

NOTES FOR THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

Volume Twelve, Number One (October 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<<

Late fall greetings from Minneapolis. I'm a bit tardy with this issue due to lots of October travel, including a moving trip to Africa, which I write about below.

Several personal notes after my last Notes – thanks, all. Long-time subscriber, Stewart Herman, graduate school colleague and professor at our sister institution, Concordia College, wrote in response to my piece on asking questions: "...I found the list of questions from Richard Paul very helpful. I typically structure my courses around questions, and eschew lecturing, but had never thought to parse out the kinds of questions one might ask. So this is a typology which itself inspires some introspection—what kinds of questions do I focus on, and why?"

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

>>Reflections on Africa<<

As mentioned above, I traveled to Africa in mid-October to visit our permanent campus site in Windhoek, Namibia and to meet with democracy activists in Johannesburg, South Africa. It was a remarkable trip on many levels. I posted the following blog entries during my trip, which help sum up my feelings and observations.

The main road

The sparkling lights of the city of Windhoek, Namibia were shining below as I looked out from my perch in an ultra-modern restaurant high above the city. All was well, it seemed, as I waited with my colleague, Orv Gingerich, head of Augsburg's international programs, for our dinner companions to arrive. We are in Windhoek visiting Augsburg's 16 year old

Center for Global Education (CGE) site, where US students come for semester long programs focused on Namibia's post-colonial experience.

But the view from our perch high above the city, nestled in an obviously affluent subdivision of the burgeoning city, belied our experiences earlier in the day. We had witnessed the remnants of an apartheid system. Formerly separate cemeteries for the whites, colored and blacks. Housing that was clearly demarcated by tribal class. Primary and secondary schools stratified by social class. A sprawling tin village – the so-called “informal settlements – in which tens of thousands of Namibians lived in squalor, unable to find work after they arrived in the city and left to their own devices to survive without means. Health clinics with waiting rooms full of women seeking both pre-natal care and HIV tests. Non-governmental organizations struggling to serve the needs of indigenous people whose rights were neglected. The stark contrasts of our day were mind-bending.

Our dinner companions arrived – a labor activist and a teacher working to improve education for indigenous people – and as we described our day in Windhoek, one of them commented that he was grateful that we had witnessed these contrasts because too many outsiders came to Namibia and traveled only “the main road,” from which all seemed well. We had left that main road and experienced the real Namibia.

And so we had – just as the students who come to our CGE site do each semester as they participate in a variety of intense experiences that open their eyes to the mind-bending and life-transforming dynamics of life in a developing country. Through extended home stays in both urban and rural areas, internships with organizations doing important social and educational work, classes that feature speakers who have firsthand experience of the tensions in Namibia's life, and opportunities for significant interaction with Namibian people and culture, our students experience life off the main road in this remarkable country, just 22 years after its declared independence.

And when they return home to the US, we know that they carry with them knowledge and experience of this developing country and its good people that will shape the decisions they make about their own lives and what they might be called to do in the world. Some may return here to Africa, perhaps as medical workers or teachers. But most will not and, for them, we trust and know that their experiences off the main road in Namibia will help them understand their own privilege in an increasingly complex world, privilege that must be named and then put to responsible use in the search for equity and justice, both in their personal lives and in the systems they inhabit.

Off the main road in Namibia, I'm only beginning to understand how critical our work as a college in this place is to transforming the lives of students and contributing to a different vision of our common future as global citizens.

What in the world?

My all-too-brief visit to our campus site in Windhoek, Namibia affirms for me a set of values that are core to my own vision of higher education for citizenship.

In the many, intense conversations I had with a wide swath of Namibian society – from Prime Minister Angula to the deputy minister for education; from the heads of Namibia's major universities to the legendary figures who fought for Namibia's freedom a quarter

century ago; from the brave staff members in local NGOs fighting for healthy lives and justice to the good citizens of this beautiful country – I found that we shared common aspirations. It is that we would better understand each other's lives and that we would find ways to work together to achieve our common aspirations in Namibia, in the US and around the world. It is that we would ask, "What in the world?" we owe each other.

