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# *Contents*

1. Beginnings 1
2. Green Nature: Human Nature 23
3. Seeds and Self-Belief 45
4. Safe Green Space 67
5. Bringing Nature to the City 87
6. Roots 109
7. Flower Power 135
8. Radical Solutions 157
9. War and Gardening 183
10. The Last Season of Life 209
11. Garden Time 237
12. View from the Hospital 257
13. Green Fuse 277

Acknowledgments 289
Selected General Sources on Nature, Gardens, and Health 295
Notes 297
Illustration Credits 323
Index 325



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# CHAPTER 1

# *Beginnings*

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Sue and Tom with baby Rose, planting the first hedges in the courtyard at the Barn, 1988.

*Come forth into the light of things,*
*Let Nature be your teacher.*
William Wordsworth (1770–1850)

Long before I wanted to be a psychiatrist, long before I had any inkling that gardening might play an important role in my life, I remember hearing the story of how my grandfather was restored after the First World War.



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He was born Alfred Edward May, but was always known as Ted. Little more than a boy when he joined the Royal Navy, he trained as a Marconi wireless operator and entered the submarine service. In the spring of 1915, during the Gallipoli campaign, the submarine he was serving on ran aground in the Dardanelles. Most of the crew survived, only to be taken prisoner. Ted kept a tiny diary in which he documented the early months of his captivity in Turkey, but his subsequent time in a series of brutal labor camps is not recorded. The last of these was a cement factory on the shores of the Sea of Marmara from which he eventually escaped by sea in 1918.

Ted was rescued and treated on board a British hospital ship, where he recovered just enough strength to attempt the long journey home overland. Eager to be reunited with his fiancée, Fanny, whom he had left behind as a fit young man, he turned up on her doorstep in a battered old raincoat with a Turkish fez on his head. He was barely recognizable, weighing, as he did, little more than eighty pounds and having lost all his hair. The four-thousand-mile journey had, he told Fanny, been "horrendous." On top of everything else he had endured during the preceding years, that journey took a severe toll on his health. When he underwent the naval medical examination, his malnutrition was found to be so advanced that he was given little more than a few months to live.

But Fanny nursed him faithfully by feeding him tiny amounts of soup and other sustenance on an hourly basis, so that gradually he was able to digest food again. Ted began the slow process of regaining his health, and he and Fanny were married soon after. In that first year, he would sit for hours stroking his bald head with two soft brushes, willing his hair to grow back. When it finally did, it was prolific, but it was white.

Love and patient determination enabled Ted to defy the gloomy prognosis he had been given, but his POW camp experiences stayed with him and his terrors were worst at night. He was



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especially afraid of spiders and crabs because they had crawled all over the prisoners as they tried to sleep. For years to come, he couldn't stand being alone in the dark.

The next phase of Ted's recovery began in 1920, when he signed up for a yearlong course in horticulture, one of many initiatives set up in the postwar years with the aim of rehabilitating ex-servicemen who had been damaged by the conflict. After this, he traveled to Canada in search of a new life and in the hope that working the land might further improve his physical and mental strength. At that time the Canadian government was running programs to encourage ex-servicemen to migrate, and thousands of men who had returned from the war made that long Atlantic crossing.

Ted labored on the wheat harvest in Winnipeg and then found more settled employment as a gardener on a cattle ranch in Alberta. Fanny joined him for some of the two years he spent there, but for whatever reason their dream of starting a new life in Canada did not come to fruition. Nevertheless, Ted returned to England a stronger, fitter man.

A few years later he and Fanny bought a smallholding with an orchard in Hampshire. In his spare time, he kept pigs, bees, and hens as well as growing flowers, fruit, and vegetables. For five years during the Second World War he worked at The Admiralty wireless station in London, and my mother remembers his pigskin suitcase which traveled up with him on the train, packed full of home-slaughtered meat and home-grown vegetables. He and the suitcase used to return carrying supplies of sugar, butter, and tea. She relates with some pride how the family never ate margarine during the war and that Ted even grew his own tobacco.

I remember his good humor and the warmth of his spirit, a warmth that emanated from a man who seemed to my childish eyes to be robust and at ease with himself. He wasn't intimidating and he didn't wear his traumas on his sleeve. He spent hours tending his garden and his greenhouse and was almost always attached



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to a pipe, with his tobacco pouch never far away. Ted's long and healthy life—he lived into his late seventies, and his reconciliation to some of the appalling abuses he experienced—is attributed in our family mythology to the restorative effects of gardening and working the land.

Ted died suddenly in his late seventies, when I was twelve, from an aneurysm that ruptured while he was out walking with his much loved Shetland sheepdog. The local paper ran an obituary entitled "Once youngest submariner dies." It reveals that he was reported dead twice during the war and that when he escaped with a group of captive soldiers from the cement factory, they lived for twenty-three days on water alone. The closing words document his love of gardening: "He devoted much of his leisure time to the cultivation of his extensive garden, and achieved fame locally as the grower of several rare orchids."

Somewhere inside her, my mother must have drawn on this when my father's death, in his late forties, left her a relatively young widow. In the second spring afterward, she found a new home and took on the task of restoring the neglected cottage garden. Even then, in my youthful, self-preoccupied state, I noticed that alongside the digging and the weeding, a parallel process of reconciling herself to her loss was taking place.

At that stage of my life, gardening was not something I thought I would ever devote much time to. I was interested in the world of literature and was intent on embracing the life of the mind. As far as I was concerned, gardening was a form of outdoor housework, and I would no more have plucked a weed than baked a scone or washed the curtains.

My father had been in and out of the hospital during my university years, and he died just as I started my final year. The news came by phone one morning at around 5 a.m., and as soon as dawn broke I walked out through the quiet Cambridge streets into the park and down to the river. It was a bright, sunny October day,



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ment from Tom's parents and a number of willing friends. When we held stone-picking parties, Rose, along with her grandparents, aunts, and uncles, joined in the task of filling up endless buckets with rocks and pebbles that needed to be carted away.

