

Journey of a Wounded Healer

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17. Dandelions and Daisies

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I have long felt that we Americans concentrate too much of our energies on the acquisition and maintenance of material goods. But as the culture of materialism spreads—it is hardly an American invention and hardly new—there is not a corner anywhere that does not use this material standard of value. It is even in evidence here in the hospital where there are those who can afford private rooms and televisions and telephones, and seem to complain the most about nothing being right. None of the extras they enjoy appears to confer the slightest health advantage and instead makes them dissatisfied because, naturally, they expect even more.

A woman on the floor received an enormous and elaborate floral spray that would have been the envy of any newly-deceased. There were rumors she was important, but no one new for what. A compendium of four-letter words perhaps. The arrangement of flowers and grassy paraphernalia, when it was placed on the windowsill, all but blocked any sunlight from entering her room. They conferred a mood of somberness rather than joy. Within a week the flowers were desiccated and desaturated, and even more funereal than when they arrived fresh.

Though I pick dandelions and wild-flowers on occasion that grow in profusion in the fields and meadows around my house, in general I am opposed to cut flowers. Better to let them be so that all passersby may enjoy them. Cut flowers seem a little selfish and imply one is too busy to water a live plant once a week and pick off dead leaves. I tried to nip in the bud any notion my friends may have had to squander money by sending me flowers killed by disinterested third parties.

My neighbors in Bovina, Cay Sophie and Christian, stopped my partner on the road and handed him a bunch of field daisies, black-eyed susans, and an assortment of what the uninitiated might call weeds, with instructions to give them to me when he visited the hospital in Albany. They were limp and half-dead by the time Anthony gave them to me, but they revived miraculously in a paper cup full of water. They were the best bouquet money did not buy because they were simple, well-meant, and they reminded me of home. I liked that I had a part in their revival and survival, at least for a time. The ones in my fellow patient's room reminded me only of extravagance and pointless waste. The woman's chair faced away from them, too, so they probably received only the occasional glance. My humble daisies outlived her snapdragons by a full week, thriving on the attention they received. My visitors would see the daisies on the window sill before they found me.

A cousin and his wife, Kevin and Ellen, however, not having heard my suggestion on how to better use the money for flowers to buy a homeless person a meal, sent me a large flower

basket. I was dismayed at first but saw they were all live plants: two varieties of ivy, some small yellow roses, and a tiny white flower with enormous succulent leaves that continues to bloom three weeks after their unexpected arrival in my room.

My cousin could not have devised a better floral gift for me—other than none at all. Their floral arrangement required tending: I had to prune the dead blossoms and make room for the new ones. I had to make sure all the plants got watered and I turned the wicker basket every two days to face the western sun. When it looked as though the ivy were about to escape the basket and trail down the wall, I wound it round and round the braided wicker handle. It was my own little Eden, a miniature garden, that thrived because of my caring for it. And I had every intention of transplanting all of them in the ground near my house as soon as I got home. Perhaps my cousin and his wife had this in mind all along.