I was reminded of some reflections I wrote a couple of years ago when thinking about the same common aspirations during a trip to China. I asked several simple questions that help us make sense of how we name our own values, engage each other as neighbors and then work to create a more just and humane world.

My first question: *What is the "social ethic" that grounds our work with neighbors, i.e., what is the normative statement of what we owe each other and why?*

This is the fundamental question of "what in the world?" we owe each other. Each of us has beliefs and values and cultural norms – our obligation is to articulate and share them with each other. This is the connection between what we believe (and value) and what we do (our callings in the world).

Whatever our different political, cultural and economic systems, we all have an underlying social ethic that shapes how we engage and live with each other. Asking the question of what we owe each other begins with this deep engagement with beliefs and values that shape behavior and policies in our common lives.

My second question: *How do you engage your neighbors to know who they are, to listen to what they need, and to base a response to their needs on this genuine engagement?*

This question challenges us to ask how open we are to being with and accompanying our neighbors. And once we listen and learn, then there is the call to respond, to join with each other in common purpose, to work to meet our mutual needs. These are the sort of conversations that are going on between Augsburg (its students, faculty and staff) and our neighbors in Namibia (and elsewhere around the world) – conversations that lead us to seek understanding across our differences and then to common purpose in our actions.

My third question: *What are the organizational and systemic structures that allow us to be pragmatic – nimble, innovative, concrete – in our responses, honoring the needs of our neighbors rather than our own needs to follow the rules, build agencies or pursue our own convenience?*

This is perhaps the central issue for those of us who live and work in organizations – we have rules and structures in place that are important sources of discipline and accountability, but sometimes they get in the way of meeting needs. Are we willing to suspend our normal ways of doing business to meet the needs of others? Are we willing to admit that we make mistakes or that we can learn from those who are different than we are? In Namibia, for example, are we willing to respond to requests for student and faculty exchanges that may seem – based on our organizational economy – to be inequitable and one-sided, when in fact they are the foundation for building capacity in a developing society?

And my final question: *In what ways do our lives and work in the world recognize that local and global are inextricably bound together – that we learn in our rich and immediate context lessons that are relevant for neighbors around the world?*

This is the call to global citizenship no matter where we find ourselves – whether in Cedar-Riverside, in Windhoek, Namibia, Zhuhai, China, Managua, Nicaragua or wherever our journeys take us.

We must consider the impact of our behavior on those around the world and accept the fact that we do make a difference here and around the world with the choices we make, the positions we take, and the passion we bring to telling our stories of global citizenship. Our students in Namibia make a real difference when they bring their gifts to various NGOs and public agencies, helping to build more sustainable services for the vulnerable and marginalized. But what about when they return to the US? What choices do they make here that recognize the impact on those who live halfway around the world?

This commitment to genuine engagement with neighbors is the basis upon which we prepare students to be citizens of the world, and suggests a stance that is at once humble – i.e., admits our own biases and privileges – and respectful – i.e., authentically open to the perspectives and experiences of others. Humility and respect set the foundation for learning and for transforming human relations – in neighborhoods here and around the globe.

Our college is involved daily in engaging our neighbors as they worship, celebrate cultural traditions and holidays, and seek to maintain ties to their home countries. At the same time, we are engaging those same neighbors in the civic work of keeping our neighborhood safe, participating in the political process, and supporting economic development. And in the midst of it all – in the classroom, in the residence halls, in the cafeteria and on the streets – we all learn **what in the world** we owe each other as we prepare for lives of meaning and purpose.

I'm so grateful to Augsburg's neighbors in Namibia for reminding me of our common aspirations – to realize just **what in the world** we owe each other.

I've been to Soweto...

