



Genocide Memorial Garden Dedication “One Step in Fostering Cooperation Among Faith Groups”

By Paula E. Kirman

When Rev. Audrey Brooks had a landscaped dry riverbed garden built on her front lawn, she decided to dedicate the garden in memory of the victims of genocide. Brooks, a Unitarian minister and member of The Raging Grannies protest singing group, had some very personal reasons for her decision.

“The idea to dedicate the riverbed came to me after my daughter and I visited Jewish cemeteries and synagogues in Prague, Vienna, Budapest, and Frankfurt,” Brooks explains. “We also visited the Dachau and Theresien concentration camps. Our family found out in 1958 that our Hungarian grandmother was Jewish, had married a Christian, and both were cast out by their families. They came to Canada as homesteaders and told their children they were both orphans with no living relatives. However, one of their daughters always disputed this because she remembered visiting relatives when she was a little girl. When her grandmother died and her immigration papers were found, she was listed as a Jew.”

“In the 1980s,” Brooks continues, “My mother and I visited those relatives, who had been located by one of my aunt’s sons. The story of my grandparents was proven to be true. So, when we planned our trip to Europe, my daughter and I decided to honor our Jewish heritage by doing this trip. We noted that visitors to the various Jewish sites often left small stones behind to mark their visit.”

To honour her Jewish heritage, Brooks originally was going to dedicate the garden to the Holocaust alone and to place a memorial plaque to honor that. However, upon reflection, she decided that the garden would have a larger scope. One day, Brooks explains, “I was sitting at my living room window, looking at the morning sun play over the front yard, and over the stones in the riverbed. I was listening to the news on the CBC radio station.”

Brooks found herself crying as she heard news from the Republic of Congo, stating that soldiers were raping women and girls, one as young as 11 months old. “History keeps on repeating itself,” she says. “Then there was more killing: in Darfur, in Somalia, in Nigeria - and the list kept getting bigger as I recalled other genocides.” Brooks decided at that moment that the dedication of the riverbed must be to honor all those who have perished because of violent deaths in events such as wars, racism, slavery, greed, religious persecution, gender orientation, and appropriation of Aboriginal lands. “This is how,” says Brooks, “the idea of the Genocide Memorial Garden began.”

An official dedication ceremony took place on June 21, 2009. The ceremony included sacred readings and prayers provided by Brooks and Rev. Brian Kiely, also of the Unitarian church, as well as musical reflections. The central part of the ceremony involved people from different faiths and backgrounds, many of them personally invited by Brooks, to write the name of a person, place, or event affected by genocide and put that stone in the riverbed. Afterwards, the person would explain the significance of what they wrote on the stone. Participants included a Christian

Genocide Memorial Garden continued...



Rev. Brian Kiely and Rev. Audrey Brooks from the Unitarian Church co-officiated the ceremony.



Stones placed in the Genocide Memorial Garden



Genocide Memorial Garden



Genocide Memorial Garden

survivor from Rwanda, a Muslim cleric, and a rabbi, in addition to others of the Christian, Muslim, and Jewish faiths (including this writer, who laid a stone for the Jewish victims of the Holocaust).

“It was my goal to have a loving and respectful interaction among the participants regardless of differences in faith,” says Brooks. “I invited as many representatives from ethnic, religious, and family groups as I could. I sent invitations to 30 associations, inviting them to participate in the dedication of the Genocide Memorial Garden, and to place a stone with the name of the group they were honouring, then to tell the audience why it was important to place that stone. I emphasized that the ceremony was to be ‘a peaceful witness to violence in the world.’ I also spoke with my Muslim colleague, Shaykh Zak Sheikh, from the U of A Chaplains Association, who was thoughtful and inspiring in accommodating not only the various groups within his own faith, but to honor those of other faiths. During the ceremony Brooks said, “It goes without saying that Rabbi David Kunin and Shaykh Zak Sheikh knew instinctively what was needed, and acted accordingly. I also emphasized, in my personal contacts with people, and in the service, that we are all brothers and sisters. Even our DNA tells us that very clearly. People responded with their hearts rather than their politics or religious biases. I was so honored by this ceremonial event!”

Brooks is now considering making it an annual event and possibly combining it with a citizens march or rally. As for her thoughts on how genocide can be avoided, her belief relies heavily upon interfaith dialogue and understanding. “We simply have to stop killing each other and telling ourselves that it is God’s will that we do so. If we publicly and repeatedly promote and engage in interfaith dialogue, and really mean to change the way nations relate to each other, the idea of religious wars being used as a cover for genocide can be shown to be a lie,” she explains.

Says Brooks: “The Abrahamic faiths in particular have more in common than they have in differences. Each culture responded to God’s call in their own way, but they don’t have to be mutually exclusive. God calls in many ways, in many cultures. We do ourselves serious religious injury if we draw a circle to exclude the beliefs of others. The ceremony of dedication of the Genocide Memorial Garden is one step in fostering cooperation among faith groups. We respected the truth as each one spoke it. We cried together. We listened to each other.”