

BLOOM WHERE YOU ARE PLANTED

Have you ever done something and immediately realized you've made a terrible mistake? This happened to me about 5 minutes after I got married, and it was a pretty big oops. However, having been raised not to be a quitter and with the maxim of "you made your bed, now you must lie in it" imbued in me, I figured I'd better try to make a go of it-not the best choice I've ever made, but I stuck with it as I had believed that it was what I wanted.

I wish I could tell you that things got better and that there was happily ever after; but they didn't and there wasn't, at least not in the marriage. Needless to say, I wasn't very happy but I did try to make it succeed. A well meaning friend, who knew nothing about my situation, gave me a pillow that said "bloom where you are planted" and under the circumstances, it really, really annoyed me. Did I say annoyed? Substitute PO'd and you've hit the nail on the head. How could anyone bloom in a situation like mine? And what did it even mean? It couldn't possibly have anything to do with me-I was just trying to keep my head above water in a lousy relationship.

Long story short, I did find ways to survive and even bloom during those years, especially toward the end, ways that led to a new and wonderful life. I found the courage to get a divorce, and once that decision was made, everything, albeit slowly, fell into place. I found new doors to open, doors that led to new life experiences and wonderful consequences that I could never have imagined. The lessons I learned during those unhappy years were invaluable to my personal growth; they helped me learn who I was and what I could become; they've stood me in good stead for many years.

Blooming where you are planted means taking a look around and seeing what tools you have available-what choices. There are ALWAYS choices. Some require a great deal of courage to make, others are easier. Some are long term, others very short term, but both lead to taking positive steps along your path; you can not grow, never mind bloom, if you choose to remain stagnant. Anais Nin expressed this beautifully when she said "And the day came when the risk

to remain tight in a bud was more painful than the risk it took to bloom.

Blooming is a state of mind as much as it is an actual physical place. In Japan, there is a practice called kintsugi: the art of mending broken pottery with gold, producing something even more beautiful than the original. I believe that this happens to us as well: we fall, we may break emotionally or spiritually, but the process often takes us to a place of transformation, of blooming more beautifully where we are planted.

I think that part of the process is that of learning how to be grounded: it may be in a spiritual or emotional sense. Being grounded means having a balanced and sensible outlook on life. Well grounded people are typically focused in the present, self-aware, emotionally stable, and connected to their environment. They usually show clarity of thought, emotional resilience, and a sense of inner peace. In other words, to be grounded is to be deeply, fully present. Ram Dass said this best: be here now. That's not to say, however, that grounded people are perfect or have all the answers or never experience highs and lows of emotion, that they have everything figured out and live lives of blissful calm and peace. I've always been an intensely emotional person; whatever I feel I feel deeply, often in the extreme, but as I've gotten older I've come to see that this degree of intensity takes a toll. It's exhausting, for one thing, and often has unforeseeable consequences-usually not good ones. I still feel things deeply, but I've learned to temper it, to examine the emotion to see if it's something that I really want to spend a lot of energy on. As someone who was quick to anger and slow to forgive, never mind forget, it has taken me a long time to begin to learn to stay grounded, to try to find balance, and be focused in the moment. Needless to say, it's a work in progress and always will be, but the knowledge that it's doable is a something that I'm lucky to have to acquired.

Most of us have experienced blooming where planted, some by choice, some by necessity; it's part of the human condition. For some, it has been a combination of both.

Dame Julian of Norwich, who lived from 1343 to 1416, chose to become an anchoress at around age 30. She lived permanently secluded in a cell adjacent to St. Julian's Church in Norwich, England. Her book, "Revelations of Divine Love" is the one of the earliest surviving works by a woman. Most unusual was her theology, which was optimistic and spoke of God's love in terms of joy and

compassion. Her message was based on the certainty of being loved by God, during a time when religious belief firmly encompassed the pervasive view that Hell and the Devil were very real-that life was all doom and gloom. She is perhaps best remembered today for saying: “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.” Extraordinary for the time in which she lived.

Sometimes, the need to bloom where we are planted is forced upon us. In 2013 Raynor Winn and her husband Moth lost their home, livelihood, and savings through no fault of their own. Shortly thereafter, Moth was diagnosed with CBD, Corticobasal Degenerative disease, which has no treatment, no cure, and a survival prognosis of 6 to 8 years. Raynor’s choice was to walk the 630 mile South West Coast Path from Somerset to Dorset. With incredibly limited funds, they rough camped, meaning in any spot they could find to pitch their tent, which is illegal in England; they couldn’t afford campgrounds. In their case, blooming where planted meant learning to survive while constantly on the move. Inexplicably, Moth’s health improved as they walked, and when the journey was completed, Raynor wrote about it in her amazing book “The Salt Path” which became a best seller. She went on to write two more books about their life, and at this time, 11 years later, Moth is alive and disease free-the journey, and two more after it, gave Raynor and Moth insight into the meaning and value of life, health, and love, that they would not have learned otherwise. Theirs is a tale of not only blooming but of triumph against all odds.

