

NOTES FOR THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

Volume Twenty-Five, Number Two (December, 2023)

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

NOTES FROM READERS

Happy New Year, friends! I trust and pray that 2024 will be a year full of happiness, peace, and reflective practice!

As I have mentioned in past Notes, several Augsburg colleagues and I have written a book that was published earlier this month. Entitled *Radical Roots: How One Professor Changed a University's Legacy* (Myers Education Press, 2023), it has been a joy to share this story with friends far and wide.. If you are interested in learning more, we have created a companion website for the book, go to www.augsburg.edu/radicalroots/.

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

>>Conflicted<<

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

God is our refuge and strength,
a very present[a] help in trouble.
2 Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea,
3 though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult. Selah
4 There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,

the holy habitation of the Most High.
5 God is in the midst of the city;[b] it shall not be moved;
God will help it when the morning dawns.
6 The nations are in an uproar; the kingdoms totter;
he utters his voice; the earth melts.
7 The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.[c] Selah
8 Come, behold the works of the Lord;
see what desolations he has brought on the earth.
9 He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
he breaks the bow and shatters the spear;
he burns the shields with fire.
10 "Be still, and know that I am God!
I am exalted among the nations;
I am exalted in the earth."
11 The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.[d] Selah

Psalms 46 NRSV

The Word Awaited

Sometimes
I long to call
Words of praise
To me,
So that they may settle
Like doves on my palm.
I long to coax them
Down from the trees
Into my waiting hand.
Sometimes they come,
Swift and powerful
Like hawks to the wrist of the falconer,
Words of challenge,
fierce words of regret.

One time you came,
The word.
Not at my call,
You came
to occupy
a cradle,
a grave,
my heart,
a universe.
You came to call me
to unleash

words of comfort
words of hope.

Sometimes I hold out
my empty hands
and wait.

Kate McIlhagga

So here we are in these dark days of early December, in this first week of Advent, the new church year, and I come reflecting on the call to be conflicted – and I imagine you think I’m going to talk about all of the conflict in the world – and as tempting as that might be...

Instead, I am here this morning to suggest that a central theme of this Advent season is the reality that we are called to be conflicted, to live in the tensions that define the lives of God’s faithful people – people already saved by a baby in a manger, a teacher and a healer, a savior on a cross, a Christ risen indeed – and people still fallen, tempted by the urge to control our lives, to know all, to define success and truth for ourselves.

Our spiritual ancestor, Martin Luther, taught us the Latin phrase for this tension: *simul justus et peccator*, at once both saved and fallen, saint and sinner. It is a core part of our Lutheran Christian faith tradition. It names the paradox of living in the tensions. It forms us to deny the either/or demands of the world – are you for me or against me, are you conservative or liberal, I am right and you are wrong – and accept God’s claim upon us to be both/and people, navigating the complexities of life with the trust that only God has all the answers, that we are called to embrace and love our neighbors even when we disagree. And it is hard stuff, this paradoxical, tension-filled, conflicted life we are called to lead.

And here comes this delightful poem from Kate McIlhagga, a minister and member of the Iona spiritual community in Scotland until her death in 2002 – a poem that juxtaposes these two aspects of our nature. “Sometimes, I long to call words of praise to me,” she writes, “to coax them down from trees into my waiting hand.” And sometimes they come, she continues, “swift and powerful...words of challenge, fierce words of regret.” Our longing to call the word, she suggests, often leads to challenge and regret.

But “One time,” she continues, “you came, the word, Not at my call, you came to occupy a cradle, a grave, my heart, a universe. You came to unleash words of comfort, words of hope.” One time, as the Evangelist tells us, the Word became flesh and broke into our history with words of comfort and hope and grace and truth. And there is nothing to do but hold out our empty hands and wait.

And waiting is hard, too. “Be still and know that I am God,” the Psalmist writes to the Israelites impatient with their God, tired of waiting, sure that they had been abandoned to lives of exile and slavery. “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble....God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved; God will help it when the morning comes...The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.” Be still, be still, wait, have faith – and know that I am God. Wise counsel for our Advent journeys.

So what to do while we wait, while we live in the tensions, while we are conflicted? Surely it is not to do nothing, to wait passively, to stand by and hope for the best – our God demands “active waiting,” for in the tensions, in the conflicts, are the stuff of our lives of faith in the world. We are called to be conflicted, and our God has our back!

