

The gift of nurturing small things during isolation



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There were six babies born in our congregation last year, including mine, and then two more early this year. As the director of family ministries in a medium-sized church in a denomination that's mostly gray, I've found this to be something to celebrate.

Now we as a community miss seeing the babies grow. I miss standing in the pews, bouncing our babies strapped to us in their carriers, whispering, "He's getting so big!" I miss the grandmothers eager to give my arms a break from holding him. I miss commiserating over teething and sleepless nights and cradle cap, being with other parents also consumed by caring for their tiny beings.

The beauty of a baby is meant to be shared. When you have a baby, people stop you in the street to peer into your stroller and see. It nourishes most of us to see babies we know as well as babies we don't know.

But now I cannot share my baby. His grandparents observe his grainy image through the computer screen. I plop him on the grass in the front yard while the toddler digs

in the clay-hard soil, and our elderly neighbors fawn over him from their porches. I wear him in the carrier, and other parents on the street smile and nod. That's as close as anyone else besides his father and his brother gets to him.

People still want to peer at my baby, and some of them seem to forget—or simply disregard—the six-feet-apart rule. I'm too Canadian to know how to tell them to stand back. One man leaned over and tried to sing in the baby's face to calm his fussiness; then he concluded, "I guess you better feed him!" Perhaps the pull of seeing a baby is too much to resist.

Something about self-isolation is amplifying my desire to nurture little things. This is strange because, as a mother on maternity leave caring for a toddler and an infant, I do plenty of that already. But there is something rewarding about watching my tiny succulents grow, about watching the sourdough starter bubble and rise in its jar throughout the afternoon.

Both of these organisms easily propagate. When active, the bacteria culture in sourdough starter needs to be fed flour and water twice a day, so most people end up with more of it than they need. I got mine from a friend's mother. The jade plant clippings can be planted directly in dirt and begin to root there. I received mine from a friend's cutting.

Right now there is something rewarding about watching things grow.

Now, in this time of isolation, I give my overgrown jade plant a makeover. This keeps me from cutting my own bangs. I take a picture of the cuttings spread out on the dining room table, and I post it to the neighborhood Buy Nothing Facebook group. I leave them on our front porch and check periodically as they gradually disappear. Over the course of three days, nine different people come to take jade clippings from my porch, all of them unseen by me. It still feels like a connection. One woman sends me a message to say thank you after she picks up her jade clipping. "My daughter is so excited to have her own little plant to take care of," she writes.

Last week I went to a small local shop to buy bean seeds and a small lavender plant. I waited five minutes for one customer to settle up at the till. She talked and talked to the cashier, and then realized she had forgotten something, and then gave me advice about planting beans, and then talked some more. I had planned on getting what I needed and getting out of there quickly. But I think the woman ahead of me needed more from her visit to the store than just the items she was buying.

My husband arranges for me to pass along some sourdough starter to someone who requested it through social media. It can be tricky to work with, and it took me a few months to learn how to make the kind of bread I actually want to eat. I pour my excess starter into an empty pickle jar, write a note about it, and leave it on the porch. The next day I ask my husband repeatedly, “Do they want anything else? More information about how to feed it? Recipes?”

“I offered,” he says.

“I just want to know that my babies are being cared for,” I say.

“I can ask for a photo,” he says, “or schedule monthly visits.”

So many of our interactions in social isolation take place with the help of technology. Without it, we have limited ways to connect: infrequent exchanges with vendors, porch visits, calling to each other in the streets. But passing along organisms to others provides a kind of organic connection: the living thing I have touched and cared for is now touched and cared for by someone else. Being able to pass along a small, growing thing—a thing that might bring the gift of something to nurture to someone else’s life—is a small joy.

Perhaps in the absence of time with people, our relationships with other, nonhuman living things becomes heightened. They do not speak or reach out or smile the way people do. But they grow, and they give—through providing food and color and oxygen and beauty. Nurturing inanimate life forms provides a brief respite from the challenges of parenting, especially during a pandemic.

