

December 14, 2009

Dear Friends of Cornerstone,

Attica! To anyone my age that word arouses memories of a prison riot (“uprising” according to the inmates): a four-day standoff, tear gas, massive volleys of gunshots into the resulting cloud and thirty nine people dead at the Attica State Prison in upstate New York. Just the word does it. Four years later in the film *Dog Day Afternoon*, Al Pacino's character, Sonny, who is holding eight bank employees hostage, starts a chant of "Attica! Attica!" at the amassed police outside evoking the excessive police force used at Attica. So when I heard the word recently at the Cornerstone dinner table, I was immediately intrigued. Our newest resident said that he had been incarcerated at Attica. I asked if he was there during the uprising in 1971 – yes, he was. I was moved when he shared his personal experience of that tragic event. He described the deplorable, abusive conditions before the takeover. He related his experience of the brutal siege by the state police and prison guards – the indiscriminate shooting of inmates and hostages, some right next to him killed while cowering in the same corner. He talked about the fear of being the next one and then the questioning when he was spared. He told us about the humiliation after the siege – of being stripped naked and forced one at a time to run through a gauntlet state police and guards who mercilessly beat the naked inmates with night sticks, rifle butts and anything else they could get their hands on. He went on for some time. As I sat there spellbound by his story, I felt anger and sadness, but also a kind of pride and awe at this man who had survived this and much more since then in his 58 years. I was so grateful that he is resting, healing, living and growing in this little community of ours.

We hear many stories at Cornerstone – painful stories, dark stories – all of our residents have them. The sharing of these stories is important and therapeutic but only a beginning to the healing process.

"If one does not look into the abyss, one is being wishful by simply not confronting the truth ... On the other hand, it is imperative that one not get stuck in the abyss." (Robert Jay Lifton as quoted in *Bridge at the End of the World* by James Gustave Speth, p. 17)

Similarly, in *The Prophetic Imagination*, Walter Brueggemann writes about the two elements of prophetic vision. One is criticality, recognition of the world's pain. The second is hope, recognition of the world's possibilities. With all the pain we see and hear about at Cornerstone, it is a wonder that anyone ever leaves the abyss. But somehow they do. Somehow these who have lived in the abyss begin to change and grow in their own unique way, at their own pace, taking as long as they need at Cornerstone. How? Actually I am not that sure – it is a bit of a mystery. As much as I would like it, there appears to be no real formula, no magic steps (though the Twelve Steps of AA give a hint in the first word of the first step – and it is not “admit”). But there is an environment where the mystery seems to often arise – in a loving community.

In ancient India they used a very good simile. Fire is latent in wood, but it has to be evoked by the friction of rubbing two sticks together. This produces heat, and from heat the spark is produced that can ignite the fuel. In community we are sticks rubbing together (albeit sometimes the “wrong way”). We are present with each other through the vicissitudes of life – when we are happy, angry, tired, less than truthful, tempted etc. We are present when it is not comfortable, when someone is difficult. We are there interacting, working through whatever goes on. Then as we “rub together,” the mystery begins to happen. Somehow the fire, passion – some might call it the true self – begins to emerge in each of us. Sometimes it is obvious but usually I see it in little things – like after a recent dinner on our community night.

Just that week a nine year old boy had been shot and killed through the door of his apartment in Columbia Heights. Whenever I go to Cornerstone I pass by the dilapidated apartment house. For some reason this

murder really affected Dorothy and me – we were quite sad and angry. Maybe it was because we have a grandson that same age – but mostly that it was such a senseless act of violence close to home.

After dinner on our community nights, we have a time for meditation and prayer. One of our community members will read something and then pass a lighted candle around the table. As each person receives the candle, they share something for which they are thankful or say a short prayer. This particular night, when Dorothy received the candle, she prayed for the family of the nine year old boy. She passed the candle to me and I followed suit and prayed for the family. Then I passed the candle to our longest standing resident. He too prayed for the family, but then he did something that I was not really ready to do – he prayed for the shooter!

Afterward I thanked him for his prayer. He told me that prayer for the shooter was the farthest thing from his mind when he first heard about the shooting. He was angry and wanted the killer to be killed. But after he talked with our counselor and thought about Cornerstone and what we stand for, he began to think that he should pray for the man. At that table with two seminary graduates and the son of a seminary professor, it was this recovering addict who embodied our values of nonviolence, mercy and grace. He said later that would never have happened before he came to Cornerstone.

Maybe there is hope. And maybe it is kindled in the crucible of community. I believe that. I see it. It is such a privilege to be part of this community of healing and hope. I love my work!

Those of you, who hold us in your hearts and donate your treasure to us, make it possible for us to keep the fires burning. You are so appreciated. Right now we are in a transition. We will need to move out of the delightful house we have occupied these last three years because we can no longer afford the rent and are not in a position to buy it. We will miss it – so many good memories and so much healing – but finances dictate a change. There is a possibility that we will be able to move into a house that is bigger (we can add some sticks to the fire), less costly and more suited to what we do. We should be hearing about that sometime soon. I would be so grateful if many of you would offer prayers for us about this new place. And, if possible, send us a generous gift to close out our year and to facilitate our anticipated move.

By the way, the first word in Step One of the Twelve Steps is “WE.” Sounds like community to me!

Peace and love,

Tom Copps