NOTES FOR THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

Volume Thirteen, Number Three (February 2012)

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"What we have loved, others will love, and we will teach them how."

(W. Wordsworth, from "The Prelude")

NOTES FROM READERS

>>What you think<<

Greetings to all far and wide. I apologize that I am a few days tardy with my Notes for February, 2012 – it has been a hectic few weeks here in Minneapolis where we hosted the 24th annual Nobel Peace Prize Forum this past weekend. We organized much of our three-day program around issues of peace and freedom in South Africa. We honored the 1993 Peace Prize laureate F.W. deKlerk, who gave a major address on his experience alongside Nelson Mandela (who also won the Peace Prize that year) in dismantling the apartheid government. We also heard from Naomi Tutu, Archbishop Desmond Tutu's daughter, who offered a rousing call to action for our audience to "pay the prize" needed to secure the "prizes of peace" in their daily lives. For more information on the Forum, visit the website www.nobelpeaceprizeforum.org, where much of the program is archived. You also can view much of the running Twitter commentary about the Forum by searching the hashtag, #PeacePrizeForum.

Not much else to report from my Notes correspondents this month. I trust you are well and finding time and space for your reflective practice.

Occasionally, I (or my colleagues) refer to items from previous issues of Notes. If you have not been a subscriber previously, and wish to review our conversations, past issues of Notes are available on-line at www.jgacounsel.com. The website version of Notes also includes helpful hyperlinks to sources for purchasing or subscribing to the various publications mentioned in Notes. I thank my friends at Johnson, Grossnickle & Associates for their many years of abiding support for our reflective practice.

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REFLECT ON THIS

>>Who do you say that I am?<<

I preached the following homily in the Augsburg College Chapel near the beginning of our spring semester – it was the feast day marking the Confession of St. Peter.

[Scripture cited: Acts 4: 5-12; Matthew 16: 13-20]

"So often, words fail us.

I was at the White House last week for the launch of an exciting new project to promote civic learning and work in our colleges and universities. As part of the program, a White House staff

member was describing his work on social innovation. He asked the audience what "social innovation" meant to them. One of my fine academic colleagues responded by saying that "social innovation is the deploying of resources to ameliorate entrenched dysfunctions in society." After a moment of stunned silence, the speaker said, "Oh you mean, finding new ways to solve old problems!" Words sometimes fail us.

More on point for the theme of this feast day, the Confession of St. Peter, here is a theological joke along the same lines:

"Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, Reinhold Niebuhr, and James Cone find themselves all at the same time at Caesarea Philippi. Who should come along but Jesus, and he asks the four famous theologians the same Christological question, "Who do you say that I am?"

Karl Barth stands up and says: "You are the *totaliter aliter*, the vestigious *trinitatum* who speaks to us in the modality of Christo-monism."

Not prepared for Barth's brevity, Paul Tillich stumbles out: "You are he who heals our ambiguities and overcomes the split of angst and existential estrangement; you are he who speaks of the theonomous viewpoint of the *analogia entis*, the analogy of our being and the ground of all possibilities."

Reinhold Niebuhr gives a cough for effect and says, in one breath: "You are the impossible possibility who brings to us, your children of light and children of darkness, the overwhelming oughtness in the midst of our fraught condition of estrangement and brokenness in the contiguity and existential anxieties of our ontological relationships."

Finally James Cone gets up, and raises his voice: "You are my Oppressed One, my soul's shalom, the One who was, who is, and who shall be, who has never left us alone in the struggle, the event of liberation in the lives of the oppressed struggling for freedom, and whose blackness is both literal and symbolic."

And Jesus writes in the sand, "Huh?"

Who do you say that I am? There is something in the poignant question that seems appropriate for the beginning of a new academic term here at Augsburg, for in many ways, it seems to me, this question is at the heart of our educational enterprise in this college that claims to honor the intersections of faith and learning.

