

# *Solvitur Eodiendo*

*it is solved by digging*

**Imagine** a scene from Louis Sachar's novel *Holes*. A dozen teens in face masks

squint and sweat, hurling shovels downward against unyielding ground. It's mid-September 2020, and we're deep in record-breaking drought, our parking lot baked solid like desert caliche. The general atmosphere bearing down on us from beyond East Burke School's campus—the weight of pandemic, social inequity, and political strife—seems only to confirm the dystopian image in our parking lot. But our students are here by choice. They're learning that, when the weight of the world comes crashing down on you, you must dig down to rise up.

A student pops out of a shallow hole she's been chiseling for over an hour. "I think there was a fire here!" She holds up bits of charcoal from several inches down. Another student recalls that, a century ago, children were paid five cents per day to keep the school's wood stove running. "Maybe this is where they dumped the wood ash," he speculates.

EBS's parking lot has borne generations of village history. Horse-drawn carts, games of kickball and basketball, cars and school buses, Kingdom Trails bikes and VAST snowmobiles, snow plows and sand trucks, and five generations of foot traffic have all crushed down this patch of land. From soil samples in ecology class, students learn that what they're working with isn't actually soil any longer: it's completely dead.

After 150 years of nothing but being trodden under foot, hoof, and tire, it's no wonder our little lot is so unyielding.

It's nearly fall when our students start toiling to resurrect 1,000 square feet of this dead parking lot into a thriving food forest. Mimicking the ecology of a natural woodland ecosystem, our garden will ultimately produce perennial edibles at every vertical level of a forest ecosystem, from root tip to tree top, while actively restoring the soil. The idea is not a new one, but examples of regenerative food production remain limited in cold climates like ours. Our students are creating a model that others in the Kingdom can follow.

**Beneath** the observable resurrection of dead ground, the food forest serves to

resurrect spirits as well. After a spring of mandated school closure and social isolation, our students—like so many of us—were not okay. Anxiety and depression skyrocketed among adolescents. Many of these students, expressing feelings of despair, begged to come back to school. They need a sense of purpose, a reminder of their individual and collective ability to create meaningful impact. They need to rediscover that most precious treasure: hope. The treasure they seek is not buried in the ground, yet the digging will guide them to it. Their work will create a legacy for them and a resource for generations to come.

After weeks of digging, conducting percolation tests, and hauling in compost from Black Dirt Farm for vertical mulching, students and faculty cover over the surface of the lot with what is immediately available: an abundance of maple leaves and twigs, manure from nearby farms, compost from our school's own kitchen, and coffee grounds from Café Lotti. Then, we wait. Hope doesn't grow all at once.

When the ground begins to thaw and it comes time to purchase plants, we get an astounding response from followers on Facebook. Donations pour in from as far south as Mississippi and as far west as Washington, helping us reach our fundraising goal in just three days. With a matching gift from Elmore Roots Nursery, we're able to plant over \$1,600 worth of trees, shrubs, and perennials in our first year.

Sunchokes now tower over young paw paws, seaberries, and cherries. Field peas and clover, planted as nitrogen-fixing cover crops, mingle with pumpkins, peppers, kale, and cabbage donated by Firefly Farm. Amazingly, weeds spill over the plot's borders into the unfertilized driveway, helping stabilize the sand that has been eroding there for a century. Nature picks up where we've left off, reclaiming ground that, only a year ago, was too damaged to sustain life.

**The story** told by our neglected, calloused, uninviting parking lot is very

much the story that our students will have to play out in their lives. To build themselves up, they will need to dig down, to do the work of hauling in what will nourish and sustain growth, to learn and plan the cultivation of something better, to pour in hours upon days upon weeks of seemingly thankless work, and to wait, patiently, through spiritual winters. Now, as they look out on a patch of dead land resurrected, the pride that they feel is written all over their faces, and their minds just might be turning to what else they can build up. The surfaces of their lives, too, looked pretty bleak a year ago. But now that they know how much power they have, they just might be ready to reclaim what so many others have given up for lost.

They might begin, within themselves, to dig.