

**Back to the Garden: Pledging Ourselves to Beloved
Community
October 12, 2008**

As some of you may have deduced, the motto for this year's stewardship campaign, made evident by the t-shirts that our gardeners are wearing today, is the two-word, duo-syllabic, interrogative phrase, "Dig it?" [Gardeners will you please stand and show the backs of your shirts so everyone can see?] See? Dig it? [Thank you gardeners.]

That motto is why you also see before you this gorgeous Gay Phillipian flower reaching for the sun-shiny goal of this year's stewardship campaign. That's why you see Lois Brown's wheelbarrow filled with rich soil, juicy worms, and more flowers a-bursting, as pledges are planted within it. That's why you saw, earlier, still other flowers, accompanied by a bumbling bee and a Gent-bug, dancing shamelessly before you as Dana and Patterson sang that we've got to get ourselves

back to the garden. Our motto is “Dig it?” because we want to know, do you dig this church and all that it stands for and promises? Are you willing to do the gardening, the getting your nails dirty and the back of your neck burnt, the weeding and seeding and watering, the sowing and reaping, to make this church what you envision it to be? Do you dig this church that much? If your answer is yes, may I get a “dig it!” from the congregation?

Now I know that not everyone here wants to shout out such a proclamation of dedication to the work this church demands. And that’s all right. Many of us are here because we ourselves want and need to be tended to. Many of us are here because we have been lonely, because we are grieving, because we are seeking a place and a way in which to belong. If you are among those numbers, welcome. Welcome to this beloved

community. May you find here a religious home and loving, meaningful connection.

And for all who have been here for weeks or months or years, welcome. Welcome to this beloved community. May *you* find here a religious home and loving, meaningful connection.

Now, of course, it's one thing to *wish* that for all of us, and I do, and I believe we all do. But how do we make *manifest* this vision of beloved and *just* community at Wildflower Church? How do we make manifest Walt Whitman's proclamation, "The sum of all known reverence I add up in you, whoever you are"? How do we *live into* the notion of "happiness, knowledge, not in another place, but this place—not in another hour, but this hour"?

In answer to that question, beloved people of this congregation, if we're carrying them, I ask that we lay down our individualistic, consumeristic pistols of the wild, wild west,

fill our holsters instead with our own Wildflower trowels and begin—and *continue*—the work of digging into our interdependent lots that make up this Wildflower garden. We must each tend to ourselves and to one another in such a way that we are both the garden and the gardeners. Because, remember, *we are it*. We are Wildflower Church. You and you and you and you: You each and all are what create this sacred space. When we sing the opening hymn, when we sing the line “our separate fires will kindle one flame”? That’s you. That’s us.

So, knowing that—really taking that in—let me talk about our flower over here for a moment or two, and how it’s doing in its photosynthetic process. In order for this lovely flower to reach its full height, it needs *about* 44,000 more dollars worth of nourishment. Now, for you scientists out there, you know that the materials created by the

photosynthetic process are made largely of carbohydrates, which in turn are largely made of sugars. So if a sugar mama or sugar daddy were to come along, we might be set. But that *if* is a very big, morally ambiguous, and extremely hypothetical *if*.

So coming back to what and who we *do* have, which is us, how are we going to make this flower grow? I know, before I go on, that probably the least favorite thing you like to be preached to about is your own money and how you should use it. So I promise to move beyond that in a moment. But let me tell you what we're working with, what we're facing, as a community: At this time, we are not only \$44,000 short of fulfilling our proposed 2009 budget through our pledges, we are about \$22,000 short of what we very successfully campaigned for in last year's stewardship campaign. Even if we lower *this* total number that the flower is reaching for to

expected pledge income, banking on other sources of income to meet our 2009 budget total, we still fall \$39,000 short of *that* goal. Now today was supposed to be the final day of this campaign, but because we are where we are, we're going to keep this flower up for two more weeks to see if it grows any more. If we do not meet last year's goal, let alone this year's goal, we will not only have to cut back on *proposed* additional program expenses for 2009, we will have to cut back on pre-existing program expenses. Think for a moment of what that might look like.

Now I fully and wholly understand as a fellow human being that gas prices weren't last year what they are this year. I understand that every time we turn on the news these days, the DOW seems to be spelled with a silent N on the end if its name, as the arrows keep pointing down, down, down. I also understand that a large number of our friends and

members are on fixed incomes, and simply cannot increase their pledges. I understand too that heads of families, single and coupled, are having to prioritize every penny spent. The last thing I want anyone—coupled, single, retired, working, raising children or simply supporting yourselves—the last thing I want anyone to do is to pledge more than you can afford. That harms you and it harms the community. By the same token, however, I need—we need—those who can pledge more to do so.

