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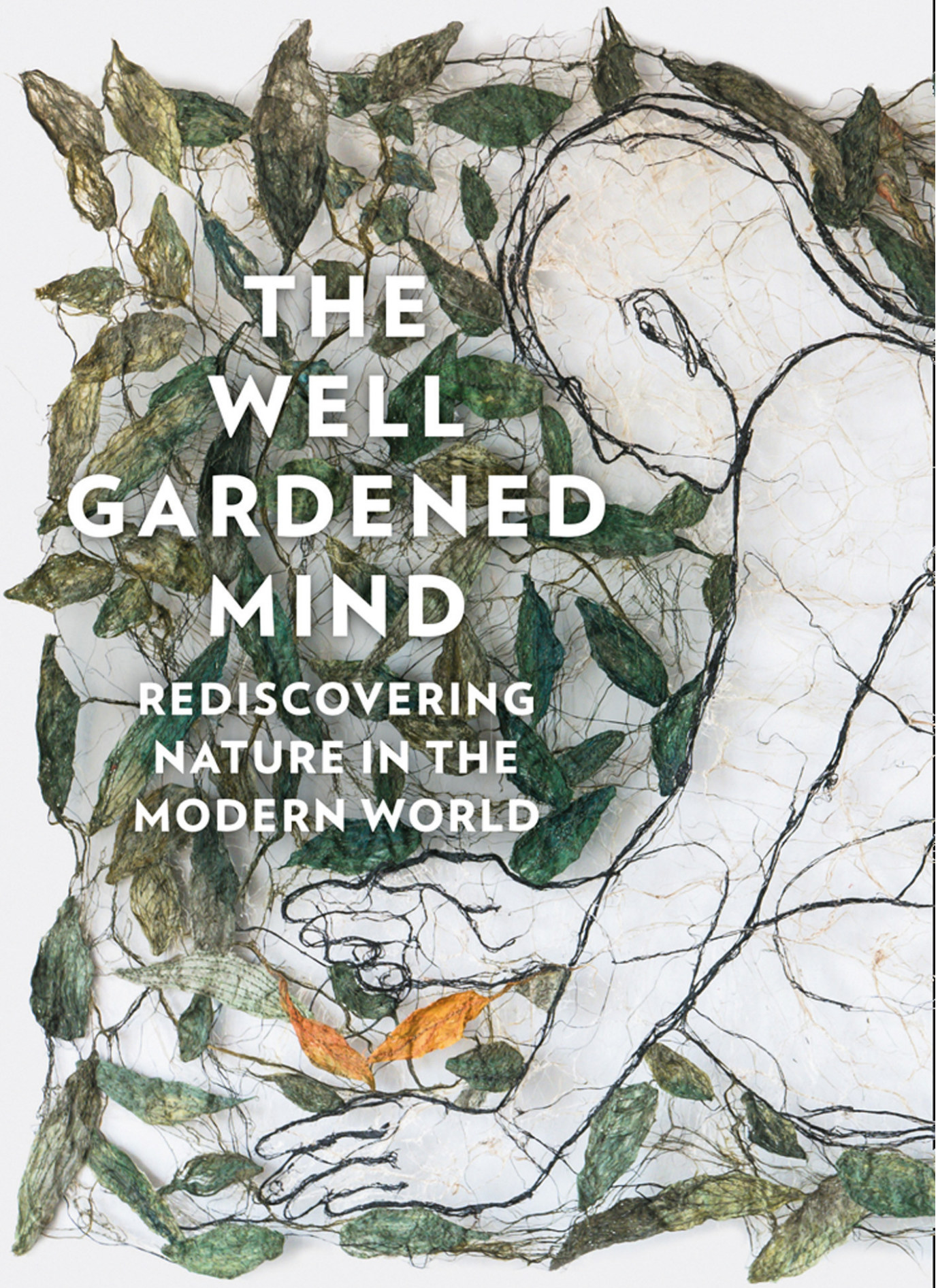

THE WELL GARDENED MIND

REDISCOVERING NATURE IN THE MODERN WORLD

SUE STUART-SMITH

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The Well Gardened Mind

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‘The wisest book I’ve read for many years … Much more than a gardening book, much more than a guide to mental health … Hugely recommended’ Stephen FryTHE SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLERA Times and Sunday Times Best Book of 2020How can gardening relieve stress and help us look after our mental health? What lies behind the restorative power of the natural world?In a powerful combination of contemporary neuroscience, psychoanalysis and brilliant storytelling, The Well Gardened Mind investigates the magic that many gardeners have known for years – working with nature can radically transform our health, wellbeing and confidence.With illuminating stories of how people struggling with stress, depression, trauma and addiction can change their lives, this inspiring and wise book of science, insight and anecdote – now translated into fifteen languages – shows how our understanding of nature and its restorative powers is only just beginning to flower.

