
Interhelp Newsletter, Fall 2010

Dear Interhelpers and Friends,

Two events have marked the month of October for the Interhelp Community: the annual Gathering, and the death of our beloved Sondra Sprinkling. Below you will find a bit about the Gathering, and reminiscences about Sondra. I thank each of the contributors for their rich and intimate sharings.

Two events to look forward to in 2011: Joanna Macy at the Rowe Conference Center September 23 - 30 (a weekend followed by a five-day workshop), and the Interhelp Gathering October 28 - 30.

May your holidays be rich with connection.

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We have received word of a Council of All Beings planned for June of next year in Montpelier, Vermont by Global Community Initiatives. Please see:
www.global-community.org/council-of-all-beings

As usual at this year's Gathering, the daily SUPPORT GROUP provided a simple and deep experience for many. Here's an article that can help you form a support circle for the rest of the year:
www.interhelpnetwork.org/articles/support.html

THE 2010 GATHERING EXPERIENCE

Embracing Uncertainty was the theme of this year's Gathering. Two participants offer reflections on their experiences:

Living with Uncertainty and its Gifts by Rosalie Anders

For me, the theme of the 2010 Gathering provoked many thoughts and feelings. One of my tasks as part of the facilitation team was to describe some of the gifts of uncertainty. Thinking about what to say, I realized that in fact I do feel certain about some things, notably climate disruption, and that this sense of certainty can be paralyzing. In my work as an environmental planner I read a lot about the disasters in store as the CO2 levels go up while we continue to do next to nothing about it. This sense of certainty about disaster, this realization that we earthlings of all species are in for very hard times, hangs over me.

The Gathering, and thinking about the gifts of uncertainty, offered a different perspective. I was reminded that we don't know for sure what the future holds; we don't know what will happen, how things will turn out. We can, and should, of course, make our best guesses, based on the best evidence, and act accordingly. We can't dismiss scientific predictions of future disaster with a "who knows?" and a shrug. The lesson is more subtle

than that. It is to rest in the present moment, the present moment in which we act and choose. And it is to recognize that feelings of hopefulness and hopelessness are just feelings, and not really relevant to our taking action right now.

Over the weekend we explored the theme in many ways. Especially moving for me was the walking meditation while carrying an empty bowl. Somehow, walking among the many-colored leaves of Fall, in the season where change is so abundantly clear, beauty, impermanence, precariousness and certainty all blended together.

Exploring feelings, sharing our grief, and laughing and singing and dancing were all part of the weekend. The friendships, the bonds that we forge together at each Gathering, grow deeper and deeper for me. Whether people come to just one Gathering or every year, everyone who participates is part of the Interhelp family, because we have shared our hearts. Amidst all the uncertainty we live with, to me those bonds are a certainty.

Reconnecting: The Elm Dance by Rebecca Ruggles

Several days after returning home from the fall Gathering, I feel the Elm Dance still playing inside me. Both the music and the sensory experience of the dance linger as mementos of the weekend.

This was my first time attending the Gathering, and my first time experiencing in person The Work That Reconnects. How well named it is! Though I spent the weekend in a place I had never been before and largely with people I had never before met, I did in fact reconnect with both people and place. Woolman Hill felt like an old home. Many of the people who attended seemed like people I have known already. The beauty of this work is that it brings us together so authentically that we are quickly connected to our shared grief and joys and purposes. How we differ from each other remains intact; I appreciate that as well. The weekend did not try to overstate our connections – no love-in or love fest. But what we held and hold in common surfaced and became primary.

My arms are still raised, my hands wave in the branches of our raised arms as we form a single gnarled trunk in the center. It was on Sunday morning when we did the dance for the second time, and during the second round. Soft voices called out losses and fears and all my own losses and fears rose like sap up that trunk and into those waving branches. I no longer had to hold them alone and feel their weight alone. I lost myself for a moment. I gained myself for a moment.

