

Cultivating Peace

From a Tea Estate in South Carolina

For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall be to the LORD for a memorial, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.

ISAIAH 55:12-13

May this small letter be a prayer for the wanderers who have not yet found peace in the wild fields. I have spent the better part of my ministry seeking to understand the great spiritual gifts offered through plants and the rest of creation, immersing my work and community in that knowledge.

I have spent years as director of Thistle Farms learning how to cultivate herbs for distillation, finding the best essential oils from around the globe, and opening a café that serves special tinctures of herbal teas. I have done some of it peacefully, but way too much of it stressed about money, deadlines, and family. I have written books on the healing power of essential oils and the way tea can offer justice and healing for women in the world. But many times I gulp down those “peaceful” cups of tea while answering e-mails. Writing about it for others and trying to live by it are two very different things. My writing about peace means that I probably still long for it. Someone once told me that preachers preach what they most need to hear. My guess is that all of us present our lives in public with some care, and beneath that facade hide secret habits, fears, and coping skills that we keep to ourselves and perhaps the

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few people who know us best. The goal is not to pretend that divide doesn't exist, but to have those two parts in conversation with one another so they live closer together and we can feel more peaceful.

Those two parts of my life came together walking through a tea field.

Thistle Farms was just beginning to expand into the tea industry. It was important to go to the only working tea farm in the United States, in South Carolina, as we decided if we should import or start our own tea farm. The sun was at the apex of its trajectory as it scorched the July day. Weeds were thriving alongside the tea plants; the bugs were so thick they looked like sprinkles on hot doughnuts. I felt the need for water, shelter, and community as thick as the air that hugged my lungs. But there was a peace as I walked alone among the weeds and tea plants.

Tea is the oldest cultivated plant in the world, requiring little tending. Tea is not bothered by sharing the field with pesky weeds and so it all mingles among a variety of plants in this rich land known to produce thirtyfold a season. There were no pickers out in the field at this hour, no tourists, and, thank God, no cell phone coverage. The sound of bugs became white noise as the peacefulness of the field filled me with the hope that one day I might truly be a farmer who knows peace. It wasn't about understanding, but about acceptance. I could imagine all the farmers throughout the state of South Carolina wiping their brows and sitting under trees for shade. I could imagine the farmers out west teaching the next generation about walking among the rows and identifying varieties in plants. I almost could see small rice paddies and coffee farms owned by small farmers in distant lands. Can we learn to live like farmers, whether we are digging up dirt or walking through the world harvesting hope? To be willing to be in thick, hot air and sweat and toil without stressing about the overwhelming noise filling us. We can't intellectualize our way to peace—in-

stead we seek it, we sit in it, and we find it unexpectedly in field and farms where creation is allowed to preach.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What aspects of your life and faith exist in tension with each other?
2. Where do you seek peace?