

## **Brief Thoughts After Sixty Years with the AFSC**

Offered at the January 26, 2020 meeting of the AFSC Board of Directors

I first knocked on the AFSC's door as a draft counseling client in 1959. I started volunteering for AFSC in 1960, leading what were then called Institutional Service Units for college students at Manhattan State Mental Hospital. So, 2020 is actually the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of my affiliation with AFSC, which has continued over these 60 years in various capacities, with only a very few brief sabbatical interruptions.

In many respects such long service is an exercise in letting go. Of course, I fell in love with the AFSC of the 1960s. But no organization can survive if it does not change, grow and adapt. The challenge of being an older member of the group is to try to bring some benefits of experience without inflicting on the community a dead hand from the past. I hope I have succeeded in this, and that you have not heard me refer to the good old days very often. Even the words "work camp" have rarely escaped my lips! I *have* permitted myself to observe that we once had a better system of dealing with the volatility of the bequest income stream, and I still do believe that to be true. But I hope that has been the limit of my lamenting a lost past.

Money has been a haunting problem throughout the 60 years. There are never enough financial resources. There were always disappointments – programs which had to be ended, and staff whose service had to stop in an untimely way. But I think it fair to observe that none of the stresses over money could be compared to the calamity of 2008 and its aftermath, which we are still living through. I really cannot recall anything comparable to what our AFSC has endured these last twelve years. This unprecedented situation has required extraordinary service from our Treasurer, Susan Cozzens, unlike that required of any previous Treasurer. In the past – so it seemed to me – the Treasurer was a ceremonial function, involving a *pro forma* signature on certain legal documents. Susan, in contrast, faced and met the daunting challenge of uncovering the illusory nature of our presumed "recovery" of the decade of the 2010s, and of leading us in the fashioning of remedies.

Given the unprecedented nature of this situation, it has been an honor to serve under Phil's Lord's leadership – always balanced, always charitable and caring, always calming, always conscientious about conducting an open, searching deliberative process. And Joyce Ajlouny has been amazing, coming on board with an unflagging determination to get to the bottom of things and to guide the ship in the direction of balance, health and renewal. I leave Board service with a very optimistic spirit because of the leadership of these three Friends, and because of the way we as a Board have responded to and supported their leadership.

Of course, I cannot conclude without saying a word about strategic planning. From the perspective of 60 years this, too, is a new phenomenon, perhaps a phenomenon of the last twenty years or so. There was a time. I think it fair to say, when we were inclined to believe that good intentions alone, perhaps with a whiff of charisma on the part of a key staff or committee member, were enough to justify launching and continuing a program effort. Trying to supervise and administer good intentions is very frustrating, to say the least. For better or worse I consider myself to be a rationalist, and the pursuit of a balanced appraisal of the relationship between resources spent and objectives achieved, and the enunciation of clear goals, has been a breath of fresh air.

As we know, Mahatma Gandhi, a practical activist if there ever was one, was a devotee of the *Bhagavad Gita*. There is a beautiful passage in the *Bhagavad Gita* which likens our work of social activism to the giving of a gift. In personal affairs, a gift is impure if it is offered in the hope of currying favor, or in the expectation that the person to whom the gift is given will alter her or his behavior in a way favorable to the giver. We readily recognize such a gift as flawed; indeed, it is not an act of generosity, but is more akin to a bribe. In personal affairs that gift is pure which is given without expectation of results, but which is given simply because of the fitness of the gift at the time, in the place, and to the person involved. Such a pure gift does not corrupt either the recipient or the giver. According to this line of thought, service and social activism should have the character of such a gift because of its fitness as an expression of truth, and not as a stratagem for having one's own way with the unfolding drama of the Creation. Thus, we are cautioned that we cannot carry out social activism in the spirit of a merchant expecting payment.

About two weeks ago I saw the film *A Hidden Life*. Perhaps some of you have seen it, too. It is the story of Franz Jagerstatter, a simple Austrian farmer who conscientiously objected to being conscripted into the army of the Third Reich. His friends pleaded with him to abandon this madness. They argued that his witness would be obliterated by the Gestapo, that it could not possibly alter the relentless march of events, that the cost of this stubbornness to himself, his wife and his three small daughters was totally incommensurate with anything that could be achieved. Even the authorities offered to get him off the hook. He could do non-combatant service; all he needed to do was sign a statement of loyalty to Adolf Hitler. But he found this requirement unacceptable. Alas, Franz Jagerstatter had no strategic plan, and the Nazis executed him in 1943.

Here in the United States democracy has been an aspiration, but never yet a reality. With the Louisiana Purchase Thomas Jefferson launched a genocidal war against Native Americans. It required a bloody Civil War to end the brutal institution of slavery. This was followed by the Jim Crow terror regime. Women did not get the right to vote until 1920, and we are still waiting for the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment. Voter suppression, gerrymandering, the Electoral College, and the

Citizens United decision all seriously undermine democratic values. We have a President who delivers vituperative rants to noisy crowds in an atmosphere laced with racism. So, as I leave the Board I am convinced that we need an AFSC now as much as we ever did in the last 103 years.

In citing the example of Franz Jagerstatter I do not mean to denigrate the importance of the strategic planning process, but only indicate that there is a paradox here of which we must constantly be aware, there is something more than a cost/benefit analysis which we should nourish and cultivate. For when we make field visits to AFSC programs, when we attend workshops at Corporation meetings, when we hear program reports at these Board meetings, what gladdens our hearts and lifts our spirits is a spark of Truth illuminating an Eternal Now. As I think over the past 60 years, and remember all the wonderful colleagues on staff and committees, and all their loving and dedicated work, the golden thread which ties it all together, in spite of changing practices and structures, differing styles, a great variety of personalities, and all calculations of costs and benefits, is this spark of Truth illuminating an Eternal Now which ties it all together.

The mystical poet William Blake asserted that he could see the universe in a grain of sand. It is such a mystical perspective which enables us to face gigantic realities without being frantic, shrill or hysterical, and also without being morose or defeated. For we can see in each moment that any beautiful thing, however small, somehow contains and expresses all beauty; that there is no good and caring act, however small, which does not somehow contain and express all goodness; and there is no true thing which does not somehow contain and express all Truth. So thank you for letting me be part of this great adventure, an adventure which transcends the tyranny of past, present and future. For it is all your sparks of Truth in an Eternal Now which has made every step of my sixty year pilgrimage with you something beautiful, and joyful, and familiar.

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