NOTES FOR THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

Volume Eleven, Number Four (April 2010)

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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 am tardy again this month, for which I apologize. I'm in China now with the Augsburg Choir, celebrating its 75th anniversary with a wonderful tour of this remarkable country. We are visiting Beijing, Guilin, Zhuhai and Hong Kong – and then I am going on to Singapore to visit a faculty colleague who is on leave there. The extra special thing about this trip is that I am traveling with my nine-year old son, Thomas – who has studied Mandarin for three years in his immersion elementary school. Come to find out he has learned his lessons well!

Check out the blog and pictures from our China trip:
http://www.travelpod.com/members/augsburgchoir

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.

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REFLECT ON THIS

>>A liberal arts life<<

I offered the following address at our annual Honors Convocation last month and am struck by the convergence of themes in my work that are linked to a liberal arts education. I guess I'm in the right line of work!

"This is a fine and important occasion – and we've all gathered and dressed up to mark our pride in your many achievements, in the quality of your minds and hearts, in the passion and courage you have shown in your journeys here at Augsburg, in the ways you have made Augsburg and the world better, and in the promise you offer all of us in your leadership. We honor you – lift you up – set you apart with accolades and cords and congratulations. You are among the best and brightest, we are proud of you, and it is a privilege for me to offer some brief thoughts this afternoon that might help frame our common understanding of how an Augsburg education – honorably pursued – grounded in the liberal arts – leads to a way of life, what I am bold to call "a liberal arts life."

I think it is fair to say that there is considerable confusion among diverse audiences in 21st century America about the meaning of the liberal arts. I have spent a good bit of my career studying the issues raised by this confusion and I could spend a good bit of my time this afternoon exploring why it is that this ancient tradition of education for citizenship suffers for lack of public understanding – but I won't rehearse those arguments here (big sigh of relief!)

Instead I want to consider a different beginning point, i.e., what we might learn about the liberal arts by focusing on what we hope it might mean for the world that there is such a thing as an education grounded in the liberal arts – by focusing on you, our honored graduates, and what we hope for and expect from you as you go into the world to live as liberal arts graduates. What does a liberal arts life look like?

Allow me to suggest three ideas that might begin our conversation. I want to suggest that these three ideas follow a simple pattern or formula that sum up my understanding of a liberal arts life. That simple, and admittedly provocative, pattern is this: the liberal arts have prepared you to "Think, Act, and Give a Damn." With all respect to those who might object to my language, I need to tell you that I once promoted this summary of the liberal arts as a marketing scheme for prospective college students – and it actually worked well, even as I answered all of the phone calls and emails from local clergy. I finally called my Lutheran pastor dad, who gave me a pass – thanks, dad.

So, here are some initial thoughts about thinking, acting and giving a damn – about your liberal arts lives.

<u>THINK: PAYING ATTENTION</u>

Paying attention may be the most important lesson you have learned about how to think as you go out from Augsburg College to make your mark and to be good citizens of the world…

What does paying attention have to do with the liberal arts?

I had a revelation a few years ago about liberal arts education while listening to a presentation by a religion professor at Rockford College, where I served before coming to Augsburg. He described his work over a couple of years with a small group of Muslim students to develop a new introductory religion course on Islam. As I listened to his engaging story, I was reminded of what I believe deeply about the challenge we have in the 21st century when it is easy to be more worried about education for a career than about learning that stretches the imagination and offers us the skills, knowledge and values to live in a complex world. What this faculty member taught me is that to genuinely embrace liberal arts learning, we need to pay attention, to attend to each other and to what is good and valuable in our lives, and to practice extreme patience, deep humility and a suspension of disbelief in our learning and in our lives – all attitudes and characteristics that are rare in our culture (and in our colleges).

