

NOTES FOR THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

Volume Eleven, Number Three (February 2010)

"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'm a bit tardy with this issue of Notes as my travel schedule has been relentless. I trust that you have survived these long winter months with your sense of humor and good will intact. March 1 marks meteorological spring, I'm told – good news!

Long-time Notes reader, Julie Varee from Anchorage wrote after the last issue of Notes to say "The Kahlil Gibran piece (on children) couldn't have arrived at a better time. My 19-year-old daughter, Maddie is home on winter break from her sophomore year at Lewis & Clark College, and it's been so inspiring (and fun) to spend time with her. She has begun her life apart from her parents while remaining in close communication with us, seems well-equipped to make her way in and contribute something great to the world. Next year, she'll study in the Dominican Republic and do service work with Haitian refugees. She wants to be a foreign language teacher. Every day, I pray we've been good stewards of the wonderful gift that is our amazing daughter, that we've provided a "bow that is stable."

And, as a nice coincidence, Chicago friend Kathleen Carpenter, wrote to say: "You mentioned Erik Larson's book, *The Devil in the White City*, and a trip to Chicago (the field trip with my Honors class). I am a docent with the Chicago Architecture Foundation (CAF) and I give a tour based on the book. Larson gave CAF permission to name the tour after his book. You might find the tour interesting as part of your research." We've added the tour to our list of options for students during our late March visit to Chicago!

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

>>Fear and loving<<

I preached the following homily in the Augsburg College Chapel at the end of January – and also delivered a version of the homily that same week to a group of Lutherans who were exploring how to be faithful in the midst of an increasingly diverse world. It is a relevant

and timely topic – and one that we spend a good bit of time considering here at Augsburg as we reflect on our mission to be a college of the church in the city.

[Scripture cited: 2 John 1: 7-11, 3 John 1: 9-14, 1 John 4: 18-21]

“We are still a fretful nation.” So writes University of Southern California sociology professor Barry Glassner recently, commenting on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of his book, *A Culture of Fear*, which explored why Americans are so fearful of unlikely dangers. We live in perpetual anxiety, he argues, and we cast about for ways to overcome our fears. There is a literary tradition of sorts around responses to fear. 19th century Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard penned *Fear and Trembling*, his analysis of the existential human condition in the presence of the divine. A century later, gonzo journalist Hunter S. Thompson, looked around and wrote a series of *Fear and Loathing* books (*Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* is perhaps his best known), his provocative essays on the sense of anomie and meaninglessness in American culture. And, as Glassner points out in his review of our fears, lately we’ve tried to address our anxiety and fear by focusing on individual cases (an example he uses is how we psychologize ‘road rage’) rather than seeking more durable social solutions (like addressing horrific commutes and traffic congestion).

I think we all can recognize fear as a powerful force in human nature. We are creatures who fear from our earliest moments of life – afraid of the dark, of spiders, of heights, of being alone, of being with others, and so on. But, as my literary sources argue, this is about a good bit more than the fear of surroundings, this is fear in our souls and in our natures. And because we fear so deeply, we must seek ways to alleviate the fear that are substantial, that allow us to go on with our lives. This isn’t about simply turning on the light in the dark. This is about trembling and escaping and loathing and psychologizing in response to and as a means to overcome the fear in our lives.

I’ve been thinking a good bit about fear in our souls these past few weeks as I prepare to lead a Bible study tomorrow at a gathering of church leaders who are meeting to explore what the church and faithful people might do to combat racism. And I’ve begun to recognize, both from my preparatory reading and from the recent circumstances in our neighborhood and world, that racism and fear are inextricably bound up together. Racism is individual and institutional fear of the other, of difference, of the stranger who represents a race or culture or language that I don’t understand, that I fear. And what I do when I feel this fear is to seek responses that help me feel better. I ignore, I tremble, I loathe, I perpetrate violence, I use the familiar to put down the stranger.

The trouble is that the fear that is racism is not relieved in our souls or in our communities when we respond in these typically human ways. We are afraid of those differently colored than we are but our typical responses seem to have exacerbated and extended the fear rather than relieved it. I’ve been struck by some of the commentary about the earthquake in Haiti and how in its aftermath we are reminded of how our fear of otherness, of this nation borne of slaves, has led to the systematic oppression of these good people – and this despite the remarkable efforts of NGOs and courageous individuals who have fought the good fight there for years to make life better for Haitian people. We must go back to the original acts of racism and fear that stripped that country of its natural resources and left its people to generations of poverty and degradation.

Even here at Augsburg, we must face up to the racism and fear that insinuates itself into our common lives – even as we celebrate the remarkable diversity we have gained in our student body, we must admit that we still respond out of fear when faced with genuine otherness. Individually and institutionally we have yet to face our fears and the conflict they will inevitably occasion to know and practice what it means to not be afraid, to seek not to escape or loathe or tremble in our fear, but to find the capacity to live together as strangers.

