

InterVarsity Christian Fellowship

Be a Tree



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What Plants Have Taught Me About
Soul Care

By
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The Role of Plants in Scripture



I could easily become a plant-talking, tree-hugger. I grew up in a small farming community and spent my summers in high school and college caring for my neighbor's vineyards and orchards. I love to visit public gardens and work with plants. I day-dream of owning a plant nursery someday. But I also enjoy helping individuals listen for God's voice and bond more closely with Father, Son, and Spirit.

I have noticed that in the Bible, plants such as trees, bushes, vines, or grasses, are frequently used to illustrate some truth about human beings and our relationship with God. Plants, like humans, start small. They develop root systems, grow, and bear fruit. They can become diseased, and even die, but they benefit the world in a variety of ways.

I am also intrigued by the interaction between plants and Biblical characters—Adam and Eve and the trees of life and knowledge; Moses and the burning bush; Elijah and the broom tree; Jonah and the unpredictable plant; Jesus and the vine; the disciples and the fig tree. This booklet seeks to explore the bridge between plant care and soul care.

The Blessed Person

Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence is in him. He will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It has no worries in the year of drought and never fails to bear fruit. Jeremiah 17:7-8



Rule 1—Pay Attention! More plants and souls die of neglect than anything else. This may be why Ignatius of Loyola felt that the discipline of the Daily Examen was the most important thing you could do.

Rule 2—Do no harm! Before you saw off a limb, get a second opinion. Gentle is better in the care giving business.

Healthy Plants— The Six Elements

Pay attention to these important functions.

- **The Energy System**— Leaves absorb solar energy from the sun and carbon dioxide from the air. Through the process of photosynthesis solar energy is converted to chemical energy which can be used to fuel the organism's activities.
- **Root System**— Hidden roots stabilize the plant and absorb water and minerals from the soil. Water is a compensating force to sunlight. It glues the tree together and makes the organism a unified whole rather than a pile of dry dust.
- **Nutrition**—Soil chemicals such as potassium, nitrogen, and phosphorus strengthen plants by aiding rapid growth, increasing seed and fruit production, and improving the quality of leaf and forage crops.
- **Healing from the Destructive Forces**— Harmful insects, disease, wind, and fire can threaten the vitality of the plant.
- **Genetic Inclinations**—Some plants are made for shade. Others thrive in hot deserts. Rain forest types need poor soil and lots of water. Honor their genetic design.
- **Pruning**—Farmers prune to remove dead and diseased wood, direct branch growth towards fruit bearing, and create a balanced structure.

Soul Care—Our Animating Energy Defines Us

Like plants, our bodies need energy to function. We acquire this mysterious, wondrous energy at conception and lose it when we take our last breath. It is expressed as physical, sexual, social, intellectual, and creative energy. Genesis 2 pictures God breathing on a lump of clay which he had formed into a human shape. The energy of his breath animated the clay giving it life. The Hebrews referred to this energy as our "spirit" which came from their word for "breath." Our "spirituality" is the way our unique animating energy is formed within us. Everyone on the planet has a spirituality. Everyone must deal with their inner energy.



The Classroom of 7th Graders without their Teacher

When I think about what it is like to experience my own internal energy, it is as if a classroom of chaotic 7th graders without their teacher lives in me. On some days the class is anxious and noisy. It is as if certain members of the class are carrying



on a heated debate slinging threats and accusations at one another across the room. On other days it seems as if someone sensitive and moody is feeling lonely, restless, or bored. If that part of me aligns with another member of the class who is always obsessed with sex, I find it very difficult to keep my eyeballs from fixating on any attractive woman in my line of sight. Added to the mix is a class clown longing for attention, an overly responsible older child, and a shy

artist. At times I can hear my creative-self passionately plotting great acts of courage and sacrifice. As I grew older I discovered other members of the class that I rarely saw because they were kept locked in the basement by their fellow classmates. The cellar dwellers all possessed attributes that their above ground peers found fearsome or shameful. These darker figures sometimes haunt me in my dreams with their plaintive cries.

