

This Appreciative Hour: 8-13-09 Open Mic Recap ... and More

Harvesting the Highlights:

A pleasant, meandering, yet substantial OM hour: just the kind of swinging-in-a-hammock time that you might spend on a steamy, August, Dog Day afternoon. We meditated for one minute to center ourselves, recalled summer High Points, said what we feel proud about as we looked back on The Year of Living Dangerously, listened to my recollections of NexGen in Moline and Garrett Planning Network Retreat in KC, and used a "Clearness Committee" to address a planner's dilemma about his next career move. That's quite a lot, actually. Get the story below, and then read "Ed's Further Reflections" on the benefits of being in community. It takes a village, you know, to raise and support a planner. Catch the next Open Mic on Wednesday, August 26, Noon eastern. Call 1-219-509-8322, passcode 202779#.

The Path of Appreciation and Positivity© group:

Thank you for your response to my *Department of Shameless Self-Promotion* notices about the Path group. The September group is full, but if you're interested in the next one (which could begin before end of the year), let me know and I'll send info.

August 13 Open Mic Re-cap:

Centering Practice: I created an impromptu meditation by focusing and building on strengths (areas of the body which are already relaxed and spacious), rather than fixing what's "broken" (trying directly to relax the tight, tense areas). I invited participants to make themselves comfortable (feet on floor, hand off computer mouse, eyes closed), and:

"Take a series of natural breaths; just let the breath enter your nose, go through the lungs and into the belly, and then out. Repeat this rhythm: in-breath, out-breath.

As you continue with this rhythm, locate an area in your body which is relaxed and calm. Focus on this area, get to know the sensations of calm and relaxation, and enjoy them.

As you do so, allow the area of relaxation and calm to expand slowly outward to other areas of your body. Enjoy watching this area spread outward, like ripples on a pond, til the sensation occupies your entire body.

If you encounter areas which remain tight, let them be, and watch the rest of the body slowly relax. The tight areas will catch up, at their own pace."

Several commented on how quickly they relaxed (and how beneficial, given how focused they have been on project deadlines). I beat my usual drum about the value of such "One-Minute Drills" before (or between) appointments. From a business-case perspective, it allows us to bring our entire self to the conversation -- and our clients and collaborators have every right to expect our full presence. From a personal perspective, it allows the interaction to be more enjoyable and fuller, and allows us to use our creativity and skills more completely. It's a true Win-All-Around,

but one that we often don't avail ourselves of. What can *you* do today, to give yourself a One-Minute-Drill between appointments?

“What’s been a High Point of your summer, thus far?”

Several participants cited their summer high points, including: a recent, overdue Mexican vacation; a week on a windjammer in New England, during which a participant became an expert in photographing through fog (making lemons from lemonade, as it were); a weekend-with-wife-minus-the-kids in the Smokies (including seeing a rattlesnake up close, but not too personal); and finally getting a study group of six planners together in person, following NexGen in Moline. I offered my own summer high point, feeling a little awkward at its lack of grandeur; it took place on the morning of the Open Mic, and consisted simply of our street's getting paved. Here's the back story: beginning on April 17 our street has been subject to an occupying army of construction equipment, piles of new water and sewer pipes, guys (and one woman) in bright yellow shirts, and a seven-foot berm of dirt spanning the entire length of our block. It got pretty old, long about July 10. Then suddenly -- in a matter of three hours -- a beautiful new street, and the occupiers and their materiel were gone! You could hear the denizens of Fox Avenue heave a collective sigh of relief: *Aaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhh*.

“What’s one thing you’ve done that you’re proud of, in handling an aspect of your business or your personal life during this past year?”

- One participant's pride in facilitating the NexGen gathering in Moline. (Her pride is justified. I was there, shared some of the facilitation, and watched her do a wonderful job.)
- For another participant, it was the Art of Hosting event in Gold Lake six weeks before, as a great way to be immersed in important conversations. He was one of four planners who birthed the event, and so any pride he might feel in that role is fully justified, in my eyes.
- A planner offered his tale of adversity and resilience. “I let go my planner during the downturn, which led me to be closer to the ‘actual work,’ and got me more involved and directly accountable to the clients... It's been a blessing. My three biggest clients have all come in this year, far and away bigger than anything before. It must have something to do with how I am holding myself out.” Since I know that he reads these Recaps, I'll take this opportunity to ask him a question: “Can you ask each of these clients, at the right time, their decision to retain you was based upon? It could be very informative, and could set the stage for you to request that they refer ‘people like you, who I so enjoy serving.’ ”
- A fourth person noted his successful completion of the 18-month journey to become a Certified Life Coach. (Bravo, Sam!)
- Another planner noted, with pride, that he had actually taken a lunch break on a recent workday, for the first time in five or six years. (He must have been *famished* by the time he lunched, after all that time going without!) He sat under a large tree, ate his sandwich, and read a book: a rare indulgence for him, and one which I hope he will repeat often -- perhaps daily.

“Any Burning Questions?”

A planner has been on the fence about staying with his current firm, saying that “Clearly, I’m not in the right environment as a planner. What can I do to change my situation?” He feels somewhat ‘trapped’ by a comfortable level of salary and benefits, and would like to make a gradual transition to a new environment, rather than “jumping off the cliff” (his phrase). He would like an environment which supports his personal mission, “to help people live their lives on purpose.”

