



Healing after Cancer in the Kitchen Gardens at Pennsbury Manor

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After surviving a rare form of blood cancer, I healed myself in the gardens at Pennsbury. I learned how to live again where root meets soils, and anyone with a little dirt, some sunlight, and a few seeds can find a new way to overcome mental, physical, and spiritual trauma.



The scariest time in a cancer patient's life begins when they go into remission. Little support exists to help the survivor rebuild themselves and develop coping skills to function after remission. At the time, I didn't think it mattered. The treatment destroyed my body, and I'd lived so long without the expectation of survival that I couldn't risk hoping for a future. My oncologists told me to manage my expectations. They believed the remission would be short, so I feared making plans or choices for the future. I just froze, trapped in stasis. Fear even blocked my passion to write. I just went through the motions every day, waiting for life to eventually kick in. And at the time I didn't know it, but this is a common reaction for

survivors. Many victims of severe illness like cancer suffer a soul-shattering effect that leaves them moving through life like a zombie. Their battle with disease or injury robs them of a feeling of control over their bodies and a sense of self. I felt lost and terrified to think about the future. I had no coping skills to deal with the residual emotions that I had buried to survive the torture of radiation and chemotherapy, and I needed to process these feelings while developing new skills to function under the constant threat of new malignancy. I found some understanding in shamanism—the idea that everything has a spirit—and I wanted to fill my life with life, so I studied gardening. Eventually, I learned about the idea of the “greening” power and found my way to the kitchen gardens at [Pennsbury Manor](#), a historic estate in Pennsylvania. Not only did I heal through this divine natural force, but I also learned a new way of seeing myself. This new perception assuaged my inflicted spirit, gave me a sense of control, and helped me find a way to live with the cancer with grace.



My story began at the age of eighteen when I found a golf ball under my ear. Two days later, surgeons excised the tumor along with a chunk of my face. After several labs tried and failed, the Armed Forces Institute identified the cells as both large cell and Hodgkin's lymphoma. Only nine other people in the world had been diagnosed with this rare combination, and none of them had survived.

Doctor Giles McKenna, chair of the Radiation-Oncology Department at the University of the Hospital of Pennsylvania, developed an aggressive treatment. Before starting, he warned me that the intense chemotherapy known as CHOP (cyclophosphamide, hydroxydaunorubicin, oncovin, prednisone) along with radiation treatment was a long-shot, and the damage would cripple my body. He asked me if I wanted to just enjoy the time I had left, but I felt like if I did that, I was letting everyone down.

Chemo melted my body over the summer. I went into toxic shock every time. Then they burned my head, neck, chest, and back with radiation every day for months. I couldn't eat for three months. I couldn't swallow. I dropped down to eighty pounds. Finally, I spent October in the hospital near death. Then on [Samhain](#), something changed. The treatment had killed all the fast-growing cells, but I held on.

With remission came euphoria. I lived! I felt such joy, relief, and gratitude. A day turned into a week and a week became a month. And eventually, I settled into my new reality. The treatment had hollowed me out. I felt like an empty vessel set adrift, no longer a person, just a void beneath burned skin. The treatment had dismantled me, and

before I could go on with my life, I had to rebuild myself without any idea how. This is the hardest time in a cancer patient's life. Everyone just expected me to go back to who I was before and just forget about it, but I couldn't. So I set out on an existential journey and studied modern interpretations of shamanism.

My Uncle Ford, a gifted poet and naturalist, had introduced me to the concepts when I was young. Eventually, I identified an injury to my spirit. Modern shamans believe illness or trauma can shatter your soul, a condition that makes a person feel empty, on autopilot. They suffer an existential ennui, a pervasive disembodiment like their soul fell out on the road behind them. Whether magic or metaphor, it's how it felt, and I searched for remedies to mend my spirit. First, I meditated and attended Quaker Meeting in Fallsington, Pennsylvania. Finding peace at the center, a Quaker phrase, helped me begin to mend, and after meeting one Sunday, I learned about an open house at a local historical site. Like most people, I found peace and comfort in the idea of going back to an era before turbulent technology, so I went to Pennsbury Manor to volunteer and learn about the history of my state.

