

LEARNING TO DANCE WITH DIONYSUS

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I'd argue that we need more spontaneity and "wildness" to balance our culture's clock-bound, agenda-driven demands. I've good company among Western and Eastern philosophers in my belief. Friedrich Nietzsche, for one, noted that

Western thought has been too bound up with the pursuit of Apollonian beauty. Anyone who knows the legacy of Platonism understands how unattainable "The Beautiful" is, in this life anyway. In a garden that quest can lead to the straight line, the monoculture of one plant, the mathematical rigor of formal plantings. Not bad effects in themselves, but often we spray and slay to get them, poisoning our ground-water and getting rid of useful insects along with pests. Spiritually that is a harmful practice, but in doing so we also neglect Dionysian beauty: the sudden revelation, the inspired use of disorder, the bright colors of passion balancing the more nuanced tones of intuition.

Effective garden design can combine reason and intuition, bringing Apollo and Dionysus together to consecrate the sacred spaces where plants grow. Consider how tragic it can be when a landscaper rips out everything to create a "perfect garden." I've heard of office parks cutting down oak or maple trees that are not "straight enough" and replanting with fragile and weak Bradford Pears, trees that, while straight of trunk, are doomed to break in our region's ice storms and hurricanes. That's why all the flowering

Bradford in Richmond's Carytown had to be removed. They are poor trees for a streetscape, but someone wanted quick results.

What if we instead moderated the ideas of short-term gain and Apollonian perfection with the beauty of “the thing that is of no use,” a concept from Taoism? The Chinese philosopher Chuang Tzu mentioned a village tree that was so huge cattle could rest under it. The tree, a focal point for meetings of all sorts, had never been touched by an axe. Its wood was no good for any craft; it bore inedible fruit. Thus, by being “useless” it had become “useful” in a different way, grown huge, and lived a long time.

How can we dance with Dionysus, use the useless, and escape the fascism that we see in many commercial landscapes?

- ❖ **Experiment with shape and color:** I'm giving my shed door a coat of bright paint to provide the type of effect that an “accent wall” gives in a home. I'm also looking for old pieces of driftwood or oddly shaped rocks to make certain plants in the landscape “jump out” at the onlooker.
- ❖ **Get away from right angles and new materials:** The best paths have an organic curve to them—so the paths where I garden follow circles, not angles. Instead of perfectly milled, and arsenic-treated lumber for trellises, I'm using trunks of saplings cut down on a local farm and trimmings from my crape myrtles. Whenever possible, I'm doing the right thing environmentally by re-using lumber, rock, and other cast-offs to build structures, paths, and beds in my garden. A local fencing company gave me 50+ French-Gothic pickets because their stock was “old and faded”—exactly the effect I want from a garden fence!

❖ **Leave something wild; plant local varieties:** Look at shady areas and wild corners of your garden as opportunities, not problems. Not all plants need full sun (thank the Maker for that!) so it's rewarding to see what will thrive in the cool, moist shade of a well-mulched bed near mature trees. Plants suited to our bioregion look right, and spiritually they "feel right." Seek out locally owned greenhouses that stock such plants and work them into your garden in a way that duplicates their placement in nature.

Believe it or not, my ageing power-mower inspired this column. The machine mainly performs Apollonian tasks such as cutting the tallest grass level and chopping leaves for perfectly shredded mulch and compost. After a successful repair breathed new life into this rusting beast, the mower, originally painted an Apollonian gray, got a make-over. As I walked through Pleasant's Hardware, passing the paint aisle it hit me: think wild colors! I considered bright purple, even Zebra stripes until I had a vision: hot-rod flat black with flames streaming back from the mower's front edges. Now the mower, in those colors, inspires laughs and "thumbs up" from neighbors. As with the door on the shed and trellises of recycled wood, the hot-rod mower makes the garden year memorable and my own practice with the most mundane task a mindful and Dionysian ritual. Besides, my bottle of "lawn mower beer" afterward now seems like the winner's cup at a race!

So be whimsical! Balance the methodical pursuit of garden chores with the abandon of lying on the grass under the summer moon. The sprits of Nietzsche and Chuang Tzu will raise a bottle with you. Blessed be this gardening season.