

NOTES FOR THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

Volume Eleven, Number Six (August 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<<

Another year's worth of my Notes comes to an end, 11 full years of our virtual conversations about reflective practice. My abiding thanks to all of you for your support and encouragement – and for your fine examples of what it means to live and work as reflective practitioners.

Occasionally, I (or my colleagues) refer to items from previous issues of Notes. If you have not been a subscriber previously, and wish to review our conversations, past issues of Notes are available on-line at www.jgacounsel.com. The website version of Notes also includes helpful hyperlinks to sources for purchasing or subscribing to the various publications mentioned in Notes. I thank my friends at Johnson, Grossnickle & Associates for their many years of abiding support for our reflective practice.

REFLECT ON THIS

>>Education and service<<

On the Tuesday after Labor Day each year, the Augsburg community honors its historic commitment to "Education for Service" as we participate in our long-standing "City Service Day." On that day, more than 500 Auggies – students, faculty and staff – fan out across the Twin Cities to be of service to our neighbors. It is a wonderful spectacle as we don our colorful t-shirts and work with our hands – painting, tending gardens, packing school supplies, doing whatever is asked of us at one of 25 sites where our volunteer efforts will illustrate our deep belief that education and service are inextricably bound together.

But this is more than a show of voluntarism (as impressive as it is!), this is a powerful way in which we begin to model for our students what it means that learning and service go together, a relationship that is central to their Augsburg education and experience.

So what is it that we believe "City Service Day" teaches us?

First, it is the important value of mutuality. If service is simply our meeting the needs of others, then we have missed a critical point. When we engage in service, we are entering into a relationship that is premised on shared needs and aspirations. Tending the garden of the Korean elders who live in the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood is not simply about getting rid of weeds, it is about our shared commitments to adequate and nutritious food. It is about

the herbs grown there to help heal. It is about the peace and calm that we find in a garden in the midst of a busy city.

Second, it is the importance of engaging those who are different than we are and learning from them. In the city, we encounter strangers from all walks of life and backgrounds. As we meet and work with them in these service projects, we are introduced to their cultures, experiences and values. We learn about what it means to live in a homeless shelter or what it is like to be an immigrant in a new land. We learn how important it is to be open to learning from the many and diverse experiences we share with our neighbors who are negotiating their lives with us in the city.

Finally, it is the value of self-reflection. Our service projects include time during and after the experience for all of us to consider how I felt, how my values were affirmed or challenged, what I learned about myself as I engaged in serving my neighbor. Here is the heart of a liberal arts education – the life well-examined. Here is where education and service are bound up together, offering us the tools we need to live as informed citizens, thoughtful stewards, critical thinkers and responsible leaders.

All of these important lessons – and a lot of fun as well!

>>My words cannot suffice to my heart<<

My graduate school colleague, Stephanie Paulsell, now teaches at Harvard Divinity School and writes an occasional column for *Christian Century*. In her June 15, 2010 column, Stephanie offered these beautiful words as an admission that words are never enough. I quote at length...

“So much of human life is an attempt to reach out from the fragile bridge of language to others, to the future, to God. It is holy work, this searching for the right words to cross the distances between us...”

“It is a spiritual discipline to find the right word to set down next to another word in a way that reaches across boundaries and distances...In a culture in which words are flung out not as lifelines but as invective, it is an act of resistance to measure our words against the reconciling work of the Word that gives life and hope..”

“Language cannot do all the work of love – and thank God for that. If our prayers and our relationships and our hopes depended upon our ability to find words that sufficed to our heart, what would become of us? The distances between us cannot be crossed by words alone, even the ones we find in scripture or poetry or in our hearts...it is our shared, embodied life that gives words their meaning.”

PRACTICE THIS

>>Asking the right questions<<

I've been thinking a good bit lately about how best to engage others constructively and respectfully in genuine conversation – to draw colleagues and students and fellow citizens into civil and substantive deliberation. Whether in the classroom, at neighborhood meetings, with prospective donors or in campus planning sessions, I've experienced how difficult it

can be to generate and sustain conversations that are mutually beneficial. At the same time, I've spoken with some of you about similar challenges in your fundraising or consulting work. Perhaps you are working with a leadership gift prospect, trying to connect her passion with institutional priorities. Or you may be involved in feasibility studies for campaigns or neighborhood initiatives, and you are committed to gaining important insights through conversations.

I have found a wise guide to my efforts at genuine conversations in Peter Block, whose work over the years has been influential in my reflective practice. In his *Community: The Structure of Belonging* (Berrett-Koehler, 2008), Block suggests that questions are more transforming than answers and writes that "(T)he future is brought into the present when citizens engage each other in questions of possibility, commitment, dissent, and gifts. Questions open the door to the future and are more powerful than answers in that they demand engagement...How we frame the questions is decisive. They need to be ambiguous, personal, and stressful...We give permission for unpopular answers, and inoculate people against advice and help. Advice is replaced by curiosity."

Similarly, John Baldoni, writing earlier this year in the online *Harvard Business Review* blog (February 16, 2010), argues that leaders must connect with others in order to be successful, and that asking good questions is at the heart of healthy relations and genuine conversations. He suggests that it is often not what we ask, but how we ask that leads to the connection. According to Baldoni, effective leaders ask questions in ways that are:

- Curious – genuinely interested in what others have to say.
- Open-ended – helping others to share not just what happened, but what they were thinking as it did.
- Engaged – with clear facial expressions or body language showing that you actively care about what is being said and want to learn more.
- In-depth – digging deeper so that the whole story is told, not simply what someone thinks you want to hear.

