

Column

PLANT MAGICK: ROSES

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When I was a child, I was consciously, eternally, intensely grateful that the sky was blue. Not orange, or yellow, or red, or green, but blue! As were all my clothes blue. I could not bear to wear anything that was not some shade of blue. On sunny days I would lie on the grass, gazing upwards astonished, feasting on sky blue.

Only as a middle-aged adult did I begin to introduce other colors into my wardrobe. And did I begin to know, too, why the color blue had been so crucial to me as a child. Blue, as we know now in color therapy, is calming, peaceful.

I was a child of Hiroshima. The Bomb destroyed Japanese cities when I was 2.5 years old and I *knew* it. That singular fact spoiled my childhood. I had no childhood. I was Chicken Little, for whom, at any moment now, the sky was about to fall.

I knew that we humans were warlike creatures, and I knew that our wars had caused Hiroshima, and I went around my world in a state of continuous shock and panic, hungering for serenity, peace, peaceful radiant sky blue.

I was less consciously aware of another facet of my early environment that was also healing, and to which I also turned when despair threatened to overwhelm. Roses. I would stop to smell the roses.

And they were everywhere, mature rose bushes, entwining our slatted wood backyard fence like a chorus line of great fans, holding hands, one after another, pink, white, red and yellow blossoms seeking the sun, suspended in air, calling to me to come, come. To snuffle right up to those great, fragile, multi-petaled spirals in all stages of blooming. To feast my eyes on their breathless beauty, to bathe my lungs in their loving gentle joyful spirit.

I loved them and felt blessed in their presence. I could forget nuclear war, could forget the war within my own psyche, could forget the squabbling among eight siblings in the red brick house facing the rose-trellised fenced yard. The red brick house where my mother labored day after endless day with chores, and of which the back door was forever slamming open and shut with the rush of young strong restless tanned legs in shorts of all sizes.

I could release it all and sink into the fragrance of roses. Tittering on tip toe, expectant, I would seek, and then thrill to discover the perfect rose. The one rose that was not closed tight as a bud, nor was it opened fully to show the seeds, but — oh ecstasy! — was opening, spiraling out, its fluid ordered dynamics so clear, so glorious, so mysterious, that my heart would flutter in jubilation.

I didn't think about roses the same way I thought about the sky. I was not conscious of the roses, I was simply there with them. Nor did I think about the giant weeping willow standing in the middle of the yard, its long thin drooping branches dripping with leaves. As the roses were my place of forgetting, of transcendence into an exquisite world beyond the Bomb and the clamor of daily life, so the willow tree was my refuge. Clambering up like a monkey, I would perch in my high spot, young muscled bottom embraced by that one wide, slightly curving branch. Sitting silent there, above it all, curtained by leaves, encircled below by roses, enveloped in blue sky, I felt safe. Happy. All was well with my world — for the moment. Sooner or later, inevitably, the back door would swing open, my mother would appear in her apron, and call, “Ann! Ann! Time to set the table!” or “Ann! Ann! Come take care of the baby!”

I was the eldest. My chores were legion. And I was a very good girl.

My life as mother while still a child continued when I found myself pregnant at twenty. Desperate, frustrated, lonely as hell, I was still a very good girl.

While breastfeeding my baby, I devoured Betty Friedan. That was in 1964, and for the first time I knew I was not alone.

A few years later, the shock waves of social revolution caught and flung me into a world I was not prepared for. I survived, but barely. I learned to harden myself, to become like a man, to manipulate, to take power over. That lasted until I was forty. Again, another switch. All of a sudden, once again, roses. Roses! I could not get enough of them. Everywhere I would go — to Portland, to Salt Lake City, cities graced with roses, I would walk miles down neighborhood streets, drinking in that old familiar perfume, that softening soothing angel of my dreams.

