



Preparing the Soil

If you wish to make anything grow, you must understand it, and understand it in a very real sense. "Green Fingers" are a fact, and a mystery only to the unpracticed. But green fingers are an extension of a verdant heart.

—Russell Page, *The Education of a Gardener*

You might say the seeds of this book germinated in Brazil when, at twenty-three, I accompanied my mother to Rio de Janeiro after the death there of my aunt Patsy, my mother's younger sister. Our families were very close, and I had a special affinity for Patsy because she was a spiritual seeker. Her daughter, Mossa, was a good friend of mine and the only other person who ever spoke to me of spiritual matters.

Patsy wanted to be cremated. She asked to have her ashes scattered in the ocean bordering the city she had lived in and loved for the last fifteen years of her life.

Mossa had the daunting task of going up in an open helicopter and doing the job nobody else wanted to do. Out of a mixture of guilt and courage, I said yes when she asked me to go with her.

Once up in the air, we opened the large mahogany box of Patsy's cremated remains, and, instead of dust as we had expected, we were surprised by what looked like large clumps of sun-baked coral. We scooped out handfuls of this unpulverized bone and threw it out to the wind, yelling over the noise of the engine for Patsy to have a good journey.

The experience left me shaken. For months after I returned to New York, my heart felt raw and life seemed tasteless and meaningless. Patsy was the first person I had been close to who died. Her departure left a void that was almost tangible. Confronting the death and loss of a loved one for the first time in my life made me ask questions I had never asked before. Why was I here? What was the purpose of life? And what did it all mean, anyway?

During this time, I met my future husband, a journalist who was asking himself the same sort of questions. Since we both seemed to be on a similar course, we returned to Brazil to find our answers. Brazil was supposed to be the first leg of a spiritual journey around the world. We were on a spiritual quest and we wanted to find *it*, whatever *it* was. *It* was a big nebulous *it*; a magical Something that would enlighten us and allow us to do everything right. Life's problems wouldn't exist for us. This is an overstatement, of course, but it might give you some idea of how unenlightened my idea of enlightenment was.

We settled for a few months in a tiny mountain town called Novo Friburgo, just three hours outside of Rio, where we rented a house on top of Hungarian Hill, a place filled with Swiss, Germans, and, of course, Hungarians. Alpine plants, flowers, and trees blended in with the tropical vegetation, so the expatriates felt right at home. There were pine trees and red papaya, icy white azaleas and mangoes galore.

In the mornings, we practiced yoga at a nearby hotel retreat called Templo de Yoga. People came there from the cities for rest and relaxation. The teachers held classes in a rosewood room lined with shoji screens that slid open onto a rushing creek. The sound of the water made that room seem eternal. It could have been anywhere in the world—China, Japan, even Tibet.

Every morning the altar was freshly decorated. It consisted of a large, round, flat handmade basket painted with a black-and-white yin/yang symbol of the Tao in the center. On either side of this simple icon sat a flower vase. One contained exquisitely vital dew-covered white roses; the other, equally fresh and fragrant red roses. I learned more from that room and how it was loved than from any words the teachers ever spoke.

After class, we would walk home to our house atop Hungarian Hill, zigzagging up a steep mountainside switchback through wilderness. In order to reach the ascending path, we had to walk on a flat stretch of dirt road bordered on both sides with dense vegetation. One day as we walked in the hot noonday sun, I looked down the dusty road, and stretched out in front of me were thou-

sands and thousands of butterflies emerging from their cocoons.

That moment was like walking into a birthing room filled with millions of babies being born. I just stood there transfixed, watching a metamorphosis I had only read about in *National Geographic*. When I got home, I lay down on my cot and closed my eyes. Then, for the first time in my life, I had a spiritual experience like one they wrote about in the *New York Times* magazine section. In an article I had read before we left the country, the reporter referred to a survey concerning the spirituality of the American public. One of the questions was "Have you ever had a spiritual experience?" Apparently, seventy-five percent of the American people polled said they had. I thought at the time, in 1973, that that was quite a hefty number. I remember wondering then what defined a spiritual experience. But I figured it was like an orgasm. If you had one, you knew.

So there I was in Brazil, lying down on my cot resting, with my eyes closed and boom! There it was. A voice. Not in the room but inside me. One I could hear but not with my ears. It sounded like my Aunt Patsy's voice. The voice said, "It's not the outer life that matters. It's your inner life that really counts."

I waited for more. I wanted more. But nothing came. I opened my eyes and looked around the room. It was quiet. I was alone.

Whoa, I thought. What was that? Did I imagine it? No. I sensed the truth of the words I'd heard; something real had occurred. A door had opened. From that moment on, I

was on a path. In retrospect, I had two awakenings in Brazil. One was hearing the spiritual voice; the other one was an awakening to the voices of the natural world, the realm of trees, plants, and flowers.

