

God in the Garden: Earthy Encounters with Food and Faith

A Summer At Shalom Farms

Claire Hitchins

Preface

This summer I had the great privilege of working with Shalom Farms, a faith-based nonprofit community farm project responding to food insecurity in the Richmond area, particularly its low-income urban neighborhoods. I came across Shalom Farms as a second-year at UVA just beginning to delve into the complexities of the American food system and the wonders and horrors of modern agriculture. Dominic Barrett, the Executive Director of Shalom Farms, visited my Food Justice group independent study seminar to lead a discussion of food access and the ethical and spiritual dimensions of farming. At the time I was contemplating declaring a major in Religious Studies and preparing to take on the role of summer manager in the student-run UVA Community Garden of which I was (and still am) an eager participant. I was thoroughly captivated by the idea of a farm rooted in social justice working to make our broken food system more whole and holy. I was amazed by the marriage of two of my greatest interests – food and faith – so fruitfully embodied in the work of this organization. Working with Shalom Farms this summer has left me no less captivated, no less amazed, by their brave mission and their good work.

Shalom Farms began in 2008 as one facet of the United Methodist Urban Ministries of Richmond, an ambitious effort of Richmond congregations to provide food, education,

housing, health, and faith support to communities in low-income neighborhoods of Richmond. The farm project, forty minutes west of Richmond in Goochland County, held such promise that in 2010 it became the sole focus of UMUMR, providing 16,000 pounds of organically grown produce to the Central Virginia Food Bank and a vast network of other partners. In 2011 cultivation expanded and production doubled, enabling greater breadth and depth of impact. The abundant harvest advanced Shalom's goals of providing fresh healthy produce to underserved communities, creating educational opportunities for youth and adults in growing food, nutrition, and food-based entrepreneurship, and linking community groups to a network of food security resources and partners. This year Shalom, now producing on a little less than four acres, has already grown 26,000 pounds and will likely exceed 45,000. Put in terms of servings the numbers are fairly staggering – those 26,000 pounds generate roughly 65,000 servings of nutritious vegetables and fruit. But as I've learned through my internship with Shalom, this food represents much more than raw nutrients to the communities that receive it.

My work this summer was rich and varied, truly challenging and deeply nourishing. Spending half my time on the farm with the Farm Manager, Steven Miles, and half in the city with the Executive Director, Dominic Barrett, provided a wonderful blend of experiences and an opportunity to see many sides of the food justice issue. As I read, discussed, and blogged my way through these experiences, they took on even greater meaning, becoming occasions for theological, ethical, and spiritual reflection. The nine weeks of my internship were blessed by encouraging, inspiring, caring people, countless grace-filled moments, endless fodder for theological thought and, at every turn, God in the garden, alive and active in His good Creation.

What follows is an account of my summer with Shalom Farms presented in four movements: serving the soil, sowing the seed, keeping vigil, and sharing the harvest. Each of these movements lends itself to agricultural and theological reflection, unfolding in succession as an earthy sort of liturgy. I have chosen this framework as one that provides both the liberty to move freely between various facets of my internship – both the agricultural and the theological, as well as the intellectual, the practical, the spiritual, the political, the personal, the relational – and the structure to distill some possible meaning, allowing a few broad themes to emerge. Running throughout this account is a testament to the complexity of relationships connecting, surrounding, and thoroughly permeating Creator, Creation, creature and community, food, farming, eating and feeding, work, plentitude, praise and mystery. I hope that my earthy encounters presented here offer an invitation to greet God in the garden, and at the table. It is with deep gratitude that I share these experiences and reflections from my summer internship with Shalom Farms and the Project on Lived Theology.

Serving the Soil

And God set the human being into the garden to serve it and to preserve it.
– Genesis 2:15

The land is mine and you are but aliens and my tenants. Throughout the country that you hold as a possession, you must provide for the redemption of the land.
– Leviticus 25:23

This summer I developed a real reverence for soil. I had at least some sense of the soil's importance before working at Shalom, gleaned from my experience with the UVA Community Garden and combined with whatever knowledge I still retain from 3rd grade science. But soil *reverence* is best learned on a farm. And an organic or ecological farm at

that. “Organic” or “ecological” or “good” farming is often characterized in terms of what it does *not* do – it does not use harmful chemical pesticides, herbicides or fungicides, it does not use synthetic fertilizers, it does not use genetically modified seed. But what allows it to abstain from those destructive and inharmonious methods is what it *does*. My boss at the farm, Steve, always says that what good farming *does* is orient itself to maintaining the health of the soil.