There are some whose blooming has profoundly impacted the world.

We are all familiar with Helen Keller, but can you imagine at age 19 months going deaf and blind? You would have been visually and auditorily aware of the world around you. Any child would have been traumatized and terrified, perhaps permanently, and yet Helen Keller went on to become a disability rights activist, a political activist, author of 14 books, a supporter of women’s suffrage, and a founding member of the ACLU. She worked ceaselessly for change until her death in 1968. She was the epitome of courage in the face of overwhelming odds, a true example of blooming where planted. The following quotes give us insight into her beliefs:

“We are never really happy until we try to brighten the lives of others.”

“The continued lynchings and other crimes against Negroes, whether in New England or in the South, and the unspeakable political exponents of white supremacy according to all recorded history, auger ill for America’s future.”

And particularly apropos for today: “I am thankful that in a troubled world no calamity can prevent the return of spring.

Anne Frank, 1929 to 1945, has always struck me as an extraordinary person. I’ve tried to imagine, without success, what it must have been like for her to go into hiding, to leave behind all sense of normalcy. She was a teenager, lively and bright, forced into living a severely constricted life—the daytime must have been particularly difficult. And yet, she bloomed: she experienced all the highs and lows of adolescence, she fell in love, she experienced her first kiss. And she had remarkable insight, especially for one so young, into human nature, including her own. Her story remains a testament to human resiliency, of being able to bloom despite a horrific situation. The following remarks illustrate how fully she did so:

“Whoever is happy will make others happy, too.”

“I don’t think of all the misery but of the beauty that still remains.”

“In spite of everything, I still believe that people are good at heart.”

And perhaps with true prescience “I want to go on living even after my death.”

Some of you, I know, are familiar with Anthony Ray Hinton’s story. Born poor and black in rural Alabama in 1956, he was wrongly convicted of the murders of two men. The arresting officers said they knew he was innocent, as did the judge, but despite a total lack of evidence, he was sentenced to Death Row at Holman Prison in Atmore, Alabama. He spent 28 years there in a 5’ x 7’ solitary confinement cell that was 2 cells down from the room that held the electric chair, which was named Yellow Mama. I’ll spare you the details of what it was like when an execution took place. And yet somehow, against all odds, this man accomplished remarkable things. He started a book club for other Death Row inmates. He never, ever gave up hope, never stopped professing his innocence. Because he had an unusually vivid imagination, he was able to create a world for himself that allowed him to travel the world, play on professional sports teams, marry Halle Berry, and have tea with Queen Elizabeth, a gift that kept him

sane in the face of evidence that life was anything but. Bryan Stephenson of the Equal Justice Initiative spent SIXTEEN years working to free him until The Supreme Court ruled in 2014, in a unanimous per curiam decision (ie without full argument and briefing) to exonerate Hinton. Since then he has written a NY Times bestseller, became a social justice activist, speaking against the injustice of the prison system and the death penalty. He has been awarded honorary degrees of Doctor of Humane Letters by St. Bonaventure University and Emory University. If you read his book "The Sun Does Shine" you will understand how this man bloomed where he was planted. It is both a heartbreaking and hopeful story.

There are two kinds of gardening that seem to me essential to blooming where planted. The first is actual gardening: getting your hands dirty in a good way. It is known to have a positive impact on physical and mental health in terms of psychological well being and overall brain function. It can help prevent specific cognitive and mental health disorders, including dementia. And the benefits of gardening are many: farmer's markets offer healthy, fresh food. An overabundance of food in your garden can benefit others-food banks welcome all that you can donate. It's certainly something to consider if you plant too much zucchini or too many tomatoes! Growing flowers is essential gardening for some; it not only brings beauty to all who see them, but it brings joy to the grower. Someone once said that gardening is an instrument of grace. Somehow, when you garden, a miracle happens: the dirt on your hands feeds your soul. This leads me to the second kind of gardening, that of the spirit.

For me, blooming where you are planted is about our life journeys and the flowering of our being; there's a wonderful French proverb that says "wherever Life plants you, bloom with grace". It's never too late to become who and what you want to be. Do you know what you need to bloom? As we walk along our paths, it's essential to know what we need to do this-what we need to thrive. It changes, of course, as we move forward, but if we don't consciously define what those things are, we're not going to make much progress. Some do it on a daily basis upon waking up, asking what can I do that will make this a good and happy day, and some do so only occasionally. We can not meet our needs, especially spiritual ones, if we don't first define them. Oprah once said: "You are responsible for the energy that you create for yourself and you're responsible for the energy that you bring to others." Whatever helps you grow and bloom, remember, we must never underestimate the power of planting a seed. The best way I know to expedite our spiritual blooming is to fertilize our seeds of growth

with gratitude and love. To do so guarantees the we will bloom where we are planted, today and every day. May we all plant seeds of love, caring, compassion, and positive change, so that we may always bloom where we are planted.