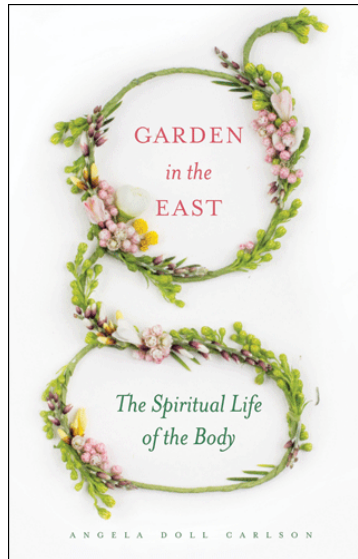


GARDEN IN THE EAST

group discussion guide

MY HOPE when writing *Garden in the East* was that it might serve those of us who need reminders about being worthy, and loved, and beautiful. Whether we are overcome in the weeds or spending time in the desert, I wanted the words to be balm and water and nourishment.

But sometimes, we need a little more encouragement, direction or



accountability. That's why we put together this study guide. Whether you choose to strike out on your own or choose to include a group of fellow travelers, this program is meant to help you lay groundwork, clear away the weeds, lean

into the rich soil of your journey, and build up the garden in real and lasting ways.



*Good journey, good gardening,
and God grant that this task
may be greatly blessed.*

-Angela

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INTRODUCTION

The Body is a Garden

“Over time, I’ve come to see that the way I care for and nurture my body has implications in all areas of my development—physical, emotional, and even spiritual.”

CHAPTER SYNOPSIS

When we think of the body, it’s common to think of a machine, or perhaps a dwelling of some kind. We talk about the body “housing” the spirit. We talk about the “parts” of us as a kind of machinery. Our first consideration as we begin to explore the spiritual life of

the body is to move into a new view of the body. Rather than machine, building, or vehicle, we choose the metaphor of a garden to describe our physical “home.” And in this metaphor, we find that the care of the body takes on a new meaning, a new relevance to our spiritual lives.

Questions for Discussion

1. When you think of a garden, what comes to mind first?
2. Can you tell the story of the first garden you remember?
3. In the chapter, the author talks about her poor gardening skills but her persistence in trying. Is there something you have done, or tried to do, in which you feel inadequate? What keeps you trying?
4. Think for a moment about the aspect of care that begins with “paying attention.” What parts of self-care fall from your attention first?

TENDING THE GARDEN

THIS WEEK, focus on paying attention to the garden of you. Do not try to change behaviors or attitudes or adopt new behaviors or attitudes. Instead, just pay attention to how you move,

how you breathe, how you live. If you see a connection to your spiritual life in any of these things, make a note of it. This week is simply about paying attention.

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CHAPTER ONE

THE HEALING—On Persistence and Perception

“The real and true story of health and wellness, as it pertains to my life and this garden, is the one I write with the One who made me.”

CHAPTER SYNOPSIS

Healing our view of the body and discovering the connection to our emotional and spiritual selves begins with a recognition of our starting point. Every journey begins this way. If we discern a picture of our current state of

being, without shaming ourselves in the process, we can set realistic goals for our progress—but to do that, we need to examine the particulars of our journey.

Questions for Discussion

1. What does your self-talk sound like?
2. If God’s voice informed how you spoke to and about yourself, how would it be different from what you say now?
3. What keeps you from taking the view that you are God’s gift—valuable, body and soul, and worthy of care and cultivation?
4. Is there a risk for you in taking that view instead of making criticisms of your body?

TENDING THE GARDEN

THIS WEEK, we’re “preparing the soil.” We’ve spent some time paying attention, and often this leads us to want to make big changes immediately. What does it look like to suppress that desire to jump to a quick fix? Instead of moving right

to “fixing” something, try instead to focus on prayer this week for those things you’ve noticed. Ask for patience, or care, or opportunities to feel more connected to the Creator.

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CHAPTER TWO

THE DIVIDING LINE—On Balance

“The more I know about how this system of me functions and flowers, the better I can choose the course of care for the entire garden. This is what balance promises. This is what choosing to take a long-term vision affords.”

CHAPTER SYNOPSIS

Making positive changes in our lives is courageous. Once we know where we’ve been and how we arrived there, we can begin to make changes that are sustaining and nurturing. We have the “lay of the land” now. We have the

history of the region. It’s countercultural to lean into a process of change, a long-term plan. It’s far easier to jump with both feet across the chasm between where we are and where we want to be.

