

NOTES FOR THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

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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<<

I hope all is well for you in the new year. We've had an exciting couple of months at Augsburg, where we continue to implement our *Augsburg2019* strategic plan with its highest priority – building a signature academic building, the Center for Science, Business and Religion. To that end, the announcement of a \$10 million gift to name the building (our second \$10 million gift for the project!) raised our spirits to new levels. We're in the home stretch and working very hard to wrap up the campaign in the next several months. You'll hear the cheers from Minneapolis when we've reached our goal!

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.

REFLECT ON THIS

>>Called to reflective practice<<

The network of those who read these Notes is virtual and thus I don't always know who subscribes unless he or she brings it my attention – which I always appreciate. Such a subscriber came forward last fall when Dr. Andrew Prall, chief academic officer at the University of St. Francis in Fort Wayne, Indiana, wrote to ask if I would deliver the keynote address at an annual professional development gathering of faculty members from various colleges and universities in the Fort Wayne area. It was fun to connect with Andrew and to share some thoughts about reflective practice (the theme of the gathering) with the hundreds of attendees. Here is an excerpt from my remarks, fittingly entitled "Called to reflective practice."

"I am most pleased to be here for this impressive consortial gathering and to offer some opening remarks to frame your important conversations today about teaching as reflective practice.

My reflections this morning, entitled *Called to Reflective Practice*, call for some definitions of two concepts imbedded in my title.

First, what do I mean by “called”? Certainly it is fitting that I am here in Indiana, home to the Lilly Endowment, which over the past 15 years has supported remarkable work on college campuses across the country around the concept of vocation or calling. I imagine some of you have been engaged in that good work on your campuses. At Augsburg, two Lilly grants supported an in-depth and integrated programmatic commitment to helping our entire community – students, faculty, staff and alumni – discern and equip to live out callings. All of our undergraduate students take required religion courses designed to explore the theological concept and then consider its relevance for their vocational journeys, and then we engage these questions again in senior keystone courses within the major department. I am teaching one of those keystone courses this semester, exploring with our senior honors students an interdisciplinary understanding of the role of place in their vocational plans.

All of this said, one of the conclusions we have drawn from our work on vocation these past 15 years is that the concept of being called, when separated from its theological footings, can easily be co-opted by the worldly definitions of progress and success. So your calling becomes something akin to a successful career path, an upwardly mobile trajectory to higher income and status and power. Instead, we have sought to recover the theological concept of calling, especially as explained by our spiritual ancestor Martin Luther, and translated a more nuanced way of thinking about what it means to be called. There are four ideas we promote for our students and colleagues in this more nuanced understanding of vocation:

- Your vocation – your calling – may very well be found in the messy, mundane details of daily life, and should not be judged by extraordinary outcomes
- Your calling has a history, which unfolds like a story with twists and turns, where there is no one single destination but many stops on a life-long journey.
- Your vocation is not a solitary undertaking, but is inextricably bound up with those whose own callings complement and inspire yours.
- And finally, there may come a time when the call you receive takes you on paths unexpected and even demands of you sacrifices the like of which you cannot imagine.

So, when I say that we are called – however we understand the source of that call – I want us to think about that call as grounded in the mundane, lived out across a lifetime, situated in community, and potentially taking us to places as yet unknown. Your callings as educators surely reflect this sense of both purpose and adventure!

And now to what I mean by reflective practice. Given the theme of this conference, I am going to surmise that most of you know the work of the late MIT professor, Donald Schön, whose groundbreaking work on reflective practice as an alternative form of professional education provides the framework for our understanding of the concept. [*The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (Basic Books, 1983) and *Educating the Reflective Practitioner* (Jossey-Bass, 1987).]

For Schön, there has arisen in our society a gap between a conception of professional knowledge (as developed by professional schools and the professions themselves) and the actual competencies required of practitioners in their work. In response to this gap, Schön proposes reflective practice as a way of understanding what he calls knowing-in-action (how theories are developed), reflecting-in-action (the on-going dialogue between reflection and practice in our lives), and professional practice (how professional-client relationships are developed).

In this way, reflective practice is a way of being professional that looks much more like artistry than science. He commends the reflective practice model as a form of professional education (like apprenticeships and internships rather than sitting in classrooms and soaking up professional knowledge!). He also shows how reflective practice has implications for the relationships between professionals and their various publics—it demystifies professional expertise. We might say that in this view, professionals are neither the heroes sent with their technical expertise to save society nor the villains who would use their special knowledge to keep control over us, but rather, they are participants in a common, public conversation about the important work they help us do.

