



Sue Stuart-Smith talking to Marian Boswall, from the Chiddingstone Castle Literary Festival

Marian Boswall: Hello, I am landscape architect and garden designer Marian Boswall. I'm probably best known through Instagram and my magazine articles and a recent TEDx Talk musing on how we can design a more sustainable way of living, both for the planet and for ourselves. And I'm talking today with Sue Stuart-Smith, who is a doctor, psychologist, and also a gardener, and who, together with her husband Tom Stuart-Smith, has created the beautiful Barn Garden, which many people listening to this may know of, and who has recently written and published, just yesterday, the beautiful book *The Well Gardened Mind*. So, Sue, it's incredibly wonderful to be talking to you today. And gosh, can I just say, the timeliness of this book. Had you any idea how much needed it was going to be when you started off writing it?

Sue Stuart-Smith: Of course I couldn't possibly have had any idea. I did write it very much in the context of the climate change crisis, the biodiversity crisis. So I was thinking about that, particularly when I wrote about earlier times in history when people have turned back to nature, have turned back to the land and to gardens, at times of crisis. But of course I had no idea, and it feels very strange, looking back at some of the things I wrote then...

MB: It shows how incredibly apt it is for now – I hear it was published yesterday and it immediately sold out on Amazon –

SS-S: I think it did, yes.

MB: – and I think it's very interesting at the beginning of the book, when you were talking about the activity of the micro ... microglia, is that you how you pronounce it? And you say that it exemplifies one of the fundamental laws that govern life, that health is not a passive process. And you say that the mind needs to be gardened too, which I think is your prompt for the book. And, you say, above all we need to recognise what nourishes us, and I think that hugely resonated with me and lots of people who are now gardening to get through this lockdown period, aren't they?

SS-S: Yes, yes. What you're referring to is the microglia, the cells in the brain. One of things that concerned me, writing the book and getting myself more current with neuroscience was, I was aware of a growing metaphor in neuroscience, particularly popular neuroscience, of the brain as a computer. And in fact the brain is a biological organ. It operates in accordance with the laws of nature and it is, in fact, constantly tended, and pruned, and weeded by these cells that are recognised as the brain's gardener cells, these days. They've



only really been discovered properly, their full role in maintaining brain health, in probably the last decade or so. So that was an important thing for me, to get that message across. It's about how we think of ourselves.

MB: As part of nature, because we are part of nature, aren't we? Somebody has described the current response to the pandemic as an urgent biophilia, that seeds are running out like bread flour – it's no longer too roll that people are worried about, but people have this need to get back to the land and to touch the land, don't they?

SS-S: The phenomenon of urgent biophilia has been recognised and written about in many different situations following natural disasters, in the aftermath of wars and other kinds of atrocities that people experience an almost instinctive reaction; the need to work with nature's regenerative powers and how enormously strengthening that is and stabilising it is for us psychologically. Most of the time we take it for granted that it's there.

MB; Yes. When we spoke earlier I told you that the reason I became a gardener is that I read *Day of the Triffids* and thought 'Oh my word, I need to understand how this planet works' – aged about 12. And that was an immediate beginning, a kick-start, if you like. I'm interested, you read English at Cambridge, and then you became a doctor after your father died, and you were interested in Freud, and then a psychologist and now an author.

SS-S: A psychotherapist, actually. I'm not a psychologist.

MB: Sorry!

SS-S: [laughs] It's all right. Most people don't know the difference, but within the profession these things kind of matter.

MB: So when did you know that you wanted to write a book? When did that come about?

