

Lost in the Weeds

IN PRAISE OF WILD THINGS—IN THE GARDEN
AND IN WRITING

BEFORE the pandemic, every spring I ventured outside and jerked up all the new dandelion, blackberry vines, and globes of white clover that dared invade our yard. Those trespassers encroached on more “worthy” species—the precious tufts of fescue, my heirloom double pink roses, Greek oregano, and three fig bushes. But after COVID struck, and after more than a year of worry and grief, my heart softened.

This past March I peered a little closer at these once-loathsome plants. Dandelion wriggled among the river rock that I had spread to cover the bare red dirt beyond our deck, and in spite of the scant space and arid conditions, this hardy plant thrived. It soon sported golden flowers, and my heart surged with joy at the sight of so many tiny suns polka-dotting the yard.

Even my worst nemesis, creeping Charlie (or ground ivy), brought new charms. When I parted the scalloped leaves running through our apple orchard, for the first time I noticed dainty purple blooms that dangled like bells. Nearby, ruby-red mock strawberries gleamed in the morning dew, more bountiful than ever. Although tasteless compared with cultivated berries, the vigor of this little fruit lifted my spirits. Wild blackberries soon joined the farrago of verdant vines, and instead of fighting the briars, I simply rejoiced that our cardinals and tanagers would have something else to nibble this year. Laying aside my spade I left all my former foes in peace. After all, life in any form was *life*, more precious to me than ever.

Horticulture and writing go hand in hand for me because I’m so inspired by nature. On a whim I picked up an old gardening journal from 2017, the first year my husband, J. P., and I kept a garden. Here we recorded the dates of our first cherry blooms, when our raspberries ripened, and when plump cucumbers and tomatoes finally emerged. Then I spied my own notes. *What do you call a group of butterflies?* I had written, followed by a trail of what seemed like nonsense. *Tarradiddle, quandary, confabulation...* and then *nimbus, peccadillo, philter*. These morsels intrigued me too much to ignore. They belonged in a poem. But how? For now, I saw only a tangle of words. Then I thought of my weeds, which happily rambled through the yard. Instead of fretting, I let



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my words meander all over a new page. In a few hours, the poem “Butterfly Lexicon” fluttered into life.

Inspired, I riffled through the papers on my desk. In my world, as many fellow writers do, I constantly struggle between the twin poles of order and clutter. Looking out my window I spied a new vein of knotweed winding through a channel of rocky clay. Even weeds, I realized, abide by a plan, as ramshackle as they might appear. Then I noticed a loose pile of index cards with notes I’d scrawled while reading an 1859 treatise on beekeeping by famed American apiarist L. L. Langstroth. What could I do with these tidbits? I remembered my work at hand, an essay about my mother. Could I possibly bring these musings into this piece? The more I let myself ponder this idea, the more it made sense. My mother, after all, reigned as a queen “bee” in my world. So I titled each major passage of my essay with quotes from Langstroth that applied to my mother, such as “The queen is treated with the greatest respect and affection by the bees...” These extracts led to new insights that helped me organize the story of our relationship, how we drifted apart for a while but then came back together. “No colony can long exist without the presence of this all-important insect (the queen); but must surely perish, as the body without the spirit must hasten to inevitable decay.” In the end, quotes on these abandoned cards formed the backbone of a long-form creative nonfiction narrative called “One in Ten Thousand Bees.”

A few weeks later I used this same approach on another essay residing in purgatory. Several years ago I had typed up a series of observations made while J. P. and I built our bookshelves. I carefully documented how I felt about the work and my annoyance when he asked me to swivel my head out of the way as I steadied the braces while he screwed them into place, an action I found nearly impossible. This piece never took off, and among other things it lacked a gift for the reader, a bit of wisdom they could apply to their own life. The good

news is that the distance between our carpentry and my review of these notes gave me perspective, the genesis of an *angle*. I soon realized that the *angle* and the gift existed in the very words that had irritated me so much at the time. My husband’s insistence that I *physically* get my head out of the way while working led to a metaphorical leap that didn’t occur to me until I studied my scribbles again. The final essay, “Move Your Head: A Lesson in Conquering Doubt and Worry,” detailed my revelation that the tendency to overthink things often unnecessarily complicates life, a lesson that I hope helps anyone struggling with a mental block.