Kevin Daley, writing for the on-line *Harvard Business Review* Management Tip of the Day (March 5, 2010), further suggests that resistance to engagement can often be overcome by asking "the right questions." And what a better guide to the right questions than the philosopher Socrates?! The so-called Socratic method, "(a)sking a series of easily answered questions," may help others rethink assumptions and open up possibilities for agreement.

Daley then turns to Richard Paul of the Center for Critical Studies for a list of the kinds of questions that work at different stages of the conversation. Paul suggests six categories of questions:

- Questions that help clarify what the other person means (e.g., "Can you tell me why you think the budget is too high?")
- Questions that probe assumptions ("Can you tell me more about why you believe that this trend is disturbing?")
- Questions that look into the rationale, reasons and evidence being used ("Can you tell me what data you have and its source?")

- Questions examining viewpoints and perspectives (“What is at stake for you in your decision?”)
- Questions that probe implications and consequences (“Have you thought about what it might mean if your plan is adopted?”)
- Questions that get to the root of the other person’s questions (“Why do you ask?”)

As we listen carefully to answers, actively engage our conversation partner(s), and build trust that is both intellectual and emotional, we begin to see the promise of genuine conversations, healthy relationships and strong communities.

A final word from Peter Block on why asking the right questions is transformative: “The important thing about these questions is that they name the agenda that can shift the nature of the future...The power is in the asking, not in the answers. And we do not need to get it just right.” Amen to that.

>>Board counsel<<

I happen, at the moment, to be chairing or otherwise providing leadership on Boards of Directors for a wide range of nonprofit organizations. It has been helpful in that work to return to some of my past posts on how to create and lead effective boards. Here is an item, first posted in August 2005, which is a good primer.

“I am a member of BoardSource, an organization devoted to building effective nonprofit boards (www.boardsource.org). The June/July 2005 issue of *BoardMember*, the organization’s newsletter, included a very helpful set of “Twelve Principles of Governance that Power Exceptional Boards.” Intended as guidance for staff leadership looking to empower a board as a strategic asset and for board leadership as a vision for how a board can add lasting value to an organization, the principles strike me as well worth promulgating. So here goes...

- (1) Constructive partnership – exceptional boards govern in partnership with the chief executive, recognizing the interdependence of board and staff leadership and the need for trust, candor, honest communication and respect.
- (2) Mission driven – exceptional boards keep mission, vision and strategy as the basis for all decisions and actions.
- (3) Strategic thinking – Exceptional boards pay attention to strategy and use strategic priorities as the basis for aligning agendas, shaping recruitment, and evaluating the chief executive.
- (4) Culture of inquiry – exceptional board institutional inquiry and constructive debate, always seeking to question assumptions and base solutions on sound data and analysis.
- (5) Independent-mindedness – exceptional boards apply rigorous conflict of interest policies and put the interests of the organization above all else.
- (6) Ethos of transparency – exceptional boards ensure that all stakeholders have access to appropriate and accurate information about all aspects of the organization.
- (7) Compliance with integrity – exceptional boards promote strong ethical values and use various mechanisms (including audits and evaluations) to reduce risk and honor accountability.
- (8) Sustaining resources – exceptional boards link strategy to financial support and networks of influence.

- (9) Results-oriented – exceptional boards measure the organization’s progress towards mission and gauge efficiency and effectiveness with peer analysis, return on investment calculations, and assessments of the quality of service delivery.
- (10) Intentional board practices – exceptional boards structure themselves to fulfill core governance duties and support organizational priorities.
- (11) Continuous learning – exceptional boards embrace the commitment to a learning organization, evaluating their own work in relation to organizational progress and value. Learning becomes an integrated aspect of board work.
- (12) Revitalization – exceptional boards energize themselves through planned turnover, leadership development, diversity of experience, and exposure to fresh perspectives.

How are your boards doing? I’ve set an agenda for my board work this year based on these helpful principles.”

PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<

Peter Block has a powerful new book, written with Northwestern professor John McKnight, entitled *The Abundant Community: Awakening the Power of Families and Neighborhoods* (Berrett-Koehler, 2010). I’ll have more to say about the Block/McKnight model in a future issue of Notes.

University of Chicago professor Martha Nussbaum is back with her continuing strong defense of the role of the humanities in our lives in *Not For Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton University Press, 2010).

And I’ll read anything that Parker Palmer is involved in – his recent work, written with Arthur Zajone and Megan Scribner, is entitled *The Heart of Higher Education: A Call to Renewal* (Jossey-Bass, 2010).

>>Forgetfulness<<

I love this Billy Collins poem, especially at the beginning of an academic year when I am once again surrounded by students who remember much more than I do...

Forgetfulness

The name of the author is the first to go
followed obediently by the title, the plot,
the heartbreaking conclusion, the entire novel
which suddenly becomes one you have never read,
never even heard of,

as if, one by one, the memories you used to harbor
decided to retire to the southern hemisphere of the brain,
to a little fishing village where there are no phones.

Long ago you kissed the names of the nine Muses goodbye
and watched the quadratic equation pack its bag,
and even now as you memorize the order of the planets,

something else is slipping away, a state flower perhaps,
the address of an uncle, the capital of Paraguay.

Whatever it is you are struggling to remember,
it is not poised on the tip of your tongue,
not even lurking in some obscure corner of your spleen.

It has floated away down a dark mythological river
whose name begins with an L as far as you can recall,
well on your own way to oblivion where you will join those
who have even forgotten how to swim and how to ride a bicycle.

No wonder you rise in the middle of the night
to look up the date of a famous battle in a book on war.
No wonder the moon in the window seems to have drifted
out of a love poem that you used to know by heart.

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>>Topics for the next issue (October2010)<<

- The abundant community
- Evolving social arrangements
- What is required of you?

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