The Garden and the Furnace: Parenting, Activism, and the Politics of Children

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Abstract

This lyrical essay reflects on the tension between despair and cultivation, exploring what it means to parent—that is, to actively hope for and build toward a livable world for future generations—in an era of ecological collapse, economic precarity, and political unmaking. Blending creative nonfiction with socio-political reflection, the piece traces a parent-activist's effort to build a community garden on the site of a condemned and decaying playground. As the physical garden takes shape, the narrative intertwines with stories of activism on behalf of children, anxiety over enduring and broadly relatable issues like climate, economy, and politics. It sheds light on the daily negotiations of selfless action and self-preservation that constitute parenting and political resistance alike.

'The Garden and the Furnace' explores parenting as a radical act of hope: an insistence on nurturing life amid systems of extraction and decay. Drawing on feminist theories of care, matriarchy, ecological pedagogy, and Black and Indigenous traditions of communal sustenance, the essay frames the garden as both metaphor and method. It becomes a living policy intervention—one that reclaims public space for collective belonging while reimagining child-centered places as social and environmental justice.

Structured as a mosaic of vignettes and dialogues, the essay resists linear closure. Its form reflects the work of nurturing—cyclical, uncertain, and deeply relational. By weaving together the personal and political, the narrative argues that the most radical activism on behalf of children may be the work of engaging one's full self and staying present, staying tender, staying hopeful—as the world burns.

November 12, 2024

Fluorescent lights hummed softly, flickering their dim, gray light in the basement of a city building I drove past daily and had never noticed. I glanced at the clock on the wall—the community council meeting was eight minutes late in coming to order.

An energetic, smiling, and well-dressed woman whose role and business there I wasn't certain of, was apologizing for the third time that the heat in this room was "acting up again". Each time, she made a more dramatic and disingenuous show of frustration and protest about the suboptimal conditions. I recognized the district councilman standing near the exit with a group of men in important tailored suits—laughing, shaking their heads, throwing up their hands about a topic I couldn't quite make out over the buzz of voices, lights, and the legs of metal folding chairs scraping across the asbestos floor. A hired security guard stood by the double doors, and three police officers sipped coffee together at a folding table at the front of the room.

I knew the faces, but for the most part, not the names of the twenty or so people—my neighbors—who sat looking ahead or chatting amongst themselves as they waited for the meeting to start. I wondered vaguely why they were here—what had brought them from their homes after dark on a cold November night.

I sat in the third row, clutching the edges of the folded agenda. My eyes passed repeatedly over *Item 2: Public Comment on Unsafe Playground Conditions*. It sounded so tidy in print. So small. As if the problem were a simple maintenance issue, a loose bolt somewhere, a fresh coat of paint needed.

The playground in question was two blocks from the rowhouse where I lived with my partner and two children—we passed it so regularly on the way to school and work it had all but faded from my notice. But days prior, when the canvassers made their monthly rounds to drum up attendance at the community council meeting, the issue of the playground caught my ear. I wondered, with a spark of hope just bright enough, *could there be real intention to restore this space? Could we see a day in the near future where my children could benefit from it?* What had brought me here tonight—tired, cold, and unfed—was a small but persistent sense of "should".

And so, I showed up, for the first time in as many years as my youngest child had been with us, to the community council meeting in the basement of this nondescript building four blocks from my home. A wave of guilt rose in me as I considered this. A younger, more rested version of me had once pontificated to my family and friends about the importance of participation in local politics, espousing the virtue of civic engagement—especially as a person of relative privilege in a mixed-income, mixed-race community. Now here I was, over four years removed from any meaningful engagement.

I found myself floundering between guilt and self-absolution (after all, I'm a busy working mom of two). *What is my responsibility—my contribution? How will I know if I am doing what's right or best? Doing anything must be better than doing nothing… right? But what if I cause harm? Wait a minute . . . how can all of this be on my shoulders when I have so little by way of resources and power? But if I do nothing with what little I have, then I am part of the problem.* This push and pull was so familiar and so confusing. I let my thoughts traverse this chaotic path that always leads to uncertainty, then despair, then dissociation. After a minute or two, I shook myself loose from those thoughts for fear they might swallow me up, and somehow, I felt slightly less human when the well-dressed woman called the meeting to order. She joined the police officers at the folding table in the front of the room, along with the councilman, the suits, and a handful of others. Together, they looked out on "the people"—my neighbors and I—like an architecture of authority made to appear human.

I listened and did my best to make sense of *Item 1: Presentation of Plans for Community Redevelopment* as a relatively out of touch resident—only vaguely aware of the area being referenced. The suits spoke engagingly, though, and showed what I assumed would have been a series of compelling plan drawings for a mixed-income housing community and a restored shopping plaza had they not been attempting to project onto a brown wood paneling wall. The planned strip mall would be anchored by the only full-service grocery store within a ten-block radius of this neighborhood. Words like "walkable", "bike-able", and "green space" were flying around.

We strained our eyes to make out the drawings. A few residents had questions, but most nodded along in lukewarm favor as the presentation concluded with the promise of an update in the coming months.

I thought to myself, *the cynicism in this room is so complete, so deeply held, that most of us can no longer feel it. The slow, methodical abandonment of a neighborhood—the unspoken arithmetic of who deserves quality of life—it's like a nerve pressed so long and so unrelentingly that the mind stops paying attention to the pain.* As I scanned my own body, I was no better able to locate that pain—that hotbed of hope from which advocacy and activism grow. Like the November frost, cynicism pressed coldly and decisively down on me—on us.

As we transitioned to Item 2, Vera Evans stood and greeted the room. I knew her. My eldest and her youngest were in the same class. We had exchanged pleasantries at drop-off a hundred or more times. We had, by happenstance, sat at the same table and finally introduced ourselves at Family Math Night. I had always seen her as so dignified and smart—so steady and direct as she interacted with the school staff.

