

The Garden of Time

by Janice Cook Knight

I have never been good at being on time, and that is honestly an understatement. Just ask my friends, parents, sisters, children, spouse, and especially my former employers. I'm also deficient at keeping track of the passage of time, or even estimating how much time it takes to do something. If the ability to manage time is genetic, then I'm missing that gene.

Thankfully, I am self-employed now, but still I must show up for meetings with clients, as well as those annoying non-work related appointments to see doctors, get haircuts, arrive at yoga class the same time everyone else does, etc. And writers have deadlines, including the one looming for this article. Curiously, I work well on a deadline: my normally mellow, all-the-time-in-the-world persona transforms briefly into a "type A" personality, until the deadline is met; then I'm back to my mellow, time-oblivious self (though I've been known to beg for deadline extensions, too).

Perhaps because being on time has always been such a burden to me, I have become fascinated with time's other aspects. I look for those "times," places, and activities that bring me into present time. Picture these different facets of time as children on a teeter-totter: time management on one side, present time on the other. When the two of these are leveled out, all feet on the ground, there is a nice balance. Especially in summer, I feel the need to stop time: it's almost a requirement, part of the myth of summertime and relaxation, but also a physical sense of the slowing of time caused by the onset of the year's hottest days.

A place where I am almost always in present time is the garden. Not just my garden, either; others gardens will do. There is almost nothing I like better than walking in a garden. It may be a man-made garden, or it can be a garden in nature, like a particular path I love to walk among the trees in Big Sur. It doesn't matter; the plants, the outdoors, puts me at ease.

In the garden, I lose track of time – in a good way. Now, I'm not recommending blowing off work or deadlines to go plant some flowers. What I am recommending is providing for oneself those times and places where we can let go of time. Those times and places bring us deeper into our authentic selves; they take us from the busy "doing" of things, into the "being" of present-time.

I have lived at my home for nearly five years, and just last week I



noticed for the first time the lemon-guava trees in bloom. Their flowers exploded into fuzzy white blossoms, with soft anemone-like fronds, which smelled, upon placing my face into them, quite exotic and delicious. I had never done that before; they are rather small flowers. I noticed them on my way across the yard while chasing my pet rabbit, Persephone. This is an evening chore I don't necessarily relish, as she sometimes likes to play games with me: hiding under the rosemary hedge, or burrowing under the fence into my neighbor's backyard. Putting the rabbit away becomes an exercise in herding. But in that moment, when I stopped to smell the guavas, suddenly I was enjoying the evening's chore. Not simply enjoying it: I became one with it. I can take my time with the guavas and the rabbit; suddenly we (the guavas, the path, the hedge, the rabbit and me) are all living in and enjoying the same moment (and yes, when I am experiencing the present moment, it feels to me like the rabbit, and even the plants, are enjoying it too; I don't know why that should be, but it is).

While some come alive on a trip to New York City's shopping district, I might come more alive discovering Brooklyn's Botanic Garden, or walking through Central Park. Why the garden? I'd like to experience this gift of present time in many other parts of my life as well, but in my case I was trained to the garden at a young age. My parents and grandparents had productive ornamental and food gardens that became magical places for me. Gardening was something they thought about and planned for throughout the year, ordering seeds and bulbs in winter to plant in the spring. They enjoyed providing food as well as beauty for themselves and their family. They liked to cook, too. Maybe I've inherited genes for the love of food and gardening, instead of that gene for time management.

It's not just walking in the garden, either; but working in the garden. Perhaps because the garden calls to me on more than one level: while it refreshes my spirit, it also offers the present moment to my body. For example, I love to prune trees. I spend a day or two every winter pruning my fruit trees. It's not back-breaking work, but after a few hours, reaching overhead to trim with a cutter, using a saw on the larger branches, stacking the cut fruitwood into neat piles that we will use later in the year to barbecue, my body is satisfied and wants to rest. While I prune, I'm not thinking about much else. I am

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looking for the crossing branches to remove, determining which limbs will produce next year's fruit, and opening the tree up so that the branches that remain are sound and have good access to light and air.

In that place without time, there is a kind of bliss. Some people find this in their work. Sometimes it happens while I write, but not always. It could overtake any of us while kneading bread, surfing, repairing an engine. It could happen sitting in meditation, reading a story to a child, or while making love. Present time is here: our gift, our choice is to allow ourselves to experience it.

These places where we come alive are talismans for us – places we can touch in to our own timeless essence. I believe these experiences teach us how to be present. They are so enjoyable we can't help but come alive there. Recently I spent a week at a writer's retreat located on a small island off the coast of Washington. There I was in a garden again – this time a northwest fir forest, with an under story of salmonberries and wild huckleberries. Native bunnies frolicked (and no rabbit herding was required). A cultivated garden had an abundance of ripe raspberries, and I had free reign to pick and eat as many as I wanted. The setting nurtured me in so many ways (nature, food, people, instruction, uninterrupted time) that it brought everything else into focus too. I returned home inspired to bring more uninterrupted time into my everyday life – for writing, for gardening, for my family – whatever is needed.

That's where time management again raises its head. Challenging as it is for me, facing and engaging that part of the time equation is something I need to do. It actually brings mindfulness to my troubles with time. By acknowledging that I am time-impaired, I become present to it. There really is no separation between the everyday life, and life in the garden.

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