In payment of a debt owed by the crown to the Penn family, King Charles II, on 4 March 1681, signed a charter granting William Penn a large parcel of land west of the Delaware River. Penn, a Quaker, saw it as the perfect place to conduct an experiment in religious tolerance and established the Manor of Pennsbury, which was to be a summer home for his family on the western bank of the Delaware. Construction began after his arrival in 1682 and was completed in 1686. A central manor house welcomed travelers

**O most honored Greening Force,
You who roots in the Sun;
You who lights up, in shining
serenity, within a wheel
that earthly excellence fails to
comprehend.
You are enfolded in the weaving of
divine mysteries.
You redden like the dawn
and you burn: flame of the Sun.**

—Hildegard von Bingen, *Causae et Curae*

on the river, and a bake and brew house held the kitchen, brewery, and laundry facilities, while a boathouse and farm buildings sheltered the work of the self-sufficient farm. An extensive kitchen garden—two-thirds-acre grid crossed with gravel and grass paths and rectangular beds planted with trees, small fruits, perennial and annual vegetables, herbs, and edible flowers—served as a source of produce and supplied the spice rack and medicine cabinet.

In 1932, the Warner Company donated the ten-acre parcel to the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, and the Pennsylvania Historic Museum Commission established a museum. Ever since, Pennsbury Manor has educated visitors and school children about life in early colonial America. Pennsbury Manor is a functioning farm based on the colonial Virginia model: fields of crops, pastures, orchards, open yards, and a kitchen garden. Volunteers and staff recreate life in eighteenth-century America, dressing in period costumes, enacting the duties of

daily life, and taking groups on tours of the property. The volunteer program offered different areas of interest. While I became a tour guide, I spent most of my time in the kitchen gardens.

That February, the head horticulturalist put me to work in the greenhouse, preparing seedlings to be planted in the spring. In the solitude of that little room, I put on Celtic rock and filled the little cups with soil. I'd thought so much about death over the previous year, and now I could shepherd new life. It was slow, meticulous work, and the repetition relaxed me. My mind turned off, and I began to see a connection between all the seeds and seedlings, joined by the earth, air, and water. In time, I realized these elements connected them to me. We all grew as branches off a great tree. When something died, the whole lived on.

I wanted to understand this connection, so I studied botany, earth spiritualism, and herbal medicine. I read about a German Benedictine abbess who'd written about a

union between the divine and nature. Born in the lush Rhineland of the Holy Roman Empire in 1098, [Hildegard von Bingen](#) was a scholar, mystic, philosopher, musician, monk, and the founder of scientific natural history in medieval Europe. From the age of three, von Bingen suffered holy visions she called the Shade of the Living Light, and she recognized a divine love that flowed through every blade of grass, leaf, herb, flower, and tree. She called this lush force *viriditas*, Latin for “greenness.” I realized this was the energy I had been feeling in my work, and I continued to study its nature as my responsibilities grew. For the first time since I found the tumor, I started feeling whole again. The act of planting new seed moved my spirit away from death and closer to life, a step in the right direction as I began my healing through spring.

In April I graduated from the greenhouse to the gardens to help Janine, the head horticulturalist, prepare for the torrent of school children who visited during the week. We planted vegetables in the upper garden where brick paths divided sections of vegetables, fruit trees, and even tall-growing hops. Next, we transplanted the herbs I’d planted—lavender, hyssop, rosemary, wormwood, lemon balm—in the raised beds that were built around a brick cistern at the heart of the lower beds. Janine taught me to tug at the packed roots without tearing so they could spread out. As soon as they touched the open soil, you felt a palpable relief. I guided life from the seed to the shed to the raised bed, and in the evenings as dusk veiled over the farm and peacocks danced in full-feathered gowns, I sat on the stone bench beneath the quince tree sipping tea as bees buzzed about its crown. Spring

planting soothed and renewed me. It built new connection to the soil and healed my spirit through the facilitation of life. Every day, my hands dug into rich black soil, rife with the stuff of life, abound with the natural potential that plants use to fuel a vibrant green life. I had found my place to heal, and you only need to find such a place to begin your recovery, even if it’s on your window sill. You are not a stranger to life no matter how disconnected you feel. Facilitating nature will show you that. And there are many other ways nature can heal.