Tonight, she spoke between quick breaths, voice trembling slightly as she began. Nerves, I assumed. She recounted how the building adjacent to the playground lot—long since abandoned and boarded up—had been a women and children's shelter where she had stayed temporarily when her eldest child was young, over twenty years prior.

"Even then," she said, "that playground was a mess. Swings broken and jerry-rigged back together; big rusted out holes in the merry-go-round platform; nothing but hard ground so the kids would fall and get busted up." She shook her head and went on, "Our kids needed a place to play but we were scared to let them out there."

Since then, the city had put up a "temporary" chain link fence around the site with threatening signage and yellow tape, declaring the playground "structurally unsound"—none of which had been effective at keeping children out of the area. Vera cleared her throat and went on to describe the current condition—her voice steadier now as she described the collapsing slide, the exposed nails, the swing set now nothing but broken chains.

She turned to address the suits. "I'm not saying it's not great that you have plans to build housing and bring in more residents. I'm just asking why not take care of the people who are already here? Some of us in this room have been here for twenty, thirty years or more and have just seen this community fall apart, while y'all go over there," she gestured vaguely off to the right to signal *beyond—outside of our community, "*and build more new, when you're not taking care of the old."

There was an uneasy shuffling and shifting among the panel.

"I'm asking you," she said, now looking directly at the district councilman. "Where are our children supposed to play? Why does no one return my emails and my calls? I have four children—one grown, but three of them in the house. My next door neighbor runs an in-home child care. And these children have no place to go."

Her voice no longer shook but grew louder—the frost of cynicism giving way to the rising heat of righteous anger. There was some nodding, muttered affirmation, and scattered clapping among the assembled, along with some awkward shifting and a general murmur of discomfort. This is not how this meeting was "supposed" to go.

The district councilman—a crisply dressed Black man wearing tinted glasses so that it was difficult to see his eyes at any distance—pressed his fingertips together. "Ma'am," he said, "first of all, please lower your voice."

It was a warning dressed as civility, and it fell like kerosene on an open flame.

"I'll lower my voice when you do your job as our representative," she fired back. "It's not just about the playground. It's about how this community is treated. I'm just asking for our kids' safety. I'm asking you to see what we see every day."

The councilman stood and took a hand-held microphone—overkill for the small room with no more than 30 people in it. "Listen, what did you say your name is?"

"Vera Evans," she said resolutely.

"Ms. Evans? Okay, Ms. Evans, I've lived in this community my whole life. My mother lives here. No one cares for this community more than I do, okay? I understand your concerns, but let me explain something to all of you. When we're making decisions about community revitalization, we're working with community-based organizations, we're working with investors, we're working with the city, and we're looking at the big picture, okay? There are reasons why we might focus on one thing rather than another, and it's for the greater good. More affordable housing means more residents. More residents in the community means a higher tax base, okay? More retail brings in more jobs. A grocery store means this community will have more access to fresh foods, right? We're not saying a playground or other issues aren't important, but there are lots of factors that you don't see—lots of issues with zoning and land use restrictions. Lots that goes on behind the scenes that goes into setting priorities."

I could hear the subtext loud and clear—*politics and decision-making are too big and too complex for the common public to understand. Leave the thinking to us. We know what's best . . .*

"Mr. Councilman, I don't care where you live or where your mother lives," Vera continued on, drawing quiet, uncomfortable laughter from the assembly. "I care about what you do as an elected official. This community elected you, and we can un-elect you..."

The well-dressed woman swiftly interrupted. "Okay, Ms. Evans. Your concerns have been heard, and now you're disrupting what should be a civil conversation. I'm going to ask you to sit down now, so we can move on to other business, and if that won't work for you, you'll have to leave…"

Vera spoke over her, staunchly holding her ground and unrelentingly addressing the councilman. "You're hearing but you're not listening." She clapped her hands loudly as she said these words, as if to wake the panel of important people from a deep slumber. "We don't need more construction a mile down the road where most of the people in this room never go." *Clap*, again. We need someone to pay attention to what's going on *here*, and a simple playground or some kind of space for our kids would be a start."

The well-dressed woman nodded at the security guard standing at the door, and he approached Vera. I heard her say to the guard, "don't touch me," as she walked toward the double doors to leave. The security guard stayed threateningly close to her.

The people at the front table exchanged glances that dripped with ridicule, disdain, and self-righteousness.

I stayed bolted to my seat. Shame rose in my chest like a ball of fire—burning, spreading within me. I could feel the heat of it in my ears, the pounding in the palms of my hands. I should have done something. Said *something*. A simple gesture, like standing—a body in solidarity—yet in the quick intensity of the exchange, the air between my seat and the aisle had felt impossibly thick. I watched her go, feeling secondhand embarrassment, or secondhand heartbreak. I watched—no, participated in, by way of inaction—this daring Black woman being silenced under threat of violence in a space built "for the community". Her own community. Our shared community.

The well-dressed woman moved briskly to *Item 3: Report on Local Trends in Crime and Law Enforcement,* and one of the police officers took the floor. It was as though Vera's angry outburst—no, the truthful and embodied account she had carried on her heart to

this facade of a deliberation room floor—had already been swept into a dustpan and discarded.

Later, when I walked past the condemned playground on my way home, yellow tape fluttering like warning flags, I considered the cost of silence—another mother, someone so like and unlike me, burning up in the furnace all alone. As one mother stood for the worthiness of her children, her family, her community—the rest of us willfully pretended it was about a playground, so that we could dismiss it under the pretense of sensibility and prioritization.

