Often the encounter was quite ordinary, as in the time when we slept in a field set back from the “scenic byway,” and the rancher’s cows woke us up early the next morning. Of course, we did not see these creatures in the dark, but they were there the whole time.

What is present in nature that we overlook through our singular perspective? And how might exploring that perspective through autobiographical rendering inform those of us who wish to reach out to teach others? We discovered nature nearly everywhere; it seemed that when we settled in for a night and pitched our tent, whether we were in a numbered site in a national park, or on a ridge in a national forest out in the middle of nowhere, we came upon proof of nature. To be honest, on rare occasions we had encounters with less desirable wildlife...snakes come to mind. Or, we heard sounds in the distance, and we were not sure what creature was speaking down the way. Almost all of it was magical and we inhaled it all. Years later, my former roommate and I still retell ourselves these stories when we are together. She, too, is a gardener, yet nowadays we

find ourselves seeking out nearby nature to catch our breath. For many of us who are not out traveling far from home, nearby nature provides much of the same breathing space.

**Gaining a very special place to be.** Through my dissertation journey with Dr. Francine Hultgren, I know that nearby nature offers me a “very special place to be” as Casey (1993, p. 154) finds in a garden. I continue to find sweet air to breathe as my professional life evolves. I re-discovered the vital importance of nearby nature after finishing my nomadic life as an Air Force officer and nurse. That professional life began a year after our odyssey across the USA. My favorite duty, after being a flight nurse on three different kinds of air evacuation aircraft, was as a community health nurse doing health promotion. I went for a full career, but the very next year, I became a Master Gardener and a nursing clinical instructor almost within the same breath. It was as if I was breathing in nearby nature as one part of my life, and breathing out through teaching community health nursing. I was finding a rhythm.

What is it like to breathe rhythmically? What are the breathing exercises I must reclaim as usual practice? Back then, we lived in nearly mile high Utah, yet my breathing was effortless because I so enjoyed my volunteer service commitment at the Botanical Gardens. Makinlay (2004) says “We respond to what lies at the core of our being” (p. 79) and thus, find meaning. When I worked in the greenhouse or deadheaded the flowers, it was a meditative experience. I asked myself, “How might I be involved in gardening and still teach nursing?” Teaching at a small college, I was having the time of my life. It was as if I was no longer holding my breath, as I could do both garden work and teaching in the community. My first real garden was a square-foot garden. It was a “built place...[that became] an extension of [my] body, a place I built for [my] residing...” (Casey, 1993, p.

120) in the natural world and its embrace. This harkens back to Heidegger's (1954/1993a) "Building and Dwelling and Cultivating." I capitalize those for a reason. They are so important to the embrace of the living earth, the natural world.

Later, in the warm embrace of my phenomenological mother's gentle tutelage, I began to read outside the usual medical and nursing literature to make sense out of where my own experiences have led me. In writing my comprehensive exam, I was able to breathe and focus. I closed *Finding My Way to Study the Lifeworld of Older Gardeners* with a quote from an Earth Day invocation:

Teach us even just a little about how you nourish these green living beings.  
How you surround them, yet give them space.  
How you pay attention to them and urge their roots to take hold and spread.  
Planet Earth, Mother Earth, Living Earth, Gaia.  
Teach us how to give back to you, protect you, nourish you.  
Let us learn from you how to nurture our own dreams like saplings, full of promise. (Gregory, in Shamir, 1999, p. 92)

The lessons nurture my dreams, too. My roots take hold and grow during the years of this dissertation research. I learn to teach with more generosity, am more accessible to my students and I practice writing, and re-writing. The teaching happens as lived curriculum, primarily through reflecting on what Dr. Hultgren and my doctoral student colleagues model and offer in encouraging my writing self. I ask questions like, "What fundamental elements do humans need to thrive that are also present for gardeners in their experience of being with nature?" Dr. Hultgren responds "Good question!" She underlines, writes in the margins, of course, as she always does. I linger with her questioning and recognize her intentional actions as one of a transformative person inspiring deeper writing. I am not discouraged by her reminder of the work ahead. It appears I am learning deep breathing lessons to find myself. In writing about how nearby



nature has called to me, I unearth land-dreaming as a way of being with purpose and meaning.

