

NOTES FOR THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

Volume Twenty-Five, Number Six (August, 2024)

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

NOTES FROM READERS

Greetings, friends. I trust that you are well as summer winds down. We are back in full swing for our 155th academic year here at Augsburg with a great entering class and lots of exciting momentum with a refreshed strategic plan. As we conclude our 25th year together in this Notes community, I give thanks for your abiding interest and support, and for your continued commitment to modeling reflective practice in your personal and professional lives.

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

>>All we need: the miracle of abundance<<

I preached this homily during the first week of our 155th academic year at Augsburg.

Mark 6: 30-44 (The feeding of the 5,000)

It is so good to be together again here, in Hoversten Chapel – the heart of our university where we gather each day to hear the Word that is the foundation for our learning and living. How I miss this sacred time during the summer months and how I rejoice in this return to the rhythm of our lives together.

Eighteen years ago, in my first fall as Augsburg's 10th president, I invited the community into reflection on four remarkable values – abundance, generosity, engagement, and service – values that I had come to see as not just concepts we talk about, not just tasks we take on, but a way of life together. And it has been among the greatest joys of my 18+ years in this community to see us live our lives together grounded in these values, But as I suggested then, this life together takes a miracle to make it work!

And that miracle is found, I believe, in the familiar story in our scripture for this morning: "The feeding of the 5000"

Allow me to lift out of this familiar story a few ideas that may not be apparent to those of us who have heard it again and again (Palmer on "reading scripture out of doors"):

- First, see how Jesus understands the need for rest and time alone – soul weariness, along with physical and emotional fatigue, that leads us to flail for control
- And then the crowd presses on Jesus and disciples again – the scripture says 5,000, but what about the women and children – shall we say 10 or 15,000? – and Jesus begins to teach them, but the time grows late
- And the disciples begin to respond – just like us! – with their soul-weary solutions to the problem
- First, send these people home – self-help
- And then, throw money at the problem
- But here comes Jesus' response: collect the bread and fish, break into companies of 50 and 100, redistribute, feed the hungry
- And there is the miracle – in the smaller groups, the crowd begins to trust, and the personal attention and relationships mean that people are willing to share what they heretofore were hiding for themselves

Jesus says: we have all we need here if we find ways to unleash the hidden gifts and talents and foodstuffs that will meet the needs of the people. This is the promise of abundance in a world of scarcity – this is the promise into which we are called as God's people in this place – this is the promise of grace and hope and peace that is ours in Christ Jesus our Lord. This is the miracle of abundance.

Think about what this promise means to our lives of faith and discipleship as we come together as God's people in this place:

- The abundance of our lives – Together, we must face our own fears, our own anxieties that come when we look at the world as a scarce existence. The abundance of God's people – what are you hiding because it is hard to trust and believe? What must we do to accept God's gifts, God's promise, God's abundant and awesome love? I think about Professor Tim Pippert and his vision for the Augsburg Family Scholars, serving students who come out of the foster system. Tim imagined what we could do as a community to support these amazing students, he asked for help, he built trust and collaboration across our community, and now we have a program that not only serves dozens of students who might not otherwise have gone to college, but also is a national model for serving foster students. What a miracle!
- The abundance of this place – I am so very struck with the remarkable stories of Augsburg as an institution and community in this neighborhood, city and world. By our firm resolve to settle in this neighborhood, by sending our students out into the world as educated and faithful citizens, by our vigilance and stewardship

of our environment, by our willingness to embrace hospitality and generosity for our fellow humans – in each of these ways we are practicing abundance here and now. Today, I want to lift up a special story of abundance. Several years ago, a student named Emily Knudsen was in my senior honors seminar, and as a final project (she didn't want to write another paper!) she proposed planting three apple trees. Her vision was that these trees on campus would bear fruit that could help nourish future students and neighbors. Walk outside the chapel today and see those trees full of apples for the taking – they are really quite tasty! All we need – abundance – what a miracle!