I had been physically and emotionally uprooted, and I needed to rebuild my sense of home, but still I was not particularly conscious that gardening might play a part in helping me put down roots. I was much more aware as they grew of the garden's significance in our children's lives. They began making dens in the bushes and spent hours inhabiting imaginary worlds of their own making, so the garden was a fantasy place and a real place at the same time.

Tom's creative energy and vision drove our garden making forward. It wasn't until our youngest, Harry, was a toddler that I finally started growing plants myself. I became interested in herbs and devoured books about them. This new area of learning led to experiments in the kitchen and in a little herb garden that by then had become "mine." There were some gardening disasters, unleashing a creeping borage and a tenacious soapwort among them, but eating food flavored with all sorts of home-grown herbs was life-enhancing, and from there it was a short step to growing vegetables. The thrill I felt at this stage was all about produce!

At this point, I was in my mid-thirties, working as a junior psychiatrist in the National Health Service. In giving me something to show for my efforts, gardening provided a counterpoint to my professional life, where I was engaged with the much more intangible properties of the mind. Working on the wards and in clinic rooms was predominantly an indoor life, but the garden pulled me outdoors.

I discovered the pleasure of wandering through the garden with a free-floating attention, registering how the plants were changing, growing, ailing, fruiting. Gradually, the way I thought about "boring" jobs like weeding, hoeing, and watering changed, and I came to see that it is important not so much to get them done, but to be fully involved in doing them. Watering is calming, as long as



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you are not in a hurry, and strangely, when it is finished, you end up feeling refreshed, like the plants themselves.

The biggest gardening buzz I got back then, and still get now, was from growing things from seed. Seeds give no hint of what is to come, and their size bears no relation to the dormant life within. Beans erupt dramatically, not with much beauty but you can feel their thuggish vigor right from the start. Nicotiana seeds are so fine, like particles of dust, you can't even see where you've sown them. It seems improbable they will ever do anything, let alone give you clouds of scented tobacco plant flowers, and yet they do. I can feel how new life creates an attachment by the way I find myself coming back almost compulsively to check on how my seeds and seedlings are doing; going out to the greenhouse, holding my breath as I enter, not wanting to disrupt anything, the stillness of life just coming into being.

Fundamentally, there is no arguing with the seasons when you are gardening, although you can get away with postponing things a little (I'll sow those seeds or plant out those plugs next weekend). There comes a point when you realize that a delay is about to become a missed opportunity, a lost possibility, and once you have your seedlings tucked up in the soil, you are carried along, as if you have jumped into a flowing river, by the energy of the earthly calendar.

I particularly love gardening in early summer, when the growth force is at its strongest and there is so much to get in the ground. Once I've started, I don't want to stop, and I carry on in the dusk till it's almost too dark to see what I'm doing. As I finish off, the house is glowing with light and its warmth draws me back inside. The next morning when I steal out, there it is—whatever patch I was working on has settled into itself overnight.

Of course, there is no way of gardening without experiencing some disasters and ruined plans—moments when you step outside in anticipation, only to be faced with the sad remains of lovely young lettuces or a line of ruthlessly stripped leaves of kale. It has



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to be acknowledged that the mindless eating habits of slugs and rabbits can set off bouts of helpless rage, and the persistence and stamina of weeds can be very, very draining.

Not all the satisfaction in tending plants is about creation. The great thing about being destructive in the garden is that it is not only permissible, it is *necessary*, because if you don't do it, you will be overrun. So many acts of garden care are infused with aggression, whether it is wielding the pruning shears, double digging the vegetable patch, slaughtering slugs, killing blackfly, ripping up goosegrass, or rooting out nettles. You can throw yourself into any or all of these in a wholehearted and uncomplicated way because they are a form of destructiveness that's in the service of growth. A long session in the garden like this can leave you feeling dead on your feet but strangely renewed inside, both purged and re-energized, as if you have worked on yourself in the process. It's a kind of gardening catharsis.

Each year, as we come out of winter, the greenhouse takes a hold on me with the lure of its warmth when the world outside is still chilled by the March winds. What is it that is so special about entering a greenhouse full of plants? Is it the level of oxygen in the air or the quality of light and heat? Or simply the proximity to plants with their greenness and their scent? It is as if all the senses are heightened inside this private, protected space.

One overcast spring day last year, I was absorbed in greenhouse tasks—watering, sowing seeds, moving compost, and generally getting things done. Then the sky cleared, and with the sun pouring in, I was transported to a separate world—a world of iridescent green filled with translucent leaves, the light shining through them. Droplets were scattered all over the freshly watered plants, catching the light, sparkling and luscious. Just for a moment I felt an overpowering sense of earthly beneficence, a feeling that I've retained, like a gift in time.



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I sowed some sunflowers in the greenhouse that day, and later on when I planted the seedlings out in the garden the best one looked hopeful, but the others suddenly seemed straggly and exposed out of doors. I thought some of them might not make it. I watched with satisfaction their growing upward, and gradually getting stronger. Then their growth took off and my attention moved on to other, more vulnerable seedlings.

I see gardening as a reiteration: I do a bit, then nature does her bit, then I respond to that, and so on, not unlike a conversation. It isn't whispers or shouts or talk of any kind, but in this back-and-forth there is a delayed and sustained dialogue. I have to admit that I am sometimes the slow one to respond, and that I can go a little quiet on it all, so it is good to have plants that can survive some neglect. And if you do take time away, the intrigue on your return is all the greater, like finding out what someone's been up to in your absence.

One day I realized that the whole line of sunflowers was sturdy, independent, and proud, with flowers coming on. When and how did you get so tall? I wondered. Soon that first hopeful seedling, still the tallest and the strongest, was looking down on me from its great height, with the whole wide circumference of its brilliant yellow flower. I felt quite small in its presence, but there was a strangely affirmative sensation in knowing I had set its life in motion.

