

The Rose Garden

An Adult Teaching Tale

by Tina Hahn with Ellen Rolfes

Close your eyes and imagine an extraordinary land with rolling hills, a sacred Grove, and an exquisite rose garden. Those who pass through this land repeatedly tell of its rare beauty and friendly inhabitants to all who will hear. Others choose to live in the land, where they seek knowledge, explore ideas, develop talents, and feed their souls. These caretakers relish the work to which they are called.

The primary mission of the caretakers—both men and women—is to tend the roses in a spacious, lush garden positioned at the center of the land. The fragrant blossoms are lovely and healthy, and the bushes grow proud and strong. The colors of the blossoms are many hues—red, pink, and yellow. Others are white, coral, and purple. But each individual rose blossom is exquisite and full of vitality, so much so that word of the roses' beauty has spread to other lands.

People come from far and near to see these roses. They marvel at what these caretakers are doing and often ask to learn their “secret.” Each group, men and women, takes great pride in the blooms when asked about them.

In the beginning, however, neither group of caretakers knew of the other's contributions. While both groups enjoyed their work and found great meaning in it, their roles were defined quite differently. The caretakers did not have the opportunity to share their goals, dreams, commitments, or successes.

As the morning light dawned and sunshine bathed the day, the men—who felt they shouldered the responsibility for tending the roses—walked briskly to the garden with their tools. They brought books and games and food, and set about the day's tasks of making certain the

roses were pruned and weeded, and they measured their growth. They boisterously offered words of reason and motivation.

As the sun sank in the evening and the velvet cloak of night covered the land, the women—who felt they shouldered the responsibility for tending the roses—quietly entered the garden with their tools. They brought bedtime stories and songs and food. They made certain the roses were nourished physically and their spirits well-fed. The women saw that the roses felt safe and were at peace with themselves. They whispered words of inspiration and encouragement.

The roses thrived.

The people of this extraordinary land came together and said, “These roses are so special that we cannot keep them to ourselves.” All agreed the roses should be shared with other lands, and everyone—yes, the men and the women—began to help with the distribution. The results were amazing. The roses’ impact was indisputable. The unique flowers were helping others realize beauty and creative energy and knowledge and greatness. Inspiring testimonials of their remarkable presence came back to the land—came back to the men, and then to the women, who cared for them.

The male caretakers congratulated each other and were proud of their success in raising the remarkable flowers. Likewise, the women caretakers murmured their appreciation of each other, equally proud of their success in nurturing the wonderful roses.

One evening, divine powers created a howling storm that furiously blew across the land. The male caretakers looked out at the threatening skies with concern. They were worried about the garden and their roses. The women looked at each other with fearful eyes. They, too, were worried about the garden and their roses. Silently, the men left their homes and hurried with torches to keep watch over their roses. Silently, the women also left their homes and hurried with blankets to provide

protection for their roses. The protective instincts of both took precedence over all other issues.

As the two groups hastened their work of surrounding the expansive garden of their special roses and other flowers, the two groups finally met. "We are relieved that you came," said the men when they saw the women. "Welcome to our garden. We appreciate you for helping in this time of crisis."

The women responded, "It is our garden, for we have tended the roses and other flowers each night. We are not here just for the storm but because we love the roses."

"But we come every morning to tend the soil and prune the shrubs," the men said.

"We come each evening to feed and nourish the plants," said the women.

As the fierce winds of the storm swirled around them, the two groups stood, perplexed, not realizing what the other had done to make the roses beautiful and healthy. The night air snapped with electricity as the caretakers leaned closer together trying to understand what the other had done for the roses.

Suddenly the savage storm passed over the land. The wind dropped to a whisper, the lightening ceased, and a great sense of quiet enveloped all the caretakers. And slowly, very slowly, the secret of their success dawned on the groups.

"Our roses are beautiful because you took such great care of them," the male caretakers said to the women.

"No, the roses are beautiful because you men took great care of them," the women said.

"We did this together. By uniting our time and talents, knowledge and wisdom, and attention and devotion, we helped nurture the best of the best," the men said.

Without another word, the men and women joined hands and circled the garden. They sensed the sacredness of the moment. They knew in their hearts and minds that the world was starved for intelligence, strength, leadership, and beauty. They realized only by working together could they grow their roses and offer them as gifts around the world.

After a time, life on the land and work in the garden became extremely hectic. People daily delivered numerous requests making pleas to the caretakers to increase rose distribution. Countless people benefited from the rare blossoms. As individual lives and the world at large were enhanced by the roses' influence and leadership, calls came for more and more roses to be grown and shared.

