



My Garden, My Teacher: Life Lessons from the Garden

Consider the dandelion. Reviled by many as an insistent, bothersome weed, it nevertheless continues to proudly display its pert, bright yellow self in lawns and gardens everywhere, thriving in the face of adversity.

Thriving in the face of adversity.

Where, in our own lives, do we face adversity? How do we carry ourselves through it: head down, beating ourselves up or feeling defensive and resentful? Or head up and face open, like the dandelion, sure of our intrinsic worthiness, knowing our gifts to the world, even if the world doesn't necessarily recognize them?

For those who know how to look and wait, the garden teems with other such life lessons. As Spring awakens this year, turn your awareness to the wise teachings of your garden. If you don't have a conventional garden, a container garden on your porch or potted plants in your home still offer valuable lessons. Here are a few:

It's OK to be imperfect. Trying to grow the perfect rose, or the perfect cabbage, is an exhausting, never-ending quest for flawlessness. "Imperfect" roses are still beautiful and "imperfect" cabbages still burst with flavor, just like we humans. With our myriad imperfections, we still contribute our own beauty and zest to the world.

Pruning improves growth. Removing old habits that don't serve us opens new possibilities for growth in areas that do serve us.

Pay more attention to your health than your appearance. As author William Longgood wrote, "Over fertilized plants may be beautiful but are otherwise useless, like people whose energies are devoted so completely to their appearance that there is no other development."

Regular maintenance is important. Isn't it soooo much harder to clear an overgrown jungle of a garden than to regularly pull

encroaching weeds? Think of the clutter that can accumulate in our houses, the extra pounds that are harder to lose than to keep off in the first place, the overwhelm or illness that can result from too little self-care.

Have faith. Plant a seed, water it, and trust that it will grow. Similarly, believe that the shifts you make in your life, the dreams you hold dear, will fully blossom if you nourish and protect them.

Don't be afraid to try new approaches. The garden is an incredible laboratory for experimentation. What new approaches do those old problems in your life need? Trial and error is one of life's best teachers. Not trying is the domain of hopelessness.

Take care with predators. It doesn't take long for predators to damage the result of your careful cultivation, in the garden and in life. What toxic relationships, substances and emotions are feeding on your energy and taking away from what you have to give to others? Eliminate them.

Transform your trash. The compost heap turns rotting plant waste into a treasure pile of rich, organic fertilizer. What negative patterns in your life can you work to transform? When we do this hard work of breaking these patterns down, the results are often rich and beneficial to our lives.

Everyone is unique and needed. Everything in nature has a function that is interdependent. As famous naturalist John Muir said, "When one tugs at a single thing in nature, he finds it attached to the rest of the world." Rock, plant, bird, bee—even bacteria in the soil—all occupy a vital place in life. What is your purpose, your gift to the world? Who do you depend on; who depends on you?

Something important happens every day. Take the time to notice the little everyday miracles in your gardens and in your life. ✨

"Everything that slows us down and forces patience, everything that sets us back into the slow circles of nature, is a help. Gardening is an instrument of grace."

— May Sarton

10 Top 10 Lists to Create

They're everywhere, these Top 10 lists, filling our desire for bite-sized, digestible morsels of learning or humor. They give us tips on housework or investment practices, satire on current events or political issues, and ideas for consideration on personal growth, as this newsletter does each issue.

With this Top 10, however, you are the writer. Use these Top 10 lists (and any others

you may create) to remind yourself of what's good and shining about you and your life. Use them to become more aware of what you know and what you can do to affect your world. Use them to reconnect with your dreams, to remember what you want deep inside. Enjoy!

1. Top 10 Things I Love About My Life.

2. Top 10 Ways I Positively Affect Those Around Me.

3. Top 10 Things That Are Uniquely "Me."

4. Top 10 Things I Want to Do Before I Die.

5. Top 10 Things I Know That I'd Like to Share.

6. Top 10 Ways in Which I am a Leader.

7. Top 10 Things I'm Grateful For.

8. Top 10 Dreams I Want to Fulfill.

9. Top 10 Things That Fill Me With Joy.

10. Top 10 Things I Could Fix or Change in the World. ✨

A Letter From *Christopher Ann Vallier* LCSW, JD



Whether you're a gardener or not, the garden yields rich metaphors and great teachings on self-care and personal growth. For example, do you let things go, soon to discover that you're living in a jungle, or do you prune judiciously? Do you waste valuable energy trying to be perfect, or do you accept blemishes and imperfections? As Spring blossoms everywhere, consider what you might learn from a garden—or start one to bring certain qualities into your life.

The Top 10 is magnified this issue by listing ten "Top 10" titles that you can create for yourself. When you do all the lists, you'll have identified 100 ways that you matter—to yourself and to your world.