A month or so later, how changed they were. The bees had cleaned the flowers out, their petals were faded, and the tallest could barely support its bowed-down head. Lately so proud and now so melancholy! I had an impulse to cut the row down, but I knew if I lived with their raggedy sadness for a while, they would bleach and dry in the sun and assume a different kind of stature as they led us toward autumn.

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To look after a garden involves a kind of *getting to know* that is somehow always in process. It entails refining and developing an understanding of what works and what doesn't. You have to build a relationship with the place in its entirety—its climate, its soil, and the plants that grow within it. These are the realities that have to be contended with, and along the way certain dreams almost always have to be given up. Our rose garden, which we started making when we first carved out some plots from the stony field, was just such a lost dream.

We had filled the beds with the loveliest of old roses, like Belle de Crecy, Cardinal de Richelieu, and Madame Hardy, but it was the delicate, heady, and delicious Fantin-Latour, with its flat petals, scrumpled like pale pink tissue paper, that was my favorite of all. You can nuzzle right into its flower, soft and velvety, and disappear in its scent. Little did we know back then that their time with us would be so brief, but it wasn't long before they began to balk at the conditions they were living in. Our ground did not suit them well, and a lack of ventilation in the wattle enclosures made matters worse. Each season became a battle to stay on top of the black spot and mildew that increasingly assailed them, and unless they were sprayed, they looked sad and sick. We were reluctant to rip them out, but what is the point in gardening against nature? They had to go, but oh how I missed them and miss them still! Even though not a single rose is growing in those beds today, all long since replaced by herbaceous perennial planting, we still call it the rose garden. So the memory remains.

Neither Tom nor I liked the idea of using chemical sprays, but I had a particular antagonism to them; in fact, because of my father's illness, I was afraid of them. It was never entirely clear what had triggered this catastrophe, but among the possible culprits was a long since banned pesticide lurking in the garden shed and an antibiotic prescribed when he had become ill on holiday in Italy the summer before. He nearly died then, but the treatment



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ing, How does gardening have its effects on us? How can it help us find or re-find our place in the world when we feel we have lost it? At this point in the twenty-first century, with rates of depression and anxiety and other mental disorders seemingly ever on the rise, and with a general way of life that is increasingly urbanized and technology-dependent, it seems more important than ever to understand the many ways in which mind and garden can interact.

Gardens have been recognized as restorative since ancient times. Today, gardening consistently features as one of the top ten most popular hobbies in a range of countries around the world. Quintessentially, caring for a garden is a nurturing activity, and for many people, along with having children and raising a family, the process of tending a plot is one of the most significant things in their lives. There are, of course, people for whom gardening feels like a chore and who would always prefer to do something else, but the combination of outdoor exercise and immersive activity is acknowledged by many as both calming and invigorating. Although other forms of green exercise and other kinds of mindful activity can have these benefits, the relationship that is formed with plants and the earth is unique to gardening. A close contact with nature affects us on different levels; sometimes we are filled with it, fully present and conscious of its effects, but it also works on us slowly and subconsciously in a way that can be particularly helpful for people suffering from trauma, illness, and loss.

The poet William Wordsworth explored perhaps more intensely than anyone else the influence of nature on the inner life of the mind. He was psychologically prescient, and his ability to tune in to the subconscious means he is sometimes regarded as a forerunner of psychoanalytic thinking. In a leap of intuition, which modern neuroscience confirms, he understood that our sense impressions are not passively recorded; instead we construct experience even as we are undergoing it, so that, as he put it, we "half-create" as well as perceive the world around us. Nature animates the mind, and the



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mind, in turn, animates nature. Wordsworth believed that a living relationship with nature like this is a source of strength that can help foster the healthy growth of the mind. He also understood what it means to be a gardener.

Much as I had felt uprooted, and the creation of our garden was existentially stabilizing for me, the process of making a garden together was an important act of restitution for Wordsworth and his sister, Dorothy. It was a response to the loss of their parents, who had died when they were children, leaving them to endure a lengthy and painful separation from each other. Gardening helped them recover a sense of home. At Dove Cottage they cultivated vegetables, medicinal herbs, and other useful plants, but much of the plot was highly naturalistic and sloped steeply up the hillside. This little "nook of mountain-ground," as Wordsworth referred to it, was full of "gifts" of wildflowers, ferns, and mosses that they collected on their walks and brought back, like offerings to the earth.

Wordsworth frequently worked on his poems in that garden. He described the essence of poetry as "emotion recollected in tranquillity," and it is true for all of us that we need to be in the right kind of setting to enter the calm state of mind needed for processing powerful or turbulent feelings. The Dove Cottage garden, with its sense of safe enclosure and lovely view beyond, gave him just that. He wrote many of his greatest poems while living at the cottage and developed what would be a lifelong habit of pacing out rhythms and chanting verses aloud while striding along garden paths. So the garden was both a physical setting for the house as well as a setting for the mind; one that was all the more significant for having been shaped by his and Dorothy's own hands.

Wordsworth's love of horticulture is a less well-known aspect of his life, but he remained a devoted gardener well into old age. He created a number of different gardens, including a sheltered winter garden for his patron Lady Beaumont. Conceived of as a



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therapeutic refuge, it was designed to alleviate her attacks of melancholy. The purpose of a garden such as this was, he wrote, "to assist Nature in moving affections." In providing a concentrated dose of the healing effects of nature, gardens influence us primarily through our feelings, but however much they may be set apart as a refuge, we are nevertheless, as Wordsworth described, "in the midst of the realities of things." These realities encompass all the beauties of nature as well as the cycle of life and the passing of the seasons. In other words, however much they can offer us respite, gardens also put us in touch with fundamental aspects of life.

Like a suspension in time, the protected space of a garden allows our inner world and the outer world to coexist free from the pressures of everyday life. Gardens in this sense offer us an *in-between* space which can be a meeting place for our innermost, dream-infused selves and the real physical world. This kind of blurring of boundaries is what Donald Winnicott called a "transitional" area of experience. Transitional processes allow us to imaginatively endow the world and feel part of something larger than ourselves. They are central to children's play, and in adult life they play a role in the creative arts and in religion.

