Friends School of Baltimore

GROW (Growth and Renewal in our Work) Program

Report from Program Year 1

June 2013

Program Overview

The generous gift of grant money from the Edward E. Ford Foundation has made it possible for Friends School of Baltimore to launch a unique and powerful practice of faculty-driven professional development. Following the confirmation of gift monies from the foundation, a visionary body of faculty and administration began pursuing input from faculty across the school’s academic divisions and disciplines. The goal was to create a program that would foster both individual and shared learning, promote a collaborative community, and allow teachers to embrace 21st century models of teaching and learning in an atmosphere that balanced risk-taking and trust. In addition, it was paramount that the work honor the school’s Quaker principles and model the practices of learning that exemplify a Friends School education. Three core elements of each cohort’s time together were identified. First, the focus of a cohort’s experience had to map to the school’s Teaching and Learning Paradigm, remembering that the Habits of Mind are what drive the experience of Friends School educators. Secondly, each group pledged to ensure that its work had direct application to experiences in the classroom. Lastly, the cohorts made a commitment to include a reflective component to their work. This could be formative or summative and might manifest itself as journal, a blog, digital portfolio, or any other means of cataloging one’s learning journey.

Cohort Experiences from Program Year 1

In the Fall of 2012, the school gathered the inaugural cohort of the GROW (Growth and Renewal in our Work) program. Nine faculty members from across the school’s three academic divisions worked together for ten weeks (and fifty contact hours) in a learning environment that was radically egalitarian and drew on the strengths, interests, and gifts of each member of the cohort. Learning goals and deliverables were decided upon by the group as a whole and structures of accountability emerged through deepening relationships and trust in one another.

The cohort began its work with a day-long retreat and met thereafter twice each week for two hours at the close of the school day. While the schedule was rigorous, faculty members in the cohort valued the time for fellowship, learning, and reflection that nicely balanced the more hectic schedule of the school day. The space in which the cohort gathered also enhanced the experience: the Head of School set aside a small home on campus for the use of the GROW cohorts. There, faculty members could step away from their classrooms and administrative meeting spaces to focus entirely on their own learning. Gathering over a cup of tea in the kitchen, discussing a shared reading in the living room, or writing in a journal on the back deck, faculty found the space to foster deeper reflection and to nurture relationships among fellow cohort members.

By week three of the program, cohort members had mapped out their learning and proposed a deliverable of a shared Blog site. The cohort focused its learning on cultivating
greater creativity and mindfulness in our classrooms. Two cohort members met with the Head of School to share and earn agreement for this plan.

Learning experiences included classroom observations and de-briefs, shared readings and discussions, creative improvisational theatre, experiential work with art, music, and dance, and community service at a local food pantry. As teachers became learners and the roles shifted during each meeting, cohort members were able to observe themselves as learners and make deeply empathic connections with their own students’ experiences in their classrooms. The cohort-authored blog site “GROW with Friends” explores the experiences and outcomes of the group’s learning; the site was shared with the broader school community so as to keep the group’s work transparent and inclusive.

The second GROW cohort began its work in mid-winter and adapted the ten-week, 50-hour format to meet its members’ needs. As with the first cohort, this group of nine faculty members was drawn from the school’s three academic divisions. The same collegiality and self-determination marked this group’s experience, and their learning focused on what it means to be a “21st-century teacher and learner.” Having again earned agreement for their learning plan from the Head of School, the cohort conducted a series of interviews with colleagues who volunteered to share their most pivotal moments in teaching. They then generated a series of short films that presented their findings on such topics as project-based learning, technology as a transformative tool, maximizing connections among learners in a classroom, and making learning more student-focused with the teacher serving as guide or coach. The films were shared with the entire faculty.

**Essential Elements of the GROW Program**

While each cohort has defined its own goals and outcomes, they have identified certain essential elements in common. GROW is:

- An opportunity to reflect deeply and in a sustained manner on both our teaching practices and ourselves as teachers and learners;
- Energizing and restorative to us in our daily work;
- Informative as we experience the disorientation that we often ask our students to experience as “21st century” co-learners;
- Trust and relationship-building at a cross-divisional level;
- A collaboration-starter: several campus initiatives have had their birth in GROW.

