



Patience and the Spider Plant

... they all participated so deeply of one another's being that the experience could almost be called mystical. For instance, he seemed to know what it actually felt like to be a lizard ... or starry-eyed amaryllis ... he was back in the moment which our European fairy-tale books described as the time when birds, beasts, plants, trees, and men shared a common tongue, and the whole world, night and day, resounded like the surf of a coral sea with universal conversation.

—Laurens van der Post, speaking about the
Bushmen in *The Lost World of the Kalahari*

One day, when I was about seven, my mother took me to the basement of our apartment house to do the laundry. The walls and floors were painted military gray, and the low ceiling displayed a complex warp and woof of pipes and tubing. It felt claustrophobic as we navigated our way down and around long corridors until we reached the laundry room.

While she loaded the washing machines, I sat mesmerized watching the soapsuds sloshing around the tiny circular windows. At some point, I stood up and walked out the back door for some air. When I stepped over the threshold, instead of the usual view of buildings and streets, I saw a cloud bank of cool light brighter than any sunshine I had ever seen. Through these clouds I could see another bright light emanating from its core, friendly but commanding.

Somehow I got the message that this light was the power behind everything. Although I didn't have words to describe it, I knew that it meant there was a lot more going on out there than I had thought. This vision loomed so large that I automatically tucked it away for future use.

Imbued with this long-forgotten but seminal impression, I suppose it might have been easier for me, once I started gardening, to connect in a nontangible way with my plants. As the years went by, this awareness faded and I seemed to forget it until my mid-twenties, when my very first incident as an inner gardener transpired in an apartment house in New York City, where I lived with my husband.

I had a job writing freelance pieces on all aspects of gardening for NBC All-News Network Radio. The schedule called for five one-minute spots a week. You may not think much could be said in one minute, and I myself was surprised to learn how power packed my time could be. My boss loaned me a stopwatch and directed me to appear in the studio at the end of each week to voice my gardening soliloquies. These words of gardening advice were broadcast nationwide to the NBC affiliates three times a day.

Once my aunt Gladys heard me on her car radio as she

was crossing the Golden Gate Bridge. This recognition thrilled my mother, and the family was duly impressed. Unfortunately, I was unable to fully enjoy the moment, since I spent a good deal of my time twirling my hair and chewing my lip, trying to crank out my weekly quota of gardening pieces.

One day, a colleague asked me to sit in on an interview with Peter and Eileen Caddy, founders of the Findhorn Community in Scotland. They had just published *The Findhorn Garden* (Harper & Row, 1975) and were doing a publicity tour of America.

The Findhorn Community grew giant vegetables and flowers on the northernmost tip of Scotland in sandy soil and gusty winds, where nothing should have grown. The catch was they were doing it through meditations with the nature spirits and "devas," or angels, of each plant. They were receiving gardening advice directly from such illustrious beings as the sweet pea deva, the lettuce and tomato devas, and Pan himself. I couldn't tell if this was symbolic talk, ideas that existed in their imaginations, or genuine magic. Even with my love for plants it sounded pretty foreign to me.

I couldn't put the book down. It combined magical gardening experiences with practical methodology and described real-life results. I was tickled to discover other people who loved plants the same way I did. Because of the miraculous results, the Findhorn Garden was becoming a pilgrimage mecca for horticultural societies from England, Scotland, and other parts of Europe. I couldn't wait to meet Peter and Eileen Caddy and ask them my most burning spiritual questions. It was still the early days of my

spiritual seeking; metaphysics and mystical experience were new concepts to me. I wanted to know more about spiritual growth. When the time came, I asked them both if they thought a person had to suffer in order to grow. They answered simultaneously. She said yes; he said no. We all laughed.

As they left the studio, they invited me to Findhorn. I wanted to go as soon as possible. In the meantime, I went home with new enthusiasm and started to experiment with the ideas proffered by the Findhorn Community.