Winnicott was a pediatrician as well as a psychoanalyst, and his understanding of the mind is not an individual psychology; it is always about the child in relation to the family, and the baby in relation to the mother. When you look at a mother and baby from the outside, it is easy to distinguish them as two separate beings, but the subjective experience of each of them is not so clear-cut. The relationship involves an important area of overlap or *in-between* through which the mother feels the baby's feelings as the baby expresses them, and the baby in turn does not yet know where it begins and Mother ends.

Much as there can be no baby without a caregiver, there can be



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no garden without a gardener. A garden is always the expression of someone's mind and the outcome of someone's care. When we step back from it, how can we tease apart what nature has provided and what we have contributed? Even in the midst of the action itself, it is not necessarily clear. Sometimes when I am fully absorbed in a garden task, a feeling arises within me that I am part of this and it is part of me; nature is running in me and through me.

A garden embodies transitional space by being *in-between* the home and the landscape that lies beyond. Within it, wild nature and cultivated nature overlap, and the gardener's scrabbling about in the earth is not at odds with dreams of paradise or civilized ideals of refinement and beauty. The garden is a place where they can come together, maybe the one place where they can so freely come together.

Winnicott believed that play was psychologically replenishing, but he emphasized that in order to enter an imaginary world, we need to feel safe and free from scrutiny. He employed one of his trademark paradoxes to capture this experience when he wrote of how important it is for a child to develop the ability to be "alone in the presence of the mother." In my gardening, I often recapture a feeling of being absorbed in play—it is as if in the safe curtilage of the garden, I am in the kind of company that allows me to be alone and enter my own world. Both daydreaming and playing are increasingly recognized to contribute to psychological health and these benefits do not stop with the end of childhood.

The emotional and physical investment that working on a place entails means that over time it becomes woven into our sense of identity. As such it can be a protective part of our identity too, one that can help buffer us when the going gets tough. But as the traditional pattern of a rooted relationship to place has been lost, so we have also lost sight of the potentially stabilizing effects of an attachment to place.



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The field of attachment theory was pioneered by the psychiatrist and psychoanalyst John Bowlby in the 1960s, and there is now an extensive research base associated with it. Bowlby regarded attachment as the "bedrock" of human psychology. He was also a keen naturalist, and this informed the development of his ideas. He described how birds return to the same place to build their nests year after year, often close to where they were born, and that animals do not roam about at random, as is often thought, but rather occupy a "home" territory, around their lair or burrow. In the same way, he argued, "each man's environment is unique to himself."

Attachment to place and attachment to people share an evolutionary pathway, and a quality of uniqueness is central to both. The feeding of an infant is not enough on its own to trigger bonding, because we are biologically encoded to attach through the specificity of smells, textures, and sounds as well as pleasurable feelings. Places too evoke feelings, and natural places are particularly rich in sensory pleasures. These days we are surrounded by functional places lacking in character and individuality, like supermarkets and shopping malls. While they provide us with food and other useful things, we don't develop affectionate bonds for them, in fact they are often deeply unrestorative. As a result, the notion of place in contemporary life has increasingly been reduced to a backdrop and the interaction, if there is any, tends to be of a transient nature, rather than a living relationship that might be sustaining.

At the heart of Bowlby's thinking is the idea that the mother is the very first place of all. Children seek out her protective arms whenever they are frightened, tired, or upset. This "safe haven" becomes what Bowlby called a "secure base" through repeated small experiences of separation and loss that are followed by reunion and recovery. When a feeling of security has been established, a child becomes more emboldened to explore his or her surroundings, but still keeps half an eye on Mother as a safe place to return to.



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the gem from the deepest diamond mine, which is the rarest and most precious gift of them all.

The palace gardener has a son, who is secretly in love with the princess and interprets the challenge in a different way—one that is informed by his close relationship with the natural world. The trees around the grounds are groaning with nuts, and he presents one to the king, along with a pair of nutcrackers. You could say he calls the king's bluff, for certainly the king is bemused at being given something as ordinary as a nut, but then the young man explains that if the king cracks the nut open, he will see something that no living soul has ever set eyes on before. In the way of all good fairy stories, it is a tale of rags to riches and lovers united. But it is also about how the wonders of nature may be revealed to us if we do not overlook them. More than that, it is a tale about human empowerment, because nature is accessible to us all.

If there were no loss in the world, we would lack the motivation to create. As the psychoanalyst Hanna Segal wrote: "It is when the world within us is destroyed, when it is dead and loveless, when our loved ones are in fragments, and we ourselves in helpless despair—it is then that we must recreate our world anew, reassemble the pieces, infuse life into dead fragments, recreate life." Gardening is about setting life in motion, and seeds, like dead fragments, help us re-create the world anew.

It is just this newness that is so compelling in the garden, life endlessly re-forming and reshaping itself. The garden is a place where we can be in on its beginning and have a hand in its making. Even the humble potato patch offers this opportunity, for when we turn over the mounded-up earth, a cluster of potatoes that no one has set eyes on before is brought into the light.



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CHAPTER 2

# *Green Nature: Human Nature*

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Snowdrop from the Barn Garden.

*Who would have thought my shrivel'd heart*
*Could have recover'd greenness? It was gone*
*Quite underground.*

George Herbert (1593–1633)

Snowdrops are the first sign of new life in our garden, when winter begins its turn. Their green shoots feel their way up from the dark earth, and their simple white flowers express the purest intention of a fresh start.



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Each year in February, before they die back, we divide them up and replant them. For most of the rest of the year they are invisible, though all the while they are growing and replicating themselves underground. While the resident mice feed on other bulbs in the garden, they don't feed on the snowdrops, so they multiply themselves with abandon. It is not only the mass of them that is so compelling, it is the sense of legacy, for the legions of snowdrops that now cover our ground derive from a few buckets of bulbs transplanted from Tom's mother's garden more than thirty years ago.

