



Petunias and My Inner Worth

Earth has no sorrow that earth cannot heal.

—John Muir, *John of the Mountains*, 1938

Petunias had never been one of my favorite flowers. As a matter of fact, I didn't even like them until they won my attention in an odd, fortuitous sort of way. Then they became more than just color to enliven my garden; petunias emphatically planted themselves in my heart.

When we arrive at the setting of this story, I was just turning twenty-eight and my marriage was dying. On the surface we were the perfect couple. Or, so everyone thought. We chose to live a lie. We never discussed our unhappiness together. Now the time had come to struggle with an issue I never thought I would have to face. I was pregnant and petrified.

In our society, or probably any society for that matter, women who don't want babies are looked upon with dis-

dain, disbelief, and pity. They are often considered selfish, lacking the motherly instinct to raise another human being. I grappled with that stereotype for a while, feeling guilty and ostracized by my own acceptance of it. Then my panic took over, my nauseating fear and morning sickness that lasted morning, noon, and night. Everything overwhelmed me. I finally admitted to myself that I did not want to bear this child, that I wanted to have an abortion.

Even though I was twenty-eight years old, I was extraordinarily ignorant. I didn't have the slightest idea as to *when* a woman could have an abortion. How much time did I have? When would I be forced to admit to the world what I really wanted to do?

I owned a pirated copy of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* by the Boston Women's Collective, in those days a radical tract. I had never touched the mimeographed pages stashed away in my drawer, saved from my student days at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. After all, I prided myself on how well I took care of my gynecological needs. I had a Pap smear and an internal examination every year, didn't I? And I was a pioneer user of birth control pills in high school.

"What a joke," I thought. I didn't know anything. It was time to read the book.

I could scarcely breathe as I turned the pages. I discovered I needed to decide by the twelfth *week*. If I waited beyond that time, I would need to be injected with a saline solution and have to go through the birth process, giving birth to a dead fetus. That was too close for me. Too close to the truth of what I was actually going to do. At least with an early abortion, they would put me out cold.

Ashamed that I didn't have the slightest idea of how to take care of a baby, let alone love it, I couldn't confide my terror to anyone. The underlying panic persisted that I would surely have an emotionally out of control kid because I felt that way inside. I was not mother material.

The level of deceit I lived while trying to find a way out was appalling. Unfortunately, my husband and I had already told everybody the supposedly wonderful news. Everyone was happy for us. So I performed like an actor in a play, on the outside, and lived another completely alien life on the inside. Tormented by every demon of negative emotion that exists within the human heart, I carried on a constant dialogue with myself about what I might do and how I would do it. My time was running out. It was the end of April and I had until the beginning of June. My one saving grace, though, was that I was a lost soul and I knew it. I sincerely wanted to do the right thing. But I feared reproach from those who watched, and I hated myself and judged myself more harshly than any onlooker probably ever did.

My husband and I rented a place in the country for our weekly escape from the rigors of life in Manhattan. Every Friday afternoon we would load the car, which was parked all week long at the local garage on 113th Street and Broadway, and propel ourselves in a none-too-relaxed fashion to the joys of country living. When we got there, we'd unpack, go food shopping for the weekend, cook endless meals, and wash umpteen dishes. Then on Sunday night, we'd pack up again, including all the uneaten food, and drive back to "Rome," back to the hell of a declining civilization.

The house, circa 1860, was made of stone and wood. I had

to bend over slightly to clear the doorway into the living room. The couple we rented it with were our best friends. The wife was having trouble getting pregnant and wanted babies so badly it consumed her. I felt guilty because I was pregnant and secretly didn't want to have the child. I wished I could have given her my baby and everyone would have been happy.

On this particular Memorial Day weekend, we arrived in the country to open the house for the summer. The water that ran in the house smelled like sulfur. When I took a shower, brushed my teeth, or washed the dishes, I ended up gagging or vomiting, sensitive to the odor because I was pregnant.

For distraction on Saturday morning, I decided to go to the local nursery and look at the flowers for sale. When I arrived at the nursery, the only nice-looking sets left were of petunias. Petunias were not my first choice. I wasn't crazy about picking off their dead heads all the time to keep them looking good, a need even more peculiar to the petunia than other flowers, I believed. But, of all the flowers on sale, the petunias were the freshest and healthiest. I chose an assortment of three: deep violet, a smoldering magenta, and pure white. There was something inside me that was driving me to plant. I had to plant that day.

