

From the upcoming issue of our newsletter, "SeniorWise"

Notes From the Director—January 2008
"An Expanding Heart"

This has been an eventful time in Shelburne Falls, a time of extremes. There have been two major snowfalls sandwiched around the terrible fire that has left a big hole not only on Bridge Street but also in our collective heart. I think of the words of the French writer Leon Bloy, "There are places in the heart that do not yet exist and suffering enters in order to bring them to life." Perhaps the empty feeling is really what happens when the heart expands. Surely the outpouring of support is an expression of this. May we not let go of this feeling too soon, for there is suffering in and all around us, inviting us to expand and reach out.

With this I am moved to reflect briefly on how the heart of the Center is being invited to expand as well. I want to be as clear about this as possible. The world around us is changing dramatically. Many of the old institutions and social arrangements are changing or even dying altogether. The numbers of people over 55 is growing at an astonishing rate. At the same time people's experience of aging is also changing.

The Center must be ready to respond to this shifting landscape. I actually see it as a great opportunity. We are in the midst of a profound shift in our mission. We are not only looking for a new building, but we are looking at a new way of serving the people of our towns. We want the building to be an expression of this new vision.

The Center staff, along with some Board members and friends, has begun to brainstorm what a new center might look like. We are deeply concerned that this not be our private vision. We need everyone who feels passionately about these issues to become a part of the conversation about the direction we will be taking.

We are also very concerned that a new generation of people commit to becoming involved in actually bringing about this transformation. We need people with fresh eyes and innovative ideas to serve on the Board and on the Friends. We want to invite younger adults and even youth to be a part of this adventure. We need a whole variety of skills and "enthusiasms" for finances and community organizing, building design and green building technology, fundraising and programming. We need people who can help us think through how we can expand without putting undue financial strains on the municipalities. We need groups and organizations, both public and private, for-profit and not-for-profit, who can partner with us to grow a new kind of Center that will better serve our communities five, ten, twenty five years from now.

Some of the parameters of the new vision have already begun to take shape. One is the creation of a new adult education initiative. In collaboration with GCC and other colleges, as well as independent scholars, we want to create a simple, flexible west county educational program where we can engage the critical issues that confront us at the personal and social levels.

Such a program would serve the five dimensions of human existence - social gatherings (emotional) with wholesome locally grown food and drink (physical) where we can be stimulated by gifted thinkers (intellectual) and inspired to explore previously undreamt possibilities (spiritual) that might lead to new ways of living with each other and the earth (action).

Another key area is outreach and service, not only for our elders, but also for anyone with a disability. As we look carefully at the unmet needs in our towns, for example, we are mindful of the need for an alternative transportation network. We are also becoming more aware of the need to not only support, but to provide basic training for those who are caring for elders and disabled people in their homes. Beyond this, we are looking at the possibility of a Supportive Day Center and, even further down the road, a new kind of community owned nursing home.

These are big ideas. I believe that the times call for nothing less. It will take a combination of public and private funding - and a whole lot of creative thinking and community involvement.

The longest journey, so the saying goes, begins with one simple step. I would offer that the first step we can take together is simply to spread the word among family, friends, churches or spiritual communities, civic organizations, workplaces. I ask you to reach out especially to younger adults and youth and to those who might never otherwise see themselves as interested in the "Senior Center." Pass along this article. Share your own passion for our emerging vision. Call me at the center to set up a time when we can talk. Perhaps you or someone you know might be ready to take that first step with us.

Together we can expand our common heart and move, one step at a time, into an undreamt new possibility. But the time has come to take that first step.

Jamie Godfrey