

“On Flying Sparks and Asking for Help”

Our Conversation Café series has been exploring the question of what it means to be a neighbor in these times. The sessions have been thought provoking and rich with insight, and I invite you to come to any or all of the three remaining Cafés beginning this month.

A number of times during the sessions it has been pointed out that we live in a society where it is harder to ask for help than to offer it. I think that there is some truth to this. To ask for help is to become vulnerable. It feels like an admission of weakness. It carries with it the risk of negative judgment or not being heard or outright rejection.

But sometimes we have no choice but to ask. I believe that when we ask for help we are giving that person a great gift. We give them a chance to step outside themselves for even a moment. It's as if a spark is ignited across the gap that separates us, a little explosion of energy. An opening. A connection. Even the smallest of gestures can be all it takes to set a life ablaze. The risk is real, but the rewards are beyond measure.

The Center's core mission is to help make such sparks fly. It is to nurture these little moments when the gap between people is crossed. It is to make it easier for these simple acts of neighborliness can happen so that friendships between people of all ages can be ignited.

But now *we* need help. As the numbers and needs of seniors are increasing, the staff has been stretched to the breaking point and is in desperate need of administrative help. Many who served long and well on the Center's board and the Friends have resigned. The towns we serve are in a financial crisis and are asking legitimate questions about the cost effectiveness of the current arrangement. And nearly every funding source is being reduced for next year. We are at a crisis point, and we need help.

I think it would be a shame to waste such a good crisis. It is a wonderful opportunity to transform our perceptions and attitudes about aging and the way we relate to our older neighbors. It is a chance to create new social networks where our elder have a revered place. This would revitalize our common life, and be a great gift to our children and grandchildren. No amount of funding and no service agency, important as they may be, can accomplish this for us. We hold the key. The time is now.

And so, as if on cue, a group of wonderful people has stepped forward to help us chart a course into the future. We are working on a five-year plan that will seek out new sources of funding, allowing towns to redirect some of their resources to create local programs that meet the particular needs of seniors in each town. These may include shared meals or wellness classes or social programs and events

The plan will also provide a richer array of social and educational opportunities for seniors at a regional level that will give seniors a chance to connect with people from other towns.

Finally, we want to create new initiatives for frail elders – social day programs and new shared living arrangements and support networks.

We are not talking about getting bigger. We are not and do not want to be an “outside agency” delivering services *to* seniors in the towns. We want to be so rooted in the realities of seniors in each town that we “disappear” because we are neighbors and friends. Our goal is to help each town, each neighborhood, each person to be less dependent on us as an organization and more interdependent, more alive, more caring. Perhaps some day Center staff will be happily looking for other work because we will have succeeded in making ourselves obsolete!

The only way that this can happen is with the active involvement of people from all four towns. Here are some very particular ways that people can help:

- ◆ We need people who can take on daily administrative tasks so that staff can tend to vital unmet needs and redirect its focus on the new plan;
- ◆ We need people with organizing and grant-writing skills who can help us revitalize the Friends and take our fundraising efforts to another level;
- ◆ Perhaps most importantly, we need people with enthusiasm of all ages to join their local COA's and serve on the Center's board of directors.

Please call or stop by to offer your time and talents. Spread the word among friends of all ages. It's not about volunteering for an organization, nor is it about heroic effort and time commitments. It's about reconnecting with neighbors and building something enduring. It's about even the smallest of gestures in a time of crisis. There's no better place and no better moment. Come and see!

Jamie Godfrey

*"Nobody sees a flower
really
it is so small
we haven't time
and to see takes time
like to have a friend takes time."*

- Georgia O'Keefe