

December 8, 2008

Dear Friends of Cornerstone,

“...toward the end of his life, Albert Einstein removed the portraits of two scientists – Newton and Maxwell – from his wall. He replaced those with portraits of Gandhi and Schweitzer. Einstein explained that it was time to replace the image of success with the image of service.” (Philip Yancey)

Lately, I have been thinking a bit about success. What is success to me? What is success to our beloved Cornerstone Community? In these days of economic turmoil – people losing houses and retirement savings (who told me that 401k was such a good deal!), banks failing, stock markets crashing, corporations folding, government bailouts for rich corporations appearing to ignore main street and exposing the marginalized, less money given for those trying to make a difference in society and the loss of the so-called "American dream" – I wonder if it might be a good time for our culture to reassess what success looks like. At least it is another good opportunity for us at Cornerstone to assess how we see success.

As a former engineer, it is always tempting for me to try to translate all reality into empirical, measurable data. My empirical tendencies could fit fairly well in the non-profit social service milieu where success is often measured by positive outcomes that can be quantified on a spread sheet and turned in to reveal success for a grant. I know that empirical data can sometimes help us discern trends in our work, and I understand that grantors need to see that their money is being used effectively – there are charlatans in this social service world (many it seems work in this capitol city). But I am frustrated at times because at Cornerstone it seems our success is told better by story than by statistic.

A couple of months ago I experienced a touching end to one our Cornerstone stories. Rob had been a part of Cornerstone for nearly two years. He had been incarcerated most of his life. He had no family around him. He would often say that we were his family. Rob and I became very close. A few months ago, his health began to decline sharply after he was diagnosed with esophageal cancer. When it was obvious that we could not provide the medical care Rob needed, he moved around the corner to our parent community, Joseph's House, where he would live out the rest of his days. As he often said during those last days, his home was still at Cornerstone. He would frequently make his way around the corner to take a shower “at home” and sit and enjoy our comfortable living room and share love with his “family.”

One night I got a call about 10:00 pm from David, one of Cornerstone community builders. He said that Rob was close to passing. I said I would be right over. When I arrived at Joseph's House, I was ushered into the living room and confronted with a poignant sight. There was Rob on the couch leaning on the chest of our other community builder, Brey. This man whom we had enjoyed, suffered with, been a family with, was dying in the embrace of one of our own. I was allowed to sit on the other side of Rob as he lay dying. I held his hand and watched his breathing and tried to match it. I could see his chest rising and falling in rhythm. After a while, there was a change in people in the room. Patty, the director at Joseph's House, came and knelt in front of Rob and kissed him. Priscilla, the head nurse at Joseph's House gently touched my hand. I thought she just needed a little comfort so I patted her hand knowingly. I turned my attention back to Rob and saw that his chest was still moving. At this point, people began to stir and leave the room. After about 15 minutes more, I finally asked Brey and David if Rob was gone. They nodded and whispered that he had been gone for about 15 minutes. The breathing I had thought was Rob's was actually Brey's as Rob lay on his chest.

For me this was a beautiful picture of the intimacy and bond we share at Cornerstone. I was deeply touched that night. I miss Rob immensely. It seems that with each story I live through here, I become more and more enamored with our community.

In our view of things, Rob's story with us was a smashing success, but it did not translate so well into empirical data we could send to funders. Could it be that love and compassion are just hard to put into numbers?

A few years ago, I was drawn to a picture of success that I heard in a seminar on addictions counseling. The speaker likened our work to a chemistry experiment that many of us did in high school chemistry lab. One student would fill a beaker with plain clear water. The lab partner would draw another clear liquid into a dropper. As one of the aspiring chemists would place the liquid from the dropper into the water one drop at a time, the other one would count the number of drops. At a certain point, the water would turn blue (go easy on me chemists – this is not a scientific treatise). The seminar speaker said that the experiment was a metaphor of our work. We just put the drops into the water not knowing when it will turn blue. In fact, we may not be there when the water turns blue – that may come from another dropper. But every drop is important to the final result. We just have to be faithful in giving the best drops we can – in our case drops of love and compassion – knowing that someone else may see the results. That picture helps me continue doing what I do – especially in those times when the stories are hard like when one of our residents relapses and ends up back on the street. I can hope and pray that others will be there to supply more of what is needed, but that our drops were part of the process. And mercifully I have had the privilege of seeing a bit of blue!

At Cornerstone, we continue to attempt to translate what we do into numbers for the funders. But most of our effort and passion is spent finding the best drops of love and compassion to put into each unique individual we welcome to our community. And we continue to experience, celebrate and share the stories of our dearly loved residents.

As you can probably guess, the economic tumult has affected us as it has most non-profits. That is why we are so grateful for those of you who choose to remember us in your thoughts and prayers and who support us financially. You make it possible for us to continue this great experiment of compassion and love. Would you possibly be willing to consider a special gift at this time to help keep us afloat? Thank you and ...

Peace and love to you in this holiday season,

Tom Copps
Community Leader

P.S. I have a gift for you that may help you in your gift-giving this season and into the New Year (a quote often attributed to Ralph Waldo Emerson):

To laugh often and much;
To win the respect of intelligent people and the affection of children;
To earn the appreciation of honest critics and endure the betrayal of false friends;
To appreciate beauty, to find the best in others;
To leave the world a bit better, whether by healthy child, a garden patch or a redeemed social condition;
To know even one life has breathed easier because you have lived.
This is to have succeeded.