It would be months before the garden would come to fruition. But the shame I felt that night as the community council adjourned—and deeper still as I arrived home to face my own children—that was the first seed.

September 26, 2024

I pulled into the closest parking space I could find, about a half block from my front door, and performed a feat of physics and strength to balance work bags, grocery bags, and three days worth of coffee cups in a single trip.

Inside, my partner, Avery, was growing impatient with Iris, our four-year-old. In characteristic form, she was lying on the kitchen floor, arms flung wide, espousing the injustice of being asked to put on her socks and shoes. The kitchen clock ticked, boding the threat of being late for gymnastics, second by passing second. Archer, our six-year-old sat at the table, painstakingly cutting paper into tiny shapes. I set my bags down and felt the ache in my shoulders bloom, familiar and dull.

"Hi," I said to Avery as we exchanged a brief but affectionate side-hug. I sighed out loud and passed a hand over my forehead, thinking . . . *gymnastics, dinner, whatever this thing is that Archer is working on. When was their last real bath? Better get one in tonight. Tomorrow is…*

"Momma," the little one interrupted my thoughts. "Are you tired forever?"

I laughed too loud. "No. Just for today."

But in the silent moment or two that followed, I wondered if maybe I was "tired forever". *After all, caring for children—for our community, for our world—doesn't know days or weeks. It doesn't respect exhaustion, nor the rules of what we think is fair. It only knows unending need, and it only asks continuous outpouring—even when we are hollowed out.*

But that thought was too big, and today's container already too full, so I set it aside.

I crouched down beside Iris and helped negotiate a treaty between sock and foot. We talked about compromise and the balance of choice with consequence, and how sometimes you don't want to do something, but you do it anyway because bodies get cold and sidewalks are rough. And I hoped I was protecting both her feet and her sense of agency while running damage control on our evening schedule.

Avery and Iris took their leave for gymnastics. Uselessly, but compulsively I counted the minutes: *walking to the car; she'll want to buckle her own car seat belt; about a twelve minute drive to the rec center; parking is always a hassle over there; so… they'll be about ten minutes late…*"Mom, look!" It was Archer who brought me back to the present this time. I sat down next to him and leaned in with as much interest as I could muster as he blithely rambled about his paper cutting project. I reminded myself how much I love his joy and imagination—still un-constrained, unpunished by this world, and quite

probably not for much longer. And a rush of pride and endearment swelled from my belly and made my throat tighten.

Still, I wanted to close my eyes. To disappear—just for a short while—into the quiet place where nothing is asked of me. I thought about the unclosed loops and unanswered emails waiting for me at work; the trip to the aquarium I kept promising the kids like an agenda item that keeps getting tabled; my neglected friendships; the gnawing anxiety about politics, climate, the economy; the shame spiral spinning me further and further from agency and action—then, the self-admonishment, because what right have I to be helpless? Burnout hums in the background, low and constant—white noise only heard when all else goes silent.

February 3, 2025

The permission arrived without ceremony. In came in an email titled RE: Interim Land Use Request – Parcel 17B, sent at 4:43PM on a Monday, just as the children were starting to circle the kitchen like flies.

The Planning Commission is prepared to issue a temporary land use agreement to grant community access to public land…

Temporary. Revocable. Subject to review. The language was careful, defensive, and threaded with conditions. No permanent structures. No fencing without explicit approval. The City retained the right to terminate the agreement with thirty days' notice. Maintenance and liability would be assumed by the permit holder, which was somehow, now me, attached to an entity I had invented and typed into a form just before midnight the night of the community council meeting, called *Friends of Willow Street Green Space*.

Weeks earlier, the representative of the Planning Commission assigned to my case—his name was Steven, a white young man who looked to be in his mid twenties, and seemed perpetually surprised to be helpful—slid the paperwork across a table in the small conference room adjacent to his cubicle, where just he and I sat. He tapped his youthful finger on the page where the terms were spelled out, and said, "this doesn't change ownership. It just activates the space."

The word *activates* had landed poignantly. As if the land had been asleep and we had the chance to awaken it.

Now, basking in the glow of this email, I felt something loosen inside me. It wasn't relief, exactly—the terms carried their own weight, as did the questions that would trickle in over the coming days. But there was a new sense of steadiness in knowing that *something* could begin. Not forever, not freely, but legitimately. I thought of the years-old strips of yellow tape still flapping around the broken slide. Of Vera being escorted from the community council meeting. Of my children and hers. Of how big and how small this victory was all at once.

December 7, 2024

The city had described the playground as "structurally unsound", a phrase that suggests a clear failure—an engineering flaw, perhaps. But on that rare Saturday morning, with Avery and the kids out of the house, I needed to see it myself. Up close.

As I slipped in past the No Trespassing sign, through the gap in the buckling fencing that surrounded the playground, I could see what it really was. Decay. Cumulative rot by a thousand small permissions. The slide was tilted to the left—the metal bars buckling and

threatening to give way. Rust freckled the bent ladder rungs, where flakes lifted easily under my fingers, orange dust clinging to my palms. A swing hung by a single chain, twisting in the breeze, and emitting an uneasy, rhythmic squealing as it drifted back and forth.

I stepped carefully. The ground was uneven—a patchwork of cracked and buckling asphalt and exposed roots where weeds had taken hold and aged into full grown trees. Shards of broken glass glinted in the morning sunlight. I imagined my children trying to play here, and a when I did, a strange mix of emotions rose to grip my throat. *Guilt, shame—shouldn't I be able to give my children more than this? Outrage—is a safe place for children to play too much to ask of our society? Dread—Did I really bring two children into this world as community and continent sink into dysfunction and collapse? Is this what political power is about—the right to withhold resources from children? This decay is not happenstance. It is policy.*

And with that thought, the outrage took hold, and my body followed it into chaotic action. I began to kick and pull. Loose boards with nails that gave in too easily, then twisted and bent pieces of metal. Bolts, rusted to their core, snapped as I pulled. Sweat and tears gathered and fell as I worked—or tantrumed—pulling and kicking, not equipped with so much as a glove or a hammer.