REMEMBERING SONDRA

Sondra Sprinkling was a stalwart Interhelp mover and shaker for many years, alongside her husband Michael Rice. She died peacefully at her Delmar, N.Y. home of metastatic lung cancer on October 10, 2010. On the Saturday afternoon of Gathering, we planted narcissus bulbs in her memory under one of the big shade trees by the Farmhouse at Woolman Hill.

The story of Sondra's life is nicely told in this obituary:

<http://albarchive.merlinone.net/mweb/wmsql.wm.request?oneimage&imageid=12357677>

GRATITUDE by Michael Rice

I'm grateful for three gifts of Sondra's return to her self. The first hint of Sondra's lung cancer had been an untreatable laryngitis that deprived her of a voice, starting in March 2009. During the summer she was treated with 34 sessions of radiation and several courses of chemotherapy, ending in August. Despite the treatments, her cancer spread further and, meanwhile, she lost her hair. The first two gifts were the full return of her voice around Thanksgiving followed closely by a beautiful head of hair, curly this time.

The third gift was the most important of all: throughout the twelve months of the predicted three to six, Sondra continued to live very fully (including a January trip to California and a May trip to Pennsylvania). Bed-bound during her last four months, she slept a lot, but was fully engaged with all visitors. On her last Friday morning she said to the hospice nurse as she was leaving, "Thank you very much for coming today." Then she sank into a coma, with her face frozen into a mask-like expression: thin, taut lips, mouth half open, eyes half closed. She died early Sunday morning with that mask unchanged, not yielding to gentle efforts to close her eyes and mouth. The miraculous gift was that, five hours after she breathed her last, her mouth closed, her eyes opened wide -- into the blissful expression of a queen lying in state. She looked even more beautiful following a Jewish ritual washing led by Emily Sack and attended by nine women including Sondra's ten-year old granddaughter Miriam. What a gift to be able to remember her as fully herself as she had been throughout her life!

MEMORIES and STORIES by Emily Sack:

Sondra and I met for the first time in 1971, in the Woodstock Woman's Health Collective. She was pregnant with Saul (who recently turned 39!), and was ten years my senior. We were both single.

Our friendship really took shape when Saul was an infant. Sondra was happy for my involvement with Saul, and for my help. I was delighted and grateful for the opportunity to get close to a young person and a mother pretty much from the get-go. I fell in love with both of them! I thought of Sondra as my wiser, older friend/sister. During Saul's first three years, we spent a great deal of time together, and I learned so much about unconditional love.

Sondra and Saul moved to the Bay area (where she had spent many years as a younger woman) when Saul was three, and returned to Woodstock in 1979 when he was almost eight. They lived with us (Bob had moved in by that time) in the old farmhouse I had bought a year earlier. I was so happy that they were back.

Fast forward to 1990. By that time, Bob and I had married, and moved away from Woodstock because of Bob's work. My son Daniel was born in 1985, when Saul was 13,

and though we no longer lived together, Sondra and I remained close.

Bob had traveled to the USSR in 1987 with a group organized by Interhelp and led by Fran Macy. A few years later, we attended our first Interhelp Gathering, where we met Michael. He approached me at the close of the Gathering with kind words about my relationship with Daniel. I think he may have spoken to me about joining the Interhelp Council.

A couple of months later, Michael called while I was up to my ears getting ready for Passover. I invited him to our seder (which Sondra always attended). Michael has his own version of this story, where he insists he invited himself to our seder, but this is my story and I'm sticking with it!

I had known Sondra for close to twenty years by this time, and the furthest thing from my mind was to introduce her to an eligible suitor, but that's what happened! Sondra and Michael met that night, and the rest, as they say, is herstory! History! Whatever.

I am so grateful for our years together. I miss Sondra and will cherish many memories of our years of friendship, and of her "older woman wisdom," and hold her always in my heart.

Thank you, Karen Zeiders, for sending this poem.

She whom we love
and lose
is no longer
where she was before.
She is now
wherever we are.

---St. John Chrysostom