

Beginning With Mud

The white water lily is one of the loveliest flowers in all of North America. Resting among long-stemmed, rounded leaves on softly moving water that reflects their beauty, or curtsying and swaying to the hum of orchestral insects, or dancing to the drumming of a grandfather frog, white water lilies are things of beauty.

Yet, the elegant charm of this pure white loveliness rises only from muddy lake, pond, and stream bottoms. Water lilies are rooted in mud.

Whenever I hear people excuse themselves for uselessness because of poor background, a limited environment, an unfavorable start in life or crippling circumstances, I think of the water lily and its unpromising beginnings - starting from mud and developing into pure grace.

I think, too, of the many benefactors of our race whose inauspicious beginnings and continued adversities seemed to doom them to an ineffectual existence, but whose spirits rose above it all to produce some beauty of thought or word or deed.

John Kepler, one of the pioneers of modern astronomy, came from a home where both parents were considered peculiar and both later went insane. John was a sickly child, a frail youth, and lived out his mature years as a semi-invalid. His first wife was a quarrelsome nag and his second wife a sullen pouter. John's employer, bachelor King Rudolph of Bohemia, was a near-lunatic, and the learned astronomer suffered mightily from the king's odd behavior and ridiculous demands. In spite of all this, or perhaps because of it, John Kepler became one of the world's most noted scientists, preparing maps of the heavens and accurate tables of the stars by which sailors were to navigate for centuries to come. He laid the foundation for the construction of the modern astronomical telescope, discovered the three laws of motion of the planets, explained the actions of the tides, and helped establish the new mathematics of calculus. Judging by his poor start in life no one would have guessed his future fame.

One of the most repulsive looking people of his time was Alexander Pope. His ragged teeth were reminders of an ancient and weathered plank fence with many of the boards missing and the rest broken or rotting. His big bulging eyes were like shelled hard-boiled eggs that had become discolored by age. He was so badly hunchbacked that he had to be laced tightly in stiff canvas before he could stand on his feet. Yet, Alexander Pope wrote poetry valued for the smoothness and sweetness of its versification and for brief and memorable phrasing poetry that claimed for Pope the chief place in the literature of his day.

Frederic Chopin composed seventeen Polish songs, eleven polonaises, fifty-four mazurkas, as well as ballads, fantasies, waltzes, and preludes while struggling against an ailing body and ebbing time. Because he so often verged upon death, news was frequently circulated that he had passed away, and before he was forty years of age the newspapers several times printed the news of his passing. His friend, George Sand, addressed him as "My dear corpse," and Chopin once gave this summary of his physicians' reports: "One said I would die; the second said I was about to die; the third said I was already dead." The charm of Chopin's music arose from his suffering..

Dostoevsky, whose novels of profound psychological insight have ranked him high among the world's literary figures, was an epileptic, painfully conscious of his handicap.

Pasteur did much of his most brilliant work, advancing the cause of modern medicine, after sustaining a crippling paralytic stroke.

Mozart wrote great operas and composed his immemorial *Requiem* when heavily oppressed by debt and struggling unavailingly against onslaughts of disease which carried him off at an early age.

The happy poems of Frederic Schiller, including his triumphant *Hymn of Joy*, were written amidst physical agony and weakness caused by a serious lung ailment.

The lively, lilting music of the light opera, *H. M. S. Pinafore*, was written by Sir Arthur Sullivan while he was enduring the excruciating tortures of kidney stones.

What could people of two thousand years ago expect of anyone whose background was northern Palestine? Not much.

They said of Jesus, "Could any good come out of Nazareth?" Rooted in those circumstances he didn't stand a chance. Or did he?

There are no circumstances so good but that the unwise and unimaginative will use them to their own hurt or destruction. There is no situation so adverse but that the wise and the good will turn it to advantage, and, like a lily rooted in mud, make beauty out of it.