My arms and lungs ached quickly, though, and for every tiny victory—a splintering piece of wood kicked loose, a sharp bit of metal tossed aside—there were ten or more tries where the total of my strength was insufficient to budge this monstrosity.

I stopped, allowing myself to sink into defeat for a moment. This is the part of caring that no one prepares you for. The realization that love is not leverage. That wanting a safer, kinder world for your children does not mean the world will cooperate. Grief pressed down on me as I looked around and I considered how it got this bad: The heat that made the materials brittle. The expanding and contracting under cold and ice. The storms that loosened the bolts. The years of care deferred, denied. This was the story unfolding everywhere. The breaking of our world, not all at once, but steadily, predictably, while we are not looking. We are asked to be reasonable—to be calm in the face of what should terrify us. We are instructed to look at the "bigger picture" and endure the cracks rather than repair. Adapt rather than demand better. And as we comply, the things at our fingertips break, bit by bit, until they are declared beyond our reach to save them.

I thought about my children's small, vulnerable bodies. Their trust in me. Their faith that adults know what they're doing. I pulled one last time on the singular chain holding up the last swing. It didn't budge, and the truth landed heavily on my heart: this will not move because I want it to. Because I am a good mother. Because I finally showed up after all these years. I sat on the bottom stair of the climbing structure, the frustration acute and powerful—pressing against the back of my eyes. *I'm only making it worse,* I thought. *This work is too heavy*. *The decay is too deep. I am not a hero and this is not my stage.*

I hadn't told anyone about the land use application that I had submitted, nor the *Friends of Willow Street Green Space*—not even Avery. Not because I wanted to keep it a secret, but because on some level, I was ashamed. I'd been trained against the notion of community as, and in, resistance—made to feel naïve for believing politics can be shaped without the approval of authority. But as I sat there, I felt how thin and tired that story had become. I imagined that as the facade of democratic process crumbles, a different story emerges. I considered that maybe the labor of creating together—of decentering what serves political power and centering what serves our communities, our children—is not only an option. Maybe it's our only real recourse against the breaking.

August 15, 2022

The weight of parenting felt heaviest when Avery had to travel for work, and I was alone. The trips weren't long, nor unusually frequent, but as the days brought them closer, that familiar, visceral anxiety would take hold in me. I would remind myself that it's only a few nights, that we've gotten through this before, and we can do it again. I even admonished, at times, the mother who stared back at me in the mirror: *Lots of mothers do this day in and day out with no partner. No support system. You should be grateful…*

But something about the alone-ness made me feel exposed and vulnerable. Like at any moment the ground underneath me—the eggshell-thin confidence I had in myself as a parent in those early years might give way, and my children and I would simply fall through.

Until well after her third birthday, Iris slept between Avery and me—or more accurately, she slept in the crook of my arm on the side nearest the middle. She had a habit of waking up in the middle of the night inconsolable, for reasons she was not able to explain. This night, with Avery gone, her screams tore instantly through the thin veil of mother sleep, and seemed to rattle the whole house as I gathered my bearings and attempted to comfort her.

"What's wrong, Iris? What's wrong baby?" I whispered in the dark, scooping her into my lap. She offered the same unintelligible response over and over again—frustration flooding her as her scrambled words fell in vain on my ears.

My own frustration was mounting, as I offered snacks, snuggles, even a TV show as my resolve eroded. "Iris!" I cried out, desperately. "Stop screaming!"

She screamed louder. "No, YOU stop screaming!" She had a point.

I had read all the parenting posts about young children and emotional regulation: *You are their rock. If you are dysregulated, they will be dysregulated. Be firm, but gentle. Be consistent. Be calm. Be flawless—the perfect, uncracking vessel for your child to pour their 3AM terror, rage, and vitriol into. Never break.*

Minutes went by. A half an hour. Time marched on as Iris held me by the shirt with two white-knuckled fists, rocking backward, then slamming her tiny body into me, wailing the same incoherent phrase over and over. I went between whispering—attempting to soothe her, and shouting—attempting to startle her into submission. My own tears mixing with hers, I laid my hands on her shoulders and willed myself not to shake her.

Instead, I held a pillow over my face and screamed into it loudly, from deep within. To my surprise, Iris followed suit. She lifted a pillow to cover her mouth and buried her high-pitched scream deep in its fibers.

"Again!" I cried, and stuffed my face back into the pillow, screaming. Now, sitting across from me on the bed, she screamed into her little pillow once again.

Again! Again! Again! I lost count of how many times we screamed together. Two-year-old Iris and her full-grown mother, together in a spontaneously combusted furnace of rage and terror.

She lifted her red, tired face from the pillow, no longer screaming, but her breath came in ragged sobs.

"Calm down," I said firmly.

"I-I-I n-ee-eed h-help." Her words struck me as deeply insightful and wise. Instructive even. She might as well have reminded me that calm in the face of terror is an unrealistic ask. An unjust ask. Her knowing body would not comply with the falsehood of it.

"Ok," I said, feeling the temperature begin to fall. I held her close to me and rocked back and forth. "Ok."

February 20, 2025

Invitations went out with the help of Avery and the kids: folded into backpacks, stapled to telephone poles, slipped under windshield wipers, and slid through mail slots with bold hopefulness. *Friends of Willow Street Green Space*, the flyer read, *Community Meeting regarding the lot at 2721 Willow St.* It included my home address, 7:00-8:00PM, and the words: *All are welcome, including children.* I had borrowed folding chairs from my workplace and cleared the dining room table. I pushed aside homework and mail piles and the haunting thought that maybe no one would show. I steeled myself, and put out snacks.

