

Spirituality and Urban Agriculture: Environments that Inspire Awe, Humility, and Reverence

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There is no escaping the cacophony of protests that erupt at the mere mention of spirituality. There is a genuine fear of the possibility of the doctrinal or exclusionary politics that often come with organized religion. But spirituality in urban planning is not about arguing for or against God, or for the superiority of a particular dogma. It is about upholding the values of awe and wonder and humility; values that we completely miss when we plan as though we are gods. “To forget that you are only human, to think you can act like a god – this is the opposite of reverence” (Woodruff, 2001). The idea that we can cull, process, organize and redistribute populations of plants and animals to fulfill our plans, with no regards to consequences, is grasping at immortality. It presumes knowledge of the unknown. The idea has failed (Scott 1998). We are no less mortal when we subdue natural systems, and when our cities ascend into consumptive hyper-efficiency, our urban environments descend into vulnerability and soullessness.

A refreshing antidote to the culture of consumption in the city is the growing prevalence of urban agriculture. This paper offers a snapshot of a 60-acre farm on the campus of the University of British Columbia. The farm is a hub of social, socio-economic, pedagogical, disciplinary and biological diversity. What was once a fallow field is now a thriving provider of fresh produce to numerous university food outlets and a weekly farmers market. It is surrounded by a tall coniferous forest. The sights, sounds and scents of the farm are a refuge from the pace, noise and pollution of urban life. It is a majestic place that takes your breath away. In the summer it is full of dozens of students, staff and volunteers joyfully going about their business. Different immigrant and refugee groups have their own plots where they are able to retain some modicum of tradition and grounding in the cycles of life, death and rebirth that every farm embodies. They are able to be grounded in the familiar practices of their home countries and their ancestors. They are able to connect to the earth’s life nurturing qualities, to the sacredness of life.

Growing food in the city is about much more than sustaining ourselves. Instead, growing food cultivates attitudes of patience, tolerance, respect and forgiveness. It slows us down and reminds us that the cycles of life, growth, death and decay take time. We can try to speed it up a little, but ultimately seasons dictate our cycles and the weather can wreak havoc on our most considered plans. We are not in control. We learn of the complex web of factors that need to coincide precisely to nurture life. Working directly with the soil and with compost, seeds, seedlings, the sun, water, drainage, rodents and disease is a constant reminder of the preciousness of life and of the profundity of nature’s balance. It teaches reverence. It teaches humility and connectedness, inclusion and hedging against a premature presumption of solutions. The farm is a stand against liquidating the asset of ecological integrity and agricultural productivity. It enriches our spirits when it helps demonetize the products of nature that give us physical and emotional sustenance. As Wendell Berry (2001) puts it:

Most of us cannot imagine the wheat beyond the bread, or the farmer beyond the wheat, or the farm beyond the farmer, or the history beyond the farm. Most

people cannot imagine the forest and the forest economy that produced their houses and furniture and paper; or the landscapes, the streams, and the weather that fill their pitchers and bathtubs and swimming pools with water. Most people appear to assume that when they have paid their money for these things they have entirely met their obligations (Berry, 2001:40).

A spiritually enriching place is an environment in which we understand our responsibilities to other living beings and to other humans. It is a place where rights meet responsibilities in a union of humility and awe at our common humanity and collective destiny despite our incredible diversity.

The deep caring and reverential regard of nature has led to what many have termed nature-based spirituality. Douglass Todd's edited book on the uniqueness of nature-inspired spiritual practice explores this distinction between conventional religion and nature-based spirituality (Todd, 2008). Todd brings together a range of perspectives that exemplify a movement that sees nature as a source of wisdom, values and meaning.

... nature based spirituality includes a conviction that nature represents ultimate reality and as such, offers both a source of ethics and a framework of meaning for life. For its most passionate adherents, nature-based spirituality answers those two central questions that religion tries to answer: "What is real?" and "How shall we then live?" (Wells, 2008)

For the less passionate adherents, nature is a place where we can both connect with our most reflective selves, and a place where our non-discreteness from other species and other people becomes powerfully obvious. Vibrant ecosystems in the city allow us to see each other with reverence as one organism, dependent on each other. It causes us to care and to love and forego the primacy of our egos.

Pier Giorigio Di Cicco, the City of Toronto's Poet Laureate from 2004-2010, speaks of the need for a spiritual revitalization of our cities.

The onus in the 21st century will not be "diversity of culture", but "diversity of spirituality. As religion is increasingly privatized, for fear of feud, fanaticism and market irrelevance... it will behoove the architect, the planner to design public space that mediates the spiritual instinct to communality and transcendence. The communing of streetscape, landscape, building, skyline enjoins the citizen to commune with projects and entities and reestablishes trust with others... The effect of architecture and space on the entire person, in the advent and presence of other persons is universal. It gentles the civic creature. It can gentle disparate cultures and peoples by the vocabulary of the sublime, bringing them to the point of awe, gratitude and mutuality by shared space, making such space sacred (Di Cicco, 2008).

References

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