Houseplants became my subjects. The book said each plant was a being with a soul and an intelligence. I had read of similar ideas from the Druids, the Celts, the ancient Greeks, and the Egyptians. Indigenous cultures around the globe abound with lore about the healing power of plants, not only on the physical level but on the emotional, mental, and spiritual levels as well.

Inspired by the Findhorn example, I started to talk to my houseplants; not just small talk—I related to them as if they were children or beloved pets. Beyond taking care of their physical needs, I began to forge a bond of friendship and love. I gave the plants respect instead of treating them as mere interior decoration.

I decided to use a pot-bound spider plant for my first formal experiment. The plant's tubers were packed in so tightly that I couldn't budge the plant to remove it from its pot. The leaves were starting to lose their nice green color and turn brown and brittle at the tips. There was no soil left, just roots. Since spider plants are tuberous, I knew I could cut this one in half and make two plants out of it.

In the past, the two-step operation of division would inevitably mushroom into an ordeal for me, as well as for the plant. I hated breaking the plastic pots. I'd always cut myself and agonize over sawing the root ball in half, even with a long, suitably sharp kitchen knife. I certainly needed a new system.

The Findhorn Garden suggested giving plants twenty-four-hour notice before doing anything major to them, such as cutting back or transplanting. At this point in my life, communicating with plants was a new concept, and as unusual as the idea sounded at first, it made complete sense to me. I'd certainly want someone to warn me if I was going to have to move, give me notice to prepare myself psychologically as well as logistically.

The Findhorn people said that with twenty-four-hour notice, a plant or shrub could anesthetize itself and do whatever was necessary so it wouldn't go into shock. Leaving part of the procedure up to the plant seemed like a good idea to me. Then the burden of responsibility wasn't wholly on me. The book said that as long as I didn't proceed with a "prove-it-to-me" attitude, giving twenty-four-hour notice would definitely work.

I decided to assume that the spider plant had an intelligence—one beyond my understanding, but an intelligence nonetheless. With this attitude, I left the possibilities wide open. Anything could happen. And why not? It was just as easy to think this way as the other way, that plants just sat there and didn't think or feel anything.

I had read, too, in *The Secret Life of Plants* about the galvanometer experiments that Cleve Backster did with his

plants. It seems that in the 1960s in New York City, Backster taught police officers and security agents from around the world to read lie detector tests. As a lark, he began to hook up his own plants to see if they responded to danger. Sure enough, they did. Every plant in Backster's home reacted to just the *thought* of lighting a match under the leaf of one of them, the *Dracaena massangeana*. They even registered emotional reactions to Backster's thoughts when he was many miles away. Once, while he was driving on the New Jersey Turnpike, he sent the thought to his plants that he was coming home. When he arrived, he found that they had responded vigorously on the polygraph, looking forward to seeing him, he surmised.

I took Backster's experiences to heart: I reasoned that if other people could tap some sort of primal sense perception in plants, why couldn't I? It was time to get down to some serious fun with my gardening.

I purposely chose my office as the appropriate place for an initiation into the mysteries of inner gardening. It was a light and airy space, flanked on one wall by a huge south window overlooking the city and on another by a view of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. A loosely woven blue-and-green wall hanging from Brazil dropped from the ceiling next to my desk, the reds of an Afghan prayer rug vibrated on the hardwood floor, and lots of bushy houseplants made the room look like a conservatory.

I plotted my course while I gathered all the materials I needed, then placed them on some newspaper. I arranged the pot-bound spider plant alongside two new hanging

baskets filled with fresh potting soil and set my largest and sharpest kitchen knife next to them. I made sure nobody was home, closed the door for extra privacy, and turned around to face the task. A roaring silence ensued. Now that I had set it up, it was time to follow through.

There didn't seem to be any rules about exactly how to do this sort of thing. I was used to thinking in terms of doing everything "the right way." (Paralyzed by this attitude, I had often ended up doing nothing!) This time was going to be different. I would be brave and forge ahead to make my own way. Isn't that how people discover and invent things?

