

## NOTES FOR THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

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"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 summer, friends. I hope and pray that you are finding time for rest and renewal – and reflective practice. Other than trying to keep track of my teenagers, I'm occupied with a couple of writing projects this summer. I am drafting a white paper on "Higher Education and Democracy" for the Association of Governing Boards – a daunting and oh so important project. I also am working on reflecting again about how abundance thinking is key to organizational planning. More on these projects in future issues of Notes. My summer will be capped off with a ten-day trip to Namibia and South Africa to visit our campus sites there!

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](http://www.jgacounsel.com). I thank my friends at Johnson, Grossnickle & Associates for their many years of abiding support for our reflective practice.

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## REFLECT ON THIS

>>Abide in me<<

This is my Baccalaureate Sermon for 2018. One of the honors of my office is to preach the Good News to our graduates as they commence from Augsburg.

*Abide in me as I abide in you.*

(John 15: 4)

It is a wonderful privilege to be with all of you this evening – our graduates, your families and friends; honored guests; our faculty, staff and Regents; and other members of the Augsburg community. This is a splendid day for all of us as we mark your great achievements and celebrate the mission-based work of Augsburg University. You, our graduates, are our epistles to the world, and we look forward with great anticipation to all of the ways in which your work, commitments, relationships and faith will make God's world an even more fair, just and compassionate place for all God's creatures.

This evening, I invite you to join me in exploring what it means that we are called to abide in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, just as he abides in us; this simple idea of thanksgiving for the gifts that abide, that are ours as they have been for generations of those who have gone before us as God's faithful people in this place we call Augsburg.

The inspiration for my thoughts this evening is in our reading from John's gospel, where Jesus is teaching his disciples to consider what grounds them, what is the foundation for their work in the world. Using evocative vineyard metaphors, Jesus says, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower." Or again, "Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches." And then, "Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned." And finally, "My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples." The point is clear. The call the disciples receive – to bring the gospel to the wider world – is a call from God to do God's work. Jesus is teaching his disciples – he is teaching us – how to make sense of our various calls as they fit into a larger plan – God's plan – already in motion in the world. Jesus is teaching us to abide – perhaps one of the most beautiful words in the English language.

For those of us gathered here some 2000 years later, this notion of the call to abide may strike us as fairly obvious. It is, of course, the gift of our vocations, the gift at the heart of an Augsburg education – perhaps the gift you would like to stop talking about. But, of course, the point is that it is a gift you will never stop receiving because it is at the heart of your life of faith and work; it is the gift of education and service.

I've long been a student of vocational journeys – even before I came to this "V-word" school. And I'm always looking for stories of how various people come to hear and follow a call. Perhaps the most compelling stories of vocational journeys are found in the lives of Jesus' disciples as depicted in the Christian scriptures. Think about Simon Peter and John and Thomas and Paul and Mary and Miriam and Tabitha – and all of those invited by Jesus to follow – in many ways, the disciples offer us a mirror to our own experiences of trying to live faithful lives in the world. I've been struck by how relevant their experiences of some 2000 years ago still are for us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

And so God does have a plan for us. Just as God had a plan for Peter and James and John; for Paul and Miriam and Tabitha – disciples all. A plan that our teacher(s) have prepared us to live out. A vocational plan, if you will – a call to love and serve. A call to follow even when – like for disciples throughout the ages – the stakes are high, the rewards perhaps uncertain, the terrain uncharted, the future murky at best. A call to abide in our awesome and loving God, You're not alone with these vocational feelings!

"Where I am going," Jesus tells his disciples in the 14<sup>th</sup> chapter of the gospel of John, "you cannot come." But you will not be alone. I leave you this new commandment, by which the world will know that you are my disciples. "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." By this, they will know that you are mine, if you have love for one another. You are known by how you love – how you love God, each other, and God's good world. You're as ready as you're going to be. You've been called...abide in me and all will be well.

And now what?