Elements essential to the creation of the GROW environment include:

- A concentrated period of deep connection to the cohort community. This allowed for the creation of strong relationships and conversations that went beyond scratching the surface of a topic.
- Time between each face-to-face session to allow for reflection and to integrate and apply what has been learned as a community into our daily lives as teachers and learners.
• A cohort size of 9-10 fosters diverse ideas and input but is not so large that close
connections and bonds can be formed.
• Two facilitators per cohort, who quickly evolve from participatory leaders into team
members as the group takes on responsibility for the experience.
• A period of time where the facilitators from the outgoing and incoming cohorts meet to
discuss initial planning of the new cohort.
• A crossover meeting between the outgoing and incoming cohorts for Questions and
Answers, and passing on the wisdom of the previous group.
• A balance between group and individual goals.
• The gathering space is an essential part of the GROW experience. The space creates a
sense of retreat and removal from daily responsibilities and allows the members to put
their energies into being in community with the cohort. The shared responsibility of the
space creates a sense of belonging and “home” which facilitates not only the cohort
meetings, but the more spontaneous conversations that emerge from tending to the daily
stewardship of the surroundings.

Future Plans and Sustainability

Next year, the GROW program will host three cohorts: Fall, Spring and Summer. (The
inclusion of a summer cohort will make the experience possible to a variety of faculty who have
special commitments during the year that preclude their participation in the Fall and Spring
cohorts).

The GROW program will be supported by a Cultivation Committee (a more organic
version of a Steering Committee) comprising previous cohort facilitators and/or participants.
This committee will serve an advisory function to current cohorts, maintain the integrity of the
vision of GROW, and study program outcomes and impact on the broader community. While
the cohorts themselves will continue to be chosen by the school’s Academic Council, the
Cultivation Committee will encourage future facilitators to step forward as they feel called to
serve in this capacity.
Friends School of Baltimore
GROW (Growth and Renewal in Our Work) Program
Report from Program Year 2
October 2014

By the close of our second program year, 48 of 92 full-time faculty at Friends School of Baltimore have participated in GROW. Our learning has been diverse and our experiences richly varied, but we are united in affirming that this model of cohort-driven professional development aligns with our School’s Teaching and Learning Paradigm and is transforming our work in our classrooms each day.

The Fall 2013 cohort anchored its learning around experiences of community service by participating in the work of several not-for-profit organizations in our city and by inviting guest speakers to join in reflective discussions. The eleven members of this cohort describe the deepening relationships among colleagues from our school’s three academic divisions as “enhanc[ing] our respect for how the school functions” and “opening up collaborations in ways we would not have previously imagined.” The diversity of teaching and learning styles among cohort members sometimes took them outside of their comfort zones, but these moments were described as ultimately quite helpful.

The native teaching gardens and community vegetable garden on campus provided a focus for the eleven-member Spring 2014 cohort. One fruit of this work was the development of a new shared gardening curriculum for the 5th and 6th grades. Community was built and sustained among the members through their use of a Critical Friends Group protocol, which sustained focus on a theme (such as a lesson plan or a classroom management challenge) and offered practice in deep listening and supporting one another in working through challenges. Again, the wide-range of interests among cohort members was embraced as a “strength and unifying force,” allowing them to “learn about being learners [thereby] turning the tables on our typical roles at school.”

With the gathering of a first Summer cohort (2014), we were able to create opportunity for colleagues whose academic year and/or family responsibilities made participation in GROW a challenge. This nine-member group designed a creative schedule: they met their 50 contact hours through intensive learning weeks early and mid-way through the summer, bridging this time with individual work and reflection. A longer retreat day at the close of the summer provided time for synthesizing their learning. Anticipating a major technology shift at the School, members of this cohort focused some of their learning on iPads in the classroom. Even as they looked forward, however, cohort members deepened their understanding of the Quaker roots of our School and our City through an interactive tour of Baltimore with a local Quaker historian. Whether engaging in learning and sharing about technology or Quakerism, brain research or curriculum development, the cohort noted that “[o]ne of our greatest discoveries... was that the simplest plan, a shared breakfast [or a hike along Stony Run one morning] brought
some of the richest rewards.” Overall, cohort members experienced the “joy that comes from shared work and fellowship.”

