

Message from Susan Wadell to the Shadow Rock Congregation

November 14, 2010

Last weekend I participated in the Profound Journey Dialog event. The first session was titled Mysterious Reality...dialog about the way life is and our relationship to mystery at its heart. We spent some time with symbols and language and thoughts about the Great Mystery many of us name G-O-D, God: that which sustains us, challenges us, calls us into being...into being, what a phrase.

I've heard it said that the two times people feel the most connected to God, or whatever name it is you give to That Which is More than We Can Imagine, is at birth and death. These "thin places" where the veil lifts between the visible world of our ordinary experience and the sacred, may seem to decrease as we age unless we are intentional about receiving all that surrounds us with an open heart. We are on a journey in search of meaning for ourselves and the children we love, looking around for resources and provisions to guide and sustain us on our way; grateful for companions on the journey. So here we are at Shadow Rock United Church of Christ.

Anne Lamott writes in [Traveling Mercies](#) about why she wants her son, who is less than enthusiastic about it, to go to church.

I want to give him what I found in the world, which is to say, a path and a little light to see by. Most of the people I know who have what I want-which is to say, purpose, heart, balance, gratitude, joy-are people with a deep sense of spirituality. They are people in community, who pray, practice their faith; they are Buddhists, Jews, Christians-people banding together to work on themselves and for human rights. They follow a brighter light than the glimmer of their own candle; they are part of something beautiful.

Many of you serve on various teams of Shadow Rock and you know that too often the immediate overrides the important. There are deadlines to be met. The Children's Ed Team is no different. Much of the time we busy ourselves with the details of events and programs. But a few months ago we were able to have an authentic conversation about what qualities and values we want our children to internalize. Hopes voiced included wanting our children to be compassionate, to appreciate what they have and not always want more or the newest version. The folks gathered wanted their child to know that other adults care for them and that they are loved unconditionally. There was an appreciation for the inclusive message of Shadow Rock and a celebration that each child is cherished for whom they are...Shadow Rock is a safe place to not have to pretend. Heads nodded

when someone said, "I want my child to live in harmony with all God has created. I want my child to know that their presence makes a difference in our world." These hopes sound very much like the ones Anne Lamott expressed in her story.

How do we go about teaching, guiding, encouraging our children as they grow in understanding and stature? The commitment of faithful adults to make their home a place for faith is essential. This requires intention and a willingness to live in the in-betweenness of knowing and not knowing, yet trusting in God's presence. A partnership between the faith community and families is essential. Together may we understand that being with children provides us opportunities to affirm faith, live faith, and name faith. The informal theological epiphanies that happen every day in the grocery store, at the dinner table, transporting children from one activity to another, singing with Gemstones, playing on the playground, a bedtime ritual teach and empower a life of faith in a way as essential as formal schooling in the church. Our spiritual lives are something we discover, uncover and explore as we seek to act in ways consistent with our shared values.

I think we all are "wired" with a faith connection at birth. Faith is God's presence within us-that Spirit that orients us in some unfathomable way to a love of God and of each other. Our response is faithfulness...living in ways that reflect how God's love affects all aspects of our life. A faith tradition helps us recognize God's presence within us, around us, about us and to respond faithfully.

As a faith community, we partner with parents to introduce practices that acknowledge, affirm and support our children's journey of faithfulness. Children spend their time "overseeing" and "overhearing" the wider community in which they live and incorporating their experiences into a sense of personal and communal identity. They populate their evolving image of community with the people, characters and objects around them. The presence or absence of spiritually significant objects, stories, rituals and practices affects whether a child incorporates these specific signs and narratives of spirituality into his or her fundamental worldview. Our modeling of faithfulness makes a difference.

Another of the questions asked this past weekend at PJD was, "What would you have inscribed upon your tombstone?" Give it some thought! What does an inscription reveal about your life? How would you like to be remembered?

I've participated in many forms of this event and, in the past, have responded with the word – cheerleader. I thought of myself as a

cheerleader for Life! But I'm coming to a different self realization, not that I've given up on life, but at this point I choose the word gardener. That may surprise some of you who know not to give me a live plant; but the garden I've helped tend the past twenty-five years grows people, people striving to be aware, sensitive and intentional, so as to live out meaningful and powerful lives.