I concluded my African journey with two days in Johannesburg, South Africa, where – with the help of Augsburg faculty and staff – I had the great privilege of meeting with some key leaders and resource people who offered me a stunning glimpse into the work of democracy activists who continue to struggle that their country and region might live up to its aspirations for freedom and justice for all people, no matter the color of their skin.

And what I encountered in my brief stay were examples of the tensions inherent in the daily life of this remarkable country, tensions that are at the very heart of the human condition. The tensions, for example, between safety and security, on one hand – this remains a city where neighbors are walled off from each other in their homes and, to a large extent still in their townships – and the reality on the other hand that this may be the most cosmopolitan, multi-cultural city in the world – teeming with people from multiple races and languages and cultures.

As I spent time with colleagues in Johannesburg and learned of their experiences, I began to understand how the various tensions of daily life in South Africa are, at their core, tensions between personal identity and memories, on one hand, and public history and narrative, on

the other. The efforts of the South African people (and the others in places like Namibia who suffered through the violence and hatred of apartheid) to reconcile the personal and the public – efforts that take shape in the dynamics of daily life on the street as well as in large-scale public settings such as we witnessed in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission – offer all of us important lessons about how we shall live together in our interrelated and complex world.

A couple of quick examples to illustrate my early reflections on the promise of reconciliation.

I met Professor David Thelen, retired from the history department at Indiana University and one of the world's foremost public historians. He took me to Sophiatown, a neighborhood where he and colleagues from the nearby University of Johannesburg are working at reconciling deep personal and common conflicts. Once the teeming hub of Black cultural life in Africa with an integrated population, Sophiatown was targeted by the Afrikaner government to be bulldozed, rebuilt and renamed "Triomf" (Triumph in Afrikaans) as a symbol of their White supremacist ideology. All of its former residents were resettled, most to communities in the Southwestern townships (aka Soweto).

After the elections of 1994, Sophiatown reclaimed its name and began to rebuild a community, but has struggled to develop the sort of social fabric that it once enjoyed and that was the source for its creative energy. Thelen and his colleagues recognized that neighbors in Sophiatown did not know each other and had little occasion to be together. Their public history project is focused on helping residents to share their personal identities with each other so that they might begin to rebuild a public memory and story that links back to the community's heyday and that offers a framework for a sustainable future.

Their methods are intriguing. Knowing that if neighbors were inclined to talk with each other, they already would have done so, Thelen designed a photo-conversation project that recruits neighbors from particular areas, gives them a disposable camera and asks them to take a picture of one thing in their community they love and one thing they would like to change. After the pictures have been taken, neighbors gather informally to share the pictures and reasons why they chose their subjects.

A Black resident, for example, takes a picture of a formerly segregated bridge across railroad tracks and tells about how she once took the whites-only bridge instead because she was frightened of the quality of construction of her assigned bridge. She recounts how she was caught and fined by the police. A white neighbor, hearing the story, quips that she was lucky she wasn't arrested. Potentially an explosive moment in the relationship, instead it serves as the opportunity for those gathered to remind each other of a painful history that must be named and not hidden away behind walls.

With these sorts of conversations as a starting point, Thelen and his colleagues hope to help neighbors begin to recognize common needs and aspirations, and with some help from community organizers, begin to work together in various interest groups and clubs to create a sense of solidarity and social fabric in Sophiatown. It is still early in the project, but here is the sort of concrete effort that seeks to reconcile personal memories (both good and ugly) with a public narrative that has a past, present and future.

Another striking example of reconciliation I witnessed was in the gentle words and way of Molefi Mataboge, a thirty-something man, born and raised in Soweto, active in community organizing and a veteran of the student activist movements in South Africa in the 1980s, an important part of the freedom movement. Molefi, who was my guide for an extended tour of Soweto, serves as a resource person to our CGE students in Namibia who spend several days in Johannesburg each semester (including home stays with Soweto families).

