

NOTES FOR THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

Volume Twenty, Number Two (December 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<<

Happy New Year, my friends and faithful readers of these occasional Notes. May your year be full of good spirit, bold ideas and reflective practice. I am grateful for your important work in the world!

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

>>Keeping Watch<<

This was my final chapel homily for the fall semester. It was fun remembering lessons from my Wabash days!

Scripture: Luke 21: 25-36

I remember the first time I witnessed the guards on a blustery November night, some twenty years ago, stationed at the various entrances to the Wabash College campus, huddled in blankets around a barrel, in which a fire was burning, trying to keep warm, stopping cars as they neared campus, determining their occupants and purpose, intent on protecting their beloved college from the hated cabal from the south. I thought, what the hey is this about? Are these guys crazy? These poor fraternity pledges, staying up all night, protecting the campus from vandalism attacks during Monon Bell football game week...surely this is some sort of medieval ritual that we are (or should be) well beyond in the late 20th century!

But the more I think about this scene and what these guys were doing, the more I wonder whether there might be an important lesson for all of us in the dedication and passion they brought to their guarding responsibilities. Clearly these young men believed deeply enough in something (whether we approve of the cause or not) that they were willing to risk their comfort and health to keep watch, to stand guard, to be vigilant – and that, it seems to me, is something all of us – especially we Christians – might want to pay some heed.

There are two lessons I glean from my experiences with the campus guards – lessons that raise questions for all of us:

- Are there people/things/ideas/causes that are worth keeping watch for – this is a tough question in a culture marked by apathy, passivity, a lack of investment and responsibility – an unwillingness to be accountable for what we do and say? Are we willing to buck the cultural norm and stand for something?
- Are we willing to make the sacrifices – to give up our comfort, our safety, perhaps even our livelihoods and lives, to seek after those things, to keep watch, to stand guard?

It seems to me that our lives in the world might be genuinely transformed if we genuinely believe in and hope for something enough – and then have the courage and resolve to make it real, to pay attention, to be vigilant in its pursuit.

These are such fitting questions for this first week in the new liturgical year, the beginning of our Advent preparations. In the gospel read this morning, we have this clarion call to the faithful: “There will be signs...people will faint...there is something coming...the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory...this generation will pass away, but not my words...Be on guard...be alert...be strong.” The call to keep watch, to be faithful, challenges all of us to face the questions my Wabash story illustrates. There is someone coming – do you believe, are you willing to stand and fight, to keep vigilant, to band together as God’s people and support each other as you huddle around the fire, keeping watch, waiting for the angels to bring you good news of great joy – for all people?

As we turn our hearts and minds to the blessed Christmas celebration ahead, we are offered the gift of these few weeks of Advent for preparation, for prayer and reflection; weeks to learn to wait, not just for the sake of waiting but because someone worth waiting for has already come — someone who calls us to give up our lives, to take up the cross, to hope for the kingdom to come; someone who loves us so much that, in spite of all our human foibles—fear, weakness, pride, apathy, you name it—gives us the gifts of faith and patience and wisdom and courage to keep watch, to pay attention, to stand guard...

In Advent, we are reminded that the One who has come and is yet to come bids us to live as people who have been saved, as those called to watch for all of the ways in which love is breaking in – again and again – in the ordinary moments of our lives in the world. Love is breaking in as God’s grace and reign is with us here and now, and for time immemorial. As we love each other, as we love the world, as we meet the needs of strangers – God is here. Are you watching, are you paying attention?

What do you believe in enough to keep watch? It is our Advent challenge. Shall we keep watch together – for peace, for our children, for a living wage, for a world that knows no hunger, for justice in the land, for a sustainable earth, for common purpose? Do you care enough to keep watch, to give up your comfort and safety – perhaps even your life – to do God’s will? There is work to be done, a promise to be fulfilled, life abundant to know and enjoy.

And so here we go – as God’s faithful people – to:

- Keep watch with our neighbors, near and far, in our common aspirations for healthy communities, fair and just lives together, compassion for the vulnerable, a home for those experiencing homelessness, the beloved community in which dignity and respect for each other inspires our common purpose; to...

