Bonner Healing Garden: A Place of Solidarity at Life’s Threshold

By Chris Garcia

A gray and white pencil sketch faces Debra Kellerman, Director of Bonner Hospice, as she works at her desk. The sketch is composed of ghostly human figures that dance around the garden chapel, climb its pitched roof, grow wings, and ascend toward the moonlit night sky. Kellerman bought the drawing from a sixth-grade artist for twenty-five dollars, at a community auction to raise funds for the Healing Garden. “I think this drawing really captures how kids see the Healing Garden,” says Kellerman. The drawing is a symbol of the invisible community spirit that pervades Bonner Healing Garden; a place that fosters collective meaning and provides hope at life’s threshold where the “transformative ascent” is comfortable dying.

I first read about Sandpoint’s Bonner Healing Garden in an article when preparing a list of healthcare facilities to visit for my fellowship granted by the University of California, Berkeley. During my two-month journey, I evaluated therapeutic landscapes at thirteen healthcare facilities, starting with the Legacy Healing Gardens in Portland and traveling east to Idaho, Utah, and Ohio. In the article entitled, “The Healing Garden…A Personal Sanctuary from Dusk to Dawn,” Kellerman says that often “the tears come” to those who enter the garden for the first time after losing their loved one.

In my first hour at the Healing Garden, I discovered a pervasive sense of emotional solidarity that emanates from the meaning of hospice care. As I tracked garden visitors with behavioral observations, a burbling group of six women walked through the clematis-covered entry arbor. As the group approached a three-legged fork in the path, each member quietly dispersed to observe each garden feature: A rose garden defined by three arbors and an arching wall, a water wall that pools into a stream, the shelter of a meditation chapel, and a tea house half hidden behind verdant flora. One by one, the women gathered in the tea house overlooking Sand Creek.

Upon joining the women, I discovered that they were celebrating their ten-year sorority reunion. Two women from the group, a grief therapist and the wife of a landscape architect, had read about the garden in an article and were drawn to it as a group destination. Some of the sisters had not seen one another in twenty years and came from all around the Northwest to reunite amongst the mountain beauty of Northern Idaho’s Lake Pend Oreille region.

After an hour of pouring out our experiences, we all embraced each other in a circle of solidarity. The grief therapist summed-up the meaning of our encounter: “Helping others in their time of grief and pain helps us cope with our own loss and in that way we are all united in understanding and healing.” The compassionate tears began to flow as naturally as the gentle creek waters below us.

Marni Barnes, the co-editor of the book Healing Gardens: Therapeutic Benefits and Design Recommendations, defines therapeutic design as the movement of emotions over time and through space. In the tea house that morning, I found comfort in the sisters through a self-
reinforcing cycle of awareness that validated our common experiences of loss and hope. The journey through the Healing Garden and its hospice setting provided a meaningful experience for the expression of our inner emotions. This therapeutic outcome is the result of an informed design effort that referenced *Healing Gardens* with the goal of creating a sanctuary for community healing.

The planning process for Bonner Healing Garden exemplified community solidarity. Gene Tomt, CEO of Bonner General Hospital, proposed the “Garden of Life Project” and allotted the one hundred and seventy thousand dollar loan to develop the hospice grounds. Tomt put Kellerman in charge of a task force to plan the garden and repay the loan through community donations and fundraising events. The “Dirty Dozen,” included a landscape architect, a master gardener, an interior designer, therapists, patients, community volunteers, and a newspaper columnist. In a year and a half period, the pencil drawn layout evolved from quilt-like flower beds, zig-zagging linear paths, and a concrete labyrinth to a more naturalistic layout with meandering paths that journey through a series of structural features and sensory gardens. In the middle of this process, Kellerman’s team felt that the design’s prescriptive features did not capture the essence of their original vision and looked toward John Siegmund, a landscape contractor and concrete artist, to build the emotional features that would facilitate the therapeutic experience.

I met John Siegmund at a pub in Downtown Sandpoint. Twenty minutes before John walked in with his lumberjack stature, blue bandana, muscle shirt and work-torn jeans, the altitude induced me with a bloody nose. The flow of blood drowned-out my mental preparation for the “interview.” But formal questioning wouldn’t do anyway with a person like John, who decided to meet me because he had a “good feeling about me,” after speaking on the phone with Kellerman.

For inspiration to design the meditation chapel, John sat on the old run-down dock, between the hospice and Sand Creek, and contemplated a woman’s curves and emotional tenderness. In this flow of thought, he sketched the details of the structure. The chapel is constructed with salvaged wood from that dock and the concrete curves embedded in the chapel façade form a heart-shaped stained glass window of a lake amongst the mountains. John’s philosophy in life is that “we are all beacons of energy that compose a greater current. The actions of each beacon ripple out and reverberate to affect others.” At the garden’s opening ceremony in the fall of 2004, John described the garden as “a love letter to the community, built by the community.”

Before the garden’s construction, the forested site adjacent to the hospice needed to be cleared. The Allen Family, from the nearby town of Hope, arrived at its family reunion with trucks, tools, equipment, and its hands to clear out the site. The entire extended family, forty in all, came together from all around the country in dedication to their late father and in appreciation of hospice care. The Allen Family’s gift, a transformation of death into new life, founded the Healing Garden site on a current of emotional solidarity. This emotional current transformed the
meaning of the Garden of Life Project from a place of healing for the community hospice to a sanctuary of hope for the grief stricken human spirit.