- The abundance of the promise – The challenge I have for us is to truly live as a community that believes we have all we need, a community of abundance in a world of scarcity. Here may we dedicate ourselves to trust-building, to collaboration, to doing things differently, to working together to meet the needs of students and neighbors, to the courage and imagination to practice abundance. Where others say there is not enough, we say we have all we need, more than plenty, if we believe and bring our full selves to our efforts to educate, to feed the hungry, clothe the poor, meet the needs of strangers.... Right here in Cedar-Riverside, in Minneapolis, in a community and society that can't get beyond the world's scarcity questions – a community that needs a miracle – and here we are!

And so today, we are offered a miracle – the miracle of God's abundance – that calls us to a life as part of this faithful community. Are we willing to let this miracle happen here? Are we ready to accept God's promise for ourselves, this university and our community? God calls us. And our answer must be: Here I am, Lord – I return to you what has been so graciously given to me – and thereby I live with the sure and confident faith in life abundant. We have all we need! What a miracle. Thanks be to God. Amen.

>>Losing an old friend<<

Earlier this week, a significant storm came through our area with torrential rain and high winds. When we came to campus the next morning, we found many downed limbs and debris - and one particularly sad circumstance - a beloved Cottonwood tree that had graced the campus for decades had fallen victim to the winds. One of our biology faculty members, Leon van Eck, penned this remembrance of the "Loveliest of Trees":

"OBITUARY FOR A TREE:

On August 26, 2024, the eve of the new fall semester, Augsburg University lost one of its most charismatic community members. A plains cottonwood (*Populus deltoides*), it was widely known as The Loveliest Of Trees, and was absolutely deserving of that moniker. Despite having survived decades of brutal Minnesota winters and countless summer storms, the decay that had set into the heartwood of this peerless giant meant its trunk could not support its towering canopy during the 70 mph wind gusts of the overnight storm.

This is a sad day for Augsburg University: No longer will we be able to watch a bald eagle take flight from the regal branches of The Loveliest of Trees. No longer will students be able to find communion in its comforting shade. No longer will its downy seeds collect in drifts that signal the hazy magic of summer on campus. No longer will its golden leaves blanket the community garden at the end of harvest season. But a plains cottonwood was always meant to have an ephemeral existence, being a fast-growing pioneer species of the Mississippi River floodplain.

A new sapling might take its place in our urban arboretum, and grow to shade us anew, but this that we have now lost, this will always be The Loveliest of Trees.”

PRACTICE THIS

>>Defining vocation<<

I provided the following reflections on how I understand the concept of vocation as part of a story for our university magazine. What do you think?

How would you define vocation in your own words?

Vocation has two components for me: it is a response to external forces that leads us to choose particular roles and pathways in life. For some, those external forces are the divine – this is the theological understanding of vocation that we inherit from our ancestor, Martin Luther. For others, those forces may involve relationships with individuals and communities; incidents or needs in the world; or some value structure that calls us to see needs and opportunities in the world that demand our response.

Second, vocation reflects the multiple ways in which we respond to those external forces. It may be a profession, and it also may be roles as parent, sibling, neighbor, citizen, and so forth. In fact, I believe for most people, our vocations reflect multiple intersecting roles that we play in the world. Personally, I am an educator by profession, and I also am a parent and sibling and spouse and citizen. I live out my vocation at the intersections of those various roles.

How does Augsburg help students deepen/cultivate their understanding of vocation and create a passionate purpose in their lives?

In many ways, we see vocational discernment as the heart of the educational experiences we offer students. We call it a three-dimensional education – educating students to make a living, make a life, and build community. In that way, we aspire for students to experience a three-dimensional education across all aspects of their Augsburg experience – in the classroom, surely, and also in the residence halls, in student organizations, in athletics, in the arts, and out in the wider community. This combination of experiences means that students gain the education and skills they need to get a job or pursue a profession, and they also learn how to discern the other roles they will play in their lives, all the while learning that everything they do must be done alongside others in community.

Why is it so important for people to develop a vocation?

We live in a world marked by scarcity, transactional relationships, and loneliness. Our understanding of vocation runs counter to each of these challenges. We encourage students to see the world through a lens of abundance, to see relationships as meaningful and mutual, and to seek to build community wherever they go. That is the sort of world we want for our students, and vocational discernment is the means we believe will help them build it.