Содержание

THE WELL GARDENED MIND
Rediscovering Nature in the Modern World
Sue Stuart-Smith

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Dedication

For Tom

Epigraph

‘All truly wise thoughts have been thought already thousands of times; but to make them truly ours, we must think them over again honestly, till they take root in our personal experience.’

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

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BEGINNINGS

Come forth into the light of things,
Let Nature be your teacher.
William Wordsworth (1770–1850)

LONG BEFORE I wanted to be a psychiatrist, long before I had any inkling that gardening might play an important role in my life, I remember hearing the story of how my grandfather was restored after the First World War.

He was born Alfred Edward May, but was always known as Ted. Little more than a boy when he joined the Royal Navy, he trained as a Marconi wireless operator and became a submariner. In the spring of 1915 during the Gallipoli campaign, the submarine he was serving on ran aground in the Dardanelles. Most of the crew survived only to be taken prisoner. Ted kept a tiny diary in which he documented the early months of his captivity in Turkey but his subsequent time in a series of brutal labour camps is not recorded. The last of these was a cement factory on the shores of the Sea of Marmara, from which he eventually escaped by sea in 1918.

Ted was rescued and treated on a British hospital ship, where he recovered just enough strength to attempt the long journey home overland. Eager to be reunited with his fiancée, Fanny, whom he had left behind as a fit young man, he turned up on her doorstep in a battered old raincoat with a Turkish fez on his head. She barely recognised him for he weighed little more than six stone and had lost all of his hair. The 4,000-mile journey had, he told Fanny, been 'horrendous'. When he underwent the naval medical examination, his malnutrition was found to be so advanced that he was given only a few months to live.

But Fanny nursed him faithfully, feeding him tiny amounts of soup and other sustenance on an hourly basis, so that gradually he was able to digest food again. Ted began the slow process of regaining his health and he and Fanny were married soon after. In that first year, he would sit for hours stroking his bald head with two soft brushes, willing his hair to grow back. When it finally did, it was prolific, but it was white.

Love and patient determination enabled Ted to defy the gloomy prognosis he had been given but his prison camp experiences stayed with him and his terrors were worst at night. He was especially afraid of spiders and crabs because they had crawled all over the prisoners as they tried to sleep. For years to come, he could not bear to be alone in the dark.

The next phase of Ted's recovery began in 1920 when he signed up for a year-long course in horticulture, one of many initiatives set up in the postwar years with the aim of rehabilitating ex-servicemen who had been damaged by the war. After this he travelled to Canada, leaving Fanny at home. He went in search of new opportunities, in the hope that working the land might further improve his physical and mental strength. At that time the Canadian government was running programmes to encourage ex-servicemen to migrate and thousands of men who had returned from the war made that long Atlantic crossing.

Ted laboured on the wheat harvest in Winnipeg and then found more settled employment as a gardener on a cattle ranch in Alberta. Fanny joined him for some of the two years he spent there but for whatever reason their dream of starting a new life in Canada did not come to fruition. Nevertheless, Ted returned to England a stronger, fitter man.

A few years later, he and Fanny bought a smallholding in Hampshire where Ted kept pigs, bees and hens, and grew flowers, fruit and vegetables. For five years during the Second World War, he worked at the Admiralty wireless station in London; my mother remembers his pigskin suitcase, which travelled up with him on the train, packed full of home-slaughtered meat and home-grown

vegetables. He and the suitcase would then return carrying supplies of sugar, butter and tea. She relates with some pride how the family never had to eat margarine during the war and that Ted even grew his own tobacco.

I remember his good humour and warmth of spirit, a warmth that emanated from a man who seemed to my childish eyes to be robust and at ease with himself. He was not intimidating and did not wear his traumas on his sleeve. He spent hours tending his garden and his greenhouse and was almost always attached to a pipe with his tobacco pouch never far away. Ted's long and healthy life – he lived into his late seventies – and his reconciliation to some of the appalling abuses he experienced, is attributed in our family mythology to the restorative effects of gardening and working the land.

Ted died suddenly when I was twelve from an aneurysm that ruptured while he was out walking his much-loved Shetland sheepdog. The local paper ran an obituary entitled: 'Once youngest submariner dies'. It described how Ted had been reported dead twice during the First World War and that when he and a group of other prisoners escaped from the cement factory, they had lived for twenty-three days on water alone. The obituary's closing words document his love of gardening: 'He devoted much of his leisure time to the cultivation of his extensive garden and achieved fame locally as the grower of several rare orchids.'