Both Scripture and modern psychology caution us that our internal energy is neither friendly

Biblical Spirituality—Rooted in God’s Love

nor moral. If our classroom of 7th graders is to ever grow up, if our inner chaos is to become more peaceful, if we are to fully become who we were created to be, we will need a skilled and compassionate teacher to shape and guide us from within.

Without such a teacher, our inner chaos will reign. To cope, people tend to do one of two things. They either anesthetize themselves with drugs, alcohol, entertainment, or over work. Or they submit themselves to a strict, fear inducing ideology or person. Fear is a powerful force that can create order, but it also tends to cut us off from God and ourselves.

Biblical Spirituality—Three Parts

Step One—Surrender. Scripture teaches us that our energy does not come from us, belong to us, nor can we naively manage it on our own. The energy is meant to be returned to God our creator. We are therefore invited to surrender ourselves to the compassionate God who loves us.

Step Two—Pay Attention. As we surrender, Jesus becomes our teacher and guide for our internal 7th grade class. Our job is to pay attention. A useful question to frequently ask yourself is, “Where is Jesus in your experience of life today?” To use another metaphor, our internal class is also part of our root system. The Apostle Paul helps us understand what will gradually happen to us. He said, *“I pray that you being rooted and established in love may have power, together with all the saints to grasp how wide, long, high, and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of the fullness of God.”* (Ephesians 3:17)



Step Three— We will be led into a lifelong process by the Spirit of becoming more like Jesus for the sake of others. We will slowly begin to think, feel, and behave like him while also becoming the unique person he intends for us to be. Our hidden 7th grade class will learn to function more harmoniously. Many of our cellar dwellers will be invited into the light, transformed and set free from fear.

Developing Our Hidden Root System



Though the root system is hidden, it may be the most important part of the plant. One could remove all the leaves, but if the roots function properly, the plant will find a way to revive and keep growing. Roots anchor the plant to the ground and create stability for the structure. They also absorb food and moisture helping the plant to flourish.

To regularly surrender ourselves to God in prayer is to anchor our lives to the one being in the universe who is constant, solid, and unchangeable. God becomes our firm foundation and strength creating in us over time inner steadiness and confidence.

Recently an ancient oak tree died at our local public garden. The arborist told me that the tree started to fail when an asphalt driveway was installed around the tree. Soil compacted and the roots could no longer get the water and nutrients they needed. We make the soil of our hearts soft and receptive by being vulnerable to a trusted prayer partner or counselor or by making space to reflect on our inner thoughts and longings.

Jesus our teacher never sleeps. He is always with us, watching over and interceding. He daily extends mercy to us through food, friends, and fullness of life. Regrettably we miss 90% of it because we fail to pay attention. We assume he is teaching only when we are reading our Bible or attending church. We fail to see his hand in the kindness of a friend, the beautiful sunset, or an insightful dream. By taking time to daily notice God's good provisions, we send nourishment to our roots.

Jesus our teacher also loves the individual members of our internal 7th grade class. When something external stirs or upsets me, I invite Jesus to meet with the class. In my imagination, I hear him ask who in the class is upset. He patiently listens as one or more members share what they are feeling. He quickly forgives when someone confesses a sin. He comforts when someone says she is afraid. He may gently correct someone but he never scolds, threatens or shames. He may sometimes ask, "What new thing are you learning today?" Once members of the class feel listened to, they are able to relax even though the external challenge remains. The reflective listening process with our teacher is another way to develop a strong root system.

Nutrients for the Soul

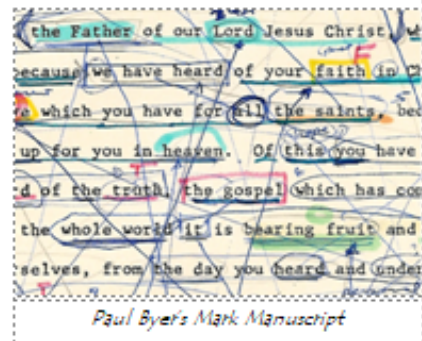
Spiritual Disciplines are nutritious. They strengthen our soul. Based upon my observations of the InterVarsity staff that I see each week, here is my recommended diet of disciplines.