As new cohorts were forming and carrying out their work, past participants were gathering to reflect on the program and its evolution. Consideration—both philosophical and practical—was given to whether the program should be “mandatory.” We also reflected on tensions between process and “product,” and the right balance of freedom and structure needed by cohorts. A survey completed by those who had participated in the program affirmed the program’s strengths and provided insight for ongoing development.

Several themes echo across the survey responses. First, colleagues insist that the program provides a unique and important opportunity to build personal connections and bonds across the academic divisions of our school. Cohort members consistently affirmed that participation in GROW gave them a better understanding of how the school works and what unites us across the PK-12 experience.

Second, while the process of discovering a cohort’s focus can be slow, groups affirmed that “the entire cohort is a model for teaching. We had to collaborate, be patient with one another, and work through situations without knowing the outcome.” By experiencing the learning process we engage with our students each day, we deepened our trust in the process of discovery and developed greater empathy for our students.

Third, even as we affirmed that “each cohort needs to find its way,” we discovered new ways to help launch each cohort more effectively, to articulate the role(s) of each cohort’s conveners more clearly, and to hold each cohort accountable for communication of its discoveries and outcomes.

To provide ongoing oversight for the program, and to retain its collegial vision, a GROW “Cultivation Committee” was formed in late Spring. Comprising 12 colleagues who have participated in the program, this committee will meet quarterly to review program outcomes, form and launch each new cohort, and share the story of our work in GROW with the wider school community. We envision conference presentations and scholarly publications about the GROW program to emerge in program year three.
Teaching Students About Blogging: Two models for Collaboration
Posted on October 18, 2012 by jbroome66

*First drafted during personal reflection on the afternoon of 10/11:*

Today I had two different experiences with blogging. The first was with a colleague of younger students. This teacher came to me with questions about the merits of blogging. She approached the idea in a thoughtful, measured manner. She was curious, but cautious. She listened carefully to my input, digesting it and taking time to formulate thoughts about how moving in this direction might suit her students. Her objectives for pursuing blogging were clear. She wanted a vehicle for enhancing communication with her students, creating a reflective space for thinking about literature.

We talked at length; we planned, we honed our ideas with shared input from each of us...the beginnings of a true collaboration.

Later in the day, I had the opportunity to meet with a group of older students who are also beginning their journey with blogging. Though the class began in just a few hours, the homeroom teacher and I carved out some time to talk about how we might conduct the class together. I described a lesson plan that I had used with a previous group and we discussed how that might marry with her goals for her students. We launched the class together, with me giving direct instruction, and she rapidly taking notes as I taught. From time to time, she piped up, offering insight and making a connection for the students.

Mid-class, we revised our plan. We accelerated the lesson to the third item on our agenda: navigating blogs. Again, there was ebb and flow to our instruction, each of us making comments that were pertinent to the class discussion. We noticed the waning time and elected to give the students time to explore. As the children began looking at blogs, my colleague’s dismay grew. The links that the students were using were not all what she wanted for her students. Many of the blog pages seemed more like teacher websites with assignments posted, links to games, embedded video and distracting widgets.

The purity of the blogging experience seemed lost. It felt to her as if the students were wading through mud to find meaningful posts or comments. We decided to end the class and reassess the direction we wanted to go.

