

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<<

Happy early fall! School is in session here, a bit earlier than usual because of the late Labor Day, so we're in full swing greeting our largest entering class in college history. A good way to start a new academic year.

I was pleased with responses to my reflections on colleges being "student-ready" in the last issue of Notes, including a wonderful connection made by long-time reader, Mary Brumbach, at the Dallas County Community College District, who shared my thoughts with her institution's Vice Chancellor for Educational Policy, Dr. Fernando Figueroa. Dr. Figueroa and I were able to chat this summer about how our shared vision for colleges that are student-ready might transform our institutions and the students we serve. Thanks, Mary.

Paul Morris at the American Tinnitus Association also enjoyed the idea of a student-ready college and suggested, "perhaps social benefit organizations could do better by following a similar template and being 'donor-ready.'" How about that for a radical idea!

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. I thank my friends at Johnson, Grossnickle & Associates for their many years of abiding support for our reflective practice.

REFLECT ON THIS

>>Paths of mercy<<

I preached the following homily in the Augsburg Chapel during the first week of our new academic year – our 147th!

"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy..." (Matthew 5: 7)

Earlier this summer, I had the remarkable opportunity to be in Israel, exploring partnerships with Israeli and Palestinian organizations. While there, one of my most memorable experiences was the trip to the shores of the Sea of Galilee, where the intersections of the Biblical narrative with that historic place are visible and deeply moving. One such place was the amphitheater-like hillside overlooking the Sea where it is believed that Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount. As we begin our daily chapel services this academic year exploring "blessings," I am transported back to that hillside to consider how Jesus instructed all of us about what it means to be blessed.

As a theological ethicist, I have long found great inspiration in the Beatitudes as found in the Gospel of Matthew. As the American novelist Mary Gordon has written in reflection on the Beatitudes: “To say yes: for this I will try and change my life. And more: without this I would not know who I am.” In other words, the Beatitudes offer not simply rules for a good life; they are a way of describing who I am, who I am called to be. And, as Gordon further suggests, who I am and who I am called to be by the Beatitudes is very much tied to the sort of world Jesus intends for his followers to create – “a world that is safer and more generous.”

I am especially struck by this morning’s scripture from Matthew 5: 7, “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy,” I was intrigued to find that of the nine Beatitudes in Matthew, verse seven is the only one where you receive the same as you give. Being merciful begets mercy. If you’re poor in spirit, you get the kingdom. If you mourn, you are comforted. If you’re meek, you inherit the earth. But if you’re merciful, it’s right back at you. I suppose we could be a bit disappointed by that equation – it doesn’t seem quite fair given some of the other returns. Instead of being disappointed, though, I want to suggest that this is actually the beatitude that best defines what it means to live as faithful people in the world. The mutual dynamic of giving and receiving mercy are at the heart of the called life that we enjoy as people of God, the body of Christ, here and now in the midst of this neighborhood, city and world. To give and receive mercy are what it means to live our vocations in God’s world.

There is precedent for this claim about giving and receiving mercy. Religious historian Martin Marty was once asked what the distinctive mark of the Lutheran church is, to which he replied, simply, “Acts of mercy.” Martin Luther himself used the word “neighbor” more than many other important Lutheran words in his voluminous writings and made giving and receiving mercy a hallmark of his ethics. There is clear evidence that this commitment to giving and receiving mercy is a hallmark of Lutheran Christians – witness our legacies of educational, health care and social service institutions, not to mention the abiding hospitality and service offered by Lutheran individuals and congregations around the world.

We might have reason to pause here, however, for those who know anything about what Lutherans claim about being justified by faith alone through faith, you might think that our Lutheran Martins are missing something. Why this talk about mercy and neighbor when the central theological claim of our tradition is that we can’t earn our salvation – good works don’t merit redemption? But the fact is that it is precisely because we can’t earn it that we have been freed to live as merciful people in the world, knowing that mercy begets mercy. That is the foundation of healthy and just and faithful lives together in the world. God is in charge, God has a plan, and God’s plan is that faithful people will care for the earth and for each other with mutual mercy. God calls us to serve God’s world.

Theologically, Luther said it this way in his treatise, *The Freedom of a Christian* (as translated by our own Professor Mark Tranvik): “From faith there flows a love and joy in the Lord. From love there proceeds a joyful, willing, and free mind that serves the neighbor and takes no account of gratitude or ingratitude, praise or blame, gain or loss.” In other words, for Luther, our faith itself calls us out of ourselves and into love of the world, where what we know and do are always about serving our neighbor without account of our own standing. We give and receive mercy.

I am of the opinion that this simple verse from Matthew could be Augsburg’s motto because we do most certainly know what it means to give and receive mercy – to seek out what I call “paths of mercy” – to live our vocations in and for God’s world.