Soil – that infinitesimally intricate web of relationships between organic matter, minerals, and millions upon millions of insects, fungi, bacteria and other microorganisms – that living breathing substrate that recycles death and decay into life-sustaining nutrients, making those nutrients, and water, available for plants – is a truly miraculous thing.

Wendell Berry puts it beautifully and reverentially:

The soil is the great connector of lives, the source and destination of all. It is the healer and restorer and resurrector, by which disease passes into health, age into youth, death into life...without proper care for it we can have no life.¹

What constitutes “proper care” is summed up in the calling of the good farmer – to serve and preserve the soil.

That language of “serve and preserve” I borrow from an essay I read this summer called “And the Land I Will Remember.” In the essay Ellen Davis offers a poignant exegesis of Genesis 2:15, in which we read what is perhaps, “the first statement about human vocation.”² Davis explains that the Hebrew verbs *’avad* and *shamar* that describe what the first humans are to do in the garden, typically translated “to till and to tend,” have more complex meanings than the conventional translation would suggest. *’Avad* connotes a reverence not adequately conveyed by “to till.” The verb, occasionally used in reference to

¹ Berry, *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture*, 87.

² Davis, *Wendell Berry and Religion: Heaven’s Earthly Life*, 122.

work done *on* or *with* soil, much more frequently describes ones action toward God or some other master – to work *for*, to serve, even to worship in the sense of acknowledging worth. Additionally the verb that follows, *shamar*, means “to keep,” almost always in reference to upholding, observing, or preserving God’s commands. Davis illuminates how from the outset humankind’s obedience to God is intimately tied to humankind’s proper relationship with the soil, the garden, the land. Davis calls this “the primacy of the land”³ and it is a theme that unfolds throughout the Old Testament, in which “land is the earnest of the covenant, the tangible sign and consequence of God’s commitment to the people Israel”⁴ and also the primary gauge of Israel’s faithfulness to the covenant.

Thus, farming holds great theological significance when viewed in light of Salvation History. *Good* farming, farming that serves the soil and preserves it, enacts a proper relationship of human with Creation and Creator, responding to that call to “provide for the redemption of the land”⁵ and the liberation of creation.⁶ As for how one goes about serving and preserving the soil practically, that is a matter I am scarcely equipped to address with only nine weeks of farming experience behind me. I learned first-hand some fundamentals of soil preserving techniques at Shalom – crop rotation, cover cropping, gentle tilling, letting beds “rest” every so often – but probably the most important thing I learned is that I have much left to learn.

If I want to become a good farmer, I know that not knowing is something I ought to become familiar with. A good farmer knows there is *always* much left to learn. That, I think, gets to the heart of what it means to “serve” the soil. It is when we think ourselves wise and

³ Ibid., 121

⁴ Ibid., 120

⁵ Leviticus 25:23

⁶ Romans 8:21

powerful that we begin to expect the soil to serve *us* and fall down the slippery slope of soil exploitation – planting fertility-exhausting monocultures, relentlessly adding synthetic fertilizers whose salt content perpetuates the sterility they aim to reverse, tirelessly combating disease and insects with ever increasing application of toxic chemicals with ever decreasing efficacy. The alternative is a posture of humility, “literally, the quality of being thoroughly ‘grounded,’ connected in mind as well as body to the humus from which human life is drawn.”⁷

In bending down and grounding ourselves deeply in the earth, it becomes apparent that we are quite small, quite ignorant, quite incapable of grasping the utter mystery of the intricate relationships that sustain life. And at the same time that posture readies us to receive. Norman Wirzba describes this transformation in his essay “The Dark Night of the Soil.” He writes, “When we bend down, what we are, in fact, doing is signifying a humble disposition that is prepared to learn from creation and is willing to be taught in the ways of interdependent living.”⁸ Wirzba writes of the “need to become ‘apprentices’ to creation, by learning to know the world as best we can and then cooperate in its processes.”⁹ In this way, farming can become a spiritual practice in which we “tune our living so as to be in harmony with God’s life-giving presence among us.”¹⁰ Serving and preserving the soil prepares the soil of the soul to bare fruits of humility, selflessness, and surrender to mystery, as God, who planted the first garden in the beginning of time, nurtures his creation in us, cultivating our lives to bare witness to His goodness.

