

## WEEK ONE: GROUND OF MY GARDEN

*God is nearer to us than our own soul, for he is the ground in which it stands, and he is the means by which substance and sensuality are so held together they can never separate.<sup>1</sup>*

—Julian of Norwich

The LORD will guide you continually,  
and satisfy your needs in parched places,  
and make your bones strong;  
and you shall be like a watered garden,  
like a spring of water,  
whose waters never fail. (Isaiah 58:11)

There are many types of gardens and equally as many individual spiritual paths. In nature we may encounter coastal or high alpine gardens and all the diversity in between. Some gardens might need to withstand severe winter freezing, and others require humid, tropical or temperate climates. Garden design ranges from formal to casual, haphazard and natural. Some gardens may be designed by specific color, flower, plant and crop types. A garden may contain flowers, herbs, fruits, vegetables, trees, shrubs and such natural elements as rocks, water and wildlife (and some tame creatures too!). A garden can be in full or partial shade or in the intense sun. Garden soil can be dry, moist, loamy, sandy, full of clay or even boggy. Wind and pollution add to the environment. Many gardens include decorative art, spaces to relax, supportive trellises and staking, or fences to keep critters in or out. No matter the variety or makeup, gardens are reflective of their environment, seeds, plantings, attention, light and water. So too are the daily lives we inhabit and live. And thus, so too is our spiritual life.

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God created the universe and in chapter one of Genesis we learn, “it was good”! (v. 10). In the garden of creation are creatures of all shapes, sizes and colors, lands too multiple to ever fully comprehend, and an intelligence at the core that calls us to interior life and interdependence. Exploring the details of our life allows us to see more clearly and tend to the presence of God in our midst. Tending to God in our lives affords us knowledge about ourselves, while it sustains us and creates us anew. In a garden, tending to the soil and light ultimately provides the nourishment and ability for plants to take root. Like plants, we have places that we dig our life roots into deeply and that nourish us. At different times in our lives, we may take the opportunity to determine if we need additional nutrients, look more closely at the ground of what our life is “growing” in, and pay attention to light sources and the life-giving water available to us.

During the first week of this retreat, you will be noticing and naming your own specific life details. You have a unique life story with a divine thread weaving it together. The meditations for week one are designed to allow you to reflect on the specifics of the life you live and notice what is enriching and worth growing. If your life is a garden...in what type of earth does your garden grow?



### PEONY

*I have a particular fondness for Paeonia lactiflora, the flower commonly known as a peony. For many years I desired to grow a peony in my garden but knew that the coastal climate in southern California would not support a plant needing a sustained period of cold in the winter. I rarely encountered peonies the first thirty years of my life living in California and only admired them through botanical prints, gardening books, photographs, paintings and a few childhood memories.*

*After moving to Colorado, I was delighted to learn that I could grow a number of different flowers—including a peony! Right away I chose a garden location for the peony. But then I discovered hard, lumpy and dry ground. It was disheartening. I did some research and found out that a peony can live fifty years or more, and it was therefore necessary to take time to prepare the soil and location ahead of time. Paeonia lactiflora does not like to be transplanted. Not taking any chances, I watered, turned the earth, added compost and readied the ground for a warm fall day when I could finally plant my first peony. I chose a visible, sunny spot, so that everyone who passed it could enjoy the fleeting beauty of a peony in full bloom.*

*Day 1: Ground of My Being*

For it was you who formed my inward parts;  
you knit me together in my mother's womb.  
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.  
Wonderful are your works;  
that I know very well.  
My frame was not hidden from you,  
when I was being made in secret,  
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.  
(Psalm 139:13–15)

The person you are today has been formed by many elements. Some you have chosen, others you have inherited and, for some, circumstances beyond your control have brought new elements into your life. From a catholic—universal—worldview, all of creation is imbued with the Spirit of God and holds potential and promise. It is from within this context that your retreat reflections begin. Openness to hope, faith and trust in the goodness and

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mercy of God brings fullness of life and unfolding of mystery. God invites us, through regular prayer and even the details of ordinary life, to enter into the process of our own conception.

You are unique, distinct and utterly irreplaceable. There is no other human person who has ever lived in the same way you have or who will live as you have in the future. The magnificence of God is alive within you and has been since the moment of your conception. A unique rhythm and identity that can be claimed only by you resides in your personhood. From the ground of your essence, you are known and embraced by the holy mystery we call God.

Although you may have had life experiences of loneliness, pain or even trauma, and God may have appeared at times to be absent, you have never been truly alone. Every human person is held in this inclusive and primary embrace of the Creator from conception. No one is excluded. Today offers you time to reflect upon the ground of your deepest identity, an identity conceived in God.