Daily

- Upon waking, a prayer of surrender. (sample- I am not my own but I belong, body and soul, in this life and the next to me faithful Savior Jesus Christ)
- Nightly prayer of relinquishment before bedtime. (called Compline)
- 30 minutes in scripture and personal prayer.
- During the day between appointments take a 15-20 minute walk with Jesus and ask Him where and how he is revealing himself to you that day.

Weekly

- Sabbath Day that includes:
 - Worship with a multigenerational community
 - Listening to the Word
 - Fast from media
 - Relaxed time sharing with family and friends
 - A nap and/or exercise
- Serve someone with less advantages than you.
- Read a good book or watch a good movie that will expand your mind (IVP has a great selection)



Paul Byer's Mark Manuscript

Monthly

- Making Space for God Retreat Day with a group that includes:
 - Review of previous month's calendar. Ask, "where did I experience Jesus?"
 - Extended time in Scripture passage and respond in prayer (Lectio Divina)
 - Review of disciplines related to physical and emotional health, strengthening your family/friend relationships, and life with God.
 - Plans for the next month.
- Sharing/Review with Prayer Partner or Spiritual Director

Yearly

- 48 hour retreat to review the previous year and plan the following year. Invite a friend to join you if that will help you stay focused.

Healing From Destructive Forces

For plants, external and environmental factors such as storms, droughts, and poor soil conditions threaten their potential to flourish. The three most common categories of destructive forces that I see with the people that I serve include:

Childhood Trauma

InterVarsity staff tend to be high functioning young adults so it has been surprising to meet so many who have been the victims of childhood trauma. Parental divorce is quite common. Some have experienced the untimely death of a parent or sibling. Others are victims of verbal, physical, and on rare occasions sexual abuse. It is crucial for those in this category to seek professional counseling help as well as the help of an intimate Christian community.

Disease

I work with individuals in their early twenties and thirties who are dealing with migraine headaches, chronic back pain, digestive problems, colitis, rheumatoid arthritis, cancer, paralysis, chemical depression, and chronic fatigue. Some of our staff care for young children who struggle with autism or other life altering conditions.

Individuals in this group also require professional medical assistance. Both groups however often seek spiritual help. They ask "Where is God? If He is good, why did He allow this to happen to me?" These are theological questions that need to be answered and InterVarsity Press has some excellent books that can do that. But more importantly, individuals who experience suffering most appreciate being able to walk with a compassionate friend who believes in the goodness and nearness of God.

Anti-Faith Forces

Ronald Rolheiser states: "Anti faith forces are not abstract, foreign forces. They live in the house with us and are as comfortable to us as a well-worn shoe. What blocks faith is that myriad of innocent things within our ordinary, normal lives which precisely make our lives comfortable: our laziness, our self-indulgence, our ambition, our restlessness, our envy, our refusal to live in tension, our consumerism, our greed for things and experience, our need to have a certain lifestyle, our busyness and overextension, our perpetual tiredness, our obsession with celebrities, and our perpetual distraction with sports, sit-coms and talk shows. These are the anti-mystical forces of our time." This third category is the most difficult to address and requires the commitment of a community to challenge the culture.

Genetic Inclinations

Tom is the team leader at State University. He loves being with people. He is a gifted teacher and decisive visionary. He is one of the hardest working individuals on the team. He is a person of high expectations for himself and others and the InterVarsity chapter has grown significantly under his leadership.

Rich is a second year staff member at State University. Rich has great respect for Tom and feels honored to work on his team. In contrast to Tom, Rich is much quieter. He enjoys one-to-one meetings with students and leading Bible studies in the dorms. Rich is recognized as being a sensitive, compassionate person. Students struggling with their faith seek him out.

Both individuals came to me separately for spiritual direction. Tom felt the weight of leadership and wondered how long he could keep going. He would like to delegate more to the younger staff but some are newly married and he felt bad about asking more from them.

Rich, who is single, told me that the pace of work is wearing him down. He is starting to feel bitter towards Tom and InterVarsity. Feelings of exhaustion and guilt overwhelmed him. He was not sleeping well and had no time for dating, hobbies, or a personal life. He wanted to quit but that thought filled him with shame. He felt like he was a bad staff worker.

