

Gardening with Heidegger

Rupert King on creating a haven for healing



Being-in-the-world

I trained as an existential psychotherapist and the writings of the German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) play a formative role in my professional life. After several years of practicing I experienced a period of burn-out and depression, and Heidegger’s later works provided the solace I needed. These are a series of essays and lectures replete with poetic imagery of wooded paths (*Holzwege*), clearings (*die Lichtung*) and shadows (*concealment*). One essay in particular struck a chord – Building Dwelling Thinking, in which Heidegger talks about the importance of learning to dwell: ‘*Dwelling, however, is the basic character of Being*’ (Heidegger, 1993, p.362). What does Heidegger mean by dwelling? In my busy life I had certainly lost all sense of dwelling. Why are the simplest things so easily overlooked? As I pondered how to dwell the answer came in an unexpected form.

It was around this time I moved house, the garden I acquired with my new home was in a sorry state, a threadbare lawn dominated by a Leylandii hedge under which nothing grew. The garden was surrounded by a beautiful red brick wall most of which was covered by a suffocating mass of ivy. Mindful of Confucius' saying 'Life begins when you plant a garden', and the renowned psychoanalyst Nina Coltart writing 'in an ideal world, all psychotherapists would have a garden', my plan was to create a water garden – a haven where I could heal.

I wanted to evoke the same kind of sanctuary as my great-grandmother's garden, where I recalled stepping through the gate, from the ordinary into a magical world, a mature, well cared for English garden with no shortage of hiding places, old trees, beautifully kept lawns, and garden 'rooms' in which I could create fantasy worlds. With no formal design training I followed my imagination combining it with a love of Japanese gardens and an interest in exotic, sculptural plants. In doing so I built a space where I could re-connect with the world and myself – a space for dwelling.

In another of Heidegger's later essays, *The Origin of the Work of Art*, there is a line that I have always found poignant: *'In the midst of beings as a whole an open place occurs. There is a clearing.'* (Heidegger, 1993, p.178). Heidegger's clearing communicates the essence of his later philosophy, namely that the nature of Being is openness. This is our need to create space and dwell in openness whether it's physical or psychological: *'Such standing in the clearing of Being I call the existence of man'* (Heidegger, 1993, p.228).

The image of the clearing certainly resonates with my work as a therapist. Sitting with clients echoes the dappled sunlight of the clearing; where patterns emerge, things come to light and insights are uncovered – Heidegger's *aletheia*. At the same time the clearing is an inherently ambiguous space with blurred edges. In the clearing certain things remain forever in shadow. The clearing teaches us to accept these every present mysteries, it inspires both therapist and client to *'let things be'*, to tolerate uncertainty and become present to the unfolding of life.

Gardening is more than merely an escape or distraction. Feeling the earth in my hands and the dirt under my fingernails is a grounding experience. Planting bulbs, pruning climbers and sweeping autumnal leaves remind me of the passing seasons – very existential. Gardening is a form of dwelling, it is about creating and nurturing. I see myself as an artist, sculpting space and creating forms through planting, building layers of texture with my choice of plants. When I garden I become 'one with the process', time stops and I am in *flow*. These are the moments that any artist cherishes, that sense of getting lost in the creative process. My garden is a space where my psyche finds expression and responds to the world – it is my *soulwork* (Romanyshyn, 2007).

When Heidegger talks about the dwelling he refers to it as ‘gathering’: the fourfold elements coming together – Sky, Earth, Gods and Mortals, each representing a different aspect of Being-in-the-world. My garden, in Heidegger’s phrase, ‘holds open a world’ – where the wildlife, visitors and I, the gardener, become present (Mortals); all this that happens under heaven – ‘*the vaulting path of the sun*’ (Heidegger, 1993, p.351) which is captured and reflected in the pond (Sky); the garden arises out of the London, clay soil (Earth). And what of the *gods*? A visitor to my garden furnished me with the best answer to this question. While discussing the ceramic sculpture at the centre of the pond she referred to it as ‘very Jungian’. The gods then are the numinous aspects of life. They are the spiritual made present yet not fully understood. I like Heidegger’s idea of the gods because they remind me of the importance of *not-knowing*, a quality similar to Keats’ Negative Capability, which is an uncomfortable, yet familiar, place in therapy. Where we sit awaiting the gods as “the beckoning messengers” (Heidegger, 1993 p.351) and for the psyche to manifest itself. In short, my garden represents all aspects of the fourfold – it also a symbol of Being and nothingness: ‘The clearing is the open region for everything that becomes present and absent’ (Heidegger, 1993, p.442).

I once worked with a young client who suffered from terrible social anxiety. As a result his world was all about constriction and limitation – his physical presence, the way he curled up in the chair, the shallowness of his breathing and his reduced group of friends. He feared the world and so literally shrunk it to the point where there was no more space until he felt totally trapped. Much of our work was about exploring his worldview, but in equal measure it was about increasing his awareness of the physicality of space and the need for openness. We did this through relaxation, breathing and just sitting (which at times he found excruciating). Gradually he began to tolerate difficult feelings and learnt to dwell, in doing so the constricting tentacles of anxiety loosened their grip. Indeed, Heidegger wrote: ‘dwelling itself is always a staying with things’ (Heidegger, 1993, p.353).

The years spent gardening have taught me vital lessons: the need to create space, to let things be, to surrender to not-knowing and to dwell in openness. I started my journey in the belief that gardening was a creative outlet and an essential antidote to therapy; over time I discovered that gardening and therapy have much in common.

References

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