Realizations come from within us as we pause and reflect on our lives. My conversants, the seed-carriers, do this unconsciously through their gardening. For this reason they remain so passionate about continuing. I read recently that Terry Tempest Williams' mother wrote, "I am realizing the natural world is my connection to myself. Landscape brings me simplicity" (in Williams, 1991, p. 86). All our senses come alive in natural settings, and I think it particularly convenient that this sense experience can occur in gardens and nearby nature. For me, whether it is a park, a national forest, or some form of a garden, nature is where I can breathe deeply to regain consciousness of the seasons of my life. Lately my life has been in fast forward. My phenomenological mother, Dr. Hultgren, directs me onward by encouraging me to listen to my "ownmost being" (Levin, 1989, p. 233). After lingering in the safety and comfort of her teaching, I return to the garden path to find my self.

**Rootedness for young and old.** In between writing and work, I find it best to get back to the garden. If I were a young student in school, would I learn this in a school garden or on-site natural habitat I helped maintain as part of my schooling? Experiencing nearby nature grounds us in that it can teach us about the circle of life and our relationships with living things. Getting close to the ground, planting in the dirt and tucking seedlings into a spot where they can be happy and out in regular light instead of my "grow lights," I feel rooted again. What is it like to move into real light from artificial light if you are a plant? I find an analogy here. What would it be like for persons to move into natural light; where appreciating a relationship with earth is fostered as a source of

rootedness? Sometimes it helps gardeners to think of themselves *as* the plants. Then, it is not difficult to figure out what the plant might need. If my body were really a plant, it would breathe in carbon dioxide and breathe out oxygen. Somehow, moving into regular light is another breathing lesson for us. How can we create a dwelling-place where we feel most alive and in tune with our ownmost being?

Some of us successfully combine work and life purpose and acquire rootedness in having created a dwelling place. I share an example of Shamir's (1999), who co-founded a company, ReLeaf, which creates tree-planting opportunities in nearby states. In bringing thousands of volunteers into the forests and city parks, over 30,000 trees have begun to grow as the company teaches others about restoring nearby nature. Shamir's story can inspire others. In fact, many U.S. cities have recognized the importance of tree canopy in urban settings to lessen electricity use. Arbor Day, a day set aside for tree-planting, is celebrated nationally but receives local support, too, to stop the "25% decline in tree cover since the 1970s" (Gangloff, in Harden, 2006, ¶ 30). In Iowa, the utility company is involved in planting trees in concert with Trees Forever, a non-profit group. The utility spokeswoman, Wilhelm adds, "It is difficult to put a value on the community relationships we have built with the trees" (in Harden, 2006, ¶ 7). How do I inform others? How best to inform practice? I see that it also is my task to find my way beyond the questions to action. Moving to action demands commitment. Boice (1989) expresses this as a commitment to self-awareness—which, in turn, can bring a shift in our thinking and the perspective of those we influence. These are the beginning ingredients for moving us toward a cultural change. In bringing individuals to consider their relationships with earth and its co-inhabitants, my work can take root.

**Finding the right place for our souls to dwell.** When Arendt speaks of emotions being bodily felt moments that capture us (1978), I know this blending of soul and somatic experience is what enriches me within my gardening life. However, I have not continually nurtured this blending within my professional life. I forget to listen to my self, hence, to find the right place for me to breathe. I search for a dwelling-place where gardening and nursing are connected, wondering if this is a place I must build? Through my dissertation, I now believe it is already being cultivated.

Finding ourselves in built places is no straightforward matter....It is often decidedly circuitous, both in time...and space, ...[a place] where we must often move between places to find the “right” place and where byways may be more significant than the straight path. (Casey, 1993, p. 120)

When nurse phenomenologist Johnston (2005) discusses foreground and background in the context of a researcher’s view of reality, I suspect that is the task at hand in this chapter. That very process is what I am doing: distancing myself and yet, gazing back at the study to make sense of the big picture of persons in relationship with Earth. Doing hermeneutic phenomenology compels me to re-adjust my focus, and as Johnston (2005) illustrates, move from gestalt to the particular and back again—all the while crossing boundaries of inner (particular to self) and outer (common and in relation to others) experiences. I look between the foreground and background of my life as a researcher and gardener and that of my co-participant conversants as older gardeners, all with the intention of gathering some of the meaning for others.

