

## 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<<

Well, my son Thomas has moved into the residence hall at Augsburg, orientation has begun, classes commence on Wednesday – and here we go again with this agrarian-based academic calendar. My 44<sup>th</sup> straight year on a college campus and what an exciting year it promises to be as Augsburg celebrates its 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary. I trust that the summer has been a time for rest and renewal for you and yours.

I have not had much occasion for new writing this summer so I've put together a bit of a retrospective set of Notes, capturing ideas and practices that I believe are durable and abiding in their importance and impact. As always, I welcome your thoughts and reflections.

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

>>Loving reform<<

As we commence our Sesquicentennial year at Augsburg, we also will adopt a new strategic plan called *Augsburg150*. While presenting the plan's key goals to various groups, it has become clear that we will need to do our work differently if we hope to live into our strategic vision for the university. Several years ago, I preached the following homily about the theological concept of *Semper Reformanda*, a gift of our faith tradition that is more relevant than ever.

Scripture: John 2: 1-11

This morning I continue with the fourth of five chapel homilies dedicated to the charisms (or gifts) of the Lutheran theological tradition that help to shape the identity and character of our college.

Today I point to the concept of *semper reformanda*, the underlying contention of our Lutheran heritage that we are called always to be open to new and different ways of being in the world, to watching for God's activity in our midst and bringing our hearts and minds and hands to bear as co-creators of God's plan for God's people.

Our exploration of *semper reformanda* seems especially fitting on this day when our Board of Regents have gathered for their winter meetings and when they have invited into an historic conversation almost 60 of us – faculty, staff and students – a conversation about the future of Augsburg College.

There is genuine enthusiasm and anxiety about these conversations, in part because at the heart of planning for the future we must face the difficult, complex and challenging questions that portend change – change that is inevitable, some would argue; but change that will not be easy, we all agree.

In the midst of this swirling discussion of change – within our academic community and in the wider society – we here at Augsburg have the gift of the theological concept of *semper reformanda* which offers a framework that may be more relevant than ever to helping us negotiate a path forward together, faithful to who we are and at the same time fresh and relevant to the needs of the world – a world that God loves so much.

A few thoughts about what *semper reformanda* means to us and to our work as a college.

First, what is the character of the reformation tradition of which we are a part? My title for this homily, “Loving Reform,” might be read in at least two ways. The first way is likely the worst fear of many of us. And that is that you have a crazy president and perhaps a few others who simply love change and will pursue it with abandon no matter the cost, no matter the damage to our underlying values, no matter what... In other words, loving reform means exactly that – we must love change for change’s sake.

I stand here today to firmly reject this attitude about reform and change. Instead, I call for us to embrace the stance of Martin Luther himself, who believed that reform must be loving, that change – inevitable as it may be – is never an end in itself. Reform happens in the context of communities of memory and faith and values, whose underlying commitments set firm boundaries on who we are, what we do and where we are headed. Augsburg College is such a community, firmly rooted in its values as a liberal arts college, preparing students for lives of purpose and meaning, guided by its Lutheran Christian heritage, shaped by its distinctive setting in the city. These core values are the “loving” we bring to any exploration of reform.

Martin Luther wrote in perhaps his most well-known treatise, *The Freedom of a Christian* (1520, M. Tranvik, trans.) these famous lines:

A Christian is lord of all, completely free of everything...

A Christian is a servant, completely attentive to the needs of all

Here is the creative tension at the heart of Luther’s vision of reform: because we have been saved already, our freedom assured through Christ’s death and resurrection, we are freed not to do whatever we desire, but to be of service, to follow our calls to be God’s co-creators in the world. And there we are situated, freed and at the same time bound, saved and called to love the neighbor and the world, to be God’s people and do God’s work. Luther’s vision of reform was pastoral. We are called to be loving reformers.

So the next question is what exactly this call to be loving reformers sounds and looks like? There appear to be many options before us. How will we know what God intends for us? Here we are drawn back to the gospel to listen carefully and discern what God has in mind for God’s faithful

people. And the passage from John's gospel, assigned for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Epiphany, may offer us some guidance.

