

The roots of the problems

—Week 4, Day 1—

Whatever you sow, that you will reap. Galatians 6:7

I do **not** like trimming bushes and pulling weeds. Instead of enjoying the great outdoors or my “alone” time, I sift through feelings of inadequacy followed closely by self-condemnation for so intensely disliking the tasks with which I struggle. In the past four years, I’ve killed a hydrangea bush, thrown away gardening tools, impaled my fingers with thorns, and—perhaps most dramatically—slashed an extension cord with the hedge trimmers and blown a fuse.

Yard work does give me some quiet time to think.

When I regularly uproot the tiny shoots growing in the front yard, I think about how futile my efforts are since I am not getting at their roots. The sprigs are growing off a tree root with a devilish (albeit natural) reproductive urge so strong it extends from our flower beds under our walkway to our front yard. This tree root grows so far underground it has persisted through last fall’s chemical and aeration treatment. As I gather these little sprigs, I think about the ways that I might be treating the *symptoms* of my own problems rather than getting at their *roots*. Sometimes the bad habits, attitudes, and beliefs I see in myself really point to deeper wounds that beg to be addressed.

It’s easy to look at my neighbors’ lush grass, manicured bushes, and weed-free beds and think their task must be easier than mine. But an adequately-maintained yard—and a well-lived life—both take hard and ongoing work. Everyone’s task might be a bit different, and we might be more or less prepared to take it on. But as with most things, the burden can be lightened through conversation and collaboration with others.

Something to consider:

*Write about the weeds and the roots in your life;
the symptoms and the underlying problems.
Is a life well-lived necessarily free of weeds (problems)?*

(kab)

“A Liturgy for a Fleeting Irritation”

—Week 4, Day 2—

from *Every Moment Holy*

But the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Galatians 5:22-23

I bring to you Lord, my momentary irritation,
that you might reveal the buried seed of it—not
in the words or actions of another person, but
in the withered and hypocritical expectations
of my own small heart. Uproot from this
impoverished soil all arrogance and insecurity that
would prompt me to dismiss or disdain others,
judging them with a less generous measure than
I reckon when judging myself.
Prune away the tangled growth
of my own unjustified irritations, Jesus,
and graft to my heart instead your humility,
 your compassion,
 your patience,
 your kindness,
that I might bear good fruit in keeping
with your grace.

Amen

*Humility, compassion, patience, and kindness are
antidotes to what irritates us.*

Something to consider:

Write about how you cope with your irritations and anxieties.

Hidden Helpers
—Week 4, Day 3—

For out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks. Luke 6:45

What is your default emotion in a crisis? We're talking knee-jerk, instant, gut-level reaction, prior to your first rational thought. Anger? Fear? Guilt? Are you prone to blame? Do your control issues jump into over-drive?

Chances are this default emotion has been around for a long time, maybe since your childhood. It's programmed into your hard drive. You rarely give it a second thought. How about we give it a second thought today?

We all have a little girl or boy inside us that has been our protector since we were small. She or he works overtime to help us feel safe and comfortable. We can even have more than one.

They tell us to run and hide. Or they tell us to fight back, or curl up in a shame ball, or take the bull by the horns, or deflect blame on someone else.

These hidden helpers can get a bad name. Granted, they go to extremes: temper tantrums, pouting sessions, isolation, self-harm, shame, passive aggression. But their intentions are to protect you.

Have you noticed how hard times can prompt more frequent and pronounced emotional outbursts? It might help to tell yourself, "This is my hidden helper trying to do their job." This doesn't mean they're doing it well, but they're trying.

As you notice your helper's efforts to protect you, try to pause and become more aware of how it might be hurting others.

The fact you can objectively observe this is a significant step toward hope and healing.

Something to consider:

Talk about a prevailing emotion you've experienced for as long as you can remember.

(wcvv)

X Marks the Spot

—Week 4, Day 4—

If I say, “Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night,” even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you. Psalms 139:11-12

Someday, I will get my son a metal detector for his birthday. I know he will be so excited and begin imagining all the treasures he will uncover (as well as how much they will be worth). This new tool (not a toy, of course) will accompany us on all future trips to the beach. He will excitedly scan the shore line, and when the alarm goes off, he will dig at that location and find buried treasure.

But today, a different set of alarms went off when I gave him an instruction, and he told me, “no.” Initially, I made his behavior about me. And so arose all of the parenting lessons and insecurities such as, “You know you need to be consistent!”; “You know you can’t allow disrespect!” “He’s testing the limits—be stern!” And last of all, “What am I doing wrong?” and “I am failing!”

When this particular set of alarm bells go off, I really want to silence them by either ignoring the situation or shutting it down. I want to give in (“okay, you don’t have to!”) or just to escape (“go to your room!”). I definitely don’t want to dig deep to find out the root cause of the crisis.

The messy work of excavating a repeated site of conflict or figuring out why I respond so predictably poorly requires me to stop, reflect, and linger in the discomfort of conflict.

But we need to do that hard work to uncover the real cause of our problems so that we can treat the root issue. Think of it this way: in some cases, it might be enough to treat the symptoms—maybe my

muscles hurt because they need to be stronger. But other times we have to deal with the root cause in order to heal: the pain of a broken leg will need more than heat, ice, and anti-inflammatories.

Something to consider:

Write about the situations that predictably coincide with your anxiety, stress, or other elevated emotions.

(kab)

“The Journey,” by Mary Oliver

—Week 4, Day 5—

So he called out, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.” Luke 18:38

One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice --
though the whole house
began to tremble
and you felt the old tug
at your ankles.
"Mend my life!"
each voice cried.
But you didn't stop.
You knew what you had to do,
though the wind pried
with its stiff fingers
at the very foundations,
though their melancholy
was terrible.
It was already late
enough, and a wild night,
and the road full of fallen
branches and stones.
But little by little,
as you left their voice behind,
the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice
which you slowly
recognized as your own,

that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world,
determined to do
the only thing you could do --
determined to save
the only life that you could save.

Deciding to dig deep is just the beginning of the journey.

Something to consider:

This poem focuses on the ways that we choose this journey as individuals. Write about the ways in which God is part of your journey.