

3/13/2019

AUSTIN PRESBYTERIAN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

ISSUE 336

Inside: poetry, reflections, composting, and more!

Editor

Sheth LaRue, Middler MDiv

Sheth was born at a young age and has been introverted and under-confident for most of his life (except for a brief period from August 18 to August 23, 1997). Avid fan of pie and Led Zeppelin. The most famous person he ever met is a tie between Barry Lopez and Rich Karlis, neither of which are very famous. He wants humanity to be nicer, kinder, and more loving. And to laugh more. Fears spiders.





Designer

Reba Balint, Junior MDiv.

Combining her passions of Fine Arts and Religion, Reba is very excited to be the new designer for Kairos. She loves denim jackets and music she wasn't yet alive to originally listen to. She believes in sharing cheerfulness whenever possible. Has deep respect/fears for bees.

Kairos would like to thank all of you for reading, contributing, and offering kind words these past few months as we've been publishing. It is an honor to be able to showcase your work!

We're currently seeking submissions for the next edition – would you be willing to contribute a poem, essay, drawing, or photo that you'd like to share with your friends at seminary?

Questions and contributions should be sent to Sheth at...

sheth.larue@student.austinseminary.edu

The deadline for submissions is the first of the month.

On Gardening

Dr. David Jensen, Academic Dean and Professor of Reformed Theology

Gardening is the first job that human beings are given in the Bible, when God instructs the first person to till the soil and keep it (Gen. 2:15). To be human, in this view, is to live close to the earth, to care for plants so that they might flourish and, in turn, give us sustenance for life. The Bible begins with people working in a garden and ends in a city where the nations are healed by a tree of life: a tree that grows in the midst of urban bustle. From beginning to end, the Bible knows the importance of plants and gardens, not just for nourishment, but for the healing of a broken world. In Jewish tradition, Torah is often compared to a tree: life flourishes when we are rooted in the Word of God. keeping the commandments, growing in wisdom. Some biblical scholars, such as Ellen Davis, have claimed that the Bible (and the Old Testament in particular) evinces an agrarian perspective, that the people Israel know how to eke out a sustainable living in the delicate landscape of the eastern Mediterranean. Gardens flourish in this landscape not automatically, but when people tread the earth lightly, conserve precious water resources, allow the land to lie fallow every seven years, and work toward a sustainable yield. Gardening is central to biblical traditions.

Gardening has also been integral to Christian discipleship over the centuries. In the midst of a Roman economy that sought to control the production and trade of food, early Christian monasteries tended gardens that represented alternative economies. These early monastic communities, almost without exception, established themselves away from centers of commerce, often in areas that others considered uninhabitable.

In such places, monks created gardens, relying not on corridors of trade but on nursing the land so that it might yield a harvest year after year. In these practices, monks recognized that the bounty of God is made evident in creation and invites our loving response: in tending the soil, we also attend to others. The bounty of these gardens, in turn, was shared with the world outside the monastery walls. Food, in this view, was not a means of economic exchange, but a gift to be shared with others.

Austin Seminary has a community garden, one sign of hope in a broken world. It is small; it requires lots of work, and to an outside observer it may not seem very significant. But I would argue that it is. The labors of a garden offer one gesture of a Christian economy of abundance. Gardening relies on the generosity of God: watering the land with rain, bathing the earth with sun, the dependable cycle of the seasons that fosters life itself. But in gardening we are reminded that humanity is not simply a passive recipient of this generosity; indeed, God invites our response so that we might become participants in the neverending cycle of giving. And, that pattern requires our work: bending over tomato plants in the summer heat, weeding the beds so that the harvest doesn't get choked, burrowing in the soil as we plant for the next season. Gardening is neither the result of our labors or God's alone. Rather, it represents our co-operation with the earth, each other, and ultimately the generosity of God. When we harvest the garden, moreover, we are reminded that in a Christian understanding of abundance, there is always room for one more gardener and one more guest at the Table. The bounty of the harvest is meant for all.

