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Cultivating a beautiful life

By Caroline Robertson

Transform your life landscape into a flourishing haven by following the straightforward steps of 'The Natural Path'.

The Natural Path

Voltaire's call to 'cultivate our garden' can be met when we apply the principles of good gardening to our personal plots. The guidelines for creating a beautiful garden run parallel to the secrets of a beautiful life. Digging to discover nature's laws we uncover the spiritual substratum that governs the entire universe. Rekindling our relationship with nature we learn to harmonise our own nature, following Wordsworth's advice to "let nature be our teacher." Recognising that all creation is governed by the cycles of gestation, birth, growth, decay and death shows us how to maintain balance through life's variegated phases and to see value at every stage. Viewing nature as a metaphor for life we can hone our gardening skills to create the field of our deepest desires. Shakespeare's belief that "our bodies are our gardens, to which our wills are gardeners" encourages us to get our hands dirty in the rich soil of our existence. The Natural Path is a simple and result-oriented self-help system to gently guide one to a fulfilling life. Based on nature's example it is a model that everyone can rapidly relate to and easily apply. The five stage pragmatic process directs us to attend to our lifescape's weeding, landscaping, sowing, nurturing and harvesting. If followed sincerely it can create a gorgeous future garden, a place where we radiate in the full fragrance of our blossoming potential.

The Five Steps

"Sow a thought and reap an act;
Sow an act and reap a habit;
Sow a habit and reap a character;
Sow a character and reap a destiny."
- Anonymous

Take a stroll through the garden of your life. Some areas are fertile and flourishing while other regions are withering from neglect or poor management. What strategy will you use to rejuvenate your plot into a place where you can bask in the sunlight of joyous living, to "expand and live in the warm day like corn and melons", in Emerson's words there is a profound and pragmatic way to identify problem areas and transform them into an oasis even 'Backyard Blitz' would be proud of.

Natural imagery has always appealed to humans because it reconnects us with our wild roots, reinstating a kinship with the wise and healing earth. Thoreau called it the tonic of nature saying that, "there can be no black misery to one who lives in the midst of nature", perhaps revealing a remedy for today's rising depression rate. The therapy for our artificial life's ailments may be, as Ellen Glasgow extolled, "to preserve, within, a wild sanctuary, an inaccessible valley to reveries."

The Natural Path involves five gardening skills that can be used on one aspect of your life or for a total life makeover. To avoid feeling overwhelmed however generally it is better to focus on one or two areas before expanding to encompass more acreage. One step generally takes precedence over others for a time though sometimes we may need to juggle all stages simultaneously.

The five steps are

(1) Uprooting weeds (2) Landscaping dreams (3) Sowing seeds (4) Nurturing growth and (5) Reaping the harvest.

To bring the Nature Process from the abstract realm of theory to a practical situation we'll use Sarah's dilemma. Sarah's life garden was being overrun by a Trifid-type job of three years. Except for the pay she disliked everything about it -the duties, boss, premises and hours. It was suffocating her life of pleasurable flowers and starving her of fulfilling fruits. Committed to taking charge of her turf again Sarah began the five-step process. She began by identifying and uprooting the weed belief at the core of the problem. The fear that she was unqualified to get another job with as good pay stemmed from low self esteem planted in her psyche by her critical mother. After talking openly to counsellors and close friends Sarah realised that she did have valuable skills and her discouraging parent had little impact on her anymore. Having uprooted the weed of fear Sarah proceeded to landscape her dream job. Once she identified a realistic and exciting option she set about sowing seeds for it to manifest. After sending out CV's and attending interviews Sarah eventually found a fulfilling position. She continued to nurture further growth by watering her confidence with fun challenges. With her blossoming results Sarah was grateful for the grace in her life. Having gained empathy for others suffering similar issues, Sarah went on to volunteer time to career counsel high school girls. This summarised true story illustrates how we can tackle dissatisfaction and strive for improvements just as systematically as a gardener establishes a heavenly paradise from an earthly dump. Sarah followed the Nature Path for career satisfaction yet it can be applied to all facets of life. We'll now explore in greater depth how each step works.