7:02

When the doorbell first rang, it was Vera. I wasn't altogether surprised to see her. In fact, a couple of weeks prior, when I clumsily approached her at school drop off to tell her about the land use agreement, she had asked me to send her a copy of the agreement, and had ultimately emailed me back to say she would try to make it tonight.

I hoped she and I could become friends. For now, a shadow of my own guilt filled the space between us. On its face, the guilt was about that night at the community council, but it was reinforced by legacy—by the micro-politics that govern relationships between Black women and white women. The rules of engagement we are supposed to follow, the protocols that preclude authenticity and connection.

She stood with one hand tucked into the pocket of her coat, the other holding a notebook like armor across her chest. "Am I the first one here?" she asked, scanning the room with thinly veiled discomfort.

I tried to compensate with as much ease as I could muster. "Yes," I said. "Welcome. Please make yourself at home."

Her son, Archer's classmate, who I had not realized was there, filed in behind her. "This is Taj."

Taj and Archer—who was shyly creeping down the stairs to check in on the action, exchanged stifled smiles and waved awkwardly to one another.

7:05

The doorbell rang again, and relief washed over me. I opened the door to an energetic, middle-aged Black woman. "Am I in the right place? Sorry I'm late, I had two parents running late to pick up their kids. But Vera told me this was going on tonight so I thought I might as well make my way over." She struck me as the type who never really stopped, but rolled perpetually onward for fear that if she stopped she may cease to exist.

Vera chimed in, "This is my neighbor and friend, Donna. She runs an in-home child care next door to me." The two hugged as Donna sat down next to her on the sofa.

7:07

My friend Helaine, who, admittedly, I had recruited to help populate this meeting, arrived next with a quick knock before letting herself in. She was smilingly breathless and apologetic, with a notebook and the easy familiarity of someone who had not only been to my house before, but seen it in every stage of disorder. "I wasn't sure if this was going to be standing room only," she said, looking around, "or just us."

She hugged me and turned to the other guests with the seamless grace that I admired so much about her. Introductions were made, light conversation initiated, snacks offered and taken up in small measure…

7:12

Jerry Booth came last. He knocked loudly and abruptly. An oversized trenchcoat hung over his slender frame, and he lifted an expensive-looking fedora from his head as he crossed the threshold. He introduced himself with the effortless gravity of a true community elder, and seemed quite at ease as he extended a hand to greet each person in the room and finally found a seat in the accent chair.

Five people. Plus Avery, Archer, Taj, and Iris who skirted the edges of the meeting either to signal general support, or to peruse the snacks. Five people, sitting loosely in a circle, waiting patiently for leadership.

So I offered a welcome with profuse gratitude and cut to the chase. I explained how I had named the *Friends of Willow Street Green Space* as an entity to take responsibility for the lot, and how I hoped we could think together about what's next.

"I want to be clear," I said finally. "We don't own the land. The city issued a temporary land use agreement, and it comes with conditions." I passed around copies I had printed off earlier that day. "No permanent structures or fencing, and anything built has to be removable within 30 days. And the permit holder—right now that's me—assumes maintenance responsibility."

A flash of cynicism and absurdity passed through me as I said that last bit aloud. The city had owned that plot of land for decades and had never, in effect, 'assumed maintenance responsibility'. Now, it sat squarely on my shoulders by my own request. I decided to keep that thought to myself.

Vera chimed in. "So, basically, they're saying go ahead and use the lot, but they can take it away whenever they feel like it."

"Exactly," Donna said. "And that's how they do it. They'll let you put time and money and everything else into it, and then one day they might take it back and not even do anything with it."

"That's true," I said, desperate to keep the conversation above the fray of despair. "But even if the only thing we get accomplished is to take down the playground equipment, and clean up the lot, that would be an improvement."

My hopeful plea went uncontested, so I continued on: "I still have a lot of unanswered questions, but I've been emailing with someone at the Planning Commission and here's what I know so far: Once we decide what the space is going to be, we will have to insure it because we… well, *I* am liable for anything that happens there. My family is able to take that on for now, but we will need to find some financial support for whatever improvements we are going to make there."

I realized I was ahead of myself. It wasn't time to talk about funding or other issues of *how* just yet, so I changed course. "I was hoping tonight we could brainstorm *what* the space could be. As nice as it would be to have a restored playground there, that would be considered a permanent structure. But how can we make it into a space that serves the children in this neighborhood within the limits of our agreement?"

Ideas came slowly and cautiously at first. Safe, tidy ideas. Benches. A micro-library where people can leave and take books. A clean, empty lot that neighbors could use to host block parties and family events. Then, bolder ideas emerged. We could accept applications for temporary art installations from community residents. A ball field. A skate park. Ideas fell like seeds on hard ground, one after another, without taking root.

"What about a garden?" Vera suggested tentatively.

"A community garden! I love that idea!" Helaine mused.

Encouraged, Vera went on. "My niece helps run a community garden over on the west side. They get the kids involved from the school that's right there. They have a little walking path where every so often you can stop and read a page of a children's book till you've read the whole book. They have a little circle of tree stumps where they sit and read stories with the kids. There's a greenhouse. It's nice. I don't know how it's funded, but I think people in the neighborhood can get food for free." She shrugged.

Jerry leaned forward in his seat. "They can't argue with that. People growing food. And the thing is, it can start small." He turned to Vera. "What you're talking about is great, but it takes time. It takes resources. But you can put seeds in the ground and they know how to grow. You don't have to do everything all at once."