SS-S: It started thanks to somebody called Christopher Woodward, who is the director of the Garden Museum in London. In 2013 he was setting out on what has turned out to be a very successful series of events, but it was the first one, a garden literary festival. Tom and I had agreed to host it in our garden here, and at one of the planning meetings, he said 'Sue, you're going to write about gardening and the mind'. And I thought, 'oh, ok, I think I could do that!' And it was in writing that talk, and it brought together two sides of my life suddenly. Though I'd been gardening and benefitting from it, I'd never thought about it in a structured way, or thought about it in terms of theory or understanding of the mind. So for me, that was an absolute revelation, that I suddenly realised that so much of the things like



attachment theory, and how we experience grief and need to mourn, and how we understand those in psychotherapeutic terms, actually was very, very relevant to understanding how gardening helps people. And I couldn't find much of that in the existing – there's a lot out there about how gardening can help wellbeing and recovery from mental illness – but I couldn't find much of *that*, so that set me off, wanting to explore that, and try and get a deeper understanding of what's going on. Because the other thing that struck me, and that other people have commented to me, is that a lot of the writing about gardening can seem a little bit superficial, when actually people experience it in a very deep way. And I wanted to capture that, something of the more unconscious aspects. Because it's a non-verbal activity and so it is very difficult to verbalise. I worked quite hard trying to verbalise my own experiences, and then doing quite lengthy interviews with people who recovered from, or who were recovering, or had been helped, sometimes on mental health projects, or community projects, within prisons...

MB: I think that that research is phenomenal. That really comes across in the book. One of the things I was blown away by was the utter scope of the book. This is not just a book for gardeners or people who are interested in the mind. It's a book on how to live, really, isn't it? On how gardens can help us to understand life and understand death. One of the things that I love was the bit you had on Montaigne, who said the task of living is made much harder if we see death as an adversary, but it's absolutely essential for the survival of life itself on the planet. I just found there were so many things you could dip into in the book, from myths, to stories, to history. It took, what, five years to write it?

SS-S: It took me five years, yes. It's a wonderful subject, actually, so I got very into the research. But you know, in one way the book is absolutely as you're saying relevant to the moment now, but the thing that struck me, looking back through history and mythology, is that these themes are age-old, aren't they? And I wanted to convey that, too, because I think that's hopeful, that our situation may at times seem dire in various ways, but it's not unique. People have found their way through, and they've found their way through nature, through working with nature, many many many many many times, in many places.

MB: One of the things I like was the myth – well, there are lots of lovely stories and myths – but the myth of Nunkui, and the way that was the return to motherhood. Can you tell us a bit about that?

SS-S: Yes. That section of the book is about the Achuar tribe in the Amazon, and in particular some anthropological work that was done there in the 1970s by Philippe Descola and his wife Anne-Christine. And she impacted most of the fieldwork, because the gardens there are the women's domain, and the women have – the Achuar tribe are not unique in thinking about the plants that they grow as a kind of offspring, but there it's very explicit, that they



have their family, their children that they give birth to, but they also have their plants that they tend. And they actually go to the garden to give birth, so the garden is the place where life begins.

MB: I love that, I thought that was fabulous.

SS-S: It's a tribe where the expression of emotion openly isn't encouraged, so they go to the garden at times of distress as well. And the women can comfort each other in the garden.

BW: And you weave that in with the 1960s psychologist John Bowlby, his sense of motherhood and place as well, which I thought was very interesting.

SS-S: I think attachment is key to one of the important ways in which gardening can stabilise us and ground us. I think that is something that we have that is a contemporary problem – I think we've lost sight of the value of attachment to place. Of course, it's not necessarily available for many people, either. But it doesn't have to be your own garden. It may be a community garden that you invest time in and you get to know people in, and you contribute to growing the produce in. Or it might be your allotment, if you're moving around in a town. And I think around us as well, you know, you look at the high streets, the shops are similar everywhere. We've developed a bit of a functional idea of place, or transient pleasures, rather than something that's about continuity.

BW: I think it's lovely at the moment that people are noticing real details aren't they, because people are stuck at home, just for this moment. Perhaps by the time this is aired in May

SS-S: [cross-talk] ... but it is about a kind of intimacy as well, I think there is an intimacy involved in gardening. You notice what the plants need, but what you're describing as well, that level of knowledge: you have to understand the soil, understand so many different things. But that's the basis of human relating, isn't it, is that kind of intimacy. And if we just pass through places, we never develop that.

