

NOTES FOR THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

Volume Eight, Number Six (August 2007)

"What we have loved, others will love, and we will teach them how."
(W. Wordsworth, from "The Prelude")

NOTES FROM READERS

>>What you think<<

It is State Fair time in Minnesota – the great Minnesota gathering they call it. The fair is known for serving nearly everything on a stick (hot dish on a stick, walleye on a stick – you get the idea), bringing hundreds of thousands of people together for ten days, and signaling the imminent beginning of a new school year. It is that last fact that makes State Fair time in Minnesota such a busy and anticipatory time in my world! And so it begins again. Hope your late summer goes well.

My friend, Stewart Herman, who teaches religion and ethics at Concordia College in Moorhead, MN, writes, “My attention was caught by the *Preservation* article commending the convergence of institutional promotion with reality. A very difficult challenge, it seems to me, when institutional strategies for publicity involve creating a hermetic discourse not easily informed by the phenomenon it represents, and then that discourse becomes the measure of value of the institution. Perilous ground....” Indeed it is – and Stewart rightly names the pathology that lies at the heart of promises not kept!

Graduate school colleague, Joe Price, who teaches religion (and so much more!) at Whittier College, writes often about connections between baseball and theology. He sent along an article he recently wrote for *Vital Theology* (www.vitaltheology.com) on Barry Bonds and his pursuit of the home run record. Here is an excerpt:

“Bonds’ pursuit of the record also raises ethical and theological issues. For one, critics point out that his name has frequently been associated with Major League Baseball’s steroid scandal. They suggest that his skills might have been artificially elevated by performance-enhancing drugs and that, consequently, his record is tainted—in essence, that he cheated the pure nature of the game itself. In addition, Bonds’ likely record-breaking performing will challenge our theological notions about whether “most is best,” whether superiority approximates perfection, somehow producing salvation, somehow assuring immortality, at least for baseball’s faithful fans. “

Another subscriber has sent this wonderful request for your musings: **If you had one or two weeks to recharge your batteries--to revisit your call, whether for teaching or administration--where would you go and what would you do? For the sake of eliciting the most imaginative responses, assume that money is not a significant obstacle.** I (and your fellow reader) would value your thoughts. Please send them to me

whenever you have a moment – I'll forward them on to our colleague and perhaps print a few good ideas for all of us in an upcoming issue of Notes. Many thanks.

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

>>Who is my neighbor?<<

The following remarks were prepared for our opening convocation for new students, and offer you some sense of how this reflective practitioner is making sense of Augsburg's mission as it relates to daily work on and off campus.

“I am so pleased you are here and that we have this rare opportunity to be together before you commence your educational adventures at Augsburg. I can't wait to see what you will learn, how you will make a difference, and how you will help to live out Augsburg's abiding commitment to education for service.

One of the most compelling moments in the Christian scriptures is recounted in the gospel of Luke (10:29-37), where we read:

But wanting to justify himself, the lawyer asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus answered, “A certain man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who both stripped him and beat him, and departed, leaving him half dead. By chance a certain priest was going down that way. When he saw him, he passed by on the other side. In the same way a Levite also, when he came to the place, and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a certain Samaritan, as he traveled, came where he was. When he saw him, he was moved with compassion, came to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. He set him on his own animal, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. On the next day, when he departed, he took out two denarii, and gave them to the host, and said to him, ‘Take care of him. Whatever you spend beyond that, I will repay you when I return.’ Now which of these three do you think seemed to be a neighbor to him who fell among the robbers?” He said, “He who showed mercy on him.” Then Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

And so we, too, ask, “And who is my neighbor?” It is a question at the heart of the mission and vision of Augsburg College – a question that is at once theological, reflecting our understanding of what God intends for us to be and do, and also educational and practical, helping us to link our learning with service.

So, let's do some theology! Ask yourself right here and now in this chapel – who is my neighbor? Is it the Somali woman I met this morning on Riverside Avenue struggling to carry her groceries home from the bus stop? Or is it the family in the ravines of Cuernavaca, Mexico who will offer me both refreshments and life lessons when I meet them on a Center for Global Education trip? Or is it my roommate, who is struggling with being away from home for the first time and who needs my time and comfort? Once the question is asked, we are compelled, as was Jesus himself, to answer with stories and parables of how being educated at Augsburg prepares us to serve our neighbors no matter when or where we encounter them. In that way, the question leads us to think about learning and service.

