

NOTES FOR THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

Volume Twelve, Number Two (December 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<<

Happy New Year, kind readers. May 2011 be a year of renewed reflective practice, health and well-being for you and yours!

Good friend and advisor Ted Grossnickle commented on my idea of moving off the main road in the last issue of Notes: "I was particularly struck by the idea and imagery contained in "being off the main road" in your Notes. It seems that is so often where – and when -- we find either our real selves or a part of ourselves that has been asleep, dormant or unused. And it is where we are often forced to move beyond that which is comfortable. I see it in myself, in our clients and among friends. It would be good if we remembered more often to move off the main road."

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

>>I am not your enemy<<

I had the privilege of being in Oslo, Norway for the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize ceremony earlier this month and wrote this blog post after the moving ceremony in which Chinese poet and activist, Liu Xiaobo, was awarded the prize *in absentia*.

"The chair sat empty for the first time in 75 years as the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Liu Xiaobo, the Chinese poet and human rights activist, who is in jail in China and was not allowed to attend the ceremony. In his stead – since no family or close friends were allowed to attend the ceremony either – the Nobel medal was placed in the empty chair and the Norwegian actress Liv Ullmann read Xiaobo's powerful words written as his final statement to the Chinese court and regime that sentenced him to 11 years in jail in 2009 for "speech crimes," co-authoring Charter '08, a manifesto for human rights in his native land. As Ullmann delivered his words, we learned of Xiaobo's deep love for his wife – as he says, I live in a tangible prison of cells and steel bars, while

you live in an intangible prison of the heart. We heard Xiaobo's compassionate words of thanks to his jailers for the fair treatment he received – they did their job well. And, above all, we listened to Xiaobo's passionate dedication to his country as he respectfully challenged the regime to live up to its own aspirations for fundamental human rights for all its people. "I am not your enemy," he declared.

My daughter is Chinese-American – Chinese by birth, American by adoption and our daughter by the grace of God. And it is through the lens of my unfathomable love for her that I witnessed the Peace Prize ceremony. Yes, there were social and political issues to consider as a global citizen. And as an educator, I could not help but reflect on what our students might learn from this historic event. But it was as the parent of a little girl who someday will know that her life was radically changed by a Chinese regime and its policies that did not allow her parents to raise her in her native country that I most felt the power of Xiaobo's award for peace and his meaningful words to the court. "I am not your enemy," my little girl can also say to her native land.

It is ironic that, while I was in Oslo for the awarding of the Peace Prize, my wife was in China on behalf of our kids' Chinese immersion school in Minneapolis. She was there, under the auspices of the Chinese government, as part of a program to establish sister school relationships between Chinese and American communities. It is one of the many ways the Chinese people are reaching out to the world, attempting to open themselves to the riches of life in a global community. Alongside of its remarkable economic growth, these educational and cultural efforts suggest that the Chinese regime understands that it will never play a leading role in the world without openness to the diverse ideas and values of other countries. And yet the ruthless ways in which the regime responded to the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to Liu Xiaobo – restricting travel and access to international news, cutting off diplomatic talks, demanding that allies boycott the ceremony and lashing out at the Norwegians through official channels – suggest that such openness has stringent and irrational limits. "We are not your enemy," we all might say to the Chinese people.

One of the most poignant moments my wife and I experienced when we were in China to adopt our daughter six years ago was in a hotel elevator when an elderly Chinese woman turned to look at us and several other American families holding their Chinese daughters with tears streaming down her face – clearly she understood how her country had turned away from its own children and she mourned their loss. As parents of our Chinese daughter – as citizens of the world – as people who long for peace, we too mourn for the losses inflicted on these good people by their own leaders. Xiaobo's courageous efforts to proclaim and practice the links between human rights, peace and democracy – along with those of his many fellow citizens who pay a tragic price for their dreams of a free and just society – allow all of us who mourn for China's losses to stand together and proclaim, "We are not your enemy."

The Nobel ceremony concluded with Norwegian children's choir singing folk songs. It was Liu Xiaobo's only request for the ceremony – that it would include children singing. In the joyous faces of those dear children, we witnessed why those who seek peace carry on despite the sacrifices it too often demands. It was an inspiring lesson from this Chinese teacher and peacemaker. May my dear daughter grow up to know her native country – and indeed, her entire world – as places and peoples that embrace freedom, justice and peace, and that truly understand that "I am not your enemy." "

>>Happy new year<<

I preached this homily at the opening chapel service of our academic year in September and though it was aimed at a different “new year,” it seems fitting for the turn of the calendar as well.

“For God so loves...

[Numbers 29: 1-6]

Happy New Year! A greeting I can offer this morning for at least two reasons.

First, because this is, of course, the beginning of a new academic year for those of us who follow this agrarian and State Fair schedule. For some of you, this is your first new academic year in the college. For others of us, we just can't get enough. It is a time of excitement and some anxiety and new beginnings for our teaching and learning work and maybe some resolutions to attempt to follow.

In addition, it also is fitting to acknowledge the new year for our Jewish brothers and sisters who celebrate Rosh Hashanah, the festival of the trumpets that commences the Days of Atonement culminating late next week with Yom Kippur, the most sacred day for the Jewish community.

