

NOTES FOR THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

Volume Nineteen, Number Six (August 2018)

"What we have loved, others will love, and we will teach them how."

(W. Wordsworth, from "The Prelude")

NOTES FROM READERS

>>What you think<<

Well, the students are back so it must be the fall again! Always an exciting time on a college campus. I had many nice responses to my last issue of Notes – I so appreciate hearing from you and knowing how your lives of reflective practice are unfolding.

Long-time subscriber, Joan Flanagan, a Chicago friend, sent this delightful anecdote in response to my sermon, "Abide in me" in my June Notes:

"Your sermon on *Abide in me* was excellent. My Godfather Clifford was drafted out of his high school senior class, served in New Guinea, the Philippines, and was an occupier in Occupied Japan. He had just begun trumpet lessons for 25¢ a week from one of the people on his paper route. So he got to be the trumpeter for his battalion. The only hymn he knew was "Abide with me," so every Sunday they would process in to "Abide with me," take Communion to "Abide with me," and process out to "Abide with me." As Clifford said, "What else do you need?" Indeed and Amen!

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. I thank my friends at Johnson, Grossnickle & Associates for their many years of abiding support for our reflective practice.

REFLECT ON THIS

>>A plumb line<<

I had the privilege to offer the following sermon at Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in Minneapolis earlier this summer. The assigned scripture was difficult, but as you will see, I made the best of it!

Scripture: Amos 7: 7-1; Ephesians 1: 3-1; Mark 6: 14-29

Good morning – it is a wonderful privilege to worship with you this morning and to proclaim the Good News in your midst. That said, when Pastor Ingrid called to ask me to join you this morning, I did not immediately check the lectionary texts assigned for this 8th Sunday after Pentecost, only to discover weeks later this sordid tale of the beheading of John the Baptist – where's the Good News in that? Let's see if we can find it!

I begin with this morning with a story, a baptism story. Our youngest, Maya, was surrounded by family and friends at her baptism, including her older brother, Thomas. As my dad baptized her in

the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, spilling the ceremonial water over her head, Maya let out a great cry, and her brother, always quick to get a word in, shouted out for the entire congregation to hear, “Maya, shake it off like a dog.” As much as we might like to shake off the role of faith in our lives, it is, of course, impossible to do – thanks be to God! But that doesn’t mean that we don’t try...

Now, I’m not much of a carpenter, so as I read Amos I can’t quite picture the plumb line – so I went to the hardware store down the street and bought one. Here it is. With the weight on one end, the plumb line was a sort of level, meant to indicate whether or not walls of a structure are straight. A sound structure needs straight walls. The metaphor of a plumb line thus means that God has set a standard true to the plumb line, a covenant standard against which God’s people Israel would be judged – and so they were judged time and again, defeated by enemies, exiled and then brought home again to live as God’s covenant people. The standard set by the plumb line – a high bar indeed – God’s covenant law. Shake it off, they tried.

The Apostle Paul’s soaring letter to the Ephesians reminds us that the divine plumb line remains true – a standard too high for God’s faithful people to meet except for the sacrifice of God’s only Son, Jesus Christ. “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace,” Paul writes. We were chosen before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless – we were adopted as his children through Jesus Christ – marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit. Baptized, in other words, sealed and sent to be God’s faithful people in the world. The standard set by the plumb line – a high bar indeed – God’s redeeming love in Jesus Christ. Shake it off, we try and try and try again.

And then we turn to this odd pericope from Mark’s gospel – it is a sort of flashback scene, if you will. If you recall, the last few Sundays have been filled with tales of Jesus’ healing miracles – the touching of hems, the raising of a child, the casting out of demons, a prophet unwelcome in his own hometown, and then the sending of his disciples to go and do likewise. Suddenly we’re in the court of King Herod, who, having learned of Jesus’ miracles, speculates that John the Baptizer has been raised from the dead to do these miracles. This is particularly unsettling to Herod because, as the next verses recount, he’s the one who, despite his fear of John, who he found to be a righteous and holy man, was tricked by his wife – actually, his brother’s former wife! – into ordering John beheaded.