⁷ Davis, *Wendell Berry and Religion: Heaven’s Earthly Life*, 124.

⁸ Wirzba, *Wendell Berry and Religion: Heaven’s Earthly Life*, 158.

⁹ Wirzba, *Wendell Berry and Religion: Heaven’s Earthly Life*, 154.

¹⁰ Wirzba, *Wendell Berry and Religion: Heaven’s Earthly Life*, 152.

As a final note on serving the soil, I'd like to reflect briefly on the gritty reality of farming. It is very easy to romanticize farming and, as a lover of pastoral poetry, a keeper of idealistic notions of agrarian life, and a hopeless romantic, I am particularly adept at such romanticizing. There were moments this summer that affirmed my romantic tendencies – seeing smiles spread across kids' faces, eyes widening as they pulled carrots out of the ground; watching the greenhouse fill with tiny sprouting cabbage, kale, and chard where only days before there was nothing but black plastic flats filled with dirt and impossibly small seeds; eating plump blackberries and raspberries straight off the bush. And there were moments that sent such rose-tinted notions flying into the putrid compost pile – planting cucumber after cucumber, squash after squash, in hundred degree weather, back and knees aching from hours of kneeling in the dirt; collecting crow-pecked watermelons from the patch and trying unsuccessfully to avoid both the fermenting juices that pour out of their rotting rinds and the swarming bees those juices attract; watching entire beds of plants wither and die practically before my eyes from sudden blight or downy mildew or an irrigation system failure. Farming in the summer in central Virginia, provided me a healthy dose of realism.

Sometimes soil is poetry for the soul and serving it is a transcendent experience. But most of the time soil is just under your fingernails and clinging to the sunscreen and sweat on every exposed inch of your skin, and serving it is just hard work. It's not beautiful or poetic. It's definitely not romantic. And it's hard to imagine how it could be spiritual. But what serving the soil really means is acknowledging that even the most mundane realities are pregnant with mystery. Even the most menial farm work serves a deeply worthwhile purpose. Even what seems inconsequential has great value. There is a beautiful poem by

Mary Oliver in which she writes, “everything is nourishment / somehow or another.”¹¹ I think that is a perfect description of the miracle of soil. It is profoundly indiscriminate. The soil receives everything as nourishment, everything as a gift. Serving the soil means learning to do the same.

Sowing the Seed

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.

—Matthew 13:31-32

He replied, “If you have faith even as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it will obey you.

—Luke 17:6

I remember a conversation I had with Steve and a co-intern, Kaylee, early on in my internship. We were talking about the spiritual virtues that are nourished in the discipline of farming – things like patience, humility, attentiveness, gratitude, and generosity. We wondered if the people who visit Shalom Farms only once or a handful of times could undergo such a transformation. At some point in the conversation we started talking about how, although it is unlikely a brief encounter with the farm could cultivate those longer gestating virtues, it certainly could (and hopefully does) “plant a seed.” Hopefully, experiencing the beauty and bounty and magic of the farm, even briefly, “plants a seed” of wonder or hope, an idea or a vision, a bit of knowledge, a broadened awareness, a piqued interest. If Shalom Farms is to make a lasting difference in the food system, these kinds of seeds are as necessary as the seeds sown in hundred-cell flats in a mixture of potting soil, perlite and vermiculite and set in the greenhouse to germinate.

¹¹ Oliver, *Evidence*, 36.

Growing healthy local produce for the urban Richmond community is an important part of Shalom's work, but it is only one part. People who talk about food justice often delineate the terms *availability* and *access*. Even if healthy food is *available* in a particular area – that is, there is a sufficient quantity of it on a consistent basis – it still might not be *accessible* to the people in that area. Barriers to access come in all forms. There are the more obvious ones like location, affordability, and time. If there is a grocery store stocked with fresh produce but it is too far away to get to, or you can't afford those products, or you don't have the time to make the trip or do the necessary preparation or cooking, that food isn't accessible. There are also the subtle cultural and personal barriers of exposure, awareness and perceived value. If none of those first barriers pose a challenge but you don't know the importance of eating fresh produce, or don't know how to prepare it, or don't see fresh produce as something valuable or worthwhile enough to buy, prepare and eat, that food is likewise inaccessible. This summer I got to learn about these barriers and participate in Shalom Farms' efforts to overcome them.

