

Five Signs of a Rose Society in Disarray

By Jim Delahanty

Every once in a while a rose society has to take a look at itself to determine whether it is living up to its own stated goals. It is easy for any volunteer group or association to lose its way in the welter of 'things that must be done' or 'practices that cannot be changed' or 'personalities.' However, the mission of a rose society usually states fairly coherently that the purpose of the society is to promote the rose; the relative importance of various activities has to be judged against the utility of the practice toward that goal. There are certain signs that indicate that a closer look is imperative. These ominous signs include the following:

'The Eating and Drinking Society' Syndrome

Frank Getlein in *Modern Demonology* relates the story of little known St. Adiposa who dedicated her life to eating for the greater glory of God and was canonized when the floor of her cell collapsed under her successful eating program. Rose societies are frequently tempted by the wares placed in front of them by successful and talented cooks and hospitality mavens. But once the reason for meeting is transformed from attention to roses to attention to the culinary arts, the rose is diminished in importance and the *raison d'être* of the society suffers. While it is true that a healthy hospitality program is an important adjunct to a rose society, maintaining a proper balance between the purpose of the society and an incidental benefit of a society, requires vigilance to prevent the decay of the rose society.

Personalities Plus

One of the things I check at rose shows is to see if the name of the rose or the name of the exhibitor gets greater prominence on the trophy table announcements. Because if it is the latter, an imbalance has occurred. The point of rose shows and exhibiting is not to exalt the person doing it, but the object of the effort—the rose. Similarly, a rose society is not an extension of a person's personality or world view, the point of the society is the coming together of many people who share the same goal. To the extent that personalities prevail over the mission of the rose society, an imbalance has been created that will ill serve the rose, no matter how famous or how infamous the personality becomes.

The Active Minority

Every rose society has a group dedicated to leading, taking the initiative on certain projects, or occupying the name offices over a number of years. Frequently, because no one wishes to replace them or take the responsibilities of

office holding, they stay in office for many years. Eventually, they become used up, burnt out, and resentful of being taken advantage of. This results in a mass exodus of leadership cadres, the loss of the institutional memory of the organization, and a long learning curve by new leaders who start all problems and solutions afresh with no knowledge of what was done before and succeeded or failed. Or, worse yet, the leadership cadres stay on and on and on.

The saddest letter I received while chair of the ARS Local Society Relations Committee reported the disbanding of a local society; the leaders had all retired to nursing homes and had not been able to recruit any successors. Thus, they dissolved as an organization and distributed the society assets. In social science, the notion of a 'circulation of elites' is essential to organizational health: not only must able leaders be recruited from new people in a society, but old leaders have to be replaced before it becomes painful to do so. Without a true circulation of people in and out of the active minority of leaders, the rose society runs the risk of becoming the 'possession' of any group of current leaders.

The Tool Becomes the Purpose

The easiest example of the tool becoming the purpose is to let a fund-raising activity become the organizational purpose. Whether the fund-raiser is an auction, a cocktail party, a patron program, or selling corsages in a mall on Mother's Day weekend, all such activities pose the problem of focusing so much organizational attention on the tool of fund raising that the purpose of the fund-raising is lost.

To use the example of the Rose Auction, there are educational components to the rose auction that prevent it from becoming solely a money-making enterprise. The amount of work and effort that goes into a VCRS Rose Auction is not justified by the amount of money raised. It would be infinitely easier just to ask five or ten people to donate the money rather than their time and talent. However, that kind of fundraising runs the risk of dividing the society into those who can afford to support activities versus those who cannot, those of have easily disposable income from those who do not. The same principles regarding balance and imbalance are operative here as well as in the other signs. Any fund-raising activity must be educational for the participants, both internal and external, in order to be justified as serving the rose.

Exclusiveness

The words of Shakespeare regarding Cleopatra, 'age cannot wither nor custom stale her infinite variety' equally apply to the rose. Any attempt to bind consideration of the rosarian solely to exhibitors, casual gardeners, organic influences, or monoculture effectively says to potential participants in the promotion of the rose: Go Away! Just as negative as an unwelcome mat is posing extra conditions for membership other than love the rose, however well

meaning or intentioned such conditions may be. And today's requirement of an affinity for exhibiting or not exhibiting, gardeners with no time to care for roses versus those with ample disposable time or devotion of ecological concerns versus devotion to sheer laziness represent tomorrow's faded shibboleth.

Over the course of decades ideas and concerns change. To read issues of the *American Rose* from the early 1950's is to recognize that non-competitive rose shows were both common and historical, representing about a third of the shows reported in the bi-monthlies. One of the prominent efforts of the 1930's was to promote 'doorway' roses, roses that would climb up and above doorways; while not exactly extinct, it has been a rare climber in recent years that warranted introduction and promotion and certainly not a something appropriate for the 'doorway. To serve all facets of the 'infinite variety' of roses requires more than a passing acquaintance with the actual variety of that infinity.

Conclusion:

A healthy rose society is not the antitheses of the examples provided here. No rose society would prosper in any sense of the word with food fit for a hash house, or ambitionless and pallid leaders, or lack of funds, or a membership so diverse as not to be able to agree on anything, or worse yet, one that promoted skunk cabbage rather than roses. But each of the memes presented here has to operate within a sense of balance and proportion (a phrase I learned in judging school) that serves the promotion of the rose as the mission of the rose society. Like the rose itself, the society will continue to grow and thrive even if it is not in perfect health or balance; the secret is to strive for balance and proportion, anyway.

Keep those roses growing.