



Letting SOMEONE ELSE *Plant the Garden*



SPRING IS HERE: planting time. Peas and favas and broccoli in March, tomatoes maybe in late April, squash and eggplant in May. I'm home this spring, and looking forward to planning and planting and knowing where every seedling will go. I'll have a garden that will reflect my vision, my understanding of what a garden should be, my taste in vegetables and my experience on this piece of land.

Last year I was away all spring. I was forced to leave the planting of my garden to others — four or five young people who flocked to this piece of land in the month before I left and stayed while I was gone. We worked together: I taught them the intricate quirks of the solar electrical system and the convoluted water system. We planted chestnuts and olives and I gave lessons on mowing with a scythe — and then I was gone. I left with a basic sense of trust — only occasionally on my trip did I wake up in a cold sweat thinking “I've left my home and garden to *teenagers!* What was I thinking?”

When I came home, I had a garden. It was in many ways a spectacular and abundant garden — but it also wasn't the garden I had in my mind. Spring was cold and rainy, and many things hadn't grown. Others had done spectacularly. My helpers had planted some things I'd never heard of and others that I wasn't particularly fond of. They had also fertilized, watered and mulched in a blitz of raw, youthful energy that I no longer possess. There were sunflowers spring-

ing up and stands of corn, abundant greens, wildly profuse tomatillos, roses and dahlias and butterfly bushes all pink and blowsy.

Letting someone else plant the garden is an exercise in letting go of control. That's been a major theme in my life for the last few years, ever since Reclaiming and the Witch Camps began our restructuring processes. I think it's also an apt metaphor for the community building we need to do.

Reclaiming began restructuring several years ago. Spurred by our desire to support a physical space in the Bay Area, we held a series of community meetings. Instead of responding to our ideas with gratitude and acclaim, the community essentially said to us: “Hey, who are you guys, and why should we support you? You're insular, we don't know who you're accountable to, how to get into your group or where you get your authority from.”

We had to stop and examine our structure and process. The old collective had become insular — we had no clear way to ever get anyone out of the collective once they were in, and as a result we had become terrified of admitting new people who might turn out to be difficult. People got in not because of any objective standard of work and commitment, but because someone liked them. Nevertheless, we didn't all always like each other or work easily together. We were in different stages of commitment, energy and burnout. Some people were doing too much, and others were not

doing much of anything. Other people outside the collective were doing much of the work, and we had no clear way to bring them into the central decision making.

Two years ago, in January of '97, we held a retreat and began to define what we called our “core values.” Reclaiming had gone along quite happily for seventeen years without a mission statement or much definition of who or what we were. But now, for those of us who had invested our time, energy, creativity and love for many years, we needed something that would allow us to feel comfortable letting go, to feel some assurance that whoever took on the direction of the group would continue with the same spirit and principles we held sacred.

We held a series of meetings — some wonderful, some dreadful. At one point, the process got so bogged down that the old collective nearly withered away before we could complete the work. We rallied and in one intense weekend in November of '97, we reached consensus on both a new structure, and the document we call “The Principles of Unity”. And we dissolved the old collective. It was time to let someone else plant the garden, if the garden were to grow beyond its old boundaries.



That weekend had the feeling about it of magic working. At the same time, it had a bit of the stomach-dropping feeling of stepping off a cliff. When I was driving home, I had the sudden realization that next year there might be a Reclaiming retreat — and I wouldn't be at it. I had to pull off the road and cry.

Letting go of control is not easy. This summer, after a day in the garden, I would sometimes awaken in the middle of the night in a blinding rage. "No eggplant — I let those kids plant the garden and there isn't *one single eggplant!*" And there have been many moments over the last couple of years when a similar cry, or a whispered grumbling, or a barrage of email, has arisen from some of us who were the core of Reclaiming for so many years. "We let those kids take over — and they're doing *that!* What were we thinking?"

When we restructured and wrote the Principles of Unity, we very carefully left them general. We chose not to define specific practices or theology. We said the equivalent of: "This garden is organic. This garden is for healing herbs, food, flowers, and healthy soil." We did not say, "Bed One must always be for tomatoes and three purple dahlias must grow by the gate." The choices we made were brave ones for a group of people who do like control: we chose to leave a lot of room for autonomy, creativity and experiment.

The old collective formed itself into the current Advisory Council, and one of our charges was to further define the Reclaiming Tradition. We decided not to do it. Many, many religions and spiritual traditions have bogged down in creating rules, liturgies, canonized books and orthodoxies. We didn't want to go there — or anywhere remotely in that vicinity.

The more aspects of our tradition we legislate, the less freedom we have — and freedom is one of our core values. The Principles of Unity say that we work toward empowerment — and I have yet to discover how to empower people to agree with me completely and do things

exactly the way I think they should. If many people are going to plant a garden, if they're going to plant and tend with love and care, if they're going to invest their deepest selves in the work, they need to have a say in the design. And when they do, that design is not going to reproduce the garden in any one person's head, or any single group's ideas of how things should be done. The new gardeners are going to make mistakes. They're going to plant squash outside the deer fence even though I know that won't work. They're going to have to relearn things I might already know. And in the process, things that didn't work for me might work for them. I might learn from their mistakes, and be pushed to grow in a new direction.

I couldn't plant my garden last year because I can't be in two places at once. More than that — I can only plant and tend a relatively small garden. If I want to cultivate more ground, I have to let other people in.

Much as I would love to have con-

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trol over every single aspect of Reclaiming, to be on every Ritual Planning Cell, to lead every key drum trance, to facilitate every meeting and set every agenda, I can't. I can't because I am one person with limited time and energy, and I can't because to do so would contravene the values I hold most dear, and because if I could, it would kill our tradition dead.

So I know that there will be moments I'll be standing in the middle of a ritual thinking, "No eggplant? Not *one single eggplant* in this whole ritual! How could they?" Or worse, "*broccoli?* We never have broccoli in a Brigid ritual — that's not how Reclaiming does things!" And I know it is my responsibility as an elder to hold back that rage and let it go. I need to trust the other gardeners — not to trust that they will realize my vision, or that I will always like their vision or agree with it, or that they won't

make mistakes — but to trust that they are working in good faith, making decisions that seem right to them, and that they will learn from the mistakes they make. I need to trust that the garden has a life of its own, and in the end will determine what flourishes and what dies.

If I want this garden to grow beyond me, to endure beyond my lifetime as a fertile and evolving place, it is my responsibility to nurture the vision and experimentation of the other gardeners, and to express appreciation for the great gift of their willingness to take up the work and carry it on.

Letting go is hard, but it brings rewards. All last summer, I ate greens I never would have planted. I gloried in stands of sunflowers and unexpected love-in-a-mist. I found surprises every day.

I've planted a lot in the Reclaiming garden — many, many annuals that have bloomed once and died, and maybe a few fruit trees and olives that could endure for centuries. I can look around the

garden now and say — "Oh yes, and that's Cybele's plum, Rose's Climbing Cecile Brunner, Thorn's corner of citrus, rugosas and lilies." I can see abundant herbs and trees and wildflowers that have taken root and grown in their own fashion — and no one remembers any more who first planted them. I hope nobody will cut down my apple trees until they cease to bear fruit, and that someone will tend them and prune them not because they are mine but because they feed the community. But I won't try to tell you what to plant around their base. There is infinite room in this garden for each one of us to plant trees and flowers and herbs according to our vision, and according to what the garden herself tells us that she wants to be.