Somewhere inside her, my mother must have drawn on this when my father's death, in his late forties, left her a relatively young widow. In the second spring afterwards she found a new home and took on the task of restoring a neglected cottage garden. Even then, in my youthful, self-preoccupied state, I noticed that alongside the digging and weeding, a parallel process of reconciling herself to her loss was taking place.

At that stage of my life, gardening was not something I thought I would ever devote much time to. I was interested in the world of literature and was intent on embracing the life of the mind. As far as I was concerned gardening was a form of outdoor housework and I would no more have plucked a weed than baked a scone or washed the curtains.

My father had been in and out of hospital during my university years and he died just as I started my final year. The news came by phone in the early hours one morning and as soon as dawn broke I walked out into the quiet Cambridge streets, through the park and down to the river. It was a bright, sunny October day and the world was green and still. The trees and the grass and the water were somehow consoling and in those peaceful surroundings, I found it possible to acknowledge to myself the awful reality, that beautiful as the day was, my father was no longer alive to see it.

Perhaps this green and watery place reminded me of happier times and of the landscape that had first made an impression on me as a child. My father kept a boat on the Thames and when my brother and I were small, we spent many holidays and weekends on the water, once making an expedition up to the river's source, or as near to it as we could get. I remember the stillness of the early morning mists, the feeling of freedom playing in the summer meadows and fishing with my brother, in what was then our favourite pastime.

During my last few terms at Cambridge, poetry took on a new emotional significance. My world had irrevocably changed and I clung to verses that spoke of the consolations of nature and the cycle of life. Dylan Thomas and T. S. Eliot were both sustaining, but above all I turned to Wordsworth, the poet who himself had learned:

To look on nature, not as in the hour
Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes
The still, sad music of humanity …

Grief is isolating and it is no less so when it is a shared experience. A loss that devastates a family generates a need to lean on each other but at the same time, everyone is bereft, everyone is in a state of collapse. There is an impulse to protect each other from too much raw emotion and it can be easier to let feelings surface away from people. Trees, water, stones and sky may be impervious to human emotion but they are not rejecting of us either. Nature is unperturbed by our feelings and in there being no contagion, we can experience a kind of consolation that helps assuage the loneliness of loss.

In the first few years that followed my father's death, I was drawn towards nature, not in gardens, but by the sea. His ashes had been committed near his family home on the south coast, in the waters of the Solent, a busy channel full of boats and ships, but it was on the long solitary beaches of north Norfolk, with barely a boat in sight, that I found greatest solace. The horizons were the widest I had ever seen. It felt like the edge of the known world and seemed as close to him as I could be.

Having studied Freud for one of my exam papers, I developed an interest in the workings of the mind. I gave up my plan to do a PhD in literature and decided I would train to be a doctor. Then, in the third year of my medical training, I married Tom for whom gardening was a way of life. I decided that if he loved it, then I would too but if I'm honest, I was still a garden sceptic. Gardening seemed at that point to be another chore that had to be done, although it was nicer (as long as the sun was shining) to be outdoors rather than in.

A few years later, along with our tiny baby Rose, we moved to some converted farm buildings close to Tom's family home at Serge Hill in Hertfordshire. Over the next few years Rose was joined by Ben and Harry while Tom and I hurled ourselves into making a garden from scratch. The Barn, as we had named our new home, was surrounded by an open field and its position on a north-facing hill exposed to the winds meant that above all, we needed shelter. We carved out some plots from the stony field around us, planting trees and hedges and making enclosures of wattle fencing as well as labouring over the ground to improve it. None of this could have happened without an enormous amount of help and encouragement from Tom's parents and a number of willing friends. When we held stone-picking parties, Rose along with her grandparents, aunts and uncles, joined in the task of filling up endless buckets of rocks and pebbles that needed to be carted away.

I had been physically and emotionally uprooted and needed to rebuild my sense of home but still, I was not particularly conscious that gardening might play a part in helping me put down roots. I was much more aware of the garden's growing significance in our children's lives. They began to make dens in the bushes and spent hours inhabiting imaginary worlds of their own making, so the garden was a fantasy place and a real place at the same time.

