

Journey of a Wounded Healer

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11. Patience and Determination

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During my first week on the rehabilitation floor, I learned of a medical center garden available to the patients and their families. The prospect conjured images of solitude and quiet, and during Anthony's first visit we got directions from a nurse and headed for the greener spaces.

The garden was a small area lodged in the courtyard between four hospital buildings. While highly structured, the overall effect was pleasing and well-proportioned in the manner of a Japanese garden, one of my aesthetic preferences for enjoying nature in a small space. The planters containing small ornamental trees and the elegant benches were all of oiled teak. Each of the planting areas was curved, the arrangement of shrubs and grasses seemed well thought-out, but they were not rigid or too geometric. The design felt fluid as opposed to solid. The spaces without ground plantings were strewn with rounded river gravel of various colors, a few of which stones I pocketed as souvenirs.

When the sun was out, some corner of the garden was fully illuminated and warm, but except for the noon hour, there was always one corner in shade. I was astounded by the beauty and simplicity of the garden, something I had always striven to accomplish with my own planting areas and stone arrangements. The pavement, rather than a continuous slab of concrete, was made of blocks of gravel-imbedded concrete that were fitted around the curved limestone borders defining the planting beds.

After that first afternoon in the "Massry Healing Garden" on the sixth day of rehab, I ventured down each afternoon or evening after my therapy, and often again after supper. On rainy days I checked the weather radar online for an opening in the clouds that enabled me to spend time in the garden in between downpours. During threatening weather, I was usually the only person outside, even though all it often did was merely threaten.

The garden was especially sweet-smelling after the rain had washed the air. I was reminded of home and all the beautiful places I had ever seen and wandered through. The fact that it was called a "healing garden" seemed redundant. Nothing could have suited me better or contributed more to my good spirits and thoughts of getting better. It reminded me that one day I would be returning to my own gardens and woods and vistas. I felt hopeful.

About twenty years ago I had a short story published called “Bonsai Jack.” I realized as I wrote it that it might be a prescient account of what I might go through if I lived long enough to grow very old.

Jack was a fellow in a nursing home who had outlived his wife and siblings, and was far away from his children. He had been the owner of a landscaping and tree nursery business. Upon his retirement, he satisfied himself with maintaining the garden and shrubs around his house. After his wife’s death and his own enfeeblement, Jack was able to “get down in the dirt” by taking care of the window boxes. At the time the story opens he is confined to the nursing home. He learns from a young Japanese volunteer the art of *bonsai*: creating miniature trees. He is in his element again. The scale of his endeavors with living plants does not matter. He is fulfilled and grateful for his continued ability to work with nature and succor and grow his trees.

I saw the diminishing process of aging in my own family and knew that realistically it was not a fate I myself would escape except through a premature death. I did not look forward to it, but knew I could accommodate myself to growing old so long as I could maintain some semblance of a garden, even one no larger than a window box or a flower pot. I am grateful to have understood early on what changes await us in aging, but I am also graced with both patience and determination to be able to make the best of whatever situation befalls me.