BW: Yes, it helps us to understand ourselves. But I think one of the interesting things as well is that need for different types of place. I know we mentioned that I'm trustee at Blackthorn Trust which is a healing garden, a quite dynamic healing garden. And that's in the old walled garden of what was a mental hospital. But really that feeling of being in the walls is a bit like the Nunkui; they're within the walls, and when you're within the walls, you're safe, and I think that idea of sanctuary is so important in a garden. But you were also explaining that there's a need for different types of gardens for different types of mental states.



SS-S: Yes. Not everybody needs that sense of safety so acutely, but I think we all benefit from a feeling of refuge in a garden, up to a point, anyway. But I think for people who have been traumatised, people suffering from PTSD, veterans... there's been a lot of research on veterans, and a lot of projects that have run very successfully in walled gardens for people suffering from trauma. And, actually, the severer kinds of mental illness where it can be hard to trust other people or trust life. It is the feeling of safety that's crucial, and in terms of the therapy of PTSD, it is the first criteria. You can't – regardless of the modality, this has got nothing to do with horticultural therapy – the first principle is you have to establish you have to establish a sense of safety, or re-establish a sense of safety. So I think in that sense the garden is a therapeutic tool, the feeling that you can create in the garden.

MB: I loved the way that you described how different types of people had affinity not only with different places, so whether it's walled garden or wilderness or greenhouses, but also with different types of plants. You explain that some of the war veterans had an affinity with the old solid oaks, who'd seen lots of

SS-S: Yes! I came across that several times, that theme, both in the interviews and research that had been written up, and it struck me as of enormous psychological significance. There are lots of other things that they're benefitting from in the garden. Soldiers are outdoor people, and the physicality of the garden is important, and also the bringing new life, the creativity after destructiveness, all of that is enormously important. But the trees were something that really helped them feel safe, I think, like a first point of contact? An unthreatening part of nature that was of similar endurance that gave them hope. But also something they could begin to reattach to life through.

MB: And you mention a young girl who has an affinity to cactuses.

SS-S: Yes, the scale varies with different people's needs, and this was a young girl who I met on a project called San Patrignano in Italy, a drug rehabilitation centre. It's a very large centre, it's a remarkable place, and horticulture is only one of the many craft-based therapeutic streams that they have there. But whichever one you're in – it may be textiles, and they have a vineyard too – you stay there and you train in that for two or three years. She had been working in the floral nurseries, where they grow all the bedding plants. She'd been there nearly two years when I interviewed her. She told me how for the first six months at least, she really hated the work and she resented it and she was still full of anger and grievance and couldn't really connect with anybody and couldn't connect with the plants. And then one day she noticed, in the corner of the poly-tunnel, there was some cacti which had actually been there since she arrived – but they were languishing and she noticed them and her predecessor had left them behind. So nobody owned them. So she saw them



and she decided to adopt them, and that was the turning point for her. My understanding was that there was something in the cacti she could identify with. She wasn't prickly when I interviewed, but you could see her description of herself, pushing people away and not wanting help. It felt like she had been a bit like a cacti, and somehow through that she learnt how to be different through nurturing them.

MB: And also a bit vulnerable. We often find that one of the things that we're trying to play out when we find our own idea of paradise, which is one of my themes of what we're looking for in the garden, is to find where we can be vulnerable. Was it Jung who said that the great thing about plants is that they have neither the conflicts nor the emotions?

SS-S: It was actually Freud.

MB: Ah, sorry.

SS-S: It's all right, they're both in the book! Jung of course is known for writing about nature and ecology. Freud's love of nature and in particular his love of flowers is much less well known, as is his love of the garden.

