

“Into the Garden”

A Story by Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull
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Where the wild things are. I'll bet some of you are thinking of the adventures of Max in that unforgettable book by Maurice Sendak, *Where the Wild Things Are*. But I know another place where wild things are. I discovered it early on. Right next door to the house we moved into when I was four years old was Mrs. Kingman's garden. She was our landlady, which is why for a long time afterwards I thought landladies had to be about a hundred years old, because that's how I remember her – snow-white hair, slightly stooped, speaking with a voice that you could barely hear, and walking so dignified and delicately with her ever-present cane. Mrs. Kingman was also a gardener, so she had to have some energy left to tend that magical space that I discovered soon after moving next door.

Her garden was full of wild things. Pinks and yellows and lavenders and blues were clustered in shapes that made me think she knew what it was like to color outside the lines. Yet it was orderly enough for me to walk through it all. There were carefully laid paths so you could do exactly that, and I did, usually barefoot, because that is how the queen of such a garden must walk, and there was no doubt in my mind that I was the queen of that garden. I walked quietly also, close to the earth, watching and listening and breathing in every drop of fragrance!

I didn't think about meditation then; I just entered it. I didn't think much about prayer then; I just knew I was grateful. I didn't think much about going home either, even when my Mother called me again and again, rudely interrupting the spell that was cast by the glory of what this ancient lady had planted in her backyard.

Carol Williams knew what she was talking about when she wrote that

“Usually children spend more time in the garden than anybody else. It is where they learn about the world, because they can be in it unsupervised, yet protected. Some gardeners will remember from their own earliest recollections that no one sees the garden as vividly, or cares about it as passionately, as the child who grows up in it. That intensity haunts the garden ... long after that child has grown up and become the gardener.”

I wonder how many of the gardeners here can reach out to a green thread that winds all the way back to your own childhoods of finding enchantment among gardens – among flowers and shrubs and trees and tomatoes and onions even, among the miracles of life that grow before our eyes when sometimes we plant the seeds and sometimes nature puts on her gardening gloves and makes sure that the most unexpected seeds land in the most perfect of spaces.

This morning is about planting and nurturing, about seeds and seedlings, and about dedication to what we have planted in the earth and what we have planted on the earth, that each seed and each two-legged seedling might grow and thrive.

We are each planted differently. We are each born differently. Some of you know that last weekend I missed a quite wonderful service here, but I was present at a quite wonderful event in Dan's and my family. Our daughter Lisa was married on a rooftop in Brooklyn, New York. She and Rob have been together a long time. Now they're family officially. We might say they're officially planted in the same garden.

As her Mother, she gave me the amazing gift of asking me to preside at their wedding. I did. She asked Dan, her Dad, to give a toast at the reception that followed. He did. I'm compelled to share a bit of what I recall him saying, because it's a story that touches me again and again and sings a song to this morning.

Lisa was born twice. She was born the first time somewhere in Korea, probably Seoul, the capital of that country, in 1975. Four months later, she was born to Dan and his first wife, Johanna, at New York City's JFK Airport. That's right, she came right out of a huge airplane into their arms. This tiny seedling was transplanted into a garden whose tenders would love and care for her so that she would grow up to be a loving and caring woman, and indeed she has. But sadness happened early on for Lisa, because her adoptive mother died when she was just 16 months old, so Dan had to do what we might call "double watering." He gave extra tending to this fragile but strong-willed seedling, and it worked. She grew and thrived.

I tell this story because it's new and fresh for you, and ever new and fresh for me, but also because I shared earlier the story about the day you were born. Sometimes we need to remember that when we go into a garden, we might see the beauty of seedlings that have first been planted elsewhere and then transplanted to this new garden. You never know how a child or a flower is born. We all know that each child and each flower is a miracle of life, a harvest of centuries, millennia even, in which life on this earth has moved through so many cycles and seasons of growth.

What a wonder it is that we are sitting together in this Meeting House this morning, each a miracle of the harvest of more years than most of us would take time to count – all because we are part of nature, all because we were nurtured and loved by somebody who tended our part of the garden.

As we dedicate ourselves to Ruth and Griffin, as we dedicate the garden that has flourished across the street, let us dedicate ourselves also to each living creature, each living thing. If we do this, just imagine. Some day a little girl might walk into your garden and discover a lifetime of enchantment. Some day a little boy or a little girl might come into your home and discover a lifetime of care. Are there losses in these gardens? Yes, there are. Do we remember seedlings who didn't make it? Yes, we do. Do we hold the love and renew our will to nurture wherever and whomever we can? Yes and yes.

In a few minutes, we'll cross the street to dedicate our First Parish Garden – our Memorial Garden, our Peace Garden, and all the loveliness that surrounds our Parish House that wasn't there just a year ago. Seeds sprout or go to seed. Seedlings thrive or let go. Life moves in curves and detours, ever so precious for doing so. Here we are, amid "another May, another spring, eternal but unlike any other that was or shall be," just as this morning is eternal but unlike any other that was or shall be."

I am glad we are here and now. I am so grateful for each of you. I love you and will try to tend you as we tend one another in this garden that is ours to move through with the same wonder that enchants the most curious child. Amen.

Sources:

Hal Borland (1900-1978), "There is a temptation to say, as May spreads the leaves and opens the blossoms...." Exact source unknown.

Maurice Sendak, *Where the Wild Things Are*, Harper Collins, New York, 1963.

Carol Williams, *Bringing a Garden to Life*, Bantam Books, New York, 1998, 26-27.