A True Garden of the Earth

Lorraine Shannon[1]

> A subtle conversation, that is the Garden of Eden.
> - Ali Ben Ali

In 1968 Joseph Beuys made a sculpture entitled *Erdtelephon*. It was a simple piece, just an old black telephone linked by a wire to a lump of earth. If art can change the world, this was the piece that did it for me. The *Erdtelephon* sat Buddha-like in the gallery, silent and self-absorbed. Yet the old-fashioned dial invited action. Looking at it, I wondered what I was supposed to do. Should I simply wait for the phone to ring and then answer it, or should I take the initiative, be intrusive and dial up the pile of dirt? The sheer foolishness of indulging in the art of conversation with a clod of earth captivated me. What cadences, rhythms, innuendoes and intimacies might we share in the back and forth play of words? What would the dirt tell me? What might we have in common? Could we get along and even become friends?

In the western world, most people are probably more at ease with a telephone than a clod of earth. There are, after all, a lot more telephones than gardens. We live in telephone societies and respond to the telephone's rhythms in ways similar to pre-industrial society's responses to the rhythms of nature. At home, if not at work, as soon as the phone rings I drop whatever I'm doing and run to answer it. I don't have to think about it. I know someone unseen is seeking a connection with me.

The success of our social and cultural lives, as well as our working lives, depends on an ability to converse on the telephone, to understand the role of caller and answerer. Generally, we talk and listen to other people – friends, acquaintances even strangers – more comfortably than we talk or listen to plants, or a tree. Conversing with the inanimate is considered odd, to say the least, and certainly lacking in purpose. What could it possibly accomplish? Chatting to a pile of dirt seems hardly likely to improve our quality of life, develop our minds, lead to success and advancement. Dirt might be fun but, according to Mary Douglas, it is the "disordered" and the "dangerous."[2] It undoes civilization.

Anyway, I've never been very good at conversations, either with people or clods of earth. My shyness gets in the way. I've even been reduced to reading

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2 M. Douglas (1966), *Purity and Danger. An Analysis of Pollution and Taboo,* Routledge, London.

books on how to be a successful conversationalist. They provide appropriate phrases for every situation, formulas to follow so you appear an interesting, attractive person. But I always feel false using someone else's words. It's a bit like reading gardening books and thinking you're then an expert, despite having no hands-on experience. Mind you, I'm a bit of a failure at gardening too.

I've also read about how people conversed in the past; hoping I might find some clues on how to be loquacious, indulge in witty repartee with aplomb. Before gardeners came on the scene early hunter/gatherer societies, I learned, had an oral storytelling tradition. They could hold each other enthralled for whole evenings. They also had a rapport with the natural world which is largely lost today. To them the landscape was animate and expressive, revealing its hidden presences through sound. David Abram writes about nomadic foraging societies where the "human and non-human life-worlds interpenetrate and inform one another."[3] It sounds like Paradise. And it was the gardeners who messed it all up. They settled down to life in villages and began planting and cultivating. It was a radical change and it brought with it changes in thought, a reworking of perceptions, retuning of the senses. Paul Shepard refers to these changes as having to do with quality of attention rather than ideas. By this he means, "cultural and habitual differences in the style of day-to-day hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting and touching the surroundings . . . What people notice, what they expect to encounter, the mix of senses used, even the quality of their inattention and disregard, all reveal something about the kind of world it is for them."[4]

By the time I was a child there was little left of a nomadic, pre-gardening world. First had come villages where the people's laughter, chatter, calls and cries muffled the soft rustlings of small animals, the stirrings of foliage, and alarm calls of birds. Then we developed large towns and cities with a cacophony of sounds to deaden our ears to the activities of the natural world. Our visual abilities changed too. The hunter-gatherer had trained himself to see roots, berries and nuts that were hidden from sight. Gathering, even though it's directed to plants rooted in place, requires a different temperament than gardening, calls for a different sensitivity and attentiveness. As the food collector became the planter, much of the keenness of looking and listening to discover a hidden object was exchanged for probing the mysteries of germination and growth. Digging supplanted gathering. The urge to dissect the vital stuff of dirt replaced respect for the terrain. And the need for productivity called for new ways of interacting, a different type of intimacy. The land became a tool,

3 D. Abram (1996), *The Spell of the Sensuous. Perception and Language in the More-Than-Human World,* Vintage Books, New York, p. 144.

4 P. Shepard (1982), *Nature and Madness,* University of Georgia Press, Athens and London, p. 21.

something to be possessed and improved by technology. It was no longer an organism to touch, a presence to embrace. Once we had been spellbound by the secrets the earth divulged. Now we believe we have all the answers. We no longer listen to the soil. We tell it what to do. Conversation as the matrix of our existence, an entwining of language and emotion has been turned into an effective communication 'tool'. Its original sense of poetic play derived from the Latin *con versare* meaning to turn or dance together has been lost. And something else has been lost too. The blithe wonderment of a child playing in the dirt, communing with sensual materiality.