For our purposes, I set the horizons of reflective practice in this way.

Reflective practice is a way of living that:

- Values the mutual and abiding dialogue between what we think, what we believe in, and what we do;
- Points to the common and historical nature of human experience, leading us to see living as common work rather than simply my personal project;
- Accepts the tensions and dynamics of our existence as a source of imagination and hope rather than a sign that we just haven't got things under control yet;
- Is grounded in the profession of faith—faith in something larger and wiser than our own powers (we might say that this is what it means to be a professional!)

Called to reflective practice, then, is both a personal and common journey toward a vision of how learning and life are inextricably linked. Noble work, indeed. Messy and countercultural, surely. And so here we are, gathered to consider how we are called to this dynamic and important and complex life and work. Are we prepared?

I'll admit to some doubts about our preparation. I am a product of a fine liberal arts education. I received my undergraduate degree in sociology and political science from Luther College some 37 years ago. I then went on to study social ethics at the University of Chicago, where I received both my masters and doctoral degrees. This is my 39th straight year on a college or university campus – you have to love it – and I often remark that what brings me back year after year to the work of higher education is the sense of hope and promise that I witness in the efforts of our students to be educated, to imagine how they will make a difference in the world, and to take up their roles as those who will lead our nations and world in the future.

As a social ethicist, I also am a lifelong student of the links between education and citizenship. I am firmly convinced that the strength and vitality of our public life is directly tied to how effectively we make education our highest public priority – and, in particular, how we position the values of education as central to the well-being of our lives together in the world. For those of us who have the privilege to be educated – to be educated as a whole person – I believe we have the obligation to ensure that others will understand the importance of, and have the opportunities to enjoy, the fruits of being educated – both for their personal benefit and for the well-being of the body politic.

All of this said, I am more and more convinced that we are up against some powerful forces that run counter to this vision of life and education in our democracy. Surely we all are aware of the barriers that have arisen in our society between a meritocratic understanding of education and this commitment to education as central to a healthy society. I (and I would guess, most of us in this room) am a product of that meritocracy. No one taught me about reflective practice at the

University of Chicago, but I discovered it while I was there and I had an epiphany about the need to have what my colleague at Augsburg, Harry Boyte, has called a focus on *democratic excellences*, the belief that our highest aspiration should be to equip all of our students and fellow citizens for lives of meaning and purpose and learning that never end, no matter what they are called to be and do in the world.

How might we frame our common understanding of how our work as educators can promote this idea that all of us – our students, colleagues and fellow citizens – are called to reflective practice as a way of life?

>>Come and see<<

I preached the following homily in our chapel during Epiphany.

Scripture: John 1: 1-5 and 43-46

“The 20th century theologian Paul Tillich once said that the opposite of faith is not doubt; it is certainty. I think of this point often during the liturgical season of Epiphany, when we celebrate the light that has come into the world, and Christians everywhere are tempted to believe that all is well, certain even that the dark will no longer prevail. God has broken into our lives and now the entire world will see that we have found the way, the truth, the life...

And then I pause and consider the power of the darkness all around us. Even in the first few weeks of this new year, we witness the darkness of religious intolerance and violence, of bias and injustice, of hunger and pain and indifference. Where is the light that overcomes this darkness? If all is well (as we would like to believe), then what are we to do with the evidence that contradicts our certainty?

I am reading a provocative book by theologian Barbara Brown Taylor entitled *Learning to Walk in the Darkness* that seeks to address this tension of a world divided into light and dark. She writes: “...I have learned things in the dark that I could have never learned in the light, things that saved my life over and over again, so that there is only one logical conclusion: I need darkness as much as I need light.” Her theological point is that we cannot afford to divide the world simply into light and dark, or good and evil, and believe naively that God is only in the light, while all else is left to the shadows of our lives. Instead, we must embrace the reality that we live as those called into the light while residing in a world marked by darkness. How will we learn to walk in the darkness?

Our two readings from the first chapter of John’s gospel illustrate this dynamic tension. On the one hand, we have these soaring words from the opening stanza: “In the beginning was the Word – What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of the world. The Light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.”

And then just a few verses later, we are on the ground with Jesus in the early days of his ministry, calling his disciples to follow him. First, it is Andrew and then Simon Peter. And then we join the story with Philip and Nathanael. And it is Nathanael who helps set the terms of our tension when he asks of Philip, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” to which Philip responds, “Come and see.”