So, why is this story included here – in the midst of Jesus’ healing ministry and just before the feeding of the 5000 (heads up for next week’s sermon)? My sense is that Mark believes deeply that to follow Jesus means to recognize that you will not be welcome in your hometown, you will not necessarily be the hero or heroine sent to save the day, you may be scorned and rejected, and you may pay the ultimate sacrifice as per the holy and righteous John the Baptizer for the good you are called to do. The standard set by the plumb line – a high bar indeed – go and do likewise. Shake it off, we may try, but it is our call as God’s faithful and redeemed people in the world – no matter the cost.

I have recently returned to a wonderful little essay by Kentucky farmer and poet, Wendell Berry, entitled “The Burden of the Gospels” wherein Berry reminds a group of seminarians that the radical claim of the gospel for those who believe requires a willingness to suspend our own, human, modern and postmodern notions that we can somehow live up to God’s intentions by following our own paths. Berry asks two questions of his readers. First, “If you had been living in Jesus’ time and had heard him teaching, would you have been one of his followers?” He asks us to consider the

scandal of being called to love our enemies, treating those who hate us kindly, praying for those who mistrust you. Are you confident that you would follow?

And then the second question: Jesus says, “If you love me, keep my commandments>” “Can you be sure you would keep his commandments if it became excruciatingly painful to do so?” The standard set by the divine plumb line – a high bar indeed – if you love me, keep my commandments, follow me.

At Augsburg, we seek to respond to these questions through our undergraduate curriculum, that invites all of our students – no matter their own faith traditions – into an exploration of their calls in the world, their vocations – what students have come to call the “V-word.” In this way, we practice evangelism – giving away the gift of our Lutheran Christian tradition – the gift of the theological concept of vocation – so that others might be enriched in their own vocational journeys. We find inspiration for this form of evangelism in these beautiful words from the late Roman Catholic priest and author, Henri Nouwen:

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.

In this radical vision of hospitality, we engage students in exploring what it means to be called. Here, then, is our Lutheran understanding of vocation. I call it Vocation 2.0. In a world where vocation has become part of common parlance, and where Christian theologian and preacher Frederick Buechner’s lovely formula – “your vocation is that place where your deepest gladness intersects with the world’s deepest need” – has been misappropriated to suggest that vocations are upwardly mobile journeys to always more meaning and success in the world, we now come with this perhaps never more relevant and urgent message to all God’s faithful people.

Your vocation – your calling – may very well be found in the messy, mundane details of daily life, where we believe God is present and active, even when we are unsure what to do. (Owen and Mzenga)

Your calling has a history, which unfolds like a story with twists and turns, where there is no one single destination but many stops on a life-long journey. A fisher one day, a healer the next. A

carpenter and then a teacher. A student and then a nurse or even a tax accountant – surprise! (Cody story)

Your vocation is not a solitary undertaking, but is inextricably bound up with those whose own callings complement and inspire yours. You are not alone. (Beth F story)

And yes, there may come a time when the call you receive demands of you sacrifices the like of which you cannot imagine. And in that moment, you will know a love that surpasses all human understanding, the love of our God who loves the world so much, so very, very much. The love of our God who does not leave us comfortless or without the help we need to do God's work in the world. The love of our God who calls us to join in the work. Will we follow?

Perhaps the greatest prophet of 20th century Christian realism, Reinhold Niebuhr, wrote in his *The Irony of American History* (1952) these words that summarize how we might live in these tensions between the gift of faith and the work we are called to do in the world – how hope can be found and pursued, how faith creates trust and leads us to grasp the love of the Creator: “Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime; therefore we are saved by hope. Nothing true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we are saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore, we are saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as from our own; therefore we are saved by the final form of love, which is forgiveness.”

The divine plumb line is straight – the bar is high indeed – and we are saved by the gifts of hope, faith, love and forgiveness, so that we might follow the call to discipleship, no matter the costs, no accounting for the joy.

I'll leave the last word to my daughter, Maya, who we met at her baptism being encouraged to shake it off – now she comes with this faith statement, written for her confirmation earlier this spring at our home congregation, Central Lutheran in Minneapolis. She writes these wise words to all of us...