One of those barrier-breaking efforts is inviting groups and individuals to visit to the farm. This can begin a process of broadening awareness and shaping values. In a book I read this summer called *Super, Natural Christians*, the author Sallie McFague writes, "We do not care about what we do not know."¹² The knowing she's talking about here is a personal, relational, experiential one. One of the major symptoms and sources of brokenness of the modern food system is the great separation and alienation of people from the source of their food. There is something healing and restorative about meeting your food at its source, experiencing the energy of growing things, the generosity of plant and soil. Seeing that phenomenon unfold as I worked alongside farm visitors and volunteers was a deeply

¹² McFague, *Super, Natural Christians: How we should love nature*, 118.

gratifying part of my internship. I was amazed so many times by the excitement kids show for eating vegetables they have personally yanked out of the ground, cut off the vine, or plucked off the bush. I remember one young boy, a self-proclaimed tomato hater, who said he surprised himself by wanting to try the tomatoes he helped harvest. Sometimes it seemed that just being out in there in the open on the farm could make a person more open-minded. McFague says it well, “The interior landscape *is* influenced by the exterior.”¹³ Hopefully the landscape of the farm leaves a small imprint, a little seed, in the heart or mind, stomach or soul of every person that visits.

Shalom plants a lot of seeds beyond the farm. Outreach, education, and relationship building efforts in the city of Richmond all represent opportunities to sow seeds of community empowerment and food system transformation. Shalom Farms’ diverse network of partners range from development centers that offer cooking classes, to churches and other organizations that hold community meals, to schools and recreation centers with their own urban garden plots. It was a gift to get to witness so many different community responses to poverty and hunger and collaborate with the passionate people who devote themselves to that work. While half of Shalom’s produce goes to the Central Virginia Food Bank, helping to meet immediate need and address the availability piece of the food justice puzzle, the other half goes even further in the able hands of these organizations to increase *access*. It is through these critical partnerships that Shalom Farms produce becomes seeds of systemic change in the Richmond food system, hopefully one day making the food bank obsolete. One of Shalom Farms’ own alternative distribution methods is their youth-run farm stand program, where kids sell Shalom Farms produce in their community at prices their neighbors can afford. Much of my internship was spent running a farm stand with the

¹³ Ibid., 123

elementary and middle school students at the Neighborhood Resource Center in Greater Fulton, a low-income neighborhood on the East End of Richmond. The farm stand is both a fun opportunity for the kids who participate to learn about fresh produce, nutrition, agriculture and food-based entrepreneurship, and a convenient source of affordable high-quality fruits and vegetables for the neighborhood. The program is still in its germination phase, but the unique power of children to be seeds of change in their neighborhood gives me great hope.

Beyond all these sowing metaphors, I did plant some actual seeds in the city this summer. Shalom Farms supports urban agriculture efforts in any way possible, helping to initiate and maintain community garden projects. One of my favorite responsibilities as an intern was working in the vegetable garden Shalom Farms put in a year ago at Hotchkiss Field, a parks and recreation center in a low-income neighborhood on Richmond's North Side. There are three inspiring women who are particularly invested in that garden. They are seeds in their own right, seeds of hope and healing in their community. Each of them balances full-time work with family, church, and community commitments, devoting what precious time remains in their busy lives to the Hotchkiss garden. Ida checks on the garden every morning while walking her dog and shares what she harvests with coworkers and neighbors. Tamara, who has her green thumbs in more community garden projects than I can ever remember, tweets, blogs, and facebook's all the news from Hotchkiss, and always has some bit of garden wisdom or cooking knowhow to share. Cherylin, a graphic designer, made flyers and posters to get more people involved. The times I spent with these women, planting, building beds, watering, and weeding, were always some of the most blessed moments of my week.

It was there in the Hotchkiss garden that I learned about “seed bombs.” Someone had donated several flats of transplants and amidst them we discovered golf-ball sized clumps of hard dirt, flecked with little pale seeds. We tossed them around our little plot and delighted in wondering what they would yield. The plants are now knee-high and leafy, attracting bees with their delicate purple and white flowers, and our continued musing about just what exactly they are. After a bit of research we now know that those seed-filled dirt clumps were in fact seed bombs, a favorite ammunition of “guerrilla gardeners,” people who transform vacant lots, traffic medians, and any number of other unlikely places into verdant oases in the concrete desert. I love that idea of guerrilla gardening, of trusting in the potential, promise and hope encapsulated in something so very small and unimposing as a seed.