Mercy is the hospitality and welcoming that the Augsburg community practices with neighbors, strangers, students and each other. I am struck every day by the number of different ways members of the Augsburg community offer hospitality. From the diverse students, faculty and staff who find Augsburg a home at Augsburg, to the move-in ritual we have for first year students coming to campus to live in the residence halls, to the diverse neighbors who are welcomed on our campus to engage in important conversations for our neighborhood and world, to the remarkable ways in which Augsburg graduates are practicing hospitality in their own lives, and I could go on and on. It's certainly in the specifics of how we practice hospitality, but it's also in the attitude and spirit we bring to what it means to be a welcoming community. And genuine hospitality offers mercy so that it might know the mercy that comes from engagement with others. If it was just about welcoming folks well, then we might as well be a hotel. But if it's welcoming so that I might get to know you, to learn from you, to work with you to make the world more hospitable, then it's about mutuality, about giving and receiving mercy. It's a path of mercy that defines our lives of faith.

Mercy also is the sort of educational experience we aspire to offer our students. I hear from so many of our students about the relationships they gain here with fellow students, with faculty members and with those in the neighborhood and city who share their educational journeys. It is a hallmark of this place, I believe, to see education itself as a relationship that is marked by its giving and receiving. Parker Palmer has written of the central role of love – in both teaching and learning. A teacher loves his/her students – offers mercy – and the students return that love in engagement, questioning, growing in understanding and going out to share what they have learned with others. The poet William Wordsworth has written these words, which are my own creed as an educator, “What we have loved, others will love, and we will teach them how.” That is a description of what happens on this campus each and every day as we engage each other as fellow teachers and learners, hungry for knowledge and skills and perspectives so that we might share what we learn with others. It's about giving and receiving and serving God's world. Teaching and learning in this community place us on paths of mercy.

And mercy is faith in action, the passion to do good not for any recognition or reward but because God calls us to love the world. Our institutional calling, which we articulate this way: *We believe we are called to serve our neighbor*, makes the claim that faith, learning and service can never be separated because God intends that what we believe (the gift of faith), calls us to be educated (the privilege of an education), so that we might be of service (the obligation of making the world better for all God's people). I have the privilege to learn about and witness the work of our students, faculty and staff who are practicing mercy – both the giving and receiving of mercy – in the chapel, in the residence halls, in the classrooms, on playing fields, in the neighborhood and around the world. I love to brag about our Campus Kitchen program, led by our students, which prepares and shares food in the neighborhood, grows food in our community garden and buys food at our weekly Farmer's Market. It's all good work – it's merciful work – but it's not simply one-way service. Beth Florence, who graduated a few years ago, once told me that preparing and delivering meals was OK but not good enough for her, she needed and wanted to sit with the recipients of the meals, break bread together, and get to know each others' stories. She wanted food to be the occasion for giving and receiving mercy. Faith in action through learning and service for our neighbor and God's world. Paths of mercy.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. What abundant gifts we have been given from our gracious God – gifts of hospitality, education and faith active in love. Paths of mercy that mark

our lives together in community. For these many gifts – in this, our 147th academic year at Augsburg – we proclaim for all the world to hear: Thanks be to God! Amen

>>Higher education and the recovery community<<

We have a remarkable program at Augsburg called StepUp, which serves students recovering from addictions. It is the gold standard for collegiate recovery programs (if I say so myself!), offering 100 students a residential community, counseling services and a high-quality educational experience. Its outcomes are amazing with a nearly 90% abstinence rate and a network of families who celebrate the healing and reconciliation they find at Augsburg – after enduring harrowing recovery journeys. The students are main streamed into the college and are lauded as some of our most accomplished student and leaders. Learn more at www.augsburg.edu/stepup/.

Each fall, I spend time with the incoming StepUp students and make the following case for how our mission and work as a college is enhanced by our engagement with the recovery community. You will note references to the steps to recovery as found in the so-called “Big Book,” the recovery bible.

(1) *We are aware of “the narrative quality of human experience” (Stephen Crites) and how our intersecting stories weave a social fabric for our lives*

Step 12: “...to carry this message...”

- You are wonderful storytellers – I value the trust and confidence you have in me and this community to share your stories with us. And your stories are often full of heartache and tragedy and recklessness – before they turn to healing and redemption
- This is what life looks like – stories of the good, bad and ugly – depictions of reality that we must tell and hear, recognizing the messiness that often marks our personal and common lives
- Vocation as narrative – it’s not necessarily linear! Life unfolds and sometimes our stories are the only way we make sense of where we’ve come from and where we’re going (Norman Maclean on telling “true” stories)
- I am left with Reinhold Niebuhr’s powerful words: “Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime; therefore we are saved by hope. Nothing true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we are saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore, we are saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as from our own; therefore we are saved by the final form of love, which is forgiveness.” (from *The Irony of History*)

(2) *We embrace the inextricable ties between what we believe and how we live our lives.*

Step 3: “Made a decision to give our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understand God”

Step 12: “...to practice these principles in all our affairs.”

