



On Other People's Stories: Sowing the Seed

What a wonderful life I've had. I only wish I had realized it sooner.

—Colette

When I speak at workshops and clubs, I learn more and more about the healing power of inner gardening by listening to other people's stories. One way I elicit these stories is through writing exercises. Most people who love to garden are already inner gardeners. Some know it; others don't. By sharing gardening experiences, it is easy to see how we cultivate ourselves when we cultivate a garden. We translate spiritual philosophy into practical work.

Many participants become highly motivated after writing down their ideas. They make connections in their own lives that are instructive and revealing. The process of examining their experience on paper brings self-confidence, clarity, and reflection. They can't wait to go back to their

gardens with new awareness. Even nongardeners say the experience inspires them to give gardening a try.

At Sherman Library and Gardens in Corona del Mar, California, I listed one of my workshops as *The Inner Philosophy of Gardening: A Forum to Explore the Healing and Self-Discovery Available Through Communication and Cooperation with the Plant Kingdom*. The group had a very staid appearance, one which belied their emotional connection to the subject. After I spoke about my own experiences with plants and we all traded ideas, I asked people to write for ten minutes on the subject, "Why Do I Garden?" beginning with the phrase, "I garden because . . ." My only other stipulation was that they write continuously, without stopping to edit, organize, or check spelling. I would take care of watching the time.

I scanned their faces while they wrote. One woman started to cry, huddling over her paper to get closer to her thoughts. When the time elapsed, I asked for volunteers to read their work. The woman who cried raised her hand immediately, so I motioned for her to begin. She read a few lines and then broke down completely. She couldn't go on.

The next woman appeared to be in her early sixties. She was stunning, with silvery hair that glinted in the sunlight. She pulled it back into a chignon at the nape of her neck, allowing us a good look at her soft, blue eyes. Simply dressed, her silver jewelry added a quiet elegance to her peaceful demeanor. She was an artistic woman who made an immediate impression with her inner and outer beauty.

She wrote about taking care of her three children during the fifties, nursing them all, even though it wasn't fashion-

able. In fact, breast-feeding was frowned upon in that era. She had been a very busy new mother since the babies were born so close together. But, whenever the children took their naps, she went out into the garden to work, she loved it so. Inevitably, she said, when she gardened, her milk would begin to flow and she would have to return inside to nurse.

A big sigh went up from the crowd. Everyone marveled at this story of the ultimate symbol of nurturing feminine energy, milk, streaming from a woman's breasts as she played in her garden. Her body obviously was very in tune with her emotional connection to the plants. It was refined enough to turn on the faucet, even when she nurtured the earth.

The next reader was a big woman, with short, curly gray hair. She wore a white blouse with a red velvet bow at the collar and a navy pleated skirt. She looked very businesslike. I was pleasantly surprised when she read her piece. She made herself so vulnerable.

It seems that when she was younger and her children were small, she and her husband took them on a trip to Yosemite. It was mid-afternoon and everyone had gone off to explore. She decided to rest and be quiet so she could replenish.

She sat under a giant redwood tree and breathed a sigh of relief to be alone for a while. Eventually she looked up and saw shafts of light pouring in through the branches of a gargantuan tree. As she sat and watched, fully feeling the moment, she had an epiphany. She said, suddenly she saw the whole world in that tree. She experienced the interconnectedness of all life, and she cried.

As she read, her voice choked up and her face reddened with intense feeling. She told everyone that up until that time in Yosemite, she hadn't understood about gardening with her soul. After that experience, she knew what it meant and it changed her forever.

When the workshop was over, the only man in the audience came up to me. I noticed him throughout. He seemed very withdrawn and had difficulty reading his piece. I thought, perhaps, he was holding back tears.

When we were alone, he told me his daughter was dying of cancer and he was her primary caretaker. He drove her to Mexico for alternative medical treatments and helped her while she went through this very painful process. He started to cry, saying he wished his daughter had the same feeling about plants as we did. His love of gardening recharged and uplifted him. "But," he added, "you can't give that to another person. They have to find it for themselves."

Once, I gave a two-hour call-in interview on a listener-sponsored radio show called "Seeing Beyond" out of Santa Cruz, California. We talked about gardening as a healing experience, for children as well as for adults, whether one gardens indoors or outdoors.

A woman called in, very excited, speaking rapidly with great feeling about an old wisteria vine she had to cut down. It wrapped itself around her porch and invaded the plumbing which caused many problems. She said at the time she cried, overcome with emotion. She didn't understand then why she was crying and felt embarrassed in front of her husband for acting like such a fool. He

thought she was nuts. Now she understood the reason for her tears. She was glad to hear other people felt the same way.

Everyone has plant stories. Writing them down clarifies their meaning. Committing your ideas and observations to paper will alter you. You will have to examine what you know and what you think you know. Explore what is true for you. Once you begin, your own story will unfold. The more you welcome it and give it a voice, the more story you will generate.



I have a friend Jana who is a superb landscape architect. She has won many awards for her wild gardens. At Christmas she made her own greeting card using Japanese calligraphy to illustrate her impressions of the plant world. Accompanying this drawing on earthy brown paper stock was a short message about her experience with the rose fairy in a New York subway. She made an unemotional and intelligent plea to inspire all the recipients of her cards "to pay attention to the fairies wherever they are and give them your support because without them, not only our gardens but the entire world would be a very sad place." She mailed out hundreds of these cards to friends, relatives, and clients. I was so impressed at her courage to say such a thing to the world. She told me she was surprised how touched everyone was who read it. She received calls from university professors, doctors, lawyers, dentists, and their assistants thanking her for her thoughts. Many

of them passed on the card to others, they were so taken with the message. It struck me how times are changing if so many people can relate to mythical beings who remain a mystery but speak to the primitive and the innocent within all of us.

These are the kinds of stories garden club members can share at meetings; docents at botanical gardens can add to their tours; and parents and teachers can include in their science projects with kids. There are more of us than we realize, so have courage. It's time to speak out!

