

The gardeners' cycle and I

As we approach the Equinox, on the 21 September, the gardening season that will be the summer of 2020/21 begins.

It will start with a stretch and a yawn as the new green growth appears. This year, because of the good winter rains, the floral display of the Cape fynbos flowers has been extraordinary. That natural show will begin to move into our gardens in October and November when many of our exotic favourites such as roses, foxgloves and delphiniums will be in bloom. By December, as the summer sun reaches its zenith over the Solstice period, the plants will all start to exhale. Having run at a fast pace during the first half of the summer marathon, they will now slow down and concentrate their energies into producing seeds and fruit that will be harvested around the time of the autumn Equinox in March next year. After which the leaves will start to fall as the days shorten. The summer cycle will ease to an end and the compost heap will be built.

I have been working professionally as a gardener for thirty years and the consistency of this cycle has become entrenched within me. This cyclical rhythm of the birth, maturation and death have played themselves out in my own gardening career as well as my spiritual life. These two journeys are closely intertwined.

I started out studying Horticulture at the then Natal Technikon. The training was excellent and based on the tried and tested practises of The Royal Horticultural Society. I learnt how to make soil mixes, prepare seed beds, sow the seeds, nurture them, spray when problems occurred, plant these young plants out at the correct time, feed them, prune them and then watch, with great pride, as the manicured display of colour erupted around the Durban City Hall.

Metaphorically speaking, I see this phase of my gardening life as if an oak acorn had been planted in my gardening career. It represented a tradition that resonated deeply within me and I could hear my family ancestors' voices talking to me through this way of gardening.

At that same time my walk with Jesus was also very traditional. He was a very serious shepherd and I was an obedient sheep, trying desperately to obey the rules and be part of the flock.

My Technikon training came to an end and I then had to face two years in the army. What I thought was going to be hell turned into one the most transformative periods of my life, because for the first time I started to recognise the language of my own inner voice and trust it. The outdoor training time exposed me to the unique vegetation of the Highveld grasslands that surround Potchefstroom. Later, when I was moved to Walvis Bay, I was introduced to a landscape of plants perfectly adapted to survive the rigours of a misty cold desert of the West coast of Namibia.

My 'oak tree' principles and ways of working were challenged as they simply did not work in in these unique environments and so a new seed was sown in my gardening life. It germinated slowly and it took a while for me to fully appreciate it, but I now saw the value and strength of the local indigenous and endemic plants that grew in complete harmony in these grasslands and deserts. Next to my metaphorical oak tree, a thorny Acacia tree started to grow.

At the same time my spiritual journey also started to shift. I no longer felt part of the traditional flock of sheep. I started to seek answers to difficult personal questions and also started to find my own unique voice. Jesus remained the shepherd, but I felt confident to start talking to him directly, rather than via the "groot bok" of the flock the church had become in my life.

My gardening journey took an evangelical turn and I saw all indigenous plant material as good and everything exotic as bad and which needed to be removed. I wanted to restore an environment to what it had been before the European style of gardening had invaded our shores. I learnt about gardening with Nature, I stopped using chemical fertilisers and sprays and was very proud when I saw birds and bees return to the gardens I worked in. The ancestral voices that I heard within me were different to those I had heard as a student, which were specific to my tribe. These voices were broader and deeper and seemed to emanate from a continental drum.

My passion and zeal for local plants continued until I moved to Cape Town. A friend from Johannesburg had also moved to Cape Town and had purchased a flat, but needed a temporary place to stay while the transfer took place and so he shared the cottage that I stay in for a few months.

Graham Flax was not interested in gardening or environmental science, but he was a keen hiker and walker and so we would often walk together in the green belts that run through the Constantia Valley. These green belts are badly infested with invasive and exotic plants and yet Graham saw them as these beautiful places, filled with life. As an elderly, gay, Jewish, South African man, Graham had experienced and more importantly, broken free from the boxes of classification and rejection that had shaped his own life. It was through Graham and the green belts that I began to see that there could be no such thing as an exotic, a weed or an alien. I was as exotic as they were and that Mother Nature saw no border. Rather than the mess that I had seen in this tangle of exotic plants, were in fact part of the miraculous journey that is the evolution of a new plant biome. Plant systems only ever move forward and I now saw that the eucalyptus, cannas, ivy, poplars and pines that I had railed against, were all life giving plants, working towards a new and balanced eco-system. My anxiety toward these invasive plants was because I feared and did not understand that journey.

I started attending the Sunday stories at the CMM at about the same time. Through its teaching, its outreach work and most importantly, its congregation, I have come to realise that there is no such thing as an homogenous flock of sheep and that the Jesus approach to shepherding is to remove the paddock fences and to encourage the sheep, kicking and screaming, to mix with the world beyond those fences.

Alongside the oak and Acacia tree growing in my metaphorical garden career I now see that a climbing rose has started to grow up both trees. The rose will use the trees for support and will clamber to the top branches of the tree in search of the sun. The rose's thorny branches will make it difficult to remove from the trees, but they will also provide protection for many creatures. One day the weight of the rose will become too much for the oak and the acacia tree to bear and during a storm or heavy down pour of rain, the trees will fall and it will feel like a terrible tragedy.

But out of that fallen mass and mess a new sapling will emerge. I am not sure what it will be. That will be the next chapter of my gardening and spiritual life. The ancestral voices within me continue to talk, except that now they come from a place of humanity rather than my tribe and continent.

What I am certain of is that my gardening and spiritual life will continue to evolve and change – ever forwardly. That the way I do things now had their birth and are maturing. But they too will start to die and that will allow a new seed and chapter to begin. I give thanks to God for the gift of that cycle.

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