

## A Harvest Meditation

by Julie Carrick Dalton, friend of Bethany House of Prayer and member of Thursday Morning Contemplative Prayer Group



I have no business running a farm. I'm a terrible business manager. I don't know much about farming, and, truth be told, I'm a bit intimidated by the eight gorgeous horses I share my barn with. Buying our farm two years ago was probably the most reckless thing my husband and I have ever done, an unnecessary use of family savings, a ton of work and worry. It may also be the best thing we have ever done. And I'm just starting to understand why.

The farm, which abuts the neighborhood of our family home in New Hampshire, went on the market for "timbering or development." I love the thick woods surrounding our neighborhood. I like knowing it is full of bears and moose and deer. I cringed at the thought of another neighborhood, or a strip mall, or a parking lot replacing the trees.

The day I first walked the property, the August sun filtered through the tall pines, oaks and maples onto the wooded trails. The air sparkled with possibility. Trails wound through the woods, over a small wooden bridge to a meandering, ice-cold mountain brook. I was in love. I was a kid again. The property reminded me of my grandparent's farm in Western Maryland where I spent summers growing up. It reminded me of the 10 acres my father farmed when I was little. I felt like I was home.

I wanted to save this land from development. I wanted to plant food, tap maple trees. I wanted to run on the trails and jump in the stream.

The previous owners had clear cut about 3.5 level acres, the perfect location for a garden and a barn. I connected with a friend who was looking for a space to board her horses. The plan seemed perfect. I built a barn and leased it to her. She now runs a horseback riding program on the farm and I get to play in the dirt as much as I want. The endless supply of horse manure has been an added bonus.

I will leave out the frustrating parts about problems digging a well, getting permits, drainage issues, blown budgets and sleepless nights. In the end, I had a farm with a wonderfully reliable and conscientious tenant and a steady monthly income. And I was (am) absolutely terrified of screwing it up.

This Memorial Day my husband, kids and I planted corn, tomatoes, potatoes, beets, carrots, squash, pumpkins, sweet potatoes, peppers, cucumbers, herbs, spinach, kale, onions, garlic, cabbage, asparagus, lettuce, and strawberries. It was a lot. Too much. We over planted with the goal of donating most of our harvest to the local food pantry. Having worked in a homeless shelter for the past 13 years, and taken my kids to a food pantry and soup kitchen for several years, I have always been bothered by the poor quality of food available to low-income families. So we planted extra.

Naively, I thought if we planted it, it would grow. I have since been humbled by Mother Nature.

There was too much rain in June. Not enough sun. My soil is virgin forest floor, completely organic and rich. It is also full of clay that doesn't drain well, and despite my attempts to bring down the pH with wood ash, it is was still too acidic.

At first the seeds germinated and my garden flushed green with seedlings. I felt like a proud parent. Then the spinach failed. Then the garlic and kale and the peas. Too much rain, too little drainage. I hung my hopes on the tomatoes, potatoes, squash and corn that appeared to be doing okay. But the rain kept coming. The corn stalks never grew tall enough. The tomato leaves yellowed.

I kept going out to the field every day, weeding, pruning, pleading with my plants to grow. I crawled around on my knees yanking crab grass for hours at a time. My shoulders were always sore from bending over. All of my pants had mud stained knees. I had perpetually dirty fingernails.

Meanwhile, my family was not having the summer we bargained for. Within a two week period we face two unexpected deaths — both young, healthy and vibrant individuals, the first deaths my children had ever faced. It hurt to watch my children try to understand the parts of life that which can't be understood, the parts a parent can't make better. Then, shortly after, one of my daughters went on a youth mission trip to Central America, contracted a bacterial infection and ended up in the Emergency Room in a Third World country. It all felt too close, too real. I felt vulnerable and small.

The farm became my retreat, a quiet place to think, cry, sort out my emotions. I kept going to the field, crawling around on my knees in the mud, hoping for some miracle from the soil. Instead, I got more soggy rain. I finally admitted to myself, there would be no bushels of corn going to the food pantry. No baskets of ripe tomatoes and zucchini to donate. I sat in the mud, completely defeated.

When my daughter returned from her mission trip, weak and sick, we stayed in Boston for several days to let her rest, get more blood tests, see another doctor. She got her strength back and we rejoined our family in New Hampshire for one last day together before we sent our oldest daughter off to her Freshman year at college.

I'd been away from my farm for nearly a week, a hot, sunny week. I dreaded seeing how much the weeds had grown. I almost didn't want to look.

My garden, however, had taken pity on me. The surviving corn, cucumbers, peppers, beets, potatoes and tomatoes looked alive. More than alive. They were thriving. The surviving tomatoes were red and ripe. I peeled back the husks on a corn ear to discover perfectly formed juicy kernels. I picked cucumbers nearly as big as my forearm, tons of potatoes, beets, herbs. More than I could haul in one load. The apple and pear trees I planted last year hung heavy with ripe fruit. I wanted to cry.

We feasted that night on roasted potatoes, tomato and basil salad, marinated cucumbers, beets, corn on the cob, and veggie burgers I made using my own carrots, onions, and zucchini. We grilled fish from a fisherman down the street. It was probably the best meal we have ever shared.

We ate, laughed, speculated about what college would be like. I looked around the table knowing I was about to enter a school year in which I would have a child in elementary, middle, high school and college all at the same time.

Maybe *this* is what buying the farm had been all about. This one amazing dinner with my family, the end to a difficult summer, this last meal before my daughter went off to college. We all had our hands in this food. My husband and kids helped me plant it, weed it, grow it, pick it, cook it and eat it. Gratitude washed over me.

Next year we will know better. We will amend the soil properly, plant wisely and donate those bushels of corn. But this summer — this complicated, difficult summer — the farm that I thought had failed me, brought me exactly where I needed to be all along. To my knees. My very muddy, grateful knees.