I drove home, all the while glancing at the petunias to make sure they were all right. It was hot that day, and I didn't want them to droop beyond the point of no return before I even got them home. I carried the box to the back of the house and began to search for a spot to plant them. The area was covered with grass. There didn't seem to be a patch of dirt anywhere.

"Ah, there's a spot," I said with relief. Right out the back door sat an old tree stump. It wasn't a big stump, but the dirt all around it could be turned and planted. I began to dig deeply with my hand trowel and prepare the way for my new acquaintances, the petunias.

I admired them thoughtfully, holding up each little potted flower as I poked around for buds in their various stages of unfoldment. I was pleased, I decided. I had chosen well. They were fine specimens and my favorite colors, too: violet, magenta, and white.

Slowly and carefully, I began to dig a place for them in the ground. I arranged them with an artist's eye, becoming blissfully lost in the process. The petunias looked exquisite when I finished watering them. Their colors glowed like the velvets on a Renaissance palette. Those petunias almost transcended their genus and species. They were the blueprint for all petunias everywhere. They didn't have any brown or yellow leaves or crunchy, dried-up flowers. They were the most luscious petunias I had ever seen before or since.

After I finished and cleaned up my planting mess, I was rudely catapulted back into the excruciating reality in which I lived. Some relatives were on the phone to congratulate us on the pregnancy. Once again, I was faced with a baby inside me that I was terrified to have. I hadn't told another human being, even my therapist, of my fear. In those days, I kept everything hidden, afraid to tell another person the truth because then I would have to act on it.

I still didn't know what I was going to do. How was I going to straighten out my warped existence and not hurt anybody? How was I going to save myself? I climbed the creaky stairs

to the whitewashed room I shared with my husband. He had built us a bed underneath a little window in the stone wall so we could hear the stream rush past. As I huddled in bed under the quilt, the cool night air soothed me. Ironically, the quilt belonged in a child's room blocked out with little girls with giant curls hidden under hats that covered their faces.

When I finally fell asleep, I dreamed I was walking in the woods on a carpet of moss. Spongy and wet, it sunk under my feet like quicksand. Soon I came to a clearing. The light changed to the kind of light that gleams around four o'clock on winter afternoons. It cast a pink-and-orange otherworldly glow over everything. The light helped me see into the plants, into the natural world, and sense magic.

It was there, in the black humus of the forest, that I saw the white petunias. They stood in profusion, very close together, and they were talking to me. It was almost as if each petunia had a face and a voice and a personality. I heard them say in unison, "Hello, Judith. You planted our seed. Please help us to grow."

When I awoke the next morning, I remembered the dream so intensely it seemed as if it had actually happened. I had the feeling that I had just been given an answer to my prayers but it wasn't clear yet what it was. It had come in a form in which I would have to decide for myself what it meant.

Many people, I realize, might have interpreted the dream differently than I did. In the end, I decided that the petunias in the dream were the deepest part of me. I had planted my own seed of consciousness and I needed to help it grow, no matter what it took to make that happen, even if it meant having an abortion for reasons of mental

and emotional incapability. I didn't know why at the time, but I needed to have an abortion so I could live. I thought I was a terrible person for feeling this way and I wished things were different, but at least I was telling the truth.

So one night, as we lay together under the little girls' quilt, I told my husband that I wanted to have an abortion. I said that I loved him, but there was only friction left in our marriage and I was terrified to have a baby. I needed help. We needed help. Telling him was the hardest thing I ever did. And my husband did not respond well.

In fact, he called me a dried-up, shriveled old witch and left me right on the spot. He took his socks and underwear out of our drawers and went down to the station to wait for the next train to the city. For the first time since I found out I was pregnant, I took a deep breath.

At the therapist's office the following week, my husband said he would stay with me if I went through with having the baby. I told him I wanted him to stay because he wanted to be with me. We didn't work it out. I went through with the abortion. I repeated the name of God over and over until the sodium Pentothal did its work and put me out. When I awoke, I hurt everywhere, particularly in my heart. I could hardly believe all this was happening to me.

My mother couldn't stay away from the abortion clinic. I hadn't wanted her to come. But she arrived in time to help me home in a cab and put me to bed. She stayed with me for the first night, hovering and fretting, worried about my condition. I just wanted her to back off and let me be.

The next morning the obligatory New York cockroaches were crawling all over my kitchen because I had

abandoned my post there for a couple of days. My original deal with them was they could live there and I wouldn't use the Raid if they didn't show their faces while I was in the kitchen. If they did, I would be forced to kill them.