Tom's creative energy and vision drove our garden making forward and it wasn't until our youngest, Harry, was a toddler that I finally started growing plants myself. I became interested in herbs and devoured books about them. This new area of learning led to experiments in the kitchen and in a little herb garden that by then had become 'mine'. There were some gardening disasters, unleashing a creeping borage and a tenacious soapwort amongst them, but eating food flavoured with all sorts of home-grown herbs was life enhancing and from there, it was a short step to growing vegetables. The thrill I felt at this stage was all about produce!

At this point, I was in my mid-thirties, working as a junior psychiatrist for the NHS. In giving me something to show for my efforts, gardening provided a counterpoint to my professional life, where I was engaged with the much more intangible properties of the mind. Working on the wards and in clinics was predominantly an indoor life but gardening pulled me outdoors.

I discovered the pleasure of wandering through the garden with a free-floating attention, registering how the plants were changing, growing, ailing, fruiting. Gradually the way I thought about mundane tasks such as weeding, hoeing and watering changed; I came to see that it is important not so much to get them done, but to let oneself be fully involved in the doing of them. Watering is

calming – as long as you are not in a hurry – and, strangely, when it is finished, you end up feeling refreshed, like the plants themselves.

The biggest gardening buzz I got back then, and still get now, is from growing things from seed. Seeds give no hint of what is to come, and their size bears no relation to the dormant life within. Beans erupt dramatically, not with much beauty, but you can feel their thuggish vigour right from the start. Nicotiana seeds are so fine, like particles of dust, you can't even see where you've sown them. It seems improbable they will ever do anything, let alone give you clouds of scented tobacco-plant flowers, and yet they do. I can feel how new life creates an attachment from the way I find myself coming back almost compulsively to check on my seeds and seedlings; going out to the greenhouse, holding my breath as I enter, not wanting to disrupt anything, the stillness of life just coming into being.

Fundamentally, there is no arguing with the seasons when you are gardening – although you can get away with postponing things a little – I'll sow those seeds or plant out those plugs next weekend. There comes a point when you realise that a delay is about to become a missed opportunity, a lost possibility, but like jumping into a flowing river, once you have your seedlings tucked up in the soil, you are carried along by the energy of the earthly calendar.

I particularly love gardening in early summer, when the growth force is at its strongest and there is so much to get in the ground. Once I've started I don't want to stop. I carry on in the dusk till it's almost too dark to see what I'm doing. As I finish off, the house is glowing with light and its warmth draws me back inside. The next morning when I steal outdoors, there it is – whatever patch I was working on has settled into itself overnight.

Of course, there is no way of gardening without experiencing ruined plans. Moments when you step outside in anticipation only to be faced with the sad remains of lovely young lettuces or lines of ruthlessly stripped kale. It has to be acknowledged that the mindless eating habits of slugs and rabbits can set off bouts of helpless rage and the persistence and stamina of weeds can be very, very draining.

Not all the satisfaction in tending plants is about creation. The great thing about being destructive in the garden is that it is not only permissible, it is *necessary*; because if you don't do it, you will be overrun. So many acts of garden care are infused with aggression – whether it is wielding the secateurs, double-digging the veg patch, slaughtering slugs, killing blackfly, ripping up goose grass or rooting out nettles. You can throw yourself into any of these in a wholehearted and uncomplicated way because they are all forms of destructiveness that are in the service of growth. A long session in the garden like this can leave you feeling dead on your feet but strangely renewed inside – both purged and re-energised, as if you have worked on yourself in the process. It's a kind of gardening catharsis.

Each year as we come out of winter, the greenhouse takes a hold of me with the lure of its warmth when the world outside is chilled by the March winds. What is it that is so special about entering a greenhouse? Is it the level of oxygen in the air, or the quality of light and heat? Or simply the proximity to plants with their greenness and their scent? It is as if all the senses are heightened inside this private, protected space.

One overcast spring day last year, I was absorbed in greenhouse tasks – watering, sowing seeds, moving compost, and generally getting things done. Then the sky cleared and with the sun pouring in, I was transported to a separate world – a world of iridescent green filled with translucent leaves, the light shining through them. Droplets were scattered all over the freshly watered plants, catching the light, sparkling and luscious. Just for a moment I felt an overpowering sense of earthly beneficence, a feeling that I have retained, like a gift in time.

I sowed some sunflowers in the greenhouse that day. When I planted the seedlings out a month or so later, I thought some of them might not make it; the largest looked hopeful, but the others seemed

straggly and exposed out of doors. I watched with satisfaction their growing upwards, gradually getting stronger, although I still felt they needed looking out for. Then, their growth took off and my attention moved to other more vulnerable seedlings.