A central aspect of an Augsburg education is to nurture and sustain the work of civic engagement – the practices of citizenship, negotiating our lives together, navigating what political philosopher and Roman Catholic theologian, John Courtney Murray, once called the “intersection of conspiracies,” his definition of democracy.

Here at Augsburg, we believe we are called to serve our neighbor. I am so proud of our Augsburg community for its abiding commitment to civic engagement, to meeting the needs of our neighbors – there are abundant examples of ways in which students, staff, faculty, Regents, parents, and alumni are modeling for all of us and the rest of the community what it means to be a reflective, productive and responsible citizen of our campus, our neighborhood, and our world.

At the same time, I want to challenge all of us to think at an even deeper level about the work of civic engagement, to see it not simply as acts of service and compassion, but also as the abiding and messy business – the lifelong business – of being educated, of building communities of trust and accountability, and of helping to create a more just and humane democracy.

I'd like to offer two specific challenges today that begin to illustrate what I mean by this deeper understanding of civic engagement and serving our neighbors.

As much as I value and support the remarkable work of the Augsburg community in serving the needs of our neighbors outside of the campus community – something we will illustrate again today in our AugSem service projects – we also must remember that civic engagement is something we need to learn to do right here on our campus. I once heard another college leader talk about his campus as a group of neighborhoods, and he suggested that the work of citizenship meant that the neighborhoods needed to learn to be healthy, vital places for their inhabitants both as separate neighborhoods and as a collection of neighborhoods that had intersecting and common needs and aspirations.

Think of what this means for our campus: We have many neighbors and neighborhoods. We have an arts neighborhood, we have an athletics neighborhood, we have a nursing neighborhood and a philosophy neighborhood, a student government neighborhood, a weekend college neighborhood, and so on – groups of citizens who band together by virtue of activities or proximity. I find these neighborhoods wonderful places to visit – I find in them examples of good citizenship and education, as well as idiosyncracies and rituals and dysfunctions that make them distinctive (and perhaps not for everybody). At the same time,

when these neighborhoods do not interact with each other, or share what they have learned with others, or invite others in, they become exclusionary and disruptive of our efforts to build a genuine community of trust and accountability.

Our challenge as citizens (and mine as your mayor!) is to find ways to link the neighborhoods, holding on to all the good they do for themselves, while also building a sense of common purpose for our lives as a city or community. For example, the sociologist, Ray Oldenburg, has suggested that we all need “great, good places” that serve to offer space for hospitality and conversation, and that help create stronger neighborhoods. What are the “great, good places” that serve this community-building role at Augsburg? Asking the question, “Who is my neighbor?” takes on more immediate and intense meaning when it challenges us to consider our fellow campus citizens as our neighbors. That is the wonderful work of civic engagement – right here on our own campus.

My second challenge focuses beyond our campus, where I also believe that the work of civic engagement requires a more thoughtful and nuanced approach. One of the issues we face as a college (as does any college with our sorts of commitments) is paying attention to how our many and diverse relationships and projects honor the essential link between education and service. It seems to me that the work of civic engagement that we pursue as a college needs to be linked to our primary mission as an educational institution. How can we pursue our founders’ remarkable vision of the essential link between education and a stronger democracy?

Several years ago I learned about the work of a man named Earl Shorris, who founded something call the Clemente Project in the Humanities. Shorris believes in the deep connection between the humanities and politics. His project recruits primarily young woman – often single mothers, living in poverty – and offers them an education in the humanities, taught by college instructors. His argument is that “training” programs often perpetuate the subservient position of those in poverty. Instead, he believes that offering the humanities to those in poverty offers them the “riches” of a life of citizenship. It offers them the political power of an education.