Uprooting weeds

"A man's nature runs either to herbs or to weeds; therefore let him seasonably water the one and destroy the other." - Sir Frances Bacon.

Every garden has its share of weeds. When kept to a manageable level they healthily co-habit with the garden's fruit and flowers. However when they strangle important plants of life, its time for some weeding. Similarly our weed beliefs, thoughts, associations and environment can undermine our capacity to flourish by draining us of positive, life-affirming energy. Often we're unaware of the powerful impact these negativities have on our life but if we ignore them they eventually build from molehills into mountains, suffocating our garden of life aspirations. Shakespeare advocated a rapid response saying " 'tis the spring, and weeds are shallow rooted, suffer them now and they'll overgrow the garden". To eliminate a weed first we have to be aware of it and then we trace must its roots for complete eradication. Weeds are evident wherever there are difficulties or conflict in our lives. They can sap the joy from any sphere including relationships, health, wealth, career and leisure. Over time if we fail to respond to their insidious influence they will infest all areas of our life.

Weeds gestate as beliefs, germinate as thoughts, sprout into actions and branch into our life as negative repercussions. To trace a problem back to its weed belief we'll take the example of Jenny. Jenny lived in a perpetually cluttered house. It was in such a state that she couldn't find anything, was too embarrassed to have people over and felt miserable living there. Her root belief underlying this was "I need all these things though I can't organise them". This stemmed from her deprived childhood at boarding school where she felt underprivileged and insecure. Accumulating things made her feel temporarily secure but they soon became an unmanageable burden. Jenny recognised her root belief and over time switched it to the empowering alternative "Divine protection and abundance provides me with all my needs now and always". Nursing this belief daily through repetition and affirmative action, Jenny began to sort out her house with help from a supportive yet firm friend. Just as with a cluttered house, if we live with a mess of old beliefs there is no room for fresh ideas and energy to enter our lives. Just as Jenny managed we need to sort out the harmful thoughts in our minds and open up to more useful beliefs. To acknowledge negative patterns we may need to quieten the justifying ego and engage in some serious soul searching. Rather than blaming others for ruining our garden we can dig a little deeper to accept how we

contribute to our own patterns. Without adding extra weeds of guilt, shame or depression when facing flaws we need to accept that there's always room for improvement. If we have trouble identifying the weed belief we can consider what valued people have observed about us, paying particular attention to recurrent remarks or issues that keep cropping up. We often have valid reasons for believing and acting in sabotaging ways. Weeds may have offered us protection or self-preservation at one stage but eventually their presence limits our growth and freedom. For example, someone may have adopted an aloof persona to protect themselves from further rejection after a painful break-up. But after time this only compounds feelings of isolation and loneliness. Their weed belief that 'people will hurt me' must be reviewed in the light of current reality. Holding an intense awareness of present blessings will dissipate the fruitless focus on the past or future. After recognising the self-destructive nature of these thoughts we can use the weed-kill of a positive alternative belief such as 'there are kind and loving people in the world', following Paramahansa Yogananda's advice to 'always think of your mind as a garden and keep it bountiful and fragrant with diving thoughts'.

Though our beliefs are often long held and deeply conditioned we can change them in a second by changing our mind about their usefulness. To see whether a belief warrants replacing ask yourself 'Does this belief hinder or help my life purpose?' The deep roots of weed beliefs are described in India's Vedas as unwanted things in the heart or 'anarthas'.

They spring from six main psychological sources: lust (*kama*), anger (*krodha*), greed (*lobha*), illusion (*moha*), delusions (*mada*) and envy (*matsarya*). These are conditioned responses sprouting from our limited life view. Once we access an unlimited spiritual view we will react with understanding instead of anger, love will replace lust, generosity will override greed and so forth. We can cultivate a more empathetic outlook by sensing that we are all children from the spiritual womb of 'mother nature'. As Elizabeth Glyck suggests "like an oak tree, find balance at your centre, and all the branches of your life will grow in harmony to support the structure of who you really are".