All my work with seeds this summer, both the literal and metaphorical varieties, has brought my thoughts time and again to the image of the mustard seed in the Gospels. Jesus uses the mustard seed as a simile of the Kingdom of God, expressing at once the subtlety of the Kingdom – it is barely perceivable – and the promise of its ever-increasing presence – it is alive and growing even now. On another occasion Jesus teaches that faith, even as tiny as a mustard seed, has enormous power. The beautiful paradox of the mustard seed reveals in both instances that God’s grace is abundant no matter how small the vessel, how subtle the movement. That both faith and the Kingdom are described in terms of the mustard seed leads me to believe that the Kingdom of God *is* the mustard seed faith growing in each of us – that every act of mustard seed faith advances the mustard seed Kingdom. All of the seeds I’ve mentioned – these people and communities, actions and efforts – are really seeds of the Kingdom. All those seeds are sprouting up beauty and truth, peace and justice, love and

healing. They are sowing guerrilla gardens of grace, restoring Creation and cultivating God's Kingdom in our midst.

Keeping Vigil

Behold, the Kingdom of God is in your midst.
– Luke 17:21

Waiting with purpose, patience, hope, and love is *vigilant* waiting.
– Macrina Wiederkehr, *Seven Sacred Pauses*

Working for a farming nonprofit offers nearly constant exercises in waiting – waiting for the proper time to plant, waiting for germination, waiting to see how crops will respond to a new planting, fertilizing, trellising, or pest-defense method, waiting until next season to try a new method, waiting for grant money to come through, waiting for outdated ordinances to change, waiting for community interest to pick up, for ideas to catch on, for paradigms to shift. Waiting is not something that comes naturally for me. I have been well conditioned by the twenty-first century ways of quick and easy, instant, and high-speed. If something is not *immediately* gratifying it's often difficult to imagine how it could be gratifying at all. But these lessons, and so many more, illuminated for me this summer the great value of waiting, not merely as a means to an end, but as a posture for living and a blessed opportunity for transformation.

There are of course ways of waiting that are little more than fretful, anxious and impatient. Experiences of this kind are unlikely to be felt as a blessing or an invitation to transformation. But waiting can be practiced in a particular manner such that waiting becomes keeping vigil. A wonderful spiritual writer, Macrina Wiederkehr, explains,

“Waiting with purpose, patience, hope and love is *vigilant* waiting.”¹⁴ There is a long Biblical precedent for this kind of waiting, beginning perhaps with the Sabbath’s rest. This kind of waiting is a surrender of will, a conformation to a pattern and plan that is not our own. Far from a pitiful self-capitulation, keeping vigil invites us to greater freedom – freedom from worrying about the future, freedom to be faithfully attentive to the blessings and challenges of the present moment. All throughout the Gospels, Jesus speaks of the immanence of the Kingdom. His message is “Get ready!” But it is also “Pay attention!” “The Kingdom of God is in your midst.”¹⁵ The Kingdom is now and not yet, a future hope and a present reality. Keeping vigil orients our lives toward both the expectation of the Kingdom and its presence among us, God’s final plan for His Creation and His creative Spirit continually shaping the world and our lives, even now. Keeping vigil is the dynamic waiting in which our attentiveness to the here and now makes us participants in what it yet to come.

I know that I am goal-oriented. The destination, the arrival, the end, can easily consume my thoughts and energy. But so much of what I experienced and read this summer testified to God’s presence in the process. Two of the theologians whose writings accompanied my work and reflection write extensively on the hand of God in Creation’s continual becoming. Leonardo Boff describes God’s creative action in what he calls the “cosmogenic principle,” that is, “the permanent genesis of the universe at all moments and everywhere.”¹⁶ He explains that “God is identified *in*”¹⁷ that process. The same notion is echoed in a prayer that appears in Pierre Teilhard de Chardin’s *Writings in Time of War*. It

¹⁴ Wiederkehr, *Seven Sacred Pauses*, 34.

