

A Mind to Mow

By: Gina Mazza Hillier

Originally published in the [Pittsburgh Post-Gazette](#).

To heck with psychotherapists, self-help books and spa vacations. Who has time? I've found a low-cost, non-fat way to get in touch with my soul while checking a chore off my "to do" list.

Meet my lawn tractor: an "electric start, hydrostatic drive lawn tractor," according to the owner's manual. The booklet doesn't say FOR PEACE OF MIND, RIDE THIS MACHINE; perhaps it should.

Like many women these days, I often impersonate a juggler--deftly spinning and balancing the various parcels of my life like china plates on long poles. Life is frenetic and, for the most part, I enjoy its quick pace. But my work as a writer requires that I carve out slices of solitude. Without it, I wouldn't have the space to think. That's where my humble, 15-horsepower Sears Craftsman comes in: snatches of much needed serenity come while caring for my 2 1/2-acre yard.

The important thing here is not so much mowing the grass as what happens to me while I do it. With a turn of the ignition switch, the engine's roar tunes out all noise--including the rhetoric in my head. Its hum becomes hypnotic. And while the blades clip and blow trails of grass, they create a path that clears and quiets my mind. In this state of motorized meditation, I connect with my higher self, the marrow from which mental clarity and creativity emanate.

Caretaking a lawn seems a logical thing to do when wishing to create. Nature is the quintessential expression of the creative process; all living things emerge from it. Being mindful of the natural world teaches us that we are participants in this ongoing, ever-changing process. If we are sentient to what is inside us and around us, we are fresher, more alive in our daily existence.

I am reminded of this every spring. During the first few cuts of the season, I rediscover the characteristics of my outdoor environment: grass thickly sprinkled with dandelions; water swelling in the stream, tinkling along rocks; rotund robins flashing from branch to branch. Amidst such beauty, my corner of the world seems to be constructed on a more delicate scale. Tiny wild violets, dainty dogwood buds, new iris shoots all get noticed. I steer around and savor the sun warming my face and forearms, as if for the first time. Among the fruit trees and flowering shrubs, a zephyr carries the scent of apple blossoms and lilacs--almost too intense to bear after the sensory deprivation of winter. Soon, I've fallen under nature's spell, and every time, she rewards my affection with a clear mind and tranquil heart.

As a result, some of my best introspection is done with my rear on that vinyl seat. I contemplate everything from the banal to the mind-boggling: what to make for dinner, what my kids will be when they're grown, and what exactly is that face on Mars. I've rehearsed a debate with a difficult business colleague, created recipes, relived childhood moments, planned dinner parties and pondered the meaning of life. At indiscriminate times --like after I've been staring at a blank computer screen and my intuition nudges me to get some fresh air -- the tractor serves as a mobile office: song lyrics, ad campaign concepts and article ideas (certainly this one) have all come to me while weaving through trees and preening around the barn.

"Why don't you attach a sticky pad to that thing?" my husband suggested one day after I darted from mid-yard to the den to record a brainstorm.

In fact, I've come to regard certain parts of the yard as memorials of particular revelations. Rounding the rhododendrons is where an elusive lead for an important feature story hit its mark. Near the grapevines is where the psychological profile of a fiction character evolved. An epiphany about how to redesign the living room revealed itself near the rose garden.

From time to time, I experience sparks of clarity while performing other odious activities: preparing a meal, showering, ambling down grocery store aisles. Perhaps you have, too. It's this power of the mundane that holds the potential to our aspirations. (Is that how the Eureka vacuum cleaner got its name?) The key is to claim these instances as legitimate, thereby allowing this "down time" to occur on a consistent basis. Invariably, it will. We all need to perform mundane tasks. So try this: practice becoming *mindful* while doing tasks that are *mindless*. Learn to be simultaneously meditative and functional.

How to begin? Consider every act as a rite, says renowned Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh in [The Miracle of Mindfulness](#). Don't just "wash the dishes in order to have clean dishes, wash the dishes in order to wash the dishes," Hanh suggests. Keep your consciousness focused on the task at hand. "Mindfulness is the miracle by which we master and restore ourselves," he says. "To look deeply is to use mindfulness to light up the recesses of our mind, or to look into the heart of things in order to see their true nature." For me, this penetration of the mind is a prerequisite for writing and for knowing myself.