Trees of Heaven Rev. Sarah Gaventa, Dean of Students

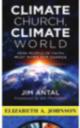
I always loved the idea of a garden. I think flowers are beautiful, love the crunch of a home grown snap pea. So, when we moved into our home in Virginia, in rural Nelson County, I was thrilled with the huge flower bed someone had planted before me.

Well, I was thrilled for a while. While the tulips and ir is es and daylilies were a delight, it turned out lots of other things grew in the garden, too. Unauthorized things. Sometimes poisonous things. Our flower bed lived thirty feet from a forest, and forests are extremely interested in perpetuating themselves. I could not weed fast enough to keep up with the dandelions and Virginia creeper and the worst - Trees of Heaven. The Tree of Heaven is a hardy tree not native to Virginia. The trees have invaded the forests because they can grow almost anywhere. This is the tree pictured in the famous novel A Tree Grows in Brooklyn, which grew perfectly happily in between New York houses. Trees of Heaven put down their roots fast, so if you neglect your garden for even a couple of weeks, you can have a solid half hour of digging and extracting the roots of multiple trees that have decided to take root where they weren't invited. I associate that four year period of my life with the woodsy, almondy smell of a broken Tree of Heaven root.

Jesus used so many agricultural images and I can't help but think the God's spirit works a little bit like a Tree of Heaven seed - planting in any number of unexpected places, in all kinds of people, all over the world. The spirit takes root and will grow and take us places we can't imagine.

One of the great pleasures of getting to work with you at Austin Seminary is seeing all the ways God has taken root in you. You come from so many different contexts and yet that seed has been planted is growing furiously. I am grateful to get to grow in the garden with you! (Just please don't make me weed it.)

2018 Green Seminary Initiative Book List:



Antal, Jim. Climate Church, Climate World: How People of Faith Must Work for Change. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018. Library Call No. BT695.5. A57 2018



Johnson, Elizabeth A. Creation and the Cross: The Mercy of God for a Planet in Peril. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018. Library Call No. BT775. J64 2018



Johnson Leese, J. J. Christ, Creation, and the Cosmic Goal of Redemption: A Study of Pauline Creation Theology as Read by Irenaeus and Applied to Ecotheology. Library of New Testament Studies: 580. London, UK; New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2018. Library Call No. BS410. J56 no.580



Stulac, Daniel J. *History and Hope : The Agrarian Wisdom of Isaiah 28-35.* Siphrut : Literature and Theology of the Hebrew Scriptures: 24. University Park, Pennsylvania : Eisenbrauns, 2018. Library Call No. BS1515.52.S785 2018



Dear, John. They Will Inherit the Earth: Peace and Nonviolence in a Time of Climate Change. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018. Library Call no. BT736.6.D427 2018



Kelly, Anthony. Integral Ecology and the Fullness of Life: Theological and Philosophical Perspectives. New York: Paulist Press, 2018. Library Call No. BX1795.H82 K45 2018 For the past several months, I have been trying to educate our community about the "how" of composting and recycling, in keeping with our commitments to the Green Seminary Initiative and as a matter of good stewardship of our planet. I know it is challenging when we have come from a lot of different places where recycling and composting practices have varied or perhaps not even existed. In Austin, we are lucky to have excellent waste disposal systems and we should take advantage of them! The city has a goal of zero waste by 2040, and composting is a big part of that. I also know it's hard to try to remember one more thing on top of all that we are attempting to squeeze into your heads in your classes. So today I'd like to share just a few reasons why it is a good and joyful thing to compost, specifically. Recycling is a whole separate article!

I have shared in the past the statistic that 75% of landfill waste is either recyclable or compostable. Of that 75%, 30% is compostable. When food waste goes into the landfill, it decomposes anaerobically, generating methane, a key contributor to global warming. However, if food waste is composted, the result is a natural, soil-like material that nurtures plants without chemicals, as well as reducing pollution in groundwater and keeping the waste out of the landfill.