“I'm not always sure what to make of God. I've learned the prayers and creed. I've read the Bible and attended church services. I'm still trying to figure out what God means to my life. I believe that Jesus, God's son, came to this world and taught us many important lessons about how to live together and about serving our neighbor. And I believe that God puts people in our lives – parents, grandparents, siblings, pastors, teachers and friends – who take care of us, help us succeed, teach us life lessons and love us. I guess for all of this, I believe that God is good and God is love.”

I think that Mark the Evangelist would have affirmed Maya's words. Shake it off, we may try, but God will not pass us by for we are God's adopted children through Christ Jesus, loved beyond measure, marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit, called to do God's holy work in the world. Here is the plumb line. This is the Good News! Thanks be to God. Amen.

>>Democracy and higher education<<

I have spent the summer working on a white paper for the Association of Governing Boards (AGB). The topic is higher education and democracy. The audience is members of college and university boards of trustees. I'll let you know when the final version is published, but for now here is the introduction...

“The first and most essential charge upon higher education is that ... it shall be the carrier of

democratic values, ideals and processes.” Truman Commission on Higher Education, 1947

It seems remarkable today that just 70 years ago a commission charged by President Harry Truman to explore the state of education in the United States would conclude that the highest purposes of higher education were directly linked to the well-being of our democracy. Given recent public opinion polls that raise doubts across the political spectrum about the value of higher education, it is difficult to fathom how the Truman Commission’s six-volume report, “Higher Education for American Democracy,” set such a compelling argument for reclaiming the public purposes of higher education.

Truman Commission

The Truman Commission on Higher Education sought to radically increase access to higher education. Among the groundbreaking proposals recommended by the Truman Commission were:

- * Federal student aid programs;
- * The elimination of discriminatory admissions criteria;
- * The establishment of a robust public community college system, with programs tailored to the needs of specific locations and contexts; and,
- * A focus on adult education programs aimed at expanding academic offerings for non-traditional students.

And yet the Truman Commission report is simply a more recent historical marker of a long tradition of linking education and democratic citizenship. From Cicero to Thomas Jefferson to John Dewey, there are abundant arguments that education is essential to the cultivation of civic virtues and habits of mind that characterize citizenship in a democratic society. We find in the founding documents of states and territories lofty language promoting the role of education. For example, in the third article of the Ordinance for the Government of the Northwest Territory, it states: “Religion, morality and knowledge being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall be forever encouraged.” In such constitutional language, our ancestors provided the motivation for the founding of colleges and universities to serve the emerging republic.

Education and democracy throughout history

What greater or better gift can we offer the republic than to teach and instruct our youth?

[Lat., Quod enim munus reipublicae afferre majus, meliusve possumus, quam si docemus atque erudimus juventutem?] (Marcus Tullius Cicero)

Above all things I hope the education of the common people will be attended to;

convinced that on their good sense we may rely with most security for the preservation of a due degree of liberty. (Thomas Jefferson)

Knowledge will forever govern ignorance, and **a people who mean to be their own Governors must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives.** (James Madison)

Education is the great American adventure; the world's most **colossal democratic experiment** (Mary McLeod Bethune)

Honest and earnest criticism from those whose interests are most nearly touched – criticism of writers by readers, of government by those governed, of leaders by those led – this is the **soul of democracy** and the safeguard of modern society. (W.E.B. Du Bois)

It is no accident that all democracies have put a high estimate upon education; that schooling has been their first care and enduring charge. Only through education can equality of opportunity be anything more than a phrase. Accidental inequalities of birth, wealth, and learning are always tending to restrict the opportunities of some as compared with those of others. Only free and continued education can counteract those forces which are always at work to restore, in however changed a form, feudal oligarchy. **Democracy has to be born anew every generation, and education is its midwife.** (John Dewey)

Democracy cannot succeed unless those who express their choice are prepared to choose wisely. **The real safeguard of democracy, therefore, is education.** (Franklin D. Roosevelt)