We had achieved this typical New York *détente* during the time I was home to converse with them. Now, they became shameless and broke our tentative bargain. They were brazenly running across the counters and all over the tile floor. My mother had bought a can of bug spray and was determinedly spraying it everywhere. I ran into the kitchen and started screaming at her to stop killing the cockroaches.

"I have a deal with them!" I yelled.

She looked at me as if I were nuts. Suddenly, I broke down sobbing with the horrible realization that I was losing it over the cockroaches but had just had an abortion the day before. How perverse could life get? I was at a complete loss.

Days, weeks, months passed. I was guilty and confused and so afraid about what people would say that I told everyone I had lost the baby. I lied, ashamed of my choice to abdicate motherhood. It took many years before I was able to mourn and grieve for the child and resolve the pain of what I had done. I had to struggle with my own ambivalence and the paradoxical nature of the situation. I made the right decision in order to save myself, but I needed forgiveness for my choice. In the end, I was the only one who could bestow it.

My husband and I separated, and I continued to work with my business partner in our indoor-outdoor gardening service. Functioning like a sleepwalker, dutifully I went to the addresses of our business accounts and

watered and pruned the plants. It was a good therapeutic job for me. I was running on automatic.

For the public rooftop gardens at a major New York publisher, the flower boxes needed to look good. So, we planted giant yellow and orange marigolds up and down the whole length of their outdoor terrace overlooking midtown Manhattan. I went twice a week to water and weed. The marigolds began to grow.

Each time I came to water, I would examine the whole city block's worth of marigold boxes by fishing around in the soil to make sure there were no bugs. One day, as I poked around in the marigolds, something strange happened that miraculously jolted me back to my inner truth. The box of marigolds at the very end of the line was filled with sprouting petunias.

I lowered my head to get a closer look, tilting it sideways as I stared in disbelief. Petunias, growing where no petunias had been planted. I kept thinking, I must be wrong. I asked my partner, but she hadn't planted them, either. There must be a logical explanation. As they grew, I couldn't deny their reality. In a few weeks, the box at the end of the terrace was blooming with violet, magenta, and white petunias.

They were blooming for me. They were letting me know I hadn't been wrong. They hadn't abandoned me. In the midst of my pain, they were acknowledging the courage of my decision. Even though I had misgivings about what I had to do, I had known what was best for me and my unborn child. There was no choice but the one I chose. And the petunias knew it.

For a long time, just seeing petunias reminded me of that dark period in my life. Now they have taken their

proper place in perspective. They were my first partners in inner knowing. I listened to them and trusted their message. At the time, they were my only light.

In retrospect, the petunia incident was part of a larger lesson about nurturing. Before seed can germinate, the ground has to be prepared; before I could nurture a child properly, I needed to nurture and grow myself. A first step, for me, was to acknowledge my own stunted level of growth. Having a woman's body and physical capabilities wasn't enough. I needed some emotional grounding and maturity, too.

After my petunia episode, I finally made my trip to Findhorn, my first spiritual pilgrimage. I flew to Glasgow as part of a group that attended a three-week global conference at the Findhorn Community. Upon arrival in Glasgow, we boarded a bus for an eight-hour ride north to the tip of Scotland. As we drove through miles and miles of national forest, my anticipation grew.

Our first group meeting, in a large circular hall still under construction, united hundreds of people from all over the world to attend numerous workshops on gardening, spirituality, and our relationship to the earth. After the introductory talks, people shared garden experiences that were as meaningful to them as mine were to me. We exchanged information and points of view, developed camaraderie, and built support for those of us who felt out of touch with any sense of community like this at home.

I learned at Findhorn that my treatment of garden tools was as important as my attitude toward the plants. I needed to keep the tools clean and well oiled so rust wouldn't form. Putting them back in the shed when I fin-

ished using them assured their longevity. If I respected the tools and allowed them to do the work, they would.

For example, rather than my being tense and forcing my action on the hoe, they suggested holding the hoe loosely and relaxing into the rhythm, allowing the hoe to move me. Oddly enough, it worked. The technique presented a new awareness about allowing rather than imposing. When I applied the principle to other parts of my life, I discovered I needed to let go and let life unfold rather than try so hard to control it.

Life at Findhorn was decidedly less serious than I had imagined. Eileen and Peter Caddy invited us all to partake at the Findhorn Pub after the evening's activity. After a hard day in the garden or giving service somewhere else in the community, people had a good time dancing, drinking, and talking. Even though I didn't drink, my rigid ideas about what was "spiritual" faded fast. An embrace of life rather than a rejection of it was the example they set.

