

February Notes

## The Price and Promise of Citizenship

***What is required of us now is a new era of responsibility - a recognition, on the part of every American, that we have duties to ourselves, our nation, and the world, duties that we do not grudgingly accept but rather seize gladly, firm in the knowledge that there is nothing so satisfying to the spirit, so defining of our character, than giving our all to a difficult task. This is the price and the promise of citizenship.***

### ***President Obama's Inaugural Speech***

I received an email recently that scolded me to be more practical. It read in part, "the time has past for visioning, deep listening and other ethereal adventures." I was taken aback by this, but I have decided to welcome it as an opportunity to be more clear about who we are and where the Center is going.

If I had to describe the outlook of the staff and Board, I would say that we are practical idealists. The title of our summit on aging last September was called "Gathering the Harvest" and was billed as "A Call to Action Rooted in Wisdom." We want to move decisively and effectively on behalf of very real people with urgent needs. But we refuse to leave the vision and the listening behind. We are committed to making them part and parcel of every program, every relationship, every penny spent. They do not prevent effective action, they make it possible.

A vision does not come easily; it requires patience and careful listening to the undercurrents of need and aspiration of persons. Just to name a crisis well is the difficult first step in shaping a vision. A vision cannot be forced on anyone, but must be wrestled with and somehow internalized. It is an adventure; it is gristle and bone, sweat and sacrifice, but it is also hope and meaning. Without one, as scripture so rightly puts it, the people perish. That is, our identity as human beings with a common purpose dies.

What have we learned in our own listening these past months? We have learned that the economic crisis is inextricably tied to a crisis of collective identity and meaning. We have learned that questions about elder care are the same burning questions that confront us all. What is it that connects us to one another across differences of age, class, political, and religious identities? How do we overcome the fear and inertia that hold us hostage in our own private worlds? What kind of neighborhoods and towns do we want to deliver to our children and our children's children?

In short, we have learned that the needs of elders are intimately bound to the needs of all of us. If lives are at stake, it is *all* of our lives, not just the lives of elders and vulnerable ones. We can no longer expect to tweak the current Senior Center structure and even begin to address the real needs of elders. Rather we must step clear out of the "service delivery" model in favor of a vision directed to rebuilding the "common wealth."

President Obama's call for a renewed commitment to citizenship goes to the heart of this new vision. Our “common wealth” cannot and should not be measured only in fiscal terms, but rather by the numbers of people willing to pay “the price of citizenship” I would add to President Obama’s words only that our duty to nation and world are rooted in and made real by our duty to our neighbor - that is, our willingness to overcome fear and reach out to the person next door. In so doing, I believe, we fulfill our essential duty to ourselves – to be fully alive and in touch with all that is noble and good in us.

If I had to summarize the new mission of the new Center it is to help make this happen. It is not so much to provide services as to foster friendships. It is to build relationships of interdependence across generations where the focus is no longer the Senior Center, but rather particular *persons* - elders and others, drawing on and contributing to the rich life of a locale with its land and its social, economic, cultural, educational, and religious centers.

This will have implications for the Center’s structure. We are considering a gradual separation of staff from the administration of our current facility. The space itself would become a Neighborhood Center, to be administered by volunteers, with vibrant programs that are rooted in deep listening and designed by and for seniors and people of all ages in that locale. The current staff would then redirect its focus toward the creation of a network of such neighborhood centers in the towns we serve, providing technical assistance, programming and funding resources as needed.

There are many details yet to be worked out, and the transition will take time. Money is a reality, but we need people’s donations far less than we need their citizenship. Come to the Conversation Café series on Neighborhood Building. Email us or stop by to share your ideas about the vision and how to make it work fiscally. Become engaged with this year’s town meetings where we hope to present our plan and solicit feedback so that it can become a shared vision. And finally, consider how you might want to become involved.

Just a few moments ago a woman stopped in to introduce herself. She was inspired by President Obama’s election to become more involved in helping others. She’s interested in helping with our deep listening project. Listening is hard work. It costs something to set aside our interior chatter long enough to listen to another. But a person listened to - I mean really listened to – can move and expand in unexpected ways. No money changes hands but something happens - something common as bread and promising as spring.