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## Exploring the Spiritual Alliance of Maintaining a 5-Acre Tropical Farm Through the Lens of Occupational Engagement

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## Exploring the Spiritual Alliance of Maintaining a 5-Acre Tropical Farm Through the Lens of Occupational Engagement

### Abstract

Large-scale commercial farmers and small scale “hobby” farmers engage in growing crops for subsistence and survival for themselves, their families, communities, and beyond. Their reverence and passion for farming make them good stewards of both community and world population nourishment. We suggest there may be a collective physical, emotional, and spiritual draw to farming that is interwoven with occupational engagement. Through a personal narrative approach, we reflect on the meaning and the work-focused occupation of farming and specifically how spirituality may be a guiding force that supports engagement despite seemingly insurmountable environmental and personal hardships. With an increasing interest in community practice as well as environmental and social sustainability, occupational therapy’s role in supporting the farming community is important to consider.

### Comments

The authors declare that they have no competing financial, professional, or personal interest that might have influenced the performance or presentation of the work described in this manuscript.

### Keywords

farming, nature and health, occupational engagement, spirituality

### Credentials Display

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Many occupations foster physical activity, advanced technical skills, and knowledge that address cognition and sensory function. Gardening, “the act, activity, or pastime of planning and cultivating gardens” (Merriam Webster, n.d.), is an instrumental activity of daily living, leisure, and health management occupation engaged in by many for various reasons, including exercise, learning, self-fulfillment, stress reduction, food consumption, and as a therapeutic intervention (American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], 2020; Norwood, 2022). Unlike gardening, farming, which is the process of cultivating plants and livestock for monetary gain (USDA, n.d.), tends to be more pragmatic, as it is associated with greater responsibility, oversight, and physical labor than gardening. While farming is by no means a work-focused occupation for the meek, the daily embrace of mother nature can be as exhilarating as it is rewarding. Despite the essential function of farming, which is to feed people, it would be remiss to discount its capacity to improve mental health (Borgi et al., 2020), which, like its counterpart gardening, is well supported by research (Chalmin-Pui et al., 2021; Howarth et al., 2020; Wästberg et al., 2021). In this paper, we propose that farming’s capacity to improve mental health arises in part from a sense of spirituality.

### **Context**

The lived experience of farming inspired this article. The first author, an occupational therapist, resides on and manages a 5-acre tropical fruit farm in Southwest Miami-Dade, Florida. The farm provides ample opportunities to experience a spiritual connection with nature and to reflect on and emulate the resilient nature of fruit-bearing trees that, against myriad odds, produce fruit year after year. To consume and share the fruit with friends and colleagues elicits a sense of reverence for, and deep connection with, nature (Bisht & Rana, 2020) as well as servitude. We suggest that the spiritual feelings that arise from farming exceed the routine expectations of occupation. The enduring cycle of planting, growing, tending, watching the crops grow, harvesting its rich bounty, and sharing it with others is majestic and, at times, awe-inspiring (Bisht & Rana, 2020).

### **Occupation and Occupational Engagement**

According to the World Federation of Occupational Therapists (WFOT), occupations are “the everyday activities that people do as individuals, in families, and with communities to occupy time and bring meaning and purpose to life. Occupations include things people need to, want to do, and are expected to do” (WFOT, 2012, para. 2). While farming is primarily categorized as a work occupation, consumer reliance on its yield supports participation in the instrumental activity of daily living occupation of meal preparation and shopping. Farmers benefit from engaging in educational pursuits to learn new farming practices and social participation, such as community and peer group participation, and sharing the trials and triumphs of maintaining a productive farm. Farming as a health management occupation also aligns with physical activity and social and emotional health promotion and maintenance (AOTA, 2020).

On a deeper level, occupational engagement (OE) evolves from a subjective or internal meaning an individual ascribes to involvement in any given occupational task(s) (Polatajko et al., 2007). This selective meaning is actualized by the person engaged in the occupation and may be equally if not more impactful than its outcomes (Bar & Jarus, 2015; Hasselkus, 2002). OE spotlights the value one places on performing a certain occupation and less on the activity itself. It provides a subjective meaningfulness that people ascribe to the engagement of a given activity or task (Black et al., 2019; Kennedy & Davis, 2017). What is less understood is an association between spirituality and OE (Maley et al., 2016), a topic that is worthy of exploration through the lens of occupational therapy.

## **Spirituality and Farming**

Spirituality, a deeply personal and abstract construct, connects something within and beyond us (Victor & Treschuk, 2020). For some people, spirituality is a religious or cultural experience; for others, it may represent a connection with nature (Naor & Mayselless, 2020). Reverence for the spiritual nature of gardening and farming may emanate from the immersive experience of being in nature and from the physical act of working and creating with one's hands.

Gardening and farming are nature-immersive experiences. While ample evidence supports the spiritual nature of gardening, the findings are far more limited with regard to farming (Hoesley, 2019). Despite limited evidence, the spiritual nature of farming is important to consider, as unlike home gardeners, farmers bear a heavy sense of duty and responsibility for the sustainability of natural resources, as well as meeting the most basic of human needs: to provide food for their immediate and more far-reaching community. For some farmers, this sense of duty originates from a higher calling and is driven, in part, by a sense of spirituality (Westerink et al., 2021).