The story is simple and familiar – sometimes referred to as Jesus' first miracle, performed at a wedding banquet. Jesus is at the wedding with his disciples and his mother. We learn that the wedding hosts have run out of wine. Jesus' mother says to him, "They have no wine," to which Jesus responds rather impatiently, "Woman, what concern is that to you and me? My hour has yet to come." Surely this is meant by the evangelist as a glimpse of the future – Jesus can't be bothered with these mundane problems, there are bigger challenges ahead. But his mother jumps right back in, telling the servants to "Do whatever he tells you."

And perhaps to make the point that Jesus is a good son, he proceeds without further protest to have the servants take six stone water jars, fill them with water, and then take a draw to the chief steward, who compliments the bridegroom on the unusual practice of saving the best wine for the conclusion of the banquet.

We can draw many lessons from this simple story, but allow me to suggest three points that offer us guidance as loving reformers. First the role of Mary, who doesn't allow Jesus off the hook when he claims to have more important things on his mind. She reminds us that we too are called – as she was – to pay attention to the moment, the sphere of human experience right in front of us with all of its ordinary, mundane, perhaps even trivial, and yet also significant and meaningful, aspects. And she teaches us this lesson most simply by saying to the servants and to us, "Do whatever he tells you."

The second lesson we might draw from the gospel story is how the instructions Jesus offers the servants do not call for some supernatural hocus-pocus; they point them back to their work. "Fill the stone jars with water, take a draw to the chief stewards," he tells them. The servants may have witnessed a miracle – the miracle of abundance in the midst of scarcity – but the fact is that they participated in the miracle by doing what they were called to do. We, too, are called to participate in the miracle of God's abundance right here in the midst of our daily lives.

And finally, there is the startling outcome of this story. Fine wine is served at the conclusion of the banquet. This is counter-cultural – no one saves the best wine for last, the steward says to the bridegroom. But there you have it, perhaps the most hopeful and inspiring lesson of the entire gospel: Since you follow Jesus, since you do what he calls and tells you to do, you can believe that the best, the very best, is yet to come. This is God's way. This is why we embrace loving reform. Because the best is yet to come.

And so, what shall we do? Do we sit back and wait for God to speak out of a pillar of fire or a cloud, telling us what to do, calling us to this blissful future state? That, of course, is one way the concept of vocation or calling has been (I would say) misunderstood. Our callings do not denote some sort of passive form of agency. Instead, they call us out of ourselves, into community, into the world, constantly vigilant and active in pursuit of our God-given role in creating this better future. We are called to bring the best of our hearts and minds and hands to bear in being co-creators of God's loving intentions for all of creation. "Do whatever he tells you," Mary says to the servants. Use your gifts to help perform a miracle.

Our friend and colleague, Christensen professor Marty Stortz, recently reminded me of a 2010 *New York Times* opinion piece by columnist David Brooks entitled "The Summoned Self." In the

column, Brooks outlines two ways of thinking about our lives. Coincidentally the first way he suggests is based on a commencement speech by Clayton Christensen, a Harvard Business School professor, whose book, *The Innovative University*, is the beginning point for our planning conversations this afternoon. Brooks labels Christensen's way of thinking about life as "The Well-Planned Life." In the well-planned life, you spend time when young finding a clear purpose for your life and then you dedicate and discipline yourself to live with that purpose clearly in mind – granted, with a few tweaks and refinements along the way, but ultimately leading to a well-rounded fruition.

Brooks then describes a second way of thinking about life, which he calls "The Summoned Life." In the summoned life, you do not live as an unfolding project to be completed, but rather as an unknowable landscape to be explored. In this mode of living, you focus on the important commitments that precede choices you make – commitments to faith, family, nation or some other cause – and you tend to be skeptical about applying so-called business concepts, with their focus on utility, to other realms of life.

The well-planned life emphasizes individual agency and is widely admired in our American context as we lift up the entrepreneur, the pioneer, the lone free agent who blazes new trails and creates new worlds. The summoned life focuses on context and circumstances, observes the world carefully and asks questions about how we can be most useful in this time and place.

We might recognize the summoned life as a fairly close description of what we describe as "the called life," and I would contend that at our best as a college, we keep this vocational focus firmly in mind as a way of understanding our roles in the world. It is counter-cultural and deeply rooted in our faith tradition. I couldn't be prouder of our commitments to the summoned life.

At the same time – as Brooks concludes in his column – if we choose only one of these two options for looking at life, we may miss important guidance for what he names as a third option, "the well-considered life." Looking only at context and circumstance without a longer horizon of naming our life's purpose can lead to passivity. On the other hand, focusing only on achieving long-term goals by planning out well in advance the steps we will follow, may well lead to rigidity and disappointment.

