

Of Mutual Things: Observations in Three Parts

Dr Kitty Wheeler, Mindfulness Chaplain, University of Edinburgh

Artist Brigid Collins and poet Christine De Luca have a key question: 'Can artistic practice – product or process – reveal spiritual reality?' My answer begins with an exploration of 'spiritual reality'. In my time with Brigid and Christine in Dr Neil's Garden, poring over paintings, pastels, and poems, artist and poet described their own sense of its quality: that which is transformative, revelatory, and insightful. These are qualities which imply movement and change. In so doing, they depend in turn on the sense of what is perhaps an unspiritual reality; the state from which one shifts. This begs further questions as to the nature of that shift, and what it is one shifts to. My reflections below stem from observing both artistic product – artwork and poems – and process. The latter is many-layered. In Brigid and Christine's work, there were conversations that took place between artist and poet, but also between both and the garden. The shift I observe is, as both artist and poet posit, from separation to mutuality; but what I will draw out too is the ways in which that mutuality retains vital distinctions between plants, between plants and humans, and between garden and representation. It is in this mutual distinctiveness, a fractal configuration of connection and distinction, that we find a certain kind of spiritual reality: a sacred geometry sensed only by those who seek.

Plants and Plants

In the shelter in Dr Neil's Garden, Brigid shows me how her residence has changed the way she paints. She began by drawing specimens, single plants, but the singularity of that artistic gaze soon changed. I am drawn to 'Sharing Space', Brigid's pastel of Chinese red birch and willow fronds, for its fine bright lines of willow and the pearly glow of birch bark behind. At the end of her residency, Brigid has found herself drawing plants together: the birch and the willow and the grasses; what humans might, in our unreflective moments, call 'messy' or 'weedy' or 'wild'. But *look closer*, 'Sharing Space' seems to say, and so I do. It is a beautiful tangle in its greens and whites, and I feel, as I observe it, both its invitation and its secrets: this is a tangle that does not include me.

For this is a mutuality between plants. It has nothing to do with me, and yet Brigid can draw it, and I can see it. Plants are finding their own way together. Upon sight of mess or tangle we have a choice: our eyes might skate over it, or we might look deeper. That is what Christine does in her accompanying poem, and here is what she finds: a mutuality that contains both distinctiveness and belonging. 'You're keen to fit in with the locals, / not stick out like a specimen,' Christine addresses the birch. It's telling, because there is still the possibility of specimen-ship: a Chinese red birch is, after all, always going to be a Chinese red birch, and not a willow. Yet, 'wind-wrapped in willow fronds, it seems / you've happily bedded in; found / your feet eased in the damp grasses'. These plants are distinct from one another, but can also find, together, comfort and delight.

How to capture that mutuality and togetherness? In Christine's 'Conversation', the metaphor of speech finds its apogee: 'the conversation / between hop and ginkgo and wild rose is / of mutual things; chatter of shade, support, stability; / of drowsy bees; of nutrients, water'. But the 'whisperings' and 'lip-reading' between plants that we find in Christine's poems point to something just outside the range of human ears. 'Messages touch deeply,' she writes, and in the sensory 'touch', not 'hear', we sense the ways in which plants speak to each other beyond human notions of

speech and talk. In her imagery elsewhere, she describes how plants are ‘a corps de ballet’ – they ‘trip in, stage-left, wave on floaty wave’; dance discloses the physicality to their mutuality.

In moving between metaphors, Christine shows that neither the language of ‘conversation’, nor ‘dance’, nor even perhaps both, can ever quite capture what it is that happens between plants. She both ushers us towards mutual relating to plants – they are like us; their communings are like human forms – and gently holds us back. If they speak a language at all, it is one that we don’t speak. And Brigid too, in her beautiful pastel tangle of ‘Sharing Space’, reminds us that in the moment of artistic viewing, this is a space that I – the onlooker – do not quite share.

Through Brigid and Christine’s artistic care and attention, we move closer to the plants of Dr Neil’s Garden; and in that very movement, we sense more deeply the space between us. This is a sober understanding, something rather beautiful, because it is born of care. It is not the casual sense of human superiority and separation. Rather, distinctiveness is itself reconstituted – and that is the gift of Brigid and Christine’s evocation of mutuality. As Christine herself wrote, it is a message that touches deeply indeed. For the viewer-reader, we know not whether to rejoice or mourn. Maybe both; maybe that is just how it should be.