I have been curious how our compostable materials are handled specifically here in Austin, so I went to the City of Austin website to learn more. I was trying to imagine how all of the things we put in compost come out as an evenly-textured substance. The website explained that compostable materials are ground up in a machine, then piled up to start the cooking process that breaks them down. Some sites say that a 1:1 mix of "brown material" such as yard waste and "green material" such as food waste is desirable, and others say 3:1. A mix is required to balance oxygen and nitrogen and get the materials to the right temperature. The piles of materials reach 160, and this is how we are able to compost meats, fats, bones, and all of that wonderful soiled paper, unlike home composting that does not get hot enough to break all of that down. After 6-12 months, the compost is ready to be used in landscaping, which generates revenue for the city.

So, why compost? Waste reduction, reduction in the use of chemicals, reduction of pollution in groundwater, improved air quality, and healthier plants are just a few good reasons.

One last shout for "how": in our wonderful new bin in Stotts, you may place ANY food waste, dead flowers, wooden coffee stirrers, dirty paper napkins, paper food boats, paper plates and cups, and fast food paper bags and wrappers. Please just be careful to put condiment packets, plastic utensils, and chip bags in the trash.

As always, please share your questions/concerns/frustrations so we can learn from each other how to be the best caretakers we can of our beautiful 12 acres in Central Austin.

Information source: http://www.austintexas.gov/blog/what%E2%80%99s-deal-composting, accessed March 4, 2019.



I See It In the Trees

Angela Williams, Senior MDiv.

I see it in the trees.

The way they move,

Before,

During,

After

A Storm.

Battered

Weathered

Beaten

Worn

Broken

Ravaged

Bent

How much more can they withstand? How many more storms can they weather?

Coconuts

Bananas

Livelihood

Gone.

How much longer must we wait?

When will change come?

Not the strengthening of storms into super

typhoons,

But serious change to curb our impacts on the

environment.

An end.

Climate Marches

Awareness

Conversations

Advocacy

Campaigns

Activism

Climate Talks

But are these enough?

The Philippines

How long can this country endure?

How much can my new home face?

Why must it bear the brunt of the effects of

climate change?

Preparing

Fearing

Breaking

Dying

Smiling

Joking

Rebuilding

Only to have it all happen

Again

And again

And again.

Pablo

Yolanda

Ruby

How much longer?

Waiting.

For supplies

Bananas

Regrowth

Coconuts

Regeneration

Income

Healing

An end.

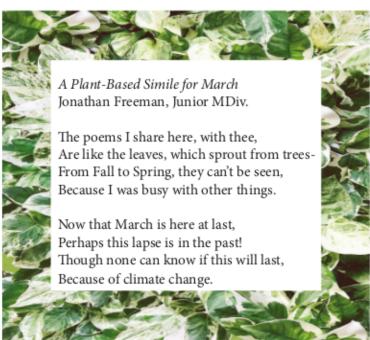
Just this weekend, I was reminded in my dear friend and colleague's sermon about the idea of "thin places." This ancient Celtic idea, later espoused by Christians in Ireland, posited that the heavens and the earth were always three feet apart but, in these thin places, the distance was even closer. There, you could witness the divine and the temporal be only a thread's width from each other. In thin places, we are given clear lenses, able to see the both the sacred and worldly laid bare in a way that we wouldn't otherwise witness in our ordinary routines. In other words, they invite us to be transformed in our experience with them

I believe that it was no mistake that the Celts embodied the idea of thin places in spaces of wild, natural beauty where flora roamed free like the island of Iona near Scotland or the Aillte an Mhothair in Ireland. The divine comes into close contact with the world where the grass blows in the wind and the rolling landscape is colored green. In some of these places, there are even monuments erected to mark it as a thin place, pointing those who come across it to the opportunity to witness the almost-touching of the heavens and the earth. Of course, we have such thin places in our own realities as well, each of us able to personally identify spaces of wilderness in which we have "seen the face of God." For me, the places that immediately come to mind are the rainforests of Volcán Arenal in Alajuela, Costa Rica and the view from the Lighthouse in Palo Duro Canyon. Both are encounters where I truly felt that the space between the divine and the temporal was razor-thin, becoming transformed by witnessing it. In essence, my history became divided in two when my feet touched these thin places: the time that existed before I did so and the time that exists afterwards. The trees and vines of the rainforest and the painted rocks and desert flowers of the canyon breathed a raw, unbridled authenticity of living that I had to pay attention to. Even my thoughts were tranquil in these places. The plants invited me to simply be. I flew across a continent, drove around eight hours, and climbed a steep incline to simply be.

