

ESSAYS

THE ART AND SCIENCE OF DEANING: LESSONS FROM MY GARDEN

*Linda L. Ammons**

WHEN I received the request to contribute to this volume, I struggled with what I should say that would be helpful, considering the fact that I had just completed my first year as dean of a very large, two-campus, two-state law school. In many respects, the first year is a blur. As I think back to the beginning of this journey and the lessons I have only begun to learn, it is clear to me that a deanship in a law school is the ultimate position of service through leadership. Having been in the position of administrative leadership before, it is interesting for me to contrast the more hierarchical style, with which I am most familiar, with the more consultative, persuasive model of educational leadership.

During this past year I have found the community of deans comforting. I look forward to the fellowship at various times of the year at the AALS and ABA meetings. The advice from other deans during the year has been affirming as we share our common trials and triumphs.

Before I actually took over the reins at Widener, a friend of mine suggested that I read Jim Collins's "Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap ... and Others Don't."¹ The principles of that book were enlightening and have informed and confirmed much of what I think about decision-making. I have also read John Maxwell's "The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership,"² and his latest book "Talent Is Never Enough,"³ and again I have found many good nuggets for introspection and implementation. Before leaving my last post, I had already read, "Difficult Conversations" by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen,⁴ which I will recycle soon. Years ago, I was introduced to David

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1. JIM COLLINS, *GOOD TO GREAT: WHY SOME COMPANIES MAKE THE LEAP ... AND OTHERS DON'T* (2001).

2. JOHN C. MAXWELL, *THE 21 IRREFUTABLE LAWS OF LEADERSHIP* (1998).

3. JOHN C. MAXWELL, *TALENT IS NEVER ENOUGH: DISCOVER CHOICES THAT WILL TAKE YOU BEYOND YOUR TALENT* (Thomas Nelson, 2007).

4. DOUGLAS STONE ET AL., *DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS: HOW TO DISCUSS WHAT MATTERS MOST* (1999).

Keirsesey's temperament sorting⁵ by my good friend Judge Leslie Hayashi of Hawaii, with whom I teach each summer at the National Judicial College, and now I am less frustrated in dealing with personality traits that do not necessarily complement mine.

In many books on leadership, authors use the example of the athlete and her preparation for the big event and the need to remain focused as an analogy for effective leadership. Lessons offered to teach how to succeed recite the history of the great inventors who kept failing until they found the right formula or until they resolved the problem. Other primers review how little organizations became outstanding ones. These illustrations are very instructive; however, the resource and place from which I draw incredible lessons transferable to day-to-day life as dean come from my gardens and what I am learning about gardening.

My late maternal grandmother, Emma Robinson Golson, was a tremendous vegetable gardener. A young southern woman during the Depression, she learned very quickly how important it was to be resourceful. When she moved north from Tennessee, self-sufficiency remained her motto. Without exception, until the year she died, she had something growing every summer in her garden, no matter where she lived, no matter how large or small her plot of land. During most of our time together, I paid little attention to her instructions about how to have a healthy, productive garden.

I have always admired beautiful flower gardens; however, before I bought my first home, I was only a spectator. It only took the blooming of tulips, given to me by a friend and planted by my hands in my front yard, to awaken in me the desire to become more involved in digging, scratching, watering, cultivating, and waiting for the earth to produce the magnificent blooms, textures, fragrances, and colors from the seeds, seedlings, cuttings, tubers, and bulbs. I do not profess to be a master gardener. Each season, I add something more to my repertoire of skills. I prefer perennials, but I also plant a few annuals. Geraniums, petunias, heliotrope,⁶ cosmos (this year they are six feet) sweet potato vines, celosia, canna,⁷ and lobelia⁸ are on my list of annual plantings. The garden provides for me a place of solace, release, and instruction. In winter, when I see the first sign of new life (generally crocuses) piercing through the snows of winter, I am excited about what I know is coming next (assuming the squirrels and chipmunks have not dug up the bulbs—more on that later).

