

Why We Garden

Here on the east coast, the spring is a welcome relief after the bitter cold of winter. The first crocus is an amazing gift from the gods and the promise that indeed, life does live on under the blanket of snow. In spring, I walk outside for the first time without my winter coat and I have a chance to feel my arms move without the bulkie padding that my winter coat provides. The spring air smells fresh and crisp. and the daffodils and tulips begin to lean toward the sun and show their color and form to eyes weary from squinting at stark grey landscapes.

In spring, I begin the ritual of turning the soil in the garden. I begin the ritual of checking to see if new topsoil is necessary, by looking for worms and checking the color of the earth. Our ancestors used to taste the soil to check its acidity. I skip this step because I don't have same sensitivty to the soil that they did, and I'm not that interested in eating dirt these days. Parker maybe, but me, no. I can usually tell by looking and sometime add a bag anyway, just for good measure.

I spend some time planning where things will go. trial and error have taught me not to plant the cucumbers in the middle of the garden, they tend to take over. I plant what I like to eat- carrots, lettuce, cukes, peppers, green beans and peas. No tomatoes unless someone gives me a plant or six. Which inevitably happens. Trial and error has been my teacher in gardening. I don't have much patience for reading gardening books over

the winter months. I forget what they said by the time spring comes anyway. I watch others and learn from their mistakes and their wisdom too. I sometimes make the same mistakes they did, but I learn. And usually something grows with or without me.

I count my time the garden not by minutes or hours, but by breathes.

Gardening is a time for me to let go of the world and honor my connection to all life. Gardening is sacred time for me. A time removed for the daily worries and concerns of the week. Gardening teaches me to slow down, that things happen in their own time and that I cannot rush them.

Gardening teaches me that pests and weeds are inevitable and I must find a way to constructively deal with them. Moving to a new place always means taking the time to find out what the new challenges will be and reinventing ways of addressing those challenges.

Gardening is a marking of sacred time in a sacred place. The Native Americans believe that there are places on this earth that are special, blessed in a way that gives them the power to make us stop and reflect. Blessed in a way that makes these place more valuable than any amount of money because the value of the place goes beyond the land itself to something deeper. Something that resonates peace, wamth, awe and self-reflection. We are able to grasp, if only for a fleeting moment our connection to all life, to the universe. In his book *Why We Garden*, Jim Nollman explains this connection:

“Traditional people used sacred places to access the holy, the eternal, the infinite. The sacred sense of a place might be best explained as a kind of physical umbilical located at a specific site that connected people directly to the mystical order of the universe. This form of access led not to knowledge or to fortune but to communion: a sense of spiritual participation with the very process of living.”

Digging in the earth I am connected to the planet. I am aware that I am not in control of the movement of things. The rain, the cold, draught, sunny skies. These are all beyond my capacity to control. Even when to plant and how deep- these are not controlled by my desires but instead these are determined by the capacity of each plant, and each seed. How well they might grow is effected by my nurturing and attention but even then, I’ve watched plants slowly die as I struggle through trial and error to figure out why and how to save them. Sometimes they don’t make it, and sometimes I find the key to bring it back to life.

In this sacred place, I learn lessons for my life. When my son was upset and crying, I sought through trial and error to determine what was bothering him. I have definitely never been in control of who he is, and although I may have some impact on who he will become, much of that is based on my ability to remain calm in difficult situations; on my ability to remain flexible and listen; on my ability to remember that we are connected and we are both capable of making mistakes.

I know that my own abilities are based on seeing life as sacred time and reflecting, as I often do when gardening, on my life and my choices and the barriers that keep me from acknowledging and accepting my connection to others and to the mystical order of the universe. Honoring this sacred time also comes when I make a conscious choice not to turn on the television or go to the mall or turn on the radio. When I make these choices I choose a different kind of center for my life. I choose a center that steps away from the commercial and the secular to a center that honors relationships.

It is always a struggle not to turn on the distractions of the world. I'm sure that I deserve it after a hard days work. The last thing I want to do some days is go out and dig around in the dirt. Really the last thing I want to do is check in with myself and see how I'm doing.

Each of us seeks a sacred place where we can reflect and learn and listen and try and explore and make mistakes. Coming to this Fellowship is one place where we meet the sacred. Sunday mornings are a time for us to gather together to sing, meditate, reflect and share about our lives and what is important to us. We bring ourselves here to be with people who share values and purposes in common. Each of us brings a different perspective, a different way of looking at the world. In sharing these visions, these lenses, we help each other see the world a little more broadly.

Sacred place does not mean that we cannot laugh or be angry. Instead it means that we express these feelings knowing that we will be heard and

supported. Like the garden, we learn that we are all connected. In our connection we learn that when one of us feels angry or unsupported, we are all affected. In our connection we learn we are each responsible for our own reactions and feelings and we have a responsibility to the community.

Building community has been the focus of many of my sermons since I arrived here last August. It has been the underlying focus of our discussions about vision and part of the conversations of the Circle Dinners. Building community, true community not pseudo-community, is essential if we are to imagine our vision and define our mission together.