Each of us has the privilege to be here at this college, working, living and exploring the riches of a liberal arts education. The work of civic engagement demands that we find ways to offer our fellow citizens those same riches and the power of citizenship that goes with them. That is how the education and citizenship are genuinely linked in our work as a college. That is the work of engaged citizens – sharing our various gifts and privileges to build a stronger democracy.

Who is my neighbor? That compelling question – theological, educational, and practical all at once – demands our response, and as we share our own parables and stories about serving our neighbors we shall learn together how to authentically and persuasively model what it means to be educated for service. My dear new neighbors, I can’t wait to hear your stories!”

>>Pursuing accountability - update<<

Over the years I’ve written often about the notion of “pursuing accountability” instead of waiting for it to be imposed. It’s part of a vision of stewardship for the philanthropic

community that focuses on the idea that if philanthropy is a public practice and belongs to all of us, then we have an obligation to tell the public how it is going – both when it goes well and when it does not.

I am always on the lookout for examples of how this understanding of accountability is present in philanthropic work. I was pleased to read a *New York Times* story on July 26, 2007 that seems to indicate that there is a growing movement in the philanthropic foundation community to be more straightforward about grants and programs that do not succeed. The article references a report from the Carnegie Corporation about a significant effort to help Zimbabwe overhaul its constitution and government. The report begins with the candid statement: “This is the anatomy of a grant that failed.”

The article quotes Phil Buchanan, executive director of the Center for Effective Philanthropy, who says, “There’s an increasing recognition among foundation leaders that not to be public about failures is essentially indefensible. If something didn’t work, it is incumbent upon you to make sure others don’t make the same mistake.”

There are several other examples in the article of similar efforts at transparency and disclosure. Good news for those of us who believe that pursuing accountability should be a way of life.

PRACTICE THIS

>>A view from the balcony<<

My leadership team here at Augsburg has, as one of its ground rules, a commitment to making our work together an on-going teaching and learning experience. As part of that commitment, we devote a significant portion of one meeting a month to a “graduate seminar” in leadership and organizational dynamics. Individual members of the cabinet instruct us – they choose readings, develop study questions for our consideration, and then lead the seminar discussion. We are developing our own curriculum, if you will, of leadership writing and thinking. I urge you to think about how you might integrate this same teaching and learning model of leadership into your work.

One of the most important seminars for our group this past year was led by our academic vice president, Barbara Edwards Farley, who asked us to read “The Work of Leadership,” an article by Ronald Heifetz and Donald Laurie (*Harvard Business Review*, January-February 1997) that has become an important guide to our work here at Augsburg. The article encourages leaders to learn how to do “adaptive work,” to break away from the notion of leadership in the form of solutions and to recognize that adaptive change is (and should be) distressing to those involved and requires that we don’t give in to the “easy” solutions that define business as usual.

I urge you to find and read this article, which offers six principles for leading adaptive work:

- “Get on the balcony” – Leaders have to view patterns as if they were on the balcony, not swept up in the field of action. And then they must return to the field of action with insights gained from the balcony view about the adaptive challenges their organizations face.
- “Identify the adaptive challenge” – Organizations must be able to name the adaptive challenges and threats, and then adapt to them. Leaders must engage a wide range of people to listen and learn; they must see conflicts as “clues” of adaptive challenges; and they must be reflective about their own roles in creating adaptive challenges.
- “Regulate distress” – Given that adaptive work generates distress, leaders must find ways to regulate the sometimes overwhelming nature of change. Leaders create safe, holding environments – safe contexts for tough conversations. Leaders are responsible for direction, protection, orientation, managing conflict and shaping norms. Leaders must have presence and poise, the emotional capacity to deal with distress but still move forward.
- “Maintain disciplined attention” – Leaders must help their organizations to pay attention, to counteract distractions, to bring people back to the core adaptive issues and challenges.
- “Give the work back to people” – Leaders must encourage people to take responsibility (even when the people would rather have someone else do it) and must help build collective self-confidence, the belief that together we can meet these challenges.
- “Protect voices of leadership from below” – Sometimes the most important clues to adaptive challenges come from those who are not positioned or inclined to speak out. Effective leaders rely on others to raise questions and provide cover when those questions make others uncomfortable.

