



IRENE VIRAG

BA LI LIFE

In the dawning days of the New Year, I walk about my garden. It has been put to bed but it doesn't want to sleep. The green shoots of bulbs cluster amid evergreens, and a few of them even show buds. The koi move slowly in the bottom of the pond as if unwilling to sink into their winter torpor. The lawn wears green.

It's not exactly June in January, but for this day at least it could be April. It's one of those days when the seasons intersect. Holly bushes are bright with berries and winter jasmine impersonates forsythia. Magnolia leaves glisten and the exfoliating bark of the river birches invites my touch. I grasp the rich brown earth in the front beds and smile. I think that I could still plant bulbs.

My thoughts are caught up in this crossing of the seasons, in the magic of the growing things, and in the garden I have tended for 15 years. In the joy of helping life spring from the earth, there is always time to pause, to reflect — moments when you hold the past and embrace the present and look to the future.

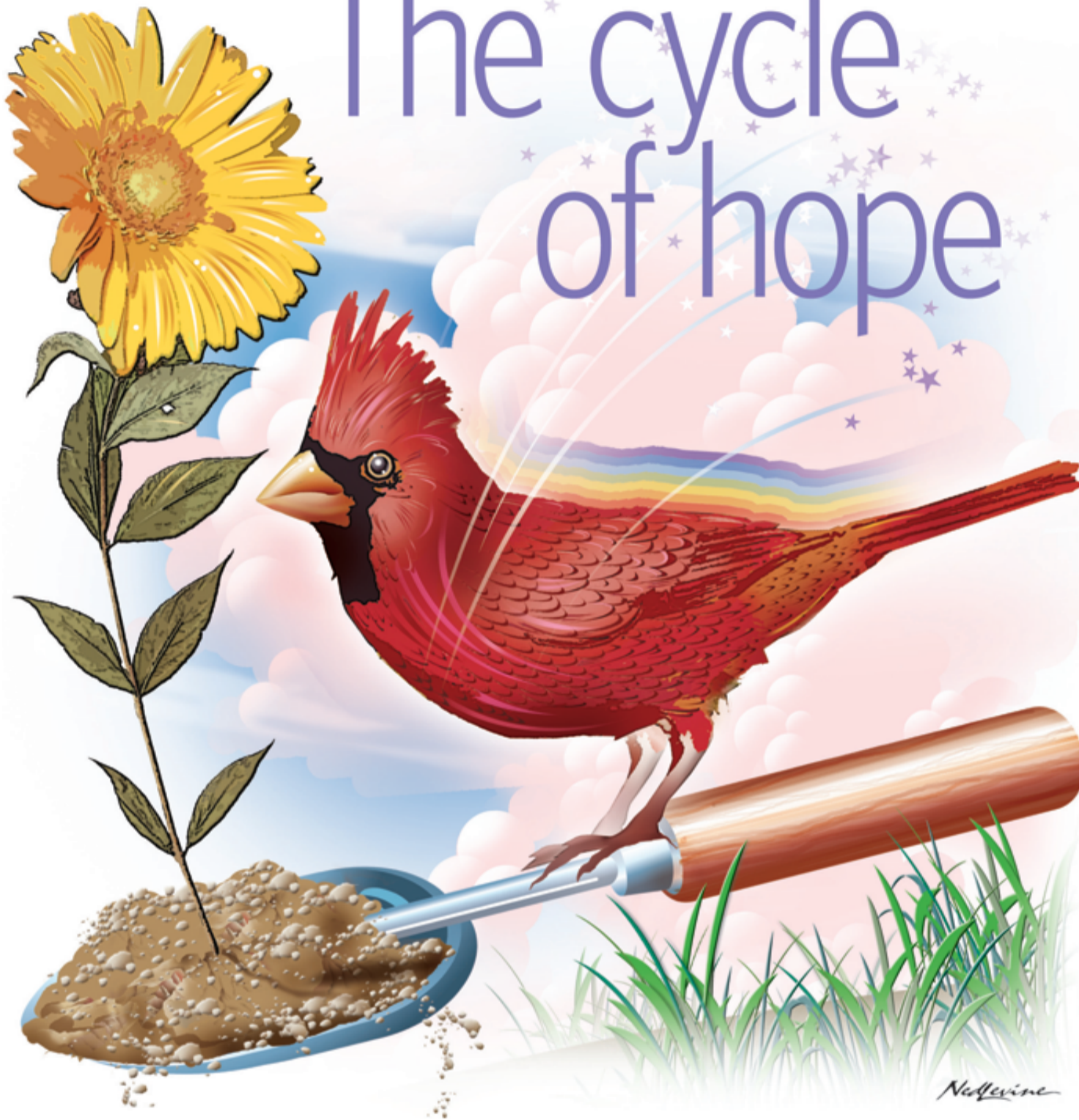
As I write this, a cardinal suddenly appears outside my window. He perches on the top branches of a weeping dwarf *Kousa* dogwood and looks straight at me through the glass. I take his chirping as a sign of encouragement. "Go, girl," he's saying. He's singing my song.