By “others,” I mean the larger community of our world, so to speak, of persons who might join the dialogue. I might begin the discussion with constituents of the health professions, the social and human sciences, and, in particular, nursing, gerontologists, ecologists, naturalists and persons in horticulture, to get started. Gardeners, farmers, and

plantpersons are “near of kin” with that larger community of earth’s inhabitants and, thus, the need for discourse seems almost obvious. The meaning-making itself compels us to act on what we have come to understand and know differently, to wish to make a difference because we cross some of those boundaries and view reality differently because of these new understandings. It is my call to action. Johnston (2005) invites us to “Consider the need, particularly in the health professions, for a paradigm that adequately accommodates the body, self-consciousness, and self-reflection as well as the capacity to link these subjective experiences to a larger sphere of knowledge” (p. 269). I believe this means I am in the cloud cover and can proceed to dream about the possibilities of becoming real.

### **Calling for Collaborative Research and Discourse**

Within the hermeneutic phenomenological tradition, I am interested in looking ahead to what remains out of our reach, that which remains to be unearthed. The questioning allows for a different perspective that leads us to looking ahead. I believe it is as much a call for discourse as it is for exploration and raising awareness. Even the language is not agreed upon as yet—a point I intend to make in this section. An editorial by Burls and Caan (2005) introduces a new term, ecotherapy, which has surfaced within the last two years and is called the “theoretical implication of biophilia” (p. 1221). By collaborating, differing disciplines may illuminate overlooked aspects of the phenomenon of gardening as nearby nature, and how the meaning of gardening relates to our surrounding world. Another task is to make known what has become visible through our differing viewpoints. The disciplines represent parts that can make major contributions to the whole. Merchant (1989) says “holistic presuppositions about nature are being revived

in ecology's premise that everything is connected to everything else; the emphasis is on the primacy of interactive processes in nature" (p. 99). We can all belong to an ecological community that honors its relationship to Earth; however, the discourse must be multidisciplinary for us to gain a richer understanding of differing views. However, before I bring this chapter to a close, I wish to mention the early research, the background for the research questions that led me to this study as a way of explaining how, in a sense, I am coming full circle with this study. I am back to the beginning.

In 1972, Lewis (1994) approached the American Horticultural Society about establishing some research about people-plant interaction. It was favorably received and eventually led to a third symposium organized by the People-Plant Council. At that meeting, Lewis notes how the field of research about people-plant relationships is based on "a revised view of ourselves which acknowledges our connection with nature" (p. 16). When asked to explain where the research was leading, Lewis adds, "In western culture, we seem to be caught in a dichotomous view. Humans are separated from nature and see nature primarily as a resource to be utilized for their benefit" (p. 16). His statement returns us to the initial questioning in the beginning section of this chapter. Yet, I believe I have brought out that there are signs of movement and more change is ahead, what I have named the swirling aspects. Swirling also can be troubling and conflictual. It is movement, however, and where movement occurs, often there is energy.

Having recently completed an updated review of the literature since beginning the study, I look to where else research is needed. What has not been addressed, and where might this study lead? Where does this study fit in among what has been offered so far? I look to one of the leaders in the United States for the "state of the science" in this country

at least and find Dr. Diane Relf, who kindly met with me early in my studies when I first wondered about the meaning of gardening to adults in this country.

Several years ago at an international conference held at the New York Botanic Garden, Dr. Relf informally shared that she prefers not to create a singular professional group studying people-plant interaction in human health and well-being (typical key words in the international symposia titles). I have gradually come around to support her position. Persons from differing disciplines need to approach the research collaboratively as we each bring unique perspectives. Collaboration becomes all the more crucial because we do not all have relatively easy access to the same source documents that can inform our work. I say this after a literature search for a review of three Edenized healthcare facilities in the metropolitan Baltimore/D.C./Virginia area (Collins, 2002). To get the source documents, I was fortunate enough to live close to major library collections including the National Agricultural Library, Library of Congress and the National Library of Medicine. Then and now, only universities with a science or technology emphasis—medicine, nursing, sociology and behavioral/psychological sciences, for example—hold full collections of early periodicals. I literally had a handful of library copy cards after the literature search I did for my proposal. I keep copies of articles from the *Journal of Environment and Behavior* filed near *Activities, Adaptation and Aging*, but not far from *Healthcare Design*. Fortunately, the American Horticultural Therapy Association website (<http://www.ahta.org>) has a wealth of links to information and other research. We need to continue to develop websites that inform and connect us. One such as this exists at Virginia Polytechnic University (<http://www.hort.vt.edu/human/PPIARTS.html>).