It was a couple of hours into the powerful experience of seeing Soweto and learning from a native son of its troubled history that Molefi took me to the site of the historic People's Congress in South Africa, where the Freedom Charter was ratified by those gathered. He mentioned in passing that when the site was memorialized by President Mandela in the late 1990s, he was a special guest of the president for the occasion. His off-handed comment might have gone unexplained had I not asked what he had done to deserve such a special invitation.

He then told his story. A story of deep and active involvement as a very young man in the freedom movement. A story of violence and hatred (both for himself and those who threatened him), a story of fear and constant danger, a story ultimately of a dream realized but not without sacrifice. He told me of his recurring headaches, the result – doctors tell him – of living for years in constant fear, afraid to sleep even for the possibility that he might be kidnapped and killed for his activist efforts. He told me of the church leaders who ultimately helped him find some healing by providing counselors and psychologists to help him work through the painful memories. But the headaches persist.

And perhaps it is in telling his stories again and again, sharing them with those who need to know and understand what happened to him and his fellow South Africans, that Molefi is making his own peace, reconciling his personal memories and identity with the public narrative of a country still suffering in many ways and yet seeking to be healed, to find peace, to show a way forward that does not forget even as it sets a new horizon for justice and freedom and possibility.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu writes of the importance of the following prayer (I offer just a brief excerpt) for his beloved South African people, as they seek to be reconciled in their personal memories and public narratives:

“We built irreconcilable barriers between us; now we seek to build a society of reconciliation. We suffered a separateness that did not work; now we are reconciled to make togetherness work.

We believed we alone held the truth; now we are reconciled in the knowledge that the truth holds us...”

May we all learn from this painful and hopeful example.

PRACTICE THIS

>>What is required of you?<<

I gave the following address at our opening convocation and received more comments than usual from students, faculty and staff about how relevant they found my thoughts – sometimes you hit a nerve!

“If you know your Hebrew Bible – and if you don’t, don’t worry, Religion 100 will help – you will recognize the allusion in my title this morning to the well-known passage from the prophet Micah, the sixth chapter, verse eight:

*6.8 He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.*

And, if I was smart, I might leave it right there, because if each of us would behave as Micah claims the Lord requires, all would be well with the world. Justice, mercy and humility set a high bar for God’s faithful people, but the theological claim imbedded in Micah’s prophetic words is not mine to negotiate for you. The links between your faith, your relationship with the divine, and how you live in the world, are for you to explore and work out. We will provide a rich and challenging context for you to do just that, but we do not pretend to know how you will make sense of what the Lord requires of you.

On the other hand, there are some things that we can and do require of you. And that is the simple message I want to share with you this morning as you commence your Augsburg education. And maybe – just maybe – if you do what we require of you, you will find a pathway to understand what the Lord requires of you. That would be the bold claim at the heart of our education for vocation in the world, that how and what you learn here, that who you meet and engage here, that what you find out here about yourself and your various gifts, will offer you a clearer idea of what it is that you are called to do and be in the world.

So, what is it that is required of you?

Show up

The first requirement is really pretty fundamental and you already have begun to live up to it. You are here – on campus, engaged in your orientation, at this Opening Convocation, about to begin your college classes.

But as the coming days pass, you will be tempted by many distractions and late nights and other obligations to not show up, to miss a class or a meeting, to say that it doesn’t matter whether you attend every class session. I know this tendency – I lived it myself, making up elaborate excuses for why I could skip every 7th class session and no one would notice. And we might not notice every time, but you will notice (whether you fully get it now or not) that it is a slippery slope to not show up. Statistics show that skipping even one class session has an impact on whether or not first year college students stay in school, let alone graduate, or perhaps most importantly whether or not they learn something.

But, of course, this is not simply about showing up for class. Showing up is also a sort of spiritual practice. It is about being present now. It is about being in relationship to a text, a classmate, and/or a teacher. It is about accompanying each other on a journey that is both solitary and social. The famous educational philosopher, John Dewey, said that genuine education is not preparation for life, it is life itself. And if you believe that – as we do here at Augsburg – then showing up, being present now, is the key factor in whether or not you get the education you need in order to live in the world.