John built his structures on the Allen Family’s solid ground. From his emotional kinship with the hospice’s natural setting and his artistic expertise in concrete, John built the most distinct features I have ever studied in any healing environment. The success of these structures is in their details’ ability to facilitate positive perceptions, social interaction, and personal meaning. Unlike a hospital setting where the goal is recovery, the goal of hospice is comfortable dying. Therefore, once living material such as fossils, sculptural stumps, and salvaged wood animates the garden structures to convey the cycle of life. There are neither plant labels nor garden titles to direct movement; instead, the path forks, meanders and varies in width to define areas of interest and respite. At each destination, a structural feature offers a distinct sensory experience, as exemplified by the water wall and chapel. A seat wall integrated into the water wall’s crystal clear pond offers a soothing seat beside a torrent of water pouring onto boulders. An echo chamber lies behind this waterfall, concentrating the sound toward the chapel, which is completely silent once inside. According to studies, hearing is the last sense to fade as we pass; making the water wall, living things it attracts and contrasts of sound, “beacons” of life that reverberate throughout the garden.

I didn’t realize how profound silence in a healing garden can be until the mountains evoked my second bloody nose of the week. As I tilted my head back and pinched my nose, the first sign I recognized in Downtown Sandpoint was a red, white and blue striped pole. The barber was a middle-aged woman with a calm and gentle voice. She immediately sat me down in a stool and handed me a wet towel to absorb the hastening flow. I reclined and closed my eyes in nervous silence as I remembered driving with my mom to Nana’s house when my nose suddenly overflowed. The blood was a torrent propelled by my childhood allergies and landed me a night at the emergency hospital. My mom was by my side the whole time.

I opened my eyes and stared at the reflection of my face smeared with red streaks and then of the kind woman by my side, holding a cup of water. When the flow of blood froze, she used her hands to remove my cloth and dispose of the memory soaked in red. I thanked the woman for her kindness and told her I would be back the next day to repay her.

At dawn, I walked into “Heidi’s Barber Shop.” I asked for the haircut I have received since I was a kid; a “fade with a number three on top.” I told Heidi about my personal reason for being in Sandpoint; about how a backyard water garden that my mom and I built when I was thirteen evolved with our confluent emotions during her cancer treatment. Hospice care meant a lot to my family. For me, Bonner Healing Garden represents the garden of my adolescence on a community scale.

She too had a story of loss in her family. Her adolescent son was involved in a car accident and passed away at a nearby hospital four years ago. Heidi said she “knows the Healing Garden
well.” The opening ceremony took place that fall, just after her son’s funeral. She frequently needed to get away from home to be alone. When she disappeared, her family knew her place of pilgrimage.

The winter after her son’s death, Heidi walked through the desolate entry arbor for the first time. At the fork, she chose the middle path, into the barren rose garden that leads to the water wall, now an ice sculpture frozen in time. She continued on, choosing to walk back toward the tea house. The tranquil water’s of Sand Creek now stood still, a frozen pond well below the bank of the structure. Heidi walked back toward the chapel, along a clearly defined path of snow melted by the heated walkway. She entered the chapel and closed the door many times that winter, never straying from her personal path through the garden blanketed in tones of gray and white. Behind the chapel door and its engraved stone sign that reads “Chapel Hours: Dawn to Dusk,” the garden was silent. A corner alter made of boulders, lit by an eternal flame, kept the inside warm as she sat alone on the wood plank bench, in a confluent stream of thought. The Healing Garden was Heidi’s personal sanctuary to cope with her time of grief and pain.

The night of my scheduled departure, I missed my 11:00 P.M. train to Spokane, mistaking it for the 2:00 A.M. train heading east to Chicago. With no place to go, I decided to camp out in the Healing Garden until dawn. I zipped up my jacket and walked a mile, toting my suitcase through the entry arbor’s monolithic silhouette for the last time. In the dark of night, I settled down along the path parallel to Sand Creek, below the white glow of the chapel’s porch light. As I dozed off, lying on a wood plank bench, the nearby brush began to twitch and shriek. Dark figures ascended toward the garden chapel, and then two lights converged to intensify onto my face. Instinctively, I jumped up and began to run up the path for dear life!

Then I heard the laughter as the flashlights revealed two adolescent kids. Evidently, love manifests itself in many ways amongst the Healing Garden. I asked the young couple where they climbed from, somewhere beyond the benches at the end of the path. They told me to follow them. Amongst the invisible surroundings, we walked through the sound of crumpling leaves and twigs until we arrived at the remnant structure of a dock, gray against the moonlit waters of Sand Creek. There I sat silently, the dark form of a stranger in kinship with two glowing young confidants. We hardly said more than a few words. Instead, we listened to the gentle waves as they echoed off the creek bed. United through emotions for which there are no words, the three of us stared out over the reverberating reflection of the moonlit sky, ascending over the gray clouds passing above.

In the end, it is the invisible meaning and collective spirit within us that transforms a healing garden into a personal and community sanctuary, bringing us together in our common grief and hope. At Bonner Hospice, a symbol of loss into new life captures how we all might see the healing garden at the end of life, from dawn to dusk or dusk to dawn, a place of solidarity at life’s threshold: Bonner Healing Garden.
Afterward

Debra now uses her passionate can-do spirit to restore vintage teardrop trailers in Hope. John recently constructed the Healing Garden’s new children’s features, including a giant stump that acts as a tree house hideout. John also bought a ranch in Montana and now raises Texas Longhorns in addition to running his contractor business. The Bonner Community Hospice caregivers are as “rock-solid” as ever. The hospice staff and community volunteers continue to ensure the healing garden’s perpetuity.

I read the article to Heidi over the phone and we were both in tears as I approached the last paragraph. “It’s exactly how I remember seeing the Healing Garden,” Heidi said; she was also very excited about the drawing on Debra’s desk. She currently teaches a youth arts program through her church.