

IMAGES, IDEAS, and REFLECTIONS

Periodical Letter #23
January 2022

from
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January Dreaming (Canada)



Dreaming of my January visit to Western Australia at the peak of the wildflower season. My friend Roger Brownsey from Tokoroa, New Zealand, and I spent six days in the vicinity of Payne's Find, far north of Perth, sleeping at night in unheated shipping containers behind a roadhouse.



My idyllic photograph of a January morning on the opening page is almost pure dreaming, but not quite. Most winters will produce a couple of mornings, maybe even a half dozen, of beauty so breath-taking that they manage to make me forget for a little while the innumerable experiences of bone-chilling winds penetrating my “impenetrable” wrap of woollies and fleeces, of having my feet fly out from under me and cracking my head on a snow-covered sheet of ice, even the times I’ve had to venture forth in the middle of night to start my generator, because an ice storm has taken out the electricity and I haven’t been able to flush the toilet for hours, sometimes even days. Yes, an experience of beauty always cleanses the mind, naturally suppressing the ugly and the bad while lifting one’s spirits into fresh, pure air.

However, I have long maintained that the Almighty created the southern hemisphere to apologize for having created the Canadian winter, and it’s an apology that I have often accepted. My visit to Western Australia in January several years ago, right at the peak of a tremendous wildflower season, was an embrace of compelling beauty that “drove” the Canadian winter far, far from my thoughts. And, for the people who live in particular spots, it also provides a respite, not from winter but from incinerating heat. I spoke with some people who live below ground several months of the year, but “move upstairs” for a while to absorb the cooler temperatures of late fall/winter/early spring (a combination season from a Canadian’s point of view.) In this semi-arid region the brief burst of wildflowers brings the parched residents the same emotional uplift that a magical winter morning brings to frosted Canadians.

As many of you know, I spent 26 springs (August-September) photographing and giving workshops among the incredible wildflowers displays of Namaqualand (the western and northwestern regions of Northern Cape province in South Africa. So, on my spring visit to Western Australia, I was immediately struck by two differences: 1/ the Australian display is generally composed of glorious pastels, rather than the much more vibrant, often primary hues of the Namaqualand displays, and 2/ unlike Namaqualand there is a very large number of “strawflower” species, which tend to have a very long life in dried bouquets.

Western Australia is also home to many native Namaqualand and other South African species that were deliberately or accidentally introduced, some of which thrive to the point of being invasive in the suitable climate and environment. Of course, some of the invasives produce stunning displays – in either their original hues or in colour adaptations.

Anyway, on a frigid and windy Canadian winter morning when my eyes have been watering so badly and restricting my vision that remaining outdoors was to imperil my life, I find it mood-altering to come indoors and begin ambling through photographs of these flowers.

Recently I wrote an article for ATLANTIC RHODO on “How to Make Better Photographs of Your Rhododendrons,” which is being reprinted in the spring issue of the American Rhododendron Society Journal (ARS JOURNAL.) It’s not intended for serious photographers, but I’m adding it here as a hyperlink in the hope that all you gardeners will find my guidelines and suggestions useful. (Just click on [Photographing My Garden.](#))

“An old man in love is like a flower in winter.”

Portuguese proverb

My home is roughly 40 kilometres inland from the Bay of Fundy (the north Atlantic), which means that the ocean moderates our seasons – less than at the coast, but certainly more than another 50 or more kilometres inland. In winter this sometimes means that a blizzard hitting Shamper’s Bluff will turn to rain and occasionally the rising temperature and the downpour will wipe the landscape of snow, but leave behind mysterious formations that provoke imagining and wonder.



More winter magic (highbush cranberries!)



This scene, however, “gets me down.” I see a great deal of hard work ahead and, when I’m done, I’ll be ready for bed, not for skiing.



PASSINGS

At the time we acquire a pet, we rarely contemplate its eventual passing or the fact that we may have to decide when that will occur. Yet, many of us have dealt with the death of a pet that has made a significant contribution to our lives – usually a dog, a cat, or a horse. Sometimes the death is natural, but if we are realistic and kind, it may well be our responsibility to decide and determining the time is rarely easy.

An elderly friend said to me recently that an important life lesson he was taught as a child was that the day would come when he would have to shoot his own dog. Although we now have veterinarians who do the job for us, it's my conviction that if we consider this fact when we acquire a pet, we will always try to make sure that it leads a rich and happy life, not spoil it or acquiesce to it.

On December 13 I gave my canine companion of the last 15 years, Gaia (named after the Greek goddess of Earth), the final gift I could give her, a quick and easy death. After she had enjoyed her usual morning treats I put her in the rear seat of my car and drove her to the vet. Then, I petted and talked to her as we waited until the vet came and administered a tranquilizer, which put her into a coma within three or four minutes, and I continued to do this until the vet returned to administer the second shot, which ended her life in less than a minute. It was, quite frankly, a beautiful departure, one that is now available under Canadian law to persons in conditions of decline similar to Gaia's.