- Keep watch for abundance, when the world says there is never enough; to be beacons of hope in a world where there is too little evidence to hope; to feed hungry bodies and minds and spirits with the plentiful gifts of our good God; and to...
- Keep watch and get to work, believing that the Word made flesh calls us to be the body of Christ on earth, in the darkness, in the weary world; to live as 16th century mystic Teresa of Avila charges us in this haunting poem:

Christ Has No Body

*Christ has no body but yours,
 No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
 Yours are the eyes with which he looks
 Compassion on this world,
 Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
 Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.
 Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
 Yours are the eyes, you are his body.
 Christ has no body now but yours,
 No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
 Yours are the eyes with which he looks
 compassion on this world.
 Christ has no body now on earth but yours.*

My friends, be alert, stay awake, keep watch - with someone, for something – Christ has no body on earth but yours. God is in our midst and calls us to wait and watch and listen carefully for the gracious word of salvation we all so long to hear, again and again. Keep watch. Amen.

>>The final form of love<<

Each year as part of Augsburg's Advent Vespers celebrations, many of us on campus are asked to craft brief devotions based on the readings in the Vespers service. Here are my thoughts on this lovely W.H. Auden poem...

*Unto you a Child,
 A Son is given.
 Praising, proclaiming
 The ingression of Love,
 Earth's darkness invents
 The blaze of Heaven,
 And frigid silence
 Meditates a song;
 For great joy has filled
 The narrow and the sad,
 While the emphasis
 Of the rough and big,
 The abiding crag
 And wandering wave,
 Is on forgiveness:*

*Sing Glory to God
And good-will to (all),
All, all, all of them.
Run to Bethlehem.*

— W.H. Auden, “Chorus of Angels”

My eye goes to the middle of the poem, to the line “While the emphasis.” And then to find the “on what.” And there it is four lines later, the emphasis “Is on forgiveness.” But what of all the words in between? On the rough and big, the abiding crag, the wandering wave - descriptions of a broken and dangerous world. Into this world comes the ingression of Love, the blaze of Heaven, a Child, a Son. And the emphasis is on what theologian Reinhold Niebuhr once called the final form of love - which is forgiveness. Sing Glory to God, good will to all, indeed.

PRACTICE THIS

>>Yes, and...<<

I write a column for our Augsburg Now magazine entitled “Notes from President Pribbenow on...” The latest iteration expands on my reflections about the power of improvisation for our lives together.

“Yes, and...”

I teach the Senior Honors Seminar each spring - always a highlight of my year - and one of the class sessions introduces students to the history and practice of improvisation.

I invite members of our theater faculty and local improv performers to come to class, where they help us understand why improv is so important to places like Chicago (think Second City) and Minneapolis (think Dudley Riggs Brave New Workshop). But then the fun begins.

The improv artists invite us to the front of the classroom, where we are taught some basic improv skills. Embarrassment aside, these sessions are full of life lessons. My favorite exercise goes like this: one student makes a statement related to an assigned topic. Perhaps the topic is the weather and the student proclaims, “Wow, is it hot.” The next student then answers, “Yes, and...I’m sweating like a faucet.” And the next student continues, “Yes, and...my faucets often leak.”

You get the point. No one is allowed to say “No” or even “Yes, but...” - it’s always “Yes, and...” That’s how improv works and I believe that that’s how Augsburg works when we are at our best.

We live in a “No” and “Yes, but” world - a world of scarcity that keeps us from risking ourselves in relation to others. Improv teaches us the way of abundance, a way that finds we are better together. “Yes, and...” builds upon the gifts of others to help us live healthier, more just and compassionate lives together.

The anthropologist Mary Catherine Bateson offers this helpful word: “Improvisation and new learning are not private processes; they are shared with others at every age. We are called to join in a dance whose steps must be learned along the way, so it is important to attend and respond.”

This issue of Augsburg Now is full of stories of “Yes, and...” - including highlights of our planning for next year’s Sesquicentennial celebration, Augsburg’s 150th. What a grand celebration it will be as

we recall the abundance of our founding in 1869, the decades of educating students for lives of meaning and purpose, and the promise of Augsburg's mission in the years ahead.

Yes, and...it will be good!"

>>Leadership lessons<<

I came upon this piece I wrote back in 2009 that is a helpful reminder of the leadership lessons I have learned to embrace and practice:

"I feel a bit like I've been on a year-long roller coaster ride – the really daring kind – and my leadership in this turbulent environment has needed to keep us centered as we navigate through the year and look to a longer horizon. A few words about the ways I've thought about this leadership challenge...

