

YEAR END '09/YEAR BEGINNING '10  
TWO PAIR OF VIGNETTES LINKED TOGETHER

This one's a little late. Actually it's a substitute. For the last few years, I've been putting together an essay around year-end/year-beginning. I did a rough draft of one between the holidays and then decided I really couldn't share it with anyone.

So I just let things sit. Images and experiences would float through my mind, but the motivation to put them on paper, well I guess it was misplaced, until a catalyst came along, namely, watching episodes of "The Wire" that a friend lent to me. "The Wire" is an HBO gig, now out on DVD. It's a stunning and riveting dissection of contemporary culture, specifically urban culture. It's not pretty, but is articulate, literate and seductive.

After watching episodes, these four experiences would inevitably float through my mind, oddly paired together. I'd like to share them with you in a somewhat linear fashion.

Back in the middle of November, on a slate gray and bone-chilling afternoon, I found myself driving around Springfield, as part of an effort to spend a day every week or two in Springfield. The challenges since we assumed responsibility for the Open Pantry Community Services cannot be overstated, yet they're welcome challenges, ones that feel engaging. One of the issues is finding a new program site for the Emergency Food Pantry and a new site for the Loaves & Fishes soup kitchen. The Food Pantry is in rented space that the lessor, a generous and fair-minded non-profit, needs back.

The kitchen, well that's a different story. It's located in a church basement in what is arguably the most visible and attractive section of the cityscape. The church is wonderful, but there doesn't seem to be a way to mitigate the legitimate concerns about having and managing such a prominent and visible site. So, there I was, driving around, looking at all the empty and underutilized industrial buildings that border the City's central corridor, many looking like they've been empty for years.

The inevitable questions are: Should we co-locate the two programs? Do we need a different program design? Where in the City can we be? and the most important one, How can we be most helpful to people struggling with the issues of poverty?

I found no answers that afternoon.

Then I met up with our Open Pantry Director, Allison, and headed over to the Loaves & Fishes' host church for a meeting with the Rector. After finishing our meeting, we were walking to the parking spaces in front of the entrance to the basement. It was about 4:00 p.m. and I suggested to Allison that we visit the kitchen and say hello to Darleen, the Program Manager. There were a few people milling about outside. An hour before the meal serving I expected to find a quiet scene inside. It was quiet, but not because of the lack of people. Walking into the basement and looking around was a jolt. The tables were already crowded with folks. The staff was back in the kitchen preparing the food. I looked around and took the scene in. There must have been 60-75 people an hour before the meal was scheduled to be served, sitting around the folding tables.

As I surveyed the faces; young, old, black, white, brown, male, female; one thing stood out - quiet, the lack of noise, the lack of sound.

It was a good visit, exchanging pleasantries with staff and volunteers, but on the way home, I kept replaying that scene in my mind. This is what struck me that afternoon and stays with me today. Over the years I've been in lots of different churches at lots of different times, sometimes when they're filled with people, sometimes when they're not. They're usually quiet. Their atmosphere I would describe as the quietness of reverence, the quietness characterized by reflection, thought and prayer, the quietness attributed to the setting. The silence in that dining room that I experienced that afternoon was not that kind of quiet. It was the quietness produced by poverty, produced by the exhaustion of experiencing engaging in life without enough resources. It was the silence brought on by the grind of life and the extinguishing of hope and energy when your best choice for a meal is at a soup kitchen.

It's very unsettling.

The very next day I'm back in Framingham. Lo and behold, I'm thinking about sites there too. Specifically, the 300 Howard Street (our admin home and Metrowest service hub) issue. SMOC's 12.5 year lease on the 55,000 square feet of space, entered into when we sold the Dennison Complex in 1998 is due to expire at the end of July 2010. What are we going to do?

If you asked me four years ago if I thought I'd be in a predicament where our lease at 300 Howard Street was going to run out without us having a firm plan in mind as to what we were going to do, I would have said, "No way." I believed that our problem would be how we could exit our current lease early in order to move into a brand new building on the Blandin Avenue site purchased in 2005.

Our lease is going to be up in less than a year, and on this November day, just like on all the days that have recently preceded it, I don't have a plan yet.

Why? Well, due to a number of variables; think lawsuit, think financing issues, think permitting issues, Blandin Avenue just sits there. 300 Howard, we've prettied it up a little bit, but 300 Howard Street is a 120 year old building with 50 years of deferred maintenance on its systems, not particularly respectful to the folks who come to the building to provide services or come to the building to receive services. So it's getting to be a bit of a predicament. An understatement, huh. We need to be downtown, we need to have a building large enough so our provision of coordinated, integrated and respectful service delivery in the Metrowest can happen in one setting. Choices are limited.

So, on the day following Springfield, I had arranged to see the building perpendicularly attached to our headquarters, in Dennison Complex lexicon, Building #5. When we bought the Complex in 1993, our plans for Building #5 included a health center, Head Start and Day Care classrooms, offices of the Department of Transitional Assistance and the Juvenile Court. We had a real vision. Fortunately or unfortunately, we didn't have the capacity to pull it off. It led to the new owner, our current landlord, implementing his private sector vision, namely converting #5's 60,000 square foot building into office space and leasing it to a well known and well respected engineering firm. The firm now wanted out of their lease, corporate consolidation and all, and we were told by brokers that they may be interested in sub-leasing the space for us.