### MEDITATION

Sit in stillness, noticing your breath and the unique rhythm of your heartbeat. Imagine yourself held in the embrace of your loving Creator. Enter into prayer with the *lectio divina* process (see guidelines below) using Psalm 139. Read the Scripture slowly, pausing in silence between each verse to ponder the questions and listen to your inner wisdom. Be gentle with yourself and allow any emotions and thoughts to simply rise within your awareness. Take as much time as you desire.

### LECTIO (READING AND LISTENING)

Read the Scripture slowly. Rest in the words. What word, phrase or image captures your attention?

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### *MEDITATIO* (MEDITATION)

Read the Scripture once again. Sit silently. What meaning comes to you from the words you hear or the image you encounter?

### *ORATIO* (PRAYER)

Again, read the Scripture. What rises within you that you want to speak to God about? Share your thoughts and feelings in a conversation with God, just as you would with any friend. Listen to any new awareness you may become conscious of.

### *CONTEMPLATIO* (CONTEMPLATION)

Read the Scripture slowly. Rest silently in God's loving presence. Make journal entries about any insights or feelings that rise within you. Conclude by reading the Scripture one last time, pause, and then from your heart offer a spontaneous prayer to God for the time you have shared together.

### *Day 2: Ground of My Individuality*

How beautiful you are, my love,  
how very beautiful! (Song of Solomon 4:1a)

Each of us is born in a particular place, at an exact time in history. A part of our humanness is inherited genetically and other parts are shaped by environment and circumstance. Our personalities are formed from the moment we enter the light of the universe and are unique to each human person.

Some parts of identity cannot be changed. Race, ethnic origin and the time period into which we are born remain the same throughout a lifetime. Other elements may change. These include our physical ability, social and economic status, religious affiliation, likes, dislikes and even the ways we play, work and serve one another. We may be pleased or even frustrated with any one of the inner qualities and outer expressions of that identity. But,

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we discover our own identity as we learn to love one another and ourselves, and as we delight in the differences and commonalities of individual personalities.

Each person has a distinctive personality that brings a rich garden of diversity and experience into their families and communities. Belief systems, the culture one lives in and one's own unique life experiences shape and form the soul. All human persons have a beauty within that they express through actions and in relationship with others. God contemplates every person's inner beauty with reverence. God invites us to know each other and ourselves with the same sense of wonder and awe.

### MEDITATION

To begin, sit quietly and simply feel your breath rise and fall in your belly for three minutes. Become attentive to any points of gentleness or tension you feel in your body.

Spend some time in reflection with these questions:

- I have personal characteristics that I inherited genetically. Are there five genetic characteristics that I like and five that I am not so happy about?
- I also have personal qualities that have developed over my lifetime. What are seven things I like about myself and seven pesky qualities that are like stubborn weeds in my life?
- How do I experience living inside of my own skin? Is my body a place of comfort, suffering, joy or ease? Has age, ability, disability or illness affected my life? Do I feel grounded in myself? How do I love to express who I am in my body—now and as a child?

To conclude, pause for one minute of gentle breathing and then, using your imagination, feel Jesus place his hand over your heart, look you in the eyes and say, "I love you."

*Day 3: Ground of My Family Story*

Like abundant leaves on a spreading tree  
that sheds some and puts forth others,  
so are the generations of flesh and blood:  
one dies and another is born. (Sirach 14:18)

Within the human family every person is born into a family of origin and may one day create a family of his or her own. Throughout our lives we interact with other groups of people that are either related by birth or desire. Within the context of our family of origin or adoptive family, we experience a grounding of identity and a safe place to call home. Sadly, many people miss the opportunity of vital bonding at a young age. Others may spend much of their life in a family touched by tragedy, divorce or discord. Whatever our circumstances, we have a human family story that influences our identity.

A family story may include treasured memories and relatives. Cultural aspects of ethnicity and nationality may be strong touchstones. Our birth order and the places where we live and travel add dimensions to our story. Within each of us is a family dream and reality. Today will be spent recollecting the ground in which our life story began.

MEDITATION

For prayer today you will need your driver's license or photo identification card. You may also choose to gather any other important papers, such as a birth certificate, baptismal certificate, marriage license or passport.

Begin a time of silence for two or more minutes with this prayer:

*Here I am. I come before you, O Holy God, to listen, to explore more fully the mystery of who I am, and the grounding of my life on earth.*

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Hold your driver's license or another important document that reveals on paper something of who you are. Gaze with new eyes at what you hold in your hands. Remember you are so much more than the words or images you see on paper.