Other's weed beliefs and deeds can take seed in our garden if we attach undue importance to them. When we view them merely as a result of their overgrown garden we can sometimes gently guide that person to uproot them. Any weeds thrown into our garden by others can be turned into compost to nourish our plants, by following the philosophy of making lemonade out of lemons. For example if someone pollutes our plot with a critical weed rather than defensively throwing it back immediately we can question if it holds any truth. If there is, then we can take it as a timely call to work on certain areas of our garden. As Emerson said, a weed may be 'a plant whose virtues have not been discovered'. Parasitic weeds damaging our life gardens are rooted in weed beliefs, offshoot into weed thoughts and produce a poisonous crop of weed deeds. James Allen explains 'every act springs from hidden seeds of thought. Act is the blossom of thought, and joy or suffering are its fruits.'

If we are really motivated to create our ultimate internal garden of Eden we need to put our weeding gloves on and undertake some serious sorting and throwing of out-dated weed beliefs. Then we have made space to replace them with positive seed beliefs. Think about a source of dissatisfaction in your life, narrowing it down to a specific issue. Ask yourself, 'What is the weed belief feeding this situation?' What is an alternative positive belief? By repeating and acting on the new belief its roots will grow stronger and it will eventually bear fruits that will fertilise other dying areas.

Landscaping dreams

"Wishes of the soul bud forth
Deeds of the will are striving
Fruits of life are maturing"
-Rudolf Steiner.

Before weeding we may have 'lost the plot' but now surveying our garden everything should be much clearer. There's fragrant foliage already blessing your life and now you've created room for more growth. If dreams are the seedlings of reality, what would you like to sprout from your fertile imagination? To maximise our terrain we need to till stagnant soil, filtering out redundant elements and folding in the rich fertiliser of fresh ideas and novel

approaches. As the Chinese proverb goes 'rain falls on all the fields but crops grow only in those that have been tilled and sown'. Elevating our aspirations we will liberate a field of exciting and inspiring new goals or we may simply uncover old ones that have been buried in weeds of self-doubt and discouragement. To prevent repeating past errors, we can scrutinise what didn't work and brainstorm fresh strategies or goals. Open your mind to the field of infinite possibilities where you dare to dream every desire. When planning what to place in your plot remember to prioritise really important things over those that don't matter much. Think in terms of what you want within the context of an overall meaningful life mission. Plants that enhance your life without harming others can be given more space to expand. Divide your life into five garden beds. Then specify your two-year gardening plan for one or more areas.

The garden beds are:

- 1) Mental, emotional, physical, spiritual wellbeing.
- 2) Relationship with people and the planet.
- 3) Career and contribution
- 4) Living environment and possessions
- 5) Fun, leisure, creativity and travel.

As the phrase goes -'what we conceive and believe we can achieve', so it's vital that we bring our fantasy garden to life through emotive words and vivid imagery. Shift our belief from 'Que Sera Sera'- 'What will be, will be' to 'Que Quiero Quiero' – 'What I will, will be.' Describe your objectives in a positive way in the present tense. For example instead of saying 'I won't have a bad back anymore,' rephrase it as 'my back is strong, flexible and healthy'. To reinforce the conviction that your plans will manifest, repeat them with feeling, visualise them happening and act as though they're already real. To enhance your picture make up dream charts either by montaging or computer graphics, placing photos of yourself and others in the circumstances you desire. Sometimes it also gives us leverage to share ideas with others but ask them to withhold cynical or negative criticism. As Yeats wrote 'I have spread my dreams under your feet, tread softly because you tread on my dreams'. Review your garden at least every six months, congratulating yourself on any progress or developments. It may seem unattainable now but by preserving and rededicating yourself daily, you'll be astounded by what you can accomplish. One dream can give birth to a transformed world or as Emerson put it 'the creation of a thousand forests is in one acorn'.

Sowing the seeds

'No seed shall perish which the soul hath sown' - John Addington Symonds.

