Creating Community Connections

Tompkins County Community Foundation

May 15, 2015

Thank you, Alan, for the opportunity to be here tonight and for the invitation to serve as a Board Member of the Tompkins County Community Foundation.

As a long-time resident of Tompkins County, I admit to being relatively new to understanding all of the impact this foundation has on those of us who live in, work in and love Tompkins County.

As I fulfill all 3, I am now so grateful for all this organization does to create engaged and enduring philanthropy and to do so by creating community connections.

I am especially honored to speak on this, the 15th anniversary of the foundation. How grateful we all are to those pioneers, Dan Mansoor, whose white paper launched the conversation, Jeff Furman, William Myers, John Semmler, Bob Swieringa, Howard Hartnett, and my colleague & friend, Diane Shafer.

Thank you, for your vision, dedication and dare I say persistence.

Anniversaries are very special occasions. It is important to acknowledge them publicly, share their significance with those who matter to us, and express gratitude for the work done before us. On east hill, we have been immersed in anniversary celebrations (albeit it with a zero after the 15) for the past year. It is interesting to reflect how connected the values of that anniversary are to this one.

Ezra Cornell’s first gift to the community was the free public library – 150 years ago. At the celebration of the library’s 150th last year, our librarian, Susan Currie said, “Ezra Cornell was a visionary when it came to anticipating the library of the future. He very candidly said that the community would have the kind (of) library it was willing to support. We believe that with the support of our community, we will be able to continue to grow and evolve.” (Ithaca Times, April 11, 2014). How appropriate it is that our Community Foundation now has a specific library cycle as part of its philanthropic work along with the very generous Rosen Fund

Cornell then turned to the needs of the state. At the time the Morrill Land Grant Act made available land to be sold for the development of institutions of higher education. It turns out there was quite a bit of controversy in the state legislature at the time about where the funding would go in New York State.

At one particularly contentious debate, Cornell is believed to have whispered to his colleague, Andrew Dickson While “If I could think of any other way in which half a million dollars would do as much good to the State, I would give the legislators no more trouble.” (Bishop, History of Cornell, page 67)

When the university opened its doors in 1868, Cornell admitted that his university was unfinished, … “I hope ‘ he said, ‘we have laid the foundation of an institution which shall combine practical with liberal education, which shall fit the youth of our country for the professions, the farms, the mines, the manufactories, for the investigations of science, and for mastering all the practical questions of life with success and honor. I believe that we have made the beginning of an institution which will prove highly beneficial to the poor young men and the poor young women of our country.” (*Bishop, History of Cornell, pp. 87-88)*

“Preparing them to serve society better, training them to be more useful in their relations to the state.” (*Bishop, History of Cornell, page 88)*

And thus, just as Ezra laid the foundation for what has become truly one of the world’s great universities, so did the founders of the Tompkins County Foundation create framework for an institution that will have a profound impact on this county through support of the arts/culture, community building, education, environmental sustainability, health and human services.

They would create this impact by creating community.

So let’s look at those key words.

Create---active, not passive nor simply responsive, behavior. And the Foundations creates in many ways:

* Create knowledge of issues, strengths facing our community
* Create opportunities for philanthropists to make a difference locally
* Create a difference for local non-profits.

Community--the focus of the foundation is community. While that often is a physical place – it is way more than that. Look around at donors, the not-for-profit partners, advisors, and those just learning about our community.

As George (*Ferrari)* said in this year’s annual report, “we honor the fact that we live in relationship to each other as social beings and in the context of our various environments: work, family, built and natural.”

Connections – they can be formal, informal, legal, personal, and financial. Connections imply partnerships, a concept we emphasize to our students. In partnership, you do not do something to or even for a community, but rather with it. That partnership has been at the heart of Cornell’s Cooperative Extension’s mission, “ to enable people to improve their lives and communities through partnerships that put experience and research knowledge to work.”

Once again, Cornell’s history and purpose and that of the Community Foundation are intertwined.

As Cornell launches Engaged Cornell, building on 150 years of partnership and connection with the community, it will strengthen the many ways all of us will work together so that we all thrive. We will do so by engaging faculty and students with the community and by building what we are calling impactful partnerships, locally, throughout the state and even nationally and internationally. Our connection to this community will be key.

I began my talk by saying that an anniversary is worthy of celebration – not just privately, also publicly. It is a chance for so many of us here…community leaders, agency heads, donors, and recipients… to say “thank you, Community Foundation” and “thank you, Community”. Let us be intentional about saying thank you.

Why is that important? It is because I have learned what value comes in that formal expression of gratitude.

Way back in 100 BCE, Cicero told us, “Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all others.”

Today, many scholars, especially of psychology and well being, are studying the impact of gratitude on one’s life. Robert Emmons, a professor of psychology at UC Davis, is one expert on gratitude. He has written and spoken extensively on the value of gratitude: its impact on our ability to focus on the present; its incompatibility with negative emotions such as resentment and envy; its contribution to our development of a strong social network; and its impact on building resistance to stress.

With his collaborator, Michael McCullough, of the University of Miami, Emmons has labeled Gratitude as the forgotten factor in happiness research. Their individual and combined research now is documenting the psychological and physiological benefits of being grateful. Through controlled experiments, they are demonstrating that those who are intentional in their gratitude feel better about their lives as a whole, are more optimistic, are more likely to progress toward personal goals and are more likely to report having helped someone with a personal problem or offered emotional support to another.

Just what is gratitude? As Emmons and McCullough write, gratitude has been conceptualized as an emotion, an attitude, a virtue, a habit, a personality trait or a coping response. It is derived from the Latin root gratia, meaning grace, graciousness or gratefulness. The object of gratitude is OTHER directed…either to a person or nonhuman object (like nature, or God or the supernatural). It is not self-focused.

In a New York Times column some time ago, John Tierney wrote about research that shows that those who are fundamentally grateful human beings experience better health and sounder sleep, have less anxiety and depression, behave more kindly toward others and have long term satisfaction with life. Gratitude is a stress buster, he writes…grateful people are less likely to experience envy, anger, resentment, regret, and other unpleasant emotions. Perhaps the part of the brain that is activated when we are being thankful is the same part of the brain that hosts the negative emotions? When the grateful ones are working, the others cannot??

So, as we celebrate another successful year of the Community Foundations and 15 years of making a difference in Tompkins County…indeed,

Let me say,

Thank you to the staff

Thank you to the Board

Thank you to all of you – and to those not here but engaged in the work of the Foundation

As a resident of Tompkins County, I know and experience the difference you and we make

Thank You!