Their level of fatigue possibly says that they are working at a pace that is unsustainable. The team would be wise to meet with their area director to discuss that issue. They may be able to modify their goals or look more broadly to delegate some responsibility.

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator also helped. Tom is an ENTJ type. Rich is an INFP type. Both are doing good work and deserved to be affirmed. Both need one another. But both will flourish only when they are able to adjust their jobs to fit their personality types better. Rich will need more solitude than Tom. He will need to create disciplines that will help him engage his feelings more deeply. Tom had strong feelings but found it difficult to express them. Someone could coach him. Like beautiful plants from different climates, adjustments can be made to their work environment that will enable both to thrive.



The Art of Pruning

Vine and Branches

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. ² He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. ³ You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. ⁴ Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

⁵ I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. ⁷ If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. "

John 15:1-8

Farmers prune their grape vines for three reasons:

1. **First they prune, especially when a plant is young to create a balance** between the visible leaves and branches above ground and the root system hidden below ground. In the spring time when the weather warms, energy that was stored in the roots and vine in the winter explodes upward. Green branches and leaves sprout willy-nilly all over the vine. But if the root system is not fully developed, if it is not extensive and deep enough to reach the moisture in the ground, then the profusion of leaves will absorb too much solar energy and the vine will wilt. So in the early years, the farmer keeps pruning back the branches so the slower growing roots have a chance to catch up.



I frequently meet with bright, dedicated, energetic young staff, (often they are our best chapter planters or chapter builders) who have thrown themselves into the work. They invest long hours doing good. They are praised for their efforts by their supervisors as they produce

impressive AFR numbers. What drives them to me however is that they feel exhausted. They notice anger, bitterness, and resentment growing inside and they wonder what is wrong. The answer is that their root system is not extensive enough to sustain their efforts. They need to correct the imbalance by trimming some external activities from their schedule and adding efforts that create internal peace and meaning.



2. **Farmers prune their vines in order to remove diseased and dead wood.** The words prune and clean are the same in this passage. To prune or clean the soul involves the ministry of repentance, confession, forgiveness and restoration.

Many of our staff are involved in accountability relationships with fellow staff that address just this sort of thing. By submitting ourselves to the words of Jesus on a regular basis, we will begin to experience his cleansing.

3. **Farmers prune in order to increase fruitfulness.** Grapes only produce on first year growth of a branch. Once a branch has produced a bunch of grapes, it will not produce grapes again. It will produce more leaves but not grapes. So the farmer will remove 90% of the branch so that a new branch will sprout the following year and on that new branch one or two bunches of grapes will appear 12 to 18 inches from the vine. In pruning for fruitfulness, the farmer is restricting the growth of the branch and redirecting the energy towards something that will benefit the farmer.

The principal of confining and redirecting energy in order to create something that is fruitful is seen with respect to sexual energy. The Bible says that if sexual energy is to be used to make us more like Jesus and benefit the world, that energy must be confined within the bonds of marriage. There it has the potential of producing within us the traits of deep love, compassion, and self sacrifice. Other experiences that limit us have the same potential.

Finally, fear not, pruning is not punishment for bad behavior. Our Father who prunes loves us and is committed to our transformation into the likeness of his Son. He prunes so that we might share the joy of the Triune God.

Reflective Questions

1. What helps you surrender yourself and your work to the Lord on a regular basis?
2. What are the elements of your root system that help you connect with the Lord? What aspects of your root system work well for you? What is the condition of the soil around your roots? What might you do to improve the soil?
3. What is your current diet of disciplines that strengthen your body, your supportive social network, and your life with the Lord?
4. What are the destructive forces that you have had to face in your life? How have you dealt with them?
5. What accommodations have you made to the way you live that are the result of how you are wired? (Myers-Briggs, SIMA, Strength Finders are helpful tools)
6. What fruits of the spirit have been born in your life as a result of having your energy constricted or confined as a result of a vow you have made, job assignment, or illness?

Rule 3

Plants and people take time to grow. Be patient!

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