

Gardening Together
Rev. Linda Thomson
First Unitarian Congregation, Toronto
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I love to garden. Spring and summer mornings will often find me, with my cup of coffee in hand, sitting on my back deck, drinking in the sights and smells of that morning's garden. Usually before too long, I am up, out of my chair, and busy working away at something, pulling a weed that is crowding the roses, edging a bed, or deadheading some spent blooms. And before too long, my nails are dirty, my clothes are dirty and I've decided that whatever it was that I needed to do inside the house, just isn't important.

During our short Canadian summer, most of what I need to do inside the house is not important.

I love gardening, because my garden rewards me with far more than I am able to give it. I know that whatever my efforts are, I still do not deserve the gift I was given this week. The gift of a white water lily, with a bright yellow centre, held up above the water, on a sturdy green stem. My garden reminds me to be humble and grateful, oh so grateful.

The garden that Gary & I cultivate is not a tidy one. Formal beds are beautiful, but they are suited neither to my house and yard, nor to my personality. Ours is a rambunctious garden, flowerbeds, with winding flagstone paths. The plants, many of which came to us as cuttings from friends and neighbours are close together, stalk to stalk. The general idea in a garden such as ours is that each plant has a part, in the summer symphony. The plan is that each plant will bloom at it's own time, contributing to the overall harmony. Just like an orchestra, the results would be disastrous if each player hit a distinctive note at the same time. We work to co-ordinate the garden, finding plants that have complementary blooming times, so that there is always something happening, because things do not stay the same for long. The daffodils and tulips fade out, just as the later tulips and creeping phlox begin, only to give way to the peonies and roses. We have mixed success with the plan, at times the garden is a jumble of plants and colours, and I always mean to remember to move the orange daylily that blooms jarringly beside the pink rose, to another more suitable spot. At other times the vision is realised, and drifts of one colour and texture move gracefully into the next, each plant playing their part in the soothing and pleasing whole.

I find the work of community building similar to that of gardening. For those people that take on the work of cultivating communities will find them selves with dirty nails, and dirty clothes, as often as they will find themselves amazed at the simple beauty of the whole.

I sometimes like to think of the people in a congregational community as flowers. What kind of plant are you? Are you the day lily, hardy and pest resistant? Perhaps you identify with the snowdrops and crocuses, eager to get started, not even waiting until the winter snows have melted before you begin to bloom. Is anyone here a petunia, serviceable, and reliable? The petunia blooms from the day it is planted, never failing to provide the promised colour during the whole season. What about the roses? Is anyone here a rose? It's true; roses are a bit fussy, needing the constant reassurance of the gardener. A bit of compost around the base today, a careful pruning tomorrow, and a thoughtful spray to knock off the aphids the next day, with roses it never ends! But the reward, I can't imagine my garden without those beautiful and fragrant blooms, the care I give them is more than repaid by their contribution to my garden.

Each plant that finds it's way to my garden needs to be understood. True, not all are as fussy, or as spectacular, as the roses, but each one has unique needs. Some require sun, others prefer shade. Some like to be fed and divided, others ask only to be left alone. My task as the gardener is to get to know what the needs of the plants are. Not much different than this religious community is it? Each one of us is different. Each one of us has something to contribute. Not every plant in my garden blooms, but each has a part in the overall harmony that is my goal. Not every member of this community will serve on a committee, not everyone will feel comfortable speaking to the larger group, but each person can make this garden more beautiful. The challenge for all of us, like the challenge that faces the gardener is to find out what each plant needs to thrive.

We in human gardens have an advantage over the plants in my yard. We can help to take care of one another. Some believe in a cosmic, omnipotent gardener that weeds, and stakes and prunes. Whatever your beliefs, I don't think anyone would argue that we in human gardens can take care of each other. Here in this garden, the First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto, the daisies can care for the tulips, and the tulips can in turn attend to the needs of the peonies. Oh, I wish my plant garden could manage the same.

What do you do best? Can you bake muffins, or chair a committee, or teach children, or sing beautifully, or serve as a greeter, or any of the other things that help make a community healthy? Making your contribution to a community is giving the people around you a gift. A gift that is every bit as beautiful and as awe inspiring as the water lily in my garden pond. When you bloom, when you play your unique part in this community, you help to make this garden a sacred space.

What do you need? A place not only to worship and learn, but a place where you feel nurtured and encouraged to be your best self. Here in this congregation, with the right care, you can bloom and grow. Yes, in human gardens the essential task is to support one another as we develop, at our own pace, in our own time, to the beautiful flower we were meant to be. A disadvantage of the human gardener is the lack of information we are given about the plants we need to nurture. Members of our congregations don't come with care tags tucked neatly inside their pots. Wouldn't it be great if they did. Imagine, Humanus Rosa: Grows best in committees and in groupings of 3 or 4. Requires coffee on a regular basis and needs breaks between projects. Properly cared for H. Rosa will provide inspired musical leadership and will grow at a moderate rate. Related varieties: Humanus Alba, prefers less attention than Rosa. H. Alba has a distinctive way with adult study groups.

Certainly, there are some basics, just as there is with plants. All plants need nutrients, and water, and light. All people need kindness, and respect and love. But, we gardeners find ourselves asking, in what measure? What else do they need, these plants? Some need protection from the frost, others can bloom under the snow. This person needs attention and praise, that one resents being disturbed and blooms best without all of the fuss and bother. How can we know?