Education leads to collaboration across disciplines and new research emerges. With multidisciplinary outreach, Relf expects to seed all interested professional groups, not limiting us by creating a new professional entity. I see how this rationale encourages professional community building. In the ensuing years, I become aware of several joint ventures (including some of the publications in my reference list) that integrate knowledge gained across many disciplines. I, too, correspond with a non-nurse British researcher about collaborating. Richards studies housing and services for older gardeners there. This is a good beginning for community building within my own reach.

I locate a recent contribution to the People and Plant interaction literature where Relf (2005) defines the different terms used in healthcare literature on healing gardens and gardening in rehabilitation settings. Once again, I am reminded that what this study is about is not what has surfaced before, but what has emerged that builds on the foundation of our early understandings. What has been in the healthcare literature still would be called healing, or therapeutic gardens where patients interact with plants, where the setting is the main focus of the “treatment,” or is part of a horticultural therapy program designed for patients. For example, for older adults with Alzheimer’s, the wandering garden is the “therapy.” So, this study exploring older, non-institutionalized persons who garden is different. My conversants are community-dwellers, to use the research vernacular, and are gardeners who choose to garden in a variety of settings. Kaplan reiterates that since they began exploring the impact of nearby nature on humans in the 1970s, those studies often have focused on residential settings (personal communication, February 24, 2007) so I look forward to integrating some of their understandings.

In this study, the conversants practice self-care that promotes their health through gardening. Whether the gardeners are arthritic, post-hip surgery or visually impaired, these older adults go for high-level wellness in body and soul so that they can continue gardening. Individuals or community groups choosing health promotion in this leisure-time physical activity show us it is possible to “consider health promotion activities outside a disease prevention model” (Kulbock & Baldwin, 1992, p. 59). Instead of a disease prevention mind-set, the conversants are modeling wellness initiatives that enrich body and soul.

More pointedly, gardening should be appreciated for its importance in enhancing mental health through its impact on overall well-being, one of the leading indicators of Healthy People 2010 (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005). More than providing a restorative, meditative experience, gardening teaches humans about the seasons of life and how to “be” on this Earth.

### **Pedagogical Musings about the Threads of Kinship**

We acknowledge the teachings of the older gardeners as keepers of the earth. They teach those who have forgotten or never knew how to count our rings of life experiences. We learn we have to make time to count the rings and realize all are related on this orb, our home on earth. It is not up to someone else. I check on a healing garden I helped plant some years ago by visiting the Kernan Foundation website (<http://www.tkffdn.org>) and see that it showcases their healing gardens and sacred spaces ([http://www.tkffdn.org/what/what\\_is\\_a\\_sacred\\_space.php](http://www.tkffdn.org/what/what_is_a_sacred_space.php)). The addition of a new labyrinth also suggests it is time to visit again since it is new. Their website includes a link to the Arc of Anne Arundel County. My children and I helped to put in trees at their



garden several years ago as a service project. We were pleased the Arc provided the plants purchased through a grant ([www.tkffdn.org/what/sacred\\_space\\_locations.php](http://www.tkffdn.org/what/sacred_space_locations.php)) but what remains most significant to us is watching the trees get taller in a space that is cherished.

I am intrigued by some of the new projects at the Kernan Foundation and will check into the possibility of joining in with them. I may wish to research other aspects of the phenomenon: reviewing journal entries at specified sites in their garden locations, for example. It appears that there are other earth keepers doing significant work.

“I accepted the challenge of seeing what I could do” (Sally). I am grateful for Sally’s words right now as I enter into polycyspeak and making the connection to practice, the next steps of my journey in cultivating the earth keeper community. I gain spiritual literacy for the task ahead, for Gottleib (2003) encourages a spirituality of resistance as part of advocating being fully awake to the environmental justice initiatives that are part of my future.

**Carrying on the lessons of community service.** Nurses are known for patient advocacy at the individual level. In a typical scenario for a nursing student doing free home visits to county residents, I observe for peeling paint in the homes and arrange for the young clients to have lead levels drawn to assess for lead poisoning. I might be a member of the Maryland Pesticide Network that “educates healthcare providers and public health professionals on the prevention, diagnosis, treatment, and reporting of pesticide injuries” (Schropp, 2006, p. 21). The home visit may be our first introduction to community service in public health; early in our nursing rotation in community health we serve as a health professional and a guest in someone’s home. We situate ourselves

slightly differently when we are guests in a community. Like a social worker, we mingle and dialogue toward understanding and agreed-upon goals.

