

11th National Conference Pioneer Network
St. Charles, Missouri
Carter Catlett Williams, Convener
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I long to be with you this morning. But this longing comes up against my wish to be with Frank at a time when he is vulnerable to sudden changes in health. I'm grateful to Rose Marie for helping me deliver my message in absentia.

Consonant with the site of this meeting, certain words are weaving back and forth in my mind – words like exploration, adventure and uncertainty, and courage. These are words associated with a remarkable event in St. Charles two hundred years ago, but they all are applicable to you gathered here today, and to Frank and me in Rochester, New York - to you as you explore the possibility of new life for those living and working in your nursing homes and home care services, and to Frank and me as we explore the uncharted territory of our old age.

In what more appropriate place could you be meeting than this very old town of St. Charles, the launching place for the great explorers Meriwether Lewis and William Clark. Two centuries ago, after months of preparation, the two men set out in a carefully designed 55 foot iron-framed keel boat and several pirogues,

with a company of 26 men and thousands of pounds of provisions and firearms. They were facing a journey completed by no other white men, and were certain to have encounters with numerous Indian nations – among them the Kickapoo, the Shosones, the hostile Sioux and other Native Americans not inclined to offer hospitality. It was, after all, their homeland the men of the expedition were exploring. On the other hand, a Shosone woman, Sacagawea, 15 years old and 6 months pregnant when her husband offered her services with translating, greatly contributed to the success of the expedition.

In the full and complete sense of the word, the men and the woman of the Lewis and Clark expedition were explorers, facing landscapes of surpassing beauty as well as terrifying hazards and encounters with possibly hostile people. They were adventurers, not intimidated by the uncertainties that lay ahead. And in the words of President Thomas Jefferson, the leader of the expedition, Meriwether Lewis, was a man of “undaunted courage.”

Now leap with me for a moment to the 21st century and the country of old age. Frank and I are explorers too, but we can't rely on a Lewis and Clark sextant and surveying compass. We can rely on a strong and resilient relationship of 60 years, and the support of our children and friends. We're exploring in big and

little ways – from getting acquainted with our new rain barrel to trying to decide whether it's time for us to stop driving. You may recall that last year we were wrestling with the potting and hanging of an upside down tomato plant. Well, this year it's getting acquainted with our bright blue rain barrel, and specifically how to enjoy the fine water it brings to our plants without it populating our back yard garden with mosquitoes. I become very anxious when I hear that mosquito hum. Our son Tom has rescued us by producing a hula hoop that fits snugly over fiber glass mesh so mosquitoes can't rest on our water and drop their larvae in it. We shall see. Meanwhile, our rotund water barrel sports a hula hoop.

The driving decision is another matter. We are uneasy about our reaction times, but we've not yet summoned the courage to give up the independence of driving. We think together about the myriad ways our lives will be affected when we are no longer able to go and come as we want, and we are awed by the daily organization it will require.

You can see that we are choosing to remain in our own home, arranging for our own services. So our mantra now, first expressed by our friend Anne Marie Groth-Junker, as she faced a diagnosis of advanced malignancy, is this:

“Embrace the adventure of uncertainty.” It’s scary at times, but we are learning a lot about living in the present moment, and are surprised sometimes at our creativity.

I believe that “embracing the adventure of uncertainty” is what you too are called to do as you seek to build new life in your nursing homes and home care programs. This is a call to cast out fear and the comfort of familiarity, and put courage in their place, to learn and to grow, to be open to new relationships, and new quality in old relationships. Through the days when you feel lost in the change process, and wonder whether you can find your new path, have courage and persevere, like the early explorers who set out on their explorations from this spot so many years ago, and like elders who build their lives as they meet new challenges.

Like Lewis and Clark, prepare well for the venture. Read, learn, discuss with others their experiences on this journey of change. Set your course and bring all your staff along with you – the questions and insights of all help build the new culture of your home. For in this new culture, the opinions and talents of all are valued.

Here's a true story that illustrates this. It is from last year's pre-conference intensive "Beyond Care: Exploring the Glorious Adventure of the Spirit." Banchamlak Tebedge, who is a CNA at Providence-Mount St. Vincent in Seattle, gave us an example of her experience with culture change. For years she had worked in traditional nursing homes, often finding it difficult, but persevering, because she has a deep calling to care for elders. Not too long after she went to work at Providence-Mt. St. Vincent, which was one of the first homes in the nation to initiate culture change, Banchamlak's supervisor asked to speak with her. She approached the appointment with fear because appointments with supervisors in her traditional nursing home experience invariably meant criticism and reprimand. "Instead", she said, with wonder in her voice, "my supervisor wanted to know my opinion about something!"

Here's another story, this one about a CNA's response to the first tenet of Pioneer values which is "Know each person." Now, knowing each person does not mean knowing that Mrs. S. screams at dinner every night, or Mr. K. hits you when you try to help him with his shower, or that Mrs. G. smiles sweetly all the time but never talks. Knowing each person starts not with symptoms and problems, but with the confidence that Mrs. S. has had a life of work, and sometimes play, that it's important to know what that work was and what pride

she took in it, as well as to know what interested her and what was fun for her. And it means learning to know her family and her relationships with them.

I have a friend, Gladys Reeves, now retired, who, as a CNA in a culture change situation, took on the job of creating and running the weekly community meeting. She and I had met in Barry Barkan's workshop on the community meetings of the Regenerative Community, and she asked me to assist her. Gladys created a game called "Who Am I?" After secretly choosing one resident and interviewing her privately about her life, Gladys would then pose questions to the rest of the group of about 20 residents at the community meeting. Based on what she had learned in the private conversation, Gladys might say, speaking for the unidentified resident, "I was crazy about horses and riding when I was a teenager. Who am I?" Or "I once owned a Cadillac convertible, or I used to manage a cafeteria in a Philadelphia Y, or I loved to spend summers at my grandparents' farm, or I had five brothers – who am I?" From the sidelines, I watched the still unidentified person whose life was being featured, follow the questions with intense interest. When some easy clue finally established her identity, there was hearty applause, and a new appreciation for this now broadly smiling resident *as a unique individual with*

unique life experiences. It was exciting and affirming, and happened because in culture change the gifts and talents of all staff enrich the community.

Such a community will be what Frank and I will seek when we are no longer able to remain at home. Can we count on you to build these new communities where all thrive – both residents and staff? In these two days at St. Charles, and in the days that follow, will you be exploring? Will you be ready for adventure, will you embrace uncertainty and persevere with undaunted courage?

We're counting on you!

The 11th National Pioneer Conference is now convened.