In addition, people carrying rosebushes—hopeful that the caretakers will plant the bushes in the garden and nurture them with the incredible care that had become the garden's hallmark—appeared daily at the garden gate. The caretakers had been finding space in the garden to transplant the rosebushes and added other new rosebushes to try and answer the demand.

Soon, however, the situation began nearing crisis proportions. There simply was no more room in the garden, and the requests kept coming. Concerned caretakers gathered to address the situation.

“What a wonderful challenge we have! The answer, of course, is to expand the garden to make room for more rosebushes,” one leader said enthusiastically. “With unified efforts, we will find a way to care for the added rosebushes and distribute the blossoms.”

“Absolutely not!” another leader exclaimed. “We cannot change the garden. It was created as a special place with boundaries, which were set long ago by the founding fathers who were wise and thoughtful.”

“Those who built the garden would want it to reach its greatest potential,” the first leader said. “The garden has been entrusted to us—men and women caretakers. Before we pass on our caretaking duties to the next generation, we must use whatever courage, vision, and resources we can summon to ensure the roses flourish. Imagine, just stop for a few moments and imagine, what a remarkable opportunity we have before us. We are blessed.”

Many caretakers murmured in agreement, but the second leader was not persuaded.

“Ridiculous!” the leader continued, and there were some who indicated agreement. “We don’t even know how to move the boundaries, and even if we did, where would we find the soil, nutrients, water, and additional hands to expand the garden? We must keep the garden as it always has been.”

“The very mission of a garden is growth,” the first leader said. “We don’t have all the answers, but we have been called to be caretakers at this particular time in the life of the garden. All who believe in this calling, please join me at the garden.”

The caretakers—both the men and the women—filed out of the meeting, walked to the garden, and formed a circle inside the garden’s boundaries. At the leader’s instruction and encouragement, they knelt and together began to extend the boundaries. It was a laborious task, but they soon saw great progress.

A large, uncultivated tract was uncovered and now needed tending. The expressions on the caregivers’ faces mirrored the enormity of the work ahead.

“Aha! What are we going to do now?” the second leader asked, gesturing to the new area with a sweeping of his arm. “This is too big for our group. We will fail.”

The first leader calmly addressed the caregivers. “We must reach deep within our hearts and souls to find our way on this journey. Return to your homes. Consider your possessions. Determine what you can share, and bring it to our garden.”

The caregivers soon returned, and what a sight it was to behold! Some were carrying soil and fertilizer overflowing the tops of bowls, baskets, and buckets, and others brought as much as they could push in wheelbarrows and large wagons. Still others quickly turned their talents to expanding the irrigation, and there were many who pledged extra hours of time working in the garden. Every person—even the doubting leader and caregivers—forgot the challenges and focused on the contributions he or she could make. The variety of gifts were all needed and played an essential role in the garden’s expansion and growth.

The united caregivers labored night and day for some time until the expansion was complete—complete, they said, smiling in agreement, until they were called to move the boundaries once more. New rosebushes were planted.

Today, the caregivers—the mentors—are poised to resume daily care of the roses and the garden.

At the urging of the first leader, they pause to recognize this spiritual marker in their journey, expressing gratitude and joy for what has happened in this beloved land.

The men and women join hands and then their voices in shouts of praise and affirmation. Divine powers send blessings through a glittering sapphire sky, dancing brilliant sunbeams, and soft whispering breezes. The expanded garden, one that is able to nurture more roses, is dedicated, and the world smiles.

NOTE: On March 28, 2003, the mythical garden became real, as the Rose Garden at the Gertrude Castellow Ford Center for the Performing Arts was dedicated at the entrance to The University of Mississippi. A plaque is placed on the side honoring Ellen Rolfes for her actualizing her vision. On that day, people of all ages stood in a circle and embraced the message. They now carry the vision of the Ole Miss Women's Council for Philanthropy to expand and redefine the boundaries symbolized by the rose metaphor in this adult teaching tale.

At the center of the Rose Garden, the women and men placed an exquisite sculpture, "The Mentor," to depict their nurturing energy to those who enter the campus. Each rosebush planted represents a scholarship created to educate the next generation of student leaders, who are chosen to go out into the world and make it a more caring and ethical place. The students, like roses, can be challenging to raise and require a great deal of attention. They need water, nutrients, and even pruning. But once developed and cut away from the bush, the carefully tended rosebuds will transform their surroundings and bring beauty to those around them.