In the community setting, we look at aggregate groups; nonetheless, a population is a group of individuals, lest we forget. I hold onto that as I consider how to advocate for the health of a community and foster an awareness of the relationship earth keepers model with their actions. Overall, the message is that health professionals need to partner with organization level initiatives in the community and healthcare institutions that promote environmental wellness.

One independent not-for-profit organization is Hospitals for a Healthy Environment (H2E). Their national website is an online clearinghouse of useful information (<http://www.h2e-online.org>), and member agencies look to cost-saving methods to reduce hospital waste (plastics, in particular), reuse of appropriate supplies, and reduction of energy use. Founded by agencies such as the American Hospital Association, the American Nurses Association, Healthcare without Harm, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, collaboration is powerful. However, because of my role in the community outside of the formal healthcare setting, I look at neighborhoods, parks, and other public places as my places of work.

I attend a local grass roots task force gathering of EnviRN, environmental health nurses from the University of Maryland Environmental Health education center. To influence policy and practice this political action committee educates colleagues and consumers about key issues we need to address through policymakers locally and in our state. At this gathering we build on familiar Chesapeake Bay area concerns following the passage of the Healthy Air Act last year; we follow-up on legislation for reducing air

pollution from power plants that ultimately threaten asthmatics and our communities.

There is palpable energy in the room during our conference call with Chesapeake Climate Action Net and interested parties discussing strategies for the Global Solutions Action Bill in the state legislature. Instead of focusing on the usual, “What influence can one person have?” question, I see these small efforts as examples of frameworks for action that others can learn.

### **Becoming the Curriculum of Environmental Stewardship**

How does one teach the transformative power of gardens as an example of environmental stewardship? One solution is to find a teacher and role model. Celebrated author and Buddhist friend, Tomi Keitlen insists she knows an earth keeper and arranges an interview. “The arts and gardens are lifelines for teachers, community members and children. ...People are longing for beauty in their lives. There’s so much ugliness in the world. When a garden comes in, it’s like an oasis” (Seronde, as cited in Blankenship, 2004, p. 5). I am fortunate to have a visit with accomplished poet and painter Adele Seronde, founder of the national organization, Gardens for Humanity. The web address is (<http://www.gardensforhumanity.org/index.html>). Beginning in 1996 with volunteers, Seronde’s group has won state awards. Through grants and donations, the organization funds environmental education through gardening and art programs in local schools, parks, healing spaces, healthcare agencies and the community. The list of settings continues to grow, for “It is a project dedicated to giving life again to wasted spaces of this earth, a place of building community” (Seronde, as cited in Brener, 2004, p. 5). I take copious notes and marvel at this older gardener and humanitarian who serves the

community by creating places for meeting spiritual and artistic needs. No wonder Seronde is called an artistic catalyst.

Another teacher is Palmer (1999) who writes and demonstrates that “To be fully alive is to act” (p. 17). Yet, action goes further than mere motion; it requires that we reflect on our inner power to both give and receive. We each may have different gifts. Additional teachers are John and Nancy Diekelmann, earth keepers who make time to restore the plant-lands of the historic prairie near their home. Diekelmann (2002) writes a handbook of natural landscaping, creating possibility for others to emulate in different prairie settings. It is a significant contribution which can foster natural landscaping design in residential and public settings. I walked a portion of the restored prairie and can understand how meaningful it is to work to save the land and heal it. Being present with the land can change a person’s thoughts about it. Altman, director of the Adkins Arboretum, comments:

It’s not because...gardeners will restore the earth by planting native plants. But, in the process of planting a native, they learn so much about the plant that when they see it in nature, they are more committed to saving it. It’s about being an activist. (Altman, as cited in Raver, 2006b, ¶ 8)

In this journey, I have contemplated my own inner strength and discovered who I am, an earth keeper and a community health teacher. Typically, my conversants and garden club members teach me. I am so fortunate to learn their wisdom. The earth keeper community is under cultivation and the way is unfolding. How will we continue the cultivation of this community? Neudecker (1995) suggests the best method to preserving our natural treasures is to raise consciousness, that is, inspire individuals to be as troubled as we are, and to work at understanding differing viewpoints. I also believe we must

include youth in our planning. We must bring them into nature to have them experience it and develop this awareness that engages all the senses.