He told a story of how he – on the cusp of retirement – set out to learn as an amateur. He admitted the mistakes he made in describing Islam to students. He described his childlike efforts to learn a bit of Arabic. He described being corrected in class by the Muslim students. He talked about misconceptions of the Islamic faith and tradition that he (and we) needed to debunk. What I learned from him was that education in the liberal arts – a core

pillar of our mission at Augsburg – is about so much more than what we learn; it is about why and how we learn. Liberal arts learning – whether in the traditional disciplines or in professional studies – is about the love, patience and humility it takes to learn to pay attention, to attend to what we most value.

Simone Weil has said that "Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity." A liberal arts approach to education – no matter the subject or topic – is well-suited to cultivate attention, "And *attention*, like listening, engenders genuine and lasting learning."

Brad Sullivan, who teaches at Western New England College, has recently challenged all of us who care about education to consider attention as a topic of focused inquiry. Sullivan's argument is that the ways of knowing most conducive to the purposes of a liberal arts education – grounded in a historical perspective and having their genesis in personal engagement, inquiry and critical consideration – are inextricably bound up with the cultivation of attention. "Experience-centered, inquiry-centered liberal arts learning helps them to cultivate and practice the kinds of attention that will make them intelligent observers, diligent critics, and thoughtful actors on the stage of human life."

Further, sociologist Robert Bellah and his colleagues define paying attention in *The Good Society* as the core skill of a strong democracy. Attending to the things we most value, being mindful of the most important values and relationships and principles (and not getting distracted by all the rest) and taking responsibility both individually and as a society (through institutions) for what we most care about, are ways of thinking and knowing that you learn from the liberal arts and that prepare you to lead in the world. That is how paying attention is at the core of a healthy democracy and that is what I challenge you to do as you go out into the world – and what you have learned here at Augsburg College and from all your teachers, families, churches, friends, and so forth, is the "stuff" of a good life, the lens through which you pay attention as you live in the world.

So what is it that I would have you pay attention to? I can't prescribe that for you – that is the genius of the liberal arts and democracy, it demands that you take responsibility for what you and your community care about – it links personal responsibility with common purpose – and when we get distracted, or stop paying attention, the personal and common often get separated and in most cases we stop caring about the most important things for our society. Important and valuable things like learning about those who are different than we are and engaging in healthy and civil conversations about the common good and seeking to understand and embrace the needs of our neighbors. Thinking – paying attention – is at the heart of a liberal arts life, marked by patience, humility and love.

<u>ACT: COMMON WORK</u>

I believe that one of the most overlooked aspects of a liberal arts education is actually what I might call the rules of engagement in our institutions. We have opportunities each and every day on our campuses to model for students and each other what it means to live together in a healthy community, neighborhood and democracy – in other words, we teach each other how to "act." From the residence halls to the classroom; from participation in decision-making to communication practices; from accountability for actions to fair and transparent policies – I think we need to consider how institutions dedicated to the liberal arts are promoting good citizenship in consistent and effective ways. I have labeled this way of

acting "common work," and want to suggest that daily life at Augsburg is a source of much wisdom for a liberal arts life that seeks to promote common work.

As many of you know – since many of you entered the Augsburg community when I did four years ago – we have named five abiding principles for our lives together at Augsburg that I would contend are the building blocks of common work:

- *We work out of abundance*. This is the promise of abundance in a world of scarcity – this is the promise into which we are called as God's people. This also is the promise of civic prosperity, commonwealth, and the foundation for mature citizenship, doing things together that we cannot do as well alone.
- *We live with generosity* – "And the Word became flesh" (John 1: 14a) is our historic motto. It is the generosity of our lives and whereabouts that we celebrate. It is our nature and identity and character that we lift up, our links to a particular place and culture and set of values and practices that make us Augsburg – as we have been known since 1869.
- *We learn through engagement* – In many ways, engagement is an obvious aspect of Augsburg's longstanding traditions of experiential education and community relations. Engagement involves both attitude and behavior. We engage each other because we are committed to learning from each other. We engage each other because together we are stronger.
- *We educate for service* – Service is by no means an alien concept for Augsburg. In fact, our long-beloved motto, "Education for service," is ready evidence that Augsburg has made service a central aspect of its curriculum and campus life throughout its history. The sort of service I most value at Augsburg is the sort of reciprocity and mutuality that characterizes service not as an array of random acts, but as a way of life, a set of values, a democratic ethic. It's about a vision of democracy as a social ethic – the genius of balancing individual needs and interests with the common good.
- *We see things whole* – We see things whole is a "liberal arts" way of holding our lives together in this college community in trust. Seeing things whole provides an organizational framework for planning and problem-solving that is grounded in a vision of wholeness and interrelatedness – we're all in this together and our various voices and perspectives together best ensure our common purpose and engagement.

