Lost in Space

There's no place like serenity

November 1, 1997 By Victoria A. Brownworth

Serenity comes like a summer rain to a thirsting garden, washing away anger, pain, fear. To me—when I was healthy, and now that I'm not—the serene state has presented itself as a calming of the spirit, an inner quiet that shuts out the blare of daily turmoil and mitigates the uncertainties of illness. There's a peace so real, I can almost touch it. By wrapping a special part of life in my arms and holding it close, I may not be able to heal myself, but I can engage the strength to move on.

My take on serenity is tactile (not to mention sentimental) because I experience it through an actual physical act. I have to do something to achieve serenity—touch, taste, feel, but above all, look, as the state is most often accessed through the eyes. It's not surprising, then, that many people find serenity in places or images that evoke eternity and a mental state that's transcendent beyond well-being and outside of time. Others find it in a humbler form, closer to home. My favorite mystic, St. Teresa of Avila, gleaned the serene by praying, contemplating and levitating around her 16th-century garden. Psychologists call it the oceanic feeling. In Hindi, it's shanti, the peace that goes beyond understanding. The secret of serenity? You lose yourself to find it.

Although I've yet to levitate, I, too, get it in my garden, and have ever since I was a child. There, trowel in hand under summer's hot sun or in the chilly last days of autumn, I would be endlessly engaged in body and spirit—just me, the dirt and a vast array of living things: Tough little orange marigolds with their biting scent, languid pink phlox under bevies of blossoms, inquisitive faces of magenta and yellow pansies, and breezy petunias with peppermint stripes graced the circular bed in the center of the garden. Bordering the overgrown privet hedge, stood day lilies and furred hollyhocks, while wood rose climbed up and over the fence. Beyond the greengage plum tree lay a bed of stark white and pale blue, all with heady scents and paper-thin petals. A night garden, these flowers attract butterflies by day and glow silver in the dark or dappled by moonlight and the staccato fluorescence of lightning bugs. For years, I could lie in bed at night all summer long and, even with my eyes shut, see the pale moonflowers, watch a petal fall from an overblown rose, envision the lilies with their brilliant tiger-orange trumpets closed tight, at rest in the warm night air. I still can.

This state of mind is its own end. But despite all the bestsellers promising this state in 10 easy steps, achieving it requires effort. Yoga has disciplined millions throughout the centuries. Zen

Buddhist monks practice deep breathing. Even preppies trance in TM poses. Scientific research suggests that these exercises can help people with AIDS or other serious illnesses boost their immune function and lower stress levels (including heart rate and blood pressure) by releasing endorphins into the bloodstream and increasing oxygen flow to the heart, lungs and brain. Hard work and hot sex can also produce the desired endorphin effect, but the results are more fleeting.

The physical pleasure of gardening is now beyond my capabilities (I spend most of my time in a wheelchair or bed), but the memories and deep-down sense of calm can be conjured without too much trouble. Perusing nursery catalogues that come in the mail, full of fragrant perennials and sweetly ephemeral annuals, allows me to imagine gardening again. A bouquet of my favorite blooms or even a single flower in a vase by my bedside also works. The rich scent of the earth I used to hold in my hand rises from a geranium in a terra cotta pot on the windowsill. I built my gardens plant by plant, bed by bed. I also built the memories I now hold, as tangible as that cool, dark soil.

With age, I learn to appreciate another reasons my garden soothes: Because it is always, even in the dead of winter, alive. The thick chrysanthemums in hues of ruddy rose and burnt orange last until Christmas. The hedge stays green, the rhododendron shiny; the fireweed is splashed with tiny russet berries, keeping company with the spiky holly through February’s snows. And buried in each bed are tubers and bulbs, waiting for the first thaw to burst forth with baby crocus and grape hyacinth in a rush of fragrance and a dream of spring’s hopefulness. All this will survive me.

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