I would argue that our Lutheran heritage actually leads us to embrace the well-considered life. We believe that we are called to serve our neighbor. We are freed for service in the context of our daily lives in the world. At the same time, we also believe that God has a plan for all of creation and that the best is yet to come. There is a clear purpose for our lives in the world.

Loving reform – *semper reformanda* – is the challenge to live at the intersections of God's call and God's plan, to bring all of our God-given gifts – gifts of intellect and imagination and passion and faith – to bear as co-creators of a future that unfolds in our midst, a miracle even of abundance in the midst of scarcity, of love and compassion in the midst of violence and mistrust, of grace and forgiveness in the midst of legalism and finger-pointing.

Loving reform calls us to believe and act as if the best is yet to come. And so it is, thanks be to God. Amen.

>>Hearts broken open<<

Here is an essay I first wrote in 2012, aimed at our students but certainly relevant to all of us in these fraught times. We can decide how we will respond to the violence and polarization and pettiness of our common lives. The question is what will we choose...?

“So perhaps a few words about your hearts to begin.

University of Virginia English professor Mark Edmundson has recently opined in *The New York Times* (4/1/2012) that the students who truly succeed in college are those who show up with what (borrowing from the Boss, Bruce Springsteen) he calls “a hungry heart.” Edmundson argues that students with a “hungry heart” are those who have a love for learning and openness to experience; the courage and curiosity to stare into the Abyss of human experience and get excited; and the willingness to risk beliefs and values because you have confident beliefs and values to risk. Edmundson goes on to say that “Not all students have a hungry heart. Some do, some don’t, and having a hungry heart (or not) is what makes all the difference for a young person seeking an education.”

There are ways in which Edmundson’s opinion extends a long-standing fascination in America about the role of the heart as a metaphor for integrating intellect, values and character. Alexis de Tocqueville, the French journalist and chronicler of mid-19<sup>th</sup> century America, observed in his two volume *Democracy in America* (1835 and 1840) that the vitality of the American democracy was not so much about a political or legal structure as it was about our *mores*, defined variously as “notions, opinions and ideas that shape mental habits”; or again, as the sum of moral and intellectual dispositions of men (*sic*) in society; or habitual practices with respect to such things as religion, political participation, and economic life; or, on point for our topic here, as “habits of the heart.”

In their mid-1980s book entitled *Habits of the Heart*, sociologist Robert Bellah and his colleagues borrowed Tocqueville’s concept to argue that the renewal of our democracy relied on recovering these habits of the heart as a means to navigate between our private and public lives, between individualism of various stripes and a commitment to the wider public good. The genius of our democracy depends, they argued, on a healthy balance between private and public, a balance that is only possible when we cultivate in our citizenry the civic virtues that Tocqueville called habits of the heart.

The problem is, of course, that much too often for too many people our hearts are neither hungry nor habitual. And therein lies the stuff of a pretty dismal diagnosis of our common life.

For those of us who have the privilege to be part of an academic community like Augsburg, dedicated at its core to the liberal arts academic tradition, there is much to celebrate about the promise of our education. At its best and most faithful, the liberal arts tradition claims that genuine learning, grounded in humility and openness, must embrace the experience of difference and otherness, must seek to hold the tension of opposites and conflicting perspectives without falling apart. In fact, I might argue that we are most learned and faithful when we give up attempting to control our world, when we recognize that the gifts and ideas and experiences of others are at the heart of a community that is healthy and just and compassionate, and when we lift up the ways in which our learning and lives are enhanced by living in the tension of opposites – by seeking to comprehend all sides of an issue, to be comfortable with complexity and ambiguity, to honor paradox in thought, speech and action. For those educated in the liberal arts, the ideal outcome is

that our hearts – the intersection of mind and spirit and community – are formed by living in the tensions that define human experience.

That said, we are not always at our best in our academic communities. How easy it is once we have been educated to believe that we have learned enough, that we have found the right way to the truth, that our ways of seeing the world and acting in it give us a leg up on those who do not share our superior learning. And when we do engage with those who do not share our beliefs and education, those we count as less learned, our behavior often leans toward finding ways to help “correct” their deficiencies at best or marginalizing and ignoring them at worst.