Our soil is now ready to germinate the seeds of future success. We've determined what we want in our garden now it's time to transplant the seedling of imagination to reality. Initiating change or innovations takes courage in our convictions and capabilities. This is where many falter, tinkering in the shed rather than getting into the field. Or we may start and stop, procrastinating from taking the next step so we spend our life hopping up the garden path, semi paralysed by fear, laziness or apathy. We need to recall that our past negative experiences are not relevant to the present and flip fear into faith by doing more weeding. Some can disrupt the mind's influence by acting despite fear. By overriding our patterns with action weeds are starved of mental energy and can die by themselves. If we deliberate from following our fantasies, we may find the garden gates closing forever. So we need to appreciate the time we have and be bold enough to go out on a limb to get our fruitful banquet. Once inspiration has ripened its time to put some perspiration into your projects. In a relaxed and inventive mood choose one of your two-year goals. Write down a broad two-year strategy to attain this. Next detail monthly milestones to reach. Finally outline one weekly step for the next six months to bring your goals closer. Write these steps into your diary making a mental commitment to meet the deadline. This exercise should be free of stress and strain, making you feel excited at the thought of your seed's bounty. If it seems like a hard and thankless task you may lose your drive, leaving your garden to rot, hence reassess your goal until you find one with joyful associations. Passionately love the vision of our life sanctuary as Oscar Wilde said, "Keep love in your heart. A life without it is like a sunless garden".

You're in this for the long haul so don't expect everything to flourish overnight. To allow seeds to germinate we must 'adopt the pace of nature, her secret is patience', as Emerson observed. In this fast paced world we expect instant results but anything really worthwhile often takes time. Take for example Belinda's struggle. Her main weed belief was that she was terminally fat and unattractive. Though she could temporarily loose weight on crash diets she only regained it. After hitting rock bottom Belinda decided to change her approach. Instead of chasing quick cures she took an alternative long-term outlook. By following an enjoyable two-year nutrition, exercise and attitude adjustment program, Belinda began to see positive results and alter her belief. She now conceded that she could stay slim and wasn't just 'big boned' as others had cast her. Belinda stepped out of the disempowering role she had been playing to let her true self-shine through. We all carry unique hybrid seeds in our psyche. If nurtured they will create a distinct garden as irreplaceable and inimitable as our individual essence. Others may judge the flora as unusual but if we are brave enough to grow them their brilliance will effuse our life with joy. To sustain our faith that things will flourish we can simply remember Meister Eckhardt's truth that 'the seed of God is in us'.

~Nurturing Growth

"Once a seed is planted it never shrinks, it just grows" Henry David Thoreau.

Having cleared weeds, landscaped dreams and sown seeds it's time to promote and protect our garden's growth. With care and perseverance seed beliefs will sprout into tangible saplings. It may seem that nothing is happening but we must persist in the faith that hidden forces are at work. The universe will respond to our desires but not always in the time frame or way we expect. We can maintain our enthusiasm by providing our seed dreams with plenty of nourishment. Inspiring influences and activities will sustain our momentum. For instance if we wanted to strengthen the seedling of robust health we would explore ways to improve our state by associating with health conscious people and following basic health precepts of diet and lifestyle. We may also focus mentally on our aims by visualising, affirming and acting as if we have already attained them. Checking that we're meeting set milestones then rewarding our efforts also sustains confidence and optimism.

To keep pesky bugs at bay we can use the pesticides of a positive attitude and action. For example if our goal is to develop a better relationship with a sibling we can think of their good qualities, remember special times together, send them loving thoughts and spend quality time with them. Though it may be an awkward strain initially, the relationship dynamics will shift as the universe reciprocates with your intention. As a Thai monk experienced - "as I mindfully sweep the tree of enlightenment, a tree of understanding springs from the earth".