This Advent, I am mindful that most of us are feeling more conflicted than ever. OK – just a few words about all that is going on in the world!! We’re living through a wrenching time in our history. No matter where you land on the various sides and perspectives, all of us are feeling the pain of division, of a sense of loss of bearing, of fear for what will come, of a longing for well-being and civility and common purpose. So, maybe Advent comes at just the right time for conflicted people, maybe this liturgical season is a gift to those whose longings have been frustrated and who need to be still and know that God is God – and know that our God has a plan for us.

It begins with the Advent call to turn again to the One who calls, to embrace what preacher and theologian the late Frederick Buechner calls the gift and demand of a “magnificent defeat.” He writes, “Power, success, happiness, as the world knows them, are his/hers who will fight for them hard enough; but peace, love, joy are only from God...And God is the enemy whom in one way or another all of us fight—God, the beloved enemy. Our enemy because, before giving us everything, he demands of us everything; before giving us life, he demands our lives—our selves, our wills, our treasures.” The magnificent defeat – born in a manger, won on a cross, redeemed in an empty tomb. God’s plan for God’s people.

And then God’s conflicted people are called to pursue God’s will and work in the world. For this work, I am inspired and challenged by the example of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who, in a stirring sermon in the throes of the civil rights campaign, called for God’s faithful people to be tough-minded – characterized by incisive thinking, realistic appraisal, and decisive judgment – sounds a good bit like the outcomes of a liberal arts education, an Augsburg education. But he didn’t stop there. Yes, tough-minded, but at the same time, tender-hearted – not a naïve or sentimental concern for others, but a

commitment to compassion and justice for all our neighbors – also core values of an Augsburg education. Tough-minded and tender-hearted – just the stuff of the conflicted life, and as King concludes, the very nature of the God who calls us, the God who loves us, the God whose Advent in our midst we mark in the days ahead.

Be still and know that I am God. Be still and know. Be still. Be. Be God's conflicted people in the world. Be tough-minded and tender-hearted. The Word has become flesh, indeed; the Word that comes to us in a manger – the Word, full of comfort and hope and grace and truth. Blessings on your conflicted Advent journeys. Come, Lord Jesus, come. Amen.

>>Advent Blessings<<

As is our tradition at Augsburg, we mark the Advent liturgical season in a number of ways - our annual Advent Vespers worship services, a devotional pamphlet, and a video greeting to alumni and friends. Here are excerpts from my various roles in these traditions...

Advent blessings

Advent Greetings, friends. I bring warm wishes for this sacred time to you and yours from the entire Augsburg community. In the midst of these fraught times in our world, may these holy days ahead be the occasion for reconciliation, renewal, repair, and peace.

This year at Augsburg, our annual Advent Vespers services lifted up the theme, "Oh, What a Beautiful City." In the liturgy and music of the services, we reflected on our university's location in the midst of a major urban area, while also marking the ways in which cities are central to the Biblical narrative – cities like Bethlehem, Jerusalem, and the eternal City of God we know as Paradise.

At the close of the service, we received this blessing from Campus Pastor John Rohde Schwehn, which I now offer you:

"Beloved people of God.
You are the light of the world,
A city on a hill that cannot be hidden.
So let your light shine before others.
Until the day when all is repaired, redeemed,
And restored by the tender compassion of our God,

Who guides our feet in the way of peace.

May God's radiant love
Forever shine upon you,
Upon our community,
Upon our neighborhood, and
Upon this holy city.

Go in peace."

Go in peace, indeed, my friends."

Advent devotions

[As a bit of context, this hymn was part of the Advent Vespers liturgy, with its theme of "Oh, Beautiful City." Chicago Avenue is a prominent location in South Minneapolis.]

Down Along Chicago Avenue, a hymn by Bret Hesla

4. Far, far away, Farmers gazing skyward
Glory, Glory, What glory!
beheld the northern lights.
But none could see that heav'nly sight
Down along Chicago Avenue.

5. Wake, Mary, wake! to the winter morning.
Glory, Glory, What glory!
Quick, grab a bite to eat.
At seven you're back on the street
Down along Chicago Avenue.

6. Bring gifts, you wise, for the babe before you.
Glory, Glory, What glory!
Oh, find it in your heart
To give these two a healthy start
Down along Chicago Avenue.