Because I spent the summer with the buffalo,  
there is a bone within me now.  
Because I spent the autumn growing with one tall tree,  
there is a root within me now.  
(Halifax, 1993, p. 140)

In this season of my life, my roots are branching out as a result of the dissertation.

I find I am not surprised that Swan (1995) recommends we develop our kinship with nature through a most important first action: spending time in nature. This form of experiential learning was my first teacher. It sounds similar to Aoki's (2005) *Double Reading of a Zen Parable* (p. 432) when his son recognizes Aoki only needs to move into the space between to appreciate the art. Aoki calls it the where of "learning pedagogy." Swan (1995) recommends that we grow support for our natural environment by learning more, cultivating practical knowing to share with others: "Become more intimate with the land, plants and animals near [our and] their homes" (p. 21). We can learn the customs and traditions from our own heritage. In tune with our planet and the seasons of life, the earth keepers can be some of our best teachers. It is my time to join the circle, knowing that "reconsidering our responsibilities and purpose in life opens our hearts to the Other and firmly grounds us, re-establishing our sense of self in the world" (B. Schaefer, 2003, p. 260).

### **Returning to Earth to Join the Circle**

We must find ways to live with nature in some kind of balance.  
(Erhong, as cited in Kahn, 2006, ¶ 1)

In nursing, we have "a unique opportunity to provide services that facilitate wholeness...Nursing is an art/science with the primary purpose to nurture others towards

the wholeness inherent within them” (American Holistic Nurses Association, 2000, p. 2, ¶ 1). I re-turn full circle to my being as a nurse, nurturing the older gardeners’ way of being. Dickenson-Hazard explains, “by combining and balancing the inner self with the outer self, we are able to be of service not only to others, but to ourselves as well” (2004, p. 4). My breathing lessons move my nursing spirit into my every day. But, I also must balance my relationship with the earth, remembering that spirituality in gardening supports my center and brings a sense of wholeness. Brower (2006) describes this centering as “those events in life and moments in relationships which attune us to that vital or animating force within and which give greater meaning and depth to our day to day living with others” (p. 2, ¶ 1). I expect to continue to seek out the other sacred spaces so that I may share them with others. Visiting sacred spaces has special meaning at turning points. The last day together in my clinical group, some of my group walk the labyrinth at the garden where we enjoy our celebratory picnic. Such times feel bittersweet and I reflect on the ancient Chinese understanding of the interaction between Heaven and Earth, and Yang, where we seek balance. “Inseparable and defining each other, Yin and Yang form an interdependent whole. We cannot know dark without knowing light...[nor] know rest without knowing activity” (Beatty, 1999, ¶ 2). These principles also are reminiscent of the interplay of the seasons and the change and transformation we accomplish in a meaningful life. I learn the search is ongoing and part of the harmonizing in life.

Wang (2005) offers a marvelous example of the power of a changing landscape in a Chinese garden and relates it to curriculum. I find the description of the garden reflects some of my own pedagogical journey of the dissertation. As if designing a Chinese

garden, I recognize I co-create the elements and show how harmony and difference might co-exist. The beauty greets the visitor at many turns and often there is an unexpected vista or changed surface or elevation. As in life, Wang says “There is always more to see, to experience, and to appreciate” (p. 304). During the walk in such a garden, we may or may not become aware we are walking in a different direction. Or, we might not realize we are stepping on stones instead of earth. Yet, if we linger awhile and reflect, we are sure to come away feeling refreshed. This is because of the “interplay between full (*yin*) and empty (*yan*)” (p. 305). As this also exists in nature, I suspect this is what energizes the gardeners and earth keepers who find the gardening life so meaning-full.

Landscape architect Tyson (1998) describes the personal meaning behind writing *The Healing Landscape: Therapeutic outdoor Environments*, and offers strategies for us to consider in future efforts connecting people and gardens. Tyson recognizes that collaboration and sharing knowledge is vital among those who believe in this way of thinking, “Opening new paths in the search for meaning in ordinary life, in nature, in human behavior, in design, and in the art of composing living tapestries of plants and people for the purpose of healing” (1998, p. 211). I consider Tyson a leader among earth keepers.

