My Speaking Garden

by Carole Blackburn

The words I speak can be compared to an elaborate garden.

In this garden, there are beautiful and delicate roses. The words “I love you,” “I am so very proud of you,” or “You mean so much to me,” when spoken to my children, express the sincere, delicate feelings of a mother’s love, just as Mother Nature shows her love through the beauty of roses.

The center of the garden is filled with rows of tulips, standing straight and tall, a hardy flower the gardener can depend on year after year. They are standing in neat, perfect rows, the same as my speaking manner in a business setting. My words are respectful, proper and grammatically correct. The tulips give my garden stability and, in a professional atmosphere, my words reflect a stable, confident intelligence. “Yes, sir, I will have your report ready for tomorrow’s meeting.”

Scattered among the roses and tulips are whimsical wildflowers, jutting out here and there, in a rainbow of colors. My outbursts of wildflower humor and sarcasm often surprise the listener as the words disrupt the apparent order and yet add zest to the manicured garden. Such spur-of-the-moment outbursts occur in a relaxed atmosphere when I tell my friends that taking the algebra exam “made me feel like I just had a lobotomy—my brain hurts!” or I tell my son, “Every time I see the light at the end of the tunnel, I find out the light is from a freight train coming straight at me!” Often, I am sarcastic about painful subjects. Somehow, the laughter makes the pain easier to bear. I have joked about my father to others and told them, “He is so stubborn, he’ll never die—they will have to screw him into the ground.” This is not such a nice thing to say, but my humor helps me deal with the stressful relationship.

Beneath the roses, hidden behind the leaves, are a few thorns, waiting to prick the unaware. Mother Nature gave roses thorns to protect the flower. Perhaps, in the same way, my thorny words serve to protect me from my vulnerability in the world. They are merely an expression of fear, anguish or despair. I strike out as a means of protection: “Go away, leave me alone!” These words are sharp and painful for the listener.

Once in a while, a little fertilizer is applied to the garden. My words, when I am angry, are like manure scattered around the ground. Fortunately, the X-rated words are usually spoken only to myself. The walls of my car hear them often. I have an intolerance of old people driving monstrous automobiles who should have turned in their driver’s licenses ten years ago. “Come on, you @#$%! old buzzard—get out of my way! It must be nice to have all day to drive to the store! If you drive any slower, you’ll be driving in reverse!”

Off in the corner grows a sabal palm. The winter season here has made its branches curl inward and the color is far from the vibrant green it was in Florida. Likewise, a few Southern phrases occasionally flow into the Northern breeze: “When y’all comin’ over?” “Could I have a glass of soda, please?” My friends only think of soda as a glass of “pop” (as it is called here) with ice cream added to it! The roses and tulips take note of this strange creature in the garden and try hard to make it feel at home.

There also weeds which appear out of nowhere, sneaking in where they do not belong. My collection of weeds includes words and phrases that annoy my English professor (and I must remove them soon!). My collection consists of words such as “factor,” “etc.,” as well as the disjointed words of unconnected thoughts. There are also the weeds of negative thoughts and words (“I can’t do this. Nothing ever works out right.”) All the weeds must go—they only destroy and cannot exist in a well-balanced garden.

As I sit back and look at my garden, I see that the brutal storms of life have caused an imbalance right now—not enough roses, tulips or wildflowers, and too many weeds. I, alone, am the caretaker. The time has come to breathe life back into my battered garden.

“Get going, you lazy bum!” the wildflowers scream out. “Out with the weeds! Hold up on the fertilizer! Stop feeling remorse for the past. Our beauty is still here—it’s just buried under the piles of manure and weeds.”

My, what insight the wildflowers have. Imagine what the roses and tulips are saying!