

September 2007

Dear Friends of Cornerstone,

The day had arrived. It had finally happened - I was going to prison! After yielding my identification and valuables, I was patted down by a female guard and led through a seemingly endless series of heavy duty locked doors and then outdoors next to the prison yard by a burly, expressionless armed guard. In one area there was a whole wall covered with handcuffs. In the yard we were surrounded by high chain link fences with treacherous looking razor wire. I felt more and more confined the further in we traveled. We finally reached our destination - a rather plain room with about two dozen chairs set up in a circle. Sitting in these chairs were the inmates with whom I would spend this day and two more the next weekend. I was part of an inmate-led AVP (Alternatives to Violence Project) workshop.

For some time I had been trying to participate in one of these workshops. Being a non-violent community working with men who have lived much of their lives in a violent context - in the street and in prison - I felt that a workshop on nonviolence with incarcerated men in a prison setting could be quite helpful to our community. What I received in that first day "inside" was a little better understanding of our residents. I have heard many of our residents' stories about life while incarcerated - some of them quite gruesome - but it helped to actually be where those stories originated. It is a little easier to understand why the guys feel the need to appear strong and invulnerable even though in pain. I can understand the attachments to spaces and material things. I could see why trust is so difficult, why openness and the sharing of feelings other than anger are not forthcoming, why the anger is so deep, why the violent reactions are so sudden, why the "con" is so natural. Their lives literally depended on being closed and tough and solitary. I could understand why it takes so long for them to feel a part of community.

As I listened and observed and participated in this tiny bit of community developed among these two dozen men and me, I was convinced again that what we are attempting to do at Cornerstone is vital for our residents who are all trying to adjust to life outside the institution and off the street. We still believe that community - a home where one is accepted, loved, encouraged and challenged - is the greatest thing we can offer. We still believe that the precious, rare gift of presence is what will help the most. The great theologian, Woody Allen, once said that 80% of success is just showing up. We still believe that just showing up works. We still work on the 20% - the structure and program - but we always try to return to the gift of presence.

In this first year of being in our lovely home, we have been present through celebration and through pain. Both are such an important part of community. It is so important to celebrate. There has not been a lot of celebration in the lives of our residents. We have celebrated almost a year of clean time, a graduation from an extended outpatient program, wonderful meals cooked, a yard sale enterprise, a t-shirt enterprise, going to basketball and baseball games, cookouts in the park and a multitude of laughs. We are a community with a sense of humor. We celebrate the return of David Buckley as one of our residential "community builders" and welcome Brey Cribbs as his cohort. Brey brings much experience, a good mind and a great heart to the community.

The gift of presence also involves walking with each other in the pain. A number of years ago, writer Philip Yancey and Doctor Paul Brand coauthored a book entitled *Pain: the Gift Nobody Wants*. I was immediately attracted to a book that referred to pain as a gift, and as I grow older I am beginning to believe that it's true and that I still don't especially want it! But there is so much pain from the past and present in our community. There's the resident with PTSD from his many years in prison. He frequently relives some of the gruesome experiences he had. I sit regularly and just listen. I think it helps. There is the pain of guilt and shame from deeds done and people hurt. Again we sit and listen and love. There's the pain of relapse. All but one of the men have relapsed at least once while at Cornerstone. But we continue to walk with them even with the ones who choose to stay in that lifestyle. We always seem to keep up with them and help as we can. For those

who come back, we welcome them. We want to be a persevering presence. My colleague, Tommy, is fond of quoting Jesus, "When we are asked to go one mile, we walk with them for two."

Then there is the pain of adjusting to life without the structures of prison and the lifestyle of the street; the pain of thinking about working when you haven't really worked in thirty years; the pain of relationships when you have not had any real lasting ones; the pain of trying to change your life so drastically in your late fifties. So much pain - what can we do? In our imperfect way we try to be there when one needs to talk or vent or when one just needs a laugh or perspective or a challenging word or direction to resources that may help them.

We walk with people in their pain believing that a loving, accepting, understanding, generous listening without "fixing" presence can help them through that pain to discover the true self inside. The 13th Century mystic Meister Eckhart put it this way: "The shell must be cracked apart if what is in it is to come out, for if you want the kernel, you must break the shell." So we share the pain of the cracking so that each of us can grow. It seems to work.

Recently I read Gabriel Garcia Marquez's novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. It is the history of the family who founded the little village of Macondo somewhere in Argentina. Every year during the month of March a "family of ragged gypsies" would camp outside the village and with "a great uproar of pipes and kettledrums" they would demonstrate new inventions. The first one was the magnet which they called the "eighth wonder of the learned alchemists of Macedonia." They drug the two metal ingots from house to house "and everybody was amazed to see pots, pans, tongs, and braziers tumble down from their places and beams creak from the desperation of nails and screws trying to emerge." The gypsy who put on the demonstration then proclaimed:

*"Things have a life of their own. It's simply a matter of waking up their souls."*

We believe that the Cornerstone Community is like that magnet. The life is there in each member; it is simply a matter of letting the gift of presence wake up and draw out our souls - all of us, staff and residents.

As an infant mission, we are still working out how best to supply our material needs. We have lost some government funding sources, but hope for others. Your generous support at this time will help us to continue to make this dream of community and presence viable. I hope you will consider a special gift and may you find the magnet that will wake your soul.

Peace and love,

Tom Copps