What do these two experiences with student blogging say to me? How do they relate to the larger issue of collaboration? In scenario one, we have barely begun employing blogs as a tool for learning. The planning has been thoughtful, a timeline and objectives set. Befitting the students’ age, the blogging experience is more closely defined, prescribed even. But who knows what pitfalls we might encounter. I trust that we will work through them together,

Scenario two is at a different stage. Some planning has occurred before the instruction AND mid-process and subsequent e-mails will launch further dialogue. With these older learners, our approach can be different. The students can have greater input in the learning experience. In this teacher’s view, reading blogs and interacting globally is the larger goal, so naturally the path toward that objective varies. Our work together will now be how to provide the best model for truly understanding what a blog is and to teach kids to discern the purpose and effectiveness of blogs that they encounter. With all that is out there, this could be a challenging feat.

My questions for myself are this: How can I as a teacher support both of these colleagues equally? How can I be malleable in my approach and best enable an optimal learning environment for students of all different ages?
Teaching Students About Blogging: Two models for Collaboration

2/23/2018

Examining blogs, blogging, and the role this plays in my own teaching as well as my professional development is my aim this year. It is an aspect of my individual work in GROW as well as the focus of my TP3 this year. I feel grateful for a chance to reflect on two different teaching experiences and consider how I can continue to work to collaborate effectively.

Jennifer

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One Response to Teaching Students About Blogging: Two models for Collaboration

Paul Montrie says:

October 16, 2012 at 3:40 pm

Jennifer,

I admire your reflection, and I have asked some of these questions myself. I can also really appreciate your task with so many variables in Lower School – different ages, different purposes, and different stages of development. It is such a challenge.

How do we support our colleagues equally? It calls to mind something one of my principals from a previous school said about students – “Equal is going to be different for each student!” Because you’re co-collaborators are in different places, the approaches you take together will need to be different. There’s also a lot to be said about creating that special “dance” with each individual we form a teaching relationship with.

Best,

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growthwithfriends

Collaboration anyone?
Posted on October 3, 2012 by echensohn

This afternoon, Jennifer shared with us some of her favorite children’s books: we sat in the living room in delight and wonder at the wisdom communicated through simple words and glorious illustrations. As we listened, some of us continued with our blanket-making project (the community service we wanted to be a part of our cohort experience). With the stories over, we entered into some conversation about collaboration. Where and how have we experienced genuine collaboration in our work? What does it look and feel like?

The conversation ranged across experiences, time, and places in our professional lives. We wondered how we might structure our time differently if we really wanted to foster a community of collaboration. We wondered about the relationship between our need to build discipline-specific skills and our desire to be more cross-disciplinary. We wondered how collaboration relates to the project-based learning many of us are exploring. We wondered... 

I stepped out of the living room conversation to settle into some writing. Sitting in the kitchen, I listened to the continuing conversation, but I listened more to the tone and feel of the voices rather than to the words themselves. The tone ranged from high notes of hope to middle notes of fatigue to sharper notes of criticism and darker notes of despair—and then back again to hope and vision. What is it about this topic that so engages us? What are we inviting when we embrace collaboration more fully as a way of being in our school community? What will we have to do differently?

As I listened, I considered whether it’s not at all about doing things differently, but remembering to do what we know—fundamentally—to be true about transformational learning. Two or more people coming together around a shared interest or question; those individuals giving fully of themselves, their expertise, their insights, their presence; and together discovering or creating something that none of them could have done alone. This is what we are doing through our GROW cohort; this is what we are doing on our best days in our classrooms and our work with colleagues.
2012 Election and Mindful Listening in the Classroom

Posted on November 8, 2012 by ListenTheQuestions

From Helen:

So, weeks ago, I led us all in a Mindful Listening exercise. Two people are paired together; each gets ten minutes to talk, while the other listens. The exercise is really “for” the listener, who is asked to listen non-judgmentally, without responding. Even nodding is a response and implies an affirmative judgment. This exercise is about listening with one’s whole self, and noticing judgments but letting them pass without reacting automatically to them. Then, the two people swap roles, so everyone gets to be a listener and a speaker.

Today, the first time I’ve met my “Literature and Politics” class (11th and 12th graders) since the election, I was daunted by how to respond to the election. We have to talk about it somehow, given the content of the class, but I’ve had a harder time than usual in this presidential election finding analyses of the Republican candidate’s rhetoric (I’ve got lots for Obama), and I have had a harder time knowing how to discuss the election in class because of that. So, how to handle today?