Questions for Discussion

1. Do you find that you divide yourself into “parts”?
2. If you have an injury or illness, what would it sound like for you to talk about that “part” as a caregiver and not a critic?
3. What role does balance play in the way you approach your health? What does it look like in practice?
4. Considering the whole of your garden, how can you offer yourself some gracious acceptance?

TENDING THE GARDEN

CHANGE that is lasting takes time, planning, and patience. Your work this week is not to try to jump across the chasm between where you are and where you want to be, but rather, to find solid ground on which to build the plan.

In every area of your life—physical, emotional, and spiritual—aim for balance this week. There is no win or lose here. It’s all about developing a practice of choosing balance in the big picture.

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CHAPTER THREE

FALLING WELL—On Shortcomings

“I know somehow deep inside that embracing the struggle is the thing, that identifying the fear and engaging it is vital. It is how I begin to understand this blending of soul and body.”

CHAPTER SYNOPSIS

No one plans for failing, because who on earth wants to fail? Especially when what we’re hoping for is positive change. Even so, sometimes we do fall down as we start to move forward, and if we’re not prepared for it, that falling can stop our progress. It can lead us to

quit before we’ve even begun. Recognizing our shortcomings—our propensity to fall down from time to time—is a gift. Embracing the struggle is a vital component as we plant and nurture this garden.

Questions for Discussion

1. When was the last time you fell down on the road to wellness and wholeness?
2. Has a failure ever kept you from trying again?
3. Can you recall a time when you let loss and fear bleed into other challenges or opportunities because of a failure?
4. What would it look like to allow yourself to fall down and not see it as an ending but rather a part of the process?

TENDING THE GARDEN

FALLING WELL does not mean we don’t trust that we’re capable of success. It means we recognize we’re human and fallible. It also means

we make choices to help us move forward even if we do fall down. Take this week to find a way to practice this in real and tangible ways.

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CHAPTER FOUR

UNDER THE SKIN—On Beauty

“Being able to put aside the prescribed ideas about what is beautiful and what is not is a foundational part of becoming whole and healthy.

We have to train ourselves to see the beautiful in the ordinary, in the injured, in the dying, as well as in the brilliant bloom of summer.”

CHAPTER SYNOPSIS

Our perceptions of beauty are too often formed by whatever the culture offers up to us. This kind of beauty can lead us to value transient traits or reach for unrealistic expectations. True beauty, though, is determined by

the One who made us. Our task considering this revelation is to find ways to seek out this sort of lasting beauty and to see it everywhere—in the world around us as well as in the mirror before us.

Questions for Discussion

1. Describe something (or someone) you find beautiful. What qualities do you see?
2. When you think about “tuning the heart” to the Creator, what does this bring to mind?
3. If you were to describe your own beauty, what would you say?
4. What is at risk for you in choosing to believe that you are *tov*, created good?

TENDING THE GARDEN

SEEING BEAUTY is a cultivated ability, especially when we’re talking about this true and lasting beauty. Take this week to notice the beauty in

the world around you, and each time give thanks to God, the Creator. This includes noticing and giving thanks for the beauty you see in yourself!

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CHAPTER FIVE

SEASONS—On Aging

“If I can work toward seeing my season not as a limiting factor, but as a natural progression and process, I hope then I will find the deeper gifts each season offers. If I can put aside the fraudulent messages I hear, or already hold onto, I hope I will find the gifts that emerge from the cold ground, all mystical and green, even in the winter of me.”

CHAPTER SYNOPSIS

The seasons of a garden can inform us about the truth of our own lives. The garden sees the cycle of birth, growth, and death over and over throughout its life. Our lives have the same cycle. We can look at our bodies to see that cycle play out according to the seasons, spring, summer, fall, and winter. No one season is better than another. Each has a gift for us.

Questions for Discussion

1. Think of one story about your springtime body. What was special about that springtime?
2. What about the summertime body? What memory do you have of this body?
3. If you have reached the autumn body, what can you say about the beauty in this time? If not, what do you hope for in the autumn?
4. If you are in the winter of your body, what can you say about the gifts of this season of your life? If not, what do you hope to be able to offer in the winter?

TENDING THE GARDEN

NO MATTER WHICH SEASON you are enjoying, take this week to revel in it. Make real and concrete choices that embrace your season. Instead of yearning for another season, can you choose to live here and now?

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CHAPTER SIX

PLANTINGS—On Testimonials

“Fellow travelers are those real arms to hug us and encourage us. The lives of the saints—both the historical saints and the everyday saints, the ones who walk through the doorway of the church, or the gym, the grocery store, even our homes—can be my best source of support. They are the people who will look at the garden in the dead of winter or the massive rain and flood and see the small herb shoots that spring up in opposition to the noisy, exhaust-filled alley. They are the ones we can turn to when we’re most afraid. They will remind us in whispers and calm confidence of the beauty we hold—Just wait. Be patient. Don’t give up. You’re doing it right. You’re worthy and loved.”

