

Notes From the Director
July, 2008

A Bridge of Flowers

Nearly every morning I walk across the Bridge of Flowers on the way to work. At this time of year the bridge is especially lush. Nearly every day a new cluster of blooms stops me in my tracks.

I began crossing the Bridge on the very first day of its opening, before even the first buds had appeared and all was nothing more than dirt and bare promise. I wanted to pay attention, to notice all the subtle changes and surprises.

But often my mind was awash with the concerns of work and living, and I was many yards along before I remembered to slow down and look. Or I walked along, slowly enough, as my mind raced somewhere else altogether. So much time squandered out of our bodies!

Gradually, though, I learned to relax my pace with my first step onto the path. Over time I found myself slowing down before actually reaching the Bridge; I wanted to be ready to drink in every detail from the moment I reached the arched trellis.

Now the explosions of brilliant color and exquisite shape on the Bridge hold my attention for longer stretches. Not infrequently I notice an old person stopped in rapt attention. The encounter between a frail elder and a lily is a miracle to behold - the most intimate of encounters of like unto like, a mute acknowledgement of a shared Life that is deeper than passing petal and stem, skin and bone, a moment of pure mutual worship. Just a moment as I pass by...

I am only a beginner, an apprentice in the ways of such presence. But these days a strange thing is happening. I find it more and more difficult *not* to pay attention. Truth to tell, I find myself beginning to slow down from the moment I set foot outside my front door, a good half mile away. And I also continue to step more slowly after I've crossed the Bridge and continued on my way to the Center and into the day.

I have a bit of an advantage compared to many because I work with older people. Many of our friends here step lively – *very* lively! But others have slowed considerably. It takes folks like Sylvia, Helene, and Bill many moments to make it from the front door down the thirty or so feet to the main hall. When you add in the many greetings and little conversations that take place en route, that walk can become an adventure.

It strikes me that the Center itself is like a Bridge of Flowers. It too is an invitation to slow down and pay attention. We gravitate to the beauty of flowers. But perhaps we need to recall that the elders in our midst are themselves roses and irises and peonies, each unique, each a bridge to something deeper and more alive in ourselves. Our elders invite us to slow our pace in the horizontal world of anxiety so as to drink in the vertical dimension of beauty, wisdom, and deep communion.

The Vietnamese monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, says that the task of living is to learn how to walk all over again in such a way that a flower grows in every footprint. When we can do this then the Bridge of Flowers is wherever we are and whomever we are with.

Such wisdom is the task of aging, but it is not given simply with age. The frail elder on the Bridge did not learn reverence automatically when she reached 60 or 75. But neither is it out of reach even for a 90 year old stuck in loneliness and regret. We must provide every opportunity for the oldest among us to grow in wisdom, for as far as anyone has been able to tell, we are capable of such growth at least until we die.

But we must begin by nurturing this capacity to be present in ourselves, right now, wherever we are. And we must teach it to even our youngest children. This, in a nutshell, is the whole educational vision of the Center.

And this is the same spirit with which we undertake our summer recess in July. The goal is to slow down, pay attention, and find ways to help make this vision a reality in West County.

May we come to see our elders as a local treasure - a Bridge of Flowers to a more integrated and vibrant common life.

Jamie Godfrey