Of course we cannot go back; we are barred from Eden. Our present world is undeniably agricultural and to create a garden we must grapple with the sullen darkness of dirt. For it was dirt that was made accursed with the Fall. The curse spelled the end of innocent play in the dirt and the start of hard yakka in the garden. William Bryant Logan tells a story of this curse, of how the devil is related to the gardener. It's derived from Calderon's allegorical play *Life is a Dream*. He relates how the Prince of Darkness and his partner, Shadow, hoodwink mankind. Shadow fancies man; she's desperate for him and the Devil is willing to go along with it. But they need to break into the garden before Shadow has any chance of seducing man. At first they're stymied because there's a fence around the garden. Then they hit on a great idea – they'll disguise themselves as farmers and no one will notice them. In they go and find Nature about to give man some tasty fruit. Shadow butts in rudely and says

> Get back, you rusticated earth! All you'd give him
> were little wildflowers, were it not for the industry
> by which I add to your crude forms
> all the paints that make them shine.
> You give birth but I refine,
> And so the fruits are mine.

Man can't resist. He falls in love. He wants the apple Shadow is holding out. It's so much bigger and juicer than anything he's had before. It's all for you, says Shadow, and it's free. But when he eats it, disaster strikes. The earth turns away from him and all he's left with is Shadow, hard labour and death.[5]

And so, Logan concludes, "to forget the devil's doubleness in dealing with the soil is a dangerous thing because instead of harnessing his energy, we leave free his power for crime."[6] It's all rather depressing. And it's difficult to accept that the lost connection is our fault. It's our ignorance, our lack of graciousness that always leads us to exploitative, intensive, highly technological land use. Its end result is erosion, loss of fertility and loss of tenderness for the

5 W. B. Logan (1996), *Dirt: The Ecstatic Skin of the Earth,* Riverhead Books, New Jersey, pp. 157-158.

6 *Ibid.* p. 159.

soil. The rich, textured humour of intimate conversation disintegrates and we're left with a cold, hard telephone, the special carrier of purposes. A telephone is functional. It invites the subordination of poetry to purpose. And "where the systemic nature of the world has been ignored in favour of purpose" results have been tragic.[7] Like the industrial revolution, the 'telephone revolution' brings ecological damage in its mixed bag of progress.

Eventually the soil no longer responds to us. It turns inward, becomes taciturn, spurns the harshness of our spades. Will it ever talk to us again? Can we re-establish a link? Coax, cajole, entice, restore a broken trust. Or must we remain outcast? Never again play in the dirt? What can we possibly do that will get us back in touch again?

Like all fanatical gardeners I search for a remedy. I swear, cry, despair. I dream of recreating the dirt of Eden. Bafflement has led me to experiment with all sorts of methods. At first I thought digging was the answer. There's an undeniable excitement about digging holes. Popping in plants or seeds is delightful. Taking out carrots or potatoes is tantalizing, full of mystery. What will they be like, small, plump and sweet or coarse and inedible? Or there's the danger of discovering root-devouring grubs. Holes can be full of horror exuding darkness like a grave. Walt Whitman wondered in "This Compost"[8] how the soil coped with our treatment of it. Why it wasn't poisoned by the endless succession of corpses placed in it. He was awestruck by dirt's capacity to purify, to transform flesh into a new story, to keep the conversation moving along. It is this hospitality, the warm generosity of dirt that gives me hope.

I first learned about digging and transforming soil from the Rudolph Steiner School of biodynamics. Like many gardening philosophies, it has complicated intellectual theories behind it, but basically it's digging dirt and heaving muck. Steiner viewed a garden as an 'organism' and advocated companion planting and mulching. On the less agreeable side, the Steiner method demanded double, and even at times, triple digging. This means cutting into the ground three spade depths and adding, in a very specific order, compost, manure and straw. I diligently created composts from herbs such as yarrow, chamomile, dandelion heads and the juice of valerian. And I religiously adhered to recipes that demanded stirring rhythmically in alternate directions for hours. The aim was to form vortices that mirrored cosmic law. These were supposed to behave in ways that simulated creative formative forces and act as a sort of homeopathic medicine for the soil. Certainly it seemed to work. Yet it demanded an enormous amount of time and labour and maximum interference in the soil. I

7 G. Bateson (1972), *Steps to an Ecology of Mind. Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution and Epistemology*, Ballantine Books, USA, p.136.

8 W. Whitman (c1900), "This Compost", *Leaves of Grass*, David McKay, Philadelphia.

longed for a different, less serious relationship with my patch of dirt. I wanted to have fun and play. And I wanted something less intrusive.