Usually we think of soil, seeds, fertilizer, water and sunshine when we think of gardening. Well, I have different components for our garden: young seedlings planted in the Shadow Rock soil, nurtured, watered and warmed:

- Nurtured by a sense of belonging-being celebrated as a child of God.
- Watered with an attitude of gratitude-living with a sense of thanksgiving for the gift of life and being given our daily needs
- Warmed by the acknowledgment of our giftedness-knowing that each person is wondrously and uniquely made with gifts and abilities to contribute to the community; The uniqueness and greatness of every life is radically affirmed
- Cultivating extravagant hospitality-welcoming the familiar and the stranger; encouraging everyone to use their gifts to work for a just and peaceful world
- Growing roots of understanding- as we are true to our personal faith journey and yet honor those who are on another path
- Spreading tendrils of Hope-as we engage in those activities which eliminate age barriers, cut across religious dogma, reduce cultural parochialisms and embrace life's ultimate possibilities.

Each of these elements is thoughtfully, carefully, intently ministered to our Shadow Rock seedlings.

Curriculum, programming and facilitators that celebrate our relationship with God and empower and encourage us on our journey are the basis for our time together in education on Sunday mornings, in our midweek gatherings and in supporting families on their journey. This means a lot of open ended questioning and unanswered questions. We learn, think, experience and ponder a lot. We hear stories from the Word about Life and the same truths affirmed in picture books written today. We participate in welcoming others- assisting with Family Promise, saving coins for Pennies for Peace to help build schools in Pakistan and Afghanistan, collecting monies for Heifer Project, speaking for the marginalized- on the playground at school, in the sports arena and classroom. One of the ways we share a message of inclusive love is through music. There have been camp experiences, summer programs enhanced (Marketplace) and designed (Earthlings), overnights (Caring for Creation, Arizona Adventure, Inventing for the Future, Now You're Cookin'). We've lifted our voices in marches, in family

celebrations at Polar Bear Camp and Chavez Crossing. We affirm and celebrate each child of God –no matter how old-as we worship together.

The specifics of delivery have varied over the years, but not the content or intent. In 1973, Rev. Robin Kreider laid the education foundation for Shadow Rock. With her leadership and that of our founding minister, Rev. William O. Smith and founding director of Shadow Rock Preschool, Eileen Hoard, the congregation of Shadow Rock claimed the role of nurturing gardeners. When Robin moved into a new stage of her life, Judy Brengi served and then Patti Phillips led the gardening crew. When Patti moved to other arenas, I began to work more closely with all the gardeners. Now is the time in my life when I'm going to be cultivating other fields. Though the grapevine is ahead of me, today it's official: I am retiring as Director of Education for Shadow Rock effective January 1, 2011.

Although this is a decision buried in emotion, it truly is a happy one. Jerry and I became grandparents in August and we'll be enjoying our grandson daily. But as excited as I am about the future I know there will be a void...the theology, philosophy, people, colleagues and, even, challenges of Shadow Rock have been instrumental in helping me discover who I am meant to be.

Our son Jon attended preschool at Shadow Rock and, though we were attending another church at the time, I exchanged ideas and conversation with Patti Phillips routinely. Jerry and I first arrived on the doorstep of Shadow Rock on a Sunday in July...drove around the parking lot with kids in tow and then came back in August for worship in what is now Smith Hall. It didn't take long before we were immersed in Shadow Rock activities and buoyed by the sense of mission-whatever is done is done on behalf of all. I don't want to bore you with the year by year happenings, but even before I was "officially" on staff at Shadow Rock I felt a sense of call to serve. I think each of our hearts carries that gift of service. Sometimes it just takes awhile to discover the how and where. For me, being a "gardener" at Shadow Rock has not been a job, but a privilege. The many journeys I've been fortunate to share, the joys, the sorrows, the challenges and celebrations – all live in my heart. I have learned and gained so much. Just as language is limited when we try to name the divine...I don't know what to say to express my appreciation for sharing the journey with each of you. But I do know my life is rich, my heart is full. Thank you.

The past is approved, the future is open. People are in place as we transition to new formats and exciting possibilities. Karen Richter and Abeth Spencer have responded to God's call in their lives. In January they will

begin handing out the garden tools. I'd like to give them each some beginning supplies.

(Karen and Abeth invited up to share a few words.)

But they are not in this endeavor alone, just as I was not. I have a small token for each of you...as you leave the sanctuary, please take a miniature garden implement and put it somewhere that you will be reminded of your important role in the life of this congregation as we nurture our children and each other.

It takes each and every one of us to cultivate the spiritual lives of children entrusted to us. We must pay attention to the messages we send about their place in the world, their relationship to the holy, and their responsibility to contribute to the well-being of all of creation. More than anything else, we must live as people who imagine that something more exists than just those things we can see and feel. We and the children we love and care for can open all our senses to the spiritual realm and discover that God is always there in the adventure we call life.

Resource materials

Real Kids Real Faith, Karen Marie Yust

The Heart of Christianity, Marcus Borg

Traveling Mercies, Anne Lamott