The idea took hold in the group and in me. The garden wasn't exactly a dream. Not yet. It was more of a negotiation. A compromise shaped by political constraints. A vision of what the land could hold without engaging, all at once, the support and the burden of bureaucracy.

We spent the rest of the time talking about what comes next. Logistics—demolition, signage, soil testing, insurance—interlaced with ideation—concrete pavers decorated by children, fruiting trees, a mud kitchen. Modest ideas. Hopeful, but not too hopeful. But something was awake in the space between the five of us that hadn't been an hour ago.

By the time they left and I sat alone amidst half-eaten cookies and unused folding chairs, hope was growing inside me, slowly but surely. The plan was fragile and unfinished, sitting tentatively on shaky ground. But it was a plan, and it was shared.

April 20, 2025

We built the last of the beds in the late afternoon—Vera and I—when the sunlight softens the edges of things. Avery, Jerry, the kids, the guys from the church who had been recruited to help, the volunteers from the Cooperative Extension, through which we had finally managed to secure a modest grant to cover materials, had all gone home.

Vera measured twice and cut once, steady and precise. I held the boards in place, my knee braced against the wood, the drill sending vibrations up my arm and into my chest. The work was slow but satisfying—a cascade of micro-problems that could be neatly solved. Not without due measure of error and frustration, but still. The physical work temporarily quieted the endless *thinking*, and that felt like a relief. We worked side by side—politely conscious of ourselves and each other, passing tools back and forth,

making intermittent conversation about summer plans, what we might plant, our kids . . .

Vera wiped her forehead with the back of her glove. "You know," she said, "when my oldest was born, I thought the hardest part would be the nights."

"Ugh, the sleep," I commiserated.

"The sleep, the way it never ends," she shook her head. "Turned out the hardest part was realizing how alone you are once you hold that baby in your arms."

She set a screw and waited for the drill. I handed it over wordlessly.

She went on. "I was 19 when Emmit was born, I didn't have a degree, a job, nothing. We stayed with my grandmother until she passed, but then it was just me and him. He didn't get to have all of what my younger kids have, but that's what we do. We do our best."

My mind fills with the remembered image of the people sitting at the folding table, facing "the community" at the council meeting. The well-dressed woman, who I now knew to be Dr. Savonna Ballack, CEO of the East Allendale Community Corporation—a non-profit established by the city to lead "revitalization" efforts in our neighborhood. The councilman, the developers, the police. I thought of the resources at their disposal. Money. Influence. Authority. Knowledge. Proximity to power. All laid out before them like an invisible set of tools. I thought of the land use agreement—the buttoned-up language. The words temporary, interim, revokable spelled out over and over again. A reminder that power is doled out in measure, and can be snatched away at any moment.

Anger flared inside me. It was wasted on them—all of that power. In the months preceding the building of the beds, we had asked for support. We had brought our plans before the community council, in hopes that something—anything in that invisible toolkit could be deployed in support of the garden. Instead, we were met with condescension and disingenuous well-wishes. I had met with Dr. Ballack, hoping for help locating grant funding opportunities. After all, Avery and I had turned out our shallow pockets to have the playground demolished and the site cleared, but our resources ran thin. She was more personable than I expected on a one-on-one basis, but the conversation boiled down to what I already knew—that we were on our own.

Vera and I lifted a bed into place together. "I used to think that caring a lot and doing our best would be enough," I said. "That if we loved our kids enough and sacrificed enough, and took good enough care of them, it would compensate for everything else. For how little this city, this country, this world cares for them." As I spoke these words, I became rawly self-conscious—a white mother telling a Black mother how cruel the world is for her own children…

"Well, they count on that," Vera said with a humorless chuckle. "They know we will make up the difference."

True on multiple levels, I thought.

"I don't know how you do it with four," I confessed. "I feel maxed out with two of them."

She shrugged. "You just do what you gotta do for them. My mother raised six kids, but she always said she didn't do it alone. She raised us with neighbors. People I still call auntie and uncle. People we didn't even know that well, watching out for us."
Part of me romanticized this notion of neighbors supporting each other—doing the labor of caring together. The tight, suffocating bounds of individualism softening a bit,

loosening their stranglehold on each mother—each caregiver. It was a compelling picture of humanity. A hopeful legacy of how communities have stood in the gap by necessity, while the ones with the invisible tools fail, or refuse to care. But was it enough? I considered the immense weight of caring laid on the shoulders of our community. The way our foundations have cracked under the pressure, and how so many of our children fall through…

I tightened one last screw and the wood stopped shifting. The bed held. We stood back, soil and sawdust clinging to our jeans; the beds imperfect, but solid. Physically exhausting hours of *care,* laid out in rectangles across the lot.

May 29, 2025

The house was quiet in the way that only happens after everyone else has gone to sleep. I laid on my side in the bluish glow of my phone, thumb moving on instinct, eyes passing over headlines. Each unsettling phrase sliding into the next like a rip current I can't seem to get out of.

Heat-Related Deaths Rise as Cities Struggle to Adapt Infrastructure.

Economists Predict Food Prices will Continue to Climb in the Coming Year.

Water Systems Across Multiple States Show Signs of Accelerated Failure.

Voter Turnout Expected to Drop in Upcoming Election as Public Trust Erodes.

Though I eventually laid the phone down, the dread didn't follow suit. It hummed on uncomfortably in my viscera. A flash of heat seemed to emanate from deep inside me, making me sweat instantly and all over. I kicked off the covers, careful not to disturb Avery, who slept unimposingly next to me. I sat straight up, breathless in the heat of my anxiety.

Accepting the truth that sleep would not come easily tonight, I slipped out of the bedroom and down the stairs. I opened the front door and looked up and down the street. All was quiet and still here, as usual, a few blocks removed from the main thoroughfare. The streetscape looked like a painting under the light fog and the orange streetlights. The air was warm and thick with humidity.