Today when I reach an impasse I happily dive into my backlog of unfinished writing and search for forsaken fragments worth exploring. The wisdom gained through my new appreciation of wild things—plants and writing—might help you, too. Here are few notes on what I’ve learned.

Ramble freely. Don’t be afraid of fluidity. If you try to shape a collage of words into a form too early, you might lose a bit of the imagination that inspired you in the first place. Before “Butterfly Lexicon” graduated to a bona fide poem, I needed to return to the state of mind that conjured up all those silly words to begin with. Lounging on my deck I spent hours watching butterflies dance all over our cherry blossoms, mesmerized by those erratic zigzag movements. That was a puzzle to me, and instead of trying to solve it I simply marveled at the wonder of their flight. That’s when the theme of mystery emerged, which tied together all those oddball words.

Untidiness isn’t a bad thing. Ease up on the pressure to keep a clean desk. Most of us compose on computers nowadays, but it’s okay to keep handwritten scraps on the back of greeting cards and shopping lists next to your laptop. Emily Dickinson wrote some of her most famous lines on envelopes, telegrams, even flour labels! In my case inspiration strikes at the oddest moments, such as when I’m ripping open a seed packet for cucumbers, organizing recipes torn

from magazines, or even while coring a crossword puzzle. My desk drawer contains a jumble of hastily peeped notes on these pieces that often find their way into poems, short stories, essays. These odds and ends are a constant inspiration in and of themselves, so don’t be too quick to toss what might look like trash. Indulge your curiosities as they stew for a while; you never know where they may take you.

Become a child again. Don’t be afraid to regress and examine life as a six-year-old. In *Becoming a Writer*, published in 1934 by Harcourt, Brace & Company, author Dorothea Brande advised: “Give yourself a short period each day when you will, by taking thought, recapture a childlike innocence of eye.” When I examined my dandelion up close, I noticed that two varieties actually lived in my yard: cat’s-ear (*Hypochaeris radiata*) with fuzzy leaves, and common (*Taraxacum officinale*), with such precise patterns on its jagged leaves they may have been crafted by an artist. In this same regard, I regard my unfinished writing with affection and appreciation.

Don’t give up on a stalled project. I don’t get terribly excited about a new endeavor before I finish the current one, but as experience has taught me, small fragments can aid a current endeavor. Even if you must tuck away your unfinished scribbles, don’t abandon them completely. If you’ve ever tried to propagate a field of blooms, you know that one stout root is enough to propagate a field of blooms, year after year. So start your own system. Create a sandbox file on your computer to stash little starters and from time to time plunder through it just for fun when you need a jolt of creativity.

Trust. “A garden is a grand teacher,” said horticulturist and writer Gertie Jekyll. “It teaches patience and careful watchfulness; it teaches industry and thrift; above all it teaches entire trust. Such wise words also apply to writing. Have faith, and trust that all your words, no matter how they appear, have the potential to bloom one day. Not long after I breathed new



into my scribbles, a number of kind editors honored me by accepting them for publication. "Move Your Head" appeared in April 2021 in *Rooted in Rights*, and "Butterfly Lexicon" appeared in the June 2021 issue of *O. Henry* magazine. "One in Ten Thousand Bees" was published in July 2021 in *Carve*.

As I've recently learned, the word

weed is not the name of a genus or species. It's a pejorative term defined in *Merriam-Webster* as "a plant that is not valued where it is growing and is usually of vigorous growth." Even if the weeds in your yard aren't as pretty as your roses, they may offer more than what meets the eye. Clover, for example, actually helps our lawn by plying it with

nitrogen. Dandelion loosen our brick-hard red clay and help prevent erosion. As it turned out, my literary "weeds" also fortify my work and aerate it with fresh inspiration. They've earned their place in my writing garden.

The next time someone accuses you of being "lost in the weeds," thank them. And enjoy yourself. ∞