**The Lotus Effect**

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I make up my prayers when pain or troubles double-fold me. This, as I was not raised on religion but on stories about nothing and everything much to the consternation of my outer family who viewed my upbringing as untamed in the extreme.

Answers to my secret, warm-blooded, torments and night terrors tip out not from intercessions of the divine but from luminous images settled deep within the lining of my brain that solidify as solutions when I need them. Mirages that make themselves out of fog to share my burden of fears, my raw spots.

One such image deep in my psyche, of the lotus, has stretched from a childhood poem into the length of my fifties. “Imagine you’re a seed, sleeping snug in the mud, deep within you hides a special little bud. You might be small but have a big job to do: the job of becoming uniquely you.”

To my excitable, mnemonic mind, the notion of a tiny seed squirming and worming its way through a viscous mixture of liquid and solid—a mix of sludge, marshy waters and frog-slimed bright green algae—to explode as a majestic lotus and stand audaciously above its muscular stem and already-towering rim-to-rim green saucer leaves **seemed an inspiring metaphor by which to live one’s life.** A lifefull of daring adventure, the lotus and its golden center representing a buoyed-up life force, the sludge and marsh waters symbolic of existence’s frightful, tangled realities.

So, I guess, always inside of me, within the swampy bottom of my mind, was a quiet, free-floating sort of desire, to grow lotuses in a home pond—creating a cosmic miracle within my tiny universe. And this seed within seemed to know the art of waiting, tethered as it was to a depth I could not see. Maybe it was destiny’s quirky marshmallow test of delayed gratification. After all, this is my country’s national flower, and Indian karma, they say, ambushes you in beguiling and not-so-beguiling ways.

When we were in our fifties, my husband and I built a home in Chattarpur, on the outskirts of New Delhi—a township in Mehrauli with a record of ten centuries of continuous occupation. When we moved back from our overseas stint, our savings did not stretch to an apartment in downtown Delhi and we decided instead to buy land in the city's outlying part. There would be flowers, creepers, vegetable patches, orchards, birds, dogs and fishes we thought. Luckily, all that happened.

My lotus dream had waited long enough. With blazing lucidity, I decided it was time for the bright, brilliant blooms and whirring overhead dragonflies.

Scarily, seeds were becoming a thing of the past, and it took months to find seed dealers from Kerala and the US. Dizzying activity circles had to follow if we were to sprout the seeds. First, we had to mellow the hard seeds, which took over a week, with daily changes of warm water they were soaked in. Then we had to file, sand and nick them to get to their cream-colored insides and re-soak them till they sprouted. Then we had to transfer the leaf-stem sprouts when they got to four inches into a dishpan with about three inches of clay soil covered with sand. And then we had to plant these new seedlings into the pond by readying several large round containers, making slight depressions in their soil and putting a little bit of dirt around to hold the roots. We had to follow the same contours to nourish these seeds in a lineup of huge, deep, cement containers. After a three-week dormant phase, the rhizomes thickened to tubers from which leaves sprouted.

If I liked the lotus flower’s insolence in my mind, their energized rise above their station, I liked the dare of my real lotus leaves even better. They pierced through the deliciously dirty water surface like sharpened spears, then opened asymmetrically into huge round leaves perched atop their stalks and, at last, wobbled continually in the breeze like infant heads.

I loved that their rather deep leaf plates with wide, soft slopes and wavy edges—quite like a hand drawing with shaky fringes—did not allow water streams to glide but, rather, gathered them on their lamina into a single, fat, glowing, pearl drop. Science calls this super hydrophobicity, poetry lotus effect.

I understood the functioning of this anomaly by peering beneath the leaves waxy surface. The size and density of its papillae allowed the leaves to remain dry in the heaviest of downpours. I then became privy to another peculiarity, their self-cleansing ability. As water drops rolled over the leaves, they collected dirt particles on the surface and wiped them clean. Scientists, I know, have been trying to artificially mimic this evolutionary advantage for years.

It took another year for our lotus to bloom in pink, not multi-colored as the seed packets promised. In a rush, multitudes of them soundlessly climbed up towards the sky till they could climb no further. Other than the sheer delight that wings about in their presence, they give us the fame of being the only home in New Delhi with lotus hedges as boundary walls.

Every year, I greet these wispy lotus blooms with a ritual. I cut a leaf stalk, bore a hole into its navel, open up its secret passage, and pour water into it. I then draw the petiole close to my mouth and drink the life-giving juices, in the hope that many more life truths will filter through.

For my fear is that if we lose our lotus plants, plants which have earned their existence, their space on earth, their meaning within our minds, we will not just lose biodiversity, or useful molecules, but innovative scientific, artistic, technological ideas, alongside our eternal truths. My real dread is that many metaphoric minds that throb with the imagination of lotus truths, living within them, will turn dangerously insular and maybe even infecund.