Here then are the guiding values, principles and practices of a community that is dedicated to what I would call an authentic civic education. Here are the practices of citizenship for democracy. We are, in a very real sense, committed to educating students who understand and practice within the broader narrative which recognizes that we must not attempt prematurely to resolve the messiness, the tensions of our lives, but instead find in those tensions the "stuff" of lively public discourse, civic literacy and engagement, and the promise of mature and meaningful common work. We are called to be people of abundance, generosity, engagement and service – people who see things whole and hold common purpose in trust – people who grasp the call to citizenship as a distinctive and meaningful vocation in the world.

I want to offer a concrete example of where a lesson about common work might be learned from our recent experience here on campus. And it has to do with the selection of our speaker for the May commencement, Governor Pawlenty. I, of course, am aware that some

of you are unhappy about this choice of a speaker! But the lesson for me is not about who the speaker is – there are plenty of reasons why we might bring the chief executive of our state to campus for this special occasion, agree with him or not. Instead, the lesson for me is that I did not put a process in place that gave students a voice in the selection of the honorary degree candidates and commencement speakers. I did not model the sort of practice that will teach you how I hope you will lead in your workplace and neighborhood and the other settings where common work is the way we should act. If I had done so, we might have learned more together about how we make these decisions, about what is important for a college dedicated to the liberal arts when it comes to selecting public figures to address our community, about how we might disagree with a choice and yet value the practice of civil discourse when we don't agree.

Lessons can be both positive and negative – and still be constructive. I made a mistake in not involving students more directly in this important process. I admit my mistake – which, I hope, is a lesson we all will learn. And we work together to make things right. Earlier this afternoon, deans Farley and Garvey met with a group of student leaders to discuss how we plan to involve students in the commencement planning in the future years.

Common work – acting together as those committed to stronger organizations and neighborhoods and societies – a liberal arts way of living.

GIVE A DAMN: THE CALL TO JUSTICE

You all know that I could go on and on about what it means for a liberal arts life to be characterized by a commitment to justice. Earlier this winter, Professor Lori Brandt-Hale offered wise words in a chapel homily in which she suggested that the work of hospitality is not enough if it is not accompanied by the work of seeking justice. We must have the passion and commitment, the sense of unrest and dis-ease, the anger perhaps, to recognize that all of our thinking and acting must seek to make a difference for those in our midst who deserve better. And we can – we must – help to make things better. That is a central tenet of the liberal arts life.

Paying attention to what is most important and valuable. Working together as citizens to achieve more than we can accomplish alone. Caring so much that it hurts. I'll leave you with a poem to make this point. Here comes Seamus Heaney, the Welsh poet, who writes the following in "The Cure at Troy:"

From "The Cure at Troy"

Human beings suffer,
they torture one another,
they get hurt and get hard.
No poem or play or song
can fully right a wrong
inflicted or endured.

The innocent in gaols
beat on their bars together.
A hunger-striker's father
stands in the graveyard dumb.

The police widow in veils
faints at the funeral home.

History says, Don't hope
on this side of the grave.
But then, once in a lifetime
the longed for tidal wave
of justice can rise up,
and hope and history rhyme.

So hope for a great sea-change
on the far side of revenge.
Believe that a further shore
is reachable from here.
Believe in miracles
and cures and healing wells.