As humans – and especially as humans engaged in an academic community – we may have the same tendency as the disciples when faced with this question. First, let me check my sources. History tells us you may be Elijah. My sociological analysis tells me that you look and sound a lot like John the Baptizer. I checked with my theological experts and they say you must be another prophet.

No, Jesus presses them (and us), "Who do you say that I am?" And here we are, left to find words that so often fail us.

We have Peter's words, which, at least according to Matthew, pleased Jesus enough that he entrusts the future of his movement to this beloved disciple. "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, " Peter proclaims and the keys to the kingdom are suddenly his – though we know the rest of the story and what happened on that fateful night when Peter betrays his Lord. The words sometime failed Peter as well – as they continue to sometimes fail those of us who live as Peter's successors in this movement!

What I find so compelling in this passage from Matthew is not primarily Peter's answer to Jesus's question, but Jesus's conclusion that "flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven." In other words – words we surely can trust – your answer to this question, the words you need to respond, do not come from yourself, from your vast learning and experience, they come from the One in whom we move and breath and have our being!

And here, then, is the point that I find especially relevant to our work here at Augsburg – this college of the Lutheran church in the city. Our answer to Jesus's provocative question cannot be someone else's answer and it will not come from our own wisdom or experience – it comes only from our openness to the divine, our willingness to suspend our normal ways of seeing the world, our giving up control over our human knowledge, so that our awesome God might move within us, imprint curiosity and wisdom in our minds, and put the words on our lips.

There is in this claim a call to deep humility, to giving up our need to have all the answers, to being willing even to admit "I don't know." And there, as all good teachers know, is the beginning of an authentic education.

Now, let's admit it, it's hard to be humble when you are engaged in the heady work of learning and scholarship. Parker Palmer tells a funny story of James Watson and Francis Crick reflecting on the fortieth anniversary of their discovery of DNA. Watson remarks: "The molecule is so beautiful. Its glory was reflected on Francis and me. I guess the rest of my life has been spent trying to prove that I was almost equal to being associated with DNA, which has been a hard task.

Crick – whom Palmer reports was "never…in a modest mood" – then adds: "We were upstaged by a molecule."

This uncharacteristic – if strained – humility, Palmer says, only points to the power of being part of a community, a community of truth, in which our own agendas are upstaged by what the poet Rilke calls "the grace of great things."

Such is the community of which we are a part, this teaching and learning community we call Augsburg College. It is a community grounded in a faith tradition that believes that our human knowledge is incomplete, and that it is only when we admit our inability to know fully, admit that now we see only dimly as through a mirror, that we might be open to genuine learning., that we might know the grace of great things.

Martin Luther's wise edict in the catechisms to ask "What does this mean?" is a provocative – both literally and figuratively – invitation to education, to learning, to a lifelong curiosity about the wonders of God's good world and creation. Similarly, John Polkinghorne recalls that "the great nineteenth-century physicist, James Clark Maxwell, who was a devout Christian, had the second

verse of Psalm 111, 'Great are the works of the Lord, studied by all who delight in them', inscribed in Latin on the entrance gates into the Cavendish Laboratory in Cambridge."

And so, at the beginning of our new academic term, on this feast day celebrating St. Peter's confession, we stand in awe of the saints who have come before us, moved by our awesome God to proclaim and live their faith. Thanks be to God.

As for me, I will stand with many of you, I imagine, in this community of teaching and learning, this community of faith, this community dedicated to serving our neighbors, hearing Jesus's invitation, his penetrating "Who do you say that I am?", and admitting "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief," and then entering with great joy and humility into the remarkable work ahead – even as words may fail me. May it be so."

>>Peace education<<

As I mentioned above, we recently hosted the 24th annual Nobel Peace Prize Forum, which offered me an occasion to think once again about the work of peace and peace education.

The fact that the United States is embroiled in the longest period of war in its history brings added urgency to considering the thin line we walk as humans between the best and the worst of our nature. To care or not to care – to love or not to love – to wage peace or wage war.