A few years ago, my teacher, religious historian Martin Marty, remarked that faithful people are called to pay attention to the ways in which God is depicted in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures as generous, a generosity that runs counter to careful, rational, human calculations. From acts of creation to covenants with chosen people to presence in the midst of anguish and suffering, the character of God is marked with generous self-giving. And the appropriate response to this generous God is to give thanks and get to work – with glad and generous hearts. We too are called

to abide in this generosity, in this love, and to follow our calls to be God's people and do God's work in the world.

What a rare gift it is for those of us who are part of the Augsburg community to have this gospel inspiration and challenge in our lives. In this community of faith and learning, we too acknowledge the gifts we have been given – the gifts of faith and education and community and service – even as we embrace our calls to abide in God's love and do God's work.

Here are three brief scenarios of how we might pursue our lives of abundance and generosity – scenarios meant to encourage us to live faithfully, to abide in God's love and plan for the world as we go forth from this place.

### *We abide in our place*

The concept of the abundance and generosity of place is much on my mind these days in our work at Augsburg, especially as we think about our campus and its place in the neighborhood. The original motto for Augsburg Theological Seminary and College also comes from John's gospel, the first chapter: "And the Word became flesh" – and so it does, here, in our midst, God with us. We believe that Augsburg University practices generosity most authentically when it lives as the Word made flesh – abiding, present, rooted, of service, faithful, in this place.

I have long believed that colleges are indigenous communities – that is, they are native to a particular place, a particular environment, a particular set of values and practices that define us – and that means something for the way we live our lives, it means something for the ways in which we understand the abundance and generosity of place and values and presence. For Augsburg, in particular, our place in this neighborhood known as Cedar-Riverside clearly shapes the values and commitments we have as an academic institution focused on education for service,

The poet and essayist, Wendell Berry, whose work I return to often for guidance, writes these wise words in his prose poem, "Damage" – "No expert knows everything about every place, not even everything about any place. If one's knowledge of one's whereabouts is insufficient, if one's judgment is unsound, then expert advice is of little use."

Berry's good advice is extended by the work of friend and Sabo Center colleague, Jay Walljasper, whose *The Great Neighborhood Book: A Do-It-Yourself Guide to Placemaking* (New Society Publishers, 2007) draws us into his "neighborhood love story" with lots of practical advice to live generously in our place.

Walljasper quotes Mexican novelist, Carlos Fuentes, who says, "The citizen takes his city for granted far too often. He (and she) forgets to marvel." In other words, we forget to abide!

"The Word became flesh" is both a theological and practical claim. How can we be even more generous in our whereabouts and place as the body of Christ here and now, as the Word made flesh in this place, as Augsburg University here in Cedar-Riverside and everywhere we are found?

And how will you take your lessons of abiding in this place into your work in the world? God calls you to abide, to take root as healthy branches on the vine, to love the places where you are planted, to be the Word made flesh here and now.

### *We abide in our common lives*

Let us now turn to our lives together right here on campus and in the various communities and organizations where we daily live and work and bring our faith and gifts to bear. Allow me to confess, as a lifelong organizational person, we need all of our glad and generous hearts to help our communities and organizations – including our university – live up to their better natures! We need to discern and embrace our vocations to do God’s good and generous work – to abide in God’s love and our common purpose – in the midst of settings too often shaped by the demands of the world that are grounded in scarcity, bitterness and entitlement.

These days, I’m very excited about the work of Public Achievement, a program of Augsburg’s Sabo Center for Democracy and Citizenship, that focuses on teaching the skills and habits that accompany and sustain a change in individuals from spectators to citizens

As our colleague Harry Boyte reminds us, quoting an important hymn of the civil rights movement, "We Are the Ones We've Been Waiting For," we are those called to abide in love and common purpose when the world says no. We have both that power and that obligation.

I’ve watched with great pride as many of you – our Augsburg students and faculty and staff begin to embrace the Public Achievement work – in our Special Education curriculum, where our faculty are training student teachers to work with their high school students to give them the voice they never thought they had; in various campus offices, where staff are identifying obstacles to serving students as well as they would like and are offering up their solutions, instead of waiting for someone else to tell them what to do; and in our work with youth from the neighborhood, where the Public Achievement model is offering them a way to take back control over lives that are too often buffeted by circumstances controlled by others.

