

Notes from the Director—February 2008

A Time for Deep Listening

Winter can be an especially good time for deep listening. When the temperatures go down and snow blankets the landscape, the pace slackens and we are invited into stillness and silence. It is an opportunity to take the measure of our lives and our relationships, to make an inventory not only of our personal economies but of our moral and spiritual landscape as well. It is a chance to be with ourselves and with others at a slower and perhaps more meaningful pace than we normally keep.

Of course many of us are oblivious to Winter's invitation to slow down. Our lives are no longer ordered to the rhythm of the seasons, and so the cold and snow become simply a bothersome obstacle to the frenetic pace we have come to take as the norm. (Of course such a pace is equally at odds with a more human approach to work and activity that Summer invites...)

Here at the center we are trying, as always, to stay "centered." This is not easy. Grant and budget deadlines are upon us. Much more importantly, we see the other face of Winter's reality. What for one person may be welcome silence and sweet solitude, for another may be crushing isolation and loneliness. Many people are in need of fuel assistance and other support. Indeed, Winter can be a difficult time.

Even as we continue to run our programs and meet budget and grant deadlines, we are trying to do the work of deep listening. Our efforts are rooted in one basic question: *What are the real needs of the people we are called to serve and how can we better respond?* To truly know and understand another's needs requires deep listening. A survey is not enough. We need to literally meet people where they live, on their own terms - and listen carefully to what they say.

Beyond this we must know how to correctly *interpret* what we are hearing. To listen carefully means to be radically open, to be aware of our biases and assumptions and put them on hold long enough for the other's deepest humanity to emerge. Otherwise we end up hearing what we want to hear and disregard the rest. And though we may continue on our way with lovely sounding programs and activities, we miss the boat.

A lot is at stake in this business of deep listening! To miss the boat is not a benign mistake. It really is a form of violence, both to the person and to the community. Eventually it undermines people's trust of organizations to genuinely serve, pushing people into deeper isolation and bolstering the walls that divide us.

There are many forces at work that would have us hurry or short circuit altogether the task of deep listening. One is the inertia that comes with the day-to-day demands of maintaining an organization. Another is the seductive path of "growing the center" with all kinds of fancy new programs that look good on paper but miss the mark where genuine needs are concerned.

This includes the idea of a new Senior Center. As I have previously stated, we are in fact looking at the likelihood of needing a new space for our center. But I want to be clear that the space itself, along with its programs and activities, must be a reflection of deep listening. I fear that some towns have built expensive new centers that become difficult to sustain. Perhaps they feel that they must justify the investment by trying to match seniors to facilities and programs rather than the other way around.

I believe that we must not put the proverbial cart before the horse. The staff and board of the Senior Center are committed to the work of deep listening, and we invite you to join us. Over the coming months we will be creating teams of people who are trained to conduct in-depth interviews in people's homes. How we interpret what we hear in these encounters will shape the mission of the center in the coming decades.

Please contact me if you are interested in becoming involved.