Let's Celebrate Dirt!
by MELANIE SVOBODA SND on JULY 17, 2017.

Today, let's celebrate dirt. Although we walk on dirt, drive on dirt, build on dirt, pave over dirt, move dirt, and even grow things in dirt, we often take dirt for granted. The very words “dirt” and “soil” can have negative connotations. If something is “dirty,” it is certainly not good. If something is “soiled,” it needs to be cleaned. Even as children we were probably taught to eschew dirt. If we did get dirty, we and our clothes had to be washed.

But Diana Butler Bass has written a beautiful book entitled Grounded: Finding God in the World. She devotes the first chapter to dirt. She reminds us that dirt is celebrated in scripture. In Genesis 2, God forms Adam from dirt or soil (in Hebrew adamah). Eve is formed from Adam's side. Her name comes from the Hebrew havah, which means “to breathe” or “life.” Their names, then, link together Soil and Life. The whole story of the Hebrew Bible is that of land and its fruitfulness. Humans are disconnected to the land by sin or they are connected to the land by acts of faith and justice.

We need to renew our appreciation of dirt, of soil. Sadly, in today's world we are experiencing a major crisis with regard to soil. Bass writes that soil is being lost “at an alarming rate all over the planet.” During the last 150 years, for example, earth has...
lost half its topsoil. In many place, formerly productive soil is now unusable. In addition, our planet loses approximately 25 million acres a year to erosion.

Agronomist Wes Jackson says that soil is not limitless. “Soil is as much a nonrenewable resource as oil.” Once soil is destroyed, it is “destroyed forever.” Says Bass, “The earth’s math is simple: no soil, no food, no us.”

This all may sound pretty depressing. But Bass points to another phenomenon that is occurring all over the world: “more and more people are returning to the ground.” In doing research on a wide spectrum of churches, she was amazed to find how many congregations now have gardens. They are raising food for charity, to ease their budgets, to renew the land, or just for the fun of it. One congregation, for example, purchased a neglected piece of property in the inner city and established a garden. In fact, they decided not build a conventional church, for the garden will be their church. Vegetable beds will surround their Communion table. A greenhouse will serve as their worship place when it rains.

And it’s not just Churches who are growing gardens. Cities such as Chicago, Detroit, and Cleveland have all started major urban farming programs aimed at reclaiming blighted neighborhoods while providing both healthy food and local jobs. This growth in gardens is seen even on a smaller scale. The National Garden Association reports that one in three households in the U.S. is now growing food, a rise of 17 percent from 2008 to 20013.

Bass’ book *Grounded* cites other authorities on the subject of soil. She quotes Fred Bahnson, founder of a community garden in North Carolina, who calls the soil “a sacrament.” Bahnson adds, “There is an entire ecosystem in a handful of soil: bacteria, fungi, protozoa, nematodes, earthworms. Through their breeding and dying such creatures vivify the world.” His description recalled those times I saw my father scoop up a handful of freshly plowed soil and smell it. I soon followed his good example. To this day I will occasionally bend over and scoop up some moist dirt and smell it. Mmmm! There’s no other smell quite like it.
The writer Sallie McFague, described as an American feminist Christian theologian, raises this thought-provoking question: “What if we saw the earth as part of the body of God, not as separate from God (who dwells elsewhere), but as the visible reality of the invisible God?” Says Bass, if we did “we would be both more responsible toward the soil and more aware of God-with-us.”

What is your attitude toward dirt, toward soil? Do you have any childhood memories that involve dirt or soil?

Do you do any gardening? If so what do you grow? Why? If you grow vegetables, what do you do with them?

Does your church have a garden? Does your city have community gardens?

Here are two videos of the same song called “Love Song to the Earth.” It features a number of singers including Paul McCartney, Sean Paul, Natasha Bedingfield, and others. The first is the official music video. The second one has the lyrics plus images of beautiful planet earth. I love both versions!

Official video:
Here is the version with the lyrics:

**Love Song To The Earth**

THIS IS A LOVESONG TO THE EARTH
YOU'RE NO ORDINARY WORLD

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Do you wish to respond to this reflection and/or the song?
Kathleen Magiera  July 17, 2017 at 5:31 am

Good one Sr. Melannie!

I have a flower garden in my backyard. Our cat like to lounge around in bushes.

Because it is full of perennials, the flowers are cyclical. God lets us know what part of summer we are in by what is blooming.

Kathleen

REPLY

john hopkins  July 17, 2017 at 5:50 am

Good morning Sr. Melannie,

Today I’m going to a friend’s house to weed her garden beds to ready them for planting. I will think of this reflection as I do so, and may even take the time to smell the dirt! Thank you.