We must also protect tender buds until they've grown resilient. Just as an alcoholic should initially avoid places where there's alcohol, we can minimise exposure to negative influences until our resistance is strong. However difficult to see at the time, in hindsight challenges can help us to build strength, tolerance and adaptability. Just as the hardiest plants grow in the harshest weather, difficulties can forge strengths and lead us on to a more beneficial path. During hardships we also get to distinguish who our real support are as fair weather friends fall by the wayside and real friends remain "like a sheltering tree", as Coltridge expressed. We need to prepare our garden in advance for inevitable setbacks and challenges by cultivating an attitude of surrender or the serenity to accept the things we cannot change. By countering fear with faith, discouragement with perseverance and impatience with patience in everyday experiences we will be ready to weather heavier storms.

As Paramahansa Yogananda said, "if you don't invite God to become your summer guest, he won't come in the winter of your life". Despite seemingly insurmountable odds an optimistic outlook often sees us through, proving that success is largely a mind game. However hard we try though some things weren't destined to be. We can keep perspective in these times by focussing on the positive things we can control and thinking of those who are even less fortunate. As Deepak Chopra noted, you can "put every effort into organising your life but remember the ultimate organiser is nature".

~Reaping the harvest

"See golden days, fruitful of golden deeds with joy and love triumphing" –Milton.

As the garden gifts us with abundant results we can inhale the heady spring of success. Reaping satisfying rewards often eclipses any difficulties faced previously, making it all worthwhile. The journey can be sweet but the destination should be pure nectar. We deserve to celebrate our achievement by kicking back for a while, smelling the roses and sharing the fruits of our labours. As Tagore extolled "when we rejoice in our fullness, then we can part with our fruits with joy".

Once satiated, we can share our abundance, skills and love. Extending success to others keeps our ego in check remembering that a tree bearing heavy fruits bows with humility. Acknowledge all the help we received and express gratitude to keep grounded. When we don't appreciate things or people but take them for granted, the universe tends to stop the flow of blessings into our life. Alternatively if we focus on all the grace given to us it's magnetised and swells back to us. Though we can rest on our laurels briefly if we become too complacent the garden will go to seed. A positive drive keeps our garden lush through life's seasonal changes.

Liz's story shows us how important it is to appreciate our harvest and nurture future growth. Liz planted a seed for her soul mate. She watered it by meeting people, classifying her desire and making herself more appealing. Things blossomed when she met and later married her dream partner, Mark. They shared a blissful honeymoon phase only to hit a slump one year later. Liz began to criticise Mark about minor shortcomings. In a word she became a nag. Mark tried to soften her with more attention and affection but she was too focussed on work to appreciate him. Feeling like he was taken for granted Mark considered divorce. After some counselling Liz realised that she was blowing Mark's slightly selfish traits out of proportion because she had grown up with a grossly chauvinistic father. Liz reconnected with Mark's good qualities and recaptured her love for him through quality time together. As Liz learned the hard way, whenever problems arise we need to re-examine our seed beliefs. Just as nature undergoes cycles of dormancy and growth the Natural Path takes us through phases of quite introspection to active productive periods. We need to find a balance between analysis and action. Excessive analysis causes stagnant paralysis and thoughtless action leads to regretful results. Whenever we're in a quandary we need to go within and access higher intuition. This requires stillness and silence, as mother Theresa said, "God is the friend of silence". But once we know what to do we shouldn't delay in doing what we know, in a masterful and intensely mindful way. Then wandering through your blossoming garden I hope you share Emerson's realisation that "in the tranquil landscape... man beholds somewhat as beautiful as his own nature."

HOW TO GARDEN LOVE

Plant three rows of peas: Peace of mind, peace of heart, peace of soul.

Plant four rows of squash: Squash gossip, squash indifference, squash grumbling, squash selfishness.

Plant four rows of lettuce: Lettuce be faithful, lettuce be kind, lettuce be patient, lettuce really love one another. No garden is complete without turnips: Turnip for meetings, turnip for service, turnip to help one another.

To conclude, our garden must have thyme: Thyme for each other, thyme for family, thyme for friends.

Water freely with patience and cultivate with love. Yours will be a fruitful garden, because you reap what you sow —Anonymous.