Plants and Artists

Accompanying the poem ‘Conversation’, there is a photograph of Brigid painting in the garden. She looks intently not at the photographer, but out into the green, paintbrush poised in hand. From this distance, we can see green shadows falling across her paper, yet we cannot see the painting itself. The photograph is a portrait of something intimate in motion, occurring between plants and artist, snapped in a moment. The portrait speaks for itself; in a way, we need not even see the painting. Yet when we do, it makes perfect sense: for the shadows are replicated in perfect pools and stripes across the paper, accentuating the colours of wild rose leaves in green and brown, its hips in flaming orange and red. This is not just a painting of hop and ginkgo and wild rose, but a painting of what it is for the artist under leaf and bough to paint hop and ginkgo and wild rose. To the viewer it is a gift, because it permits us a glimpse of that mutuality, with all its intimacy.

And the poet sees it, too. The plants ‘are charmed that the artist has picked / them out, spotted their communion,’ Christine writes. Others might not have done so, she implies. We sense how poet bears witness to artist, bearing witness to plants: a recursive mutual honouring, a making and merging of space. It is in words that Christine captures how the plants, too, are painters. It is not just the artist painting green shadows; it is the plants that ‘paint themselves on her white paper, / make their marks in the long light of afternoon’. Meanwhile, the artist – ‘She is part of them now’ – has become of plant-like stuff, ‘her face pixelated / in green, her ankles festooned in their tousle’. As painter and painted reach towards each other, picked out and tousled, pixelated and festooned, the art, Christine seems to tell us, emerges from the space in-between.

In these works, a new mutuality is brought to our attention beyond the mutuality between plants. We sense how artistic process itself is one of opening, a willingness both to mark and be marked. The marking and being marked are different from one another not only in direction but also in kind. There is an intentionality to Brigid’s gaze, to the artistic honouring through watercolour shadow, to Christine’s attentive capturing of plant-like chatter. And yet just as the relationship among plants recedes from our human notions of ‘conversation’, so too the work of plants upon artists recedes from human-like intentionality. For all that the plants festoon Brigid’s ankles, and pixelate her face, it

is through shadow that they 'make their marks in the long light of afternoon': they are one step removed from the painting itself, and if their mark is to endure, it's the artist who must capture it.

It is a removal that exposes both the wondrous nature of the plant world and its vulnerability. For all its tousled tendrils around the feet of the artist, when she leaves, it will remain; and we can't help but wonder how she will extract herself: what shoot will bruise, or leaf-blade snap? In our wondering there is care and attention; there is reverence for the unknowable beings that artist and poet seek to capture, and humility and tenderness for the artistic will that reveals this landscape of spirit and earth for those who seek. Once again, we find that mutuality in the garden is not a blurring, nor sentimental dissolution. It contains vistas and distinctions, and in those, we sense the more acutely what is plant and what is human. The acuity moves and grounds us, at the same time. It is a revelation, and in that comes relief.

Time and Space

It is 'in the long light of afternoon' that hop, ginkgo and wild rose emerge in watercolour on Brigid's paper. Time and temporality thread throughout both poems and paintings: there are roses and rosehips, flowers in bloom and flowers in decay. In the 'Undimmed' iris, we find that 'Its tissue withering is / a gathering into itself; / a reprise of its first unfolding / and just as lovely.' One of my favourites in both poem and painting, 'Lantern light' – grape hyacinth, touches me especially: 'Now you stoop and wither, / fade to modest white; / to paper lanterns hanging / like quiet temple lights'. The words 'stoop and wither', which we usually use to describe decay, give rise not to ugliness but to the quiet beauty of paper lanterns. Death and decay, we understand, are not a deadening but a reconfiguring. Late in the season, the loveliness of the grape hyacinth may not be a 'burst of cobalt', but they might, notwithstanding, be 'gifts'.

