

## being ... here ... now ... in the garden

Welcome, as we continue to think about being - and being well – here and now. This time around you're invited to join in appreciating, and connecting with, the much larger web of natural life that we're part of. A short padkos mailing like this can't do more than hint at the width and the depth of our connectedness with all forms of life in nature, and of the deeply restorative and transformative possibilities it might offer.

In important ways of course, the COVID-19 pandemic has shown the dark shadow of that inescapable connection we have. Modernity and capitalism constantly poison that relationship with a relentless logic that drives alienation and exploitation, domination and profit. But we also break that morbid logic in our shared human wonder and awe in the web of non-human life and nature; we break that logic when we insist that our reliance on that planetary web of life for the air we breathe, the water we drink, the food we eat and share, should express the values of life and regeneration, of common sharing and solidarity. As Pope Francis recently commented at the launch of the Vatican's seven-year *Laudato si'* action plan: "We need a new ecological approach that can transform our way of dwelling in the world, our styles of life, our relationship with the resources of the Earth and, in general, our way of looking at humanity and of living life"<sup>1</sup>.

In this edition then, let's take a look through the window of gardening to remember important parts of our individual and social humanity, and to re-affirm ways of being in the world that embrace the symbiosis between human and other forms of natural life. So whether it's taking a mindful walk through a public park, or tending a herb plant or vegetable seedlings on a window-sill, whether you're taking care of a garden, or noticing the push of green shoots and weeds against urban sterility, or just surrendering to the green peace of a nature reserve, the possibility of connecting to nature can be made real – even though in our country, as elsewhere, access to 'green space', as well as the quality of green space most easily available, is unfairly rigged along class and race contours. Research by Zander Venter of the Norwegian Institute for Nature Research (2020) demonstrated this persistent 'green apartheid' graphically. Venter argued that "[i]t takes a bird's eye view to fully appreciate it"<sup>2</sup>. Satellite images and drone footage are illuminating the full extent of South Africa's 'green apartheid' – the uneven distribution of city trees, greenery and parks across racial and income geographies". Venter (2020) went on to point out that: "Green spaces like parks and green belts have positive effects on physical fitness, mental health, social cohesion and spiritual wellness. City trees reduce extreme temperatures, mitigate flooding and clean the air of harmful pollutants. Even just looking at a tree can have psychological benefits"<sup>3</sup>.

Indeed, in our pamphlet *In, Against, and Beyond Corona* last year we argued that the COVID crisis raises again the question: "what is the appropriate human and ecological scale and patterning for co-living and settlement if we want to achieve a convivial, healthful and sustainable future for human society? Far too many people live in overly-crowded urban settlements with distressingly too little space for connections with nature – plants, birds, insects, and the like (gardens, allotments, vegetable gardens, common green spaces, wild spaces and so on). The separation of humans from our connectedness with the rest of nature is very damaging to our whole human being." All these factors underscore the growing urgency of developing a 'biophilic' approach to human settlements, and of 're-wilding' our existing villages, towns and cities<sup>4</sup>.

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1 <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/247777/pope-francis-launches-7-year-laudato-si-action-plan>

2 See also: <https://unequalscenes.com/south-africa>

3 <https://theconversation.com/we-mapped-green-spaces-in-south-africa-and-found-a-legacy-of-apartheid-143036>

In *In, Against, and Beyond Corona* (CLP 2019) we also included

“Nomfundo Xolo’s account of collective food production at the shack settlement of eKhenana. ... The people of eKhenana were central to our recent Church Land Programme research report on brutal waves of attacks and evictions targeting shack settlements in the city of eThekweni/Durban. Little has been more toxic during this period than the inhumanity and violence of this campaign of violence waged against poor people. And yet, not only do the people remain, and not only do they defend and rebuild, they are also engaged in a programme of collective thought and of food production”.

An unpublished note, written during the hard lockdown period of 2020, “*fieldwork in a time of corona*” (June 2020, CLP), documented the terrible socio-economic-nutritional impacts people were experiencing. But CLP fieldworkers noted that “[a]n important outlier response was recorded from a rural women’s group that is focused on food production. Here, our respondent indicated to CLP workers that

‘they are currently harvesting amadumbe (white-yam) and sweet-potatoes, and they are able to sell some of them to others on the main road. However, they consume most of the crop themselves, especially during this time of lockdown since most of the family members are at home which demands a lot of food. Since there is a limitation on movement, some members are restricted as they are prohibited from going to sell in town. But many members are feeling good because they are still able to sell their surplus harvest. People are coming from as far as Nkandla to Bhokolo to buy their harvest.