Perhaps he knows that I'm a late bloomer when it comes to beds and borders. My husband and I married on a January day much like this and bought a home of our own a few months later. That's when I became a gardener. I carried calla lilies at my wedding. Now I grow them in my garden.

And it was on a winter night that I felt a lump in my breast. The next morning was my 41st birthday. I watched swans swimming by on the freshwater pond outside the glass door of our bedroom and told my husband that our lives would never be the same. My husband is 26 years older than I am, and he used to worry about dying before me and leaving me alone. We learned how fragile life is and how important love is — and the garden helped.

Especially the new garden we planted in our front yard the following spring when I was undergoing chemotherapy. We call it our Garden of Health and Joy. Each year, it whispers of hope. It whispers of tomorrow. It's so good to be able to tell you that I'm a 10-year survivor.

My song is a simple one. I see the garden as a metaphor for life and death, for rebirth and revival. For the cycle of the seasons — for spring when early daffodils sprinkle sunshine beyond the picture win-



Ned Levine

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dow and the pink petals of Japanese cherry trees carpet the patio, for summer when purple clematis scrambles along the garden fence and mixes with white roses, for autumn when morning glories glisten in the dew-kissed dawn and sunflowers stretch to the sky, for winter when the *Hinoki* cypress stands sentinel by the pool and witch hazel heralds the warmth to come.

And for days like this. I look at the bulbs trying to bloom out of season and I don't know whether to laugh or cry. Or perhaps to do both. My husband is just as sentimental, if not more so. He can stroll about the garden and run into the house to announce that the Jack-in-the-pulpit has finally naturalized or that the dahlia we had given up for lost is alive and well or that the lettuce is beautiful. He sums up such declarations by telling me

that he loves our garden — that he loves our life together, that he loves me. How can I not feel lucky to be a gardener?

Some people may have greener thumbs than others, but as long as we're not afraid to get our hands dirty, we can all become gardeners. It is a pursuit requiring both faith and application. We have to share knowledge as well as seeds and plants. We have to dream. We have to believe. We have to take chances.

And there is one more thing. I learned it from a woman I never knew. Her name was Celia Thaxter, and she gardened in the late 1800s on a windswept refuge off the Maine-New Hampshire coast called Appledore Island. In her book "An Island Garden," she described a year in the garden where she found comfort and expression in golden nastur-

tiums and black hollyhocks and heliotrope and cosmos and red poppies and much more. She grew the poppies from seeds she planted in eggshells and transported them by rowboat in open ocean waters from the mainland. Her garden was a cutting garden and it grew in glorious profusion.

"Often," Celia wrote, "I hear people say, 'How do you make your plants flourish like this? What is your secret?' And I answer with one word, 'Love.'"

That, to me, is the essential ingredient of being a gardener. Love your garden, and it will love you back. But you have to love it with what Celia called "the patience that endures continual trial, the constancy that makes perseverance possible." You have to love your garden, no matter what.

And so I run out into ice and

snow and hug an evergreen mortally wounded by a Nor'easter. When an early frost threatens, I scurry about in the dark, covering tomato vines with sheets of plastic. I stake up fallen sunflowers buffeted by a windstorm. I mulch and compost and prune and perspire.

And on a bright and warm day in January, I walk about my yard and dream of spring, of past glories and new promises. As always, I have great expectations.

I am so very lucky to be a gardener.

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