We were taught to respect the process of life, to respect everything we did, whether we were washing dishes, cleaning toilets, or running the front desk. Whatever we were doing had value and served a purpose. I myself did not immediately grasp the depth of this concept, I was so busy worrying. One day I had been asked to file cards in the office. Humdrum and boring compared to my expectations, the job's one saving grace was the view I had of people working, laughing, and talking in the garden. It looked like fun, and I felt sorry for myself cooped up in an office doing unglamorous work. Since everyone got to try different jobs, I didn't last long at mine.

I didn't learn the lesson until many years later that it

wasn't what I did, but how I did it, that mattered. I would notice how good I felt when an anonymous telephone operator treated me with kindness or a waiter was genuinely interested in serving me well. I began to see how little it takes to share loving-kindness with others and to do it even in the seemingly mundane tasks of the day. If I could do it with plants, I could do it with people, too.

This truth still comes to me through gardening. Plants are my company and my solace, my friends and my refuge. When all else fails, I go to them to regain my center. My plants help me to love myself with the same care and respect I give to them.

Gardening nourishes; it refreshes, revitalizes, replenishes, and restores. My mother always says that Mozart is better than any psychiatrist. I feel the same way about plants.

I can even imagine planting petunias again someday.



Growing the Kids

I want to know God's thoughts . . . the rest are details.

—Albert Einstein

My time to be involved with children came many years later. After I wrote a children's book, I began to visit

classrooms and plant indoor gardens with children. My goal was to incorporate the spiritual aspects of gardening into teaching children about plants.

As part of a community project by the Decorative Arts Study Center, I was invited to speak to a second-grade class in San Juan Capistrano, California. We planted garlic cloves to grow garlic-tasting scallions, the crown of a pineapple for a pretty succulent plant (and with luck a blue flower and a miniature pineapple), and a few yams so their pretty purple and green vines would grow long and the kids could follow their growth, winding them around the classroom.

As I began the project, I asked the children, "Who in this class likes attention?" Of course, everyone raised their hands including the teachers, the parents, and me. I told them everything alive loves attention. The more attention you give to plants, the happier they will be. I emphasized that the most important thing to put into a garden is love.

Each child's face relaxed. Their shoulders dropped and big smiles appeared. Suddenly, we weren't doing a dry science project anymore. Their hearts were involved.

Later, I told them I believed there were flower fairies and asked them if they did, too. I wanted to see what they thought. I was surprised at their animated response. Many of the kids had concrete questions for the flower fairies, such as What do you eat? Where do you sleep? Do you go to school? The teacher asked everyone to paint a picture of a flower fairy and write directly to the fairies with their questions.

At the end of the class, a long line formed with all

the kids who wanted to tell me their stories. As I sat with them and listened, they draped themselves over me and excitedly shared tales about their favorite plants at home. Sparking their love had transformed science into magic.

The class happened in spring. In June, as a continuation of the outreach program, I joined with other members of the Decorative Arts Study Center in hosting a year-end celebration in their Children's Garden. When this class arrived, their teacher bragged to me that the kids were actually vying with each other for the opportunity to water the indoor garden we planted. They had an enthusiasm for the garden, eager to show who cared about it most.

Our team laminated the watercolors the kids painted of the flower fairies and hung them among the trees and shrubs in the Children's Garden. We distributed handwritten answers to their letters on parchment scrolls sprinkled with glitter and tied with gold ribbon. The kids went wild opening their individualized answers.

One boy huddled in a corner looking very upset. When I went up to him and asked what was wrong, he said he hadn't received his answer. I promised him I'd look around for the scroll. Perhaps it had gotten lost. I hurried into the office and wrote him a note, signing it, the Garlic, Yam, and Pineapple Fairies. These were the same recycled kitchen scraps we had planted in his classroom. In the letter, I reminded him to put love into his garden and thanked him for the kind care he gave the plants. Then I added, "We love you." At first I wondered if this was too sappy for a boy, but then some-

thing inside me said to let it go. I wrapped the scroll with gold ribbon and hurried outside waving the letter, pretending I had just found it. "The fairies must have dropped it on their way," I said, handing it to him triumphantly.

