

NOTES FOR THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

Volume Eleven, Number Two (December 2009)

"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 2010! I trust that your various holidays have been times of reflection and refreshment. I send all good wishes for a fine new year.

Not much chatter out there since my last Notes, which gives me an opportunity to say a bit about what I am noticing in my own reflective practice. Many of you ask how I put these bi-monthly Notes together – where do I find material, how do I find the time, etc.? The truth is that the process of these Notes has changed over the past 10+ years. Early on nearly every item that appeared was written specifically for Notes. These days most of what appears has been written for another occasion.

The consistency of my Notes, though, is what I noticed especially with this issue when I stepped back from what I had compiled and saw two abiding principles at work. First, my reflections (and the related practice) *have history*. In this issue, you will see various themes and authors that have been a part of my thinking for many years. As I write even for new occasions, I find wisdom and insight and provocation in these abiding themes. That history (and the present and future it makes possible) is central to my character as a citizen, an educator and a person. At the same time, my reflections (and related practice) make no sense outside the communities and relationships that shape and are shaped by them, i.e., my reflective practice *is social*. To a very great extent, that is the entire point of my spending this time every other month sharing with you what I have learned, questions I am asking, answers I may have found.

My understanding of the historical and social character of my reflection and practice is grounded in the work of the philosopher and educator, John Dewey, who writes in his *Experience and Education* (Touchstone Books, 1938) – in defense of his vision of a progressive education – that education must be understood both as a central value of democratic society and as characterized by a democratic spirit, i.e., both orderly and dynamic, historical and social. This may be more than you wanted to know about the underlying principles of my work, but I hope it offers you some insight into why I write what you read in these Notes!

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 (check out the fine new website!). 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

>>Patience<<

I preached the following homily in the Augsburg Chapel on the first Monday in the season of Advent. Long-time readers of these Notes will recognize sources of wisdom in this piece that have been important in my reflective practice for many years.

“For a thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night. (Psalm 90: 4)

I was thinking about the title of my homily yesterday – the first day of a new church year in this liturgical season of preparation that we call Advent – as I spent countless hours helping my 3rd grade son do his math and English homework. Patience, I thought to myself, God give me patience.

It is a prayer we all might offer up as Advent begins and we try to make sense of our life together as God’s people in the world – as a people who have received the gift of faith and now must live in the world as those with whom God has come to dwell. Patience, we pray, God give us patience.

As Psalm 90, assigned for this first Monday in Advent, shows us, patience is a long-standing theological topic. A thousand years for God is like a day just gone by, the Psalmist sings. My theological understanding of patience did not, however, come to me in my long years of divinity school study. Instead, I learned this important theological concept while reading a series of children’s books by Madeleine L’Engle, whose *A Wrinkle in Time (and the series that followed, including A Swiftly Tilting Planet)* was the story of a quirky girl named Meg, her overly-intelligent little brother, and their time-transcending journey to save their physicist father with the help of three mysterious beings.

L’Engle is the writer who first taught me the incredible difference between two words in Greek, *chronos* and *kairos*, which both are translated in English as “time,” but in the original Greek are vastly different. Chronos is the time on your wrist watch, time on the move, passing from present to future and so becoming past. Kairos, on the other hand, is qualitative rather than quantitative. It is time as a moment, a significant occasion, an immeasurable quality. Kairos is God’s time, it is real time—it is the *eternal now*.

As the Advent season begins, we recall the remarkable ways in which Kairos has broken into our Chronos – and how our lives will never be the same. When our God broke into human history to proclaim the kingdom among us, God came to show us in *chronos* the reality of *kairos*. Our God, heaven cannot hold him, we proclaim in this year’s Advent Vespers theme. Kairos is that time – God’s time – which breaks through chronos with a shock of joy, time where we are far more real than we can ever be when we are continually checking our watches. “Are we willing and able to be surprised?” L’Engle asks. “If we are to be aware of life while we are living it, we must have the courage to relinquish our hard-earned control of ourselves.” We must have the courage and patience to live aware that the kingdom of God is *close at hand*.

And here we are, just like the shepherds in Bethlehem 2000 years ago, going about their ordinary work when an angel appears before them and the glory of the Lord shines around them. "Do not be afraid," the angel announced. "I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you" (Luke 2:13-14). At this invasion of *kairos* into the routine of *chronos*, the shepherds choose to respond with action: "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about" (2:15).

So what will we do, living in this same curious paradox somewhere between the *already* and the *not yet*, presented with a similar decision. Are we willing to be surprised again by Christ's coming? Are we willing to act on it? Are we able to release the nervous control of our daily schedules in order to stop and see the Christ, the eternal now in our midst? Are we able to find the patience we need to be God's *kairos* people in the world?