I decided on Worship Sharing around the prompts, “What most perplexes or worries you about the election we just had?” and “What do you most deeply hope for, coming out of the election?” But this group that I’ve got is both marvelous and a challenge: they are smart and engaged, but tend to chatter a lot and move around a lot. How to set the tone for Worship Sharing?

So, we started with the mindful listening exercise that I’d tried with you. I gave them five minutes each, rather than ten, and asked them to share how their days have been, so far.

We got off to a bad start: they were too close to each other, and had trouble focusing only on their interaction with their own partners. So, I gave them new partners and permission to go find a spot on campus, not in the classroom. That went better.

When we came back, I asked them to debrief. How did it feel like to listen that way?

It was hard! That was the main response: they told how their attention wandered, how their minds raced, how they wanted to be able to respond. I suggested that minds just do that, they race, and that we can praise ourselves for noticing and choose where to put our attention next. We talked about how rarely anyone really listens to us, really hears us, and what a gift we give others when we take time to really listen.

Then we went into worship sharing. That lasted for about forty minutes or so. Students shared their confusion about what is right and what is wrong when millions of people feel so vehemently that the Republicans are all wrong and millions of others feel so vehemently that the Democrats are all wrong. What’s really right and wrong, in that climate? How does a sixteen-year-old know?

Some students who identified themselves as Republicans lamented the extreme reactive stances of their party, and hoped that Republicans would begin to value the youth vote more; they feared their own party would become irrelevant and a joke if it continued to rely on “old guys” who were out of touch (one student mentioned Karl Rove’s behavior on FOX news).
One student heard a peer call the president by an unspeakable derogatory slur, and we sat in shock with him. He also wondered how folks felt that they would have to move to another country; yes, we each want our party to win, but after that, we’re all one country together. You can’t just want to leave.

Another student talked about how the feeling of cheering on a political party feels eerily similar to cheering on a sports team, and how those two things shouldn’t feel so similar.

At the end, we debriefed the Worship Sharing time. Students who are usually quiet in class discussions appreciated the slower pace, and the rule in Worship Sharing that we each speak once; this way, nobody dominated, and everyone thought more carefully about what they really wanted to say.

One student looked up at the very end and said, “I see why you had us do that Mindful Listening thing! Because it set us up to really listen during the Worship Sharing!”

Yup.

It was all pretty gorgeous and wonderful and imperfect but great.

And it wouldn’t have happened had I not been in GROW this year. The chance to try out the Mindful Listening lesson on my colleagues helped me to place it firmly in my toolbox, where I can pick it up quickly when I need it, as I did today. And all of our thinking and talking and writing about how to create really rich, deep group discussions helped me think differently about how to approach this election discussion.

I’m grateful.
Place Pace and Purpose Friends GROW Cohort

Everything is Connected

On our “Baltimore Injustice Walk” last week with Damien Haussling and Tony Simmons, I asked why the St. Vincent de Paul churchyard was now closed. Only a week earlier, and for many years prior, the churchyard was home to some of Baltimore’s most vulnerable citizens—those experiencing homelessness. Pressures from neighboring hotels along the Fallsway were among the reasons the church closed the once-protected encampment. The irony is that more than a decade ago, the primary services for citizens experiencing homelessness (Our Daily Bread and Healthcare for the Homeless) were moved just south of the prison along the Fallsway to clear homeless people out of the Mt. Vernon cultural/tourism district. The new hotels, likely seeking a neighborhood more affordable than downtown, now threaten the neighborhood that was designed to give the homeless shelter, a neighborhood, mind you, whose dominant landmark is Central Booking and the prison complex. This is how city planning is derailed when some forms of development are king. But I digress, or do I? Isn’t it all connected?