First – as is often the case for me – to the scriptures. On several occasions this year, I've suggested that these times demand leaders who can find the appropriate balance between two scriptural themes: "do not be afraid" and "keep awake."

Allow me to translate. I have long believed that one of the central challenges of leadership is to "pay attention" and to help others to pay attention. Keep awake or pay attention is about helping our institutions to attend to the most important values and initiatives – despite the temptations to get distracted. For example, during budget negotiations this year, our commitment to being student-centered and to honoring our academic core gave us a focal point for difficult resource decisions. Our choices to increase student aid, to increase faculty salaries, to decrease or eliminate some ancillary programs, etc. were all premised on the priorities we had set. My leadership was about reminding my board, leadership team and wider community why the student and academic priorities were critical and then holding them accountable for the ways our key priorities were honored in the budget.

As for "do not be afraid," my other primary leadership value for the year was in building and sustaining trust within the organization. A recent issue of the *Harvard Business Review* suggests in a series of articles that there needs to be a new metric for evaluating leadership performance, namely the extent to which leaders create organizations that are economically, ethically and socially sustainable. To make this happen, leaders are encouraged to develop a culture of candor, to be more transparent and to not be naïve about what it takes to build trust in an institution. This trust-building challenge was a key one for me during this year as we sought more and more effective ways of communicating key information, of engaging the entire campus in important conversations about our progress and challenges, of admitting when I didn't know the answer or when I or we had made a mistake. This, of course, is work that will never end, but especially in this turbulent year, my leadership in seeking to build trust became a critical backdrop for helping to overcome the fear and anxiety in our organization. And sometimes it is so simple – as was the case when I stood in front of an all-campus meeting and was able to give clear and honest answers to straightforward questions about our finances and enrollments, not all the answers the community wanted to hear, but realistic answers that showed that we knew what was going on and had a plan to respond. Such assurances build trust and confidence – such assurances say to our community, "do not be afraid."

In this dynamic between keeping awake and vigilant and calming peoples' fears, leadership takes on concrete and practical forms. For Augsburg and me, this has meant several key strategies:

Mission and vision focus – keep going back to who we are and why we exist, and the historic and present values reflected therein – fight distractions but not necessarily status quo either; can't be afraid to try new ideas that are grounded in the mission.

Presence and accompaniment – communication is critical in all forms, but so is a sense of being there with each other – the sense of sanctuary in the midst of turbulent times is critical – and though I can't be everywhere, good choices about where to be can help to build trust and keep focus.

Absorb the pain – sometimes there is no answer, no acceptable resolution, and we simply need to absorb the pain that members of our organizations are feeling – it may come out in anger, in criticism, even in actions that warrant discipline, but emotional intelligence for leaders requires that we understand and accept our roles as servants of both mission and community, and one of the ways we practice servant-leadership is with our humble bearing of corporate pain.

Finally, be a realistic optimist (or an optimistic realist) – face the facts and find hope even so – may require a sense of humor and irony more than anything else – there is a longer horizon – Reinhold Niebuhr quote points the way...

“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.”

PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<

I'm enjoying Michael Lewis's *The Fifth Risk* (W.W. Norton, 2018) for its insights into the importance of serious presidential transitions in our federal government and the implications of not taking them seriously.

Harvard professor Jill Lepore's epic *These Truths: A History of the United States* (W.W. Norton, 2018) draws us into the history of ideas, personalities and movements that have shaped our republic.

My friend, Eboo Patel, has penned *Out of Many Faiths: Religious Diversity and the American Promise* (Princeton University Press, 2018), continuing his compelling argument for what he calls a “potluck nation,” a table set for all faiths.

>>Work to be done<<

This seems a fitting prayer for this season in-between. Thanks be to God for Howard Thurman.

When the song of the angels is stilled,

When the star in the sky is gone.

When the kings and princes are home.

When the shepherds are back with their flock,

The work of Christmas begins.

To find the lost,

To heal the broken,

To feed the hungry,

To release the prisoner,

To rebuild the nations,

To bring peace among (all),

To make music in the heart.

-Howard Thurman

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>>Topics for upcoming issues<<

- Culture change
- Big ideas!

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