

NOTES FOR THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

Volume Thirteen, Number Six (August 2012)

"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 academic year (my 37th consecutive!) – my marker for the beginning of fall. Sorry to be a bit tardy with this issue of Notes, but coming back from our Chicago sabbatical, the beginning of the school year and travel obligations have delayed some of my personal work. I hope that you are well after our long, hot summer.

My time away in Chicago was fruitful (see a few notes below) and relaxing. It was fun to be reacquainted with a city I love – and to be reminded how nice it is to have a short commute in the Twin Cities!

It was good to hear from long-time friend and colleague, Ted Grossnickle, who had this to say about some connections he noticed in the June issue of Notes:

“Your Notes struck me in a particularly strong way this time, Paul. I keep turning over in my head the link between Peter on the shore of Galilee and your description of the college and neighborhood community in the wake of Nur Ali’s murder. Renewal, mutuality and going on despite what has happened. It seems to me that in both stories, there is the seedbed of hope. And if not an exhaustive list of ingredients, you have the makings of much of that from which hope arises. I continue to think about hope. How it fuels not only what you and I and our colleagues do every day but also how Hope beckons as a goal in and of itself. We almost always aim higher and do better work when we have high hopes. And the world could use more of it nowadays. I hope that your college community continues to keep those ingredients together and continues to hope. That seems to me a central idea of what happened on the shore of Galilee.” Thanks, Ted.

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

>>Reflective politics<<

I need to begin here as we commence the craziness of the political season ahead...

I recently heard Scott Simon, the Saturday morning host on National Public Radio, recount a story about Adlai Stevenson, the Illinois Democrat who served as governor and U.S. senator before running as the Democratic nominee for president in 1952 and 1956. At a campaign stop during the 1952 campaign, someone in the crowd yelled, "You've got the votes of all thinking people, Adlai," to which Stevenson is purported to have responded, "That won't be enough, I need a majority."

As we enter the political season some sixty years later, perhaps we might hope that our politics could at least aspire to some reflection, some connection to the things we care about, some conversations of substance instead of sound bites. But, alas, thinking remains a minority activity. May the voices of our minority be heard above the din of politics as usual!

>>Lutheran higher education: the case for relevance<<

My sabbatical time this summer gave me the great gift to explore in some depth the powerful theological ideas that help shape Lutheran higher education in North America. I am not yet prepared to articulate my entire argument for the relevance and sustainability of our Lutheran colleges and universities, but I believe that there are five core ideas – ideas that are grounded in Lutheran theology and that take concrete form in the character of our Lutheran institutions.

Here is a first pass at those five ideas and a very few thoughts on each (thoughts shaped by the work of many others):

VOCATION

The central idea of Lutheran higher education – equipping students through education to discern and follow their callings in the world.

There is such a thing as a Lutheran "theological anthropology," that is, the ambiguity of authentic Christian discipleship, which shapes our vocation dialogue in higher education. The missing element in much of our vocational conversation is the truth that vocation compels us--because of "the needs of the world"--to willingly undertake callings that are messy, to undertake vocations that are "not very Christian" by the lights of many pious souls. To--for example--become the lawyer who oversees the guilty prisoner who goes free, for the sake of upholding the law, ensuring that the rule of law and the greater good is sustained. This truth is a critical element of our colleges' collective vocation as institutions in their "third way" stance of welcoming all persons of good will into our educational enterprise. (Wilhelm) Our institutional vocations involve "engaging a dialogue that attempts to tell the whole truth in a way that serves well the deep needs of the world." (Christenson)

CRITICAL AND HUMBLE INQUIRY

We are a tradition founded by a university professor, who challenged all of us to ask difficult questions and to seek God's will in the answers.

We also share a “theologically-informed vision of epistemology” (Christenson) and a bias to the liberal arts ideal (Jodock). This epistemology (or “way of knowing” is meant to avoid the Cartesian paradigm that separates knowledge and faith. We celebrate our commitment to a “Both/and” perspective, what Martin Marty calls our “simul-vision.”

Lutheran epistemology is grounded in wonder, openness, recognition of connectedness, freedom, critical faithfulness, and engaged suspiciousness.

The late Joseph Sittler says that our colleges are about the work of “annihilating innocence” about the realities of the world and human life!

WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR – ENGAGING THE OTHER?

The contention that God is creator of all and that we are called into neighborliness with all of creation.