Given the short amount of time available to us, and the complexity of his situation (which I have some knowledge of, from prior conversations), I explained the “Clearness Committee” process (which you may recall from a recent Open Mic recap) and offered him that option. He was game, and we offered him the following questions for his reflection. (Note that sometimes the Clearness Committee has the person respond to each question and sometimes, as in the Open Mic examples, the Qs are offered for internal consumption):

1. "What would be your ideal work week, when you're doing work you are meant to do?"
2. "What is your idea of 'comfortable'? What's that about?"
3. "How else might your life have to change, in order for you to have the desired focus of your work?"
4. "What's working well in your current life, that you want to keep in the act? What's working not-so-well, that you'd be up for trading in?"
5. "If you could put your fears in a leak-proof box so they wouldn't influence you, what would you then be free to do?"
6. "What are the specific fears?" (Someone added, "You can name each as you put it in the box.")
7. "What would you do, if you knew you couldn't fail at it?"
8. "What would be your advice to someone in your situation?"
9. "What's your objection to being uncomfortable?" (i.e., “You seem afraid to venture out past your comfort zone. Could you look at that fear more closely?”)
10. "What question have we not asked you, that you want to ask?"
11. **"What would someone who is fearless do in your situation?"**

Following our question-asking, our planner-with-a-dilemma said that all the questions seem useful, adding that “some made me uncomfortable – not knowing the answer.” In particular, some Qs introduced new thoughts and perspectives: “What’s working well? What would I trade in?” “What’s my thing about ‘comfort’ about?” Sounds like a typical Clearness Committee

process, in which some questions penetrate more deeply (at first) than others. I urged him to let the questions work their magic with him, and see where it takes him.

One-word Check-outs: I asked participants to volunteer a one word description of how today's OM was for them. Here's what came out:

"beautiful"

"challenging"

"curious"

"enlightening"

"calming, curious, fruitful"

Ed's Further Reflections: It Takes a Village (to Raise a Planner)

This has been a summer of bountiful community for me. First there was the Art of Hosting event in Gold Lake, CO at the end of June. Then there was the NexGen gathering in Moline several weekends ago, followed by the Garrett Planning Network Retreat in KC the next weekend. (There's also Open Mic, a kind of revolving community conversation with a shifting group composition every time.) Each setting was very different in some respects, yet with much in common, especially in the gifts they confer and some of the factors behind those gifts. This "veritable plethora" (to quote the late Howard Cosell) of community involvement has prompted me to reflect on (a) how important it is for each of us to have our own communities (I use the plural intentionally) to support our sanity, our personal and occupational effectiveness, and our continued development, and (b) how the lack of appropriate, supportive communities puts us at risk, both personally and professionally.

I have noticed some themes across these community gatherings. One is the degree of exhaustion and stress that attendees expressed at the beginning of each event. This was most pronounced and frequent during the initial months of Open Mic (which began on January 6). I heard the exhaustion theme at each of the other events, as planners came together to share experiences, raise questions and issues, move towards innovative answers -- and mainly commune, commiserate, and celebrate together. As each of these events has unfolded, the fatigue dissipated, often replaced with raucous laughter and joy; inevitably, creativity replaced stuckness. That has been my own experience as well, during these events. I have experienced a sense of renewed excitement, commitment, and engagement in my work, as each community event wound its way to a satisfying conclusion. "I have to (do X)" has been replaced by "I get to do X...and I can't wait!" I sense a similar outcome in other attendees, if our prolific email exchanges are a reliable gauge.

What makes my own experience of NexGen and the Garrett Retreat so striking is that in each event, I was in a facilitator, presenter, and/or workshop leader role – and I still reaped the same benefits as "real" community members did. Apparently it's contagious, which is very good news.

If, as I suspect, this summer's community gatherings are a fair sample, there's a similar recipe that leads to gratifying and often surprising outcomes. In each instance, the ingredients of (a) good will, (b) shared purpose in gathering together, (c) a skilled and experienced facilitator team,

(d) a willingness to suspend judgment, and (e) allowing “answers” to arise at their own pace, result in a profound sense of connection between people, a renewed sense of individual and group purpose, a shared feeling that the world makes more sense and is more navigable, and a sense of being deeply replenished and newly fortified for the road ahead.

There was something else remarkable, especially at NexGen and the Garrett Retreat. In each of these two events, most of the attendees knew each other from prior meetings and hadn’t seen each other since the last gathering. There was a palpable sense of sheer happiness and joy in each other’s company, as though everyone had been waiting the entire year to re-convene, share stories of what a long strange trip it’s been (thank you for the lyric, Grateful Dead), and celebrate that they’d all made it through. It was the adult version of kids frolicking with their favorite playmates in the park, and it was lovely to behold.

In terms of specific future directions, one stands out for me. There was a lot of talk about forming “accountability partnerships” between pairs or groups of people. I love the idea, though I think it’s mislabeled. Perhaps they should be called something else, such as mutual support groups, because “holding each other accountable” can be best done in context of mutual respect, understanding, and caringly offering information, advice, and feedback. Only in such circumstances do we earn the right to “hold each other accountable.” Without such a context, accountability becomes a feared obligation which stifles rather than promotes growth. As for myself, I’ve become involved in several such mutual support groupings following these gatherings, and I feel energized and excited about their prospects for all of us.

I hope my musings about community provide a useful backdrop for me to pose several questions for you to ponder, about your own communities:

What kinds of communities have seen you through this past year? Family? Friends? A church group? A study group? An accountability partnership? Other forms of community?

What have been your best experiences in community, prior to this last year? What kinds of lasting effects have they had, for you?

What, if anything, has been missing for you this year, in your array of communities? What has been the cost to you, of not having what you have needed? How can you fill that gap?

With summer winding down, and as you think about the year ahead: what are your needs for being in community, and how can you get these important needs met?

Once you answer these questions for yourself – especially the last one – I hope you’ll go for it.

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