

# My theatre of pleasure and adoration

Jürgen Schönwetter

**I** love the rawness of nature. My mother cultivated a large garden and introduced me to gardening at an early age. Of course, in post-war East Germany, cultivating a garden was more than a pleasant pastime. It was survival. My family grew vegetables and raised animals out of necessity.

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When Germany lost the war in 1945, eastern Germany was under Soviet-Russian occupation. My father decided to stay in American-controlled West Germany, away from vengeful Soviet authorities. He had had a key position in the German armed forces. Because her husband was beyond the reach of the authorities and could not be prosecuted

himself, Mother was sentenced by the Soviets to three years in a forced labour camp.

With our parents gone, my siblings and I lived in the slums of the city of Naumburg, in Saxony. The Soviets were determined to make life absolutely miserable for us. From the age of eight until I was about twelve, I was so undernourished that the state had to step in to keep me from total starvation. Under these circumstances, I learned to love gardening. Although there was little room for aesthetics, even then my engagement with nature was more than utilitarian.

## **Pleasure and the discovery of the Ultimate**

I take real pleasure in observing the growth and development of plants, any plants. My preference has been to grow plants I can eat. I am a grazer. Moving around in the garden and munching on herbs or vegetables gives me great pleasure and satisfies my cravings. That's my delight!

I cannot recall any period of my life when I did not have my hands—and heart—in soil. Even living in an apartment did not keep me away from my hobby. Landlords gladly accommodated my desire to get my fingernails dirty.

Before I came to Canada, my eyes were not opened to see the ultimate Source of all life. I considered myself agnostic, at best. For lack of evidence, I did not believe in God. That outlook changed during my early years in Vancouver, BC. Through Menonites, I met God in a life-changing encounter. The initial connection with the divine sparked in me a passion to know more and to fill the void of my ignorance, especially about God.

In the past, I had often wanted to bring my gratitude and appreciation to a higher being. I did not know how to do so. As I became aware that I am a child of God, my worship came to include the God of my sacred space, the garden. My ever-growing relationship with God is fed not only by reading and study but also by my realization of and appreciation for the miracle of life.

For me, gardening is a workshop of the Holy Spirit. I love singing there. My favourites include Ervin Drake's "I believe" ("Every time I hear a newborn baby cry, or touch a leaf, or see the sky, then I know why I believe"), and Brian Doerksen's songs "Creation calls" ("How could I say there is no God when all around creation calls ...") and "I believe, I believe, I believe" ("Snowflakes, gently falling, falling, each unique, whispering 'Remember the mercy of God ... remember the mercy ... ' covering the world in white and then the quiet, quiet, quiet of creation at rest").

## **Retirement**

When I retired, Columbia Bible College gave me a monetary gift. There were strings attached, though. I needed to let my colleagues know what my retirement project would be, for which this monetary gift would be used. I decided that it would go toward the construction of a greenhouse. The amount received from the college was a down-payment for an eight-by-ten-foot structure erected in our backyard.

Retirement now provides ample time for gardening—and contemplation. I have the time and interest to think more about what I am doing and what is actually happening before my eyes.

Conscience does not prick; no voice says, “You need to do more ‘spiritual’ things.” The results of my contemplation in this lively space are amazing. My observation and activity bring meaning to my life. I pray more; I praise more.

## Varieties

We have the urge to create order and uniformity in our immediate environment. But I have observed that in creation, God seems to love variety. I discovered that there are more than two hundred kinds of heritage or heirloom tomatoes. I have grown more than thirty varieties of these beauties. Shapes, sizes, colours, textures, tastes—you name it, we can grow it. Wandering through the

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jungle of my tomato plants, I am impressed with these different plants and their fruits. Their variety alone makes for a rich conversation with friends and strangers alike.