MB: And that's where you started isn't it? You started with Freud when you were doing English literature at Cambridge. Didn't you start by studying him? And it turns out he was a garden lover.

SS-S: I did, but I didn't know that then. I studied him in my psychoanalytic psychotherapy training. And I didn't know that then, but I knew that I wanted to – there are certain aspects of Freud's writing, particularly his writing about transience, where he does write about the beauty of nature. I remembered that and I went back to that first of all. One of the things he describes very beautifully in that paper is how, in order to enjoy the transience of beauty we have to be able to mourn a little as well. And that led on to him developing his understanding about melancholia or depression, that there is a link, that you can't feel pleasure or joy in something that's transient when you're depressed, and that there's a block in mourning.

MB: That's interesting.

SS-S: I think it's crucial, central, to one of the ways that the garden can help us, because I think what we learn through nature and through working with nature is about the cycle of life, is the inevitability of death and loss, but also the garden kind of lets us down gently with it. We can face it because there is Spring round the corner. When the tulips are over,



the lupins will come into flower, or the delphiniums: there's something else in sequence. We all have particular favourites, and as one disappears for that year there's something else coming along. And even in the Autumn, you can start planning for next Spring.

MB: For next year.

SS-S: Yes. And one of the other things that Freud writes in that paper is about the enormous importance of Spring, which was hugely important to him, psychologically, at various points in his life, but really throughout his life, and particularly when he was suffering from cancer in the last 16 years of his life and he couldn't travel anymore, and the gardens of the villas that he rented outside Vienna were enormously important. He writes about how the recurrence of Spring is the nearest we can get to the experience of the eternal within our own lifetime.

MB: I know your own personal experience of the garden as a healing force, you bring it in very lightly, which is beautiful. You explain that you work as a lead clinician in psychotherapy for the NHS in Hertfordshire and this led to your own burnout. One of the most poignant parts of the book for me was the moment when your greenhouse healed you.

SS-S: Yes it certainly helped.

MB: Would you mind reading that bit? It was so beautiful.

SS-S: Yes, I can read that. I think it's probably worth making the point that one of the things that was very difficult that led up to my retiring and becoming – I became physically unwell as well, and I was exhausted by the time I retired – was in 2015, was the aftermath of some cuts that were made in the service. They were being made all round the country, in psychotherapy and psychology services, and trying to carry on delivering a service on reduced resources was the problem. So it was summer when I left, and so I'll read from that autumn:

"As that autumn progressed, I hoped for a resurgence of energy, but it did not come. The lethargy dragged on into winter and the wintery feeling dragged on into March. Usually when spring arrives, I can't wait to get out to the greenhouse, but that year was different. Even though I'd long since ordered a selection of seeds, they were all still sitting in their packets. One weekend morning, Tom suggested we go out to the greenhouse together. It was certainly in need of a clean. We set to work, clearing out dead leaves, old broken pots, and all the rest of the previous year's debris. Then we rearranged the plants on the staging, and filled up the potting-up buckets with fresh compost. Just as we were finishing off, I



began rifling through my box of seed packets, and for the first time, I started planning what to sow.

“The following day, straight after breakfast, I went outside intending to pop into the greenhouse to make a start on a few seed trays. I hadn’t been out there long before I was gripped by an urgent need to get things into the ground. I worked through my feelings of tiredness as if nothing else mattered, and by the end of that day there were lettuces, rocket, carrots, spinach, beetroot, kale, coriander, parsley, basil and more, all sown in seed trays or lined out in the vegetable patch. I sowed flowers, too: calendula, larkspur, sweet-peas and cosmos. All of these, no longer nascent in my mind, but actually in the soil, soon to grow. Through the previous months I had been marooned, like a hapless surfer watching the waves rolling by, but that day I caught a ride on the wave of time. Garden time, that is, which with its seasonal pull and energy of new growth can carry you along.”