- This is about credo and vocation – about being and doing
 - Belief in the higher power – the deep and spiritual experiences that fundamentally change our perspectives, our relationships, our values
 - The notion that our lives have significance and meaning – the higher power is working through us to accomplish good in the world (God’s work, our hands)
 - Self, community and God – the ways in which we live out the ties between our faith and our calls
- (3) *We affirm the fact that the opportunities to be in community, to be educated, to be known and loved carry with them the obligations to be of service to others, to give back, to know and love our neighbors*

Step 8: “...make amends to them all.”

- For Augsburg, the idea of education for service is at the heart of our character as a college
 - Education thus is so much more than what we learn from books or in classrooms, it is our life in community and in the world
 - What we learn about ourselves and from each other in all of our relationships – moral inventory, confession, making amends and then living as one who knows that life is a gift
- (4) *We are committed to learning to “pay attention” and helping each other to attend to the most important people and values in our lives*

Step 11: “...praying only for knowledge of God’s will for us and the power to carry that out.”

- Here is an idea with theological, academic and civic meaning to us all – we live in a world full of temptations and distractions; how do we learn to pay attention to the most important people and values?
- Here is a lesson I have learned so well from getting to know our StepUP program and students; you teach me that paying attention to God, to your own lack of control and then to the family and friends who love you are at the core of recovery.
- I aspire to the same sense of mission-focus for our college, learning to attend to who we are, what we value and how we make a difference on campus and in the world

PRACTICE THIS

>>Creative benchmarking<<

One of the privileges I have in my work is to visit companies, businesses and other organizations around the globe and to witness how they live out their missions on a daily basis. I am always struck by what I learn that is of use to our work at Augsburg.

These experiences remind me time and again of an article that first appeared in the November/December 2000 issue of *Harvard Business Review* that described the concept of creative benchmarking, learning from other organizations about best practices for various organizational functions. I first wrote about the article in Notes 2-3 (February 2001) and thought it was worth

reprinting again. I hope you find the notion of creative benchmarking as intriguing and helpful as I have.

“Dawn Iacobucci and Christie Nordhielm, both professors at the Kellogg Graduate School of Management at Northwestern University, write in a recent issue of *Harvard Business Review* (November/December 2000) about their work on creative benchmarking. It is a fascinating article, full of good common sense ideas about how to compare our organizations and agencies with those whose businesses do not resemble ours.

They start from the customer’s point of view. First, list each step of your customer’s (read: client/student/member) experience from the initial recognition of need to the final follow-up after the interaction with them.

Next, determine which factors most influence the customer’s perception of value at each step.

Finally, identify companies or organizations that excel at each factor—no matter what industry they’re in. This process helps you identify relevant companies to study.

I recently asked a group of workshop participants to think about how people are welcomed to their organizations. I then asked what examples they could think of where welcoming guests was done well. One participant said that she thought churches did a good job of welcoming people (ushers meet guests and distribute programs; formal greeters often add to the welcome; someone may help you find a place to sit). We then explored how the best of what churches did to welcome guests could be replicated in our own organizations. And there you have a point of reference for creative benchmarking.

Simple advice for those of us who are always looking for best practices—no matter the source!”

PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<

Just a single reference for your consideration this issue...

My Augsburg colleague, Dr. Harry Boyte, Senior Scholar of Public Work Philosophy in our Sabo Center for Democracy and Citizenship, writes a regular blog post in the Huffington Post that is worth your attention. Harry’s work provides an important framework for understanding the intellectual and practical implications of genuine citizen engagement. A veteran of the civil rights movement, Harry’s reflections are more timely than ever as we heal our democracy. Find his regular posts at <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/harry-boyte/>.

>>To be of use<<

Here’s a favorite poem for your Labor Day reflections.

To be of use

The people I love the best
jump into work head first
without dallying in the shallows
and swim off with sure strokes almost out of sight.

They seem to become natives of that element,
the black sleek heads of seals
bouncing like half submerged balls.

I love people who harness themselves, an ox to a heavy cart,
who pull like water buffalo, with massive patience,
who strain in the mud and the muck to move things forward,
who do what has to be done, again and again.

I want to be with people who submerge
in the task, who go into the fields to harvest
and work in a row and pass the bags along,
who stand in the line and haul in their places,
who are not parlor generals and field deserters
but move in a common rhythm
when the food must come in or the fire be put out.

The work of the world is common as mud.
Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.
But the thing worth doing well done
has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.
Greek amphoras for wine or oil,
Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums
but you know they were made to be used.
The pitcher cries for water to carry
and a person for work that is real.

"To be of use" by Marge Piercy © 1973, 1982.

From CIRCLES ON THE WATER © 1982 by Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. and Middlemarsh, Inc.
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>>Topics for upcoming issues<<

- Citizenship and work
- College presidents as public intellectuals
- Chief strategy officers

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