During the summer, I studied the herbs I had grown for medicinal properties. While I’m not going to speak to all the qualities of herbal medicine as there is adequate documentation already, I will say that the act itself of growing and gathering your own medicine aids in recovery. This is at the heart of *viriditas*. Now this isn’t meant to replace modern medical treatment. Without the chemo and radiation, I would be dead. And one must be responsible. Some herbs contain chemicals that can interact with medications or affect one’s condition. I had good teachers, and responsible use of herbs like mint and ginger helped my nausea and eased the pain in my throat. The act of growing and using the herbs gave me a hand in my own treatment thus empowering me. I could play a part in my recovery because when you participate in the greening power, work with it, you take back some control. This helped me feel like a person again and not just a patient because I no longer felt as scared and helpless once I had even a fraction of control over my illness and its treatment. And it works for most sickness or injury.

Viriditas can be applied like a balm to all nature of maladies, whether physical,

mental, or spiritual. In our lives, we all suffer afflictions that disconnect us from the living world. A general and perpetual malaise weighs upon people, a feeling of disconnection, ennui, or listlessness so many can’t see beyond the banal cycle of work, home, work, home. They know they are hurting, but they don’t know why, and the simple act of tending to our gardens reminds us of the richness and resiliency of life, the potential within ourselves that never dies. In the garden we find simplicity, purity, and reconnection in a world full of so many barriers to the natural world.

The good news is that it’s accessible to all. Dirt’s as common as . . . dirt. And if you live in a city and don’t have access to open soil, community gardens offer access to the process. In fact, all you need is a clay pot, some soil and seed. Place your mint plant in the sun, and you will grow with it as I did.

As the weeks went by, the pruned parts of myself grew back. By June, I felt like writing again. My work and presence in the kitchen gardens inspired a new crop of stories, poetry, and even some art. When done in the gardens for the day, either manual work or educating the rowdy masses of kids, I would sit on a gnarled stump with my sketchpad or in the Crozier House with a laptop, laboring on some new story. I was inspired and at peace. Gardening helps your state of mind, making it easier to create art. This is how I get better. And how you can to.



I moved forward, one day at a time. Eventually, one month became two then three. After twenty years, I confess I’m still not entirely whole nor am I free of the threat of new malignancy. This disease isn’t something

that becomes less dangerous over time, and I’ve struggled with both new threats and the worsening dysfunction of my body. Nor have I healed all the emotional and spiritual damage, and that’s okay. Don’t feel like there’s something wrong with you because you haven’t fully recovered. It’s okay to just be better, and there are many paths to follow to get there.

I found *viriditas* when I needed it the most. I didn’t use it to “restore” myself but to grow a new garden within me—a garden I still cultivate.

Last week, I saw my new gastroenterologist to make an appointment for an endoscopy and colonoscopy. I’ve survived to the point when secondary cancers start to develop from the chemotherapy and radiation, so we have to be diligent. I can’t help but feel out of control and even a little guilty, and the urge not to trust time and protect myself tempts me once more. But then, I paused from writing this feature, got out a new bag of potting soil, and fetched some yogurt containers out of the recycling bin. I put on [Clannad](#), the same music I listened to in the greenhouse, and I touched the rich, dark soil rife with potential, shaping it for seed, then buried parsley, basil, and thyme seeds. The act soothed my turbulent spirit, and I felt empowered once more—calmer, relieved. The seeds burst with life as soon as they touched soil and moisture, and in a few weeks reassuring green will sprout. Life goes on. We go on.

I learned to live with cancer, and that’s when I stopped being a patient and became a survivor. I owe this to my time in the kitchen gardens at Pennsbury and my cultivation of the greening power. You also can find healing in the living green along with a new way of seeing yourself and the world. 🌱