So for them, the current pandemic and lockdown has not had a negative effect. They are able to use the money they get from selling to invest in their local stokvel organised by Save-Act’.”

The possibility to connect gardening with food production is deeply productive and healing too in a number of ways. Corporatised, mechanised and monotonised regimes of food production are massively dominant, and they reinforce our fundamental disconnect with the natural world that we’re part of and depend on. They’re also deeply implicated in grotesque food and nutritional harm and inequality, as well as catastrophic environmental impacts. Growing some of our own food, individually and/or at community-level, offers the possibility to break with those patterns and to restore fairer relations of equilibrium, resilience and regeneration.

Not only is the *activity* of gardening good for our mental health, but it is also strikingly clear that so is eating good food and maintaining a healthy gut micro-biome. There is growing evidence that the ‘gut-brain’ axis is crucial in the relationship between our mind and the biome of bacteria in our gut. So nutritional deficiencies impact on our general but also our *mental* health - and the health of the microbiome in our gut impacts our immune system. As Nontuthuko kaMashimane, a nutritionist in our city of Pietermaritzburg says: “Food should be considered a medicine”

(<https://capitalnewspapers.co.za/118167/make-food-your-medicine/>).

## Notes about the readings for the blurb

Among your resources with this padkos are two short reflections on gardening from the remarkable Maria Popova ([www.brainpickings.org](http://www.brainpickings.org)). In “Gardening as resistance”, she references Olivia Lang’s essay titled “Paradise” which, she says, “begins with the question of whether gardening is a form of art and ends with the question of whether art is a form of resistance - a necessary tool for building the Garden of Eden we imagine a flourishing society to be”.

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4 See for example: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2021/apr/05/re-wilding-our-cities-beauty-biodiversity-and-the-biophilic-cities-movement>.

Popova reckons holding the two questions means reconciling two distinct understandings of time itself - “linear time, which the Greek called *chronos* and along which we plot the vector of progress, and cyclical time, or *kairos*, which is the time of gardens and, Laing intimates, the time of societies”. This will resonate with those who recall John Holloway’s brief comment in the text for the video installment “Life beyond capitalism” where he recalls that: “In the July revolution of 1830, according to Walter Benjamin, on the first evening of fighting, it turned out the clocks and towers were being fired on simultaneously and independently from several places in Paris”<sup>5</sup>.

The second piece from brainpickings.org is focused on “The Healing Power of Gardens”. Here Popova draws on the work of neurologist and author, Oliver Sacks, who she quotes saying:

“In forty years of medical practice, I have found only two types of non-pharmaceutical ‘therapy’ to be vitally important for patients with chronic neurological diseases: music and gardens. ... Clearly, nature calls to something very deep in us. ... The effects of nature’s qualities on health are not only spiritual and emotional but physical and neurological”.

“On Crop of the World” relates a South African experience developing an urban food garden during the COVID-19 pandemic. With a local community action group in Salt River (Cape Town), Zainap Salie drove the process because she “worried about the lack of green spaces in Cape Town, particularly for children, and how this has affected people’s mental health” - she knows we need “more public spaces, more trees and a school curriculum that teaches the value of urban gardens”.

Pulling a lot of the dots together, is a short chapter from John Holloway: “The abstraction of doing into labour is the constitution of nature as object” from *Crack Capitalism*. We’ve actually shared this piece a couple of years ago (in 2019) – but it’s well worth re-reading. In it John argues that

“The tearing of people from the land is perhaps the original and irredeemable sin of capitalism... a violent separation of humans from the natural conditions of their existence ... [and] a dis-enchantment of nature”. Tearing people from the land was essential to alienating our labour power for capitalism and “it creates a world of city dwellers depressed, impoverished and desensitised by their loss of contact with nature”.

Holloway concludes “It is little wonder then that many of the movements of recent years have placed at the centre of their struggles the overcoming of the separation between humans and other forms of life” and quotes sixteenth century revolutionary preacher and theologian, Thomas Müntzer: “all living things must also become free”.

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5 And also see Chapter 19 of his 2010 book *Crack Capitalism*: “The abstraction of doing into labour is the homogenisation of time”. There is also an interesting and recent discussion of this element of revolutionary change by Joe Zadeh in “The Tyranny of Time here: <https://www.noemamag.com/the-tyranny-of-time/>