Reflect upon the following questions and choose a few to write about in your journal:

- What is the full name recorded on my birth certificate? Is there a story to the name chosen for me? Do I have a nickname?
- When was I born? Where? What are the names of my parents? If I am adopted, do I know the names of my birth parents? Who are my grandparents?
- What are three stories I remember from my early life? Do I have treasured stories from the life of my mother or father?
- Who are the other members of my family? Do I have brothers or sisters? Pets? Who are my aunts, uncles and cousins? What do I want to remember about them?
- Are there cultural aspects to my story that are important to me? Was a religious practice part of my heritage?
- What are happy and sad memories from my younger years? Where did I live in my childhood and teen years? Do I have a favorite memory from a home or outdoor garden I visited or played in?
- Have I helped to create a family at my present age? Who is included in my family? What struggles and joys are associated with my family of origin or family of choice?

Offer a simple thank-you to God for the life you have been given, for the things you have chosen for yourself, for the things others have chosen for you and for the circumstances that have occurred over which you had no control. God is with you, always.

*Day 4: Ground of Permanent Commitments*

But as for that [seed] in the good soil, these are the ones who, when they hear the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patient endurance. (Luke 8:15)

Through personal choice or circumstances we have permanent commitments in life that are made with visible or invisible vows. A permanent commitment can be to a relationship with a spouse, partner, child, particular vocation, organization or social concern for the world. We can make an enduring choice to live a life grounded in God's embrace. Our lasting commitments frame our future choices and freedom. We not only make permanent commitments; the ideal model of permanent commitment makes visible God's action. God created a covenant with us—a promise to be our God in spite of our sin and betrayal. God's vow will last throughout all time, promising fullness of life, redemption and jubilation. Through God's covenant with us, we are shown how to live in trust and permanence in spite of hardship or suffering. We are blessed indeed.

Emotions and thoughts about our permanent commitments can ebb and flow. Our permanency of heart is what matters in the end. Permanent commitments can free us to love in ways we have never imagined and can change through death, our own difficult choices or the decisions of others. The effects can be long lasting. The ending of a permanent commitment can be devastating or liberating. How we choose to respond is what makes the difference in our ability to either embrace life joyfully or with resentment, bitterness and anger. In all of our permanent commitments, God invites us to generosity of heart and single-minded love. Then the ground of permanency invades our soul, softens our heart and allows us to love more deeply.

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### MEDITATION

Today spend time identifying and reflecting upon the permanent commitments in your life. You may consider gathering some favorite photographs of people you love and who bring energy and delight to your life. You might also gather any jewelry or other symbols that represent your permanent commitments. Light a candle, breathe quietly and just notice the symbols and how they speak to you today.

We all make visible and invisible vows to God, ourselves, others, places, things and organizations. In your journal record three or more of your permanent commitments.

For each commitment, ask yourself: Do I embrace this commitment with generosity, perseverance or resentment?

Choose three permanent commitments and write in your journal about how each is important to you and about the positive aspects you offer to these commitments.

### PRAYER

*Creator of the Universe, Giver of Life, in the beginning you created the world and it is good! Your commitment to humanity brought forth the birth of Jesus the Christ, who in turn sent the Holy Spirit, our Advocate, to be with us through the end of time.*

*Help me to perceive the life-giving dimensions of my permanent commitments and to prepare the ground of my heart and actions with a generous, persevering heart so that luscious fruits for the world may be brought to life through my visible and invisible vows and your promise of love.*

### *Day 5: Ground of God in My Story*

And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and

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alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

(Matthew 3:16–17)

Named or unnamed, God has been showing up in history since the beginning of time and in your life story since your conception. Some of us begin to formally encounter religious institutions at an early age, even in infancy. Others make choices to participate in religion at a later age, and still others experience a deep spirituality separate from any faith community or religious organization. In your own life story you can recall times when you connected with God and other times when the idea may have seemed irrelevant. In all likelihood you would not be holding this book and reading this reflection if you were not, in some way, responding to a spiritual invitation or yearning for a deeper spiritual connection.

Our spiritual journey has an energy that grows and matures through our lifetime. In every world religion there are stages to the spiritual journey that invite growth, personal responsibility and commitment to a purpose beyond oneself. The nature of God is to be generative and self-giving. From a Catholic perspective we are born into God’s embrace and baptized into an eternal embrace by a Trinitarian God mediated by Jesus Christ. Many of us experience the sacrament of baptism at birth with a decision an adult makes for us, but some of us experience it at a later age through a personal decision.

Our God story is multidimensional and grounded in our own experience. Formative people guide and inspire us. Paula D’Arcy, a writer and retreat leader, recently said in a talk: “God comes to you disguised as your life.”<sup>2</sup> When we open our hearts and minds to a personal experience of God amidst our everyday life, astonishing things occur. We will gently discover that our God story expands and influences our identity and ability to give ourselves to the world with passion and purpose.