

Consider the lilies

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [October 6, 1999](#) issue

When I travel, I like to bring treasures home with me. I have four carved wooden masks I bought in Kenya, and one of the Buddha I found in Katmandu. I have an eyeglass case made out of frog skin from China, a prayer rug from Turkey, and two woven reed baskets from Ethiopia. I collected so much booty in Israel that I had to ship it home in three separate boxes. I prize my icons from Jericho, my first-century glass goblets and my Bedouin silver bracelet. When I handle these things, they stir my memory. Like time machines, they transport me back to where I found them.

It is true that much of what I remember are the shops where I purchased them. In Katmandu, the mask came from the same shop where it was possible to exchange money on the black market. Hundred dollar bills brought the best rate, and there was such a long line of tourists outside the shop that it is a wonder we were not all busted. The rug purchase required hours of formal negotiation, fueled by obligatory glasses of sweet Turkish coffee.

In China, transactions took place in the street. As soon as the local people saw me and my companions, they surrounded us and held out all sorts of wondrous things for our consideration. There was an antique opium pipe with a brass bowl and a jade stem. There were ivory chopsticks in an embroidered silk case. There were traditional baby bonnets with antennae and colorful pompoms on them to scare away malicious spirits.

Since none of us spoke the language, it was unclear how much these things cost. Finally one of us offered the equivalent of three dollars for a pair of embroidered slippers, and the crowd exploded. Some people ran to get more things to sell us while others pushed their goods in our faces. They were all talking at once, each trying to drown the other out. When I spied an opening in the throng, I escaped. A quiet woman carrying a baby followed me and sold me the frog skin case.

This past summer, my destination was the mountains of northern Greece, in a remote region called Zagoria that is just making it onto the tourist maps. The Vikos Gorge is there, along with Smolikas, the second-highest mountain in Greece. The

itinerary promised a week of hard hiking, with evenings spent in different villages each night.

The first day I was absorbed by the scenery. It was the day of the solar eclipse, which made the air look speckled when our small group stopped for lunch by a slow-flowing river. The water was so blue it looked dyed. The beach was made of round stones, which felt fine under bare feet that had suffered heavy boots for hours. After a meal of fresh tomatoes, cucumbers, salami and feta cheese, we filled our water bottles from a spring that poured through the roots of an old plane tree. Then we talked until we fell asleep, nestling down in the smooth stones that cradled our lazy bodies like magic finger mattresses.

By the second day I was ready to shop. The village where we would spend the night was supposed to be popular with Greek tourists. I envisioned streets lined with silver shops, icon shops, shops full of carved wooden objects. Instead, I discovered a quiet town with about a dozen pensions and one very good restaurant. There was absolutely nothing to buy except a few postcards and ice cream on a stick.

The same thing happened in the next village and the next. Slowly I realized that I was in a time warp, among people who did not equate having a good time with buying things. I could walk in the mountains by day and listen to bouzouki music in the town square by night. I could talk for hours over meals of souvlaki and retsina, and I could let the villagers teach me to dance, but I could not shop. There was no T-shirt, no necklace, no salad bowl necessary to make this experience complete. It required no accessories. It was mine for the living of it, and when I got home I would have nothing to show for it but the stories.

Charmed as I was by this wisdom, I was unable to accept it entirely. Before I knew it, I was shopping for stones as I walked each day, searching the path for one with an especially fine color or shape. When I found one, I would hold it until I found a better one. This meant that I almost missed the pair of Egyptian vultures that sailed briefly overhead, and I did not see the shallow alpine lake until I almost stepped in it, but the truth is that I did not want to consider the lilies. I wanted something more permanent that would help me avoid the knowledge that my life, like the lilies, is so sweet and fragile—here today and gone tomorrow—with no purchasable protection from that fact.

As we climbed higher, the stones began to look alike. Trees gave way to bushes, and bushes to grasses. Finally there was nothing but loose shale underfoot as we trudged toward the mountain hut where we would spend the night. That was when I looked down and saw one tiny red flower blooming in the brown dust at my feet. Since Greece gets no rain in August, it must have survived on dew. A little further I saw a yellow one—just one—and after that a white one, nestled in the shadow of a stone. They were all so different, and so improbably alive. Compared to them, rocks were cheap. Rocks would always be there, while these small beauties held nothing back. It was now or never for them. I could love them or not—the choice was mine—but I could not own them. They were not made for that.

Now I am back home, with nothing to show for my trip. Except for this story.