Heifetz and Laurie conclude their article with the call to view leadership as learning, which is precisely why this model of adaptive work has become a central aspect of how we view the ongoing work of leadership in this teaching and learning community. As the authors remark, “One can lead with no more than a question in hand.” And we have many questions!

>>Micro-grants<<

The 2006 Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Muhammad Yunus and his colleagues at the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh for their efforts in pioneering micro-credit, granting very small loans that have a powerful impact on jump-starting businesses or launching pilot programs. A recent article in *The Greentree Gazette* (July 2007) suggests that the idea of micro-loans and grants has relevance for college communities. Author Elliott Masie suggests several examples that he believes would have significant impact on campus:

- Take a professor to breakfast micro-grant – a grant to pay for three breakfasts over the course of a semester for a student and faculty member to learn from each other outside of the classroom.
- Presidential challenge grants – each year college presidents name two or three key challenges that require innovative thinking. Micro-grants are offered to groups willing to brainstorm and propose innovative solutions.

- Single event clubs – micro-grants to support students who want to organize a single event and then disband, focusing their energy for a short burst of time – infusing a small amount of funding – and having a major impact on campus.
- Small polls – subsidizing a poll that takes the “temperature” of the campus community on a hot issue. A micro-grant to a group of students or faculty who create and promote an electronic poll or set of focus groups on a key topic.

The article recounts several other ideas for how investing \$25 to \$500 in particular projects might have a return well beyond the investment.

We have implemented a version of this sort of micro-grant program here at Augsburg in an innovative effort known as “workculture@augsborg” which primarily focuses on creating and funding vocational opportunities (professional development and collaborative relationships) not otherwise funded through departments. In just its second year, the program has funded 30 projects here on campus, including team-teaching for new courses, a book group to bring together staff and faculty, funding for cross-departmental planning. We’re already seeing the impact of these efforts as they engender creative thinking about teaching and learning, administrative work, campus culture and so forth. A small amount of money can have an enormous impact – a good lesson for all of us.

PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<

Two recent publications have captured my attention as sources for exploration and discussion of the role of faith in public life and the challenges of teaching about religious and faith-based issues. First, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) published an issue of *Liberal Education* with the theme of “Liberal Education and the “Big Questions” (93: 2, Spring 2007), including Norman Adler’s article, “Faith and Reason on Campus.” Second, the *New York Times Magazine* published Mark Lilla’s “The Politics of God” in its August 19, 2007 edition. Both sources will be required reading here on campus this fall.

Long-time subscriber, Sigrid Trombly from Wichita, writes with this kind suggestion: “I was listening to Fresh Air with Terry Gross on National Public Radio a few nights ago and heard an interview that made me think of you. She interviewed journalist Jeff Gammage, a staff writer at The Philadelphia Inquirer. He and his wife adopted two daughters from China and he's written a book about the experience. I thought the book might be of interest to you and your wife. The title is: *China Ghosts: My Daughter's Journey to America, My Passage to Fatherhood.*” (William Morrow, 2007). Thanks, Sigrid, for thinking of me and for the good lead. Our son, Thomas, is about to begin first grade in a Chinese language immersion program, and our family is learning more and more about Chinese culture and experience.

>>Forgetting<<

I often come back (especially at this time of year) to this insightful November 2001 article by former U.S. Poet Laureate, Billy Collins, entitled “The Companionship of a Poem” (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 11/23/01). In the article, Collins talks about the state of higher education in our country and suggests that poetry has an important place in teaching even the most basic of skills. Listen in:

“To study poetry (is) to replicate the way we learn and think. When we read a poem, we enter the consciousness of another...we see the connections between surprise and learning...we experience the packaging of knowledge...we slow down...we learn the continuing importance of memorization as a foundation for understanding who we are.”

Collins confirms his strong feelings about memorization with this lovely poem:

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.

It is 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 good-bye,
and you 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 that you are struggling to remember
it is not poised on the tip of your tongue,
not 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 forgotten even 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 you used to know by heart.

[From *Questions About Angels*, U. of Pittsburgh Press, 1999]

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>>Topics for the next issue (October 2007)<<

- Praying and leadership
- Revisiting the deadly sins and cardinal virtues

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