CHAPTER SYNOPSIS

What we learn by paying attention to the stories we see around us can either guide us on the journey toward wholeness, or it can trip us up. The effort it takes to place one foot in front of the other so that we continue to move forward and become the best version of

ourselves is real. Seeing a completed, flourishing “garden” of someone else can be motivating, but only if we fully understand the struggle it took to get there and the care needed to sustain it. These are the kinds of testimonials we can trust and follow.

Questions for Discussion

1. When you think of “before and after” pictures, what comes to mind?
2. What encourages you when you are feeling impatient with your progress?
3. Is there a task or a practice you avoid, something you cannot know until you enter in?
4. What keeps you from entering in?

TENDING THE GARDEN

THE PHRASE “*progress not perfection*” is used more than once in the book. This is your work this week: focusing on that phrase. Each time you feel frustrated or want to give up or simply forget to choose as well as you hope, give

yourself this grace. Give thanks for your body and for the chance to keep your feet on the road. Look for help in the struggles instead of perfection in the results you see around you.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

WATERING—On Connection and Comparison

“If I can begin to truly see the people around me as icons of the One who made us, reflections of the Creator, it might short-circuit this unhealthy habit of comparison. It might transform the envy to wonder, awe, appreciation.”

CHAPTER SYNOPSIS

Comparison is the thief of joy, but comparison, too often, is our first stop when we want to discern our progress. What else can we do but look around and try to determine where we are while we’re on the road? We spend a lot of time looking inward to achieve progress, then looking outward to gauge the results, which can

lead to envy and unhealthy comparison. Choosing to connect with our fellow man instead of comparing ourselves is a life-giving route to a well-tended garden. Nobody’s garden is exactly like yours. Only God knows this garden better than you do.

Questions for Discussion

1. Do you find yourself moving into envy? What do you gain from it?
2. When you think of “connection,” what does this bring up for you?
3. What is the spiritual “water” for you on the road to wellness?
4. What does it look like for you to transform comparison into appreciation and compassion?

TENDING THE GARDEN

IF THE ANTIDOTE to envy is compassion, suffering with someone else, take this week to lean into compassion. Look around and consciously

shift from comparison to care. Try to truly see the people around you as icons of Christ.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

FROST WARNING—On Setbacks

“If there is a comfort I can cultivate, it begins in the good moments, healthy times, the straight-and-narrow days. It is twofold—prayer and gratitude.”

CHAPTER SYNOPSIS

We cannot plan for every problem we encounter on the road. In fact, the worst setbacks are the ones we never saw coming, or could not have avoided even if we had seen them coming. What we can do is develop habits

to shore us up in the good moments, building community, building a prayer practice, and giving thanks on a regular basis to acknowledge this great gift of life we’ve been given.

Questions for Discussion

1. Have you experienced setbacks in your progress?
2. How did you handle those setbacks?
3. When you consider “gratitude,” what does it bring up for you?
4. If you think of your body as a “first child,” does it change your perception of your body? If so, how?

TENDING THE GARDEN

GRATITUDE AS A PRACTICE is not always intuitive. It can take some planting and nurturing. This week, your work is to sow those seeds. If prayer is something you have not planted as

well as you’d like, undertake that practice as well, but plant in small and sustainable rows. Set yourself up to succeed in this task!

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CHAPTER NINE

THE STUMBLING RUNNER—On Exercise

“It’s a mistake to think that if I am unable to grow what my mom or my friends grow, I am unable to grow anything at all. I was just working with the wrong plants for my soil at that time. Ultimately, I need to keep my eyes on my own garden. I had to find my thing. Where exercise is concerned, if I give up trying anything physical because of my stumbling while running, I’m at a profound loss.”

CHAPTER SYNOPSIS

Exercise is often met with trepidation. Whether because of our history or our body mechanics, exercise can feel like torture instead of care. We know we need it, but we don’t always know what sort of exercise will work for us. Not everyone is a runner, or a weightlifter, or a belly-dancer, but if we keep trying new things,

allowing ourselves to reach out and find our “thing” where exercise is concerned, we’re more likely to make a habit of it. Like prayer or gratitude, finding a way to move that fits means we’ll sustain and practice this vital part of our wellness journey.