Renewal and regeneration come so naturally in the plant world, but psychological repair does not come so naturally to us. Although the mind has an intrinsic drive toward growth and development, there are pitfalls in its workings. Many of our automatic responses in the face of trauma and loss, such as avoidance, numbness, isolation, and ruminating on negative thoughts, actually work against the possibility of recovery.

The repetitive patterns of anxious and obsessive thinking that occur in depression set up a vicious circle. This kind of preoccupation is the mind's attempt to make sense of things, but trying to solve an unfathomable problem keeps us stuck in a mental groove and prevents us moving forward. Depression has another inbuilt circularity to it because when we are depressed, we perceive and interpret the world and ourselves much more negatively, and this in turn feeds our low mood and reinforces the urge to isolate ourselves. The truth is that, left to its own devices, the mind easily leads us down a rabbit hole.

I recall a patient from many years ago who long before I started thinking about the therapeutic effects of gardening, sowed a seed in my mind. Kay rented a flat with a small garden and had lived there for a number of years with her two sons. Throughout her life, she had experienced recurrent episodes of depression, some of which had been severe. Her childhood had



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been marked by violence and neglect. In adult life she struggled to form relationships and had brought her sons up largely on her own. The boys' teenage years were full of conflict, and when both of them left home, in quick succession, Kay became depressed again. For the first time in twenty years she found herself living alone.

It became clear in her therapy that she had internalized a lot of bad feelings about herself, feelings that originated in childhood and which made it hard for her to let good things into her life, because deep down she believed she didn't deserve them. If something good did come along, after a period of time she would start to feel anxious about losing it. As a result, she often sabotaged relationships and other chances to change her life, thereby preempting the disappointments that she thought, and that to some extent life had taught her, would inevitably follow. In this way, depression can become a self-reinforcing state in which it feels safer not to let anything grow, not to risk bringing hope alive, out of fear of being driven by disappointment to even greater depths.

At the back of Kay's flat there was a small garden, which had been trashed by her sons over the years. Now that they were no longer living at home, she decided to reclaim the space, and over the months that followed she acquired the habit of gardening. One day she said to me, "It is the only time I feel I am good." This statement was striking partly because of the conviction with which she uttered it, but also because a sense of her own goodness was so hard for her to come by.

So what did Kay mean by this feeling of goodness? Working in the garden directed her attention outside herself and gave her a place of refuge, both of which were helpful, but above all, gardening provided a real-life confirmation, that the world was not so bad and she was not so bad either. Kay discovered that she could make things grow. Gardening was not a cure for her depression, which



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tilling the soil was associated with slave labor and a beleaguered peasant class. For the Benedictines, gardening was an equalizer, and nobody within the monastery was too grand or too learned to work in the garden for a part of each day. This was a culture of care and reverence in which the gardener's tools were to be treated with the same level of respect as the vessels of the altar. It was a way of life in which the body, mind, and spirit were held in balance, and in which the virtuous life was an expression of our interconnectedness with the natural world.

In the aftermath of the fall of Rome, dark times descended on Europe and the land was badly in need of regeneration. The Roman Empire had seen the growth of large estates, or *latifundia*, which were run on slave labor and which exploited the land to the point of exhaustion. As the Benedictines grew in size and influence, they took on some of these abandoned and ruined estates and set about replenishing the land and developing them as monasteries. The reparative work that the Benedictines undertook was every bit as material as it was spiritual, in fact the two were inextricably linked, because of St. Benedict's belief that the life of the spirit needed to be grounded in a relationship with the earth.

A typical monastery had vineyards and orchards as well as plots in which the monks cultivated vegetables, flowers, and medicinal herbs, while their enclosed gardens provided tranquil spaces for meditation and recovery from illness. St. Bernard's account of the hospice gardens at Clairvaux Abbey in France dates from the eleventh century and is one of the earliest descriptions of a therapeutic garden. He writes of how "the sick man sits upon the green lawn. . . . For the comfort of his pain all kinds of grass are fragrant in his nostrils. The lovely green of herb and tree nourishes his eyes . . . the choir of painted birds caresses his ears . . . the earth breathes with fruitfulness, and the invalid himself with eyes, ears, and nostrils, drinks in the delights of colors, songs and perfumes." It is a strikingly sensuous account of drawing strength from the goodness of the earth.



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The remarkable twelfth-century abbess St. Hildegard von Bingen was a composer and a theologian as well as a medicinal herbalist. She took the Benedictine teachings further and developed her own philosophy based on the connection between the human spirit and the growth force of the earth which she called *viriditas*. The word combines the Latin for green and truth, and like the source of a river, *viriditas* is the font of energy on which all other life forms ultimately depend. It is the origin of goodness and health, in contrast to *ariditas*, or dryness, which Hildegard regarded as its life-defying opposite.

The greening power of *viriditas* is both literal and symbolic. It refers to the flourishing of nature as well as the vibrancy of the human spirit. By placing "greenness" at the heart of her thinking, Hildegard recognized that people can only thrive when the natural world thrives. She understood that there is an inescapable link between the health of the planet and human physical and spiritual health, which is why she is increasingly regarded as a forerunner of the modern ecological movement.

In a garden filled with light and suffused with the energy of new growth, the green pulse of life can be felt at its strongest. Whether we conceive of the natural growth force in terms of God, Mother Earth, biology, or a mixture of these, there is a living relationship at work. Gardening is an interchange through which nature gives life to our reparative wishes, be it turning waste into nutritious compost, helping pollinators thrive, or beautifying the earth. Gardening involves striving to keep pests and weeds at bay so that there is nourishment in all its various forms, greenness and shade, color and beauty and all the fruits of the earth.

The emotional significance of reparation tends to be overlooked in the world we live in today, but it plays an important role in our mental health. Unlike religious absolution, the psychoanalytic view



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of reparation is not black-and-white, instead the view is that, like a constant gardener, we need to rework various forms of emotional restoration and repair throughout life. Melanie Klein first recognized the significance of this through her observations of small children at play. She was struck by how often their drawings and imaginary games involved expressing or testing out destructive impulses that were then followed by acts of restoration in which they displayed feelings of love and concern, and that this whole cycle was intensely charged with meaning.

