



Mentoring

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*Gardening is the art that uses flowers and plants as paint,
and the soil and sky as canvas.*

—Elizabeth Murray

To be a gifted gardener is to be an artist of the earth and to be a gifted mentor is to be an artist of the soul. In fact, gardening is an apt metaphor for mentoring. The true gardener sees beauty before it's visible, gets her hands dirty, and faithfully weeds, prunes, and waters. In awe, she recognizes that God causes the growth.

Following Christ's command to disciple others, the C.S. Lewis Institute Fellows Program incorporates mentoring as a critical component of the Fellows experience. The Institute knows that disciples of Jesus are not made on their own. Jesus had a small group of men with whom he spent time, taught, and prayed. But the most significant way that they learned to become like him was by being invited into his life and ministry and observing how he followed his Father. So it is with mentoring—a mentor doesn't so much give advice as serve as an example.

Virginia Watson is a living example of someone who, through a lifetime of obedience, has become a determined, devoted disciple of Jesus Christ. She is also a gifted gardener of both the soil and of souls. As C.S. Lewis Institute Fellows, we have been on the receiving end of the care given by her skilled hands for the past four years. She has patiently listened to us, consistently thought the best of us, and willingly walked in the tangled weeds of life with us. We would like to give you a glimpse of a master gardener at her work.

Good Soil: On a recent trip to Longwood Gardens, Virginia was taken with the quality of the rich, fertile top soil being applied to the flower beds. The soil was the composted result of all the flowers, including bulbs, that had shown forth their beauty in earlier plantings. What initially seemed a shocking waste made sense when the Longwood gardener explained that the bulbs never bloom a second time with the same timing and beauty as they do the first year. The spent bulbs are turned into the rich soil that nurtures the next crops. That soil is like Virginia's life. Things had to die in her: many decisions to turn away from sin and despair have been mixed with decades of obedience, holy habits, and acts of service to create a life that is fruitful and fertile. Virginia has "good soil" and is generous in spreading it around in the gardens of our lives.



Virginia Watson

Deeply Rooted Plants: Virginia's is a muscular faith, rooted in her desire to dig deep into her relationship with Christ. She is hungry to learn from life and puts feet to whatever she learns. There is no idle knowledge in Virginia's life. If it is worth knowing, it is worth doing.

Her life is characterized by choices to develop holy habits day by day. She told us once about a commitment she made to pray for certain missionaries every time she put on her shoes. She had a revelation that if she wore sneakers that tied, she would have a little more time each day to pray for them. We were struck by the way Virginia turned a good habit into a better one.

One Thanksgiving years ago, Virginia decided to keep a journal for the month leading up to the holiday to ensure that no matter what her circumstances, she would have a ready supply of gratitude when the day came. Each day she wrote at least one thing for which she was grateful. That began an annual habit that she keeps faithfully. We still remember receiving an e-mail written while she sat by her husband's hospital bed as he lay in a coma just before he died: "Even in these circumstances, there is always much to be thankful for." The deep roots of this holy habit were evident even in the midst of heartache.

Fertilizer and Water: To Virginia, there are no ordinary days; all of life is sacred. The beauty of a garden, the unexpected kindness of a near-stranger shoveling her driveway during a blizzard, observing selfless gestures in others are all occasions for seeing Christ in our world.

Virginia is attentive to opportunities in the mundane, daily aspects of life to glorify God and to grow in love, obedience, and holiness. She is diligent in her own life in this way, and generous in encouraging this growth in her mentees. Throughout the Fellows Program, Virginia challenged our group to find one idea in each of our readings that God wanted to use to change us; she asked us to describe in our response papers how we were different as a result. Virginia faithfully read and commented on those papers. Our margins were filled with her comments: "Good idea"; "My prayer too"; "Great insight"; "I join you in this desire." Through her remarks, she spoke grace into our hearts with words of encouragement, affirming that she was a witness to the evidence of God's work in our lives. Virginia's words were refreshing to our souls, examples of God's own living water.

Weeding and Pruning: Pruning can sometimes be painful, but Virginia is a gentle gardener, giving us glimpses into her heart and mind or focusing on her own shortcomings. At one of our small group dinners, she shared her frustration at not always receiving acknowledgments for gifts she had given. We each said a mental "amen" to that, feeling quite justified. One breath later, however, Virginia shared that she realized her perspective was wrong. Instead of focusing on the lack of acknowledgment, she realized that she wanted to view her giving as reflective of the kind of loving and generous grandmother she wants to be. Her comment was both humbling and convicting.

Patient Tending: Some people at Virginia's stage of life take joy in imparting their many years of hard-earned wisdom. Virginia seems unaware of hers. She

simply sees herself as a fellow journeyer on the road to holiness. When told that she is who we'd like to be when we're her age, she always tells us we should aim much higher. Her humility makes her approachable. She continually looks for grace in our lives and tells us of the beauty she sees. She pays attention, like a gardener noticing and celebrating each new bud.

Virginia is a master gardener, in that she has enhanced the soil, planted deeply, watered and fertilized, pruned and tended in each of us. The result is a harvest of beauty in our lives as we have drawn closer to the Lord and in turn share what we have caught from her with those we mentor. We do our best to follow Virginia's example: to be honest about our own shortcomings, reflective about what God is teaching us, and affirming of what we see the Lord doing in the lives of those we mentor. It is a great gift to have such a mentor and also a great privilege to serve as a mentor. We believe that each role is an essential part of becoming a devoted disciple of Christ. God is in the business of growth and transformation, and we can all be the trowels, rakes, and pruners in his hands.

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