With more than 4,000 citizens experiencing homelessness on any given day in Baltimore, and only about 600 city-controlled beds available for shelter, where can these citizens go to sit, to rest, to feel safe? Not along the public sidewalks or streets in the neighborhood, many of which have newly posted “No Trespassing” signs. Not near the front door of the shelter, where an assertive security guard told our tour group to move along. Not in the shade of trees across the street from Healthcare for the Homeless, where encampments are regularly broken up and generator-powered construction lights glare all night long. Not on the pavement above the city’s heating system (where a body can stay a bit warmer on a bitter winter’s night). A beautiful mural created by people experiencing homelessness attests to their presence in the neighborhood, but where can they safely go?

So back to the theme of everything is connected. About a week later, I was at the McKim Center just a few blocks away from the Fallsway and St. Vincent de Paul’s cordoned-off churchyard. I was talking with the center’s director, Dwight Warren, and he noted that he’s having a new problem. Each
afternoon, a lot of homeless citizens have been showing up at McKim, which in the summer hosts the neighborhood children for summer camp. Dwight doesn’t have the resources at his small center to accommodate these individuals’ needs, and he’s unsure how to proceed. I proposed that I connect him to Tony and Damien, who will surely know these men and women. So to recap—it’s all connected—homeless citizens are moved out of the city’s tourism and cultural district to a less-desirable neighborhood just south of the prison where hotels seeking cheaper land are built and put the homeless on the move again until they land on Dwight’s doorstep. And all of this is happening just blocks east and north of City Hall. I know that there are more strands to pull in this web of connectivity. Where am I?

Amy Schmaljohn
Place Pace and Purpose Friends GROW Cohort

Injustice Walk and Court Watching

I had the good fortune on going on an “injustice walk” sponsored by the Baltimore Faces of Homelessness Speakers Bureau with Amy and some of her students in the spring so I had an idea of what to expect this time around. That said, the facts, stories, and personal testimony of Tony, Robert, and Damian still hit hard; it’s never fun or easy to hear about the myriad ways institutions (both public and private) perpetuate injustice, misery, and the squandering of human potential.

The walk began at Healthcare for the Homeless in a godforsaken section of the city that is 10 minutes walk from City Hall and not that much further from Harbor East, Inner Harbor, Mt. Vernon et al. From a Friends School community perspective, I imagine that most of us don’t have any reason to be around those noisy blocks because they are figuratively a thousand miles away from our leafy campus seeing as they comprise the rotten heart of the criminal justice system as constituted circa 2015. A complex of various correctional centers and intake facilities loom grim and forbidding over the trash-strewn streets. Tony in particular kept telling us about the goings-on inside these buildings, from personal experience and hearsay. We also learned about the ways the city and police treat the homeless and, in fact, funnel them straight into the criminal justice system - a streets-to-prisons pipeline, so to speak.

The overwhelming impression I had was of human potential wasted. Certainly, millions of dollars (after what I heard) seemed to be funneled into dysfunctional and inefficient programs, and listening to Tony’s theory that business interests pressured St. Vincent de Paul Church to close its grounds to a homeless encampment fired up my indignation, but seeing so many people roaming the streets on a hot August morning, aimlessly standing in lines or moving so they wouldn’t be stopped by police and cited on ridiculous charges, reminded me of the old Talmudic quote, “If you save a life, it is as if you saved the entire world.” Imagining what one person given opportunities and a little help might do and then multiplying that by 4,000, which Tony stated was the homeless population of Baltimore…our school claims that the world needs what our children can do and the same should apply to all of our citizens. Unfortunately, we’re not allowing them the chance.

Fortunately, we also had a chance to see the offices of Word on the Street, a newspaper produced by men and women both currently and formerly homeless. It was heartening to hear of their collaboration with local college students to put out this meaningful publication that not only included news stories of local interest but also information about advocacy efforts and resources for the homeless. Had me wondering if there was a way to partner Word on the Street with some Quill journalists...

Our three guides had an authentic sense of belonging to this siren-ridden district. They knew the people, whether homeless or professionals, they knew the buildings, they knew the stories behind the fences, in the shelters, buried in the prisons. They could teach us about these things because of their expertise and patience, qualities any good teacher should possess.

