

Notes from the Director—December 2007

Ready for Spring?

The first snow of the season is falling as I sit at my desk at the Center. I know that many people dread the arrival of winter as they get older. I admit that I still feel a bit of the excitement I felt as a child. At the very least we can say that spring is not far behind!

Speaking of spring, there is a real sense here that the Center is ready to burst with new life and energy. We are beginning to discern the outlines of a new vision for the center. The new vision will not be a closed “in-house” agenda that we will figure out and then try to sell to the wider community. Rather it will be the result of an ever-widening conversation at the heart of our communities. We want people of all ages and backgrounds to participate in this conversation so that what emerges will belong to *all* of us – not just “seniors.”

The key to this community conversation will be *careful listening*. We listen with our heads and our hearts in order to understand how our towns have changed and what the real unmet needs of our aging family members and friends really are. We listen in order to understand how our elders have a crucial role to play in every aspect of our civic life. What is at stake here is nothing less than the renewal of our communities from the inside out. In other words, the renewal of the Center is tied up with the renewal of our most basic relationships in our neighborhoods and towns.

One way to put the question, then, is what are the ties that bind us to one another? Even more to the point, what is it that binds me to the stranger? And most fundamental of all, what is it that binds me to the stranger who is in need?

Some of us will see the person in need as a burden that we frankly would like to avoid. Or perhaps we feel duty bound to help – but only to a degree, because we are afraid to get too involved. Perhaps we are genuinely moved to reach out, but we still operate under the assumption that we are “well” and the other is “needy” so that the relationship is a one-way affair. We go home having done some good - and feeling good about it. And some of us are compelled to keep reaching out in such a way that we burn out altogether and are of no use to anyone!

It is also true that some people feel “caught” by circumstance – supporting an aging parent or spouse or someone with a disability – and are overwhelmed by the financial and human strain of doing this alone. It is so clear that being alone in this work puts the “caregiver” herself or himself in a place of need.

This opens up a deeper perspective on the secret ties that bind us to the person in need. Just as it “takes a village to raise a child,” so too does it take a village to care for someone in need. Everything that we do here at the Center - from activities and classes to referrals and information to caregiver support sessions and transportation – serves this desire to build communities of caring.

At the deepest level of all, however, we realize that not only does it take a village to care for a person in need, but it is the person in need who *makes* the village! When we come face to face with someone who is in some way unable to get by on their own, we are invited to grow and come out of ourselves in a way that we otherwise never would. The person in need is a great gift, because she calls forth our deepest humanity. He nourishes in us an awareness of our essential interconnectedness. It is true of a mother or father holding a newborn. It is equally true of that newborn, many years later perhaps, caring for those same parents.

Finally, we understand that all of us, to varying degrees at different times in our lives, are both in need of help and capable of giving help. This interconnection is what lies at the heart of genuine community.

I witnessed this very powerfully many years ago on a bus in Montreal. I was sitting at the back of crowded bus slogging its way through the bleak wintry streets on a late Friday afternoon. The bus was filled with people reading or staring off into space. There was almost no conversation or interaction. At one stop there was quite a commotion at the front, though I could not see what it was. It continued even after the bus pulled away. Gradually the source of the trouble made his way towards the back. He was a man with Down's syndrome, perhaps in his thirties. As he came he greeted every person with exclamations and handshakes. He even hugged a few startled passengers. When he got to me, he reached down and took my face in his hands, looked me in the eyes, and said in barely discernable French, "Bonjour! Ca va?" Hello! Everything O.K.? I could feel my heart melt. In a few short minutes the whole bus had been transformed. People were smiling, talking to each other. It was springtime. The bus had gone from being a collection of individuals to a community - all because of one needy stranger.

This is the heart of the vision that is emerging at the Center. I invite you into our conversation about how to nourish a caring community. I invite you to help us think imaginatively about where we need to be as a Center in five or ten or twenty five years in light of the real needs in our families, neighborhoods, and towns. I invite you to join us in bringing it into being.

I invite you, even as you prepare for winter, to be ready for spring.