So, happy new year – and also happy breaking of the fast – the Eid al-Fitr – to our Muslim brothers and sisters who conclude the month of Ramadan and the discipline of daily fasting with a celebration of renewal and resolve.

Wow – what a convergence of calendars we enjoy today as we gather in this most sacred space as a community of faith to mark this Sabbath time together, this daily reminder of God's blessings to this college and to God's world, this daily time away from the busyness of our lives to worship and pray and sing, this daily practice of remembering how much our God loves us and loves the world

I have had the privilege in each of the past several years to offer some thoughts early in our chapel time on the significance of this time together and specifically on the role of faith in the life of this college. I have found it most meaningful to share my sense of the importance of sharing our faith stories with each other as a part of our daily lives. “This is what I believe; what do you believe?” I also have spoken of Augsburg's strong grounding in a particular faith tradition, the Lutheran Christian community, and the difference being Lutheran makes to the sort of college we are and aspire to be.

Today, I want to use this remarkable convergence of holy days to say something about how our personal faiths and our common faith traditions are linked to a wider sense of God's intentions and purposes for God's people and world. And I want to suggest that the logic of faith challenges all of us to recognize that God has something very much in mind for God's people – something in mind that is beyond human understanding and that ties people of faith together across their personal stories and religious communities to serve the world that God so loves. And our responsibility as God's people is to seek to know a bit of God's mind so that we might do God's good work in the world. How do we do that?

In a recent essay, wise teacher and writer Parker Palmer speaks of the deep connections between his faith and his writing. He says, “As we work our way into that empty page – or into the unknowable future as we live our lives on faith – do we discover what is there or do we invent it?” His answer is that lives of writing and faith are about both discovery and invention – that, as he says, “the words I put on paper are encountering realities that are already “out there” but will remain invisible until someone’s words give them visible form.”

Faith is like this, as well – a journey to know God’s intentions for us, marked by both discovery and invention. Quoting 2 Corinthians, “We have this treasure in earthen vessels to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us,” Palmer reminds us that every container – every word, every worship space, every liturgy, every holy day – we create to hold the sacred treasure is earthen, limited, finite and flawed, and the best we can do to avoid iconoclasm – where the vessels become more important than the transcendent reality they attempt to convey – is to admit our fallenness, to overcome our fear of what it means to admit that our earthen vessels are not the only or the best means to know the divine, and to (as Palmer suggests) “set the sacred loose” so that we might know the truth that sets us free to be God’s people and do God’s work.

“(W)hy believe in God,” Palmer asks, “if the God we believe in is so small as to be contained and controlled within our finite words and forms?” A great question for this new year and for this college community.

Let God be God, said our spiritual ancestor Martin Luther. And then we shall be freed to be the people God intended for us to be.

Now, I don’t mean to argue that earthen vessels – our great faith traditions – are not important. There is a dynamic paradox and tension between the earthen vessels and the treasure they were constructed to honor that we must respect and live into. And we must be vigilant because it is easy to be complacent or arrogant – witness the call of the Christian pastor in Florida to burn the Qur’an on September 11, surely an action that claims a higher place for one earthen vessel over another, surely not what our awesome God intends for the well-being of the world God so loves.

Which leads us to the crux of the matter. Given that our personal faith stories and the various earthen vessels in which we store the treasures of our faith are finite and limited, then what are we to do as people freed for lives of faith in the world, people who are seeking to do what God intends, not what we think is best or expedient or most likely to please others (or even, to please God)?

Here is where the convergence of these holy days – Rosh Hashanah and the Eid al-Fitr – with the opening of our new academic year, grounded as it is in our Lutheran faith tradition, offers us a compelling path forward. For there is in these great faith traditions – and in the education they promote – a common promise and claim for people of faith. And that promise is that God loves God’s people and the world they inhabit. And so must we if we are to live as faithful people in the world.

There are ways indigenous to each tradition to talk about what it means that God so loves the world. In our Christian tradition, of course, we believe that God so loved the world that he sent God’s only Son into our midst to live and die and be raised from the dead to redeem us and set us free for lives of service to the neighbor and for lives eternal and abundant in the time to come.

In the academic tradition we embrace at Augsburg, guided by our faith and grounded in the liberal arts, we also have ways to explore and practice what it means to love the world. What you study here has a purpose: to seek to understand the world in all its myriad aspects – historical, cultural, economic, scientific, political and so forth – so that we might bring our education to bear as we work to make the world a more just and humane and healthy place.

We learn from all the great faith traditions and today, in honor of the Jewish new year, I turn to the words of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, chief rabbi of Great Britain, who suggests that the Jewish faith compels those who believe to see their lives as dedicated to “tikkun olam,” the mending of the world. In his *To Heal a Fractured World*, Rabbi Sacks suggests that this mending of the world God so loves is found at the intersection of “what I can do” with “what needs to be done.” Sounds a good bit like what we, in the Lutheran Christian tradition, call “vocation,” that place where our deep gladness meets the world’s great needs.