This, then, is the abiding tension in our lives – the tension between our aspirations to embrace the other, the stranger, in our educational journeys and the arrogance that too often creeps in when we believe that our education privileges us and allows us to stigmatize and ignore the other. And it is in our ability to navigate this tension that our hearts are forged.

Recently, educator (and honorary Augsburg alumnus) Parker Palmer has written compellingly of this challenge for our hearts in his *Healing the Heart of Democracy*. Palmer, who is a student of Tocqueville and Bellah, has firmly in mind this idea of habits of the heart when he suggests that “we are at a heartbreaking moment in American history...the conflicts and contradictions of twenty-first-century life are breaking the American heart and threatening to compromise our democratic values.” He argues that this heartbreak is both a personal and a political condition, and that our ability to navigate the tensions of our lives in a life-giving (and not death-dealing) way are at the core of the future of democracy.

Palmer describes two ways in which our heart can respond in the midst of this heartbreak. The conventional image of a broken heart is that the tension grows unbearable because of stress and divisiveness and hardness, and there is no outcome possible except that our hearts break into a thousand shards, falling apart and spreading pain in ourselves and to those around us. In this scenario, the broken heart becomes an unresolved wound, inflicted on ourselves and others. All we can do is try and pick up the pieces.

The second image of a broken heart imagines the “small clenched fist of a heart broken open into largeness of life, into greater capacity to hold one’s own and the world’s pain and joy.” This heart broken open is in evidence all around us, Palmer argues, in the examples of those who have learned compassion and grace as the fruits of suffering. “Here, heartbreak becomes a source of healing, enlarging our empathy and extending our ability to reach out.”

Two ways in which our hearts are forged in our world. The first – the heart broken apart – shaped by our impatient and control-obsessed culture, does not allow us to hold social and political tensions in ways that open us to the world. Our hearts are hardened, shut down, either withdrawn from the world or lashing out at the other whom we see as threat and never as (even potential) friend.

The second – the heart broken open – doesn’t deny the realities and tensions of the world, but doesn’t allow those realities and tensions to define what is possible. In fact, the heart broken open holds the tensions creatively – living in love, seeking the balance between private and public goods, believing that peace – even a glimpse of peace – is possible between peoples and nations.

And here, Palmer claims, is the choice we all must face: “Will we hold our hearts open and keep trying to love, even as love makes us more vulnerable to the losses that break our hearts? Or will we shut down or lash out, refusing to risk love again and seeking refuge in withdrawal or hostility?”

So, back to your hearts, your hungry and broken hearts. What habits of the heart will you seek to cultivate as you continue your education and follow your calls in the world? I, of course, have more than a passing interest in this question, for you and your hearts are the reason I – and I would venture to guess, all of my faculty colleagues – come to work each day, why we commit ourselves to this calling as educators in this place called Augsburg College. We come to teach and learn, to cajole and inspire, to puzzle and rejoice, to live with and through you, with the wild hope that your hearts will break open to love the world. We come to live out the call powerfully articulated by the poet William Wordsworth when he wrote: “What you have loved, others will love, and you will teach them how.”

At the same time, though, we are not naïve to believe that simply being educated in this college, with our deep commitment to the liberal arts, will cultivate in your hearts that love the world. You must make that choice. You must decide whether this education that seeks to embrace the tensions, to welcome the strangers, that believes in the promise of human significance and community, will form your hearts to choose life-giving instead of death-dealing ways in the world. You must choose whether your hearts will harden and break into pieces useless to you and the world – or break open to offer a way of healing and grace that serves the needs of the world and your fellow travelers therein.

#### PRACTICE THIS

>>The grace of great things<<

I can't begin a new academic year without returning to Parker Palmer's wise words about how a teaching and learning community is formed and sustained. I'll let Palmer's words speak for themselves...

“By *great things*, I mean the subjects around which the circle of seekers has always gathered—not the disciplines that study these subjects, not the texts that talk about them, not the theories that explain them, but the things themselves.

I mean the genes and ecosystems of biology, the symbols and referents of philosophy and theology, the archetypes of betrayal and forgiveness and loving and loss that are the stuff of literature. I mean the artifacts and lineages of anthropology, the materials of engineering with their limits and potentials, the logic of systems in management, the shapes and colors of music and art, the novelties and patterns of history, the elusive idea of justice under law.