That afternoon, we spoke with a pair of Quakers from Stony Run to discuss their work on bail reform. Their discussion with us turned out to be much more wide-ranging when we learned Debbie had been a former Baltimore City detective; she gave us the straight dope on a lot of court- and police-related issues, offered clarity on the processes of the criminal justice system, and really shed light why bail reform is so
necessary. Alvin claimed that under our current system, it was better to be rich and guilty than poor and innocent b/c the system is so skewed in favor of the privileged and really designed to incarcerate the marginalized. I never really thought much about bail; it was always a figure I'd read about occasionally in the newspaper.

What I'm really learning is that this amorphous System we often speak of, talk about, and read about is a series of steps, small and large, and even the most innocuous-seeming step can be the catalyst for injustice. We like to think of our country as a nation of laws where the guilty are punished and the innocent go free, where all are treated under the law. Obviously, this has never been the actual case and always an ideal but my eyes are being opened to how far off we are from realizing that ideal. Moreover, to rue this fact and remain silent is equal to complicity and I'm galvanized by the people we've met to take action.

Mike Paulson
Place Pace and Purpose Friends GROW Cohort

To Love a Place

Already in our GROW learning cohort, we’re encountering a method of place-based education that could prove transformational in our own classrooms. I said “encountering” with great intention. We can read (and are reading) books and articles about place-based education, but these texts are meaningful only insofar as they reinforce what we are experiencing and encountering “in the field.”

Our first such experience was with colleague Bill Hilgartner, who led us on a walk in the Bare Hills region of Baltimore County, just northwest of Lake Roland. Here is a landscape utterly unlike those we generally encounter in the region: green serpentine rock, rich in copper and magnesium, lay just beneath a layer of thin soil that supports small prairie grasses and plants seen nowhere else in Maryland. To an untrained eye, the hills are indeed bare, but with Bill as our guide, we learn the names and habits of plants and see a beauty over which we might otherwise have tramped indiscriminately. Bill has been studying this micro-environment for more than twenty years: his reverie for this place is infectious, and we eagerly ask questions that elicit gentle and informed responses from him. Knowing the names of each plant, soil type, and rock is a signal not only of Bill’s competence, but of his love for this place. We amble rather than walk, crouching here, stopping there, grateful to be moving at a pace that allows us to experience a sense of awe. Equally important is our sensing Bill’s great humility as he stewards this place. Even after twenty years, he admits that he still has much to learn about how Bare Hills has evolved over time and what practices will best ensure its ongoing health.

Later that day, we met with Kay McConnell, who tends a plot of land not far from the Bare Hills. While her gardens are quite different than Bill’s serpentine prairie, she revealed the same blend of competence, humility and love that we’d witnessed on our walk with Bill. She narrated her “work” with the land: following the lead of fallen trees in her garden design, allowing the Magnolia Tripetica to thrive in its favored ravine habitat, and discovering a minimally disruptive method of weeding that preserves the native seed bank in her gardens. She has lived her way into a credo of “honor the land, honor the life, honor the work.” I was stirred by Kay’s deep connectedness to the gardens and woodlands that surround her home—she has taken a long view in its transformation, modeling the patience and passion necessary to sustain such a process. As was the case on our earlier Bare Hills amble, we came into the presence of this passion by walking alongside Kay—walking slowly, pausing to attain the right

https://placepaceandpurpose.wordpress.com/2015/07/21/to-love-a-place/
perspective, allowing questions to arise through our delight and curiosity. We concluded our walk at an old spring house which fed the house until its later connection to the modern city water system. Inside, the old cisterns were silent pools of coolness on the warm day. Kay noted a Kentucky Coffeetree nearby, which she explained signaled to native peoples and early settlers the presence of underground water. She wonders how to best restore the spring house to honor this ancient connection, knowing that her stewardship of the garden is but the next phase of its long history.