Rabbi Sacks sends us forth with these compelling words: “To live the life of faith is to hear the silent cry of the afflicted, the lonely and marginal, the poor, the sick and the disempowered, and to respond. For the world is not yet mended, there is work still to do, and God has empowered us to do it – with him, for him and for his faith in us.”

And to that, all of us can say together in faith: May Your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Thanks be to God. May it be so. Amen.”

PRACTICE THIS

>>An abundant community<<

Peter Block and John McKnight’s most recent book, *The Abundant Community: Awakening the Power of Families and Neighborhoods* (Berrett-Koehler, 2010) is – though written from a non-theological point of view – one of the most compelling explications of how we might live as faithful people of abundance (as opposed to scarcity) that I have ever found. Perhaps it takes those outside of our faith traditions to give voice to the implications of our faith for life in the world.

Block and McKnight argue for the idea of a “satisfied life” that is not tied up with our consumerist ways. The tenets of abundance, they argue, offer a way for communities and neighborhoods to support lives of satisfaction for all people. The five tenets of abundance are:

- What we have is enough – we value what we have and find it satisfying.
- We have the capacity to provide what we need in the face of the human condition – we can imagine creating a future together beyond this moment. We can harvest that which has been invisible and treated as though it were scarce.
- We organize our world in a context of cooperation and satisfaction – we do not need competition to motivate our children or ourselves. Life together can cooperatively produce what systems have been selling.
- We are responsible for each other – this is the meaning of community, believing that if one of us is not free or valued, then none of us is free or valued.
- We live with the reality of the human condition – we understand what we can and cannot do. Life is not a problem to be solved or services to be obtained.

The results for those who live out these tenets, they conclude, is that communities of abundance can prevent those dissatisfactions for which the market says we need answers, and that these communities have the power to provide for themselves much of what systems and consumerism would have us purchase.

More on this important book to come.

>>*Context* concludes its 40-year run<<

I've recommended to Notes readers several times over the years Martin E. Marty's monthly newsletter, *Context*, in which he offers insightful nuggets of writings on religion and public life from myriad sources. Sadly, *Context* concluded its run this month. The last several issues of the newsletter have been a retrospective on highlights from over the 40 years. Here are two of my favorite selections from the retrospective in celebration of this important source for my reflective practice during the past quarter century:

From Tony Campolo (in the December 1, 1991 issue): "I spoke at the Southern Baptist Convention a couple of years ago and I opened up by saying, "I don't know what you're worrying so much about the inerrancy of scripture; after you prove that it's inerrant, you're not going to do what it says anyway." It's true. If you're supposed to be a pacifist, if you're supposed to give your money to the poor—you're not going to do all this stuff. Wouldn't it be better if you agreed that the Bible didn't speak the truth all the time, and then maybe you could get out of some of these obligations?"

And this from Thomas Merton (via Harvard pastor, Peter Gomes, in the January 15, 1993 issue): "If I insist that my work be rewarding, that it mustn't be tedious or monotonous, I'm in trouble...If we're detached and simply pick up the job we have to do and go ahead and do it, it's usually fairly satisfying. Even the jobs that are repugnant or dull or tedious tend to be quite satisfying once we get right down to doing them."

And Marty himself concludes his farewell with this fitting prayer from Cardinal John Henry Newman: "May He support us all the day long, till the shadows lengthen and the evening comes, and the busy world is hushed, and the fever of life is over, and our work is done. Then in His mercy may He give us a safe lodging, and a holy rest and peace at the last. Amen."

PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<

Augsburg's new Christensen professor, Dr. Martha Stortz, gave her inaugural address this fall and it has been adapted for an article in the December 2010 issue of *The Lutheran*. Entitled "Directions, maps, compass: Finding our way on the journey of discipleship," it is worth checking out at http://www.thelutheran.org/article/article.cfm?article_id=9540.

We also had a visit on campus this fall from wife and husband, Sarah Hinlicky Wilson and Andrew Wilson, both Luther scholars who walked from Erfurt, Germany to Rome in October and

November as a pilgrimage for ecumenism. Check out their fascinating story at <http://www.hereiwalk.org/>.

>>Hospitality <<

Here is a wonderful quote from the late Henri Nouwen's book *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (Doubleday, 1975) that offers a fitting challenge for the new year.

“Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place.

It is not to bring men and women over to our side, but to offer freedom not disturbed by dividing lines.

It is not to lead our neighbor into a corner where there are no alternatives left, but to open a wide spectrum of options for choice and commitment.

It is not an educated intimidation of good books, good stories, and good works, but the liberation of fearful hearts so that words can find root and bear ample fruit.

It is not a method of making our God and our way into the criteria of happiness, but the opening of an opportunity for others to find their God and their way.

The paradox of hospitality is that it wants to create emptiness—not a fearful emptiness, but a friendly emptiness where strangers can enter and discover themselves as created free; free to sing their own songs, speak their own languages, dance their own dances; free also to leave and follow their own vocations.”

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>>Topics for the next issue (February 2011)<<

- Evolving social arrangements
- An ethics inventory and the possibility of formation

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