Five minutes later two of the vet's assistants lifted her body (wrapped in a biodegradable body bag) into the trunk (boot) of my car and I brought her home, where I buried her immediately among my azaleas. In the spring I will plant a large new azalea on her grave. Only the colour remains undecided.

I didn't grieve much the day Gaia died, as I'd been grieving for weeks before her death and I've been grieving since – grieving is all about the loss of relationship. Gaia taught me much in our 15 years together. Besides always being ready to play, even in her final months, Gaia was unfailingly patient with me, even when I was in too much of a hurry to understand her. On these occasions she was a better "person" than I.



Four days after Gaia’s passing, I acquired Tess, my fifth German Shepherd female. She was just over eight weeks old at the time and, when you receive this letter, she will be about 12 weeks. Tess will benefit from the many lessons in patience and understanding that Gaia taught me. And so, life goes forward with a new consciousness, which is currently expressed by Tess’ exuberance over her constant discoveries and her limitless affection.



Tess at just past eight weeks (Maurice Henri)

I often think of consciousness as being like an ocean, only an incredibly more vast resource, and thus to conceive of every brain as a sort of reducing valve that can accept a certain amount of consciousness and handle its development. We share our personal amount of consciousness most easily with those who speak our language, which is why acquiring more than one language has the potential for adding to our own personal resource. But, not all communication is verbal – neither among humans nor among other animal species. So, when we regard a non-human animal’s life and consciousness as significant, treat our pets with caring and respect, and endeavour to understand what they are trying to communicate, we are also helping ourselves to increase and enrich our own awareness.

**To live in this world
you must be able
to do three things:
to love what is mortal;
to hold it
against your bones knowing
your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it go,
to let it go.**

Mary Oliver "In Blackwater Woods" (excerpt)

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"Don't cry because it's over, smile because it happened."

Dr. Seuss

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A number of "things," some little, some big, have happened at Shamber's Bluff this winter and those of you who have been here even once will be able to picture some of them easily.

First of all, Covid-19 notwithstanding, I decided to travel, moving for the winter from my house across the field to my cottage at the edge of the woods. It's a lovely space with a 360-degree view into the woods and over the field and, because the south side is mostly glass, the interior is flooded with sunlight on clear winter days, but even in the dullest and coldest weather it's easy to heat. I'm as "snug as a bug in a rug."

Second, because of Covid/Omicron, I chose to spend Christmas here with Tess – just the two of us. Her special meal was a large old beef bone stuffed with real peanut butter. Mine was a huge bowl of my homemade buttercup squash-and-ginger soup accompanied by hot scones smothered in spreadable brie with a touch of basil pesto. For dessert, I decided on dark chocolate hummus topped with an exceedingly generous dollop of whipped cream flavoured with rose water. Then, we slept.

Third, I'm just concluding a few weeks (two mornings per week) of conversations in French with my friend and teacher, Laura Mazerolle. We drink herbal teas (tisanes) and laugh a lot – mostly at me. However, another Francophone friend is helping me out "de temps en temps" and I'm studying every day on my own in one way or another as well as talking "out loud/ *en haut voix*" to myself in French. (The conversations tend to be quite boring.)

Mes amis/amies qui ont m'écrit récemment mais qui n'ont pas reçu une lettre en retour la raison est simple : je suis un vieil homme qui essaie d'élever un bébé.

All my friends who have written me recently and have not received a reply, please remember that I'm an old man who is trying to raise a baby.



Tess at exactly 10 weeks old (both photos above)



It's Christmas morning! The music playing on CBC and Radio Canada is sufficient, by itself, to keep me in a state of bliss all day. I'm devouring my second "Eggs Florentine." Tess, who has been ripping around the cottage with an old bone, or her leash, or a stuffed toy in her mouth has just fallen asleep with her head on my left foot. Earlier she presented me with two gifts: 1/ She is holding both her ears up today and looks like a real German Shepherd for the first time, and 2/ she is now scoring 100% with the newspapers spread out near the refrigerator. It's taken her only a week! In a few minutes we'll head out for a long walk across the nearby

frozen bog into the woods. We'll be aware of some of the same things, but essentially she'll be making her "voyage of discovery" and I'll be making mine. The wind is dropping and the sun is shining brightly. Back in the woods is a chair and a radio (linked to the cottage) that will soon be playing Handel's Messiah. Tess and I will soon be there. What a morning! *Quel matin!*

"Happiness is a journey, not a destination." *Ben Sweetland*

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Near Payne's Find, Western Australia in late January

Beste wense 2022

Meilleurs vœux 2022

Best wishes 2022

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