I want to suggest that there is a worthy ancestor of this literature about responses to fear in the writer of what are called the Johannine epistles in the New Testament. The author, let's call him John – no one really knows exactly who wrote the letters – argues that the only way to overcome fear is by loving. Fear and loving.

In these three brief letters, we find John seeking ways to respond to the fears he sees in the early Christian community, fears that are about otherness – differences in practices and life experiences and expectations – fears that lead to disunity. It is fairly clear that John doesn't know exactly what to do.

A bit of exegesis is in order. The three Johannine epistles appear in a particular order, fronted by first John, which is a substantive and fairly philosophical essay on the spiritual life and overcoming our fears. But I am convinced by certain Biblical scholars that we can't read 1 John without first reading 2 and 3 John, both of which are very brief comments on the situation facing the community.

We read them this morning in an unusual order. In 2 John, the author writes to select members of the community, suggesting that the deceit and evil that they find in others leads to a straightforward response: separate yourself from these people whom you know to be unworthy, do not welcome these evildoers in your house. In his third letter, John seems to admit that the disunity in the community is intractable and that he needs to come and address the community personally.

And so we come back the first letter, in which it seems that John never was able to visit and so he needed to write down what to do in response to the fear the community was experiencing. And his recommendations are quite remarkable as we read summarized in this text from 1 John 4.

“There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. Those who say ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers and sisters, are liars; for those who not love a brother or sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from God is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.”
(1 John 4: 18-21)

To overcome this fear that has broken our community, John says we must...

- Accept that all of creation comes from our gracious and loving God – a theological claim – this is how God intends for God's people to live (a new commandment aimed not at punishing, which is what fear demands, but instead as the moral contours of a good community – fear is about punishment, but God is about a beloved community). Our faithful response to the fear of otherness is, above all, to place our fear in the arms of our loving and awesome God. What

would it mean for us to lay our racism right here at this altar, to admit our fear and then to ask what God is doing in our midst to show us a new way to live together? (Example at Our Saviour's Lutheran Church of naming not only the victims we pray for, but also the perpetrators. Placing our fears at the altar.)

- See these diverse brothers and sisters – name them and their gifts, calls and accountability in our midst – personally, my story of our “Asian” kids, naming their otherness is a first step to accepting that otherness and learning to love them – socially, Jane Addams and her maps and papers, knowing our diverse neighbors so that we can learn to live together. What would it mean for us to truly see those who are different than we are, to engage them as fellow travelers? Perhaps our racism – which is often aimed at the abstract “other” – would begin to break down if we talked with each other with genuine openness and interest. (Example of intergroup dialogue projects at Augsburg.)
- Love these diverse brothers and sisters – not on our terms, but on theirs – this is not about minimalizing our differences, that is an extension of our fear – instead it is about embracing who we are and who our neighbors are, and finding a new way ahead in love. I wonder if Professor Glassner is on to something when he suggests that our psychologizing of the dangers we perceive in our lives is a futile response to our fear. Instead, he suggests, we need to realize that our fears are often grounded in common needs and challenges – needs like safe schools and healthy neighborhoods and an engaged civic life – responses to which might be a much more fruitful (and I might add, loving) way to overcome our fears. Think about Haiti and the difference it might make if our responses there were less driven by the crisis of human and natural disasters, and more by our desire to create the sort of society we (and the Haitians) believe they deserve. Racism keeps the “other” down – it feeds off of and perpetuates fear. Love seeks to build up, to create the sort of world God intends for all God's people.

It is really quite simple, John reminds God's faithful people, “(T)hose who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.” In our culture of fear, there is no more urgent and relevant Word. Thanks be to our loving God! Amen.

>>Drum majors for love<<

On Monday, the Augsburg community gathered for the 22nd annual convocation in celebration of the life and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. – always a meaningful event to remember Dr. King and hear a call to action to live in the path he (and others) trod in pursuit of justice, peace and reconciliation.

Coincidentally I was in Atlanta last week and visited the historic Ebenezer Baptist Church, where Dr. King grew up with his father as senior pastor, and where he served as co-pastor and delivered some of his most memorable sermons. This was the church where Dr. King was surrounded throughout his life by a beloved community of friends and family. This was the church where Dr. King learned and preached the gospel with such power and passion. This was the church where Dr. King was formed as a person of faith who longed for peace and justice in our country and in the world – and who worked to make it a reality through his public ministries.

For all of this evocative history of Dr. King and the Ebenezer congregation, there is an apt lesson, I think, in the fact that the historic Ebenezer sanctuary is now a national historic site, essentially a museum. Ebenezer Baptist Church still exists, now lodged in a new, modern building – and its important and historic work goes on in the 21st century – but the place that shaped Dr. King’s life and work no longer exists and I wonder how that fact offers us an important caution as we gather here in 2010 in this place to consider how we might honor Dr. King by carrying forward his work, his ministry, his faith and passion for peace and justice.