This wonderful invitational text assigned for the 2nd Sunday in Epiphany reminds us that nothing much has changed over the centuries in the call to lives of faith. Jesus, baptized by his cousin John in the Jordan, has these encounters with the first disciples. There is naming and claiming going on here. Jesus knows these early faithful, knows them intimately, just as he knows each of us. And then they are off, following Jesus on this uncertain path of discipleship and ministry. But what does it mean - what can we expect - it's rather uncertain and messy? You are the light of the world, but the world is marked by darkness. How shall we go forward? Come and see...

It seems to me that these questions about how to live as children of the light in the midst of the darkness, about how to follow the call to discipleship, continue to be at the heart of our common work as God's faithful people. And together, we are called to explore our individual and common callings to be God's people and do God's work in the world. But it's sometimes hard to know what to do, what to expect, how to be faithful when there are so many obstacles and temptations to decline the invitation of faith, to step off the path of discipleship.

And so I offer these Epiphany notes from the field about what it means to receive and accept the invitation to come and see...

Come and see...the gift of surprise. I love the quintessential Epiphany story of the wise men and its emblematic lessons for what it means to fall in love with God (again), to be drawn by something as compelling as a sacred star, out of our positions of power and privilege, on journeys of risk and adventure, finally to reach our destination and to find this remarkable surprise, this counter-intuitive God, this child in his mother's arms. And then to offer our rare gifts, to worship, to return home by another route, to be changed forever.

I think about the logic of this love story often when I reflect with our students about their vocations. I often tell my own story of the professor at Luther College, who was the source of my vocational surprise. The eldest son of a Lutheran pastor, surely my call was to follow in my dad's path. But when I began to question that call, it was a wise religion professor who recognized my love of the issues and questions of my dad's work, but not the work itself. So it was off to divinity school that I went, surprised to find that the narrative of my vocational journey could encompass the unexpected, the counter-intuitive, the surprise that demanded my gifts and an alternative route home.

I think, especially this week, of Martin Luther King, Jr., whose life and work we honored on Monday, and of the journey that he undertook and the surprises he encountered along the way - often, unwelcome surprises - and how his vocation unfolded on unexpected and life-changing ways. Instead of the scholar's life or the prestigious pulpit, Dr. King was drawn by a dream to make a journey, to encounter the surprises of a life of discipleship, and to give everything to follow the call. Come and see...

Too often, we imagine that the call will be clear and direct, once and for all, we're so sure this is it, nobody said anything about surprises! Perhaps the wise men felt the same way when they reached their destination. But narrow understandings of vocation blind us to the possibility of being surprised, to the opportunities to experience the adventures and wonders our grand and mysterious God has planned for us, to the chance to fall in love with God again and again...

Come and see...the call to serve - Beth is like many of our Augsburg students who come to the college not sure exactly what she believes - and yet she jumps into the life of the college, a good student, a good citizen, and more and more an active participant and leader in our Campus Kitchen program, which collects leftover food from the cafeteria and area restaurants, and then prepares and delivers meals to our neighbors in the Cedar-Riverside and Phillips communities.

Beth begins to understand through her work with our neighbors how much she values the opportunity to be of service, perhaps initially because it feels good, but more and more because she begins to understand what she learns and gains in relationship with a neighbor. She is disappointed when she is asked simply to deliver meals - she wants fellowship and community!

Surely Beth shows us what it means to think about faith as a call to serve, not a finished product, but an evolving story in which faith is not a certain fact or truth to be grasped, but a life of work and service that reflects God's intentions for the neighbor and the world. And one of the wonders of God's call to all of us is that it is relational and social at its very core. While many of us may wonder what we are called to be and do, we may very well already be living our call in service to our neighbors and communities.

My teacher, Martin Marty, has said that distinctive mark of the Lutheran faith is acts of mercy. I'm also struck that the word that appears more often than faith or grace or scripture in Martin Luther's voluminous work is "neighbor." Beth teaches me how to be more faithful as she serves our neighbors.

Our students and co-workers and fellow faithful may most fully discern the unfolding narrative of call as they are inspired and nurtured to make a difference in the lives of our neighbors, to be of service of the world, to be God's hands and the face of Christ to our fellow travelers. Surely Peter and Philip and Nathanael didn't know exactly what was going on when Jesus called and named them, but they followed and served. Come and see...you shall be my disciples and through you shall my people find their way in the world.