Farmers often experience a deep connection to the food they produce and eat, seeing themselves as good stewards of the populations they are entrusted to feed, similar to the way they provide for their immediate family (Westerink et al., 2021). For example, the early American settlers' great reverence and respect for the fall harvest was predicated on an awareness that a higher spiritual power played a role in their bounty and survival in the new world (Castagnetti et al., 2021). In contemporary society, many farmers who dedicate their lives to sowing and harvesting food for consumption experience a spiritual connection between what they do and the deeper meaning that comes from nourishing and connecting with their local community and, in some cases, far beyond (Bisht & Rana, 2020). To what can this drive and sense of responsibility be ascribed?

Perhaps spirituality helps shape a farmer's self-identity, motivation, and intrinsic drive to work from dawn to dusk despite any hardships or risks they face. No matter the farm's scale, farming's spiritual nature can engender calmness, reflection, and reverence that is seldom experienced in other work or leisure pursuits (Giagnocavo et al., 2022). When describing the gratification associated with farming, one is drawn to a profound sense of accomplishment and servitude that it provides, a reminder to farmers that what they do has a purpose and meaning beyond themselves. This feeling closely aligns with a spiritual relationship between the farmer and surrounding nature. It keeps the farmer grounded in the well-being of their crops and the soil that provides nourishment. Highly reverent and sensory-rich experiences on farms like calm breezes, the unpredictability of storms, the sweet melody of songbirds, the gentle caress of the sun's rays, and the fragrance of fruiting tree blossoms can further heighten spiritual associations with farming and offer a deeper reverence for nature. That farms offer the mind, body, and spirit daily doses of purpose, well-being, and comfort closely aligns with the framework of OE (Bar & Jarus, 2015).

## **Nature, Spirituality, and OE**

People are often drawn to express profound feelings of self-actualization or reverence when they feel the earth beneath their feet and the dirt on their hands (Eng et al., 2019), which arguably aligns with a felt spiritual experience. This brings us to two existential questions, the first being, what are the drivers of reverence and fulfillment when engaged in farming, which is arduous and often dangerous? And the second, why is farming, a frequently marginalized profession, not revered despite the life-sustaining role it plays (Suharyanto et al., 2021)? Research tells us that gardening is a therapeutic occupation (Wagenfeld & Atchison, 2014; York & Wiseman, 2012). Accepting that gardening, and by extension farming activities, are aligned with OE, then experiencing firsthand the steadfast resilience of, for example, tropical

fruit trees bearing their bounty offers a respect, reverence, and meaning that is akin to a spiritual experience (Castagnetti et al., 2021).

OE underscores the importance of well-being and explains that engaging in occupations strengthens relationships among communities that do similar work, such as farming (AOTA, 2020; Hammell, 2017). Farming as an occupation offers many social participation opportunities for friendship building and the passionate exchange of information regarding agricultural techniques, harvest tips, and engagement in farming clubs and societies, such as for the first author, the Tropical Fruit and Vegetable Society of Redlands, or the Fruit and Spice Park of Homestead Florida, both of which are organizations that are central for exchange of ideas and social engagement.

Embracing their occupation and lifestyle, farmers share a collective ethos that focuses on routines, rituals, and grueling long hours out in the field that may lead to an affinity toward spirituality. This collective ethos creates an esprit de corps and reflective appreciation that speaks to what farmers do as a collective. This collective is essential for the survival of the human race, as it was 10,000–12,000 years ago when farming established a foothold in the Crescent Valley region of the Middle East (Chatterjee, 2016).

### Conclusion

Returning to the first author's 5-acre tropical fruit farm, we revisit the concept of OE, its relationship to maintaining the farm, and how it elicits feelings of profound pleasure, reverence, self-actualization, and deep connection with something greater than the work itself. Planting a fruit tree and watching it bear fruit is a remarkable and spiritual experience. Tropical fruit trees must be resilient to overcome environmental barriers like fungus, drought, flooding, insect infestation, and myriad other obstacles that impede growth, akin to the human experience. Emotions ascribed to nurturing a grafted fruit tree in reaching maturity and bearing fruit are similar to reflecting on the course of our lives. There are no assurances that a freshly planted fruit tree will reach fruit-bearing age; similarly, there are no guarantees for health and longevity among humans.

Arguably, mental engagement, working with one's hands, and focusing on accomplishing tasks is rewarding and establishes a routinized approach to daily chores (McClellan et al., 2021). The spiritual impact of engaging in any labor of love, in this case, maintaining a tropical farm, is subjective. However, it need not, nor should not, be marginalized but rather embraced and revered for its demonstrable results. An alliance between spirituality and agriculture, as understood through the lens of OE, may elicit respect for the work-focused occupation of farming itself, as well as the tangible goods it offers local communities and beyond (AOTA, 2020; Castagnetti et al., 2021). We suggest that farming may have a physical, emotional, and spiritual draw that is interwoven with OE. As such, we offer an open invitation to occupational therapy to gain further understanding and investigate why people are drawn to farming.

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