At a minimum, it seems to me, we must use occasions like this to think about what it means that we can’t take for granted that the historic places that shaped people like Dr. King to pursue his historic work on our behalf no longer exist in the way they did. The truth is that we should not take any of this for granted because our work together on the path set by Dr. King is more important and more relevant than it has ever been.

This intentionality about our shared public work to make the world more fair and peaceful and just seems especially significant these days. What would Dr. King have to say about the murders of innocent neighbors at the Seward Market just a few days ago? And what would Dr. King have to say about the horrific situation of those in Haiti suffering in the aftermath of the earthquake – suffering not only from the natural disaster but also from decades of poverty and neglect? I have no doubt he would have much to say and much to do if he were still in our midst. But he is not here and we are.

The wondrous gift we have from Dr. King to face our work in the world takes us right back to the historic sanctuary of Ebenezer Baptist Church, where in early February 1968, just two months before his assassination, Dr. King stood in the pulpit and preached a sermon that has recently been brought to my attention again by our colleague, Harry Boyte, co-director of the Center for Democracy and Citizenship at Augsburg. That sermon, entitled “The Drum Major Instinct,” is a clear example of Dr. King’s remarkable ability to describe the human predicament. Commenting on the story in Mark’s gospel about John and James asking to be seated at Jesus’ left and right hands in heaven, Dr. King says that the two disciples are like all of us who desire recognition and importance. As he tells the Ebenezer congregation, this longing for earthly forms of recognition is the pathology of human nature, the instinct that if not harnessed can become dangerous – for individuals and for societies.

Though you might think that Dr. King would suggest that the only faithful response to this human predicament – this need to be recognized, our egos stroked – is to go to the opposite extreme, to humble servitude, to sacrifice and self-effacement, which is not what he preaches or practices. Instead, Dr. King says that if being a drum major is the human instinct, then what faithful people need to do is to take up the work of being drum majors for what God intends for God’s people. Be drum majors for love, for moral excellence, for generosity, for justice and peace in God’s world.

This is how Dr. King was formed by Ebenezer Baptist Church – to be a drum major for greatness in service to our neighbors. And this is the legacy we have from this place called Ebenezer and this man named Martin...to reflect on how we will be drum majors for reconciliation and peace in our neighborhood...to imagine how we will be drum majors for service to our fellow global citizens in Haiti, to meet their needs now and in the future...to believe that God intends us to be drum majors for justice and righteousness in the 21st century.

As Dr. King concludes his stirring sermon: “Yes, Jesus, I want to be on your right or your left side, not for any selfish reason. I want to be on your right or your left side, not in terms of some political kingdom or ambition. But I just want to be there in love and in justice and in truth and in commitment to others, so that we can make of this old world a new world.” I think we can all say Amen to that.

PRACTICE THIS

>>Peacemaking<<

Augsburg is hosting the 22nd annual Nobel Peace Prize Forum this year (March 5 and 6) and we have the great pleasure of welcoming our many guests from our sister colleges, from the Twin Cities and from around the world, who come to join us in honoring the remarkable work of 2008 Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Martti Ahtisaari, who models for all of us what it means to devote your life’s work to peacemaking. We look forward to our conversations about how we might gather the will – the moral, political and spiritual will – to make peace in the world.

I have long been a student of those who both study and practice peacemaking, and I continue to learn from several authors whose work – while realistic about our human 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.

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 retired 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.

We gather together in the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize Forum as those committed to conversation, love and transcendence – as ambassadors of trust in a fearful world – as those called to peacemaking in the world.

PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<

Lots of reading on airplanes these days – I received a Kindle as a birthday gift in January and am enjoying its convenience (and relative lack of weight!) I now have a subscription to the *International Herald Tribune*, which shows up every morning on my machine – a media window to the wider world.

A couple of books I have found intriguing and helpful:

- *Committed* (Viking Penguin, 2010), Elizabeth Gilbert’s sequel to *Eat, Pray, Love*
- *The Metaphysical Club* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), Louis Menand’s romp through American intellectual history

>>May it happen for you<<

The Welsh poet, Shannagh Pugh, offers this powerful reminder of the promise of hope. I first read this poem as an invocation at a dinner with Dr. Oscar Arias Sanchez, former president of Costa Rica and 1987 Nobel Peace Prize laureate, and I will offer it again this

year in honor of the 2008 Peace Prize laureate, Martti Ahtisaari. Some men (and women!) do become what they were born for...

“Sometimes”

Sometimes things don't go, after all,
from bad to worse. Some years, muscadel
faces down frost; green thrives; the crops don't fail,
sometimes a man aims high, and all goes well.

A people sometimes will step back from war;
elect an honest man; decide they care
enough, that they can't leave some stranger poor.
Some men become what they are born for.

Sometimes our best efforts do not go
amiss; sometimes we do as we meant to.
The sun will sometimes melt a field of sorrow
that seemed hard frozen: may it happen for you.

May it happen for you!

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

- Asking the right questions
- Evolving social arrangements

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