

This central area makes me feel like I'm home because, in a sense, it's the place where I really grew up.

The original central area was the first thing that I noticed when I walked into the Aspen Community School sixteen years ago. This place, this space - this was **not** what a school was supposed to look like. It was certainly not what any school that I went to looked like. Where were the long, dark hallways? Where were the cold, metal lockers? What was with this wooden enclosure that looked like the insides of an old log cabin? Centrally located to the arms of classrooms that fanned out from the heart of it all? It just felt so cozy and welcoming - where on earth **was** I?

Over the course of those subsequent years, I have come to learn a very important fact: The central area **forces** you to be present. Especially the old central area. It was impossible to walk through that space without your awareness being drawn in one direction or another - whether or not you wanted it to be! Even when you first walked in the front door, you were always **hit** with something - a smell, a sound, a sight...

- Being hit with the smell of wood, dust, (and maybe just a touch of old mice) forced you to consider the steady passage of time as it hinted at prior eras of hands coming together to build a school.
- The sounds of children working, talking, and collaborating revealed an active, motivated, and engaged community of learners.
- Being struck by the sight of a looming (and seemingly very aware) apatosaurus or mammoth skull pointed to inquiry, creativity, humor, and teamwork.

Beyond remembering these more visceral reactions to this old central area, I also marvel at the ability of this space, this innate constructed area, to be able to - at the same time - patiently hold me as I stumbled (often, quite literally down those steps) and sought to define myself as an individual as well as invite and support me to expand my horizons as I pursued graduate work and questioned the professional world around me. I spent HOURS after school in this central area - HOURS - leaning back against our garage door, feet planted on the step in front of me, writing papers, pouring over research, polling the experienced minds of my colleagues, and formulating my own pedagogical plan. I also learned how to handstand in that old central area! Talk about needing to be present...

All of those actions - at the same time. When I think about it... that doesn't really sound all that innate, does it?

Well, the old central area no longer exists in the corporeal form that I see in my memory, but... check it out! It's still here. The physical walls, ceiling, and garage doors are gone, as are the specifically aforementioned smells and sights, but look what's still here: possibilities, children, smiles, **US**, and beauty. We're gathered closely together, **and** the sense of free expansion is still all around us.

When you feel supported, you feel safe. When you feel safe, you can take those few extra breaths so you can launch off in the direction you need to go. The old central area, as silly as it may sound, provided that for me. It housed the people that are like family to me, it housed the soul-filling joy that fuels me, and it housed the offer of freedom and possibility that pushed me to be the professional that I am today.

The psychologist Wayne Dyer said, "If you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change." My original view of the old central area as a strange, misplaced, wooden space has definitely changed. It's been sixteen years, and how I now view my world has definitely changed. Viewing my memories through the lens of growth and gratitude, the old central area practically shines. This lush green grass is the perfect outfit for it now, don't you think?

Here's to honoring the spirit of the old central area as we live, grow, and move ever onwards in the protective, yet encouraging, embrace of our new central area!