Given these long-standing historical, philosophical, and practical precedents for the essential links between higher education and democracy, why is it that today that these arguments for the deep ties between higher education and democracy have lost their power to persuade? To begin, we must recognize that both higher education and democracy are in crisis in the 21st century. The crisis for both is symptomatic of broader social trends: polarization, a lack of trust in institutions, relativist claims about truth, and a focus more on individual interests than on the common good. We must embrace the fact that there is an essential role for higher education and its leaders in promoting a renewal of democracy in the US, a role that challenges us to recover both the democratic impulse in the histories of our colleges and universities and to address the specific trends and issues that are at the heart of the twenty-first century crises we face.

Defining democracy

It is commonplace for Americans to assume that our democracy is summed up in the rights of individuals to vote and in the institutional forms of government created to carry out the will of the people. Though voting and government systems are important, they are at best the “machinery” of our democracy.

If we are to recover the essential links between higher education and democracy, we must embrace an understanding of **democracy as a way of life**, what the great social reformer Jane Addams called “democracy as a social ethic.”

For higher education institutions, an understanding of democracy as a way of life has several implications. It means that the education we offer, aimed as it may be to particular careers, professions and other walks of life, is always at the same time preparatory for democratic citizenship. It also means that higher education institutions have civic purpose. The economic, social, and civic impact of colleges and universities are part and parcel of their roles in democratic culture.

Leadership from presidents and trustees must acknowledge the crises we face in our democracy and be willing to offer courageous and often counter-cultural responses that will renew higher education’s public roles and purposes – responses that are about hard decisions and rigorous accountability rather than nostalgia and political gamesmanship.

PRACTICE THIS

>>Abundance thinking in organizational planning<<

A year from now, Augsburg will begin our sesquicentennial celebration, our 150th anniversary! In preparation for that celebration, we have been exploring our history and are about to publish a wonderful explication of that history. As I read the manuscript for the history, I was struck again by how Augsburg’s history is a narrative of abundance against the odds. As we engage in strategic planning for the years beyond our 150th, I am suggesting that this history of abundance thinking needs to be at the forefront of our future plans.

In particular, I have identified three themes that I believe must guide our plans and work in the years ahead...

- (1) **There is enough:** it starts with this bold claim that despite the evidence, we have enough and our call is to use what we have to meet the needs of others
- (2) **We are in this together:** abundance happens at the intersections of gifts, associational life and hospitality – challenge is to build trust that allays the fear and allows collaboration to happen
- (3) **Multiple your mind by giving it away:** this is, in the end, the point. Once we believe there is enough and we equip each other to live as the common is genuinely possible, then all

of the good and generative in our thinking and planning and doing returns to us manifold.
Herein is abundance.

PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<

Augsburg's beloved Sabo Professor Emeritus Garry Hesser, long a national leader in experiential education, has edited *Strengthening Experiential Education: A New Era* (National Society for Experiential Education, 2014), a compilation of essays on the state of experiential education in the 21st century.

Augsburg is a member of the Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities, comprising 26 institutions across the country linked to our particular brand of Lutheranism. As part of the Network's good work, we recently adopted "Rooted and Open: The Common Calling of the Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities," which provides a great overview of how our missions and identities have been shaped by the Lutheran Christian tradition. You can find a copy at <https://www.elca.org/Resources/Colleges-and-Universities>.

>>Forgetfulness<<

I love this poem from Billy Collins – especially at the beginning of my 43rd year on a college campus!

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
or 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.

Billy Collins, "Forgetfulness" from *Questions About Angels*. Copyright © 1999 by Billy Collins.
Reprinted with the permission of University of Pittsburgh Press.

>>Subscription information<<

Subscriptions to Notes are simple to establish. Send me an email at augpres@augsborg.edu, ask to be added to the list, and the listserv will confirm that you have been subscribed to the list. Please feel free to forward your email versions of Notes to others—they then can subscribe by contacting me. The current and archive issues of Notes are available on-line at www.jgacounsel.com.

>>Topics for upcoming issues<<

- Culture change
- Big ideas!
- Improvisation and living together

(c) Paul Pribbenow, 2018