

Notes from the Director—March 2008

A Golden Opportunity

I find myself increasingly tuned in to the importance of the words and images we use to describe our work and the people we serve. To describe the experience of aging is not easy because it is changing so dramatically. To say that someone is “growing older,” for example, can really mean that someone is in decline and no longer growing at all! Words like “senior” and “elder” can be a compliment for one person and an insult for another.

This is more than “just semantics” or overly sensitive political correctness. Words and images have a way of burrowing into our individual and collective unconscious where they exert tremendous influence on the way we see the world and how we speak and act.

One image that seems to be gaining popularity is the phrase “silver tsunami.” It refers to the sharp increase in the numbers of people reaching the age of 60. I have to admit that the phrase leaves me cold. I understand that some people may hear “tsunami” as a reference to the growing wave of younger “seniors” who have energy and are challenging the way we think about aging, which is a good thing.

Of course, there *are* profound changes happening and the numbers and needs of the most vulnerable in our midst will increase. And all this is happening at a time of diminishing resources. Like it or not, the Senior Center is at a decisive crossroads. We are being called on to do more with less.

My concern is that the image of a tsunami will only fuel a troubling trend in our society that devalues aging and older people. It conveys a sense that the arrival of this generation of people at the age of 60 is a dangerous and even catastrophic event. The ominous undercurrent here is the fear that people who are growing older will place an overwhelming burden on our time and resources. And we seem to have less of both every day.

The cruel irony, of course, is that we put enormous time and resources into avoiding the reality of aging. In general, aging is seen as a medical condition, so that graying hair is something that needs “treatment” with permanent hair color - even silver. An elderly woman I once knew referred with wry insight to a popular beauty cr me as “Oil of Delay.”

Even senior centers can unwittingly contribute to images that devalue aging. One current response to the “tsunami” is to shift the focus from senior to “wellness” centers. There is much to celebrate about this, but I fear that an overemphasis on wellness may feed in to our obsession with youth and our fear of aging. I’ve been in the presence of people with severe mental and physical disabilities, of people frail with age, and even of people dying of cancer who were, in the most important ways, “well.”

The fact is that it’s not acceptable in our culture to simply become old and die. But the real danger is not that people are getting older, it’s that as they get older they are at risk of losing their place in society. They become more vulnerable to being pushed aside and devalued. For those who had no valued place to begin with this is especially tragic.

The real danger is that in pushing vulnerable people aside we cause deep wounds in them – or we rub salt in the wounds that may already be there. The wounds are not caused by a physical or mental infirmity; they are caused by the social rejection that people suffer as a result of an infirmity.

Finally, the real danger is that in rejecting vulnerable people we are ourselves diminished. We equate aging with a loss of energy. But the diminishment of physical strength and even some mental faculties

can bring an increase of vital energy and a honing of sensitivity to what truly matters. People who are older often live less from the “coil spring” of ego and external compulsion and more from the “wellspring” of interior silence. They invite us to slow down enough to listen to the deeper yearnings of the heart and to reclaim our individual and collective soul.

There’s a lovely man who recently turned ninety who graces the Senior Center nearly every day. He has a bad back and moves very slowly. He worked hard on his farm and in a local mill for most of his life. A serious accident years ago left him with a badly deformed hand. He gets up every day at 4 a.m. and goes through his daily routine of splashing water on his face and making a cup of coffee. By the time he arrives at the Center at 9:30 or so he often has a loaf of sweetbread or a batch of donuts still warm from the oven, which he shares with staff and visitors.

No matter how severe his discomfort, our friend always has a sparkle in his eye. Like a child, he has a way of pulling me out of my busyness and into a personal connection, however brief. He has his moments, his little complaints. Sometimes he’ll come and sit in my office in silence while I work, a calming presence. He is stripped of the props and pretenses to which most of us cling. There is kindness and humility in every (remarkably spry) footstep, and when he leaves for the day he leaves us nourished by more than his bread.

The fact is the center is alive with remarkable people, including staff and volunteers. There are some who come to us with deep wounds who are hard to be with, but even they are our teachers, calling forth humility, patience and understanding. All are reminders that the real work of the center is to build caring relationships one person at a time.

It may be that the “silver tsunami” is really a golden opportunity to reclaim our personal and collective soul. Here is our chance to learn how to slow down, to appreciate silence, to cultivate wisdom, and to be present to one another in a new way. All we have to do is pay attention.

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What will the role of the Senior Center be in this? The answers are not yet clear, but I’d like to share some alternative images that might guide us on the path.

Nurturing Neighborhoods Our primary goal is to nurture neighborhoods of mutuality and caring where everyone, no matter their age, abilities, or social role, benefits.

Integration The only way to serve elders is not just to include them but also to actively integrate them into the heart of our common life. Even more, the integration of elders is absolutely essential for health of our common life.

Voluntary Service We seek to move from a focus on “volunteers working for an organization” to working as an organization to foster new freely given (voluntary) relationships among citizens of all ages. Building networks of caring neighbors are both a fiscal necessity and the heart of social renewal. This includes seeking out advocates for those who are especially vulnerable.

Person Centered We want to make our planning less program-based and more person centered. We want to listen deeply to the genuine needs and aspirations of particular elders in particular settings. Such listening is a creative act, and is the key to everything we do.

Wisdom The Senior Center is for seniors, but is also *by seniors for* the common good. People who are older can be a vital source of wisdom. They often have “a glimpse of eternity” without which our common life is impoverished and our planning is short sighted.

Multi-Generational Our approach must be actively multi-generational, providing educational and social opportunities for fruitful interactions among people of all ages.

Education is for Life We believe that education is lifelong, and that the fundamental goal of education is to never stop growing. We commit to working with others to create new educational forms that foster elders' desire to learn and that offer their insights to younger generations.

Collaborative We cannot go it alone. In order to do its job well, the Senior Center must build relationships with local businesses, schools and colleges, spiritual groups, civic groups, and many individuals, including youth.

Flexibility We believe that the trend to build large, highly centralized new senior centers is economically risky and counterproductive. Given the distances and diverse needs in our area, we seek to remain flexible so that we are better able to reach out and to adapt to shifting needs.

Fiscal Integrity We believe that fiscal scarcity is an opportunity to grow closer. Although we believe that the municipalities should continue to provide financial support for these efforts as they are able, we are committed to pursuing funding sources that will lighten the burden on our towns.

Soon we will begin training teams of people to conduct a series of in-home interviews as part of our commitment to deep listening. At the same time, there are a number of truly exciting and innovative ideas percolating at the Center. These include grassroots initiatives in adult education, caregiver support, and transportation. We invite you to be part of this journey that is *our* journey.

Jamie Godfrey, Director