Call the miracle self-healing:
The utter self-revealing
double-take of feeling.
If there's fire on the mountain
Or lightning and storm
And a god speaks from the sky

That means someone is hearing
the outcry and the birth-cry
of new life at its term.

We honor you this afternoon, our most distinguished students, and I leave you with the challenge to live a liberal arts life. We've done our best to prepare you to pay attention, to work together and to seek justice – to think, act and give a damn. We await with great anticipation how you will make us proud and the world a better place. Congratulations and thank you."

>>Jerusalem<<

I offered the following homily in our daily chapel as the academic year wound down.

(Scripture: Psalm 122)

Jerusalem—built as a city that is bound firmly together…For the sake of the house of the Lord our God, I will seek your good.

"If you pay attention to such things, you will know that from about the middle of the Lenten season through the celebration of Pentecost, the narrative of our worship is linked to and based in the city of Jerusalem. From the time that Jesus turns his ministry on the path to Jerusalem - to the grand entrance into the city with palms waving his way - to the tragic events of Holy Week, Jesus' last meal with his disciples, his arrest and appearances before the religious and secular leaders, culminating in his crucifixion on a hill just outside the city – to the experience of the empty tomb on Easter morning – to the appearances of the risen

Christ to the faithful in upper rooms – to Christ's ascension – to the remarkable sending forth of the disciples to carry on ministry in Jesus' name on Pentecost – the city of Jerusalem is the backdrop and the context for this remarkable drama that we know as the heart of the gospel.

And it is striking to consider the dynamic that plays out in the sacred city. The city that calls strangers in. The city that welcomes with great pageantry. The city that is home to civic and religious leaders whose efforts often intersect and sometimes conflict. The city where feet are washed and bread broken together. The city where disciples betray and deny their master. The city that crucifies its prophets. The city where redemption is glimpsed even when all seems lost. The city where friends huddle in fear, seeking evidence that their work is not in vain. The city that is the setting for remarkable diversity of language and culture. The city that sends its citizens forth to follow their calls of ministry and service in the world.

The city that is the place where both the worst and the best of human experience occur side by side. The city of paradox. The city that conspires and betrays and denies and crucifies – and the city that welcomes and aspires and redeems. The city – where God is present in the midst of all the paradox and messiness. For the sake of the house of the Lord our God, I will seek your good.

This is Jerusalem, a city with abiding relevance to our lives of faith – a city of ancient and contemporary significance – and a city characterized by often messy intersections and tensions that illustrate for us the themes that play themselves each and every day right here in Cedar-Riverside and Minneapolis, in our city where we seek to be God's faithful people.

As some of you know, I am co-teaching with Professor Lars Christianson this semester a course for senior honors students on "Chicago and Legacies of Place." We are having a good time with our students exploring the ways in which a particular place like Chicago – a city of big shoulders, Carl Sandburg once wrote – is the source of various intellectual and cultural legacies. As we learn about the Columbian Exposition of 1893, about Jane Addams and John Dewey and their approach to education and social service, about architects whose vision to reach the sky has defined the horizon in Chicago for more than a century, about Second City Improv and its sense of social and political humor, about writers and activists for whom Chicago was a laboratory for both reflection and practice – we have learned about how cities like Chicago can be settings both for remarkable aspirations – like reaching for the sky and hosting world fairs – and for deeply tragic failures – like the thousands who have died in the city alone and anonymous. A city that welcomes and celebrates and aspires – and a city that turns its back and fails to live up to its aspirations.

So what lessons might we take from Jerusalem and Chicago that are of importance to our own lives at Augsburg here in Minneapolis? What is it about cities that we must understand as we seek to be God's faithful people in this place?