I've been thinking a great deal lately about time and patience and how hard it is to keep up with all of the demands placed upon me (by myself and others!) We are part of a college community in which schedules and time demands mean that we are driven by *chronos*. And yet the message of the Advent season is "be patient" for there is something remarkable about to happen to and for you – in other words, you are about to know the gift of *kairos*. And here we are, living in the tension between human time (with all its demands) and God's time (with its gracious and freeing promise).

Several sources have helped me to describe and better understand the tension in my life between the time I do not have and the longer horizon that I believe must guide my life and work.

I've read and re-read James Gleick's fascinating book of essays, entitled *Faster: the Acceleration of Just About Everything* (Pantheon Books, 1999), written on the cusp of the millennium. How about that title? Hits pretty close to home, doesn't it? Listen to Gleick's words: "We are in a rush. We are making haste. A compression of time marks the century now closing. Airport gates are minor intensifiers of the lose-not-a-minute anguish of our age. There are other intensifiers—places and objects that signify impatience...Doctor's anterooms ("waiting" rooms). The DOOR CLOSE button in elevators, so often a placebo, with no function but to distract for a moment those riders to whom ten seconds seem an eternity. Speed-dial buttons on telephones...Remote controls..." (page 9). Gleick's essay titles read like a summary of my life: "Life as Type A," "Quick—Your Opinion?" "7:15. Took Shower." You get the point – this is our life in *chronos*!

And then I turn to Witold Rybczynski's biography of the great 19th century landscape designer, Frederick Law Olmsted, entitled *A Clearing in the Distance* (Scribner, 1999). In the précis for the book, we read this simple quote from Olmsted: "I have all my life been considering distant effects and always sacrificing immediate success and applause to that future." With those disquieting words, Olmsted, the designer of Central Park in New York and Mount Royal Park in Montreal, reminds us that the horizon of our lives matters. We must think on the end times, on the future good, on the history of our work and relationships, for only in our distant effects will we find the strength and courage and wisdom and patience to do our best work today—in the midst of this time.

William Schweiker, who teaches ethics at the University of Chicago, offers a theological take on Olmsted's distant effects, when he writes that "We live best as creative stewards of time." He describes two threads of thought in Western thought concerning time: one that time is full; the other that time is empty. We live in the tension between the two threads and creative stewards of time, he argues, are full of patience as they negotiate the tension.

And in the midst of that tension between time that is full and empty, we must act, we must go on, we must do as God intends for us to do. I find my inspiration to act in Biblical passages like this morning's psalm, and in wonderful devotional books like Martin Marty's *Our Hope for Years to Come: The Search for Spiritual Sanctuary* (Augsburg-Fortress Press, 1995), in which Marty offers these spirited and comforting words [about our times] – words that help me find the patience to live and act in the tensions between chronos and kairos...: "From the distance come sounds trumpeting encouragement. They herald reinforcements at hand, to be relied upon in our efforts of any day, of this day and night." (p. 39)

Here is the good news of Advent. God is breaking into our lives, the kingdom is come. Our God, heaven cannot hold him. And as we live in the tension of kairos and chronos, wondering whether we have the courage of the shepherds whose response to the proclamation of kairos was to go and find the Christ child, there are sounds of trumpeting encouragement, there are reinforcements at hand, there is our God who loves us so much...so much so that God came into our midst so that we might know the joy and surprise and grace of God's kingdom come, on earth as in heaven.

Reinforcements are at hand. May they be for all of us the source of comfort and strength and wisdom to live as a Kairos people. Patience, we pray, God give us patience. Advent blessings to you and thanks be to our God, Immanuel, with us forever and ever. Amen."

>>Blessed are the merciful<<

The following essay was written for an upcoming issue of *Till and Keep*, a journal published by Augsburg's "Exploring Our Gifts" program, a Lilly Endowment-funded project focused on integrating the theological concept of vocation into all aspects of the college's work. The specific context for the essay is a celebration of the legacy of Bernhard Christensen, the sixth president of Augsburg (I'm the tenth), whose theological perspective is central to the character of our college. I was asked to address the fifth of the so-called Christensen convictions. For the sake of convenience, I've eliminated footnotes from this version of the essay – if you'd like to have them, please let me know and I can send you the full version.

"To give and receive mercy

Conviction (5): Our Vocations Move Us Into God's World

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

That the theological concept of vocation has become central to Augsburg's academic mission –all undergraduates at Augsburg must complete two courses specifically focused on the idea and practice of vocation—is certainly testament to our many institutional ancestors who believed deeply that the Lutheran idea of vocation should inspire education for service in the world, no matter the particular career path chosen. For Bernhard Christensen, Augsburg's sixth president, there was an even more compelling reason for making vocation

central to Augsburg's work, and it was his abiding belief that faith and learning are inextricably bound up, not simply for academic purposes, but for the sake of God's world. Vocation – grounded in Christian faith and shaped by a liberal arts education – is the gift of a gracious God that propels us to do God's work in the world. Dr. Christensen's deep commitments to education, the church and the world shaped his entire career at Augsburg and have left us a legacy that is at the center of our work in the 21st century – the legacy of helping our students discern and follow their vocations in and for God's world.