It is true that thin places are especially extraordinary because they require a level of difficulty to experience. Yet, that difficulty isn't always physical. Thin places are not always hidden grottos amongst the wilderness that require a treasure map to get to. Perhaps the thinnest place I ever witnessed was only a fifteen-minute drive from my college campus, at a small community-sustained farm in rural Iowa, a place that challenged me to rethink where the heavens meet the earth. It was the first moment that I dug my hands into the dirt, placed a fledgling lactuca sativa plant in the ground, and harvested it from that ground four weeks later for someone to eventually eat. This thin place was not spatial, but a place of thought, the revelation of the interconnected existence all of creation shares. I was not looking at a simple head of lettuce, but the way I connected to the divine in creation. My life depended just as much on that plant and others like it for sustenance as it depended on me to cultivate and grow it. The thin place I had experienced in a head of lettuce had transformed me, enabling me to see how the divine comes into close encounters with the world even in a plant.

Throughout the school year the Students of Social and Environmental Justice, or SOJ, meet once a month to discuss and act on issues of justice happening within our campus and within our community outside the seminary walls. This year we have an amazing group of people who have brought a lot of varying interests to the group. During the fall semester we spent time planning and discussing border relations and how we can be in support of that. We also had the opportunity to once again enjoy a meaningful lunch and discussion with our partners at Interfaith Community for Palestinian Rights about the Israel/Palestine relations and how we as a community can respond. This is an organization we a have partnered with for the past few years as a way of staying connected with the global Church and a small way of trying to engage and educate ourselves. We closed out the fall semester by cleaning up the creek on campus. SOJ has made a commitment to clean the creek on campus at least twice a year to help keep our ecosystem and community clean. These are super important events because it is maybe the only time when we pause to take a look at the impacts we have on our small footprint here on campus. We learn about our local ecosystem, how much plastic and trash is passing through it on a regular basis, and make a tiny but real dent in that impact.

As we look into the spring semester, SOJ has a lot of interesting and engaging events planned and we would love to have as many seminarians and family as possible join us. The first is a time to meet and discuss what a changing homeland looks like within our community and domestically with Rev. Jimmy Hawkins, Director of the Office of Public Witness for the PC(USA), on Tuesday, March 19. We are currently in communication with an organization run by indigent persons at the border. We are hoping to have a representative come and discuss with us how the border wall has impacted the spaces indigent persons have been living on for centuries and are currently being pushed out of. More information about this event will come. On Saturday, April 6, we will have our spring creek clean-up. This event is open to the entire seminary community (professors, students, partners, and children). We encourage the participation of all. We will close out the semester on Friday, April 26, as Dr. Asante Todd will be leading a movie and discussion in Stott Dining Hall around the book The Hate U Give which has now been made into a movie. This is a very powerful story about a young woman who witnesses the fatal shooting of her childhood best friend at the hands of a police officer, and how she is called to respond. This will be an evening event that is open to the entire community.



Trilogy of Plants Audrey Burnett-Harris, Middler MDiv



Plant Murderer: A Bad Haiku. I really like plants. Plants don't like me. Even a cacti can't survive.



Plant Murderer: A Bad Haiku, the Sequel. My thumbs are devoid of the color green. Lifeless things, the stuff of death.



Plant Murderer: A Bad Haiku, the Final Chapter. Inherited plant, hopefully tended, alas... Leans away from light. the back page Sheth LaRue, Middler MDiv

I was hesitant at first on writing something about plants because they're such a large part of my life but I hardly ever notice them. They provide food and medicine, flowers and shade and homes for animals - they're everywhere, all around us, yet I rarely take time to see them. As I've been thinking about it I've come to realize that plants have made some lasting impressions on my life. Let me share with you three stories of plants in my life.