Great things such as these are the vital nexus of community in education...When we are at our best, it is because the grace of great things has evoked from us the virtues that give educational community its finest form...” (from *The Courage to Teach*, 1998, p. 107)

>>The etiquette of democracy<<

At the beginning of the new academic year, when all eyes already are on next fall's presidential elections and rancor abounds, it seems especially important that we return to the basic tenets of a democratic social ethics. Here is my go-to guide for such lessons.

“Yale law professor, Stephen L. Carter, whose work I mention often in Notes, is writing a series of books on what he calls the “elements of good character that are...”pre-political,” by which I mean that we should all struggle to exemplify them, whatever our philosophical or partisan differences.” The first in the series is “Integrity” (Basic Books, 1996), which I discussed in the last issue of Notes. The second is “Civility: Manners, Morals, and the Etiquette of Democracy” (Basic Books, 1998). The book is fascinating, especially in the midst of this political season, as it challenges us to think about how the call to be civil may force us to change the ways in which we organize political systems and processes.

My primary interest in the book is the rules for the etiquette of democracy that Carter proposes. In particular, I believe that there are important parallels between these good manners of society and the character of the organizations we all inhabit. Under the rubric of “The People We Can Be”, Carter posits the following rules (among others) for a civil society:

- (1) Our duty to be civil toward others does not depend on whether we like them or not.
- (2) Civility requires that we sacrifice for strangers, not just for people we happen to know.
- (3) Civility has two parts: generosity, even when it is costly, and trust, even when there is risk.
- (4) Civility creates not merely a negative duty not to do harm, but an affirmative duty to do good.
- (5) We must come into the presence of our fellow humans with a sense of awe and gratitude.
- (6) Civility requires that we listen to others with knowledge of the possibility that they are right and we are wrong.
- (7) Civility requires that we express ourselves in ways that demonstrate our respect for others.
- (8) Civility requires resistance to the dominance of social life by the values of the marketplace.
- (9) Civility allows criticism of others, and sometimes even requires it, but the criticism should always be civil.

There are other rules, but I think you start to get the sense of how these manners for democracy also offer helpful guidelines for our lives in organizations. Think especially about rules (3), (5), and (9)—there you have the foundations for a healthy and humane common enterprise.

Carter is savvy to point out that there are those who criticize civility, claiming that there are professions for which incivility is a requirement. His main point in critiquing this position is that, though we may have evidence for the acceptance of such uncivil work, we must never allow ourselves to forget that such evidence raises serious questions about the character of our common work. Surely we all experience the disheartening and disabling power of incivility in our lives—no wonder it is sometimes difficult to imagine the abundance and wonder of negotiating our lives together.”

#### PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<

For those of us committed to life in cities, I commend to your attention the April 2019 issue of *National Geographic*, which offers a variety of essays with ideas and practices for healthier urban living.

I read the *Hedgehog Review* faithfully and was recently inspired by an essay in the Summer 2019 issue by Goucher College English professor, Leslie W. Lewis, entitled “Liberatory Education.” Lewis explores the intersections of the liberal arts with our commitments to the lived experiences of those



who have experienced oppression and a lack of freedom. A liberatory education, Lewis argues, is about “re-learning for re-pairing, for re-storing our full humanity.”

>>Paying attention<<

Poet Mary Oliver, who died earlier this year, wrote beautiful poems and inspiring essays. Here is a brief excerpt from her essay, “Upstream,” in which she draws all of us back to attending to what is most important – indeed to “attention” as “the beginning of devotion.”

“Teach the children. We don’t matter so much, but the children do. Show them daisies and the pale hepatica. Teach them the taste of sassafras and wintergreen. The lives of the blue sailors, mallow, sunbursts, the moccasin flowers. And the frisky ones—inkberry, lamb’s-quarters, blueberries. And the aromatic ones—rosemary, oregano. Give them peppermint to put in their pockets as they go to school. Give them the fields and the woods and the possibility of the world salvaged from the lords of profit. Stand them in the stream, head them upstream, rejoice as they learn to love this green space they live in, its sticks and leaves and then the silent, beautiful blossoms.

Attention is the beginning of devotion.”

>>Subscription information<<

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>>Topics for upcoming issues<<

- Sesquicentennials and thinking institutionally
- Stories we tell to ourselves and each other
- Big ideas!

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