

(Re)Building Paradise

By Lawrence Hagerty, April 4, 2002

I sensed his presence for over a week. It wasn't as if he was actually stalking me, it was more like he just wanted to be nearby in case I needed to talk. Although it had been a while since we had last spoken, I wasn't surprised that he followed me on my first journey to the deep woods of British Columbia. I was traveling there with my wife to participate in a conference on spiritual practices.

It was when we were on the small ferry, taking us to what would be our temporary island home, that I knew for sure he was crossing the bay with us. During the week that followed, I kept expecting him to make an appearance. At times, when I was alone in the woods, I would quickly turn around, or look up into the forest canopy, fully expecting to catch a glimpse of my unseen companion. Yet he never appeared.

Even during the most heated discussions among our small band of utopian planners, he remained out of sight. How strange I thought, for some of the conversations we were having at the conference were exactly the kind he relished long ago, when we were together every day. By the time my wife and I were riding the ferry back to civilization, I had given up on making contact with him. It was as if he followed us just to enjoy the scenery.

We had a couple of days before we had to return home, so we decided to spend the weekend in Victoria, a delightful town on the southern tip of Vancouver Island. The weather was perfect. It was the first day of autumn and the winter rains had not yet begun. The melancholy we experienced after parting with our friends, both old and new, was quickly replaced by the positive energy of this beautiful city. It was during our second day in Victoria that he finally made his appearance. Like proper tourists, we visited one of the city's most famous attractions, Butchart Gardens. Perhaps you have been there yourself. If so, you already know of its mystical quality.

As I understand the story of the gardens, early in the 20th century a businessman began mining operations in a limestone quarry just outside the town of Victoria. Eventually there was not enough limestone left to make operations economically feasible. So this wealthy industrialist closed the mine and laid off all his workers. Not long after the closing, the wife of its owner, Jenny Butchart, had the idea to turn this newly created eyesore of a quarry into a garden. Thus began the long process of bringing in topsoil and plants. Today, that former quarry is the sunken garden section of what has grown into one of the world's largest and most beautiful flower gardens.

While I was standing on a ridge looking down on the huge sunken garden, he finally began to speak to me. "So, what d'ya think kid?" was the first thing he said. Only now, as I write this, do I realize how often my father said those words to me . . . and how important they have been in my life. It has been over 25 years since he died, but I still vividly recall the expectant tone of voice he always used when asking me what I thought. My dad really cared about what *I* thought. That always came first with him, not what *he* thought but what I thought. As I think about this, I see how wise he was to first hear me out, especially when he disagreed with me. It was not unusual for us to both make slight

adjustments in our points of view once we had finished one of our conversations. Now, here he was, asking me what I thought about the incredible beauty that lay before us.

What did I think? The answer to that question could not be put into words. The stunning array of color, rolling across the beds of flowers, reminded me of waves breaking at the sea shore, ever-changing and each one perfect. One of the things that had been discussed in the conference of the previous week was the need to create a new language, one that could better describe the wondrous beauty we see in nature. So there I stood, taking in that pulsating, living, breathing, breathtaking splendor and unable to say anything more than, "It is so beautiful."

"That's pretty obvious," I sensed my father answering, "but what I was talking about is the story of how this old limestone quarry was transformed into a corner of paradise."

Then he began to tell me what he was thinking, and it went something like this. He had been thinking about the men who labored in this quarry a hundred years ago. And what struck him most forcibly was how much they were like so many people today. Although the quarrymen had their moments of joy, most of their waking thoughts were focused on survival. Granted, living conditions back then made survival more of a life and death matter, but the stress of living with a sense of controlled panic was not so different from that felt by people living today's more affluent lifestyles. The only difference between then and now is the fact that our lives of quiet desperation today are being lived more comfortably.

As I listened to my father's thoughts, I realized that things haven't actually changed all that much in the century just passed. The quarrymen, and the women who held them together in body and spirit, were in the same spot that many people are in today. For example loggers, who earn their living by cutting down trees, have families that need to be fed, children to be educated, and doctor's bills to pay. Just as the earlier quarrymen hadn't set out in life to carve gigantic holes in the Earth, today's logger doesn't see his or her mission as that of stripping the mountains of their protective trees. Their primary goal is simple, to take care of their families. Most of them, I suspect, would much rather spend the day hiking with friends in the forest than they would cutting down 200 year old trees. Their primary mission, caring for their families, is pure. It is the system they are caught up in that is out of balance.

My mind tried to reconcile the human struggle for a livelihood with the stunning natural beauty that lay before me, and I noticed that my thoughts began to center on the undeniable potential we humans have to actually create paradise on Earth. I began to see how seemingly small steps can be taken that will eventually transform this planet back into the paradise it was before our species became so carried away with the wonders of industrialization. There are so many little things we can do to better integrate industrial advances and environmental awareness without major sacrifices to our standard of living. All it takes is for people to understand the truth and not continue to be misled by the never-ending propaganda of those who are not willing to move into a sustainable future.

Then I heard my father say, "Isn't that one of the things you learned this past week? Didn't you experience first-hand how deeply interconnected everything and everybody truly is? Just because you don't happen to live in a forest, it doesn't mean you can ignore their destruction. Just because you don't live in the Middle East, it doesn't mean you can

ignore the plight of that part of the human family who does live there.” How true, I realized.

Whether we work in forests, factories, or offices, if we are not careful they can become cold, deep quarries, which admit few rays of sunlight. Yet, I found myself looking down on what had once been such a brutish pit and saw only beauty. Here was the proof I had been looking for – it really is possible for us to turn this planet into a paradise. I believe that part of the magic of Butchart Gardens is the fact that it was the very same workmen who first dug the quarry who were the ones that brought in the topsoil to begin the transformation into what it is today. It was when that thought formed that I fully understood the nature of the problem we had been working on during our week in the woods.

If, as many of us believe, it is possible to return this planet to the paradise it once was, then why haven't we simply gone about doing it? Suddenly, the answer seemed so clear, and so simple: We transform our world by first transforming our own consciousness. A century ago some hard-working quarrymen had the good fortune to be working for a man who was graced with an enlightened wife. She was not willing to let her husband simply cast aside those souls who had once helped them build their wealth. After her husband closed the exhausted quarry, Mrs. Butchart hired them back. But this time their work became an act of love toward this Earth. Shovel by shovel, they covered the bare rock with soil. Plant by plant they returned life to the land. Today, the loving spirit of all those whose labor went into preserving this land can be clearly felt. It *is* possible, I realized as I gazed upon this quarry-turned-paradise. It truly is possible to reverse the damage we have inflicted on the land, on each other, and on ourselves.

“That is exactly what I was thinking,” I heard my father say.

The next day, after taking the ferry back to the U.S., we drove down the Olympic Peninsula toward Tacoma, the city in which my father had been born the very year those workmen first began to add topsoil to the quarry. Only the naked gashes from sections of clear-cut forest disturbed the serenity of our drive. Just east of Tacoma, my father took his leave. I suspect he returned to his favorite boyhood haunt, the foothills of beautiful Mount Rainier. At least I like to think of his spirit poking around up there.

As I sit at our kitchen table and put these thoughts on paper, the roar of a neighbor's leaf-blower comes in through an open window. At first, the noise irritates me. Then I remember the tranquility of Butchart Gardens, and I think back to the days when there were no gardens there, only a noisy quarry. Out of nowhere, I hear his voice once again, “So, what d'ya think kid?”

I am thinking that it is time to get to work and turn this quarry into a garden.

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