This past Christmas, my nephew told me a story about my childhood that he had heard from my brother, and it brought back a long-forgotten memory of a family camping trip in the high deserts of Colorado. As a child (and even now) I had a propensity to stumble as I walked and often wound up on the ground; this excursion was no exception. While hiking from the lake to the campsite I did, in fact, stumble and tumble, but I received the added bonus of a prickly pear cactus firmly affixed to my posterior. While my nephew laughed as he told me about my past, my recollection of the moment and its aftermath was less than humorous.

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In the spring of 2015 my parents began sorting through their life's belongings as they were transitioning from house to travel-trailer so they could begin their now-nomadic lifestyle. Despite many yard sales over the years, they had managed to retain a lot of stuff and had to sort through it all and make decisions. There were some things that could definitely be tossed out, there were family heirlooms that needed to be kept, and there were things with which no one knew what to do.

One of these was a thirty-three year old, seven foot tall ficus plant nicknamed 'The Jungle.' For as long as I could remember, that plant was somewhere in our home, tucked away in a corner and growing ever-so-slightly over the years. I would question my dad about why we kept hauling it from house to house, but I always knew it was a non-negotiable. After the stillbirth of my sister in 1982, my mom received that plant and it had been a staple in our household ever since.

That plant, as difficult as it was to move, was an important part of my family. It didn't fill the gap left by my sister, but provided a gentle and beautiful reminder of her for my parents. For my brother and me, it was a reminder of home and that, though the locations changed, we could find stability and love in our parents' home.

While I enjoy shopping for houseplants and flowers to give as gifts, I have never been on the receiving end until recently. For Valentine's Day I received an embarrassingly large amount of items from Chelsea May, including a small bouquet of Dutch petite roses. It was the first time I had received flowers, and I kept one as a reminder of the beauty of creation, but more so, I kept one as a reminder that someone cares for me, loves me, and wants me to have beauty in my life.

Plants have an enormous place in my life but I rarely see it. I hardly notice the affect plants have on me, their generosity to me, or their sacrifice for me. I pray that God will open my eyes to see the beauty of creation, will grant me gentle hands to hold the gift given to me, and that I may heed the call to honor, use, and care for them wisely.

much love, sheth.

2019 Calendar

MARCH 12	Chapel Service - Hopson Guest Sermon: Aisha Brooks-Lytle	Shelton Chapel, 11:10 AM
MARCH 13	First Call, First Steps Seminar: Kevin Keaton	McCord 204, 11:00 AM - 2:00 PM
MARCH 15	Senior Sermon: Ezequiel Herrera	Location TBD, 11:30 AM
MARCH 16	United in Prayer Day	Stotts & Shelton Chapel
MARCH 18	HESED Lectures	McMillan 210, NOON
MARCH 19	Chapel Service - Ms. Melissa Wiginton, JD, MDiv, Preaching	Shelton Chapel, 11:10 AM
MARCH 22	Senior Sermon: Estela Sifuentes	Location TBD, 11:30 AM
MARCH 25 - 29	Spring Recess	
MARCH 28 - 30	MAYM Weekend	
MARCH 31	Taize Service	Shelton Chapel, 7:30 PM
APRIL 1	Cabinet & Student Senate Brown Bag Lunch	Knox, 12:00 PM
	Hopson Guest Lecturer - John Bell	Location TBD, 1:00 PM
APRIL 2	Chapel Service - John Bell preaching	Shelton Chapel, 11:10 AM
APRIL 5	Senior Sermon: Matt Cardona	Location TBD, 11:30 AM
	Student Leadership Lunch w/ the President	Trull Board Room, NOON
APRIL 6	Suicide Prevention Training	McMillan 210, 9:00 AM
APRIL 8	Senior Sermon: Caroline Barnett	Location TBD, 11:30 AM
	Senior Class Meeting	McCord 204, NOON
APRIL 9	Rio Texas UMC Visit	Stotts, 12:00 PM
	Chapel Service- Dr. Asante Todd preaching	Shelton Chapel, 11:10 AM