

NOTES FOR THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

Volume Twenty-Two, Number Five (June 2021)

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

NOTES FROM READERS

>>What you think<<

Greetings, my friends, in these early Summer days. My, how things have changed over these past two months in our pandemic world. We held an in-person commencement for our graduates in early June, I made my first trip away from Minneapolis in sixteen months, and we are planning for a mostly normal beginning of our fall semester in September. I am finishing my 15th year at Augsburg this week, and am happy for these small signs of normalcy after a crazy year-plus. I hope and pray that you, too, will see these glimpses of hope in your daily lives. Onward, my friends, in our reflective practice.

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

>>I believe<<

As I begin my 16th year here at Augsburg and look forward to the next few years, I am going back to moments in my time here in which I posed important questions that continue to inform our conversations about Augsburg's future. Here is the very first homily I preached in the Augsburg chapel in September 2006. Its focus continues to be most relevant to the work we share in this remarkable institution.

Credo

¹³Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" ¹⁴And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." ¹⁵He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" ¹⁶Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah,^[a] the Son of the living God." ¹⁷And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. ¹⁸And I tell you, you are Peter,^[b] and on this rock^[c] I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. ¹⁹I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

Matthew 16: 13-19

There is this wonderful moment in the Mass, when the cantor's voice declares *Credo in unum Deum* – a bold proclamation of faith that rings out in the sanctuary to lead the congregation into its profession of the creed – today I come before you with the same invitation – as we begin our academic year here at Augsburg, I call you to proclaim your faith, individually and as a college community! It is where the work of education begins...

Who do you say that I am? Our gospel for this morning invites all of us to a proclamation of our credo, our faith. And as is so often the case in the Christian scriptures, the disciples offer all of us a glimpse of the range of human responses to the work of God in our midst.

The first response to the question is to offer a summary of what other people believe – here is what others say...how often we find ourselves doing the same thing – let me show you what the research tells us about this question (read a few doctoral dissertations!) – I dare not take a personal stand – but that response is not good enough for Jesus – But who do you say that I am?

The second response is firmer – at least for Peter – who declares his belief that Jesus is the son of the living God – good answer, except that a few chapters later it is Peter who is betraying his faith when questioned by bystanders in the midst of a crisis...(in Matthew 26)

And then we have Jesus' wise words and promise to Peter – there is something remarkable here, this proclamation of faith, and on this rock I shall build my kingdom on earth...so how is that going?

Well, we could say that Jesus was naïve in entrusting his kingdom to a mortal whose faith he knew would waver – or we could embrace the wisdom that it begins here with a bold proclamation of faith and then it proceeds, through the grace of God, in myriad paths of blessing and deceit and disorder and joy – with glimpses of salvation suddenly gone because of human foibles.

Jesus is clear – you begin here with an answer to the question of what you believe – the way of discipleship is grounded in the leap of faith, the credo, and from there the adventure of life is launched – to be met with all sorts of detours and disappointments but also with all fashion of forgiveness and grace and wonder.

Why is a credo important at the beginning of our academic year here in this college? Like the disciples, we too often fall back on the opinions of others, we are afraid to take stands for fear that we will be wrong or hurt or worse. And like Peter, even when we take a stand and declare our credo, we mess up and betray the faith we declare

But the wonder of college – at least a college like ours, grounded in a faith community and willing to place faith and values at the heart of its work – is that we are able and expected to state our beliefs with conviction and then to go forward together, knowing that those beliefs must be tested by experience, by relationships, by conversations, by time, by education in the broadest sense...this is the core work of our college.

Our Lutheran heritage confirms this relationship between faith and learning – we believe but we also know that our faith is not complete – we are fallible, we are human, we are sinful – Lord, I believe, help my unbelief – and that is why we gather here as a community – in this chapel, in this college, in this city, in the midst of God's creation – to share our faiths and to know that our work as a college is to question, to educate, to strengthen, to test, to embrace, to connect our faith with our learning.

I want to know what you believe – I want to learn from your beliefs even as you learn from mine – our conversations as a community about what we believe are at the heart of our common life, they are a critical part of the educational enterprise, and they are a central aspect of a healthy democracy – this isn't about evangelism, this is about the sort of public discourse that reflects the richness of our lives together in society – and our faith is clearly part of that rich fabric of human experience and community.

Stephen Carter, a Yale law professor, has written with great wisdom on the need to have conversations about our faith a central part of public discourse – for Carter, this is an important part of the “etiquette of democracy,” a willingness to be persuaded that we can learn from others. Without such public conversations about what we believe, what we value, what we care about, we are left to closely-held opinions and to the sort of polarization about faith and values that characterizes life in our country right now. We won't necessarily agree – but we owe it to each other to come to what my teacher Martin Marty has called the “great, republican banquet table,” where a seat is waiting for us, the conversation is lively, and we enjoy the company.

National Public Radio has reestablished a wonderful series entitled “This I Believe”, for which they invite all sorts of folks to write and read essays about their faith – I could preach a sermon on each of my belief statements, but here they are in summary fashion...

- I believe in a generous and gracious God whose love for us is beyond understanding but demands of me diligent and vigilant life in the world
- I believe in the power of forgiveness and the gift of reconciliation
- I believe in democracy, the miracle of abundant life together with strangers
- I believe in each of you and the promise of your work here together – the nexus between your personal gifts and calls and the mission and vocation of Augsburg College – the wonders and grace of learning
- I believe in the blessings of the ordinary – in glimpses of salvation – they may be all we have some days, but they give us meaning and hope (this quirky poem makes my point...)