How does this relate to being a new dean? Law deaning, like gardening,⁹ is part art and part science. For the master gardeners (senior deans) among us, the following lessons may be obvious, so I offer them as a review. For those of us beginners, these observations are given because as we head down these new

5. DAVID KEIRSEY, PLEASE UNDERSTAND ME II: TEMPERAMENT, CHARACTER, INTELLIGENCE (1998).

6. See App. A for a drawing of heliotrope.

7. See App. B for an illustration of canna.

8. To view a color picture of lobelia, see http://www.kispiox.com/photogallery/garden_flowers/images/lobelia_2.jpg (last visited Oct. 15, 2007).

9. Gardening actually allows me the opportunity to play in the dirt and water without some adult yelling at me about getting dirty and wet.

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paths we cannot be certain whether we may become mired in a thicket or discover a great spot to start something new.

When I work in my home garden, I often think of my work at the law school as a parallel track. I see the law school as a large plot of land with vast potential. It is like a garden started by others before me. When I bought my new home in Wilmington, I approached the landscaping with a fresh set of eyes. I had visions of Longwood Gardens¹⁰ and Winterthur¹¹ and I wanted to replicate aspects of other beautiful gardens I visited. Perhaps it is a little ambitious to think that my yard could ever resemble any aspect of those magnificent pantheons to horticulture, but my dreams and fantasies are free.

When I got past the unrealistic, and began to focus on the beauty and potential of my space (I also no longer envy Doris Tutkos's yard down the street) I considered the following tips on producing a successful garden, which can also be applied to leading a law school.

Lesson 1—Know where you are. Your success is dependent on it.

When contemplating a garden, among the first questions one must correctly answer includes: What zone is this?¹² What is the composition of the soil? Is it clay or sand? Will the soil need to be amended¹³ before I can plant? How are the gardens situated? Will they be set in a northern or southern exposure? At what time of the day will the plants get the most sun? Where are the microclimates which can sustain various types of life?

In the law school context, some of these questions (about environment) are partially answered when we diligently research while applying for the new job.

10. Longwood Gardens is a premier display garden located in Kennett Square, Pennsylvania. It is dedicated to the display of wonderful horticulture for the enjoyment of the public, researchers, and learners. Longwood is comprised of 1,050 acres with 20 outdoor and 20 indoor showrooms, and its displays include a variety of flowers, trees, fountains, conservatory, and historic house. Longwood's history is as fascinating as its gardens. In 1700, the Pierce family purchased the land from William Penn and began farming it, eventually creating an arboretum. In 1906, Pierre du Pont purchased the land, and from 1907 until the 1930s, he assembled the garden as it exists today. In 1946, the gardens were turned over to a foundation set up by Mr. du Pont. See Longwood Gardens, <http://www.longwoodgardens.org> (last visited Nov. 14, 2007).

11. Winterthur, the former house of Henry Francis du Pont, is a magnificent show of gardens, a museum, and a library. The gardens provide 1,000 acres displaying the beauty of plants from around the world. Visitors can enjoy the wonderful sight of seasonal plants when they visit.

Winterthur's history begins with Mr. du Pont's fascination with antiques and ideal to preserve nature in the early 1900s. As such, Mr. du Pont turned his attention to developing the gardens and personally developed much of the initial horticulture of Winterthur. In 1951, Mr. du Pont gave Winterthur to a non-profit educational institution which opened the estate for public exhibition. See <http://www.winterthur.org/> (last visited Nov. 14, 2007).

12. The U.S. Department of Agriculture developed a "hardiness zones" map, which reflects the ability of plants to withstand certain temperatures. The map is divided into eleven zones according to average U.S. temperatures from 1974 and 1986. Wilmington, Delaware is located in zone 7. See IAN SPENCE, GARDEN PLANTS AND FLOWERS (2004) (The hardiness zone map is located on the inside of the book.).

13. Amending the soil early with good fertilizer, top soil, adding compost and mulch increases the odds that the plants will be robust.