As a writer like Tyson, I discover my self during the writing of the dissertation and suggest this is not unlike the gardeners who unearth meaning in their gardening. I am interested in Doerr’s (2004) example of teaching ecology by using an environmental autobiographical style of curriculum in the Pinar (1995) tradition developed in the 1970s called “currere” or curriculum as lived. It seems to have promise as pedagogy for working through assumptions about aging persons with my community health nursing

students. I pull out a treasured greeting card Dr. Kavanagh sent some years ago which presents this Hebrew proverb, “As is the gardener, such is the garden” (Kavanagh, personal communication, June 22, 2002). I believe also that the proverb reflects embracing the Tao, accepting the energy that moves into our life and work—something I am on the verge of attempting as this wonderful research comes full circle. I write my way into and out of the thicket of the dissertation, grateful for the partners along the way. This insight stems from Le Guin (in Edwards, 2000), who shares that the act of writing can help unearth the concealed laws of nature which is named the Tao.

I have unearthed my own autobiography while accompanying the seven co-researchers on the dissertation journey. For it is time for me to go on my way with pedagogical considerations beyond the dissertation. Edwards says “The Tao is eternally present, always manifesting itself throughout all phases of everyday life, the unfolding of one’s inner nature through embracing the Tao” (2000, pp. 16, 18). In a similar fashion as writing does for Le Guin, the earth keepers follow their creative nature and find energy for body and soul work through the spiritual experiences in their gardening. Each finds their way and teaches us. I am so pleased to join the circle of earth keepers that I write a poem about it. The poetizing act in itself shows transformation.

*Joining the Circle of Earth Keepers*

Embedded in the center of the Plant-Lands and nearby nature  
We witness the circle of life in the seasons.  
We nourish body and soul in the paradise of our own gardens  
And we see that Beauty calls to us through gardening.

We keep gardens to create a life with the living art  
Of plants, flowers, fields and trees.  
We touch the Earth to save the Land and heal ourselves through wholeness.

Each day we enter the garden we are blessed to find wonder in the universe



And we are strengthened in body and spirit.  
We are guided in our appreciation of Earth's gifts,  
for generations past teach us and live in our memories.

We are hopeful, for we learn there are seeds of possibility in later seasons.  
A new sense-consciousness comes from listening to each other's stories  
and embracing Earth.  
Knowing that what we do can make a difference.

It is a circle where we recognize each other and share bitter and sweet,  
For each of us has a purpose and a home in the Plant-Lands,  
Through an awakening of the senses and tranquility within, we gain wisdom of  
place  
And trust who we are becoming in our unfolding.

To enter the circle is to open your heart to Living Earth and its creatures.  
Seek to understand the evolving boundaries, the interplaces of man and nature  
where we have work to do.  
Join the circle and gather with the community of Keepers of the Earth.  
(Collins, August 2006)

Returning to earth, I ready myself for work and everyday life, but with  
new perspective. Aside from some teaching and activist efforts in support of older  
gardeners and the plant-lands, I also look forward to spending time returning to  
my garden and being in the gardens of others. With the increasing number of  
households that report gardening as leisure time physical activity, I likely will  
have wonderful company throughout the seasons. It seems proper that I  
acknowledge one of my favorite quotes about gardening (and why I garden) as I  
close this chapter and the dissertation journey. For it is as one of my favorite  
garden writers, Handelsman says: "Gardening is a natural and refreshing way to  
enhance sensitivity to life, to become aware of the mysterious spiritual  
transmission that takes place between nature and humans" (1996, p. 62). I return  
to Earth and its plant-lands eager for what is still possible as nurse, teacher and  
earth keeper.

## APPENDIX A

### INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

I invite you to engage in a research study with me that explores your gardening life in later years. I am a doctoral candidate in the Department of Education, Policy and Leadership at the University of Maryland at College Park, Maryland, and will be working under the direction of Dr. Francine Hultgren. In addition to being a nurse, I am a gardener.

My purpose is to understand the life of older gardeners who are still gardening, through an interpretive methodology. It is a search for meaning in everyday lives as experienced through gardening.