Having been born and raised in Manhattan, I knew little of nature except Central Park and the zoo. I have a fleeting but vivid memory of my manic-depressive grandfather, Buck, a gardener, who suffered through electroshock treatments, the therapy in those days for depression. I never heard Grandpa utter a full sentence, but when he worked in his garden, he was a peaceful, happy man. His face, which normally looked tense and frightened, relaxed; his manner lightened, and his eyes came back to life. Grandpa Buck tended a wildly prolific garden on two acres of land across the road from his house in Mount Kisco, New York. Occasionally, my mother and I went up for weekends.

A hedge of blue hydrangeas surrounded the house like a moat. Massive shade-giving elm trees cooled us everywhere on the grounds. Down the hillside slope, a garden teemed with beefsteak tomatoes, white cabbages, sweet baby carrots, and pickling cucumbers that covered the wooden fence defining the border.

Grandpa cut large heads of Bibb lettuce for our meals and filled earthenware jugs on the porch outside the kitchen door with pickles and sauerkraut. On hot summer days it was lovely to dip my fingers into the cool barrels and pluck a few kosher dills to eat. Those days in the garden and evenings on the screened-in porch were rare, special moments. We never stayed in the country for very long.

At sixteen, I went to the University of Wisconsin at Madison. My formative years had been spent in the fast lane of the private-school set in Manhattan, so culture shock registered off the scale that first morning, when, at 7:45, I trudged up Bascom Hill, slipping on the ice, wondering what I was doing there; they closed the schools in New York City when it snowed like that.

My schedule included botany, three hours in the lab every Monday morning to fulfill my science requirement. Having been one of those English and humanities kids, science definitely made me nervous. Put me in a math or science class, and my circuits blew. I steeled myself for the worst and begged the powers that be to make it okay. Surprisingly, botany wasn't so bad.

Drawing the life cycles of plants was my favorite part of the course. I was in awe of the intelligent process plants undergo in order to leaf, flower, fruit, and then die to begin anew. There was poetry and soul to it. I couldn't identify that tender feeling gathering inside me when I studied those life-cycle drawings. All I knew was that I was deeply moved by the serene loveliness of plant life and its simple demonstration of the cyclical process of life and death. Examining the beauty of nature in detail awakened an interest in me I had never had before. Nevertheless, I still succumbed to mental blocks when test time came around. I deserved a D, but the teaching assistant felt sorry for me. I got a C in botany but fell in love with plants.

After that, indoor gardening became my specialty. I discovered a latent talent for making things grow and a gift

when it came to nurturing houseplants, I was extremely pleased I had a gift for something. Coleus were my favorites. I loved how they turned their faces toward the light, every leaf staring in the same direction. Every day, I observed, they made a complete about-face, so I rotated them often to help them maintain their balance. It wasn't too hard to figure out. They'd look hunched over and stooped if I didn't.

Caring for houseplants was a way I could nurture and bill and coo and have babies and friends without the tension of having them talk back, except in the kindest fashion . . . silence! With them, I could be myself and not worry about what they thought of me.

After college I moved back to New York. I found a friend who felt the way I did about plants. We both had plant collections we talked about incessantly, and we giggled a lot about how cute each plant personality seemed to be. We enjoyed taking care of them so much we started an indoor-outdoor landscaping business. Landscape design and maintenance for corporations, restaurants, and residences was the service we offered.

The indoor plant craze of the early seventies had barely begun. We became "the plant doctors" and fashioned a niche for ourselves doing what we loved. I had always wanted to write a book, so I combined my passion for plants with my desire to write, and my partner and I produced a layman's guide to growing indoor plants.

It was during this period that my future husband and I traveled to Brazil. When we first arrived, we drove for three days to the north, to Bahia for Carnival. A center of

African influence, Bahia was infamous for being the city where Carnival was wildest.

Can you imagine this? Two intellectuals from Manhattan, having just arrived, pale and tired, from a winter of fighting rush hour on the New York City subway, accustomed to reading about Carnival in the *New York Times*, rushing headlong into the five-day, once-a-year celebration of letting loose in the tropics. We found ourselves a little panicked when the swell of frenzied dancers that followed behind giant floats scooped us up in their path, rendering us helpless as the crowd moved in primitive musical abandon.

It took us months to assimilate into the slow-paced beach-body mentality of the Brazilians. That was when I knew I had been paying too much attention to building my mind and not enough to my physical self. Eventually, we made friends with another couple on Hungarian Hill. The first time we visited their log cabin, perched high above the town, they took us behind the house to visit their vegetable garden. For me it was love at first sight. The perfectly formed lettuce, the firm, upright scallions, and the exotic coriander looked so real they actually seemed artificial. That's how jaded my city eye had become.