However, just as it would be improper to dig up the yard of a home of which the sales contract is pending, it is also unlikely that we will know or notice everything about a law school before we arrive. Some things are just not evident until you have had time to live in the space.

Unless you live in a desert, and your garden is primarily succulents, watering is essential. Nothing beats a good downpour for a garden. I remember my grandmother hurrying home when rain was on the horizon to plant her new seedlings. She would say to me, if I can beat the rain and get these in the ground, they will “catch” more quickly. When nature does not produce liquid sunshine, gardeners know that it is best to deeply water plants at the root in the early morning. Waiting to water in the heat of the day wastes water because it evaporates more quickly. Plants fare better when they have the opportunity to let the water soak in during the course of the day, as opposed to being flooded under extreme conditions. And speaking of weather, I have become more forgiving of the local meteorologists when they do not get it just right. Like Poor Richard’s Almanac,¹⁴ experience helps with prediction. Just as there is always the possibility that an unseasonable heat wave or unexpected cold snap, which cannot be avoided, might either ruin the bloom or threaten the life of plant, one cannot completely control for disgruntled current or prospective donors, immature students or investigative reporters.

Correctly determining the environment and climate for any number of constituencies or issues at a law school is a matter of survival. The dean, like the gardener, must be astute to timing and to the microclimates of the institution to reduce as much as possible unnecessary stresses on the people she is trying to lead. Stressed out people, like stressed out plants, do not thrive. Faculty, staff, students, and alumni need to feel that they are in a safe, productive, rewarding, and welcoming setting. Central administrations also expect a specific type of attention. Getting the soil, temperature, and watering needs right for each group at any given time can be tricky.

The demands of these groups can be as varied as the requirement for plants, ranging from bright sun to deep shade. Drought tolerant plants can be left without water for days, while others, especially those in pots, require water sometimes twice a day during a heat wave. There are some faculty members and staff who have to be constantly nurtured and affirmed. There are others who will produce no matter what. These vibrant faculty members remind me of my yellow coreopsis¹⁵ that I have divided several times and given to friends and family members. I also moved with that plant from a zone 5 to a zone 7 and it continues to bloom and spread.¹⁶ Just as it is a joy to work with and watch that

14. Poor Richard’s Almanac was a publication by Benjamin Franklin which contained a variety of information such as the weather, astrological, astronomical, and medicinal information. The almanac was also well known for its proverbial sayings of contemporary life. It was published from 1732 until 1796 and was extremely popular amongst the colonists. See BENJAMIN FRANKLIN, SELECTIONS: AUTOBIOGRAPHY, POOR RICHARD, AND LATER WRITINGS (1997).

15. See App. C to view a drawing of coreopsis. To view a color picture of coreopsis, see <http://www.gardendream.net/Newgardengal/images/coreopsis%20Lanceolata.jpg> (last visited Nov. 14, 2007).

16. See SPENCE, *supra* note 12.

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plant grow, I am inspired by innovative, energized, self-motivated faculty. My role is to make sure that I have done my best to create and sustain an environment that will nurture dynamism.

Lesson 2—One person's pet may be another person's pest.

No matter where you are, there will always be pests that the gardener has to outsmart. At my former home, the squirrels and chipmunks dug up my bulbs. They would bite off what they wanted of the bulb and then leave the remains on my porches. At my present home, the rabbits and moles are my nemeses. In the old garden, I was able to sprinkle a dry substance to keep my enemies at bay. In my new gardens, the rabbits ate the repellent as a garnish as they sawed off the tips of my young sunflowers. From this I learned that it is not a question of whether you will have intruders bent on rearranging your garden and taking the proceeds for themselves, but rather the better question is: how to protect your investment, while not harming God's little creatures? I won't take the time to discuss weeds, and I'll leave it to your imagination as to how this point relates to deaning.

Lesson 3—A little extra creative effort can bring great results.

