

December 2006

Dear Friends,

At this time of year when some remember a special birth, I am reminded of some lines from Rachel Naomi Remen (*My Grandfather's Blessing*) – lines which bring to mind the wonderful story of our very first resident at Cornerstone:

*“When we serve, we see the **unborn wholeness** in others; we collaborate with it and strengthen it. Others may then be able to see their wholeness for themselves for the first time.”*

As I stood in our beautiful living room at Cornerstone watching Leon chat with his 22-year old daughter and make his handsome little 2 month old grandson laugh as he held him, I was filled with wonder. This was the little girl he had abandoned twenty years ago. And now for the first time in 20 years they were talking and laughing. Surely I was witnessing some of that unborn wholeness coming forth from his womb of pain. It had not been that many months ago that I first met Leon in the midst of that pain ...

It was dark, dirty, and fetid – filled with people with blank stares and dulled senses from the drugs. The halls were narrow. The room was tiny – the bed took up most of it. It was a mess. Leon was being evicted because he had used his rent money to buy drugs. I was there to help him pick up his belongings. No one offered to help as we made several trips down the stairs to the truck. As we were leaving, he told me that he was paying \$500/month for this tiny room in this dilapidated, drug-infested hell-hole. And his monthly disability income was only \$560

Anger boiled up inside me as we drove away: **anger** at the greediness of this slum lord who was making so much money exploiting people's pain and weakness; anger at those who were getting rich from the drug trade that had captured this man for 29 years – and, to be honest, a bit of anger at him for succumbing to that lifestyle again.

But the more compelling feeling inside of me was **compassion** – the kind of compassion described in the Christian Scriptures – where the original Greek word translated as compassion literally means intestines or even more crudely, “guts” – a vivid way of describing the deep feeling for someone in need. That day and thereafter I had that gut-level feeling for this man in his late forties who had been involved in the drug world for 29 years – this African American man who lost his father at the age of 13 and felt it his duty as the oldest to “step up” and be the “man” of the house and help support his younger siblings. The way he chose to do that – the easiest way – was on the street selling drugs. It was that lifestyle that eventually resulted in some years in prison, homelessness and the HIV/AIDS virus. He arrived at Joseph's House (our parent organization) a couple of years ago weighing less than 100 pounds but with tons of “attitude.” After a large dose of unconditional love and excellent medical care, Leon began to regain his health. Joseph's House was no longer what he needed, so he eventually left. But like so many who get well at Joseph's House, the lure of the drugs and the street lifestyle was too enticing. Without continued support and a safe and caring place to live, habits and lifestyles die hard. But our friends at Joseph's House kept up with him as much as they could. It was the one place where he knew he would always be loved and accepted. So he kept coming back to visit in some of his worst times. It was during one of those visits that I met Leon and spent the day with him listening and helping him move.

That began my journey of “coming alongside” Leon – being there to help him twice to get into treatment and being there after he left both times to go back to the drug life – being there with him in the hospital after a suicide attempt – being there when he got another drug charge requiring treatment – being there with this community when he got out of the treatment program and was welcomed to Cornerstone –

staying with him when he used one more time – celebrating with him each new day and week of sobriety – watching his heart change. Leon and I and the rest of our community have been through quite a lot in the last 10 months. And our community life has appeared to a difference in Leon’s life. And of course Leon has so enriched my life as he continues to grow and share.

As I write this, Leon has been clean and sober for almost four months, going to one or more recovery support meetings nearly every day, attending an aftercare program a few times a week, growing in spirit and heart, gladly contributing to our little community to make it better, and even giving back his own love and compassion to some at Joseph’s House who are at the end of their lives. What a beautiful picture. Some who knew Leon when he first came to Joseph's House keep using the word “miracle” to describe him these days. I cannot argue. We know that we must take it “one day at a time,” but we celebrate each of those days with him at Cornerstone.

As I ponder this story of Leon and the anger and compassion it aroused in me, I realize that both righteous anger and loving compassion energize our work here. The anger at injustice fuels our attempts to advocate for those who suffer because of it – providing housing at Cornerstone and advocating for fair and clean permanent housing when they are ready to move to the next phase of their life in the world. The compassion moves us to touch these dear ones in their pain through our little community – almost like a midwife assisting and celebrating the slow birth of their wholeness.

We have welcomed more into the community since Leon’s arrival – each with a story of pain and unborn wholeness. And we believe that through the midwifery of our community that wholeness will begin to become visible to them and to us.

We are quite grateful for the support we have received in this first year of Cornerstone. Just like Leon we have made great progress in building this community in this short time – but it has taken much prayer, hard work and generous financial support to make it this far. We believe that our mission is crucial to the District of Columbia. The need is so acute. I get calls weekly about people who need our kind of community. I have not seen any other place that is doing what we are doing – providing a loving and caring home for those with HIV/AIDS and chronic substance abuse where they are respected, nurtured, and prepared to move on fruitfully in their lives – a home for as long as they need it.

The prayers and financial gifts from friends like you make this special home possible. During this holiday season, I hope you will consider a financial gift to Cornerstone so that we can continue to provide a healthy community for people like Leon.

We wish you wholeness as you celebrate these special days.

Peace,

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