Evenly spaced and well-weeded rows orchestrated the luster of the garden. Immediately, I wanted an outdoor garden, and I promised myself I would learn how to grow one. When one of our friends handed me a basket and asked me to pick the vegetables for the evening meal, I became slightly embarrassed. I admitted I had never picked

vegetables before. Since I didn't want to hurt anything, I asked her to teach me.

It certainly wasn't very difficult, I marveled, entirely the urban innocent as, starry-eyed and hushed, I followed her through the garden. I kept hearing a little voice inside me saying, *you can do this, you can grow us, too*. I pretended I didn't hear it. In fact, I didn't connect the voice to the actual plants until a couple of years later.

Eventually we traveled throughout Argentina, from Buenos Aires, that old and elegant Paris of South America, down to Patagonia, up to Lake Titicaca in Peru, and finally to Iguazú Falls, one of the largest waterfalls in the world. There, the borders of three countries meet—Brazil, Paraguay, and Argentina—at a dramatic vortex of electric power.

At this juncture in our trip, Richard Nixon was about to become the first president of the United States to resign from office. We found ourselves drinking coffee and haunting newsstands, spending more time reading the *International Herald Tribune* and *Time* magazine than focusing on our spiritual journey, so we moved back to New York City so as not to "miss anything." To assuage my desire for a vegetable garden, I bought houseplants, as many as I could and still have furniture.

Then, in our own backyard, so to speak, the spiritual answer I was seeking materialized. Teetering high above any connection to the ground, on the sixteenth floor of an apartment house, I made contact with nature. I began communicating with my plants. Not just chitchat as you might imagine, but real talk. I let down my defenses, let go of my

preconceived notions of what was real or possible, and simply did what I felt like doing, no matter how crazy it seemed. Through thought, word, and deed I communicated with my plants and they responded. In their own silent way, they communicated back to me. It was clear, as clear as my Aunt Patsy's voice that day on Hungarian Hill—the plants were sentient beings, and I had opened a channel to make their acquaintance. In the beginning, I could hardly believe I was actually conversing with them, but, then again, I used to think people who talked to their animals were weird.

During my early years of experimentation, I had a plant business and worked at home as a writer, so I had a life that allowed for a great deal of gardening time. I spent hours playing with my plants. However, I do want to emphasize that all of one's free time does not necessarily have to be spent with plants in order to reap the benefits of inner gardening. Nor does a person have to be a technical expert to commune with plants. Sometimes it can even get in the way.

As thinking, feeling beings, we have an untapped potential to relate to the plant world. We in the United States at the end of the twentieth century have been raised in deep denial and with great superstition of anything unscientific and nonrational. We have rejected such time-honored aspects of ourselves as imagination, intuition, magic, and self-healing. Until now, we have been missing a lot.

Our consumer culture has advertised the message that materialism brings happiness. Now we are finding out that

in the process of accumulating more things, we have no time for ourselves. We are exhausted and disillusioned. There is a big, gaping hole of emptiness, a gnawing feeling that something essential is lacking.

And so, more and more of us are openly exploring the possibility of intangible, unprovable realities that parallel our own carefully observed material world. A growing wave of people within our society is turning inward to find answers and solace.

There is a beautiful quote from the *I Ching* (or *Book of Changes*), the oracle of ancient Chinese wisdom that describes the oneness of both inner and outer realities. "All that is visible must grow beyond itself, extend into the realm of the invisible. Thereby it receives its true consecration and clarity and takes firm root in the cosmic order. . . . The truly divine does not manifest itself apart from man."

This axiom works both ways. The material and nonmaterial worlds are integral parts of each other. They work together. The invisible needs grounding in the concrete, the miracle of life becomes visible in the material world. If we can accept this connection with people and animals, plants are the next logical step as members of a group we acknowledge to be living beings.

In the Native American tradition, notice was given to both plants and animals before harvesting or hunting. The Indians stated their intent, asked permission, and called for volunteers. In an excerpt from her book *Singing for Power: The Song Magic of the Papago Indians of Southern Arizona*, Ruth Underhill describes this common practice:

The Papago . . . stands at the edge of the field. . . . Kneeling, he makes his hole and speaks to the seed, in the Papago manner of explaining all acts to Nature lest there be misunderstanding: "Now I place you in the ground. You will grow tall. Then, they shall eat, my children and my friends. . . ." Night after night, the planter walks around his field "singing up the corn. . . ." Sometimes, all the men of a village meet together and sing all night, not only for the corn but also for the beans, the squash, and the wild things.



I began to develop this attitude step by tentative step, ignorance and innocence proving to be assets. I embarked upon a course of education that would introduce me to the world of inner gardening. I never saw the teacher's face. It took me a while to learn the language. But I grew to love the teacher and the teaching, and, best of all, there were no tests.