This issue's Quiz—"How Healthy is Your Relationship with Money?"—is not just for those who find themselves struggling to make rent each month; unhealthy ways of being with money come in all levels of bank account. Likewise, the page 3 article on commitment is not just for those with trouble saying "I do." Difficulty making a commitment comes in many forms.

The back-page feature focuses on children experiencing divorce, and offers suggestions for how to help them navigate those roiling waters.

May your step be lively, your eyes bright and your spring joyous.

How Healthy Is Your Relationship with Money?



Money—the lack of it, the fear of losing it, the dread of not having enough—tops the list of concerns of many people these days. We're more debt-ridden than any generation before. Some of us tie ourselves up with such notions as "Having money and leading a spiritual life are contradictions." We let our feelings of scarcity color our decisions, even if we have plenty of money!

The bottom line is that our unspoken attitudes and ideas about money may be getting in the way of a sense of well being and security in our lives. Take this quiz to learn more about your relationship with money.

True False

- 1. I have no idea where my money goes every month. I just don't think about money.
- 2. I act as if I have plenty of money, but inside, I'm always worried that I don't have enough, even to meet my monthly bills.
- 3. I have no idea where I got my attitudes about money.
- 4. I feel ashamed about having more money than my friends (or less than); if they found out, I'm afraid they wouldn't like me.
- 5. It seems like I'm always comparing my financial situation with others'; no matter how much I actually have, I always feel like I come up short.
- 6. I'm embarrassed about the amount of debt I owe; I would never talk about it with any of my friends or acquaintances.
- 7. No matter how much money I actually have, I'm secretly afraid I will lose everything and become a homeless person.
- 8. I'm too busy at work to deal with my money. I just don't have the time.
- 9. I'm clueless about money; I don't even know the right questions to ask. My financial advisor just tells me what to do with my money.
- 10. I keep having to use a credit card to cover my monthly bills.
- 11. I worry that I will never be able to make it financially if my spouse leaves me or dies.
- 12. I'll always have to do without, so I might as well get used to it. I can never really have what I want.
- 13. My body gets tense when monthly bill-paying time rolls around or when contemplating a large purchase.
- 14. It's hard to face, or even think about, people to whom I owe money.
- 15. I use money to punish or reward myself.
- 16. As a rule, I always buy the most inexpensive item. For example, though I think Ben & Jerry's ice cream tastes the best, I buy the cheapest brand at the drug store. It's frivolous to spend extra money for good taste.
- 17. Having money means having control.

If you answered true to even five of the above questions, you may want to explore your beliefs around money. By better understanding your attitudes and values toward money, you may be more able to gain control of money instead of it controlling you. Please don't hesitate to call if you would like to discuss your relationship with money. ✨

To Do or Not to Do? That is the Commitment Question

Marie longed for a deep, intimate, permanent relationship, but always seemed to gravitate to men with “a commitment problem.” They were: married, from another state or country, getting over an old girlfriend, available by email but never in person, living with an infirm mother, workaholic, involved with another woman, finishing a book, and on and on. Unavailable, in other words.

“Why are men so terrified of commitment?” she would lament to her friends.

What Marie didn’t recognize was that she was exhibiting the same conflict over commitment as the men she was criticizing. True, she wasn’t running away from permanent relationships. In fact, she appeared overwhelmingly focused on love and loving, and completely willing to commit. It was Marie who always wanted more out of the relationship, and the men who wanted space.

“Then it dawned on me one day that if I keep finding myself with men who are running away from commitment, then I’m running away, too,” she said. By choosing men with one foot permanently out the door, Marie kept her own options always open.

Marie’s “passive” avoidance, as compared with the “active” avoidance of running away, is perhaps less recognized, say Steven Carver and Julia Sokol, in their book *He’s Scared, She’s Scared*. But it is no less common.

Commitment and Life

Like Marie, many of us fail to understand the ways we avoid commitment and the ways in which this hidden conflict may be creating chaos or pain in our personal lives. And if we don’t understand how these feelings affect our behavior, we run the risk of sabotaging not only our relationships, but other areas of our life, as well.

“Commitment isn’t just about romance, it’s about life,” write Carver and Sokol. “If you are hypersensitive to commitment, your struggle is going to emerge in more than one area.”



Commitment conflicts can influence the way we handle our career, our money, our friendships. Consider some of the following:

- Are you hard to reach and don’t like to make plans?
- Do tape recorders and journals make you nervous?
- Are you militantly self-employed (“I’d never have it any other way!”) or are you constantly searching for the perfect profession or perfect job?
- Do you think of your living quarters as temporary, taking pride in your ability to move at the drop of a hat? Does buying a house sound like a nightmare?