Come and see...the promise of abundance - I would venture that the most significant challenge we all face in being faithful and following our calls is the fact that we live in a world marked by a perspective of scarcity. And to my mind, the scarcity we experience is too often a result of wanting answers here and now, of fearing the dark, the unknown and surprising, of not being able to deal with the messiness of the called life.

Consider again our gospel for this morning. If we want firm answers, this is not the place to look. But if we are willing to accept the invitation to abundance, the invitation to be loved and claimed, the invitation to follow our Lord, then here is our call.

I think of this call to abundance often when reflecting on what my family experienced when my mom died twelve years ago. During her final couple of weeks, she was surrounded by the vigil of friends and family in the hospice care center where she was lodged. My mother, who was a most remarkable woman, had been battling cancer for years, and now having made some difficult decisions about her treatment options, was in a time of peaceful and faithful waiting for the disease to run its course. Her large family - I am the oldest of six children, all married with children of their own - made frequent visits to see mom/grandma, valuing the time together.

Our visits struck me as instructive for all of us as we "keep vigil", when we band together with family, friends, co-workers, congregation members and fellow citizens to pay attention, to wait for, to mark out time in preparation for some impending moment.

Here is the promise of abundance, the ways in which we suspend our own notions of time and progress and success to wait patiently and prayerfully for God's will to be done. This faith reaching to a deeper place in our lives, asking us to remember all the ways in which we are shaped by the people we care about; to console each other, to be faithful partners in the work of grieving loss and celebrating lives well-lived; to learn how healing is more often about broken hearts and spirits than about broken bodies; to be patient, to wait for things beyond our control to show us the way to a new place; to wonder at the awesome power of life and death, and of our grand and mysterious God; and to hope for things to come.

And when my mom passed into our God's loving embrace, we experienced what the hymn writer John Ylvisaker has called "just one last surprise," God's promise of abundant and eternal life. The light of the world. Come and see, indeed...

Thanks be to God. Amen.

PRACTICE THIS

>>All that we share<<

Augsburg colleague Jay Walljasper (who is co-teaching with me the honors seminar on why place matters) writes eloquently about the recovery of the commons tradition. His *All That We Share: A Field Guide to the Commons* (The New Press, 2010) is a wonderful compendium of stories and suggestions for making the commons come alive in your community and neighborhood.

He closes the book with "Fifty-One (Mostly) Simple Ways to Spark a Commons Revolution." They're all worth a try, but here are a few of my favorites to whet your appetite...

1. Challenge the prevailing myth that all problems have private, individualized solutions.
2. Introduce the children in your lives to the commons. Let them see you enjoying it and working with others to sustain it.
3. Treat commons spaces as if you own them (which, actually, you do). Keep an eye on the place. Tidy things up. Report problems or repair things yourself. Initiate improvement campaigns.
4. Get out of your house and spend some time on the stoop. The front yard, the street – anywhere you can join the river of life.
5. Conduct an inventory of local commons. Publicize your findings and offer suggestions for celebrating and improving these community assets.
6. Buy from local, independent businesses whenever possible. For more information, see www.amiba.net and www.livingeconomies.org.
7. Watch where your money goes. How do the stores, companies and financial institutions you use harm or help the commons?
8. Take every opportunity to talk with elected officials and local activists about the importance of protecting the commons.
9. Learn from everywhere. What bright ideas could be borrowed from other countries or nearby towns and neighborhoods?

10. Become a guerilla gardener, planting flowers and vegetables on neglected land in your neighborhood.
11. Use Creative Commons licenses for your own writing, music, videos. And other creative pursuits.
12. Spread some hope around. Explain how commons-based solutions can remedy today's pressing problems.

Jay is inspiring to our students and all of us with his vision for a world in which we claim all that we share. Get to work!

PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<

Wendell Berry's newest collection of essays, *Our Only World* (Counterpoint Press, 2015) extends his remarkable legacy of concern for the future of all of creation.

Augsburg colleague, Harry Boyte, has edited *Democracy's Education: Public Work, Citizenship and the Future of Colleges and Universities* (Vanderbilt, 2015), a collection of essays by higher ed leaders and others that is a sort of manifesto for reclaiming the public role of our institutions in the 21st century.

>>Darkness as gift<<

Poet Mary Oliver affirms the point I made in my homily.

The Uses of Sorrow

Someone I loved once gave me a box full of darkness.

It took me years to understand that this, too, was a gift.

(from *The Thirst*, 2006)

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>>Topics for upcoming issues<<

- Citizenship and work
- Architecture and place-making

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