My first answer to that question is summed up in a familiar verse from Jeremiah: *But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare will you find your welfare.* (Jeremiah 29:7, RSV) The first thing we must do is embrace our responsibility, our common calling to care for the city, to love the city and seek its welfare. This is such an interesting challenge in the history of Augsburg. Last summer, I worked with Juve Meza on an URGO project that explored the history of Augsburg's relationship to its place and its neighbors. One of the things that Juve learned in his project is that

Augsburg had a difficult relationship with its urban location for a significant part of its history – at one time, we seriously considered moving the campus to Richfield – and even when that effort failed, it was 30 or 40 years before Professor Joel Torstenson and his colleagues developed a framework for Augsburg's role in the city that sought to embrace the city as our home, as the place where we are authentically engaged in our mission-based work. It can be difficult to love Jerusalem or Chicago or Minneapolis when they betray and crucify, when they are fearful and dangerous places – but love them we must, Jeremiah reminds us, if we are to do God's work and find our own welfare. We are called to love the city with all of its tensions and messiness – and therein we will find our own redemption.

My second point about cities is that we must be open to their remarkable otherness – the diversity of friends and strangers alike – if we are to do God's work here. I remember vividly one of my first forays into our neighborhood. I was shepherded through the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood by the legendary Mary Laurel True, whose cell phone number is on the walls of most Somali homes and businesses in our neighborhood – because they know she will help! Mary Laurel introduced me to good people whose lives and work intersects with the college. We sat in one of the mosques in the neighborhood and spoke with the elders about peace and the God of Abraham; about our lives here together in Cedar-Riverside; about our children and the aspirations we have that their lives will be meaningful and successful; about the world and how frightening it can be to live with strangers; about democracy and civil discourse. In other words, we spoke as fellow humans living together in the city. On Good Friday, Jesus died on the cross alongside common criminals – who, like all of us – have strayed from the path of righteousness and yet Jesus included them in his final prayers. On Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came to the disciples in Jerusalem, giving them the wisdom and skills to engage with strangers of many languages and cultures, to pray together in new and strange vocabularies. Today, we live alongside of immigrants from far and wide who share our fears and our aspirations. In our diversity, God is at work and we are called to love these friends and strangers with whom we live in the city.

Finally, I believe that those who are called to God's work in the city must learn from the work of the late Jane Jacobs, the legendary urban theorist, whose *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (originally published in 1961) was a clarion call to arms for all those who loved the diversity and energy of cities that was being ravaged by trends in architecture and city planning. One of Jacobs' main points was that the well-being of cities is defined primarily by common, ordinary things. Common things like sidewalks, parks, defined neighborhoods, and a diversity of architecture styles and buildings of different ages. These common, ordinary things, when thought about with the needs and aspirations of citizens in mind, will create healthy, sustainable and vital urban centers. It is not about spending a huge amount of money, she warned, it is about "the innate abilities (of cities) for understanding, communicating, contriving and inventing what is required to combat their difficulties." It is about pageantry and ritual, about the small denials and acts of kindness, about meeting in upper rooms to wash each other's feet and break bread together, about the tensions of daily life where the religious and secular intersect and sometimes conflict, about talking with each other even when we don't understand, about being sent forth to do God's work even when it is not clear where the work will lead us. It is about, in other words, a reflective practice of city life – what we might call the genuine work of urban planning.

Jerusalem, Oh Jerusalem. We pray for your peace, O sacred city. City of both the crucifixion and the resurrection. City of stranger and friend. City that calls us in and sends us forth. City that marks out our lives of faith now as it did millennia ago. City that reminds

all of us that our welfare, our redemption, depends on how well we tend these sacred and holy streets and neighborhoods and neighbors. City that is our home – now and for life eternal. Thanks be to God. Amen."

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PRACTICE THIS

>>Remembering<<

I am reprinting here the description and one example of a year-long series of scriptural studies that we are using with our College Board of Regents this year to help them tie their work as Board members to the heritage and mission of our institution. This series is being led by my colleague, Dr. David Tiede, former president of Luther Seminary, who has been on the Augsburg faculty for the past five years as the Christensen professor of religion and vocation. What follows are his words about this enterprise – which, I think, are compelling!