If we ignore the individual, the effect can be disastrous. The result is weak plants that fail to bloom, or people that don't engage in a meaningful way. The result is a loss to both the community and to the individual. For it is my belief that the work we do in our congregations is part of our religious journey. When I engage in the work of human community I am doing holy work. The work I do, to sustain this community and the others I have worked with, is gift, to the congregations and to me. Through the work we do in religious communities, we are called to our highest selves. We are called to be patient, and introspective, and kind and generous. Whatever you do, however you bloom in this community, it is part of your individual journey to wholeness and it is a real and valuable

contribution to this community. The importance of the work requires the gardener to take care, and to be mindful. We need to pay attention to one another, to ensure we are striking the right balance between the needs of the individual and the needs of the community.

If we are mindful and attentive we can begin to understand the needs of one another. Maybe humans can come with care tags, we can take the time to make our needs known. Not in a demanding way, but in a quiet unassuming way that provides the information that others need. Because we are simultaneously gardener and plant we need to give one another the information they need about us, and we need to listen carefully to what they tell us about their needs. Here in this garden, in this congregation, the daisies can care for the tulips, and the tulips can in turn attend to the needs of the peonies.

Here too, just like in my back yard, pacing and placing are important. I have seen perennial gardens that are a picture of breathtaking colour in June. The garden I learn has been designed for one glorious peak, without regard for other seasons. But when I look closer, I realize that something is missing. I don't see the dying foliage of the spring bulbs, I miss the blocks of green plants that are late bloomers, those that will provide colour at other times.

Imagine if each member of this community was best able to contribute in the second week of February. That would be it. Well gee, I'm sorry Barb, I'd love to teach at another time for you, but February 10th is about my peak. Hey everyone, there is going to be an adult study group on February 11, and the choir will give it's concert at the same time. I understand there is going to be a fundraiser on the 12th. Don't forget the potluck dinner and the book study group, both convening on the 10th. And then ...come February 17th, quiet, flowers and foliage wilting, and fatigue. People might be milling about waiting, wondering, is that all there is, is it over?

And what of placement, should we ignore that, as some suggest? "Everyone here has something to contribute, we shouldn't worry too much about people getting along, we're adults, after all. And aren't congregations just a great place for people to get a chance to develop in their weaker areas." Maybe true, sometimes, sort of, is my answer. I believe we need to be humble enough to know that we can't plan everything, and if we try to, we run the risk of never having those great and happy accidents... When two people, who may not

have sought one another out become great friends and brilliant team workers, supporting one another and complimenting one another.

It comes back to attentiveness, for just like in my garden, I need to watch when I make experimental pairings. How will this bellflower make out beside the phlox I wonder? Will one be crowded out? Will the colour of this one take centre stage, leaving the other fading into the background? Or will the two clash, constantly? Oh, I wish I could put some of the lush shade plants in beside my roses, but it just won't work, it is the wrong spot, and they will start to weaken. I learned a long time ago, that the finance committee was not the spot for me. I certainly won't perform up to expectations, and I will not reach my potential there. Not every member is a teacher, and sometimes two people would be better off working away from each other.

I told you earlier that our garden is a mixed garden. Mostly perennials, that come back year after year. We mix up our plants, three or five of this kind, blended with a few of those. And when it works, the garden is a mix of complementary colour and shape and form. The lesson of the garden applies here too. Imagine a committee of only very careful analytical people, methodical, and highly process oriented. Great stuff, but gee wouldn't it be great to make a decision... sometime....this year? A complementary balance is more likely to get good results. A drift of action types, blended with methodical folks, dotted with report writers. Now that's my kind of committee.

However occasionally, I like to do a mass planting of one type of plant. The result is a solid drift of the same height and the same colour! So too, there are times when a blend of people may not yield the best results. Does the finance committee really need the mathematically challenged? A choir with a representative mix of tone deaf members? Yes, mass plantings are appropriate in this garden too.

I think community building is an art. There are theories aplenty, and only a fool would ignore them completely. However, I contend, that the theories are limited. More essential to my way of thinking is mindfulness and attentiveness. We need to watch, and care, and respond to those who make up our human gardens. To reduce community building or gardening to a pure science is to ignore the context. We need to ask ourselves, what is going on here? in this soil? in this climate zone? We need to ask what kind of garden is this

supposed to be? how big should it get? what will it be used for? The answers to those questions will lead us to other questions and other answers...

What is missing from this part of the garden? Perhaps a touch of soft green, a plant that never blooms but that serves as a strong visual anchor for all the others is what is needed.

How do we deal with a committee that runs out of steam every year around this time? Perhaps we need to look for a steady worker, someone who is able to keep some energy in reserve.

Why is my peony not living up to it's promise? Oh I remember, I read somewhere that they don't like being disturbed, maybe once it settles in it will reward me with it's saucer sized blooms.

Or what is a gardener to do...."I love both of these plants", or people, but the effect when they are together is not what we were going for, well at least not here in this bed by the back door, maybe a short term task force is a place where they can work happily together.

I have a hard time resisting the work I love. Sometimes I say I am going to just sit, and relax, enjoying the community. But I can't. My nails end up dirty, and more often as not I have a streak of mud on my cheek. I've decided that the other things I thought I might do aren't as important.

I love gardening, because my garden rewards me with far more than I am able to give it. I know that whatever my efforts are, I still do not deserve the gift I was given this week. The gift of a white water lily, with a bright yellow centre, held up above the water, on a sturdy green stem. A group of people working to build a religious community that hold values of love, and compassion and freedom of belief at it's core is another gift. Happy Gardening.

Let us take a few deep breaths in silent reflection