Our learning experiences with Bill and Kay have deepened my appreciation of how a sustained relationship with a place can be transformational—of both person and place. I was moved to re-read a short essay by Kathleen Dean Moore that gives voice to what I sensed. She asserts that “to love . . . a place means at least this”: “to want to be near it, physically. . . to want to know everything about it. . . to rejoice in the fact of it. . . to fear its loss and grieve for its injuries. . . to protect it. . . to be transformed in its presence. . . to want the best for it” (“What it Means to Love a Place,” The Leopold Outlook, Spring 2012, 10-11). Thank you Bill and Kay.

Amy Schmaljohn
Place Pace and Purpose Friends GROW Cohort

Just A Few Miles Away...

Just A Mile or Two Away From Campus...

We started our last full GROW day by visiting the Govans Urban Forest. This is on a patch of woodland sandwiched between a church and a CVS, a place I have been oblivious to for years. Helene Perry, a physics professor at Loyola, is one of its stewards and gave us a quick tour (it’s less than an acre—maybe a third the size of a football field) of the place, explaining the history of its renewal and its use as a space for learning and relaxation. We pulled vines for an hour because they helped kill living trees. While buses roared by on York Road, this really did feel like an oasis in the midst of chaos, noise, and blight. It reminded me of an article I’d read this summer suggesting that the natural world provides a sense of awe and serenity that helps us develop empathy. We should all be so lucky, no, to have access to trees, plants, and dirt that lend us that sense of awe and tranquility.

Christian, a community organizer with Strong City Baltimore, met us at the Govans Urban Forest and led us on a walking tour of the Woodbourne-McCabe neighborhood he works in. The street we walked down, I was happy to notice, had over 20 current and future Habitat for Humanity homes. I know how HfH really tries to give its homeowners the tools for success by making things like financial literacy classes a requirement but they also like to anchor their clients in neighborhoods that have a chance at sustained stability, hence their practice of building multiple homes in an area. Easy, a construction manager, was generous with his time and took us through a house being built. It was easy to feel that these houses were being constructed with care and competency and by decent people. Christian told us about the initiatives he was working on with the neighborhood citizens; something so simple-seeming as getting speed calming implemented could raise a host of time-consuming bureaucratic issues. While we were out, the local park was being cleaned up and cleared of brush, something the citizens had been pushing for. Again, I take it for granted that Linkwood Park is basically in my backyard and cared for, the trash emptied, its equipment maintained. I know that the location of Linkwood (right across from Loyola) and its immediate neighbors (Tuscany-Carberry, Keswick) add up to a good deal of privilege that is lacking in Woodbourne-McCabe, yet those folks deserve the same service and respect for their neighborhood that we should all have. Christian’s anecdotes reminded me of the tough life of the community organizer but also how small victories for dignity, decency, and quality of life add up.

My first teaching mentor, Ab Logan, spent time as a community organizer in the same area in the 1970s. A few years ago, while we waited to see a movie at the Senator, Ab told me stories about going door-to-door to organize residents over various issues. Ab passed away a year ago and it is heartening to see a guy like Christian guard the flame that Ab once tended.

We finished up the day at Springfield Woods, where we met its chief steward, a cartoonist named Butch Berry. Like all of our guides & teachers during this whole GROW experience, he immediately (and more so in reflection) impressed me both with his expertise of subject and generosity of sharing. His space was considerably larger than Govans Urban Forest, about 3+ acres a moment’s drive north of Coldspring Lane. Butch started cleaning the area up in 2012 and has made great headway (with the help of other volunteers, of course). His connection is simple: he grew up in the area. He told us about the many current and future uses of Springfield Wood, including a “storyfire” area for storytelling around a fire.
pit (natch), foraging instruction, bird walks, stream restoration, and, general play. Butch’s good cheer made an impact on me; rather than hurl bitter vitriol at the apartment complex adjacent to the forest whose tenants constantly dumped trash in the space Butch so assiduously tried to maintain, he matter-of-factly mentioned talking to the owner of the complex and trying to mitigate the trash: you win some, you lose some. He also spoke of the collaborations with local academics, Springfield Wood as a laboratory of sorts. Cool. I know Josh Carlin’s Urban Forestry class hopes to use SW as a classroom and I’m excited to tag along and see how students and Butch partner together.

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