We are called to lives of faith in this community and all of the communities and organizations where we live and work day in and out. How will you follow the call to common purpose by becoming a partner with your fellow citizens – by offering your all, your mind and knowledge and experience – to say yes, to be a co-creator of God’s abundant intentions for God’s people and world, to abide in love and grace for the sake of communities of memory and justice and compassion?

*We abide in our lives of faith alongside those who do not share our faith*

Finally, I challenge all of us to consider what it means to abide in our faith as we live in an increasingly complex world – with and alongside our neighbors who do not share our faith. We live in diverse communities where our various faiths demand of us a generosity of spirit and means, where we are called to lives together in support of healthy and just and compassionate communities. We are called by the God we know in Jesus Christ to say yes alongside those who know God in other ways – to proclaim that we have been freed for lives of generosity that abide in service to all God’s good creation and creatures. While the world divides and polarizes and demonizes the other, we are called to find common purpose, to live as God intends, to live with and for each other.

I lift up the important interfaith work our community has engaged in recent years in the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood (with special thanks to Pastor Sonja and Professor Matt Maruggi for their good leadership). We are convinced that dialogue and service must be interwoven in all we do. We believe that what we learned through recent efforts to encourage interfaith dialogue with our neighbors is something we must do each day. We are working hard on safety, youth activities, infrastructure plans, and economic development to model interfaith living within our neighborhood.

We abide in God's love – the call of our faith – when we learn and practice this sort of hospitality, this sort of interfaith living. Eboo Patel, who founded the Interfaith Youth Corps in Chicago – and who is a regular visitor to Augsburg – challenged some of our Augsburg colleagues with this question in a presentation a few years back, a question we have begun to address together here at Augsburg: “What is it in your experience of the cross of Jesus Christ that calls you, that calls us, into the generous work of interfaith living?” How will you answer?

On this very special day, we give thanks for all of you who follow your calls to abide in God's love. In this university, we have sought to educate you to live as those called to abide in place, in the promise of common lives and purpose, and in the complexities of diverse faiths and cultures. We now send you forth, equipped to be God's people and do God's work. As we heard in the epistle from John, “Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.” This is the Word made flesh, God at work in the world, in the cosmos, in our daily lives. This is the good news. I am loved and I am called, and so I join the great and glad work of loving the world – even as we struggle with doubt and rejection; of loving my neighbor – knowing that the hungry and poor and dispossessed are God's special ones; and of loving God – thereby to abide in the One who first loved us. Thanks be to God. And God's people say together, Amen.

>>Stating our faith<<

Earlier this spring, our youngest Maya was confirmed at Central Lutheran Church in Minneapolis. As part of the confirmation service, each confirmand was asked to share a Faith Statement. Maya and I worked together on her statement, which I think evokes much of what many of us feel as we live in the tensions between faith and doubt. Here is Maya's faith statement. Maybe all of us should find ways to state our own faiths.

*“And Mary said, My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.”*

Luke 1: 46-47

I was born December 29, 2003 in Chongqing, China and my parents came to find me when I was nine months old. I was baptized by my Grandpa Jerry at Emmanuel Lutheran Church in Rockford, Illinois on December 18, 2004. I moved to Minneapolis in July 2006. I have attended Yinghua Academy, a Mandarin Chinese Immersion School, for kindergarten through 8<sup>th</sup> grade, and will attend DeLaSalle High School in Minneapolis, beginning next fall.

Church is important for my family. My dad is a life long Lutheran. My mom was raised in the Episcopal Church. When we moved to Minneapolis, we attended Our Saviour's Lutheran Church in South Minneapolis, where I started Sunday School. I enjoyed Godly Play. When my brother Thomas was ready for confirmation, we moved to Mt. Olivet Lutheran Church, a very big church. When I was ready for confirmation, we came to Central Lutheran, where several friends and I are in confirmation together. Maybe that is the most important thing for me about church – being part of a community of friends.