Am I practicing what I preach? Last year I shared with you that I had pledged for 2008 a little under 5% of my annual income. This year, I have increased my pledge by 20% of that total. I *have* to ask of myself what I ask of you, because, as I've said before and will say again, we're all in this together.

But I promised I'd get away from the money part, and so here I'll begin to segue: If we do make our goal for this year, we

may be able to hold what's called a feasibility study this coming spring, and if *that* goes well, we can begin, about a year from now, a capital campaign in order to begin the journey of acquiring our own building. Now capital campaigns take at least three years and a whole lot of money. That means that *if* we meet our stewardship goal, we're looking at having our own building in about four years at the earliest.

I know how much we all want our own building, our own home. I've read through the group visions that were created by 90 of you at the Search for the Future weekend last month, and these are some of the dreams: "Building in use 24/7;" "Large, warm, open space, natural surroundings;" "permanent home, beautiful; children's play yard...oaks, wildflowers, elder housing, meetings rooms;" "large building, kids around, Religious Education wing...sanctuary, meeting rooms, large commercial grade kitchen, music room, youth retreat..."

“hubbub of activity seven days a week.” The list goes on. And I believe in time we’ll transform that list of visions into the reality of our own religious home.

I believe too that we will *fill* our own home, as we fill this space now, with the other visions you have for our community. Again I quote: “each person connected with a loving, supportive community;” “each getting out of themselves so as to help others;” “welcoming atmosphere;” “Approach every question from the attitude of what is best for all;” “actively involved in social action;” “beauty and space for deep thought and spiritual [practice];” “turning isolation and alienation into meaningful friendships fostering a sense of belonging;” “caring...connectedness.”

These are some parts of the collective vision you have for Wildflower Church, your religious home. These are the ways in which we can, in the words of Unitarian Universalist minister

Vincent Silliman, “let religion be to us life and joy.” These are how we can, in his words again, “let [religion] be a voice of renewing challenge to the best we have and may be;” these are how we can let religion be “a call to generous action.”

Will a lack of photosynthetic sugar mama manna from heaven money growing on trees keep us from letting our religion be a call to generous action? No. We wildflowers grow in the roughest of terrains. We know how to improvise, innovate, and motivate. We know how to wrap an arm around our friends in need, and we know how to reach out to the wider world of the hungry, the homeless, the marginalized; we know how to practice hospitality in our own homes for meetings and classes, and we know how to create sacred space on beaches, campgrounds, and backyards. We know how to sing, how to lead, how to teach, and how to learn. And we know how to be with one another: Gently, kindly,

creatively, compassionately, uproariously, intergenerationally, patiently, persistently.

And because we know how to do all this, we must persist, amidst our homelessness (thank you for this weekly tent), we must persist in nourishing the garden, the overflowing *field*, of wildflowers that we are. I say overflowing, because we are in the midst of a catch-22: We're getting big enough that we'll soon need more space, but in order to get more space, we need more money, and in order to get more money, we need more people. But to fit more people, we need more space. Dig it?

If we cannot give of our *money* so that this flower grows, we must give, and in some cases give more, of our hearts and time and energy, so that the heart and soul of our community, if not its roof and walls, continue to be built and expanded upon. Now, leaders who are practically working fulltime here in volunteer positions in addition to your fulltime *paying* jobs,

I'm not talking to you. I'm not talking to the retirees who have found a new career here that comes with everything but benefits and a paycheck. I'm talking to those who sing, but haven't yet taken the plunge to join the choir. I'm talking to those who love what happens on Sunday mornings, but haven't yet asked or been asked to join the worship team. I'm talking to those who need coffee on Sunday mornings, but haven't yet volunteered to make it. I'm talking to those who sing, "teach your children well," but who haven't yet signed up to teach our own community of children. I'm talking to those who are saying inside, "Me! Me! I want to help! I want to be a part of this community!" but haven't yet let that cry come out into the open. You're all out there; I know you are. So, please, join us in digging into the good, rich work of making our wildflower garden grow. For that is how you, too, can grow.

Our new proposed mission statement, which we will vote on in a special congregational meeting after the service today—so please stay—proclaims this:

Wildflower Church is a deliberately inclusive, open-minded religious community in the Unitarian Universalist tradition. We joyfully nurture one another in our lifelong spiritual journeys, and we commit to transforming ourselves and the world around us through acts of compassion, love and social justice.

Will you—each and everyone of you—join us in fulfilling our mission? Will you let us nurture you in your lifelong spiritual journey, and will you help us transform ourselves and the world around us through acts of compassion, love and social justice?

“Happiness, knowledge, not in another place, but this place—not for another hour, but this hour.” Together, let us

pledge and *follow through* on our pledges to make this garden of beloved and just community grow. We need your fire of commitment. Dig it?

Please stand as you are able and join in singing hymn #1028, Fire of Commitment.