

The Memory Garden Is Blooming

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The memory garden is blooming at the Oakland Peace Center right now. That may not seem like a big deal, especially when I look out at the garden and see big cracks in the portico just beyond it. But talk about a metaphor for the work we do.

The Oakland Peace Center (OPC) was a vision of First Christian Church of Oakland, a church with a BIG heart for peace, but not a lot of members. They turned their building into a collective of nonprofits, and the umbrella organization, the OPC, is poised to

inherit the building (with the help of the denomination...details to follow once a vote formalizes everything, but we're prayerfully hopeful).

The congregation has so much longing for their beautiful but beleaguered building to come to life. I share that dream, but it's been more than I can handle to raise funds for staffing and programs, convene partners once in a long while, and support staff and partners in their work for the community. In fact, in this past year, whenever new staff suggested a beautification project or a major renovation, I found myself telling them it was impossible without even asking whether it's possible, because 12 years in this 40,000 square foot building had left me as beleaguered as the building, as its deferred maintenance of 40 years crept closer to 50 years and beyond. I was becoming a drag on the hope that new folks were bringing to the space.

But we have a new partner in the building, a queer- and people of color focused literary press, whose director doesn't know that nothing is possible here. So, he talked to me about getting plants for the church's beloved but beleaguered memory garden from a friend who works at Ace. I told him the garden was locked off and we couldn't pull it off when there were so many other demands.

So, he ignored me. And got the plants. And got his friend and our facilities coordinator and one of the church's elders to unlock the garden and put in two days of work weeding and mulching and planting.

And that garden is what the church kept saying they wished it could be. Instead of just joining in their collective longing, this secular nonprofit helped them achieve a dream. It's a tiny little dream. The portico is still crumbling. We still have to raise funds for heating and plumbing and electrical throughout the whole building.

But there's a song by Tupac Shakur that Oaklanders in particular love, about the rose that grew from concrete. Our newest partner joined with the folks who could only see the concrete crumbling and gave them (and himself and his community) some roses to remind us that this building would bloom again, just like the once forlorn memory garden. And maybe those of us who have been in the work for so long will likewise bloom again.

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