Klein illustrated her thinking through a discussion of a Ravel opera called *L'Enfant et les Sortilèges* ("The Child and the Spells"). The plot, based on a story by Colette, starts when the central character, a little boy, is sent to his room by his mother for refusing to do his homework. In his banishment he embarks on a rampage of fury, reveling in destruction as he trashes his room and attacks his toys and pet animals. Suddenly, the room comes to life and he feels threatened and anxious.

Two cats appear and take the boy out to the garden, where a tree is groaning in pain from a wound he inflicted on its bark the day before. As he starts to feel pity and lays his cheek against the tree trunk, a dragonfly whose mate he recently caught and killed confronts him. It dawns on him that the insects and animals in the garden love one another. Then a fight breaks out when some of the animals he has previously hurt start to retaliate by biting him. A squirrel is injured in the fray and the boy instinctively takes off his scarf to bind its wounded paw. With this act of care, the world around him is transformed. The garden ceases to be a hostile place, and the animals sing to him of his goodness as they help him back to the house to be reunited with his mother. As Klein described: "He is restored to the human world of helping."

Children need to see positive confirmation of themselves in the world around them, and they need to believe in their capacity to love. Adults are no different. But when we get into a spiral of anger



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and resentment, as the little boy did with his mother, it can feel hard to let grievances go, especially if pride is at stake. What eventually allows these feelings to shift, and bring a return to more caring feelings, is something of a mystery, and sometimes it happens indirectly. For the little boy, it was the vulnerability of nature in the garden and the interconnectedness of life within it that awakened his feelings of love and protection. Feelings like these set up a "benign" or virtuous circle which gives rise to hopefulness in place of despair and depression. This aspect of our psychology is the mind's counterpart to the cycle of life in nature through which destruction and decay are followed by regrowth and renewal.

Plants are so much less frightening and challenging than people that a garden may be a more accessible way of reconnecting with life-giving impulses. For my patient Kay, gardening was a way of expressing nurturing feelings that was not caught up in the unpredictability and complexity of human relationships. In a garden the level of background noise falls away and you can escape from other people's thoughts and judgments about you, so that within a garden there is, perhaps, more freedom to feel good about yourself. This relief from the interpersonal realm of life can, paradoxically, be a way of reconnecting with our humanity.

Just as in bringing up children, in the garden we are never fully in control. Beyond providing the conditions for growth, there is only so much a gardener can do; the rest is down to the life force of plants, and they will grow in their own time and in their own way. That is not to say the gardener can be laissez-faire, because care requires a particular form of attention, a *tuning in* that is about noticing the smaller details. Plants are highly sensitive to their environment and there are many variables at play—temperature, wind, rain, sun, and pests. Many plants tough it out regardless, but to garden a plot well means looking out for them, noticing the first signs of ailing, and working out what they need in order to thrive.

As we cultivate the earth, we cultivate an attitude of care, but



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a caring stance is not something that is actively promoted in contemporary life. The "replace" rather than "repair" culture, combined with fragmented social networks and the fast pace of urban living, has given rise to a set of values that devalues care. In fact, we have moved so far from placing care at the center of our lives that it has become, as the environmentalist and social activist Naomi Klein recently observed, a "radical idea."

This is not only about values—there are realities to the world that many of us live in that work against these impulses. Our machines have become far too complex for most of us even to think about repairing them, and we have become used to all the immediate "likes" we get through our smart phones and other devices. There is a devaluing of the slower rhythms of natural time, the natural time not only of plants, but of our bodies and minds. These rhythms often don't fit in with the "quick fix" mentality that has come to dominate so much of modern life.

These pressures express themselves as a demand for treatment packages and programs that promise quick results, as if it were possible to speed-dial mental health. While identifying faulty thinking or misplaced feelings can help us to understand a problem so that it immediately becomes less troubling, it will still take months to lay down the neural pathways that accompany lasting change. In situations that are more complex, we not only have to wait for things to grow, we have to first reach the point where we really want things to grow, because the prospect of change, however much we might think we want it, almost always makes us very anxious.

The most popular metaphor in use for the brain these days is the computer, which only encourages the idea that there is a fix to be had. The physical structure of the brain is likened to hardware, the mind to its software, and terms such as "program," "module," and "app" are applied to its functioning. The undeveloped infant brain is even sometimes likened to a database waiting for data to be keyed in. This brain-as-computer metaphor is woefully mis-



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be implicated in depression. BDNF levels can be boosted through various forms of stimulation, which include exercise, play, and social interaction.

A constant process of being weeded, pruned, and fertilized keeps the brain healthy at a cellular level. The activity of the microglia exemplifies one of the fundamental laws that govern life—that health is not a passive process. What is taking place on a microscopic scale also needs to happen on a larger canvas. The mind needs to be gardened too. Our emotional lives are complex and need constant tending and reworking. The form this takes will be different for each one of us, but fundamentally, in order to counteract negative and self-destructive forces, we need to cultivate a caring and creative attitude. Above all, we need to recognize what nourishes us.

We are a grassland species that emerged in the savannah landscapes of Africa, and over the course of evolution, our nervous and immune systems have been primed to function best in response to various aspects of the natural world. This includes how much sunlight we get, the kind of microbes we are exposed to, the amount of green vegetation around us, and the type of exercise we take. The significance of these things will become clearer in the course of this book, but Hildegard's intuition that there is a link between the way plants thrive in nature and human thriving turns out to have been right. When we work with nature outside us, we work with nature inside us. It is why people feel more fully alive and energized in the natural world, why gardeners report feeling calmer and more vigorous, and why spending time in nature awakens the connection-seeking aspects of our human nature.