With grass growing at its peak in the spring, my mowing regime requires me to make time for this exercise in self-awareness. If I don't, I pay the price: unfocused thoughts accompanied by time spent raking up piles of excess grass. As weeds overgrow and mess the lawn, so goes my mind. Thoughts scatter like dandelion seeds. Productivity decreases like buttercups squeezed out by infectious crabgrass. I've learned that a well-groomed yard yields a fully focused mind.

By July, the grass becomes brownish and strawlike in patches. Days turn balmy and hummingbirds come to partake of the impatiens. Summer has come at last. Near the swings and sandbox, grass is trampled hard by long days of play. The clover is blooming and I think of how my children are, too. My son, Carlin, at 5 a sports fanatic, will enter kindergarten next month. Gianne, my daughter, begins first grade and competitive dance. I wonder if they'll always be irrepressively curious and if cancer or AIDs will be eradicated in their lifetimes. Even after they're grown and gone and I'm still mothering this yard, I'll remember how badly they both want to steer the tractor. And how Daddy indulges them for a moment, then they're just as happy to hop in the trailer to be hauled along with flats of annuals, bags of peat moss or whatever is needed for yard work that day.

So the summer goes. I ponder my way through mists of manic knats and under the branches of oak, white birch and hickory trees. I let go of thoughts that drag me down. Up and over the graceful curves of the side yard. I tell myself the truth about things. Across lines of sunshine that pierce through the woodland trees behind the property. I ask for guidance and inspiration.

And the universe responds. I trim the side yard and, afterwards, have the confidence to tackle a tough project at work. I manicure around the pond and, next day, a prayer is answered. Insights break through, and I walk away from yard work with a light spirit and a lot of ideas that can be elucidated with words. There is no better use of my idle time. For as divine intelligence reveals itself through nature, words are my expression of spiritual abundance, a tool for both earning a livelihood and sharing my belief that most everything -- even something seemingly unsecular like

mowing the lawn -- can inspire. Or, as Walt Whitman said, "A mouse is miracle enough to stagger sextillions of infidels."

Male friends in the neighborhood joke that I hop on my lawn tractor to get a break from the kids. But they know it's not so. They know what it is, because they make a ceremony of it, too. I witness their rituals. One smokes fine Garcia Vegas when he mows. Another listens to a Walkman--Puccini arias, he told me. And another mows only at dusk (a time of day when the atmosphere is highly charged with energy). My only praxis is a silent prayer. Once said, my mind is free from debris and ready to receive whatever gifts may come my way.

Cutting the grass may be a chore performed mostly by men, but I believe that women do it well because of maternal instinct. Nurturance is an essential part of grooming grass to near perfection, when every blade is clipped even and the lawn resembles a velvet, earthy carpet. Such attentive caregiving nets a certain dividend. It's the same satisfaction I derive from knowing the house is squeaky clean, the pantry is filled to the brim, my children have slept long and well.

About four more cuts until autumn, when the air is crisp and the hillside redresses itself in a multicolored cloak of cinnabar, amber, orange. Soon afterward, the trees will be stripped naked. The days will run out of breath by dinnertime. Thoughts will turn to Thanksgiving feasts and the appeal of staying indoors. Winter will come and I'll be forced to find another soul-soothing task, like stoking the family room fire or making lentil soup.

Perhaps I have become skilled at enabling this tractor to serve as a catalyst to my creativity, like a musician becomes accomplished on the oboe or cello. Your instrument for cultivating mindfulness may be different. It may be folding the laundry, commuting to work, chopping wood, washing the car, gardening. Don't shun the mundane in your weekly routine, seek it out. Give it your full devotion. Then watch your world become richer. "The quality of life is in proportion, always, to the capacity for delight," Julia Cameron writes in The Artist's Way. "The capacity for delight is the gift of paying attention."

Gina Mazza Hillier is a free-lance writer who lives in Harmony, Pennsylvania. For more reading on this subject, the author suggests "Wherever You Go There You Are: Mindfulness Meditations in Everyday Life" by Jon Kabat-Zinn, Hyperion 1994.