In the late summer, I enjoy morning glories¹⁷ and moon flowers.¹⁸ Moon flowers open at night. I sometimes plant the seeds of these flowers together so that I have morning and evening blooms in the same spot. The morning glory seeds are very tiny. Although I have not tried this yet, I am told by more experienced gardeners that mixing tiny seeds with another medium, like fine sand, makes sowing them easier. I soak and nick the larger moon flower seeds to increase the germination rate. It is a cumbersome task trying to scratch those small seeds, and I do not use gloves because they decrease my dexterity. However, when I see those beautiful, white, fragrant flowers in the evening, I forget all about the tiny cuts on my hands that I suffered while trying to give the seeds the best chance at producing.

This lesson has two points. First, knowing how to reconfigure and stretch resources, even if it is initially a little painful, is an inevitable component to successfully managing a law school. Second, mixing and organizing faculty and staff, whose interests at first glance may not seem to be compatible, but in the end are actually complementary, may try one's endurance. However, when groups understand that the arrangements are in their best interests, the whole enterprise blossoms.

17. See App. D for an illustration of morning glory.

18. To view a picture of moon flower, see <http://www.flickr.com/photos/bamatini/288595892/> (last visited Nov. 14, 2007).

Lesson 4—Pruning is absolutely required if new growth is desired.

When a bloom has withered and died, the best thing for the entire plant is to remove or “dead-head” the spent flower. If this is not done, the plant begins to produce seed and will not use its energy to make more buds. There is a time for seed production, but the gardener and the season should determine when that should be, not the plant. There is nothing more distracting to an otherwise healthy plant than having dead flowers hanging on. Pruning is time-intensive, back-breaking work unless you have raised beds, which I do not. However, one must be careful in removing foliage and flowers that are past their prime. Lobelias and coreopsis have tiny flowers, and sometimes I take off new blooms while trying to get to the old one, especially if I am in a hurry.

Other plants are easier to prune. For example, my daisies and dahlias have fairly large heads and I just snap off the old blooms. So, I have learned not to prune the more complicated plants when I am rushing. It is sometimes better to let the dead blooms stay around for a little while longer than I would like, at the risk of killing off new growth, when I have not taken the time to untangle the old from the new. Again, you are on your own to decode and apply this analogy.

Lesson 5—There is a difference between dormancy and death.

Sometimes plants may appear to be dead because what we see on top is not blooming or the foliage and stems are brittle and brown. However, often when the root is examined, one will discover that there is plenty of life, waiting for the right opportunity to come forth. The plant is just in the dormant stage. If one is not careful and knowledgeable about the potential of the plant, it could be totally ignored or, worse yet, put on the trash heap because of the wrong impression that there is no hope, when in actuality another season of life is just waiting for the right stimulation.

We may find that there are faculty or staff members that have retreated to dormancy for any number of reasons. Before these persons are written off, probing deeper to ascertain the real condition is the least we should do. In the right season, with a little additional light and nourishment, a brand new productive life may appear.

Lesson 6—Take the time to learn what is already planted by those who have come before you.

I have learned that waiting a full season before making radical changes is prudent, particularly if you are not sure about what has been planted. The previous owner at my new home preferred flowering shrubs and trees. I easily recognized the azaleas, wisteria, and rhododendrons. There is also another plant that no matter where I move, there is always one of them in the yard when I arrive, which I promptly remove. All around my home are shrubs, bushes, and trees. While I enjoy the shade from trees, I had to learn more about plants which thrive and bloom in the shade. I appreciate the variety and textures of foliage, but I wanted flowers to enjoy, not just green leaves. So, I have included

variegated hostas, bleeding hearts,¹⁹ lilies of the valley, ferns, variegated solomon seal,²⁰ and other beautifully textured epi-mediums. I also brought with me from my other home and transplanted a few heirloom cuttings (lamb's ear,²¹ black eyed susans, purple cone flowers, sweet williams, sheer bliss roses, honeysuckle, shasta daisies) in spots where I could tell they would thrive. I created a new bed in an underutilized plot of land for a number of flowers and other colorful shrubs (clematis, butterfly bush, hydrangeas,²² hyacinths, burning bush, and smoke bush) that would take their turn blooming until after the first frost. Most of what I brought with me were full-sun plants. They have made my gardens and yard more complete. The sunny and shady parts of the yard are now more colorful. The beauty and wholeness of diversity cannot be overstated.