When I began visiting therapeutic gardening groups as part of my research, I got a strong sense of all these benefits. On one of those visits I encountered a woman called Grace who suffered from anxiety and had been attending a small horticulture project



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for nearly a year. About ten years previously, when she was in her twenties, she had experienced an unfortunate and distressing chain of events which had culminated in the death of a close friend. Following this she developed depression and began to experience panic attacks. Although the medication she was prescribed reduced some of her symptoms, her life became increasingly restricted. Her anxiety prevented her going out to the corner store on her own, and she spent most of her time indoors, trapped in a cycle of low self-esteem, feeling that nothing was going to change.

Grace had never done any gardening before, and when her psychiatrist first suggested the project, she found it hard to imagine it would be helpful. Although she was uncertain whether or not to attend, once she did, she instantly took to the peacefulness of the garden: "There is no hustle and bustle," she said. "It just calms me down being here."

She liked the fact there was no compulsion to do lots of gardening; it was possible just to sit and unwind if that was how she felt. Grace soon discovered, however, that when she did join in, the impetus of the group carried her along. Shared tasks help group bonding, but natural surroundings play a part too, because people connect more easily when they are in nature together. It means that the psychological, social, and physical benefits of gardening go hand in hand.

The feeling that other people in the group who had been attending for longer were supportive of her made a huge difference to Grace. She also liked the fact that the horticultural therapist took care to show her exactly what she needed to do, and this gave her confidence. On one level, a demonstration like this is simply about practical skills, but for someone as stuck in her life as Grace, a crucial message is also being unconsciously imparted—that change and renewal are possible and that she can help something grow.

When, in time, the plants grow—and, of course, they do grow—then seeing is believing. And eating is believing too. For



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when you cook and share the produce, you taste it for real, and you know, *really* know, that something good has happened. As Grace said, "It makes a huge difference to see things from start to finish and know that you put the effort in to make it grow." Preparing and sharing food collectively was a new experience for her, as was the taste of freshly grown produce. The first thing she sampled was some sweetcorn, and she was overwhelmed by how full of flavor and succulent it was. She recalled how, one time, when they were tidying up after sharing some soup together, the entire group started singing and dancing in a spontaneous outburst of joy.

Grace was surprised at how involved she became with the plants she looked after, and how much pleasure and satisfaction she derived from seeing them thrive. The contemporary emphasis on self-improvement and self-investment can make care seem like a depleting activity because it requires putting in effort for something other than ourselves, but the neurochemistry of care is not like that. For obvious evolutionary reasons, care has inbuilt neurochemical rewards. The feelings of calm and contentment that accompany nurture have benefits for giver and receiver alike, and there are obvious evolutionary reasons why this should be so. The antistress and antidepressant effect of these pleasurable feelings arises through the action of the bonding hormone oxytocin and release of beta-endorphins, the brain's natural opioids. "It helps me so much," Grace told me. "It's a whole new feeling—while I'm there, I'm in another world."

This "other world" is not only associated with the experience of care and nurture but also the soothing effects of being immersed in nature and the stimulation of sociable activities such as planting, harvesting, and sharing food. A project like this to some extent replicates the kind of simple collaborative living, close to the land, that has typified our species for most of its existence. Grace attends the project once a week and the good feeling she experiences there stays with her for a few days afterward. If she starts to feel anxious



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when she is at home, just thinking about the garden is helpful: "It's like I have a calm place in my mind now," she said. These days, as a result, she can get to the store on her own and is beginning to get out and do other things as well. When I spoke with her, she had just completed one year and signed up for another, and there was no question in her mind how much the project helped her: "It's eleven out of ten," she told me, even though I hadn't asked her to rate it.

The idea that gardens and nature can help people recover from mental illness first became prominent in the eighteenth century. This is when reformers like the British physician William Tuke campaigned against the appalling conditions and brutal treatments that such patients were being subjected to. Tuke believed that the environment itself could be curative, and in 1796 he built an asylum known as the Retreat, in the countryside near York. Instead of being restrained, his patients were allowed to wander freely in the grounds, and there were opportunities for various forms of meaningful work, including gardening. Conceived of as "a quiet haven in which the shattered bark might find the means of reparation, or of safety," the approach to treatment here was based on kindness, dignity, and respect. There followed an era in which asylums were built in parkland settings with gardens and greenhouses in which patients could spend part of the day growing flowers and vegetables.

In 1812, on the other side of the Atlantic, Benjamin Rush, an American physician who was one of the founding fathers of the United States, published the first manual for the treatment of mental illness. In it, he observed that mental health patients who worked in the asylum grounds because they needed to pay for their care by cutting wood, making fires, and digging in the garden often made the best recoveries. In contrast, those of higher social status were more likely to "languish away their lives within the walls of the hospital."



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Well into the twentieth century, many asylums continued to have large greenhouses and walled gardens in which flowers, fruit, and vegetables were cultivated by patients for use in the hospital. In the 1950s, the treatment of mental illness was radically changed by the introduction of new and powerful drugs. The main focus of care shifted to medication, and the role of the environment diminished in significance so that the next generation of hospitals that were built often had little in the way of outdoor green space.

We are beginning to come full circle. Levels of depression and anxiety have increased, and drug costs are rising. This, coupled with a growing body of evidence on nature's beneficial effects on us, is giving gardening, green exercise, and various other forms of green care a new impetus. "Social prescribing" schemes are a recent initiative which allow GPs to prescribe a course of gardening or green exercise instead of, or alongside, medication. The current policy in England is for this kind of community-based initiative to become more common. The GP William Bird, who edited the recently published *Oxford Textbook of Nature and Public Health*, is a strong advocate for green care. He has estimated that for every £1 ($1.31) the National Health Service might spend on setting up a gardening project, £5 ($6.56) could be saved through reduced health costs. As he puts it: "People are living in a state of disconnection from nature and from each other."

Therapeutic horticulture is usually based on principles of organic cultivation. The focus is on environmental sustainability as well as the psychological sustainability that comes from providing people with what they need in order to grow. When the UK charity Mind carried out a large-scale survey of people's experiences of taking part in a range of green activities including green gyms and gardening, they found that 94 percent said that it had benefited their mental health.