So we took the tour. I hadn't been in Building #5 for about 14 years back when it was an empty concrete and brick shell and I would walk people through it and ask them to imagine what a great place it would be for them to be there and be part of the SMOC "plan." Actually it turned out pretty nice. So we proceeded on a tour of the building. We toured the building with the broker and engineering company reps. They're engineers, so there were lots of maps and computer stuff and CAD tables and all of that stuff, mostly open floor space with offices around the exterior. The place seemed quiet, not bustling but busy.

The guy showing us the space began to talk about what had happened to their business over the last few years since becoming part of a bigger organization. It seems that they did no overseas work and part of the reason for allowing them to be acquired was so they could get into the "overseas market." That meant a substantial amount of work in Iraq and Afghanistan. In fact, the guy that took us around started showing us pictures on the walls of their various projects that were going on rebuilding Iraq and Afghanistan. As he was talking about this, one of the senior staff members came out of his office, engaged us pleasantly for a

minute, and during the course of the conversation, let us know that he was getting ready to head over tomorrow for a 6-month engagement in Iraq. He talked about how exciting it was in terms of the rebuilding that's going on over there and his role overseeing a number of engineering projects right outside of Baghdad. The tour ended. The impressions did not. I joked to one of our staff on the way out the door about the need for a new Marshall Plan, one pointed inward instead of outward.

How did this happen?

What can we do to change it? This is not the order of things.

I don't have an answer, but what I want to do is to relate two other experiences that are linked in some fundamental way to the above questions.

Well, I don't have an answer, but I do know that a lot depends upon how "community" is defined. It's just not the definition of "community," it's how the powers that be, whether they be the corporate, governmental, religious, educational powers, act on the consensual definition of "community."

Toward the tail end of '09, I witnessed two what I would term striking examples of how "community" can be articulated. At the center of these focal points was the Rev. Dr. J. Anthony Lloyd, Pastor of the Greater Framingham Community Church (GFCC), who spoke and shared his belief system at two separate SMOC-hosted events. Unlike the first two events that were back-to-back, these were spaced about a month apart, both leaving an indelible impression with me.

The first occasion was our Open House ceremony for Larry's Place, the service-enriched housing program for veterans that happened on Veterans Day. The Larry's House saga is well known to almost everyone who will read this. Five years in the making, court battles, the inexplicable opposition of people who, frankly, should know better. Anyway, the Open House gig gave us a chance to put all that aside, to park anger at the door, and to welcome the prospect of a new day for the disabled and disadvantaged vets who would come to live there.

The Open House was packed - staff, Board members, reps from vets organizations, prospective residents, Town officials, State officials, politicians, funders - a real good cross representation of what makes up "community." Rev. Lloyd gave the invocation, and while I don't remember his exact words, I do remember the way he spoke, the tone, the sound of the words that he used, resonating through the room, capturing the sense of that moment and perhaps capturing the sense of all the moments that had led up to that day regarding Larry's Place and SMOC's role in creating

this program in the Town of Framingham. Rev. Lloyd's words made it easy, easy for those in the room to remember why they were there, easy for those in the room to understand the importance of Larry's Place in our community. It made it especially easy for me to put aside the anger and bitterness that I felt inside me and speak publicly of this time and this event demonstrating the need for reconciliation. Veterans who come to live there need an atmosphere of reconciliation, of common peacefulness, to aid in their healing, and to become part of the community. Angry vibes would only cloud the matter. Larry's Place represents the potential of real community investment.

The second experience took place about a month later when SMOC held our Annual Single Adult Lunch. We've been holding this event for the past 4 years, partnering with the United Way, Metrowest Health Care Foundation, GFCC and local businesses to pull it off in the hall basement of GFCC. The agenda is a meal, a gift and fellowship. Volunteers including the Framingham Chief of Police and his family help serve the meal. It's designed specifically for the folks who live in our shelters, transitional housing, service-enriched housing, etc. The folks who come can be described in many ways. Perhaps the best is that these are the folks who present most challenges to a community. Rev. Lloyd gave the grace. This time I specifically remembered his words. As he walked in front of the audience, seated quietly at folding tables, close to 150 people in the room, he talked about how important this meal was and how it represented the community coming together in a way that doesn't happen often enough, how thankful those in the room could be to share this experience of community.

How right Rev. Lloyd was. His words that day inspired me. We spoke during the lunch and I expressed my appreciation for his words and how he captured something that I have trouble articulating. Our culture is not going back to the days where people with differences or challenges were institutionalized, yet our communities have not fully embraced inclusion. The fullness and richness of diversity - age, gender, race, culture, income, disability - most folks, regardless of their challenges, are going to be in community, and it's essential that those of us working to make culture and community a more responsive, more enriching and more self-empowering place for those folks with challenges, embrace the notion of community as an expansive one.

It is only through the definition of an expansive community that we can reach our potential and I also believe it is that path that the broader community can take to come to grips with what all that means. It is the only way to put battles around community acceptance behind us. Especially those battles about who belongs in the community and who doesn't. Exile, whether it's self-imposed or community-sanctioned, doesn't work. It limits us all and it especially narrows the path toward economic and

social self-sufficiency that the folks who receive services from us desire to travel.

The event was great. There was a sense of warmth and acceptance that flowed through the church hall. Perhaps nothing made this clearer more than the scene toward the end of lunch when, with Darlene Assensoa-Mazurek as leader and a volunteer piano player, a group of guys primarily from the Post Detox Program sang Christmas carols with robust voices and lots of enthusiasm, arms around each other's shoulders. They looked a lot less threatening in that moment than I'm sure they would look sitting on a stoop or hanging in front of a building. It was clear that all they wanted was a chance, in that moment and perhaps in more moments, to connect with each other and especially to connect with the community.

Amen.