This was shortly after a time when I had worked as a peace activist — a *violent* peace activist: anyone who ignored my opposition to nuclear war was the enemy. After two years I realized this, and stopped, cold. Astonished to realize that *I* was the problem. That the real war was *in me*.

That winter of 1983-84, when Reagan was demonizing the Soviet Union as the “Evil Empire” and proposing Star Wars, I decided to keep one fresh rose blooming in my yurt all winter long. Every five days I would buy one budding rose from a florist, cushion it in a cutglass vase, and worship this harbinger of peace and regeneration in the midst of wintry desolation. Determined to keep hope alive, I wanted to melt into the rose as I longed to melt the deepening freeze of the Cold War. My vigil took hold. Within a short while there were roses in all the dwellings in our little community. Imagine: in the snowy valley across from the Grand Tetons, fresh roses in ten tiny yurts, all winter long!

During that same winter, I stopped everything and stared into the fire. Seeking the roots of my own violence. Seeking the solace of my soul. This search led directly to my childhood, and my inner child, “Orphan Annie.” Loving her, feeling her depression from an early age, I learned to embrace her and her hunger for roses.

The only roses to grow easily here in the mountains of Wyoming are wild. Orphan Annie loved them too, their fainter smell, their simple five-petaled pinkish souls. And in winter, when the great freeze clamps down, and all the bushes are skeletal, she loved to pick and eat rose hips. Trudging on skis miles through snow, Orphan Annie delighted in finding a bush loaded with hips, dark wrinkled red balls plush with meat.

I *knew* rose hips were good for me. My body gravitated towards them, as years ago, when a cigarette smoker, it had craved apples. Three, four, six apples a day, whole, with the seeds. I loved apples to distraction. And wondered why. And then wondered why, when I finally let cigarettes go, that I no longer craved apples. Only later did I read that their seeds contain a substance which neutralizes nicotine. My body sought apples like a dog with an upset stomach seeks grass. I have learned not to question the body's needs.

Not having multi-petaled domestic roses growing in the Tetons, I bought a huge color photo of a pink rose, the kind I treasure most, caught in the swell of blooming, and framed it to hang above my desk. The rose, I began to realize, was my talisman.

At one point I did buy a rose bush in a lowland city, hoping to transplant it here. I planted it in its own wooden tub and installed it just outside my yurt. Within a month it had produced one huge, gorgeous, wine-red rose. My ecstasy was short-lived when a deer plucked it neatly off its stem.

Once, having been invited for dinner at an artist friend's house who lived in a neighboring state, I walked into her living room to see an easel with a just completed painting hanging on it — mystic white roses against a shadowy mountain. As my eyes, startled, took in the painting, I burst into tears. My friend walked in from the kitchen, wiped her hands on her apron, and said, "Oh yes, I made that one for you."

For the past twelve years that painting has hung on the wall of the yurt, above the couch, near the wood stove.

Another day my herbalist friend Clarissa brought me a tiny bottle of precious rose oil. I looked at her, puzzled. Why this? "This is for your depression," she said. What? I was depressed? That remark, and her gift, upset me. I had not known I was depressed. I

knew I had been depressed as a child, but I had not realized that my great work in descending to the level where my inner child lived had resulted in re-experiencing that original depression. Rose symbolizes joy. Both the image of the rose and the scent of roses are depression's antidote.

Gradually, nourished extravagantly with roses — blooming roses, rose hips, photos of roses, rose oil — I regained my self, my soul, by re-incorporating Orphan Annie. Yet I still love and need rose hips. Still ski long miles in winter to find that one loaded bush.

And every morning, my nostrils drink in that fragrance as I apply “rosencreme” to my face. My “crone creme,” I call it. By Hauschka, a German firm. Highly recommended.

Update 2010: The painting with the white roses sustained water damage over its years in the yurt; the large framed photo of the blooming pink rose commands one wall in my living room; and multi-petaled roses do grow here in the Midwest, also foraged by deer. My body no longer craves rose hips.