But 'Lantern light' is not simply a poem about grape hyacinths; it is also a poem about the making of art. The delicacy of Brigid's painting, touched by both shadows and light, is met by the delicacy of Christine's rendering of artistic process: 'Hold that breath till / the artist gladdens you, paints / your shadows, restores glimmers', she writes. The painting itself, that relationship between plants and artist, takes place within time – the tangibility of a breath – even as it captures the slow time of growth, season, and decay. The word 'lovely' in 'Undimmed' is telling, for it means worthy of love, and in it we sense the nature of the communing between artist and garden. It is love that artist and poet bring to the garden, a love that withstands the effects of time. Yet 'Time reshapes the works of love' – love is not airy, abstract, but grounded in the real. It is as dedicated and honest as the painting of shadows, and in it, we find gladness.

Grounded in the real, too, are the poems' and artworks' sense of place. The irises, plants, and pincushions, for all that I recognise them in the green glow of my own garden, and you in the sunshine of yours, are placed not only in time but also in space. 'The hill and the kirk / are bit parts' writes Christine, 'the wind off the loch / murmurs the firs'. This is not an abstract garden, but one in particular: Dr Neil's Garden, Duddingston, placed by loch and church and ancient volcano. It is the 'south slopes' of Arthur's Seat that 'are a July sensation; have slipped from / ancient cultivation to the lazy sway / of Rose-bay willow herb'; it is Duddingston loch, with its interloper geese, that peeks in 'Under the willow'. And yet there is, too, the sense of the holding of the garden within a bigger space. In 'Witch hazel', there is 'a bright sway of pinwheel galaxies // lighting her bareness. Might they spiral off / into new life-forms: / fireflies of the north'. Christine is picking up on something subtle in Brigid's oil pastel: the texture gives way, around the hazel pinwheels, to space and air. It

creates a shift in mood that Christine's words echo. The garden is right here, and precious for it, they seem to say – and, too, it reaches out to the great and spacious whole of which it is inextricably part. There is a wonder in this, and the sense of how that seam of love of place gives rise to a love of all place; how the dedication and attention to the micro places love at the heart of the macro. There is a saying attributed to Mother Teresa: 'If you want to bring peace to the whole world, go home and love your family.'

With dedication and attention come, in turn, both soberness and hope. 'It's a struggle to like the wasp,' writes Christine of 'Robin's pincushion', 'But who knows what gifts, what remedies / might languish in such oddball chemistry; / in such harmonious entanglements?' Love is a practice, we are reminded, and it is a practice embedded in time. It is commitment to the possibility of a future we cannot yet foresee, and mysteries we cannot yet understand, wrapped in that entangled private pincushion world. In commitment, there is surrender to plants, who they are, and all that they unknowably hold. In 'No future without fungi', Christine suggests: 'Give us a few years and we'll be wearing them, / cured by them, cleansed by them. / Meanwhile / we ask...where are they going? / How much do they know?' The questions have no answers, but it is in the asking that we open ourselves to the possibility of more. And it is the possibility of more not only in a big, abstract sense, but also in the concretion of Dr Neil's Garden itself: a physic garden in origin, a place of local social projects, a bringing together not only of poems and paintings but also locals and refugees, children and adults, the healers and the healing. In the big and the small and the place where they meet, the heart finds rest, and the spirit finds peace.

Drawing together

It is this that I take away from Brigid and Christine's work: we are different from plants, and this, wonderfully, is the gift of our deep mutuality. Let me come back to that unlikeable wasp: 'what remedies / might languish in such oddball chemistry?' Christine asks. It is in the very fact that we are in both communion and at odds with plants that the possibility of remedy arises: for what is healing, after all, other than the weaving together of things that are at fractal counterpoints to each other – both the same, and different? In Dr Neil's Garden, plants and people share space and time, soberly and with care, and in so doing create something new: art, for example. And then in art, Christine's words and Brigid's images co-create a story that is multimodal, a conversation that includes but transcends what is spoken. Here, in Christine's words, I turn to St Brigid's Cross: 'Fold it over, press gently, 'turn the rushes / through ninety degrees; repeat and repeat'. These are words that bring a lump to the throat, and an opening of the heart. For isn't it a wonder that of all the names and people in the world, it is a Brigid, and a Christine, who together have looked deeply into the heart of this one place, with something to tell us about all; from whose work arises a fractal geometry of connection and distinction? The cross says it all, and so it is here that I end, with gladness.