



April 18, 2009

Dear Friends of Cornerstone,

The glory of friendship is not the outstretched hand, nor the kindly smile, nor the joy of companionship; it's the spiritual inspiration that comes to one when he discovers that someone else believes in him and is willing to trust him ... (Ralph Waldo Emerson)

Few things help an individual more than to place responsibility upon him, and to let him know that you trust him. (Booker T. Washington)

Recently, through some reading and pondering of my life, I was moved by one of the great gifts I have received. It is one of the primary gifts at the heart of my life and work – a gift like most of God’s gifts which are given to be given. It is the gift of trust – believing in someone and then entrusting them with something of value even before they have proven themselves to be totally trustworthy. Dorothy Sayers describes this as one of God’s great humiliations: “In an awesome act of self-denial God entrusted his reputation to ordinary people.” Being trusted and then entrusted with something of value makes me feel valuable and motivated to serve.

This great gift of trust is one that we try to pass on to those with whom we share life at Cornerstone. And it is such a needed gift. Recently, after mediating during a loud verbal conflict between two of our residents, one of them said to me, “Tom, you know you give us the benefit of the doubt too much – you know we are addicts!” The implication being addicts just cannot be trusted.

Anyone who has spent much time around addiction knows there is truth in this. In the addict’s world, self interest is the primary concern. You do whatever is necessary to get what you want. No one is fully trusted. One must always watch his back and be wary of everyone because everyone else is out to get what they want too. This distrust – even of oneself – becomes a way of life that does not change quickly or easily – even when one gets sober. That’s why I believe that the gift of trust is one of the greatest gifts our community can offer – the gift of believing in those who have often been violated, rarely been trusted and frequently untrustworthy. I am pretty sure when this gift is given it can be a precursor to change and growth. As people are believed in they begin to believe in themselves and eventually begin to trust others.

On their very first day at Cornerstone, we begin with an act of trust – we give each resident their own personal key code to the front door. That may seem rather minor to most of us, but to a person who has been homeless or locked up, it is big. Over the years I have observed many large and tough looking men break down when they speak of receiving a key and the trust it represents. There are many ways we can express this gift of believing in our residents – cheering their successes, accepting them back when they stumble, giving them responsibility around the house, challenging them to develop and then work towards goals, etc. But recently I discovered a more subtle but very powerful way we reveal our trust.

One evening Brey Cribbs, one of our live-in community builders, heard a commotion downstairs. The same two men mentioned earlier were engaged in another heated conflict – all apparently over a plug for the sink. By the time Brey arrived on the scene one of the men had retreated to the kitchen and the other stayed in the living room to fume. Brey had decided some time earlier that he was not going to try to break up arguments; he would just try to be a “peaceful presence” with the men when they were in a conflict. He would let them know he was there but allow them work through the conflict in their own way – intervening only if it got out of control. The two men came back together, yelled, and then separated a couple more times. Their volume

began to come down with each cycle. Eventually they went their own ways to calm down. Brey was there the whole time as a peaceful presence. The story would continue at our weekly community meeting.

Our community meetings have become more than just a time to share how our weeks have gone. It has become a safe place for all of us to process tension and conflict in the community – a time where we can be honest and angry and open. Normally, it is staff that initiates this venting and reconciling process, but in the community meeting after the conflict, one of the men who had been in the conflict began the process. He shared what led up to the conflict, how he felt and how upon reflection he had realized that he was concerning himself with the other man's issues instead of focusing on his own. He then apologized to the other. Then everyone in the community shared how they felt about it – it got emotional at times and even a bit tense, but we were able to stay with it until there was a measure of peace and reconciliation. We know that we will have more eruptions – probably from these same two men. But the community process had worked. And it all started with Brey's commitment to being a peaceful presence -- what Edwin Friedman might call a "non-anxious presence," a vital component of the healing process in family systems [cf. *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue*].

Towards the end of the meeting there was a very poignant moment when Brey shared. He had been quiet for most of the meeting. He told all of the guys that he loved them very much and reiterated that when conflicts arose in the house, he would not step in to resolve them. He would be a peaceful presence so they could come to resolution on their. Then he told them that he is always there for them – they could come to chat anytime when they were feeling frustrated or down. All of the guys knew he was sincere because he lived life with them and they were touched. I was touched.

In all of this, I believe Brey demonstrated two of our best gifts at Cornerstone – trust and presence. Brey showed these men that he actually believed in them – even though they were addicts – even though they had mastered the con – and even though they had lost faith in others and mostly in themselves. He gave them the benefit of the doubt! He trusted them enough to let them work out their conflict. He refrained from acting like a parent and more like a concerned friend. It required much love, commitment and patience. It was a great gift. But it wasn't the only gift. Brey also offered the gift of presence – not only do we believe in you, but we will walk this road of anger, fear and reconciliation with you each step of the way. **We believe in you and we are there for you.** What a potent combination – more often than not resulting in reciprocation – the men usually began to trust us and believe in us over time, and they begin to trust the community process.

Now we are not naïve (well maybe a little). We know that some will take advantage of us – some have! And we know that though we believe in someone, we may not always believe them. In fact, sometimes falsely believing the lie enables a person's pathology. But we are still confident that these two gifts of trust and presence are powerful. So we keep striving to be generous with them.

People are quite generous with us in this gift giving work, yet we continue to be affected by the economic downturn. So again I ask for your help in keeping this vital work going. Thank you for your consideration and may you thoroughly enjoy the beauty of spring!

Peace and love to you,

Tom Copps