

*Returning Home*, by Julie Gardner

It was love at first sight. A late summer evening, early September 2017. Dear friends, my husband and I headed to Bloedel Reserve for a cello and harp duo concert. Mt. Rainier, the Olympics and Cascades were in full glory as we ferried from Seattle to Bainbridge Island. When we arrived, we drove past the Gatehouse, parked, walked down the path getting glimpses of the Moss Garden, Japanese Garden and Guest House. When Mid Pond, the Golden Weeping Willow and what appeared to be an 18<sup>th</sup> century Classical Revival Residence became visible in one panoramic view, I was enchanted. Still am. We walked around to the back of the Residence, placed our red plaid blanket and picnic on the well cared for lawn. On that night, swept away by the view of the expansive Puget Sound and Cascade mountains, the music, the company—perhaps the sips of wine, I pretended it was my home. On our walk back to the car, as darkness was creeping in, we all agreed we'd return.

A month later, my husband and I signed up for The Strolls for Well Being program. Two months later, our first grandson was born. Seven months later, we moved to Bainbridge Island to be closer to our grandson, his family and all the natural beauty the island offers. Ten months later, my husband died from cholangiocarcinoma.

I'm still grieving and surrendering into the wholehearted love and gratitude I have for my husband—for what Bloedel Reserve has given me, my husband, our family and all who are able to get to know Bloedel. When I met my husband, first gazed upon my children and grandsons, it was love at first sight. However, it's the on-going, ever deepening, sometimes challenging, relationships with people, animal and plants that are my loves, teachers—healing and constant companions.

Bloedel Reserve has been a constant companion for nearly five years. I keep coming back to stroll alone, often just listening to whatever is present. Falling leaves. Wind. Rain. The sounds of diving hummingbirds. Eagles. Sun. The scent of the white Sweet Box blooms. Ducks on Mid Pond. Nurse logs. Also, I enjoy walks with friends, family and visitors; educational tours with horticulturists; concerts and the summer outdoor Shakespeare performances; seasonal activities like the fall Have a Hoot Hunt, Winter or Poetry in the Woods, and more. Even during the intense phase of the pandemic, Bloedel found a way to bring us together as a community. I'll never forget the day my two-year old grandson and I placed the balsam wood ornament we had created together on the Christmas Wish tree in the front lawn of the Residence. He wished for chocolate. On the snowperson next to ours, "For health and peace on earth." So many wishes for health, healing.

Health. Healing. It happens in nature. My husband and I had heard of forest bathing or *shinrin yoku*, but we hadn't heard of Bloedel Reserve's Strolls for Well-Being program until we signed up for it in the fall of 2017. We didn't know if his health would allow him to make the walks or attend the group meetings. Fall was my husband's favorite season. That fall, it was a season of contrasts. My grandson's birth. My husband in the process of dying, living well-while dying. Though we often took walks together, we were encouraged to take the Strolls alone. On a Stroll, I was crying as I wound my way up the Orchid Trail. On one side of the cathedral-like woodland trail, rain poured down. Poured down. On the other side, sunshine rays

burst through the tall hemlocks and firs. I wasn't alone. I smiled through the tears. I was reminded how nature holds us; how we must hold nature, each other, our selves. Each of us had to take our walks alone. He, letting go of his life on earth. Me, letting go of life with the embodied him.

I still have the Strolls for Well-Being books my husband and I were given to guide us on our Strolls and the words my husband gifted to us. As he sat on a step listening to the waterfall, he wrote, "... Fall means nearing completion, the harvest, the feeling of a year's work done and, in the bin, on the books, over. It's a hopeful season of transition to that of winter, of the holidays, of family and cheer and times of huddling, remembrance and quiet joy. I have felt this week that this may be my last fall. The last transition to winter, perhaps spring and a bit of summer-who knows. But I don't know that I'll see or experience fall again. I am trying to watch, observe, smell, experience the fall for all I can."

After he passed the following July, the low energy that comes with grief and winter diminished the frequency of my returning to the Reserve. Late in the winter, after my husband passed, I reluctantly signed up for a Grief Group offered by Island Volunteer Caregivers and Bloedel Reserve. At a pre-group meeting with the leaders Robin Gaphni and Ted Rynearson, I said, "I'm not sure, I'll stick with it, so don't deny a spot to someone for me. I'm just signing up because the meetings will be held in the Guest House, and it may get me to Bloedel more often. I really don't want to be in a grief group." I still chuckle recalling Ted's face and response, "Julie, do you think anyone wants to be in a grief group?" All that was shared in that group in the Guest House as we were held by each other and the natural world all around us has endured. Nearly four years later, I am grateful. We continue in relationship with each other, sharing regular meals, on-going support—even laughs.

At the far end of the Reflection Pool at Bloedel Reserve, are Emily Brontë's words from *Symphony*. They're on a flat gray stone covering a chamber housing the ashes of Prentice and Virginia Bloedel. "Are not the best beloved years around your heart forever?" Shared memories with my husband, grandson, other family and friends, and memories of walking alone with constant companionship at Bloedel are beloved. On September 3, 2017, I fell in love with the Reserve. On that night I was giddy, pretending the Residence was my home. Now, it occurs to me, every time I return to Bloedel Reserve, it's a returning home. Wishes "For Health and Peace on Earth"