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 recently 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 was recently asked to offer devotions as part of a series on the Beatitudes. Randomly assigned to 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 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 faculty and staff who stand on corners to welcome our weekend students on the first Friday and Saturday of the trimester, 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.

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.

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 currently 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 couple of 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.

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. Gifts of wise and faithful leaders like Bernhard Christensen, whose legacy guides our abiding commitment to educating students for vocations that serve God's world. For these many gifts – in this, our 141st academic year at Augsburg – we proclaim for all the world to hear: Thanks be to God!"

PRACTICE THIS

>>Creativity myths<<

I first published this piece five years ago (Notes 6:2) and have returned to Professor Amabile's work this fall as I work with our community to create and sustain a culture of innovation. It is remarkable how often we are stymied by myths that distract us from the authentic work to be done.

“Harvard professor Teresa Amabile, interviewed for *Fast Company* (December 2004), discusses six myths that many people believe are related to the sort of work environment in which creativity flourishes. In debunking the myths, she offers a straightforward approach to “smart” management, claiming that “when people are doing work that they love and they're allowed to deeply engage in it—and when the work itself is valued and recognized—then creativity will flourish. Even in tough times.”

Professor Amabile's six myths are:

- Creativity comes from creative types – just not true, she says. As a leader, you do not want to ghettoize creativity – everyone in your organization is capable of, and should be encouraged to, imagine novel and useful ideas and practices.
- Money is a creativity factor – certainly people should be compensated fairly for their efforts, but most people value more than money an environment that encourages and supports creative activity.
- Time pressure fuels creativity – research shows that people are less creative when under stress. The key issue is the ability to focus on the work, free from distractions, many of which arise when deadlines loom.
- Fear forces breakthroughs – to the contrary, Amabile's research shows that creativity is positively associated with joy and love and negatively associated with anger, fear and anxiety.

- Competition beats collaboration – instead, Amabile shows, the most creative teams are those that have the confidence to share and debate ideas.
- A streamlined organization is a creative organization – this is PR spin, according to Amabile. Downsizing creates distrust and that is not an environment that nurtures creativity.

For leaders and managers, Amabile suggests four simple strategies for building a creative work environment: (1) When time pressure is high, clear out the distractions; (2) React to problems with understanding and help; (3) Celebrate a good performance in public; (4) When times are tough, redouble your communications efforts.

Here's to a new year full of creativity.”

PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<

I've got many new books in my pile this holiday season.

As referenced above, I've very much enjoyed Mary Gordon's *Reading Jesus: A Writer's Encounter With the Gospels* (Pantheon, 2009).

I've also read Hugh Hecl's fascinating defense and explanation of thinking about our work in common, entitled *On Thinking Institutionally* (Paradigm, 2008) and Clayton M. Christensen's classic *The Innovator's Dilemma* (Harvard Business School, 1997), a powerful reminder that sometimes even our best efforts at managing and leading are not good enough! And then what do you do?

Finally, I'm reading a good bit about Chicago these days, readying myself for a Senior Honors Seminar here at Augsburg entitled “Legacies of Place,” which is focused on the history of Chicago and the ways in which place have shaped intellectual, political and cultural movements. The course begins with Eric Larsen's fun *Devil in the White City: Murder, Magic, and Madness at the Fair that Changed America* (Vintage, 2004). More about the course as it unfolds (including a Chicago field trip at the end of March!)

>>An anthem for love and children<<

Both of our children celebrate December birthdays and we enjoyed good family time this holiday season, causing me to recall these powerful words from Kahlil Gibran's “The Prophet,” which remind us that the work of stewardship is not about possession, it is about love.

“Love is Separateness”

Your children are not your children.
They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.
They come through you but not from you.

And though they are with you they belong not to you.

You may give them your love, but not your thoughts,
For they have their own thoughts.

You may house their bodies but not their souls,
For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you
cannot visit, not even in your dreams.

You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you.
For life goes not backwards nor tarries with yesterday.

You are the bow from which your children as living
arrows are sent forth.

The archer sees the mark upon the path of the infinite,
and He bends you with His might that His arrow may
go swift and far.

Let your bending in the archer's hand be for gladness;
For even as He loves the arrow that flies, so He loves also
the bow that is stable.

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>>Topics for the next issue (February 2010)<<

- Asking the right questions
- Studying war no more

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