I took the pot-bound plant in my hands and made my first contact. I tugged hard on the foliage a few times to remind myself how stuck it really was. Maybe it wasn't such a good idea, I thought, pulling on its body like that, but I wanted some sort of acknowledgment between us about its current state.

I focused on the spider plant with both my thoughts and my eyes, giving it my full attention. Then I awkwardly introduced myself. "Hello," I asserted, "I'm Judith, and I want us to become allies so we can work together to separate your root ball into two plants." Strangely enough, I didn't even feel weird. It seemed quite normal to me, so I kept going. I remarked to the spider that it would probably be happier if it had more space and a greater source of nourishment. As things stood now, I added, the spider lived somewhat akin to the wicked stepsister crammed into Cinderella's too-tight slipper. I proposed a better life. Did I make any sense?

I waited for an answer. Nothing happened, so I decided

to proceed. The Findhorn book suggested telling plants what you want to do and why and to be specific. So I let the spider in on my plan. I delineated a straight line across the top of the root ball with the side of my right hand. "This is where I want to cut you in half," I declared. I displayed the knife gingerly, describing to the spider my past attempts at dividing others of its eminent family. I said I wanted to avoid the awful hacking and sawing job that usually occurred when I tried to cut a pot-bound root ball.

I asked the spider to do whatever was necessary to tranquilize and protect itself so it wouldn't pass out and go limp and gray. "Going into shock is no fun," I commiserated. If the spider was amenable to my plan, I'd return in twenty-four hours, and it could demonstrate to me in some way whether I might continue. I set it gently back down on the newspaper, crossed my fingers, and said good-bye. Then I left, carefully and quietly shutting the door behind me.

Once outside the room, I stopped and took a deep breath. It was a propitious moment. I was taking a quantum leap of faith, trusting in the possibility of forces beyond my five senses and asking to receive new insights. I prepared to wait.

As I walked around the house, I became very nervous. I sensed I was on the verge of something new, something that would change me. I didn't know what to expect. Somehow I knew I was invoking help from an invisible source previously untapped.

After a few hours, I couldn't stand it anymore. The suspense was driving me crazy. I was dying to check on the

spider plant before the allotted time was up. I knew it wasn't the best thing. My interference might even render the entire experiment null and void. "Nah," I thought, "I'll just peek. It couldn't make *that* big a difference."

So I silently turned the doorknob and tiptoed into the room as if I could fool the plant. If, in fact, it understood more than I previously believed, which was my hypothesis, then it knew very well what I was up to. When I realized this, I gave up my silly charade, walked right up to the plant, and yanked on it. It still wouldn't budge. I felt sheepish, to say the least. It seemed as if the spider was forcing me to wait and follow our original agreement.

I apologized, embarrassed that a grown woman such as myself couldn't wait and uphold her end of such a crucial bargain. I promised the spider that this time I would wait full term.

I fully expected to hear the clock in the Tower of London chime at the appointed hour. Then, with the touch of my magic wand, instead of my carriage turning into a pumpkin, the pumpkin would miraculously split in half and make two. That night I went to bed with great excitement. It was a veritable Christmas Eve.

The next morning, I made sure that I waited until the last second of the twenty-four hours, if for no other reason than for the sake of "science." I boldly opened the door to the operating room and walked in for surgery. I took a deep breath, my heart pounding madly. At the same time, I felt a little silly. What did all this mean, anyway? Part of me wanted to debunk the whole thing. I decided not to allow it and squelched that voice immediately.

I sat down on the floor next to the spider plant. It was then I noticed that the long green leaves had separated of their own accord. Half of them lay to one side of the midpoint, where I had drawn the line with my hand, and the other half lay to the other side, clearly exposing the invisible line. The foliage had actually arranged itself in an orderly fashion as if acknowledging what was about to happen. This in itself was astounding. I took it as an undeniable sign.