However, I was not satisfied. During my first winter in this new location, on a trip back from California to Wilmington, I brought back with me several small plants, including two small jasmines,²³ to put in pots on my patio. I had done this before at my previous home, in another zone, knowing that I would have to bring them indoors because they would not survive the harsh winter. Those plants had to be left when I moved because they were too large for transporting. They were given to a friend. So I thought I would start all over again. The tiny white flowers of jasmine and the wonderful fragrance are what I enjoy, and there is no substitute. At least, that is what I thought.

Late this past spring at my new home, while walking around in the backyard, I discovered that the monochromatic bushes lined up across the back yard have a delightful scent. Those shrubs are abelia grandiflora.²⁴ Not only do they produce tiny white fragrant flowers in the late spring and early summer, but as the summer season matures, purplish blooms appear on their stems. Hummingbirds, butterflies, and bees are drawn to the nectar and one can watch the insects and birds dance around each other as they visit.

Just months earlier, I had struggled with how to get two small plants onto an airplane so I could enjoy tiny white flowers and fragrance. I had not asked, nor paid attention, to what was in my own backyard because I was fixated on what I thought was not there. I was looking elsewhere. My vision was small and contained.

As leaders who are constantly comparing the progress of our institutions to others, it is easy to miss the fact that the very thing we are looking for in another field might be right under our noses, if we take the time, wait for the right season,

19. See App. E for a drawing of bleeding heart. To view a color picture of bleeding hearts, see <http://www.flickr.com/photos/twiliger/462946352> (last visited Nov. 14, 2007).

20. To view a picture of solomon seal, see <http://www.myherbals.net/solomon-seal.jpg> (last visited Nov. 14, 2007).

21. A picture of lamb's ear can be seen at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/audreyjm529/185550968> (last visited Nov. 14, 2007).

22. See App. F for a drawing of hydrangeas.

23. For a photo of jasmine, see <http://www.flickr.com/photos/snopek/55899534> (last visited Nov. 14, 2007).

24. To view a picture of abelia grandiflora, see [http://www.dendrologie.cz/Obrazovy_doprovod_a/Abelia/Abelia%20x%20grandiflora%20-%20kvet%20\(A11\)%20\(24.8.2001\).jpg](http://www.dendrologie.cz/Obrazovy_doprovod_a/Abelia/Abelia%20x%20grandiflora%20-%20kvet%20(A11)%20(24.8.2001).jpg) (last visited Nov. 14, 2007).

and take inventory. The pressure is great to blaze a trail in order to produce something new, right now, and a fledgling, exotic plant with pretty flowers may look better at the moment than what others have left behind. My garden has taught me to continue cultivating what is already there, and I will also have the opportunity to add new plantings and new beds which compliment what is in place.

Lesson 7—Do not dismiss out of hand or ignore the contribution of strangers.

I now have a patron plant. It is the datura.²⁵ It reminds me to always be open to new opportunities for growth, even if it is not your initial idea. A few years ago, while working in my garden, I noticed a small, strange looking plant with a large white bell-shaped flower wedged between my front porch steps and a perovskia (russian sage). I do not remember planting this specimen. A bird or an animal may have brought it to that spot as a present. The first two years, I acknowledged the beauty of the small cramped plant, but I basically ignored it. The third year, I finally decided to give it some attention and moved it to a new bed I had just created. Before that summer ended, the plant grew to five feet with multiple white blooms. All it needed was to be recognized and moved to a place where it could spread its roots and grow. For two previous seasons the potential of this flower had been stunted because another plant and structure were crowding it, and I ignored it. The datura was destined to be a giant. I saw it as one more plant (or weed) that had mysteriously come my way. I had little invested in it and, because of that attitude, I missed out on two years of enjoying a spectacular show of blooms. There are now two daturas in my new yard.