Community is also essential if we are to pass on our values and ethics, the codes of behavior and ways of being that we support and embrace.

As I find myself more deeply imbedded in communities, I begin to understand more fully the importance of showing up and recognizing important events within the community. I have learned this not from my peers, but from the generation of my grandparents, the older members of the congregation and others with whom I have been connected. These are the ones who teach me to understand and respect the depth of true community.

A few years ago, I had an uncle that died. We, my wife, son and I, drove back to Massachusetts from New York for the funeral. We were greeted

with surprise by family who had not expected us. I was not particularly close to my uncle, but family is important to me and I felt we should be there. It was, an obligation, if you will, one that I gladly responded to. We were able to be there to support other family members who were very distraught. Our presence gave some an opportunity to share in ways they might not otherwise have done so. We were able to provide support.

In being part of a community we show up, because it is the right thing to do. It might not be the convenient thing, or the thing we want to do, but as part of a community we are committed and so we are obligated.

Participating in the dedication of a child, as a community, binds us to those who will come after us. The coming of age program for teens is an important event in the life of a community as recognize their transition from child to young adult. We are responsible for the care of our children and bringing our children into adulthood is an honor and a privilege. The death of member of the community is important, even if individuals don't remember or know the one who has died. Showing up is what is required of members of a community. Even when we come together for those we don't know. We come together as a community, and we learn about those who came before us. We can provide support for those who might need a shoulder to cry on, or a listening ear as they relate their memories and stories, and we learn.

Community means there will be some individual sacrifice. As an individual, I am free to structure my time as I please. As a member of a community I am obligated to participate in the life of the community. We are asked to find balance, to make time, to delay or even set aside our own needs at times for the greater good.

As a member of any community, we must all do something to contribute to the life of the group even if we don't feel like it. These things are simple, but not always easy. Things like: showing up to community events, being present for dedications and memorial services, talking to people and letting our opinion be known, sharing our history and remembering, teaching church school at least one semester in your life. These are things that have been taught to me by long time members of our congregations. It matters that we are present over time, endurance is essential for the life of a community. Flexibility is also essential.

When I lived in New York, I had had the good fortune to be living in place that had a sixty year old garden. There were daffodils, tulips, roses, lilacs, peonies, and fruit trees that had been there since long before I was born. When I first saw the daffodils come up, I thought how beautiful they looked as they swayed together in the late winter and early spring winds. But as I was mowing the lawn one day, I noticed something I had missed in my first glances at these early flowers. They were extraordinarily different. Some had fancy centers with ruffles edges, others had ruffles on the outside. The colors although very similar were, at closer inspection quite

distinct. I was reminded of the film *Harold and Maude*, a movie about life, love and relationships.

Harold is eighteen and thoroughly depressed, Maude is seventy nine and delighted by life. At one point Maude asks Harold what his favorite flower is. He looks about and sees the field they are standing in, points to the daisies and says, "those I guess."

"Why," asks Maude. "Because they are all the same," replies Harold. And Maude responds "Ah, but you're wrong. They are not all the same. Some bend to the left, some to the right, some have petals missing. (she picks one) The great sadness is that each of are this - she holds out the flower- but we allow ourselves to be treated like this" - she gestures with a sweeping motion toward the field.

I believe that the greatest challenge of our society in the coming years will be the challenge of learning to balance the needs and desires of the individual with our innate impulse for community. We are indeed each a single flower, and we are indeed one in a field. Both the field and flower have their own beauty. The daffodils in the garden bring pleasure both in their carpet of yellow and green, and in their definable differences.

As a culture we have moved so far toward individual needs and wants, that we have forgotten how to be a community. Younger generations, like my own, have forgotten or have no understanding of being in and part of a community. Many us grew up unchurched, disconnected from community.

We never learned the rules of community. Longtime members can teach us something about those rules. We can teach each other the lost art of living in balance, managing conflict, sticking with something even if we don't get our own way, (which means losing gracefully- a skill our national leaders could stand to learn!), compromise and of course real debate. This will be a difficult tack, and there will be setbacks as we search and seek the point of balance.

Discovering the balance between the individual and the community, this is what we do in planting a garden. It is done intentionally, without the desire to control nature, instead it is embracing the desire to work *with* nature. We find the places where nature and our impact and influence meet and create a beautiful garden. One then does not adversely affect the way of nature, but works with nature to change the landscape. In the process of testing the soil, planting and moving things and trying new fertilizers, we learn to make peace with those elements of the garden that have been traditionally seen as problems. We discover new and creative ways to address them. We see the power of the individual and we create a diverse community from the existing landscape. We begin to recognize the value of both the individual flower and the field from which it comes.

We pass on the best of ourselves, handing our legacy to the next generation with the knowledge and comfort that we have taught them all we know. Our expectations are not that they will carry on exactly as we did, rather

we hope they will learn, grow and adapt. Our greatest hope is that too will see the beauty in both field and flower.