I asked the spider if it was ready, thinking I would have to do some tugging and pulling. I lifted the pot and turned it on its side. Before I knew what was happening, the entire root ball, totally intact, plopped right out of the pot. The hairs on my body stood straight up.

I never expected anything like this. Just the day before, the plant had been rigid in its pot with no movement whatsoever. Now it had a mind of its own. It had, literally, jumped onto the floor. I rose to the occasion, picked up the knife, and galvanized my forces for the next stage.

The time had come to cut the root ball in half. I was still skeptical about this part. I mentally relayed my fears to the spider about grinding away at it with the knife and asked for help. Then I steadied my hand, knife poised for the incision, and aimed my attention at the invisible line I had drawn through the middle of the root ball. I lowered the knife and began to cut. When the blade touched the soil, it slid effortlessly, as if by magic, through the myriad roots as if they were made of soft butter.

It was over in a second. "Victory for the forces of good! Here, here!" I cried, jumping up and down, dancing in

place, cheering for the spider plant, for our joint effort, and for the wonders of the invisible world I had just entered.

I had a new partner, and it wasn't a silent one either. I gently touched the divided plant and stroked the foliage as if the leaves were Rapunzel's hair. Waves of tenderness washed over me for the plant. Convinced of the validity of my direction, I vowed to finish the project in style.

I relayed thoughts of encouragement to the spider plant, coaxing it to hang on just a little longer while I placed each of its halves in a new pot. I arranged each head of hair, so to speak, attractively in the center of each pot and tamped down the fresh soil to hold the plants in place. I watered each plant well, soaking the soil deeply each time, allowing the water to run out the bottom and watering again and again so no dry spots remained. I knew I could never water too much at one time, only too often, so I didn't stint on water during this climactic part of the transplant.

Although I potted the plants in separate hanging baskets, I hung them closely together in the great south window, the place of honor. There, the sun poured in on them and they adorned this lovely room, illuminating the space with their delicate green glow. I made sure to keep them together. To me, they were like Siamese twins. I thought they'd still appreciate each other's company even after their separation.

The spiders never went into shock, lost their color, or sagged, as other spiders had before. They were perky and vital and unusually lustrous from the very inception of their independent lives. I regarded the three of us as

symbolically bonded. We all had survived my first inner gardening experiment.

The spiders helped me harness a secret power that was available simply for the asking. The experiment turned out to be as much about me as it was about the plants. I allowed magic into my life and had opened the way for more to come.

Just in case we lose touch with reality here, I want you to know I have had my share of failures, too. Unwittingly, I began to become attached and limited by my twenty-four-hour-notice time frame. Sometime thereafter, a spineless Medusa cactus set me straight. This unusual plant had long ago outgrown its pot. True to its name, at least thirty gangly arms spread randomly in all directions, like a mass of snakes. The Medusa was so top-heavy, it couldn't stand up without being propped against something for support. Stuck like cement in this too-small pot, the plant wouldn't budge no matter how hard I tugged and pulled. Finally, I gave up and put it down so we could have a conversation.

"Look," I said, "you are living in a pot that is ridiculous for you to remain in any longer. Your roots have displaced all the soil, you have no nourishment, and you can't even stand up. Please release yourself from this pot and let me plant you into a fresh one filled with good soil. Then you'll have plenty of room to grow."

I used my good old twenty-four-hour-notice speech and felt confident that the Medusa would play along. Surely, by this time tomorrow, I could transplant it. But no dice. The next afternoon, it was still not budging. It seemed to

be adamant that it wasn't going to move. The day after was the same story, and the day after that, too. I couldn't believe—given my good track record until then and the pitiful condition of its home—that the Medusa was not going to cooperate with me. But I couldn't deny the blatant fact that it had decided to stay in its pot. I insisted I didn't want to break the pot; it seemed too violent. So I said, "Be that way if you want," and haughtily put it aside to stew in its own juices. I went on to other things.