Show up, please.

Pay attention

The second requirement is also quite simple. But the equally simple fact is that we live in a world full of distractions and paying attention doesn't come easy.

Like you, I'm on Facebook and Twitter (follow me at @paulpribbenow, if you must). I have an I-Phone and a Kindle and a laptop. I read two newspapers each morning and probably have 20 magazine subscriptions. I do my best to lead this wonderful and complex college. I have two young children, a wonderful spouse who chairs the school board, and a life full of things I "must" pay attention to – and it's hard work. And I'm old. You are young and you have grown up in a time when multi-tasking is not an option, it's an expectation. I really can't imagine how you keep it all together. I admire you, but I also worry about you.

So here I stand asking you to pay attention. Yes, I mean put away all the distractions that you can control. Turn off the cell phone occasionally, spend some time away from the computer. Focus in on what your teachers and classmates are saying and doing. Find ways to pay attention.

But it is more than that, of course, because even when you have put away all those sources of distraction, it remains your responsibility to figure out what is most important and how you can make what is important the center of your life. The sociologist, Robert Bellah and his associates, have written that "Democracy means paying attention," (from *The Good Society*) by which they mean that the psychic energy we use to pay attention is the key to the sort of person we hope to be – as individuals and as a society. If we continue to be distracted, our attention and the energy that it requires of us will also be distracted, and the values and people and ideas and causes we should care about and attend to will not get our energy. And we will not become the people we want to be. We will follow someone else's idea of our call.

Pay attention, please.

Do the work

The final requirement follows logically from the first two. If you show up and learn to truly pay attention, you will find that there is work that must be done.

Many days, the work will be assigned to you. Read this text, explore these ideas, test this hypothesis, run this experiment, play this scale, practice this drill. You know all about doing school work already, but please know that this is college and college signals a quantum leap in the work required of you. Don't get behind on reading and papers. Take advantage of the support we offer to help you manage your time and learn to study. Support each other and ask for help when you feel you need it.

Because more and more, on many days the work will be yours to discern and pursue. There will be no one there to tell you what to do. You will need to seize the work that needs to be done. The profound truth at the heart of our academic mission is that the work you learn to do here – in the classroom, on campus, in our neighborhood and around the world – is the basis for pursuing the important work to be done in the world – and we need you to do it. We are counting on you to do it. That is why this college exists – to educate you to be

informed citizens, thoughtful stewards, critical thinkers and responsible leader – not just because we think it would be nice if you were all of those sorts of citizens and stewards and thinkers and leaders, but because the world needs you. There is utility to this education, there is purpose and direction, there is work to be done by educated men and women. Work they are called to do. Work that might just have to do with what the prophet Micah claimed – the work of justice and compassion and humility.

Do the work, please.

And that is what is required of you. Simple lessons that I hope you will remember: show up, pay attention and do the work. Lessons that should help you in college, I would argue, but most critically and urgently, lessons that will serve you for a lifetime of following your passions and calls for the good of the world. I can't wait to see what good you will do. Welcome to Augsburg – it's our great privilege to have you all here!"

PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>They also are children of the earth <<

Here is a moving poem by South African poet Mazisi Kunene...

They also are children of the earth

Cursed shall be the one whose passage in this world
Evades humaneness, engenders greed and hoarding
Cursed is he wallowing alone in caskets of wealth and
Counting rosary beads of accumulated cars
To be human is to humbly cherish the sweat of your toil
In measured style of decency and appreciation
To be human is to consider the plight of the needy
As they also are children of the earth
Yes, men and women of this blessed land

© 1997, Mazisi Kunene
From: *Igudu likaSomcabeko*
Publisher: Van Schaik, 1997
© Translation: 2007, Vusi Mchunu

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

- The abundant community
- Evolving social arrangements

- My God, Your God...

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