In the Reformed tradition, from which I hail, God’s first instruction to humans after creating them is often referred to as the cultural mandate. The newly made world is so wonderful that the Creator deems everything as *tov tov*, or “good good,” the repetition creating emphasis in the ancient Hebrew language. Then God instructs people regarding this good good earth: be fruitful and multiply. Have dominion over every living thing.

Throughout history, and still today, people have perverted this command in many ways. Two in particular continue to damage Christianity. The first is to limit the command to be fruitful and multiply to human biological reproduction. The second is to interpret the command to rule over the creatures and plants of the earth as permission to exploit them in ways that suit our desires, rather than serving their

interests as well as our own in a reciprocal relationship.

The cultural mandate is a theological concept that posits that this very first human calling is not just to literally make more people but to build culture. To be fruitful and multiply, to have dominion, means to be given the gift of taking the raw elements of the world around us, elements fecund with potential, and to make: to cultivate relationships, build connections, design structures, and shape the created world into new concepts and constructs. Everything from sourdough starter to just business practices to video conferences can be considered products of this first calling, to make good things of this good good world.

God gives us the gift of caring for what God has already made. We have been given many good good things to prune and knead and raise and nurture. In the pre-fallen world, this is a toil-less offering, a joyous gift of raw materials we can use to imitate a generous Creator. In a post-fallen world, we strive to continue to remember these joys against the annoyances, pain, and labor of day-to-day life.

This afternoon, while walking down the street with my two children in the stroller, I suddenly realize that I am walking through a relatively heavily peopled area and that I have been subconsciously drawn there to get close to a man walking with a toddler. I just want to be close enough to see another child, to share from a distance a knowing look or word of comfort with his caregiver. But they turn down another street before I can catch up to them. As I wait to cross the street, a gregarious young man, whose smile peeks over the edges of his mask, shouts to me, "It's easier for me than for you, with you caring for the cutest kid in the world there!"

As we walk, I notice a bottle on the edge of someone's lawn with green shoots flopping over the top. It wears a paper sign that says "GARLIC. FREE." And so I reach in and pull out a few soggy sprigs and wrap them in a Popsicle-stained paper towel.

We are nurturing each other right now by staying apart. We nurture the vulnerable in our society by staying home as much as we can. This communal care through social distance is foreign and awkward, even painful, to us. It is a privilege facilitated by technology, one not available to previous generations who faced pandemics. Still, we are finding ways to reach out, to share, to celebrate the organic when it seems all our moments of social connection are virtual.

When "a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies," Jesus explains, "it bears much fruit." "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed," he says, "which is the

smallest of seeds.” “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast,” and “the kingdom of God is like when a man sows seeds.” Jesus knew plants. The small, organic, everyday, life-giving elements of creation were ripe with holy potential for him. The smallest of plants, of microbes, of organisms, can bring great meaning to our lives.

Some say Jesus chose these images for a reason: he spoke in metaphors people in his agrarian culture would recognize. I believe this to be the case, that his images were down to earth. But I also think the Son of God, who came to earth as a tiny baby who was shared with animals and shepherds, simply took delight in the little living things around him.

“Consider the lilies,” says Jesus, and we do. My toddler is excited for spring, and he calls every flower to my attention as we walk. When we return home I plant the garlic in an old pot. The lavender plant I bought last week goes in the front yard. In the back, I dig holes in the soil and hand my three-year-old the bean seeds to plant. Gently he drops them in and then pats the dirt to hide them, counting as he goes.

At the end of the day, I lie in bed and practice my habit of thanking God for five things from the day. I try to vary my gratitude list and not just thank God for my family members each night, but in these times of limited social interactions, it’s hard. I thank God for the opportunity to give away small things that have brought me life through tending them. I thank God for the man drinking beer on his front porch who asked us how we were doing as we walked past. I thank God for the kind text from a friend, for the family member who is recovering from a could-be-COVID-19 illness, for the friend’s mother who is out of the hospital in these risky times.

I thank God for the person I never saw who gave me tiny garlic bulbs, soggy and pungent, now planted in a plastic flower pot, and I pray these small things will grow.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Attending to small things.”