

A PIECE OF MY MIND

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Nurturing Medicine

As a third-year medical student I began to keep a vegetable garden. Digging in the yard was a stress reliever, a reprieve from memorizing diseases and pathways. I'd return home from the hospital and walk through the garden pulling weeds and watering plants, and then pour over books about seed saving, composting, and canning. I watched the plants grow, flower, fruit, wilt, and eventually die, repeating each year. Over time, the garden grew, incorporating more and more plants, and then drip irrigation, compost piles, and then chickens—their shells and droppings returning to the earth, helping the garden grow. I reasoned that I could take the same approach in school and residency and apply it to gardening. *The more I know, the more I can do and the more I can control.*

During medical school and residency, I was trained to look for pathology. I believed if I asked the right questions, ordered the right tests, I could, like a detective, find the correct diagnosis and treatment. And so it went. At work I was analytic, precise, and calculating. I took a similar approach in the garden. But with time, my approach began to change. Only so much could be done to keep plants from turning brown and dying

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after a late frost or to protect my chickens from being eaten by a savvy raccoon or hawk. I began to become flexible, adaptive, relaxed. I saw that in the garden, death was expected and ordinary. But in medicine, death was a dreaded failure. If I had looked harder, diagnosed sooner, found the right treatment, maybe the inevitable could be staved off.

In those first few summer months of my palliative care fellowship, deaths were expected but still startling. Over time, I held warm hands that would become cold and waxy. My initial astonishment gave way to the acceptance of the natural trajectory of life. Death became ordinary. The hospital, home, and clinic—all started to feel more and more like the garden.

As a gardener, I see myself as someone who carefully tends not only to the plants but the soil as well. Gardeners nurture all that is in their care, while accepting that a storm, frost, or flood could destroy an entire crop, a year's worth of labor. Gardeners recognize the importance of the environment, seeing that the vitality of a single plant depends on the strength of its roots as well as the soil, air, sun, and water that surround and nourish it. In the garden, I learned to be

vulnerable, open to what was outside of my control, recognizing that despite all my effort, care, and attention, a seed will not always germinate nor will a plant always bear fruit.

In medicine too, I became a gardener. Earlier feelings of helplessness over not doing enough for patients dissipated as I learned to value the relationship more than any particular outcome. I learned to be attuned to the particular needs of the plants and earth, be it sunlight, water, or nitrogen; I nurtured individuals in my care as well as the families and friends that surrounded them, the fertile soil of community. I witnessed how people could be simultaneously resilient and fragile. I was moved by the connectedness between individuals and the impact of early life experiences on the process of aging and dying. I accept that death offers not only the expected reflection on life and mourning but an opportunity for a unique form of growth and healing.

Even while fostering life, gardeners have a deep appreciation of death. They plant each year knowing that at the end of the season, the ground will grow cold and hard, plants will die, and the cycle will repeat. Gardeners recognize that sometimes, even with no attention paid, plants will grow, seemingly in spite of us. Much like medicine extends beyond hospital and clinic walls, life extends beyond the confines of a flower bed. Death Valley, despite its dry and hot climate, is home to more than 1000 species of plants, including wildflowers that bloom after rainfall in the spring. Sometimes, years will pass between large blooms, the ecosystem waiting for the right conditions. Like plants, people can thrive in inhospitable places. Every day I see individuals who have endured overwhelming trauma only to find meaning and growth as life fades, making time for laughter, connecting with distant relatives, and renewing frayed bonds with those closest to them.

My garden began as an antidote to work and medicine but became much more. Initially a tool to keep me emotionally healthy, protected from the rigor of medicine, transformed into a way of being and offered me a new way of seeing the world. Starting with those first seedlings, I assumed I could bend the trajectory of life, not aware that life would change me. Medicine often pushes clinicians to conceptualize patients as *things* that need repair. To a gardener, a seed has all the elements necessary to flourish—the gardener provides support and fosters growth. In this sense, my role as a physician has become less about fixing and more about a way of being. It is cultivating in others the innate ability to flourish and heal, even when sick and wounded. As a gardener and physician, I hold all life in reverence and awe, knowing how fleeting it is.

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