One of the strongest findings in research across the last few decades has been the extent to which gardening boosts mood and



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use in the service of growth. In discharging quantities of aggression and working off anxieties, tilling the earth works on the inner landscape as well as the outer; quintessentially, it is a transformative action.

Only through facing the sadness of loss are we able to recover from it, but the pain involved means we sometimes resort to other solutions. Miss Havisham, in Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*, refuses to mourn and cultivates grievances instead. When she is jilted on her wedding day, she stops the clocks, shuts out the daylight, and confines herself indoors. Satis House becomes a mausoleum to her broken dreams. Her wedding cake remains like a rotting corpse on the table, with a black fungus inhabited by speckled-legged spiders growing out of it.

It is a peculiarity of human nature that people are able to turn something good into something bad and then relish it. The young girl, Estella, whom Miss Havisham brings up, has not been nurtured by her but formed, as Pip discovers, "to wreak Miss Havisham's revenge on man." In place of love and compassion, contempt and indifference have been planted in Estella's impressionable heart.

The garden at Satis House has turned into a "wilderness overgrown with tangled weeds." But Dickens makes it clear that this is no ordinary reversion to the wild. When Pip wanders through the "desolate and neglected" garden, he encounters "a rank ruin of cabbage stalks" and then something more grotesque—some old melon frames and cucumber frames that "seemed in their decline to have produced a spontaneous growth of weak attempts at pieces of old hats and boots, with now and then a weedy offshoot into the likeness of a battered saucepan." The natural growth force in the garden, as in the mind of its owner, has been perverted, and decay is taking place without renewal.



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On his last visit to Satis House, Pip recognizes the extent to which years of reclusive brooding led Miss Havisham's "spurned affection, and wounded pride" to develop into a "monster mania." He also realizes that "in shutting out the light of day, she had shut out infinitely more; that, in seclusion, she had secluded herself from a thousand natural and healing influences." If only she had got the pruning shears out, all that vengeance could have gone into transforming her garden. Instead her grievance consumes her, she goes up in flames, and Satis House is burned to the ground. At the end of the novel, Pip and Estella meet by chance on the site where Satis House once stood. Among the rubble, Pip notices that "some of the old ivy had struck root anew, and was growing green in the low quiet mounds of ruin." With this small sign of nature's renewal, we sense that Pip and Estella's lives may not be so ruined after all.



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CHAPTER 3

# *Seeds and Self-Belief*

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Insight Garden flower garden at San Quentin State Prison, San Quentin, California.

*Many things grow in the garden that were never sown there.*

Thomas Fuller (1654–1734)

When it comes to making things grow, the rewards that follow from small interventions can be disproportionately large. I feel almost ridiculously identified with our asparagus bed, because it started life in my hands as a very small seed packet. For the same reason I experience a thrill when my auriculas pop into flower each spring. Auriculas are so mouthwateringly delicious, with



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their boiled candy colors and their confectioners' sugar farina, that they always give a sense of delight, but the feeling is intensified by knowing that I had a hand in their making, and it is a form of magic that came home from the Chelsea Flower Show in a brown envelope.

Asparagus and auriculas, it is true, require patience and persistence, but sow some sunflower seeds in spring, and a few months later you will be looking up at a row of giant sunflowers. Sow a handful of pumpkin seeds, and more likely than not, in autumn those seeds will yield more than you can possibly eat. Nowhere in our garden is the marvel of nature's powers of alteration more evident than in the crop of pumpkins that our compost heap yields each year, and it all comes from a few seeds and a pile of waste.

Gardening is more accessible than other creative endeavors, such as painting and music, because you are halfway there before you start; the seed has all its potential within it—the gardener simply helps unlock it. The psychological significance of this came home to me on a visit to a prison gardening project when I interviewed a man called Samuel. He had been in and out of jail for much of the last thirty years, mainly for drug-related offenses. With his thin gray hair and heavily creased cheeks, he looked defeated by life, and when he spoke of his family, I could see that his sense of shame and failure was crippling. Samuel knew he had let them down again and again, and he felt that they had lost all faith in his capacity to stay clean and turn his life around.

This time in jail had been different from his previous spells. There was a horticulture project within the grounds, and having never gardened before, Samuel decided he would try something new. He told me about a phone conversation with his eighty-year-old mother that had taken place a few days earlier, soon after harvesting the squash he had helped grow in the garden. For the first time in decades, he had something good to tell her—something



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the baby may fleetingly feel that he or she has created the mother, rather than the other way around—such is the scope of infantile omnipotence!

Although we can never access the subjective experience of this earliest phase of life to confirm this idea or not, we can observe how much small children like to believe they are more powerful than they actually are. This illusion needs to be shattered very gently because it forms the basis of self-belief. Too much too soon is not a good thing, because the child's sense of smallness and vulnerability can then be crushing. That doesn't mean the illusion needs to be overtly encouraged either, just fostered a little. We see it in action in the imaginary games children play that offset their feelings of powerlessness and allow them to experience "the joy in being a cause." None of this is restricted to childhood. Winnicott and Milner's insight was that many of our most enriching and inspiring experiences throughout life involve a similar sense of creative illusion.

In the husbandry of seeds and the interaction between mind and nature that is involved, we can experience something of this illusion. Making things grow has a kind of mystery to it, and we can claim some of that mystery for ourselves. We even have a name for the illusion that I am describing: a "green thumb." This illusion is, I think, central to the vital connection between people and plants and contributes to the enormous satisfaction we derive from making things happen and the joy we can feel in being a cause.

The role of what Winnicott called the "good enough mother" is to foster illusion just enough. Through not being entirely perfect (e.g. , always available), the mother allows the baby to experience small frustrations which are accompanied by a dawning awareness that magical control over reality does not exist: "The mother's eventual task is gradually to disillusion the infant, but she has no hope of



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