• Are pets an overwhelming responsibility? Kids?

• How hard it is to make major purchases? Does making a choice drive you crazy because it limits your options?

“To the outside world, you may look solid, sound and committed,” say Carver and Sokol. “But inside your brain, your conflicts are raging, and you always have a contingency plan.”

What drives these conflicted feelings about commitment is a complex and very individual stew of anxieties, worries and concerns. Unexamined, these “ingredients” blend to create a powerful recipe for difficulty in finding and keeping love and happiness.

What We Fear

There are probably as many reasons why we worry about commitment as there are people who worry. A few of the multitude of fears that can present themselves: losing freedom and personal space; giving up control; being bored; being stuck; losing individuality and sense of self; loving too much; being dependent on someone else; being “found out”; giving up your lifestyle; making another mistake; being financially responsible or sharing your money; making life more complicated.

It’s important to remember that the problem is not having the fear. Everyone has fears, to greater or lesser degrees. The question is whether your fears are driving you away from good choices and pushing you toward partnerships that are ultimately unsatisfying, hurtful or painful. ✱

Making Commitments

Establishing and sustaining a genuinely committed relationship isn’t simple, particularly in a society that promotes so many misunderstandings, myths and fairy tales about them. The chief myth is that of a soul mate, that perfectly matched man or woman who will reflect our taste and status, see us for who we are, love us for all the “right” reasons and help us become the person we want to be. Few partnerships consistently live up to this ideal.

To make commitments that count, Carver and Sokol suggest some of the following:

Acknowledge your conflicts and recognize your fears. Quit blaming your partner or looking for excuses. Examine how your fears have caused you to choose or behave badly.

Realize that just because you’re anxious doesn’t mean you immediately have to do something about it.

Make a commitment to yourself. Construct a meaningful, connected and full life. When you can commit to yourself, you can more easily commit to others.

Don’t think too far ahead. It’s too overwhelming. Keep your intentions good and make the best decisions possible moment by moment. Pray for the best.

Be present and accountable in all your relationships. Don’t hide your feelings, thoughts or true self. And if you say you’ll call, visit or meet with someone, do so.

Stop falling in love with potential. This creates “if only” fantasies that never, ever go anywhere. If you want change, you have to work on yourself, not your partner. ✱

Special Delivery: Talking to Children About Divorce

It is estimated that 1 million children a year experience the effects of parental separation, the often-overlooked casualties of divorce. The homes they live in may be sold; they may have to change schools and say goodbye to friends; their lives are basically turned upside down.

During this time when families are separating, the wife and husband can be very absorbed in their own emotions and out of touch with what's going on with their kids' feelings, leaving the kids to cope for themselves with the tremendous upheaval in their lives.

It can be a huge emotional weight on children. Numerous studies have shown that children of divorce experience high levels of depression, anxiety, aggression, lower academic achievement and trouble forming personal relationships.

But it is possible for people who need to get divorced to do so in a dignified manner that won't cause trauma to their children and to address the emotional hazards of divorce in children before problems manifest themselves.

Here are some suggestions for divorcing parents:

Reassure your child. Kids often fear that both parents will leave them after a divorce. They blame themselves for the split. They worry about where they will live and who will care for them. Let them know the living arrangements, if possible

after they are already in place. Make sure the children know their parents' love or them will never change.

Deal with the divorce in a "common language." Come up with wording that both of you will use to talk about the divorce. Doing so will help reduce confusion and upset.

Don't ask children to make decisions regarding visitation or custody. This is a parental decision, made, if necessary, with the help of a mediator or the court. To ask children to choose between homes or whether they want to visit the other parent this weekend places a huge burden on the children and requires that they reject one parent for the other.

Don't criticize the divorced spouse in front of the children. Doing so is criticizing the child also because they share half the genes of that parent. If you have nothing good to say, say nothing.

Respect and encourage your child's feelings. All feelings are OK. The more children verbalize their feelings, the better.

Give your child plenty of love and positive reinforcement. You're likely to be dealing with a bruised sense of self, which needs some tender loving care.

Fight out of earshot of your child. It's often difficult to do this, given the heightened emotions of divorce. Put your kids



ahead of your emotions. If your partner won't agree to this, be prepared to leave or hang up if a conflict escalates.

Treat your ex as a business partner in the business of raising your child.

Interact with your former spouse in a way that keeps the child's interest as priority.

Accept that your child needs to have feelings of loyalty to both parents.

Don't try to win him or her over to your side. Work to minimize the child's feelings of being split or divided.

Don't ask the child to keep information from the other parent. This sort of complicity is confusing and burdensome to children and implies betrayal.

Parenting is not a game to win or lose. If you would like help learning different ways to parent through a divorce, please don't hesitate to call. *

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