A few weeks passed. I gave up on the plant and shoved it off into a corner of my patio because I was annoyed with it. Its lack of team spirit puzzled me, but I adopted a see-if-I-care attitude. (I wasn't practicing what I preached, but, hey, nobody's perfect.) I went about my other business for the next few weeks, repotting, cleaning, weeding, and generally taking care of everything else in my garden.

One day, when I had finished bringing all the other plants up to optimum, I spotted the Medusa off by itself, sitting in the corner. I glared at it, still a little miffed that it hadn't fit into my twenty-four-hour-notice scenario. I had temporarily forgotten my previous experience and how important it was to cooperate rather than command. It never once dawned on me the plant was doing its best.

I went over to it and said silently, "Okay. Last chance. Do you want to come?" and I gave it a tug, just for the hell of it. Out of the pot it flew, and me with it. Not expecting it to budge, I was thrown off balance, onto my butt. I was floored, and in that instant I realized it had been taking its

own time, not mine, and I had never even entertained the possibility. Instead, I immediately assumed it was being ornery and uncooperative. This attitude actually says more about me than it does about the plant. We were communicating, after all.

I transplanted the cactus into a clay pot, the size appropriate for a small shrub, and adjusted its stance so its long snake arms could rest on the rim. I played with its appendages, holding them up and feeling the Medusa's energy course through my veins. It seemed like a prehistoric animal to me. What a guy, I kept thinking to myself.

I noted, though, I hadn't planned on putting the Medusa into that large a pot, but as the event unfolded, one I had been reserving for something much taller presented itself strongly. I sat the Medusa inside, and it instantly relaxed its arms on the rim as if it had found its right home. By myself, I never would have thought it needed such a large pot. Once again I learned that if you let it, the process itself, as well as your relationship with the plant, will tell you everything you need to know. Your hand will be guided.

Months later, I moved into a new place with a deck and arranged my succulents together in a grouping in full view of the ocean. The Medusa bloomed. This big gangly, silly-looking plant produced the teensiest red flowers that I ever saw, right on its tips. They appeared in minuscule clusters and measured so small I nearly missed them completely, but their tiny stature made them all the more endearing. The blooms added to the fondness I already felt for the

Medusa. I got to see it give birth. The Medusa had become like family.

My experience with the Medusa reveals the intimacy that develops when you garden with a spiritual philosophy. If you stay open, the plants will teach you. I find this lesson repeats itself over and over again. Here I was, with experience behind me, and I still expected the Medusa to perform on demand. One act of supposed insubordination and what did I do? I blackballed the plant!

When people tell me they have a black thumb and they kill everything they try to grow, no matter how hard they try not to, I know it is because they aren't connecting with the plants. They still view the plants as objects to be manipulated, color to decorate their garden, or something stylish to enhance their living room. It is always a good idea to warm to your plants so they are no longer just things that sit there. Allow that an invisible level of connection actually exists. All that matters is that you have a feeling, or even an idea, of reverence. Thank your plants often and tell them how beautiful they are, how much you love them. Gratitude is a gracious quality to embrace in gardening. Look upon everything you do as another step in creating a sacred space with your garden.

The interconnectedness of all life does not have to be an abstract concept. We can live it. It doesn't matter whether we garden indoors or outdoors; we can honor our world. It's all a prayer. When we act with this attitude, it snowballs and the rewards accrue infinitely. I've seen it happen.



Giving Notice: The Golden Rule of Gardening

Whenever anyone contributes attention or feeling to a plant, a bit of that person's being mingles with a bit of our being, and the one world is fostered. You humans are therefore all very linked to us, but until you give recognition to these links, they are as nothing and remain undeveloped.

—The Rhubarb Deva, from *The Findhorn Garden*

In the early seventies, when I worked for NBC All-News Network Radio, I interviewed the head landscape gardener at Disneyworld in Orlando, Florida. I wanted to know if he thought plants could feel or, in some way, know what was going on. He said yes, and when I asked him how he knew such a thing, he smiled knowingly. Of all the hundreds of plants, bushes, shrubs, and trees at Disneyworld, he explained, the ones that died and had to be replaced the most often were the flowers (usually impatiens) planted around the benches where the parents sat and scolded their children. He adamantly asserted that these plantings shriveled up and died because of the yelling and screaming and general bad feeling that occurred on those benches.