Before I knew it, I was walking. My feet on the sidewalk and the steady in and out of my breath seemed to be amplified against the backdrop of distant city sounds. There it was, waiting in the dark, a geometry of raised garden beds asleep under the fog and the streetlights. We had propositioned the city several times to remove the temporary fencing that had been meant to keep trespassers out. Now it was simply a nuisance that made it difficult to get materials in and out of the lot. But there it stood, and I made my way through the gap as always.

I crouched by one of the garden beds and let my fingers brush through the soil. Carefully, reverently even, I felt the small, improbable sprouts. They felt… strong. A row of tomato seedlings covering themselves in a spiny armor of their own making. Peas with their first tendrils reaching out, seeking something to grab onto—something strong enough to hold them up.

I remembered Jerry's words from that night in my living room: *they know how to grow . . .* A flicker of relief mixed with wonder came on that thought. Yes, they are vulnerable—a late frost, a dry spell, or a careless foot could be their undoing. I can help protect them in some ways, provide resources, facilitate conditions. But their growth is not because of

me. I can't control the shape they take as they mature, nor can I will them to survive at all for that matter. They are resilient and adapting, compelled to perpetuate life—all on their own.

I sat back on my heels. The dread didn't go away. It never truly does. It knelt beside me like a shadow—ever present, but only fully visible in certain light. *Was I a naif for initiating more life, when life as it is feels so unsustainable?*

But there in the garden, the cool moisture of the earth soaking through my pajamas at the knees, it was as though the light shifted just so, and something else became visible too—a quiet specter insisting that growth, that the perpetuation of life, is still possible. Essential, even. That tending, caring, nurturing still matter even when outcomes are uncertain.

We sat there for what felt like a long time, those two truths and I. Until an abrupt rustling in the alley jolted my nerves. I whipped my head around just in time to see two oversized rats jump out of a neighbor's trash bin. Time to go home.

March 31, 2025

The meeting started the way they always do. Someone apologizing for being late, someone else for having to leave early. The sign-in sheet on a clipboard making its way from hand to hand.

The initial five members of the *Friends of Willow Street Green Space* sat in unofficially assigned seats in my living room, along with two new members. Mr. Varley, an awkwardly nerdy but unequivocally kind man who taught at the elementary school had approached me at drop-off one day and asked if he could help. He was a certified "Master" Gardener, and had wanted to get a gardening program started at the school, but had been met with unsupportive bureaucracy and red tape. We welcomed him with open arms, especially as we came to notice that none of us knew anything about gardening. And then there was Elder Greene—*Elder*, as he preferred to be called—the pastor of the only nearby church (among the dozens of church buildings that punctuated the streets of East Allendale) that appeared to still be active. We were not church-goers, but in the prior months, I had sought him out and we had struck up a sort of camaraderie, if only surface-level. From the start, he had affirmed the community garden and seemed to understand, without the exact words to explain it, but in the same resolute way that the rest of us did, that it mattered.

But matter as it may have, the garden beds had been sitting half-built for the last two weeks. Piles of soil had been bought and delivered, but were beginning to erode with each rainfall. The planting window was approaching, and the site was nowhere near ready. This night, the tenor of the meeting reflected the same signals of fatigue.

Just weeks ago, the energy was at an all-time high. We had fresh news that our grant application had been accepted, and we had resources to move forward. We were sketching our dream garden on great sheets of chart paper. We were all but giddy with possibility. But as the reality of the labor set in, the vision felt difficult to hold. We had reached a point where good intentions were no longer enough.

"I think we need some structure," Vera suggests with firmness and clarity that lands. "Some leadership."

Defensiveness spikes within me. I feel it immediately, the heat in my neck rising into my cheeks. I tamp down the reflex to explain how this all started—how the paperwork came

to my inbox, how both the city and the funder expect a single point of contact, but that I never meant to be the one in control of everything… Did I?

I nodded. "What does that mean for us?"

Jerry chimed in. "Leadership. Who is responsible for what. So, it's not just one person making decisions and trying to make things happen."

Vera looked at me. "You're carrying too much," she said simply.

The words themselves were heavy because I knew they were true. I'd been making plans for the garden late at night, sending email after email seeking additional help to build the garden infrastructure, smoothing over conflicts before they surfaced, hovering over the project like it might cease to exist if I looked away. It was unsustainable, and I knew it. But no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't come up with a vision of leadership that didn't ultimately amount to a hierarchy with myself at the top.

"You're right," I say. "I just don't want it to fall apart. I feel like I owe it to all of you to make it work."

Jerry nods. "I've been around long enough to know that's the fastest way for things to fall apart… one person trying to hold it all. Trying to control it all."

Agreement rippled through the group.

"What if we stop thinking about leadership as ownership, and think about it as stewardship," Vera offered. "The different jobs that need to be done can be shared, rotating. That way, it's not about a chain of command, but about all of us doing what needs to be done. We all commit to what we can, and we are all accountable to each other for it."

I imagined loosening my grip. The risk. The relief. These thoughts bumped up against one another, as if they were taking turns occupying my consciousness.

Together, we started naming roles and claiming them. Point of Contact… that was me. Garden Steward to manage the planting, pruning, and harvesting schedules…as if on cue, we all looked at Mr. Varley, who chuckled and nodded his agreement. Community Outreach… Both Helaine and Elder offered to engage their respective circles as potential laborers and beneficiaries of the garden. Vera offered to manage the watering and weeding schedules and make assignments to distribute those tasks. Donna took on initial planning for the remainder of the lot, which meant adding features to help make it a viable play and learning space for children. Jerry offered to cut the grass…

As the meeting adjourned and the *Friends of Willow Street Green Space* dispersed, the shadow of skepticism lingered in the living room with me. *What if it doesn't work? What if not everyone is as committed to this as I am?* But it no longer obstructed my vision. I could vaguely see the path forward. Now I held up hope like a flashlight, straining my eyes to see the next step. Now the work is heavier and lighter all at once.