REPLY

Doris  July 17, 2017 at 7:57 am

This reflection resonated with me this morning. For a little more than a year, I have been reading and praying and working on developing an ecological spirituality. I think that as Catholic Christians we have not taken our responsibility for God’s Creation seriously. We have not integrated science and faith. There has been little follow-up in our churches to Pope Francis’ Laudato Si. Reflections like this one are a good start. Thank you.

REPLY
Patty  July 17, 2017 at 10:33 am
Thank you, Sister.

Lori Follett  July 17, 2017 at 10:48 am
Hi Sister Melannie,

I love your blog post today in a special way. Thanks for your thoughts and the songs each week. I work with dirt (nursery producer) and find I am most happy when my hands are dirty. Just feels right, my natural state. And yes, there is something very spiritual about being dirty from working with the soil and plants. A great God connection for me. I think of the saying my Dad taught me when I first started working on our family farm at a young age. “God made dirt, dirt won't dirt.”
Great memory, thanks!

Janice  July 17, 2017 at 11:36 am
I am a volunteer for our community garden on our church’s property. We donate all the harvest to the pantry and the soup kitchen in town. The church started the community garden about 3 years ago and it has been a success! As a child, my Dad always had a vegetable garden. I loved to go in the garden early in the morning on a hot summer day and picked tomatoes and eat them off the vine! I also love the smell of farms and the soil. I never thought of the soil as disappearing! See how we take things for granted. God Bless the work of all the hands that dig in the dirt!

Rose Anne Ryken  July 17, 2017 at 12:21 pm
Thanks for inspiring me today. Appreciate your making me aware of the beauty of dirt. Love your choice of music as always.
Barbie  July 17, 2017 at 1:23 pm

Digging in the dirt is my therapy. It makes me feel close to God second only to Mass. I especially love your writing today. Thank you!

REPLY

Shirley  July 17, 2017 at 4:54 pm

Nothing like the smell of fresh turned black dirt. Really enjoy all your blogs. This one was especially good. Both videos were great. Thanks Sister Melanie!

REPLY

Melanie Ebert  July 17, 2017 at 5:02 pm

Hi sister Melannie,

Are you giving any retreats in the Va. Pa, or surrounding states in the late summer or early fall. Is there a tentative list of retreats for 2018? I would love to attend one or more if they are open to everyone. Thank you so much for you weekly blog. Always provides me strength.

Melanie

REPLY

Anita COMPAGNONE  July 17, 2017 at 9:13 pm

Very cool topic. Much insight. Thought provoking. Thanks for all you do Sister!

REPLY

Karen Dosemagen  July 17, 2017 at 10:25 pm

Just a couple of thoughts – Indeed soil is renewable! Our city of Kenosha, WI, has a marvelous recycling program. Citizens bring their yard waste which city workers compost at the recycling site. Then citizens can return and take free fresh
compost for their gardens. And talk about aroma! Wow! It’s the best. Then there’s ‘from dust (soil?) to dust . . .’ Thanks for your wonderful Sunflower Seeds.

Carol Kapostasy  July 18, 2017 at 9:06 am

I was moved to tears of sadness after watching the video. How is it that so many who are responsible for the gradual demise of our planet’s resources not feel compelled to stop the destructive practices and work towards repairing the damage for future generations? How difficult a concept is non-renewable? How can you deny global warming when you see time lapses of the polar ice caps? How do we continue to elect people who do not value clean air, wildlife, water….all the things that sustain our very existence? God entrusted humankind with being the stewards, caretakers of His creation....and I am so disheartened by the results of our choices over the last 150 years. Look what damage has been done in such a short time. I do what I can to slow the death of our environment but we need the people who contribute to this crisis on a large scale to stop & step up to thwarting the efforts of those sounding the alarm. Another daily prayer from me to God....it seems like what I thank Him for on a daily basis is slipping slowly away....I implore Him to intervene in some way before it is too late, if it isn’t already.

Fran McCreary  July 19, 2017 at 1:34 pm

How timely this is! And just on Saturday NPR had an interview w/ Jack Gilbert, a scientist from the University of Chicago on a new book he has co-authored, “Dirt Is Good: the Advantages of Germs For Your Child’s Developing Immune System”. The goodness of dirt from many aspects!

Theresa  July 24, 2017 at 2:16 pm

I have a small salsa garden and flower bed. I enjoy getting my hands in the dirt in my gardens in order to forget my woes of the day and turn towards an attitude of gratitude. Thanks Melannie.
DeDe Kidder  July 27, 2017 at 7:34 am

Please change my email address to:
dede.kidder@gmail.com

Thank you.

DeDe Kidder