Questions for Discussion

1. When you think about exercise, what does it bring up for you?
2. What is your history with exercising?
3. Name some things you know about yourself around exercise.
4. Have you already found your thing? How does it feed you?

TENDING THE GARDEN

THIS WEEK’S TASK IS TO TRY something new. Just one thing. If you already feel you have a good exercise thing, then take it one step fur-

ther and consider how that activity feeds your soul as well. Can you see some connections to your spiritual life?

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CHAPTER TEN

COMFORTABLY NUMB—On Avoidance

“Sleep and choosing to rest ought to have equal footing with eating and exercise where health is concerned. When I honor those fallow seasons or even simple moments of rest, then the desire to medicate with avoidance will ease. I have to trust this.”

CHAPTER SYNOPSIS

Rest is a necessary ingredient for the body and the soul. When we don't take the time to seek out rest, we feel it, and we find ways to compensate, often without even realizing it. Whether it's getting enough sleep at night, taking a break from a strenuous project, or simply sitting in the quiet in the middle of a busy day,

rest is vital to good health. Rest, as a prescription, is much like a gardener leaving a patch of earth fallow for a season. It is active and intentional, not haphazard. This is not an act of giving up. It is an act of protection and preservation.

Questions for Discussion

1. What does rest mean to you?
2. How do you “medicate” when you feel overwhelmed?
3. Do you know how your moments of avoidance serve you?
4. What would it look like to rest instead of medicating or avoiding when things are overwhelming?

TENDING THE GARDEN

THIS WEEK SEEK OUT MOMENTS of rest during the day. Make them intentional and nurturing. And protect those moments of rest from being swept aside if something unexpected

comes up. Make rest a priority this week and take notice of how it helps to heal you in soul and body.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

SUSTENANCE—On Eating

“When I choose to move food back into a place of blessing—with commitment and intention, supported by prayer, awareness, and good counseling—I can hope for deep shifts on every level. Clearing away that old growth in the area of eating and the attitude toward food means I am moving one step closer to appropriate care and love of the body as a way to respect the gift of this garden.”

CHAPTER SYNOPSIS

The subject of food (and how to eat properly in particular) is heavily loaded. We all bring our own story to the metaphorical table when it comes to eating. We carry our histories and our expectations with us. We often find that we are feeling defeated or defensive in the process. But

viewing food as sustenance and as gift can help to rein in the overwhelming menu of emotions that creeps into the discussion. Seeing food as gift is where we aim when we look for middle ground.

Questions for Discussion

1. When you think about food, what comes to mind first?
2. Can you remember a time when your attitude toward food and eating differed from your view of it now?
3. If your perception of eating swings on a pendulum (as the author’s does), what does each extreme represent?
4. If you could picture middle ground, what would it look like?

TENDING THE GARDEN

FOR SOME PEOPLE, keeping a food journal is an eye-opening and helpful experience. For others, it’s pure torture and can lead to disordered thinking. This week, your work is to connect what you eat with how you feel. Pay attention to what you feel when you have any

interactions with food or eating. This includes shopping for, planning for, and preparing food. If you’re able, give thanks for every interaction you have with food, especially if your feelings are negative at that moment.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

MAY DAY—On asking for help

“The elements of any good physical or spiritual practice require some kind of community of support. For some this aspect can be intimidating. Asking for help and accountability is hard. It is humbling to admit that we need help, that we need hands to hold from time to time. We want to be autonomous and self-sustaining—and yet we are creatures of community. We need people. This is what helps us to be strong no matter what comes our way.”

CHAPTER SYNOPSIS

It's easy to get caught in the misguided perception that we are these rugged, autonomous individuals who can handle whatever comes to us on our own. Discovering that we are not so rugged and not so autonomous is difficult. Discover-

ing that we need help, and then asking for it, is a humbling experience. The reality is that we are made to be in community. We cannot walk this journey for long without fellow travelers. It's all right to ask for help when we need it.

Questions for Discussion

1. Can you think of a time when you needed help but were afraid to ask?
2. What keeps you from asking for help when you need it?
3. When you do need to seek out help, where do you usually turn?
4. What would it look like to reach out in those moments of need, even in the face of that which stops you?

TENDING THE GARDEN

YOUR ASSIGNMENT THIS WEEK IS SIMPLE, but not easy. You can choose which direction suits your situation best, but choose at least one course of action. The first option would be to look at a difficult situation you're facing. Is there someone who can help you with this? Reach out to that person in some small way this week.

The other option is to look at a series of small, humdrum issues you encounter, even something as simple as finding an item in a store. Reach out to ask for help with that. Like most things worth doing, asking for help is something we must practice.