I see gardening as a reiteration; I do a bit then nature does her bit, then I respond to that, and so it goes on, not unlike a conversation. It isn't whispers or shouts or talk of any kind, but in this to-and-fro there is a delayed and sustained dialogue. I have to admit that I am sometimes the slow one to respond and can go a little quiet on it all, so it is good to have plants that can survive some neglect. And if you do take time away, the intrigue on your return is all the greater, like finding out what someone's been up to in your absence.

One day I realised that the whole line of sunflowers were now sturdy, independent and proud with flowers coming on. When and how did you get so tall, I wondered? Soon that first hopeful seedling, still the strongest, was looking down on me from its great height with the whole wide circumference of its brilliant yellow flower. I felt quite small in its presence but there was a strangely affirmative sensation in knowing I had set its life in motion.

A month or so later, how changed they were. The bees had cleaned them out, their petals were faded and the tallest could barely support its bowed-down head. Lately so proud and now so melancholy! I had an impulse to cut the row down but I knew that if I lived with their raggedy sadness for a while, they would bleach and dry in the sun and assume a different kind of stature as they led us towards autumn.

To look after a garden involves a kind of *getting to know* that is somehow always in process. It entails refining and developing an understanding of what works and what does not. You have to build a relationship with the place in its entirety – its climate, its soil, and the plants growing within it. These are the realities that have to be contended with and along the way certain dreams almost always have to be given up.

Our rose garden which we started making when we first carved out some plots from the stony field, was just such a lost dream. We had filled the beds with the loveliest of old roses, such as Belle de Crécy, Cardinal de Richelieu and Madame Hardy, but it was the delicate, heady and delicious Fantin-Latour, with its flat petals, scrumpled like pale pink tissue paper, that was my favourite of all. Soft and velvety, you can nuzzle right into its flower and disappear in its scent. Little did we know then that their time with us would be so brief, but it wasn't long before they began to baulk at the conditions they were living in. Our ground did not suit roses that well and a lack of ventilation in the wattle enclosures made matters worse. Each season became a battle to stay on top of the black spot and mildew that increasingly assailed them and, unless they were sprayed, they looked sad and sick. We were reluctant to rip them out but what is the point in gardening against nature? Of course, there is none and they had to go. Oh how I missed them and miss them still! Even though not a single rose is growing in those beds today, all long since replaced by herbaceous perennial planting, we still call it the rose garden. So the memory remains.

Neither Tom nor I liked the idea of using chemical sprays but I had a particular fear of them because of my father's illness. When I was a child, he developed bone marrow failure of a type that is caused by exposure to an environmental toxin. It was never entirely clear what had triggered this catastrophe but amongst the possible culprits were a long-since banned pesticide lurking in the garden shed and an antibiotic prescribed for him when he had become ill on holiday in Italy the summer before. He nearly died then but the treatment he received partially reversed the damage and, although he could not be cured, it gave him another fourteen years of life. He was tall and physically strong, so it was possible for all of us to forget at times that he was living with only half-functioning marrow

in his bones. The illness was always there in the background though and when his intermittent life-threatening health crises occurred, all we could do was hope.

In that phase of my childhood, there was a garden that captured my imagination much more vividly than the one at home. My mother would take my brother, myself, and any friends in tow to the Isabella Plantation, the woodland gardens in Richmond Park. As soon as we arrived, we would run off and disappear into the massive rhododendrons to enjoy the frisson of exploring and hiding in them. So dense were the bushes that it was possible for a brief time to get lost and feel the panic of separation.

There was another more unsettling element in that garden. In a small clearing, deep in the woodland, we discovered a red and yellow painted wooden caravan, which had a sign carved above the door: 'Abandon all hope ye who enter here.' We used to dare each other to defy the injunction but the thought of relinquishing hope was not something I could possibly have taken lightly. It felt as if opening that door might release the terrible dread I dared not name into the world. In the end, like all things unknown, the fantasy proved far more powerful than the reality. One day when we finally tried the door, it revealed a simple yellow painted interior containing a wooden bunk, and, of course, nothing terrible happened.

Whilst you are being shaped by experience, you are not aware that it is happening because, whatever it is that is going on, is simply your life; there is no other life, and it is all part of who you are. Only much later, when I began to train as a psychoanalytic psychotherapist and embarked on my own analysis, did I recognise how much the structures of my childhood world had been shaken by my father's illness. I came to understand why the injunction above the caravan door had such a hold on my childish imagination and also why, age sixteen, the news coverage of a leak from the chemical factory at Seveso in Italy seized my attention. An explosion had released a cloud of toxic gas with devastating consequences, the full extent of which only gradually emerged. The soil was poisoned and the health of local people suffered serious, long-term consequences. The disaster mobilised something in me and for the first time I became aware of environmental issues and their politics. Such are the workings of the unconscious that I did not see a parallel with whatever unknown chemical had made my father so ill. I only knew I had undergone a powerful environmental awakening.