Yet a few years ago when we bought our present house, the first thing I did was dig up the garden – one of those 'rooms outside' where scrubbed pavers cover the dirt and the plants are surrounded by pebbles to disguise the fact that they grow in soil. The plants themselves were a collection of Agapanthus, standard roses and other pet hates of mine. It was during the process of replacing them with a collection of Australian natives that I began to reflect on the destructiveness involved in gardening. This systematic violence in pursuit of my own notion of beauty was, by chance, lessened somewhat as the previous owners had moved directly across the road and were delighted to accept the discarded plants for their new garden. Even so, as the uprooted plants lay among mounds of disturbed soil I found myself looking on nature maimed and savaged, on devastated life. Oh God, I thought, am I doing the very thing I want to repudiate? Is my nurturing really just destruction? Am I incapable of solicitude, of listening?

It was around this time that I also became involved in bush regeneration in suburban areas and was soon introduced to the Bradley method of minimal interference. It's more or less a method that advocates leaving things alone, both above and below the ground. The Bradley sisters, who developed the minimal interference method, noticed that the edges of bush land were more readily invaded by weeds than the heart of the bush. They claimed that, "undisturbed bush soil under its natural mulch is superbly resistant to weed invasion. Weeding, however carefully done, leaves gaps and disturbs some soil." It is in the areas of disturbance that weeds will thrive. Mulch which forms a natural layer from fallen plant material is the "first line of defence against fresh weed invasion. Cherish and add to it."[9] Covering the soil up rather that exposing it seemed to be the answer. Leave it alone, let it be the boss and express itself.

It all seemed to make sense but I had no way of transferring such techniques to my vegetable plot. At least not until I discovered the writings of Ruth Stout. Ruth advocated the enticing "no dig, no work" method.[10] It was based, she said, on the methodology of God. For it was God who decreed that each year leaves would fall and cover the bare earth, and that in the spring, plants germinated under their blanket of leaves would miraculously regenerate. Obviously we should do as God does and cover the garden with mulch. Mulch, says Ruth, will keep the 'good' plants moist and feed them while refusing to let weeds grow. Quite how the mulch can tell the difference between weeds and plants is not explained. The exciting feature of the no-dig, no-work method was the lack of hard grind, digging over the soil each season in preparation for

9 J. Bradley (2000), *Bringing back the Bush. The Bradley Method of Bush Regeneration*, Landsdowne Publishing, Sydney, p.19.

10 R. Stout (1971), *The Ruth Stout No-Work Garden Book*, Rodale Press, Pennsylvania.

planting. Instead, all I had to do was pop some compost on top and plant in it. What could be easier?

Sadly, the no-dig method does involve work. Lots of it. Large wheelbarrows have to be loaded with hay, straw and compost and heaved onto the garden. It's not much fun. It's the anticipation that's exciting. Looking forward to seeing the soil bloom. Having to guess about the fertile mysteries hidden below the mulch, the teeming life of worms blindly weaving channels, exquisitely sensitive to electrical impulses conducted by the soil. Imagining the pulsing life of millions of bacteria maintaining and healing the dirt. To descend in my mind into materiality, the site of miracles. Instead of hurrying towards advancement, a horizon of promises, I can find what is real beneath my feet. Stop being a know-it-all and listen. Stop making demands and learn to match my wishes to the temperament of the soil. And lucky for us dirt likes to share. And it's patient. It will stay quietly ruminating away to itself until we are ready to talk, able to learn a new way of communicating.

The *erdtelephon* promises a new dialogue with dirt. Something reciprocal and mutual. Something foolish and serious. It places nature and culture side by side, linking technology and the soil symbiotically. It doesn't ask us to relinquish our childhood pleasure in dirt in favour of more civilised pursuits. Nor does it ask us to forego immediate earthly pleasures in the hopes of ultimate joys in Paradise. In transforming simple pleasures into complex problems it doesn't create a division between our sensuous apprehension of nature and ethical responsibilities. Instead it cries out for a dirt ethic where play and responsibility, fun and purpose combine. It promises a new amalgam of childhood sensuality and adult ethics where culture doesn't dominate nature but it does embrace a moral imperative to cherish the earth, to be enfolded by the earth.

It is a playful interaction that flows without effort. It thrives on foolishness. And foolishness, while quite capable of developing projects, doesn't rely on intentions and targets. Unlike organised goal-oriented communication, it doesn't foreground rhetorical purposes. As Gregory Bateson writes, "Poetry is not a sort of distorted and decorated prose, but rather prose is poetry which has been stripped down and pinned to a procrustean bed . . ."[11] So we can let go and make poetry over the phone, a duet of call and response. Discover harmonies and counterpoint in the gossip, confessions, confidences and fellowship of chatting to someone known but unseen. Loved but not intruded on. So I can dial up my little patch of dirt to say, "G'day. Just ringing to say we had your potatoes for dinner and they were fabulous. Thanks so much. Oh, and yeah – I love you and I promise I'll be true."

11 G. Bateson, *Op Cit.*, p.136.