Our Lutheran tradition allows us to see “the other as neighbor in a world of strangers.” (M. Stortz)

Our colleges represent “A third path (in higher education) - rooted and inclusive, faithful and open to the other.” (Jodock)

This commitment to rootedness and inclusion makes us “Partners for religious pluralism – shaping attitudes, nurturing relationships, imparting knowledge.” (Patel)

TRUTH IN ACTION: FREED FOR SERVICE

Our vocations in the world are to be co-creators of God’s intentions for all creation. We believe that we are saved through faith and thus freed for the neighbor.

We believe that “Theory must be critiqued by a doing that serves.” (Christenson) The Lutheran meaning of “priesthood of all believers” calls us to serve the neighbor (Stortz).

“The world is important, the world is good and loved by God, humans are fundamentally of the earth, God calls humans to be co-creators and stewards of the world.” (Christenson/Jodock)

SEMPER REFORMANDA

Our tradition does not worship forms, it follows where the Spirit leads – this is what reformation means. Only God is permanent!

Therefore, we believe in “flexible, responsive institutions” (Stortz). We also seek to embrace the promise of various social arrangements.

We strive as higher education institutions, in the midst of our inquiry and service, to be communities of discernment and confidence (Hanson).

PRACTICE THIS

>>Board work<<

I have a wonderful new Board chairperson at Augsburg beginning this fall (after four great years with our previous chair), which has me thinking about how boards work and how I might help to ensure that our board is focused on what is most important to our college.

I am a member of BoardSource, an organization devoted to building effective nonprofit boards (www.boardsource.org) and I returned to the June/July 2005 issue of *BoardMember*, the organization's newsletter, which 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 look forward to the work of our board, when they are needed more than ever to help guide our work in the world.

>>To forgive, divine<<

I return to this piece often (originally appeared in Notes 1-6) as I strive to learn from doing – even after 11 years as a president!

“In a recent article in “Fast Company” (June 2000), Alan M. Webber interviews Jeffrey Pfeffer, a professor of organizational behavior at Stanford on the nagging question, “Why can’t we get anything done?” Pfeffer (along with Robert I. Sutton) has recently published “The Knowing-Doing Gap: How Smart Companies Turn Knowledge into Action,” (Harvard Business School Press, 2000). Pfeffer offers 16 rules for explaining why, despite how much we seem to know, our organizations don’t seem to get much done. Among the rules are:

- Doing something requires...doing something! All the recent literature about knowledge management tends to lead to great intellectual conversations, but what it needs to promote is actual practice, testing ideas, refining our knowledge...
- Have no fear. Learning organizations are only possible when we tolerate mistakes and inefficiencies and failure. That’s the only way we will learn.
- Learning comes at a price. Pay it. There is a trade-off between proficiency and learning. You have to make those trade-offs.
- Sure, it’s measurement—but is it important? The tyranny of measurement—promoted by the notion that what gets measured gets done—must be overthrown with a focus on strategic measuring. Measurement is crucial, but you must do the right measurements.
- Make knowing and doing the same thing. Build a culture of action. Here is the province of genuine reflective practice—how you think, who you are, and what you do are one in the same.

And my favorite:

- Doing means learning. Learning means mistakes. If organizations genuinely want to move from knowing to doing, they need to build a forgiveness framework—a tolerance for error and failure—into their culture. An organization that wants you to come up with a smart idea, implement that idea quickly, and learn in the process has to be willing to cut you some slack.

To err is human—it is the means by which we learn and grow. To forgive, divine—which may be an apocalyptic aspiration (!) but doesn’t excuse us from trying.”

PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<

I have long been a student of Richard Sennett, whose recent *Together: The Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Cooperation* (Yale University Press, 2012) seems most relevant to our times.

We are about to welcome Eboo Patel, founder and head of the Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC) to campus for some lectures and time with students. His new book, *Sacred Ground: Pluralism, Prejudice, and the Promise of America* (Beacon Press, 2012) is a call to action for college and university students to face the challenge of interfaith living in the 21st century. Coupled with his *Acts of Faith: The Story of an American Muslim, in the Struggle for the Soul of a Generation* (Beacon Press, 2010), Patel is crafting an agenda for his generation that is compelling and timely.

>>The questions<<

As a new academic year begins, Rainer Rilke's wise words seem relevant once again:

"You are so young, so before all beginning, and I want to beg you, as much as I can, dear sir, to be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and to try to love the *questions themselves* like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. *Live* the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer. Perhaps you do carry within yourself the possibility of shaping and forming as a particularly happy and pure way of living: train yourself to it—but take whatever comes with great trust, and if only it comes out of your own will, out of some need of your inmost being, take it upon yourself and hate nothing."

[from *Letters to a Young Poet*]

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>>Topics for upcoming issues<<

- Reinventing governance
- Lutheran identity and higher education (continued)

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