Dear Gardener, Seed Sower, Cultivator, Grower,

It is with gratitude and love that we share this seed packet with you in hopes that its contents will provide guidance, suggestions, and support as you cultivate your own Gather to Grow Story Circle Event in your community. The metaphor of gardening is referenced throughout this packet, and as all avid gardeners know well, there are constant variables to adapt to, so consider this an introductory guide, knowing that you understand best the needs of your participants.

The Cedar Valley has always reflected the complex range of joy and despair embedded in our national social fabric, and we share in the very human desire to find community with each other in order to heal, educate, and motivate positive change. Gather to Grow’s goals are to give voice to historic and contemporary experiences of those who reside in Waterloo and Cedar Falls, to archive those stories with consent, and to engage the arts in a larger community dialogue as powerful modes of public expression and generous participation.

Your story circles will contribute to an ever-evolving culture of storytelling and deep listening in the Cedar Valley where we learn from each other and call on one another to do the work of growing justice and cultivating equity locally and globally. We also honor the arts as additional ways to communicate with one another towards a better understanding of the social landscape, and we encourage you to consider how you might infuse the arts into your event or engage the arts following your event as a public platform for what was heard and what needs to be shared.

Cultivation is messy, and it is from continuous decomposition that anything truly good grows. Even if you follow all of the directions in this seed packet, things may not go as planned. There will be unforeseen challenges. You may experience frustration and set-backs along the way. As you dig deeper, things will inevitably become harder to work through. As the subsoil is exposed, you must work to take extra care with your participants and yourself. Continue to listen to each other, even when met with the most seemingly impenetrable bedrock, and proceed bravely with kindness and generosity. This is not a process that will provide clear answers, and actually may create more questions. Life’s work is not about prioritizing the finite; instead, it values how we grow with each other, for each other, and because of each other.

Let’s continue to gather, listen, and grow together,

-Imagining America at UNI’s Gather to Grow Team