The experience with my spider plant set me thinking in a similar direction. I realized I needed to be careful about how I behaved with my plants. Seemingly, they

understood me and had clearly communicated back. Perhaps not in the same way human beings perceive and talk with one another, but something happened between us that deserved to be examined and pursued.

When I divided my spider, I became aware of what a respectful and considerate policy it is to notify a plant before initiating any major process such as repotting, transplanting, or pruning. Even when preparing new places in the garden that have been wild, or when taking out annuals, for example, it is courteous to ask before simply going in and ripping out plants.

Be with your plants for a while and feel what is going on. Simply observe them. Necessary gardening tasks can be highly intrusive acts to plants, interrupting growth or rest, disrupting places where the fairies live, or breaking apart a growing family. Consider the act of pruning, for example. You know what an emotional issue hair can be. Can you imagine someone suddenly swooping down on you and cutting your hair to a shorter length, or even cutting it off completely without asking first? No kid or cat, adult or dog would sit still for that kind of pruning for long. Plants have no choice. They are firmly rooted and are unable to get up and run away except in cartoons.

Giving notice does not automatically mean the plant will leap out of its pot right away as did my spider. Nothing may happen the first time you give notice. Or, something may happen, but not in the way that you expected. Keep on trying and experimenting.

A plant may need plenty of help from you, such as turning the pot upside down, putting pressure on its sides, cutting the plastic container, or even tugging

gently to start the birthing process. Primarily, what giving notice does is set your intent. It aligns you with the plant instead of placing you in opposition to it.

Expecting plants to perform on demand or command is unrealistic. Inner gardening is a more subtle process. As you ease into your indoor or outdoor gardening tasks, put yourself into the plants' shoes, so to speak. Think always how you would feel if you were in the same position, and then you will know what course of action to take.

Let the plant know just what it is you want to do and why. Come from your heart. Do not feel silly or give yourself a hard time because of what others might think about your talking to plants. You are not crazy. You are cooperating with other living beings and creating a bridge of communication between you and your garden, your world, your planet, and your own heart.

Address the plant silently or speak out loud, depending on how you feel most at ease. I usually feel more authentic and able to express myself more clearly and freely when I communicate through thought rather than audibly, with words. The most important element, though, is the purity of your intent. You are cultivating love and compassion, a sensitivity to life and the ability to see its miracles. This attitude will translate itself to all living things through your actions and the type of care you give.

Building this bridge is a happy and innocent task. Do not inhibit your behavior by worrying that you are not doing it correctly. There is no such thing as "the right way." You are finding the right way for you. Inner gardening is about thinking for yourself,

being yourself, and then watching the results flower around you.

Trust your instincts and your intuitions. Listen to your inner voice. When that intuitive voice comes giving you an answer, listen to it. We all have experiences in life of hearing that voice and then not trusting it. We ignore it and figure out a rational solution. Later we discover we should have listened. What the small voice said was correct—and it was the first thing that came to mind.

When I become aware that I have shunned my intuition, I usually berate myself and swear I won't do it again. But, I often do. It takes a lot of practice to go with the nonrational. Western society does not support such "nonsense." But inner gardeners can change this kind of linear thinking. Use your gardening tasks as an opportunity to encourage and heed your intuitive voice. It will create a domino effect in other areas of your life. Perhaps the next time you hear your inner voice say that the baby-sitter isn't trustworthy or your date isn't a good match for you, you will give it more credence. Then, later on, you won't have to say, "I knew that. I should have listened to myself."

Once you have established a relationship with your plants, you will feel more connected with them. Something will happen that is hard to describe. It is the same feeling you get for the ones you love. You want to do the right thing for them, you want to please them, you want to protect them.