His face lit up, and he quietly opened the scroll and read the contents. I eavesdropped when he rushed over to a group of boys gathered together away from the other children. Pointing to the last line, he confided, "Look, the fairies say they love me. Don't tell anyone. Okay?" The other boys nodded respectfully.

Nurturing, caring, and respect are easy to cultivate through gardening, even in children. It is a natural arena in which children can respond with an open heart if you encourage them to do so. That day at the study center I asked all the children to close their eyes and feel their heart. "Remember how you feel when you really love your dog or your cat, your best friend, or your mommy and your daddy and they love you back? You can reach the fairies anytime if you go to that place in your heart. That's where the fairies live."

The kids fell silent and still, squeezing their eyes shut, trying to concentrate. When we opened our eyes, it took a while for the noise and excitement to build again. The children had actually focused inside so they could feel their own love and it took them some time to come out again.

Perhaps, we've gone too far over to one side, relegating science to the realm of the rational and provable, eliminating the magic and mystery from it. Maybe now the pendulum will swing back, toward the marriage of science and poetry. That means reintroducing myth

and fairy tale, dreams and visions, intuition and imagination as spiritually valid ways to understand nature.

When I visit classrooms, I am surprised to discover how many children spend time in or under trees for a sense of comfort and belonging. The kids relate to trees and gardens as safe places to be. Plants are their friends.

One fourth-grade boy told me how he loved a special oak tree that lived behind his house. He said he climbed the tree when his sister beat him up and was mean to him. The oak was the only tree in the yard his sister could not climb. It was too big. He would stay in that tree for hours, it felt so good up there. One day he came home from school to find the tree had been cut down. He missed it. Now there was no place he could go to escape from his sister.

In a fifth-grade class on Earth Day, a boy raised his hand and said that he heard when a tree is cut down, all the other trees around it harden in response. A girl in the same class shared that she loved a big shrub in her mother's garden. She had developed a relationship with it and was sad to come home from school one day to see it gone. Her mother told her she had decided it was too big for the garden, and had asked the gardener to take it away. This child loved the shrub. She had developed a rich fantasy life around it, and this spot had become her favorite place to play. Her comment: "I guess my mother didn't know it was my friend. She didn't even ask me whether she could pull it out or not." I suggested the girl ask her mother to give her a place in the garden that she could call her own and to please consult her if she wants to do anything to it.

Children understand the world of plants. The concept of fairies, not necessarily tiny people with wings but an intelligence within nature, is natural to them.

Give children a spot in the garden that is theirs, where they have dominion, especially children who show a penchant for planting. Instilling in a child love and reverence for life and the earth means giving the child love and respect. Buying rain forest T-shirts is all well and good, but the child needs to know he or she is connected to the earth wherever that child is, even indoors with plants in a city apartment.

Do not hesitate to incorporate fairy tales, storytelling, and myths into gardening with kids. I tell them that fairies flourish in a garden, especially if you make them welcome. All this means is acknowledging their presence. The fairies live in places that are very quiet. When you look there, it is often overgrown, and you might have the feeling not to disturb that area.

In a garden I once renovated, one spot, off in a corner, I felt as though I should never dig or plant there. Vines and weeds covered the place, and I had a healthy respect for the sense of privacy I felt emanating from its core. To me, it was the wild spot in the garden where the fairies lived.

One day, my landlady, Miriam, and her boyfriend, Doug, came over to inspect what I had done. Before I knew it, Miriam started ripping out this weed-strewn place to clean it up. Doug told her stop and leave it alone. "It looks natural," he proclaimed. He may not have thought fairies lived there, but he sensed the wildness of the spot and wanted to preserve it. Be sensitive

to the need of every garden to have its wild spot.

Watch for the wild spot in your garden. There is one.

Loving the earth is a global and overwhelming task. Healing ourselves is where we begin. My friend Deborah and her three-year-old son, Jazz, planted unpopped popcorn in pots following the directions from one of the projects in my children's gardening book. When I told him that American Indians liked to sing up the corn, it captured his imagination.

One day when I visited, Jazz took me by the hand and proudly showed me what he was doing. He had placed the pots, of growing corn next to his bed on the night table. He liked to sleep with the plants for company. He pointed to each plant and told me a story related to their growth. Deborah said she used to hear him singing to the corn in the morning before he got out of bed. "Good morning, corn. Singing the corn. Sing, sing, sing."

Kids respond to love and fairies, love and attention, love and more love. We are all kids. If you make the garden a science experiment, make sure you add the proven ingredient: human love. Everything thrives on it here in the realm of matter.