¹⁵ Luke 17:21

¹⁶ Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, 146.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 147

reads, "I love you as the source, the activating and life-giving ambience, the term and consummation, of the world, even of the natural world, and of its *process of becoming*."¹⁸

Teilhard also writes, "I am immersed in God's creative action, whose hand has never ceased, from the beginning of time, to mold the human clay that is destined to constitute the Body of his Son."¹⁹ For both of these thinkers, the natural world points to the spiritual reality of God's active presence permeating and shaping Creation. While the destination, the end, the goal – be it perfection, completion, success, or fulfillment – is praiseworthy, to forgo the process is to reject God's presence in and around us *now*, transforming our lives and the world in his eternal creative action. To embrace waiting is to be present to God in the process.

When we keep vigil, our attentiveness makes us aware of both the blessings God speaks into each moment and the ugly realities that mar and muffle those blessings. This is one of the many paradoxes of vigilance – even as it requires that we be fully present to the world as it is, it stirs us to longing for a more just, peaceful, whole and holy reality. It makes us expectant of that new reality, even as it attunes us to the many bright fragments of that future already shining through the present moment. That is very much the experience I had in my work with Shalom Farms. It seemed the closer I paid attention to the communities Shalom Farms serves, the kids that visit the farm and participate in the farm stand program, the broader context of food insecurity, agriculture policy on the national and international scale, the more heartbreaking realities I encountered. But right there amidst them were inexhaustible reasons to trust in the goodness of Creation and Creator. This is what

¹⁸ King, *Pierre Teilhard de Chardin*, 53.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 51.

vigilance is all about – it is faithful attentiveness to the mustard seeds and a lived desire for the whole Kingdom tree, nests in the branches and all.

Sharing the Harvest

...in summer there is
everywhere the luminous sprawl of gifts,
the hospitality of the Lord...
– Mary Oliver, “Six Recognitions of the Lord”

All creatures look to you
To give them their food at the proper time
When you give it to them,
They gather it up;
When you open your hand,
They are satisfied with good things.
– Psalm 107:27-28

For out of His abundance we have all received one grace after another and spiritual blessing upon spiritual blessing and even favor upon favor and gift heaped upon gift.
– John 1:16

In his essay, “The Body and the Earth,” Wendell Berry writes, “To be healed we must come with all the other creatures to the feast of Creation.”²⁰ In my work with Shalom Farms this summer, I truly experienced Creation as a feast, a bountiful harvest, to be shared in the great community of all creatures. Farming is a wonderful way to learn about the abundance of Creation and the radical generosity of the Creator. From the miraculous fertility of soil and the experience of being fed by the earth, to the humble and noble task of feeding another and the joy of sharing a meal, everything in these life-sustaining processes of sacrifice and gift point to God’s loving provision for His creatures. Norman Wirzba, in the introduction to his book *Food and Faith*, writes of the hidden but powerful pronouncement of God’s grace made manifest in the cultivation and consumption of food:

...food is one of God’s basic and abiding means for expressing divine provision and care. To partake of a meal is to participate in a divine communication... To grow

²⁰ Berry, *The Art of the Commonplace*, 99.

food and eat in a way that is mindful of God is to collaborate with God's own primordial sharing of life in the sharing of food with each other. It is to participate in forms of life and frameworks of meaning that have their root and orientation in God's caring ways with creation.²¹

More than anything, my internship with Shalom Farms and the Project on Lived Theology affirmed God's divine provision, grace after grace, blessing upon blessing, favor upon favor, gift heaped upon gift.

²¹ Wizba, *Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating*, xii.

Acknowledgements

I cannot thank my theological mentor, Steven Miles, enough for so generously sharing with me his time, earnest questions, and humble wisdom in matters of farming, faith, and life. My boss and friend, Dominic Barrett, taught me more than he realizes. His devotion to his work, his love for humanity and his enormous energy for life provide an endless source of inspiration. For that I am deeply grateful. Many thanks to Shea Tuttle for her direction, encouragement, and sincere interest in my personal, academic, and professional wellbeing. Thank you to Charles Marsh and the Project on Lived Theology for entrusting me with the gift of this internship. My co-interns filled this summer with sweet memories and laughter – thank you, Lauren and Kaylee. Thank you to Tamara, Ida, and Cherylin at the Hotchkiss Community Garden and to Penny and all the wonderful people at the Neighborhood Resource Center for watering my mustard seed faith. I am so very grateful to Stacy, Pierce and Anna for giving me a home in Richmond. Thank you, Mom and Dad for your love, support, and beautiful faith witness.

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