



Stone, leaf, water, life: Miller recharges in her backyard.

On Garden Time

When her career stalled, author Karen Maezen Miller discovered a new life had just begun

TWENTY years ago, I quit a job that had me calculating my days in billable, quarter-hour increments. I was only 40, but keeping track of all that time had convinced me I was running out of it. When colleagues questioned my rush into oblivion, I assured them it was a daring leap into my adventurous second act. Just you watch, I boasted on my way out the door; you haven't seen the last of me!

Turns out they *had* seen the last of me. My new husband and I moved west and plowed our savings into a dirt-cheap house with a historic but

derelict backyard: half an acre in suburban Los Angeles, planted 80 years before and deemed Southern California's oldest private Japanese garden. It was filled with stinky ponds, rampant weeds and mountains of leaves. Light on know-how but flush with faith, we found it ideal for us.

Our relocation let my husband keep doing what he loved—engineering space missions—but my own direction was muddled. For a year I sent résumés into a void, interviewed to no avail. Should I go back to school? Earn a credential to teach or nurse? I wanted to use my time wisely, but when would my new life at last begin?

As my career gap lengthened, the answer became obvious: It would begin right here. I grew content to let my prime years pass me by as I knelt in the dirt, wearing old sneakers and a sweaty straw hat.

Caring for the garden became a kind of spiritual calling—a pursuit for which I had no aptitude or experience, but a steady surplus of time. My life disappeared into days, then years, that by any appraisal did not amount to much. Yet you couldn't have paid me to do anything else. (Not that anyone offered.) The benefits, like the hours, were immeasurable.

So now I glory in my second act as groundskeeper. I live on garden time, which stretches out forever. Weeds summon me to my ponds and pathways in spring and summer; fallen leaves call in autumn. For my efforts, I get nothing but a pile of rubbish. Still, the garden is an ideal workplace: quiet, patient, trusting and wildly creative. My mistakes go unremarked; given time, they self-correct.

Even with all my inadequacies, I am indispensable. No one is plotting to replace me. Of course, everything I do comes undone, but that's the blessing of garden time: the perennial promise of starting over.

Yes, we live on one income, but there are ways to get by on less: Want little; be satisfied; replace nothing that still has a useful life. (This last point has served our marriage well.)

Grass is not the only thing that has grown here. At 42 I became a first-time mother, at 50 a first-time author. In between, my longtime meditation practice bore fruit when I was ordained as a Zen Buddhist priest.

In the slow cycle of the seasons, freed from ambition and regret, I have become rich with time. As I celebrate my 60th birthday, I thank the garden for reinventing the way I see the world—and all the time in it. ■

Karen Maezen Miller, 60, is the author of Paradise in Plain Sight: Lessons from a Zen Garden.