

NOTES FOR THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

Volume Twenty-Two, Number Two (December 2020)

"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 last few days of 2020 are upon us, and if you are like me, you are counting down the seconds until the clock turns into 2021. Though we will still face the challenges of myriad pandemics, there are glimpses of hope on the horizon that make this turn to a new year more meaningful than most – vaccines and new administrations and renewed resolve to get to a better place all offer hope, a theme you will see throughout these Notes. I wish you and yours all warm wishes for your closely-held New Year's celebrations. See you on the other side!

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

>>The patience to hope<<

I preached this homily in the Augsburg chapel during the first week in Advent.

Psalm 13

Prayer for Deliverance from Enemies

To the leader. A Psalm of David.

¹How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

²How long must I bear pain^[a] in my soul,

and have sorrow in my heart all day long?

How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

³Consider and answer me, O Lord my God!

Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death,

⁴and my enemy will say, "I have prevailed";

my foes will rejoice because I am shaken.

⁵But I trusted in your steadfast love;

my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.

⁶I will sing to the Lord,
because he has dealt bountifully with me.

I wonder if you have the same experience I have associating particular Bible stories or passages with specific moments in your life – a time while growing up, a season of the year, a person who has a significant impact on me, a place I will never forget?

I can never hear the story of Zacchaeus without being right back at Bible camp, singing “Zacchaeus was a wee little man, and a wee little man was he.” Up a tree even. And I will always remember the moment in 1977, in a cathedral in Köln, Germany, when the words of the first chapter of John’s gospel were imprinted on my soul in a choral anthem: “And we beheld the glory as of a Father’s only Son, full of grace and truth.” And so we did. Or the cloudy April morning in Chicago almost 25 years ago, when the words of Paul’s letter to the Colossians were made real in our wedding service: “Clothe yourselves in love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.” I trust you have similar connections between scripture and your lives.

I’ve now decided to add another such connection in these fraught times. The words of Psalm 13 seem like just the way to think about these pandemic times. “How long, O Lord, will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?” Perhaps this is one association all of us can relate to in 2020...How long, O Lord, indeed?

It seems to me that the words of Psalm 13 also are a most appropriate guide for our Advent journeys – especially in this year. As we enter once again into this time of waiting, of preparation for God breaking into human history in the person of a child, this rich liturgical season calls us to think of the last things and instructs us to be patient, to hope for things to come – and it is hard to be patient, to stay awake, to trust that God is in the midst of all that afflicts our lives – a virus, economic disruption, climate degradation, racial reckoning. “How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?”

And yet, as God’s faithful people, we believe that we must be patient to hope. The Psalmist leads us to that realization and writes that despite the lament that God has hidden God’s face from God’s people, there is still this conversation going on between God and God’s faithful people – “Consider and answer me,” the Psalmist writes. Ours is a God who engages us, who breaks into human history, who becomes one of us so that we might know God’s intentions for all of creation, who is the Word made flesh.

And in that sure confidence that God is with us, we join with the Psalmist in this powerful confession of faith: “But I trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord, because he has dealt bountifully with me.” God is in our midst – in the midst of these pandemic times – calling us into conversation, into relationship again and again, so that we might be patient to hope for that salvation that is God’s promise to all of creation. I believe, Lord – help my unbelief.

I have been inspired to embrace this patience to hope by what may seem an unlikely source. Frederick Law Olmsted, who lived and worked in the late 19th and early 20th century, was a renowned landscape architect, who once wrote this simple sentence as his creed: “I have all my life been considering distant effects and always sacrificing immediate success and applause to that of the future.”

“I have all my life been considering distant effects.” For Olmsted, whose signature projects included Central Park in New York, Mount Royal Park in Montreal, and the National Mall in Washington, DC, this meant that he imagined what his designs and plans would look like decades after he executed them and long after he was gone from this earth. His patience to hope meant that his work was all about believing in things to come rather than fixating on what the current moment offered. He planted the seeds that years later created remarkable creations. Olmsted would have agreed with Martin Luther, who was purported to have said that “If I knew that tomorrow was the end of the world, I would plant an apple tree today!” Legend or not, Luther’s faith in things to come began not with his concerns for the moment, but with his patience to hope for God’s steadfast love and promise of life abundant.

As we consider the distant effects of God’s Advent promises that God is in our midst, redeeming our lives again and again, we too are called to the patience to hope and therein we find the strength and courage and wisdom to do God’s work now so that all creation will know of God’s gifts of faith and hope and love. In our witness, the human cry, “How long, O Lord?” is transformed into a proclamation of faith, “I trusted in your steadfast love...”

And then we will know the important truth that patience is not passivity, sitting around waiting for someone else to do something. The patience to hope actually calls us out of ourselves and into the world so that we might be neighbors to each other. Our friend and spoken word artist, Joe Davis, names this call to patience as action in his powerful creed for the Advent season entitled “The Advent of Hope,” in these wonderful lines:

*Hope happened then
And hope will happen again*

*But before any adventure
There is always an Advent*

*And so we wait:
For patience is a process,
And so we wait:
For patience is a practice,
And so we wait:
For we were in the past, tense,
But now we know to let go
As the present has gifts.*

And then we have the powerful words Tom sang in this morning’s hymn, “All earth is hopeful,” that ring out with a clarion call to action:

*All earth is hopeful, the Savior comes at last!
Furrows lie open for God’s creative task:
this, the labor of people who struggle to see
how God’s truth and justice set everybody free.*

*Mountains and valleys will have to be prepared;
new highways opened new protocols declared.
Almost here! God is nearing, in beauty and grace!
All clear every gateway, in haste, come out in haste!*

And that, for me, is what I'm focused on this Advent, in these pandemic times. What are the mountains and valleys to be prepared, the highways to be opened, the new protocols to be declared? How will God's truth and justice set everybody free? The patience to hope calls us ever more urgently into the work of watching for what God is doing in our midst – as God did two millennia ago in the stable in Bethlehem – love breaking into a weary world, then as now – so that we might embrace the distant effects of God's reign on earth, as it is in heaven, and get on with the work we are called to do as God's people, the body of Christ, in this time and place.

