

Two Encounters at the Intersection of Faith, Humanism and Connectivity

One I participated in, one I observed. (A slight digression here – the draft of this has been sitting on my desk since the day after Easter. As the events of this week in Boston and Washington unfolded, I decided I could not let the week end without reaffirming my belief in a vision of this world.

First, I'll start with the encounter that I participated in. One morning I was walking through the Career Center on my way to the Common Ground Resource Center when I spotted one of our community's faith-based leaders in the Resource Room. I smiled and greeted Rabbi Neal, a prime example of a faith-based leader who can move between the sacred and the secular world. As I walked into the Resource Room, I noticed a young woman reading the bulletin board off to the side. After Neal and I exchanged pleasantries, he mentioned that he had brought "Betsy" over to our Common Ground Resource Center to potentially link her up with services. "Betsy" appeared to be about 25. She had had a connection with Rabbi Neal's synagogue before moving away to Maine, and had experienced some real hard times since moving there, and the synagogue's congregation was joining together to try to get her to return to the area. Rabbi Neal mentioned that they had already connected and filled out applications with several staff people, and proceeded to introduce me to "Betsy." I asked a couple of questions. "Have you talked to this person?" "Have you talked to this person?" As I asked her about work while she was looking at the job posting bulletin board, I asked about Ready, Willing and Able, and she pulled out an application. I said, "You know, why don't we walk down and I'll introduce you to the folks down there." As the words left my mouth, Dave Davidowicz, the Director of RWA, walked by the Resource Room and I lassoed him in, made the introduction. David was great. They agreed to meet in about ten minutes when David could review her app with her and talk about the program.

Rabbi Neal, "Betsy" and I then talked a little bit about housing and I said, "I know you filled out an application. Would you like to meet one of the Housing Coordinators because we can look at possibly getting you into a place and figuring a way that maybe the congregation could help you sustain your rent until you got on your feet? Maybe you would want to meet with one of the Housing Coordinators so you could get a real feel for the person and what you could do." Again, as I was finishing saying that, one of our Housing Coordinators, Nora, wandered by and I was able to make that connection. Nora simply said, "Come on over to my office when you're ready and we'll talk about things, and I'll talk about what we have. I'll look at your application. Let's see what we can do." I sensed that Nora and "Betsy" were about the same age and I think it was easy for that connection to be made. Rabbi Neal then mentioned that after he finished those stops with Betsy, he was going to bring her upstairs and have her meet with one of our Voices Against Violence counselors. I smiled, took "Betsy's" hand, wished her good luck, told her to stop by any time, and gave the Rabbi a hug.

As I continued my path to the Resource Center, I whistled and said to myself, "It's not synchronicity, it's connectivity, the deliberate attempt to bring resources together to help somebody on their journey through the difficult patches in their life's path."

Easter Sunday. I'm at the Commerce High School cafeteria on State Street in Springfield attending the Open Pantry Community Services' Annual Easter Dinner for the community. The OPCS does three

holiday meals in the year, Thanksgiving, Christmas and Easter, a time when they feed folks who wander into the cafeteria, and they feed folks who can't come in through a meal distribution system that's run by volunteers in the community. In fact, the whole thing is carried off, from food preparation to delivery to serving and clean-up, by volunteers with the able coordination of our staff. I go out there to simply show the flag, but with a very low profile, to just shake a few people's hands that I know, thank them for their help, and thank our staff for their coordination efforts. There were probably 500 people sitting in the cafeteria, a bigger crowd than we usually get for Easter dinner. The meal usually lasts from noon to one, and is kicked off by the OPCS Director, Allison Maynard, welcoming people, followed by both the Episcopal and Roman Catholic Bishops of their respective diocese saying grace. I usually stand on the sidelines and chat with Bishop Timothy McDonnell (Roman Catholic), a really good guy who's getting ready to retire (at 75, the mandated age) and who is a die-hard Yankee fan, which obviously gives me a chance to kid him about his misguided allegiance.

Today, Allison's still out on maternity leave, so we asked one of the OPCS Board members, Sister Eileen Sullivan, a pastoral counselor for the Diocese of Springfield, to deliver the welcome. Sister Eileen is simply a wonderful person, a joy to be around. After her heartfelt greeting and as the volunteers proceeded to deliver the meals to folks seated at the lunchroom tables, I resumed my conversation with Sister Eileen. As we were talking, a young Latino man rose from his seat at one of the lunch tables closest to us, hesitated and then slowly started walking toward us, then motioned Sister Eileen to come over so he could talk with her. Sister Eileen walked over to him, shared a moment or two of conversation, walked back and looked me in the eyes. She had a joyous expression on her face and said, "That young man just thanked me. He thanked me because he said that if he hadn't been at this meal today, he would have had nothing, nothing to eat and no place to go. And he just thanked me." My response was "Wow."

So that's it. I've now arrived at the place where the first draft ended. And I remember why I've let it sit here for the last couple of weeks. I didn't know how to end it. I still don't know how to end it, except to say

Namaste

Jim Cuddy

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