## Miracle

Tiny seeds turn into large plants with flowers and fruit, plants many times larger than the seeds. Soil, seemingly lifeless, becomes the environment for germination and growth and the eventual harvest of precious fruit. New shoots, so miniscule, so fragile, so unassuming, grow into three-metre plants. I feel

excitement when I stretch to harvest the ripened fruit—the small, the medium sized, the large, and the extra large. Each time I begin planting seeds into small containers, I feel almost naïve, believing that plants and fruit will come out of something so small and unassuming. But they do—most of the time.

## Appearance

Heritage or heirloom tomatoes by nature rarely turn out to be perfect in looks. The big growers develop hybrids to create near-perfect fruit, designer products. Their research is driven by consumers’ desire for flawless fruit of the expected shape, size, texture, appearance. Taste is sacrificed for all that. Looks are everything!

I look around me, and people are everywhere. They are different. In appearance, are there perfect human beings? Perhaps, but

they are few and far between. The cosmetics industry thrives as people pay a high price to look perfect on the outside.

It has been my life goal to do my best in my work. I have always aimed for excellence, but not for perfection. I believe our best is not good enough before God. But that is OK. God does not demand perfection. Look at nature, with all its evidence of imperfection. So I grow a variety of tomatoes that in appearance are imperfect. Oh yes, there are the occasional beauties—don't get me wrong. And when I collect seeds, I harvest them from the near-perfect specimens. The plant and its fruit need to be high quality to justify my perpetuating them.

### **God's junior partner**

A hobby gardener was busy in his garden. A passer-by stopped in amazement. She marvelled at the excellent condition of the garden. The flowers and vegetables were in immaculate condi-

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tion. "Amazing what God has created," said the passer-by. The gardener replied, "You should have seen this garden when God had it. Weeds grew everywhere. A total mess."

I have come to realize that my stewardship of nature is grounded in a worldview: I am God's junior partner. We are invited to assist God in taking care of the nature of which we are an integral part. We are more than spectators; we are participants. We help shape our surroundings. Perhaps that is part of what it

means to be made in the image of God. With this outlook, I would find it hard to exploit and destroy the very environment that nourishes me. God provides the ingredients, the potentials: the soil, the seeds, the promises of weather and seasons. We are allowed to use these properties.

### **Dependence**

I have learned to recognize my insignificance in the process of growing things. Although I work hard to do my part, I realize how dependent I am on God's provisions and mercy. Unless I have the right conditions, the germination factor in the seeds, I utterly fail in my attempts, however ardent my toil.

## **The cacophony of chirps**

I am not alone when I work in the garden. Although I live in suburbia, birds are constant companions. Annie and I take pleasure in having the winged animals around us. Because we like birds, we do not have pets such as cats or dogs.

With the first snow, I get bird feeders ready on our small deck. Birds are our delight. Not always, though. Sitting around our kitchen table, we can observe the variety of birds feeding and fighting. My observations of this microenvironment opened my eyes to how God may feel about us. We make our house and yard available to these critters. It is our seeds and feeders that provide nourishment in times of winter deficiencies. All the birds that come are total strangers. They fight over the food, although there is plenty. Often I hear myself mutter, “That’s not fair! You cannot fight over food that is not yours!” I can see absolutely no need for their aggression.

The birds do not seem to appreciate our generosity. They offer us no thank-you. The survival of the fittest and strongest—of the most aggressive—plays out before our eyes. Sometimes I scheme about interfering in their competition. I wonder, does God have similar feelings about us?

## **So what?**

I am so glad I was born with a passion for growing things. That passion was nourished by my mother and is shared by my wife. How privileged I was in realizing my desire to have a garden even when I was a renter. My love—and my disappointments—have prepared me for a retirement of meaningful and pleasurable engagement with the natural environment. My hobby brings not only enjoyment but also a harvest I can eat. Most of all, as I garden I continue to discover the Source of all life and growth—and death. I stand in awe and worship.

## **About the author**

Jürgen and Annie (Isaak) Schönwetter have two adult children and four grandchildren. Jürgen has served as a pastor for thirteen years and taught at the college level for twenty-four. He lives in Abbotsford, BC, where he is a member of Emmanuel Mennonite Church.