Turning over the past and revisiting memories like this in the course of my analysis involved a different kind of awakening – to the life of the mind. I came to understand that grief can go underground and that feelings can hide other feelings. Moments of new insight ripple through the psyche, shaking and stirring it up, and although some may be welcome and refreshing, others can be more difficult to assimilate and adjust to. Alongside all this, I was gardening.

A garden gives you a protected physical space which helps increase your sense of mental space and it gives you quiet, so you can hear your own thoughts. The more you immerse yourself in working with your hands, the more free you are internally to sort feelings out and work them through. These days, I turn to gardening as a way of calming and decompressing my mind. Somehow, the jangle of competing thoughts inside my head clears and settles as the weed bucket fills up. Ideas that have been lying dormant come to the surface and thoughts that are barely formed sometimes come together and unexpectedly take shape. At times like these, it feels as if alongside all the physical activity, I am also gardening my mind.

I have come to understand that deep existential processes can be involved in creating and caring for a garden. So I find myself asking, How does gardening have its effects on us? How can it help us find or re-find our place in the world when we feel we have lost it? At this point in the twenty-first century, with rates of depression and anxiety and other mental disorders seemingly ever on the rise

and with a general way of life that is increasingly urbanised and technology-dependent, it is, perhaps, more important than ever to understand the many ways in which mind and garden interact.

Gardens have been recognised as restorative since ancient times. Today, gardening consistently features as one of the top ten most popular hobbies in a range of countries around the world. Quintessentially, caring for a garden is a nurturing activity and for many people, along with having children and raising a family, the process of tending a plot is one of the most significant things in their lives. There are, of course, those for whom gardening feels like a chore and who would always prefer to do something else but the combination of outdoor exercise and immersive activity is acknowledged by many as both calming and invigorating. Although other forms of green exercise and other creative activities can have these benefits, the close relationship that is formed with plants and the earth is unique to gardening. Contact with nature affects us on different levels; sometimes we are filled with it, fully present and conscious of its effects, but it also works on us slowly and subconsciously in a way that can be particularly helpful for people suffering from trauma, illness and loss.

The poet William Wordsworth explored perhaps more intensely than anyone else the influence of nature on the inner life of the mind. He was psychologically prescient and his ability to tune in to the subconscious means he is sometimes regarded as a forerunner of psychoanalytic thinking. In a leap of intuition, which modern neuroscience confirms, Wordsworth understood that our sense impressions are not passively recorded, rather we construct experience even as we are undergoing it. As he put it, we 'half-create' as well as perceive the world around us. Nature animates the mind and the mind, in turn, animates nature. Wordsworth believed that a living relationship with nature like this is a source of strength that can help foster the healthy growth of the mind. He also understood what it means to be a gardener.

for Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy, the process of gardening together was an important act of restitution. It was a response to loss, for their parents had died when they were young and they then endured a lengthy and painful separation from each other. When they settled at Dove Cottage in the Lake District, the garden they created became a central feature of their lives and helped them recover an inner sense of home. They cultivated vegetables, medicinal herbs and other useful plants but much of the plot was highly naturalistic and sloped steeply up the hillside. This little 'nook of mountain-ground', as Wordsworth referred to it, was full of 'gifts' of wildflowers, ferns and mosses that he and Dorothy had collected on their walks and brought back, like offerings to the earth.

Wordsworth frequently worked on his poems in that garden. He described the essence of poetry as 'emotion recollected in tranquillity' and it is true for all of us that we need to be in the right kind of setting to enter the calm state of mind needed for processing powerful or turbulent feelings. The Dove Cottage garden, with its sense of safe enclosure and lovely views beyond, gave him just that. He wrote many of his greatest poems whilst living there and developed what would be a life-long habit of pacing out rhythms and chanting verses aloud whilst striding along garden paths. So the garden was both a physical setting for the house as well as a setting for the mind; one that was all the more significant for having been shaped by his and Dorothy's own hands.