How is Augsburg's method or focus on vocation distinct from other similar schools?

Certainly other schools do a good job of integrating vocational discernment into their mission and work. What I believe Augsburg does that is distinctive is the belief that vocational discernment is at the heart of the entire educational enterprise. We claim that "we believe that we are called to serve our neighbor" – Augsburg's vocation statement – which is meant to reflect our unwavering belief that faith, learning, and service cannot be separated from each other. Our three-dimensional education translates that vocational statement into practice.

>>The etiquette of democracy<<

In my Opening Convocation address this fall, I included the following section specifically reflecting on the fraught times in which our newest students join our community. Here is my challenge to them:

"Especially at the beginning of this academic year – at a time fraught with social and political division and fear – I want to say a bit about the place and space in which you will pursue what is required of you. You come to college at a time when many are questioning whether or not our democracy will survive. Throughout the past few years, our city, country and world have been torn apart by violence fueled by all sorts of isms – racism, nationalism, fundamentalism. During your lifetimes, our economic lives have been marked by a growing gap between those who have and those who have not, a gap that threatens to unravel the social fabric of our communities.

In the midst of all of this volatility, you come to this community – Augsburg University – an institution that at its very core believes in democracy, not simply as a political system, but as an ethic, a way of life. And this democratic ethic means that you become members of a teaching and learning community – students, faculty, staff and partners – that believes that there are clear parameters for our lives together, in classrooms, residence halls, playing fields, in this chapel and everywhere we navigate daily life. There is, in other words, what Yale law professor Stephen Carter has called an "etiquette of democracy," rules you must follow if we are to live and work and study in ways that live out our mission as a college.

We have always believed that a college education is about challenging ourselves with new ways of thinking, provocative questions, mind-stretching inquiry and conversations, pursuing knowledge and wisdom with abandon. And that is deeply intense and sometimes emotional

work. The commitment to our academic vocation – critical thinking, openness to other perspectives and experiences, having your mind changed and your life transformed – may be even more difficult in the midst of our social disruptions. It can be frightening to learn new things; it can make us angry to be challenged by provocative ideas and experiences; it can be threatening to risk our social identities in the midst of those who do not share our paths in the world.

And for all of these reasons, the etiquette of our lives together has perhaps never been more important to the well-being of our common lives here at Augsburg. Perhaps I could suggest a simple rule for our lives together – let us be generous and gentle with each other, perhaps with a portion of forgiveness and grace, not so that freedoms are abridged or opinions squashed – college is not meant to be a safe place for your minds, you will encounter provocative, even troubling ideas here – but so that we might pursue our teaching and learning in ways that advance our mission and our democracy. Gentle and generous, the etiquette of democracy – a claim upon all of us in this place we now call Augsburg University.”

PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<

I am pleased to report that our new collection of essays entitled *Through truth to freedom; reconciling a university’s past, present, and future* (Myers Education Press, 2024), which I’ve previewed in these Notes over the past several issues, is now available here: [Through Truth to Freedom: Reconciling a University's Past, Present, and Future](#). It was a special privilege to distribute almost 900 copies of the book to our incoming students this past week, giving them insights into how the university we are today and aspire to be in the future has been shaped by our past - in ways both constructive and in need of reconciliation. By the way, the book design is also quite gorgeous, done by Auggie alum, Blaine Weber.

>>What we need is here<<

In light of my homily on abundance, this poem from Wendell Berry offers further insight into our common lives.

What We Need is Here

Wendell Berry

Geese appear high over us,
pass, and the sky closes. Abandon,
as in love or sleep, holds
them to their way, clear
in the ancient faith: what we need
is here. And we pray, not
for new earth or heaven, but to be
quiet in heart, and in eye,
clear. What we need is here.

>>Subscription information<<

Subscriptions to Notes are simple to establish. Send me an email at augpres@augzburg.edu, ask to be added to the list, and the listserv will confirm that you have been subscribed to the list. Please feel free to forward your email versions of Notes to others—they then can subscribe by contacting me. The current and archive issues of Notes are available on-line at www.jgacounsel.com.

>>Topics for upcoming issues<<

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

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