The Christmas narrative, so familiar to all of us – Mary and Joseph and baby Jesus in the manger, the shepherds, angels, wise ones – can seem romantic to those of us

ensconced in our warm homes and lives. We sing lovely carols and exchange our gifts...

But the reality in the narrative is not so romantic – a homeless family, poor shepherds struggling to make a living, immigrant itinerants searching for meaning...

And the reality in our own moment, in our own cities, mirrors that Biblical reality – Down along Chicago Avenue, where farmers and unhoused mothers and all those seeking for justice and compassion are in our midst, calling us this Christmas to the faithful work of being neighbors and building healthy neighborhoods.

PRACTICE THIS

>>What I've learned from the collegiate recovery community<<

Augsburg has been home for the past 25+ years to StepUp©, a collegiate recovery community for students. It is a remarkable program, one of the first ever established on a college campus. Each fall, I meet with incoming students from the program (who live in community, have counseling support, and are otherwise mainstreamed into campus life), and share thoughts about what I have learned from the recovery community that ties to Augsburg's mission. Here are some notes from those sessions, which are organized around several of the Twelve Steps from *The Big Book*...

FOUR IDEAS THAT TIE AUGSBURG AND StepUP TOGETHER

(1) We are aware of “the narrative quality of human experience” (Stephen Crites) and how our intersecting stories weave a social fabric for our lives

Step 12: “...to carry this message...”

- You are wonderful storytellers – I value the trust and confidence you have in me and this community to share your stories with us. And your stories are often full of heartache and tragedy and recklessness – before they turn to healing and redemption
- This is what life looks like – stories of the good, bad and ugly – depictions of reality that we must tell and hear, recognizing the messiness that often marks our personal and common lives
- Vocation as narrative – it's not necessarily linear! Life unfolds and sometimes our stories are the only way we make sense of where we've come from and where we're going

- I am left with Reinhold Niebuhr's powerful words: "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." (from *The Irony of History*)

(2) We embrace the inextricable ties between what we believe and how we live our lives.

Step 3: "Made a decision to give our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understand God"

Step 12: "...to practice these principles in all our affairs."

- This is about credo and vocation – about being and doing
- Belief in the higher power – the deep and spiritual experiences that fundamentally change our perspectives, our relationships, our values
- The notion that our lives have significance and meaning – the higher power is working through us to accomplish good in the world (God's work, our hands)
- Self, community and God – the ways in which we live out the ties between our faith and our calls

(3) We affirm the fact that the opportunities to be in community, to be educated, to be known and loved carry with them the obligations to be of service to others, to give back, to know and love our neighbors

Step 8: "...make amends to them all."

- For Augsburg, the idea of education for service is at the heart of our character as a college
- Education thus is so much more than what we learn from books or in classrooms, it is our life in community and in the world
- What we learn about ourselves and from each other in all of our relationships – moral inventory, confession, making amends and then living as one who knows that life is a gift

(4) We are committed to learning to “pay attention” and helping each other to attend to the most important people and values in our lives

Step 11: “...praying only for knowledge of God’s will for us and the power to carry that out.”

- Here is an idea with theological, academic and civic meaning to us all – we live in a world full of temptations and distractions; how do we learn to pay attention to the most important people and values
- Here is a lesson I have learned so well from getting to know our StepUP program and students; you teach me that paying attention to God, to your own lack of control and then to the family and friends who love you are at the core of recovery.
- I aspire to the same sense of mission-focus for our college, learning to attend to who we are, what we value and how we make a difference on campus and in the world

PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>He did not wait<<

A timely word from Madeleine L’Engle. We, too, cannot wait...

He did not wait till the world was ready,
till men and nations were at peace.
He came when the Heavens were unsteady,
and prisoners cried out for release.

He did not wait for the perfect time.
He came when the need was deep and great.
He dined with sinners in all their grime,
turned water into wine.

He did not wait till hearts were pure.
In joy he came to a tarnished world of sin and doubt.
To a world like ours, of anguished shame
he came, and his Light would not go out.

He came to a world which did not mesh,
to heal its tangles, shield its scorn.

In the mystery of the Word made Flesh
The Maker of the stars was born.

We cannot wait till the world is sane
to raise our songs with joyful voice,
for to share our grief, to touch our pain,
He came with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice!

Madeleine L'Engle

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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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