As a participant you will be agreeing to meet for two or three private conversations of about 2 hours, either in your home or a place we choose together. Additional conversations might occur as needed in other forms. This might be in email exchanges, by telephone, or in a small group of others in the study if you are willing. Or you may be asked to write a short reflection or story about something in your gardening life that was meaningful. Each conversation will be tape recorded to preserve the integrity and completeness of our dialogue. After the conversations are transcribed into written text I will, in turn, be sharing interpretations that emerge from the collected materials. All conversations, tape recordings, and written text will be kept private and your identity (and that of your family) will remain anonymous in any presentation or published work unless you decide differently. After the study is complete, I will share the results with you.

Your sharing will be contributing to a more complete understanding of gardeners in later years. As the experience of gardening can evolve and change over a lifetime, your remembrances and time as a gardener who is older but still gardening will enter into the interpretation. If you would like to be one of my conversants, please sign the required consent form on the following page. Even once we have started you are free to disengage any time. If you have questions, please contact me or my advisor at the following phone numbers or email addresses. Thank you so much.

Sincerely,

Carole Staley Collins  
243 Anchorage Drive  
Annapolis, MD 21401  
410-349-0229  
[mtngarden@msn.com](mailto:mtngarden@msn.com)

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APPENDIX B

Consent Form

Page 1 of 2

<b>Identification of Project/Title</b>	Older Gardeners as Keepers of the Earth: A Phenomenological Study	<b>Initials</b> _____ <b>Date</b> _____
<b>Statement of Age of Subject</b>	I state that I am over 65 years or older, and in good enough physical health to participate in a program of research being conducted by Carole Staley Collins in the Dept. of Education, Policy and Leadership in the College of Education at the University of Maryland, College Park.	
<b>Purpose</b>	I understand the purpose of this research is to study the experiences of older gardeners who are still at home for the purpose of informing others about the meaning of gardening during later life.	
<b>Procedures</b>	As a participant, I understand I will be involved in 2-3 audiotaped conversational sessions of about 2 hours. Additional conversations may occur as needed in other forms through email exchange or telephone. I may also participate in a group conversation or write a reflection about being a gardener. The conversations and writing will be about my experiences of gardening as I have aged. (See attachment for the kinds of questions and reflections)	
<b>Confidentiality</b>	I understand that I can remain anonymous or that I may give specific written permission to use of my first name, or a name I choose, for any written or transcribed text. I understand that I have the right to request that specific written information or conversation not be used in the study, and that I may ask that the recorder be turned off at any time.	
<b>Risks</b>	There are no foreseeable risks to my involvement in this study. I understand that examining my gardening life in later years may cause me to contemplate my life in a different way. I understand that there are normally no long-term effects to the contemplative experience of participating in this research.	
<b>Benefits, Freedom to withdraw and ability to ask questions</b>	I understand that this study is not designed to help me personally, but that the researcher hopes to learn more about the experience of gardening in later life to possibly inform policy. I understand that I am free to ask questions or withdraw from participation at any time without penalty.	
<b>Contact information Of Investigator</b>	Carole Staley Collins 243 Anchorage Drive 410-349-0229 Annapolis, MD 21401 <a href="mailto:mtngarden@msn.com">mtngarden@msn.com</a>	
<b>Faculty Advisor</b>	Dr. Francine Hultgren Dept. of Education, Policy and Leadership University of Maryland 301-405-4562 College Park, MD 20742 <a href="mailto:fh14@umail.umd.edu">fh14@umail.umd.edu</a>	
<b>Contact information Of Institutional Review Board</b>	If you have questions about your rights as a research subject or wish to report a research-related injury, please contact: <b>Institutional Review Board Office, University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742 (email) <a href="mailto:irb@deans.umd.edu">irb@deans.umd.edu</a>; (telephone) 301-405-4212</b> <b>NAME OF SUBJECT</b> _____ <b>SIGNATURE OF SUBJECT</b> _____ <b>DATE</b> _____	

**ORIENTING FRAMEWORK OF QUESTIONS  
TO ELICIT THE CONVERSATIONS**

**Page 2 of 2**

**I**

**Initials** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date** \_\_\_\_\_

1. Asking personal information about the gardener (Age, current activities related to gardening, family history of gardening)
2. Information about initial entry into gardening – in written reflection or story.
3. Returning to past experiences, remembering lessons that have gone beyond gardening.
4. Garden details, a tour of the garden. Descriptive stories about their gardening, and what influences have shaped involvement in the garden? How is this evolving, if at all?
5. Asking about favorite plants and trees. Do certain seasons resonate differently in terms of outside the garden itself?

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