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. I also believe that God created this world, which I especially learned when our confirmation class went to Camp Amnicon last summer for a canoe

adventure. 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 want to keep growing in my faith. I'm excited to attend the ELCA Youth Gathering in Houston this summer. I will take many required religion classes at DeLaSalle. I look forward to more Bible camp experiences with my Central friends. I enjoyed carrying the banner for our church services earlier this spring and would like to continue to participate in worship. I am good with younger kids so maybe I could help with Sunday School.

I know that Confirmation is an important step for me in my life of faith, but I also know that it is just a step, not a destination. I am thankful for all those at Central who will continue to help me on my journey of faith.

### PRACTICE THIS

>>The public purposes of higher education<<

I was asked to reflect for a public forum on how to explain the public purposes of higher education. As I was working on my reflections, I happened to listen to an Indigo Girls track called “Closer to Fine”, which has this provocative line: “He graded my performance, he said he could see through me. I spent four years prostrate to the higher mind. Got my paper and I was free.”

This simple line sums up an hierarchical and transactional depiction of education that informs much of how colleges and universities are perceived by the American public today – disengaged, elitist, not open to new or alternative ideas, something to be escaped – not to mention expensive, unproductive, oblivious to its own failings, and increasingly seen as irrelevant.

For those of us who believe in the public purposes of higher education, this often well-deserved perception (i.e., there's a kernel of truth to much of this) flies in the face of our aspirations to recover a deeper meaning and purpose for colleges and universities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

There are three themes to those aspirations:

- Grounded in the belief that genuine education is relational, that is it is co-created between participants in communities of teaching and learning. Rilke (and Palmer's) notion of “the grace of great things,” wicked problems that can only be addressed when we are in this together.
- Informed by the concept of democratic excellences, an argument against the meritocracy of the academy and on behalf of the remarkable gifts and experiences and “excellences” students bring to the work of teaching and learning.
- Buoyed by the faith-based claim of semper reformanda, the theological concept that only God is permanent and everything human must be open to constant reform, challenging us to imagine how to do what we do in ever more faithful and successful ways.

So, what do these aspirations look like in practice?

- Classrooms and campuses and neighborhoods that are marked by on-going engagement – no focal wall – conversations in the gray areas of life, seeking the wisdom of all participants in response to the issue or topic or challenge – the mutuality of learning – blurring the boundaries between student and teacher, between teacher and citizen, between classroom and neighborhood
- A willingness to say that our privileged understanding of excellence – crafted in primarily Western and white contexts – may have something to learn from other experiences, traditions, ways of knowing – the humility to admit that we do not know everything and can continue to learn throughout our lives – learning new ways to recognize and celebrate excellence in democratic engagement
- The call to think differently about how we put the pieces together in our organizations, institutions, communities, etc. Fighting against a 19<sup>th</sup> century understanding of organizational structure – helping each other to think “institutionally”, new social arrangements to achieve our aims – collaboration, anchor institutions, blurring boundaries of disciplines, departments, organizations.

## PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<

Books are piling up for summer reading. Here are a few highlights...

Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt probe the troubling issues of *How Democracies Die* (Crown Books, 2018).

On a more upbeat note, Historian Jon Meacham offers *The Soul of America: The Battle for our Better Angels* (Random House, 2018).

For your reference shelf, Gabriel Said Reynolds has authored *The Qur'an and the Bible: Text and Commentary* (Yale University Press, 2018).

And finally, the long-awaited next book from Parker Palmer arrived this week. *On the Brink of Everything: Grace, Gravity and Getting Old* (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2018) brings together Palmer's recent musings on the third age of his life.

>>Patriotism<<

On the eve of Independence Day and in the midst of our increasingly volatile public life, I offer these wise words attributed to William Sloane Coffin, former chaplain to Yale University.

*There are three kinds of patriots, two bad, one good. The bad ones are uncritical lovers and loveless critics. Good patriots carry on a lover's quarrel with their country, a reflection of God's lover's quarrel with the world.*

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>>Topics for upcoming issues<<

- Culture change
- Big ideas!
- Abundance - again

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