In a law school there are various gifts and talents just waiting to be channeled to the right spot or time. Being dean gives me the opportunity to create opportunities for students, faculty, staff, and alumni to expand upon their potential. Listening to others and trying to anticipate and provide for their needs so they can continue to grow, while leading the institution through each season, is exciting, challenging, and rewarding.

I could continue this essay with a discussion about weed removal, invasive plants, late bloomers, or the benefit of planting bee-loving plants, but I will have to leave that for another time. The leaves are beginning to fall, and although it has been unseasonably warm, it is time to begin to prepare the beds for the inevitable. The smell of rain is in the air and I have a winterberry that needs planting. I want to beat the downpour and get that plant in the ground, so it will catch.

25. There are ten different species of datura, which are leafy green plants with bright pink to white flowers. The flowers are all fragrant, often known as jimson weed, and bloom at night. They are known by their invasiveness. See United States Department of Agriculture, PLANTS Profile, <http://plants.usda.gov/java/profile?symbol=DATUR> (last visited Nov. 14, 2007). See App. G to view a drawing of datura. To view a color picture of datura, see http://www.missouriplants.com/Bluealt/Datura_stramonium_page.html (last visited Nov. 14, 2007).

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APPENDIX A

Heliotrope

Source: Florida's Educational Technology Clearinghouse, http://etc.usf.edu/clipart/7600/7618/heliotrope_7618.htm (last visited Nov. 14, 2007).

APPENDIX B

Canna

Source: Florida's Educational Technology Clearinghouse, http://etc.usf.edu/clipart/14400/14481/canna_14481.htm (last visited Nov. 14, 2007).

APPENDIX C

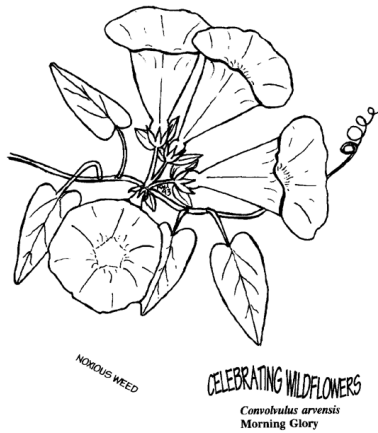
Coreopsis



Source: CHARLENE TARBOX, *FLORAL DESIGNS AND MOTIFS FOR ARTISTS, NEEDLEWORKERS AND CRAFTSPEOPLE* (1984).

APPENDIX D

Morning Glory



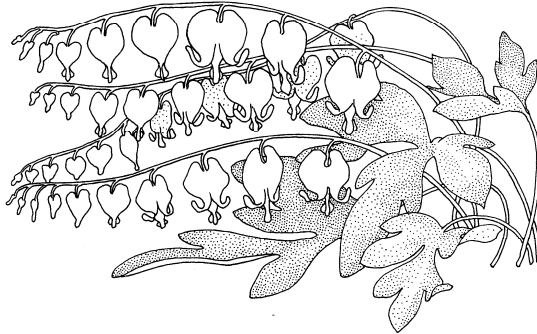
Source: Karl Urban, Northwest Wildflower Drawings, <http://www.nps.gov/plants/color/northwest/13.htm> (last visited Nov. 14, 2007).

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APPENDIX E

Bleeding Hearts

Source: CHARLENE TARBOX, *FLORAL DESIGNS AND MOTIFS FOR ARTISTS, NEEDLEWORKERS AND CRAFTSPEOPLE* (1984).

APPENDIX F

Hydrangea

Source: Florida's Educational Technology Clearinghouse, http://etc.usf.edu/clipart/5200/5274/hydrangea_1.htm (last visited Nov. 14, 2007).

APPENDIX G

Datura

Source: United States Department of Agriculture, PLANTS Profile, http://plants.usda.gov/java/profile?symbol=DAIN2&photoID=dame_001_avd.tif (last visited Nov. 14, 2007).