November 18, 2025

Mr. Varley… Andy, as we had come to call him when the kids weren't around… had sent around an email to the *Friends of Willow Street Green Space* leadership team that the forecast called for a cold snap. The first hard frost was expected over the coming weekend, which meant it was our last chance to harvest the last of the broccoli and kale,

and set the garlic and onions for spring, before the garden would lay dormant for the winter.

It had been one year… almost to the day… since the community council meeting. The start of all of this.

I replied to Andy's email, saying I could slip out and gather up the rest of the crops this afternoon, and would drop them off at the school where a small group of parents had become something like our first CSA cohort… donating money, tools, or time to help tend the garden, and sharing in its humble harvest each week. I gathered up a handful of paper grocery bags and plodded the well-worn path from my front door to the garden. Something in me was comforted… delighted even, by the familiar creak of the toolshed door as I turned the key in search of gloves and shears.

I stopped for a moment to read the words I had read over and over. *The Rules of the Garden*—a handwritten poster affixed to the side of the toolshed, listing the rules that the *Friends of Willow Street Green Space*, led by the children, had worked together to create:

Show respect for all living things.

Bigger kids look out for smaller kids.

Don't take more than you need.

If something needs to be done, do it.

If something is too hard, ask for help.

Everyone is welcome to play.

Everyone shares what we grow.

The words brought a smile to my face, and a deep sense of hopeful wellbeing came over me. In the grand scheme of things, the garden was so small. And yet, it brought so much *life…*

The air seemed to grow colder around me, and so I set to the work of harvesting… respectfully, methodically, the way Andy had shown us, being careful to preserve and protect the plant as the source, even while cutting away the produce. With gratitude. After all, it was the garden which pushed me to learn how to do that for myself. It was the garden that taught me to stop pretending burnout is some sort of virtue… to stop mistaking endurance and self-importance for leadership,,, to be a steward.

The notion of stewardship[1] had taken root in my mind after that night when Vera brought it up. I had been taught a version of care… caring for children, caring for our community

[1] The concept of "care" as collective stewardship—an alternative to the colonial notion of ownership where care is outsourced by compulsion and exploitation—is derived from various Black, Indigenous, and Feminist theories on care and caregiving. The present explanation of stewardship draws primarily from: 1) Joan Tronto's (1993, 2013) "Phases of Care" with a particular focus on shared attentiveness to needs, and on "caring with" through solidarity, justice, and democratic inclusion; 2) bell hooks's (1994, 2000) reframe of caregiving as a radical ethic of love when it is when it chosen, collective, and justice-oriented, rather than coerced or romanticized; and 3) Kim TallBear's (2014) critique of settler notions of care that extract rather than relate, and discussion of Indigenous relational ethics, kinship, and decolonial approaches to care.
Furthermore, the present explanation of care seeks to reflect shared principles across the body of care ethics frameworks, including:

- Care is political and structured by power

and our world… that was hierarchical, outsourced, somehow virtuous and exploitative at the same time. But as our earnest and imperfect try at stewardship unfolded, so did my curiosity. The notion grew like a vine inside me, intertwining with other parts of my life… helping me see more clearly the shape of power and oppression, and my own place in the story.

As it grew, I recognized motherhood provided my early lessons in stewardship. I learned, in the context of motherhood, power is temporary, it often belongs to a season… a set of conditions… rather than a person. As a mother, I had begun to learn what it means to be responsible for bodies I do not own, futures I cannot control, and needs that do not wait for a convenient time to announce themselves. I learned how to act… not because I'm in charge, and not compelled by authority, but because neglect has consequences.

Yes, I had held these lessons for a long time, but it was the garden which brought them to life. In the garden, I learned stewardship lives in the gap between the unending demand for care and our human limitations. It refuses ownership without refusing responsibility. It asks not *who is in charge?* but instead, *who will tend what needs tending for now, and then make room for someone else when the time comes?* This is the logic of nurturing. The logic of motherhood. When all else is stripped away, it is the fundamental negotiation of survival beyond the self.

The labor of stewardship means trusting others to tend differently, imperfectly, and sometimes better than we can. I think it means we must stay with the caring, even when the future is precarious. It is an ethic that is sharpened by ecological and socio-political instability… not dissolved by it… because it asks us to care anyway, to create anyway. It calls us to be accountable… to the land, to the people beside us, and to those who will inherit what we leave behind. And what distinguishes this labor from futility is the contract that rest is not a retreat from responsibility but a condition of sustaining it.

The work of creation… this garden, this community, this world is unfinished. The constant work of creating and nurturing life is no negligible effort nor inevitable happenstance. Those who do it know it is disciplined, demanding, and deeply political labor. Indeed, it is work that knows the world may not be saved from the furnace—but insists on tending it anyway.

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- Exploitation of caregivers is a fundamental injustice
- Care requires material support, not moral praise
- Collective responsibility matters more than individual virtue
- Justice-oriented care must be reciprocal, relational, and sustainable.

initiatives focused on early childhood systems design, strategic planning, evaluation, and cross-sector collaboration with partners at the local, state, and national levels.

Jennifer brings deep expertise in early childhood systems, policy, workforce development, racial equity, and family-centered systems change. She has partnered successfully with state agencies, philanthropy, and community organizations across the country to translate data and community insight into actionable strategy. She holds a Master's degree in Early Childhood Education and is a published author and sought-after facilitator, known for designing engaging, human-centered learning and co-design processes that support sustainable systems transformation.