Wordsworth's love of horticulture is a less well-known aspect of his life but he remained a devoted gardener well into old age. He created a number of different gardens, including a sheltered winter garden for his patron Lady Beaumont. Conceived of as a therapeutic refuge, it was designed to alleviate her attacks of melancholy. the purpose of a garden such as this was, he wrote, 'to assist Nature in moving affections'. In providing a concentrated dose of the healing effects of nature, gardens influence us primarily through our feelings but however much they may be set apart as a refuge, we are nevertheless, as Wordsworth described, 'in the midst of the realities of things'. These realities encompass all the beauties of nature as well as the cycle of life and the passing of the seasons. In other words, however much they can offer us respite, gardens also put us in touch with fundamental aspects of life.

Like a suspension in time, the protected space of a garden allows our inner world and the outer world to coexist free from the pressures of everyday life. Gardens in this sense, offer us an *in-between* space which can be a meeting place between our innermost, dream-infused selves and the real physical world. This kind of blurring of boundaries is what the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott called a 'transitional' area of experience. Winnicott's conceptualisation of transitional processes was to some extent influenced by Wordsworth's understanding of how we inhabit the world through a combination of perception and imagination.

Winnicott was also a paediatrician and his model of the mind is about the child in relation to the family and the baby in relation to the mother. He emphasised that a baby can only exist by virtue of a relationship with a care-giver. When we look at a mother and baby from the outside it is easy to distinguish them as two separate beings, but the subjective experience of each is not so clear-cut. The relationship involves an important area of overlap or *in-between* through which the mother feels the baby's feelings as the baby expresses them and the baby in turn does not yet know where it begins and its mother ends.

Much as there can be no baby without a care-giver, there can be no garden without a gardener. A garden is always the expression of someone's mind and the outcome of someone's care. In the process of gardening too, it is not possible to neatly categorise what is 'me' and what is 'not-me'. When we step back from our work how can we tease apart what nature has provided and what we have contributed? Even in the midst of the action itself, it is not necessarily clear. Sometimes when I am fully absorbed in a garden task, a feeling arises within me that I am part of this and it is part of me; nature is running in me and through me.

A garden embodies transitional space by being *in-between* the home and the landscape that lies beyond. Within it, wild nature and cultivated nature overlap and the gardener's scrabbling about in the earth is not at odds with dreams of paradise or civilised ideals of refinement and beauty. The garden is a place where these polarities come together, maybe the one place where they can so freely come together.

Winnicott believed that play was psychologically replenishing but he emphasised that in order to enter an imaginary world, we need to feel safe and free from scrutiny. He employed one of his trademark paradoxes to capture this experience when he wrote of how important it is for a child to develop the ability to be 'alone in the presence of the mother'. In my gardening, I often recapture a feeling of being absorbed in play – it is as if in the safe curtilage of the garden, I am in the kind of company that allows me to be alone and enter my own world. Both daydreaming and playing are increasingly recognised to contribute to psychological health and these benefits do not stop with the end of childhood.

The emotional and physical investment that working on a place entails means that over time it becomes woven into our sense of identity. As such it can be a protective part of our identity too, one that can help buffer us when the going gets tough. But as the traditional pattern of a rooted relationship to place has been lost, so we have lost sight of the potentially stabilising effects on us of forming an attachment to place.

the field of attachment theory was pioneered by the psychiatrist and psychoanalyst John Bowlby in the 1960s, and there is now an extensive research base associated with it. Bowlby regarded attachment as 'the bedrock' of human psychology. He was also a keen naturalist and this informed

the development of his ideas. He described how birds return to the same place to build their nests year after year, often close to where they were born and how animals do not roam about at random, as is often thought, but occupy a 'home' territory around their lair or burrow. In the same way, he wrote, 'each man's environment is unique to himself'.

attachment to place and attachment to people share an evolutionary pathway and a quality of uniqueness is central to both. The feeding of an infant is not enough on its own to trigger bonding because we are biologically encoded to attach through the specificity of smells, textures and sounds, as well as pleasurable feelings. Places, too, evoke feelings and natural settings are particularly rich in sensory pleasures. These days we are increasingly surrounded by functional places lacking in character and individuality, like supermarkets and shopping malls. Whilst they provide us with food and other useful things, we don't develop affectionate bonds for them; in fact they are often deeply unrestorative. As a result, the notion of place in contemporary life has increasingly been reduced to a backdrop and the interaction, if there is any, tends to be of a transient nature, rather than a living relationship that might be sustaining.

At the heart of Bowlby's thinking is the idea that the mother is the very first place of all. Children seek out her protective arms whenever they are frightened, tired or upset. This 'safe haven' becomes what Bowlby called a 'secure base' through repeated small experiences of separation and loss that are followed by reunion and recovery. When a feeling of security has been established, a child becomes emboldened to explore its surroundings, but still keeps half an eye on its mother as a safe place to return to.