“How long, O Lord?” is our human lament. “But I trusted in your steadfast love... (and) I will sing to the Lord” is our faithful response to a God who loves us so much, so very much. Let us be patient to hope. Advent blessings. Amen.

>>Advent Reflections<<

I had occasion this past month to offer a variety of reflections and devotions for various audiences. I offer them here for you...

For the Central Lutheran Church Advent devotional book:

Keep Watch

I remember the first time I witnessed the guards on a blustery November night, 25 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 is this about? Are these guys crazy?

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 here for all of us. 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.

Keeping watch is such a fitting theme as we begin our Advent preparations. In Luke's gospel, the 25th chapter, we hear 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.” 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?

What do you believe in enough to keep watch? It is our Advent calling. Shall we keep watch together – for peace, for healing, for reconciliation, 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. Keep watch!

Augsburg Advent Vespers devotional video (with my son, Thomas!):

<https://www.facebook.com/auggie.eagle/videos/10221386257039395>

For the Augsburg Advent Vespers devotional book:

Friday, December 25: Luke 2:27-32

“Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, “Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.”

On this most holy morning, we once again encounter the Christ Child in the manger and with Simeon we proclaim that our eyes have seen God’s salvation, a light for revelation, a source of glory. And now we look to what poet W.H. Auden calls the “time being,” the time when we are called to free the prisoners, heal the sick, feed the hungry, dismantle racism, fight for justice, help all of God’s creation to breathe again – Guided by the Spirit. May it be so for now and evermore.

Our pandemic version of the 41st Annual Augsburg Advent Vespers (31 minutes):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rCT7Gj1kKfl>

PRACTICE THIS

>>The Walljasper legacy<<

Sadly, my friend and co-teacher Jay Walljasper, passed away just before Christmas. Taken too soon, Jay was a lovely presence, a remarkable journalist, and a passionate advocate for our common lives. We taught the senior honors seminar at Augsburg together four times, including last spring when we needed to pivot mid-semester to online teaching. Jay was the former editor of the *Utne Reader* and always impressed the students with his knowledge of popular culture.

In his honor and memory, I reprint this excerpt from an essay I wrote more than a decade ago...

“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...

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.

A few of his principles of placemaking are relevant to our lives in this neighborhood:

- (1) The community is the expert (no, consultants aren't better than your neighbors when it comes to good ideas for our neighborhood!)
- (2) You can't do it alone (look for the right partners)
- (3) They'll always say "It can't be done" (take it as a good sign when others tell you why it won't work – you're probably on the right track)
- (4) You can see a lot by just observing (look for what works)
- (5) Make the connections (working together adds up to more than the sum of the parts)
- (6) Start with petunias (sweat the small things because they set the stage for real change)
- (7) Money is not the issue (a spirited community will find ways around financial obstacles)
- (8) You are never finished (managing after a project is finished will ensure that great places abide.)

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

Jay Walljasper never forgot to marvel! Rest in power, Jay!

PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<

I continue to read across a wide range of interests – some established, some new. Here is a sampling of what is in my pile of books...

The Essential Gwendolyn Brooks, edited by Elizabeth Alexander (Literary Classics of America, 2005) – the late Chicago Poet Laureate's remarkable legacy in one slim volume.

Metropolis: A History of the City, Humankind's Greatest Invention, Ben Wilson (Doubleday, 2020) -7,000 years of history spanning 26 world cities.

The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again, Robert Putnam (with Shaylyn Romney Garrett) (Simon and Schuster, 2020) – the map we need for 2021!

A Promised Land, Barack Obama (Crown, 2020) – why not?

>>The Advent of Hope<<

This powerful prayer/creed was written by Minneapolis-based poet and spoken word artist, Joe Davis, and commissioned by Central Lutheran Church. Though written for the Advent season, it points forward in ways that seem most fitting for the new year ahead.

The Advent of Hope

The conception of hope
Isn't always immediate
But is immaculate

I've seen hope and I know
Hope breathes and has skin

Hope hasn't left yet
Hope is coming back for us

Hope happened then
And hope will happen again

But before any adventure
There is always an advent

And so we wait:
For patience is a process,
And so we wait:
For patience is a practice,
And so we wait:
For we were in the past, tense,
But now we know to let go
As the present has gifts.

Hope clears a pathway
With each sacred passage

Not static or stagnant
But step after step
Breath after breath
"Bone of my bone
Flesh of my flesh"

It's only between
Each moment of rest
We finally see
Faith made manifest

And so we wait:

For patience is a process,
And so we wait:
For patience is a practice,
And so we wait:
For we were in the past, tense,
But now we know to let go
As the present has gifts.

Hope is not an accident,
Hope is handcrafted,
Hope is beholding the miraculous,
A body re-membered in a moment of baptism

Hope is homecoming,
Returning back to self,
And feeling that hope
Grow in everyone else

Hope whispers in the silence,
Gently waiting and asking if
We can find God's presence
Echoing in the absence?

>>Subscription information<<

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>>Topics for upcoming issues<<

- Trusting institutions - again
- Stories we tell to ourselves and each other
- Big ideas!

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