"In this year long exercise, the Augsburg College Board of Regents is participating in the ELCA's *Book of Faith* initiative where "dwelling in the word" of scripture means to "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly." The enduring question for Regents is "Why are we at the governance table of this Lutheran institution?" We are exploring scriptural stories together with an approach to the "WORD," where each letter identifies a distinct dimension of our vocations as Regents:

- **W** = Welcome: Who we are called to welcome with awe and expectation
- **O** = Oversee: Why we hold Augsburg's resources and vocations in trust
- **R** = Remember: What have we received
- **D** = Deliberate: How we discern, disagree, and decide on what to do

Our third WORD session on April 30 will focus on the story in Deuteronomy where Moses warns Israel against claiming entitlement, just as this people moves from the scarcity of slavery to the abundance of freedom in their own land.

We will hear and interpret this story in our effort to understand what we are doing as Augsburg Regents. This story of abundance interprets how we hold Augsburg and its promise in trust. We do not claim our rights or possess privileges. We steward Augsburg's historic institutional strengths to bless the world.

In <u>On Thinking Institutionally</u>, Hugh Heclo contrasts institutions with organizations. "To be institutionally minded," he notes, "is to enter and participate in a world of larger, self-transcendent meanings … because institutions are an inheritance of valued purpose and moral obligation, they constitute socially ordered groundings of human life. " (p. 107)

Heclo adds (p. 127), "Amid the perpetual perishing that marks our individual existences, institutions are weathered presences. It is intellectually interesting and important to think about them."

The governance of Augsburg is an exercise in institutional thought and practice, remembering the historic grounds of the institution's distinctive strengths and playing those powers forward to make the world a more trustworthy place.

To discern our calling, we will explore this rich scriptural story together.
We will listen as if we are Israel in this story, listening for a divine word to us.

Deuteronomy 8:

6 Therefore keep the commandments of the LORD your God, by walking in his
ways and by fearing him. 7 For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land, a land
with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, 8 a
land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and
honey, 9 a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing, a land
whose stones are iron and from whose hills you may mine copper.

10 You shall eat your fill and bless the LORD your God for the good land that he has
given you. 11 Take care that you do not forget the LORD your God, by failing to keep his
commandments, his ordinances, and his statutes, which I am commanding you today.

12 When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, 13 and
when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all
that you have is multiplied, 14 then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the LORD your God,
who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, 15 who led you
through the great and terrible wilderness, an arid wasteland with poisonous snakes and
scorpions. He made water flow for you from flint rock, 16 and fed you in the wilderness with
manna that your ancestors did not know, to humble you and to test you, and in the end to
do you good.17

Do not say to yourself, "My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this
wealth."18 But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get
wealth, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing
today.

1. What do you see God doing with Israel and for the world in this story?

2. What do you hear God saying to you in your vocation in the world?

3. What do you hear God saying to us as Regents who hold Augsburg in trust?

PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<

This is a full issue so all I'll say is get your passport and travel the world – the stuff of reflective practice is everywhere to be found when you engage the otherness of our neighbors around the world.

>>Benediction<<

As we send our students out into the world each spring I have many occasions on which to describe our aspirations for them and to remind them of the privileges and obligations they now have as educated men and women. I recently found this eloquent benediction, crafted originally for the Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary community by one of its distinguished faculty members. I will use it this spring and urge you to do so as well.

"Because the world is poor and starving,
Go with bread.
Because the world is filled with fear,
Go with courage.
Because the world is in despair,
Go with hope.
Because the world is living lies,
Go with truth.
Because the world is sick with sorrow,
Go with joy.
Because the world is weary of wars,
Go with peace.
Because the world is seldom fair,
Go with justice.
Because the world is under judgment,
Go with mercy.
Because the world will die without it,
Go with love."

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

- Asking the right questions
- Evolving social arrangements