I continue to learn from several authors whose work – while realistic about our nature – suggests that there are other ways to imagine and act when faced with a threat, an enemy, an inevitability. I think of these authors as offering us the strategies of an alternative diplomacy, if you will – a sort of curriculum for peace education. Listen with me to their challenging lessons. (Some of what follows originally appeared in Notes 4:3, February 2003.)

First, the political philosopher and theologian John Courtney Murray, SJ, writing in his *We Hold These Truths* (Sheed and Ward, 1960): "Barbarism…is the lack of reasonable conversation according to reasonable laws. Here the word "conversation" has its twofold Latin sense. It means living together and talking together. Barbarism threatens when men cease to live together according to reason, embodied in law and custom, and incorporated in a web of institutions that sufficiently reveal rational influences…Society becomes barbarian when men are huddled together under the rule of force and fear; when economic interests assume the primacy over higher values…Barbarism likewise strikes when men cease to talk together…Argument ceases to be civil when it is dominated by passion and prejudice; when its vocabulary becomes solipsist; when dialogue gives way to a series of monologues; when parties to the conversation cease to listen to one another…" How shall we recover our capacity for conversation – genuine living and talking together?

Next, to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who writes in his collection of sermons, *Strength to Love* (Fortress, 1963): "Why should we love our enemies? The first reason is… (that) returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness to a world already devoid of stars…. Another reason is that hate scars the soul and distorts the personality…to its victims (and) to the person who hates…A third reason is that love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend." Practical, you ask? Idealistic, you charge! "Do to us what you will," King said, "and we shall continue to love you." And so he did.

And finally, to sadly-departed former president of the Czech Republic and playwright, Vaclav Havel, whose address "The Need for Transcendence in the Post-Modern World" was delivered at Independence Hall in Philadelphia: "Yes, the only real hope of people today is probably a renewal of our certainty that we are rooted in the earth and, at the same time, in the cosmos. This awareness endows us with the capacity for self-transcendence. …(T)he truly reliable path to coexistence, to peaceful coexistence and creative cooperation, must start from what is at the root of all cultures and what lies infinitely deeper in human hearts and minds than political opinion, convictions, antipathies, or sympathies - it must be rooted in self-transcendence:

- Transcendence as a hand reached out to those close to us, to foreigners, to the human community, to all living creatures, to nature, to the universe.
- Transcendence as a deeply and joyously experienced need to be in harmony even with what we ourselves are not, what we do not understand, what seems distant from us in time and space, but with which we are nevertheless mysteriously linked because, together with us, all this constitutes a single world.
- Transcendence as the only real alternative to extinction."

This transcendence, Havel argues, is the foundation for our roles as ambassadors of trust in a fearful world – the only real alternative to not caring, to not loving, to waging war instead of peace, to extinction.

>>Maimonides and the ladder of giving<<

As I mentioned in the last issue of Notes, I am co-teaching a course this semester on homelessness and affluence. This next week we turn our attention to philanthropy and the various motivations humans have for giving of themselves and their resources. It has been fun to return to these intriguing questions about the human condition. We'll read the Julie Salamon book referenced below to explore a topic with abiding relevance.

"The richness of historical reflection and practice, especially as it pertains to philanthropy, is perhaps no better illustrated than in the work of Moses Maimonides, the 12th century Jewish physician and philosopher, whose *Guide of the Perplexed* is one of a series of his treatises on God and human experience that remains relevant for our day. I first read Maimonides in graduate school and have returned to his reflections on giving time and again, especially when working with Bob Payton and his colleagues at the Indiana University Center on Philanthropy.

In her *Rambam's Ladder: A Meditation on Generosity and Why It Is Necessary to Give* (Workman Publishing, 2003), journalist and novelist Julie Salamon offers a sometimes moving account of her personal exploration of Maimonides (Rambam is an acronym for the first letters of Maimonides' several names) and his teachings on philanthropy.

