



OUR ANNUAL SPRINGTIME “hardening off” is a labor-intensive, but necessary rite of the growing season. Every winter Linda plants her flats of seeds and places them on racks beneath florescent lights. Before she is done there may be from four to twelve flats containing hundreds of seedlings—all being gently warmed and encouraged to grow by the day-long illumination of the glowing tubes.

Started while there is still snow on the ground, the flats will contain vegetables and herbs such as tomatoes, celery, peppers, oregano, thyme, basil; flats of flowers will

contain such varieties as marigolds, cosmos, celosia, impatiens, bachelor buttons, moss rose, ageratum, dahlias, and geraniums. As the outside temperatures rise in late April and early May (and as the canning room takes on the appearance of a tropical jungle), the time draws near to begin moving the seedlings out to the gardens and flower beds.

If they were to be transferred immediately from inside growing racks to outside garden soil, most would die from the sudden shock of the elements. The chilly soil and hot sun would combine to reduce



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them to withered heaps within a day or two. To avoid this, the plants must be hardened off: For about a week to ten days each flat is set outside for gradually increasing time in the sun and elements. The first day their exposure is kept to about two hours, with an hour added each successive day. By the end of the week the vegetables and flowers have been gradually and safely introduced to the elements, and are now prepared to take life on their own.

Like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation, if you have tasted the kindness of the Lord.

1 Peter 2:2-3

The world can be an angry place of cold, hard nights and blistering days for the Christian—and especially for the spiritual babe. It is a twilight zone of caustic abuse combined with old familiar pleasures, pushing us away even as it draws us more deeply into its lair. And woe to the child of God thrown too soon back into it.

But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil.

Hebrews 5:14

A plant that has been hardened off has not had a protective shell erected around it. It has not had

extra armor or magical enzymes injected into its cells for warding off disease and pests. It has simply been carefully trained and gradually introduced into a potentially hostile environment.

It is not protected, but *strong*. It has learned how to survive on its own.

SURVIVAL

Then again, the same is true regarding the new Christian's introduction into Kingdom life—into the Body of Christ itself.

Woe to the infant child of God thrown too abruptly into the heady, Spirit-rich environment of the church. If the world without can be a “twilight zone of caustic abuse combined with old familiar pleasures,” it is equally true that to the spiritual babe the world within—the established church, filled with both venerable and neophyte saints—can be a twilight zone of bizarre and foreign concepts, curious rites and traditions, all peppered with lingo understood only by the resident cognoscente.

Old familiar hymns and choruses sung from memory by the veterans will be brand new, and just a little strange to the rookie. Why things are done the way they are may be confusing to the one uninitiated into the sublime yet alien mysteries of Kingdom living.

As Linda and I daily carry the

flats of young plants from the cool safety of their racks beneath florescent lights to the harsh reality of life in the sun and wind, we are, essentially, *disciplining* those plants. Little by little, one day at a time, we're teaching them the ways of the harsh world in which they are about to embark. And what will some day be comfortable and familiar to them, will always bring initially an unpleasant, sometimes frightening shock.

Just as with the immature plants, the immature Christian requires patient, methodical disciplining so as to become familiar and comfortable with the mysterious, yet glorious ways of God. With proper care and attention, what is initially disorienting will one day be for them as familiar as the old life they have just left behind.

If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.

1 Corinthians 13:1-2

