

The Zen of My Garden

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Dear Friends,

As I was growing up in the suburbs of Detroit, cutting the grass was my job. I would cut, weed, fertilize, and trim every week. I never minded the work. But, when gardening became competitive, I became unstoppable.

Mrs. Weintraub, a dower woman with, what seemed to me, a constant scowl, lived across the street. We never spoke, but I and others on the block assumed that she had reason to scowl. A single woman, she moved to our street with her adult, developmentally disabled son and, when she told the kids to stay off of her lawn and away from her house, she earned for herself the reputation of, as my mother would say, a "*fabissineh*" / sour-puss.

Whatever her story, Mrs. Weintraub was fastidious and devoted to her lawn, as much or more than I. After a full day of gardening, with our lawn carefully cut and bushes properly sheared, I was certain that our house was certainly a "Best on the Block" candidate. But, by the next day, my neighbor and nemesis, Mrs. Weintraub, had cut her lawn with equal or greater care than I, her beds immaculately swept of leaves and weeds, her bushes properly pruned and clipped.

It was clear to me that my expertise had been noted by my neighbor and taken as an unspoken challenge. My careful landscaping efforts had created between us an all-out competition, a direct challenge. She had thrown down her gardening gauntlet upon her perfectly coiffed bluegrass. Game on!

Reflecting on those halcyon summer days, I had already been recognized (mostly by my parents and grandparents who lived in Illinois) as an accomplished 14-year-old gardener. But it was on that muggy July morning that the cutting competition came to a head: the Superbowl of Gardening had arrived.

On that day of infamy, I emerged from my house, as I did each day, jumped on my bike, baseball mitt and bat in hand, on my way to the nearby baseball field. And, as I did each day, as I peddled down the street, I turned and glanced quickly toward Mrs. Weintraub's house, conveying at once indifference, nonchalance and, as it became clear later, an unwarranted sense of confidence. I realized immediately that something was very wrong.

Earlier that morning, before I made it outside, Mrs. Weintraub had completed her work in the garden, upping the ante by planting an abundance of impatiens, pansies, geraniums and marigolds from one end of the house to the other. The colors were vibrant, the spacing between species measured with precision and flawlessly executed.

At that moment I had an epiphany: Unable to out-do Mrs. Weintraub, why not simply admire her devotion and commitment to her plants? It was clear, even to a 14-year-old, that her life could not be so great. She lived alone, her full-time job supervising her large (over 6' 3" tall) and overly friendly son who scared the others on the block. So far as I knew, there were no other pieces to her life. And, as I peddled past her house, I thought that the time had come to re-evaluate my gardening. It was then that I started enjoying the time outside, walking proudly behind my lawn motor, thinking not about the competition but simply about cutting the lawn.

Today, if you drive by my house, you may find me in my garden, probably covered with mud, sweating profusely, and smiling. There is a difference between working hard in the office and working hard outside in the garden. Gardening for me is earthy, a way to connect with the beauty of nature. A way to push aside the concerns and pressures which come with life and with any profession. In the garden, while shifting between tools, lopping, pruning and cutting, I have time to think, to become lost in thought or to give myself permission to sing the song which has become stuck in my head and has decided to dominate my consciousness for an hour or more.

When my hands are dirty, I feel more connected to the miracles of nature and life. And, as I cut and prune, I find the transience of it all particularly moving. You see, when you garden, you are in control only for that moment. It is only in **that** moment that the weeds have been vanquished. It is only in that moment that the mulch is evenly spread. Today the hibiscuses are opened. Like life itself, who knows about tomorrow?

I write these words on Tisha B'Av, the day on the Jewish Calendar which reminds us, among other things, that nothing in this world is permanent. Tisha B'Av reminds us that even the greatest of structures are not permanent. They too can be destroyed. But there is also comfort to be found on this day. Destruction can be reversed. Structures can be re-built. Pain can subside. That which has been uprooted can be planted anew. Yesterday has passed, but our gift is the "present": we still have today.

I doubt that Mrs. Weintraub is still alive, but if she is, I would love to have her visit. I would be happy to tell her about the new raised beds I have built, or the placement of my plants. I would like to ask her about her garden as well. Perhaps she would share with me what she was thinking when she looked across the street at my lawn and garden. But mostly, I suspect, we would probably just sit quietly, enjoying the beautiful flowers today and thinking about old times.

B'Shalom,

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