To whet your appetite, here is a summary of Maimonides' ladder of the eight levels of *tzedakah*, translated as "charity" or "equity." I have adapted this version of the ladder from *The Perfect Gift: The Philanthropic Imagination in Poetry and Prose* (edited by Amy Kass).

"There are eight levels of *tzedakah*, one better than the next. A high level, of which none is higher, is where one takes the hand of an Israelite and gives him a gift or loan, or makes a partnership with him, or finds him employment, in order to strengthen him until he needs to ask help of no one.

Below this is one who gives *tzedakah* to the poor, not knowing to whom he gives, while the poor person does not know from whom he takes.

Below this, the giver knows to whom he gives and the poor person does not know from whom he takes.

Below this, the poor person knows from who he takes, and the giver does not know.

Below this, one puts into another's hand before (the latter) asks.

Below this, one gives another after (the latter) asks.

Below this, one gives another less than is appropriate, in a pleasant manner.

Below this, one gives sorrowfully."

Salamon labels the steps on the ladder: from responsibility at the top, to anonymity, corruption, boundaries, shame, solicitation, proportion, and reluctance on the bottom rung. The labels themselves are intriguing ways of thinking about our various philanthropic motivations and practices."

PRACTICE THIS

>>Broken hearts<<

Parker Palmer, in his recent *Healing the Heart of Democracy*, offers this evocative juxtaposition of what he calls the "two kinds of heartbreak."

He writes, "Everyday life is a school of the spirit that offers us chance after chance to practice dealing with heartbreak. Those chances come when we aspire and fail or hope and have our hopes dashed or love and suffer love's loss. If we are able to enter into and consciously engage hard experiences of this sort, our hearts will get the kind of exercise that can make them supple. But if we try to shield ourselves against life's teachable moments, our hearts – like any unexercised muscle – become more vulnerable to stress."

In other words, our hearts can be broken "apart" or broken "open" – the former leads to polarization and distrust and violence; the latter to the possibility of healing and wisdom and well-being. The implications of this perspective on broken hearts are remarkable for our personal lives, but perhaps more profoundly for the well-being of our public lives in democracy. "The habits of our hearts" have the potential to keep democracy alive.

>>Vocational reflections<<

I often return to this brief vocational reflection, which I first found in 2005, for its abiding powerful message about the nature of our genuine callings.

"In the March 2005 issue of *Fast Company*, columnist Marshall Goldsmith tells this story about leadership guru, Warren Bennis:

"He (Bennis) openly reflected upon his personal struggles—not as a teacher of leadership but as a practitioner of leadership—when he was president of the University of Cincinnati. His voice noticeably quavered as he recalled one of the most important moments of his career. As he was speaking to a university audience in his presidential role, one of his friends in the room unexpectedly asked: "Do you love what you do?"

A long awkward silence filled the room as he pondered the question. As a president, he searched for the right answer, but as a human, he wanted the real answer. Finally, in a quiet voice, he replied, "I don't know."

That revelation plunged Bennis into deep reflection. It dramatically altered his path through life. He had always thought that he wanted to be president of a university. It had not dawned on him that after he got there he might not actually enjoy the life of a university president.

Do you love what you do? This may be the seminal question of our age."

PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<

A couple of new books have crossed my desk. We're reading *Flowing Water, Uncommon Birth: Christian Baptism in a Post-Christian Culture* by Samuel Torvend (Augsburg Fortress, 2011) at our church during this Lenten season.

I also have picked up John Dickson's *Humilitas: A Lost Key to Life, Love and Leadership* (Zondervan, 2011) to remind me of one of life's central virtues.

>>The Peace of Wild Things<<

Continuing my peace theme for this issue of Notes, here is Wendell Berry sharing his wisdom…

The Peace of Wild Things

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

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>>Topics for upcoming issues<<

- Reinventing governance
- Hospitality is not enough