MB: That’s so beautiful, thank you. And I know that you’re now working with NHS doctors who are experiencing burnout, so you’re putting that knowledge into...

SS-S: Yes, yes.

MB: And it’s much needed.

SS-S: It is much needed at the moment, but it has been for some time. Obviously this is intensified by problems in a very unexpected, new, different way. But yes, it has been needed for some time. And although I work as a psychotherapist with them, I always look with them at their lifestyle, because hospitals are not very—you don’t get, often, much daylight in a hospital, for starters. So it’s very easy to be completely deprived of nature and the anti-stress effects that we can all benefit from in nature, particularly exercising in nature. But also resting and just being mindfully present in nature. All these things are incredibly restorative. So I always look with them at their lifestyles, and often they’ve lapsed. They’ve got very stressed and withdrawn and they’re not benefitting from that. One of the things I think is very nice is that hospitals are increasingly recognising the benefits for staff. So Great Ormond Street, for example, they’ve got a garden for patients, but they have also opened a garden that’s exclusively for staff that’s been designed by Andy Sturgeon, and that to me seems like a really good sign.

MB: Really important. And I know you’re putting that healing into practice with your Serge Hill Project where you’re working with the Sunnyside Rural Project, aren’t you?

SS-S: We are, yes, and we hope to work with other charities, actually. We started working with them because they’re such a good local charity to us, and we’ve been working with



them for some time already in a slightly different way. This is a charity that provides training and therapy for young people suffering from various forms of learning disability including Autism and Asperger's.

MB: Well done both of you for getting the planning permission.

SS-S: We've now got planning permission to put up a building in the orchard, and there's already a little nursery there that Sunnyside are running which is growing plants for the Hampton Court Show, which has now been postponed. Tom has a garden that he's designed there, so that will be their destination. We're hoping it will take place in September, but we'll have to see whether it can. But the idea is that the building will allow us to provide educational resources as well, and be a venue for other kinds of lectures and trainings and things like that, for people who just want to learn about things like nature and gardening. So we've also been developing with three of our local schools and also youth counselling charity. The aim in the long-run is to link up with them.

MB: I do hope, as you will, that all of our garden communities' work is going to help change the way that we live, and I think it has brought to mind— they say when you can't go out, go inward, and people are reflecting on how we live. I know we've got to finish up, but one of the things I want to finish on is your amazing, is it a parable or myth? Of the goddess Inana, a Sumerian Goddess similar to our Aphrodite, that you wrote about how it's a parable for these days, that the gardeners' mortal sin is a sort of rape of the earth. I wondered if you might, just to finish, touch on what we've got to learn from that.

SS-S: I saw it as a parable for our times. I think it's about what happens when you're so set on a track, which we have been economically and in terms of consumerism and travel and everything; when you're so set on a track, and so busy with it, and so intent on it, there is no time to reflect and think about your values. And that's what happened there. Everything was geared towards productivity – this is in the ancient civilisation of Sumer – everything was geared towards productivity and the land was never replenished. And they suffered from a series of terrible disasters, including soil erosion. Eventually this led to the decline of their civilisation. And I think we're now living in a time when suddenly we can't take all those things for granted, that before we could. It was okay, it was possible to stay at this relentless pace, to be endlessly increasing productivity. So I think it could be such a powerful edict for change: when you can't take things for granted any more you really do have to assess your values.



MB: Well I think there's so much food for thought and I've loved talking to you, and I think we've got so much lots of people will learn from our virtual Chiddingstone Festival. Would you mind just holding the book up? There we go. I'm sure it will come back into stock soon.

SS-S: It is being restocked. For people who are intent on getting it, there are various places online, including from Harper Collins themselves, where people can buy it.

MB: Fabulous. I've loved talking to you, thank you so much Sue. And I hope next time we meet it will be less virtual.

SS-S: Yes, it will be lovely Marian.

BM: Thank you! Bye bye.

SS-S: Bye.