["Blessings" by Ronald Wallace from *Long for This World: New and Selected Poems*. © University of Pittsburgh Press.]

Blessings

Blessings

occur.

Some days I find myself
putting my foot in
the same stream twice;
leading a horse to water
and making him drink.

I have a clue.

I can see the forest
for the trees.

All around me people

are making silk purses
out of sows' ears,
getting blood from turnips,
building Rome in a day.
There's a business
like show business.
There's something new
under the sun.

Some days misery
no longer loves company;
it puts itself out of its.
There's rest for the weary.
There's turning back.
There are guarantees.
I can be serious.
I can mean that.
You can quite
put your finger on it.

Who do you say that I am? Jesus asks his disciples. It is the question we all must answer again and again – it is the question of faith and it is where we begin, where we are grounded, where we draw our sustenance – and what better place to ask it than here at Augsburg College, in this community of learning and faith! Credo, credo, credo. Thanks be to God.

PRACTICE THIS

>>Shared governance<<

This past year has challenged the ways in which we live and work together. In particular, for higher education with its stated commitment to “shared governance,” it has taken a concerted effort to ensure that all voices are heard and recognized as decisions are made. Overall, I think those of us at Augsburg did a solid job of sustaining our commitment to shared governance, but it was not easy. This short piece from 2015 relating the wise advice of my friend and colleague, Steve Bahls, president of Augustana College, continues to be most relevant to our work together.

“We are working hard as a community here at Augsburg to craft a vision of shared governance that is relevant to our 21st century lives, while at the same time faithful to our mission and values. We have found a helpful guide to that work in President Steve Bahls of Augustana College in Rock, Island, IL. I’ve mentioned Steve’s work in my Notes before, but a recent article in *Trusteeship* magazine (March/April 2014), provides a helpful summary of five key ideas. Though these ideas are aimed at college and university leaders, I find them helpful for all of us seeking to develop a more democratic vision of organizational life.

First, actively engage your entire community in a serious discussion of what shared governance is (and what it isn’t). Be intentional.

Second, periodically assess the state of shared governance at your institution and develop an action plan to improve it. Be vigilant.

Third, expressly support the role of the faculty as the chief architects and overseers of the academic program (you might translate this claim to key stakeholders in your organization, e.g., clinical staff responsible for clinical programs). Be clear about roles.

Fourth, maintain a steadfast commitment to mutual transparency and communication. No surprises.

Fifth, develop deliberate ways to increase social capital between board members and faculty (again, who might serve a faculty-like role in your organization?) Build community.

As Bahls makes clear, this is by no means easy work, but for those of us who care about the critical role of institutions in our democracy, this is essential work.”

>>Leadership lessons<<

Each year, I prepare a self-review as part of my presidential evaluation with our Board of Regents. This year, in addition to my normal reflections, I was asked to explore the leadership lessons learned during this pandemic year. You will find [here](#) a link to a pre-recorded presentation about the leadership lessons and their implications for our future work together that I have gleaned in reflecting on the past year – a year unlike any other. You will hear in my presentation six key messages...

- The importance of what I call “centered leadership,” finding what is most important in leading Augsburg and arraying all we do in service to that center, which is the well-being and success of our students.
- The promise of “abundance thinking and practice,” lifting up the ways in which we face the reality of our context and circumstances, and employ our imagination, resolve, and courage to find ways to keep our promises to our students and to the world.
- The demands of “stewardship,” recognizing that we are called to care for and embrace the many gifts we have been given to advance the mission-based work of Augsburg.
- The opportunity to say yes to “evolving social arrangements,” the various ways in which we create fluid boundaries within Augsburg and with other organizations to create shared value and pursue common purpose.
- The possibility of an “elastic hybrid” institution that knows and embraces its core commitments and identity, and then welcomes other commitments and identities with the goal to build a pluralist community.
- The joy of becoming a “beloved community,” a community that is grounded in love for each other for the sake of the world.

PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<

I received from my in-laws as a Father's Day gift a lovely compilation of inspiring pieces originally aired as part of PBS's *Religion and Ethics NewsWeekly* entitled *The Life of Meaning: Reflections on Faith, Doubt, and Repairing the World*, by Bob Abernethy and William Bole (Seven Stories Press, 2007).

I have regularly recommended *Sightings*, an online publication of the Martin Marty Center at the University of Chicago Divinity School, for its wise and sometimes provocative perspectives on religion and public life. A recent post from William Schweiker, an ethics professor at the Divinity School (and a graduate school colleague of mine), is a fascinating take on this pandemic year and its religious overtones. Find the column at <https://mailchi.mp/uchicago/sightings-217757?e=09ebf578b7>.

>>You are beautiful too<<

Here is a powerful poem by the late Gwendolyn Brooks, Chicago poet laureate, who opened our eyes and ears and hearts to the truth.

Infirm

Everybody here
is infirm.
Everybody here is infirm.
Oh. Mend me. Mend me. Lord.

Today I
say to them
say to them
say to them, Lord:
look! I am beautiful, beautiful with
my wing that is wounded
my eye that is bonded
or my ear not funded
or my walk all a-wobble.
I'm enough to be beautiful.

You are beautiful too.

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>>Topics for upcoming issues<<

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

- Big ideas!
- How the gifts of our faith helped us navigate the pandemic!

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