It is a sad fact of modern childhood that playing outdoors has become something of a rarity but traditionally parks and gardens provided the setting for an important kind of imaginative and exploratory play. Creating dens in the bushes as 'adult-free' zones is a way of rehearsing future independence and they have an emotional role too. research shows that when children are upset, they instinctively use their 'special' places as a safe haven in which they feel protected while their unsettled feelings subside.

Attachment and loss, as Bowlby revealed, go together. We are not primed to dis-attach, we are primed to seek reunion. It is the very strength of our attachment system that makes recovering from loss so painful and difficult. Whilst we have a strong inborn capacity to form bonds, there is nothing in our biology that helps us deal with bonds that get broken and it means that mourning is something we have to learn through experience.

In order to cope with loss, we need to find or re-find a safe haven and feel the comfort and sympathy of others. For Wordsworth, who had suffered the pain of bereavement as a child, the gentle aspects of the natural world provided a consoling and sympathetic presence. The psychoanalyst Melanie Klein alludes to this in one of her papers on the subject of mourning where she writes: 'The poet tells us that Nature mourns with the mourner.' She goes on to show how, in order to emerge from a state of grief, we need to recover a sense of goodness in the world and in ourselves.

When someone very close to us dies, it is as if a part of us dies too. We want to hold on to that closeness and shut down our emotional pain. But at some point the question arises – can we bring ourselves alive again? In tending a plot and nurturing and caring for plants we are constantly faced with disappearance and return. The natural cycles of growth and decay can help us understand and accept that mourning is part of the cycle of life and that when we can't mourn, it is as if a perpetual winter takes hold of us.

We can also be helped by rituals or other forms of symbolic action that enable us to make sense of the experience. But in the secular and consumerist worlds that many of us now inhabit, we have lost touch with traditional rituals and rites of passage that might help us navigate our way through life. Gardening itself can be a form of ritual. It transforms external reality and gives rise to beauty around us but it also works within us, through its symbolic meaning. A garden puts us in touch with a

set of metaphors that have profoundly shaped the human psyche for thousands of years – metaphors so deep they are almost hidden within our thinking.

Gardening is what happens when two creative energies meet – human creativity and nature's creativity. It is a place of overlap between what is 'me' and 'not-me', between what we can conceive of and what the environment gives us to work with. So, we bridge the gap between the dreams in our head and the ground under our feet and know that while we cannot stop the forces of death and destruction, we can, at least, defy them.

Somewhere in the recesses of my memory lay hidden a story that I must have heard in childhood which came back to me on writing this book. It is a classic fairy tale of the type that involves a king with a lovely daughter and suitors queuing up for her hand. The king decides to get rid of the suitors by setting them an impossible challenge. He decrees that the only person who can marry his daughter is someone who brings him an object so unique and so special that no one in the world has set eyes on it before. His gaze, and his gaze alone, has to be the first to fall on it. The suitors duly travel to far-flung, exotic locations seeking the prize they hope will guarantee their success and return bearing unusual and novel gifts that they have not even glimpsed themselves. Carefully wrapped and extraordinary as their findings are, another human eye has always looked on them before – someone has either made the beautiful objects, or found them, like the gem from the deepest diamond mine which is the rarest and most precious gift of them all.

The palace gardener has a son who is secretly in love with the princess and interprets the challenge in a different way – one that is informed by his close relationship with the natural world. The trees around the grounds are groaning with nuts and he presents one to the king, along with a pair of nutcrackers. The king is bemused at being given something as ordinary as a nut, but then the gardener's son explains that if the king cracks the nut open he will see something that no living soul has ever set eyes on before. The king, of course, has to honour his pledge; so in the way of all good fairy stories, it is a tale of rags to riches and lovers united. But it is also about how the wonders of nature may be revealed to us if we do not overlook them. More than that, it is a tale about human empowerment because nature is accessible to us all.

If there were no loss in the world we would lack the motivation to create. As the psychoanalyst Hanna Segal wrote: 'It is when the world within us is destroyed, when it is dead and loveless, when our loved ones are in fragments, and we ourselves in helpless despair – it is then that we must recreate our world anew, reassemble the pieces, infuse life into dead fragments, recreate life.' Gardening is about setting life in motion and seeds, like dead fragments, help us recreate the world anew.

It is just this newness that is so compelling in the garden, life endlessly reforming and reshaping itself. The garden is a place where we can be in on its beginning and have a hand in its making. Even the humble potato patch offers this opportunity, for in turning over the mounded-up earth, a cluster of potatoes that no one has set eyes on before is brought into the light.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.