

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

Greetings, friends. It is commencement season, which means many evenings full of celebration for the accomplishments of our students, culminating in a graduation ceremony early in May. It is a happy time, though this year some of that joy is tempered by reports of encampments and protests and arrests on college campuses across the country. I am grateful that Augsburg has avoided the most extreme of that behavior as our faculty and staff have done a good job of encouraging conversation and engagement that channels the obvious passions on all sides of the issues related to the Israel-Gaza conflict into opportunities for learning and peaceful gatherings.

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

>>Breakfast with Jesus<<

I shared this devotional with members of my President's Council (a group of board members and influential friends who advise me on strategic issues) earlier this spring as a way of pointing to the importance in our leadership work of inviting folks to the table so that they might overcome their fears and imagine a future together. The scriptural story is from John 21: 1-14.

Biblical commentators suggest that the 21st chapter of John's gospel was added to the original narrative. And as is always the case in such findings, the question is why. What was it that those who edited the gospel felt needed to be added to complete the story? What was going on in the community of those for whom John's gospel account was meaningful that required 25 additional verses?

For some of us, these are intriguing questions of Biblical and theological scholarship; for some of us, not so much so. I might suggest, though, that for all of us – situated here some 1900

years after the gospel was circulated – these additional verses are most relevant. In fact, I might be so bold as to say that chapter 21 is meant especially for you and me here at Augsburg, in this chapel, during this Easter season, near the end of our 154th academic year.

Let's imagine ourselves in the place of the disciples in these days after: after the intense years of ministry across the countryside, after the triumphal entry to Jerusalem, after the Passover, after poignant and emotional final meals together, after betrayal and denials, after the cross, after an empty tomb. Now what do we do?

Well, I guess you do what you know how to do. Simon Peter says it plainly, "I am going fishing." I'm going back to the life I knew before I was called away. I'm going back to the familiar and mundane, as if these years with Jesus were simply a dream, ultimately a nightmare. I can go back and earn a living and get on with things, and the others join in. But there are no fish to find – the familiar and mundane is empty and disappointing.

And then there he is on the lakeshore. A vague figure, who knows of their disappointment and emptiness. "You have no fish, have you?" he asks. "No," they answer. "Cast your nets again and you will find some," and so their nets are filled beyond measure (153 fish, we're told a few verses later!) and they recognize him as Jesus their Lord.

And as they rush to greet him, filled once again with the joy and abundance they have known in their lives together, Jesus says simply "Come and have breakfast." There they are, gathered around the campfire, breaking bread together and eating the fish he helped them to catch. There they are, afraid to ask how this was possible, afraid to break the spell of the moment – and yet they knew it was the Lord! He is Risen, He is Risen Indeed.

I would guess that all of us have had moments when we have this sense of living in the days after ... My spouse, Abigail, has worked over the years in the arts community and she talks about how the preparation for an art exhibit or performance and production leads you through a series of emotions that can leave you pretty dejected when the production is over. Post-production blues, she calls them. Others of us might feel that way about the end of our college years at Augsburg – what do I do now? Others among us may be retiring, wondering what will offer meaning and direction in the days ahead. Perhaps your examples are less extreme, though still unsettling. A relationship ends, a job search falls apart, a family splits...what do we do in the days after?

Perhaps, like the disciples, it's back to what is familiar, to what we've always done. Or maybe it's coping with the disappointment and anxiety with a sense of fatalism – this is the best I can do and hope for. And perhaps, we too find our nets empty. The world defines success in ways we simply can't live up to.

And then he is there, standing on the lakeshore – just as when he first called to us, "follow me" – sending words of encouragement our way, instructing us to cast our nets again. And all of a sudden, we recognize our Lord and he invites us to come to the table, to break the bread

together, to lay at the altar our burdens and joys, our disappointments as well as the bounty and abundance of our nets overflowing. He is risen; He is risen indeed.

Here is the powerful Easter message in these days after... the message we have from John's gospel that is so relevant to our 21st century lives of faith.

Yes, you must go back to your lives in the world. But now, your lives in the world have been transformed by the power of the resurrection. Now the calls you have received – your vocations – have a different meaning and trajectory. In your daily lives, God is alive and acting so that you might know and make real God's will for the world. What the world counts as success has been set aside for all time. Now your lives serve the Risen Lord.

No, I have not left you alone. I am here with you in your daily lives. I know you may be disappointed and dejected and anxious and afraid. Remember how I called to you from the lakeshore. Remember how you recognized me in the breaking of bread. Remember how I invited you into community. Know that I am with you, offering my comfort and encouragement and guidance and love – even when you feel lost and alone.

Yes, all has changed...so follow me again and still. We can't deny all that happened. Healing and compassion, love for our neighbors. Triumphant entries, frightening times of betrayal and denial. Feet washed and bread broken. Government and religious pageants aimed at dousing God's love. Horrific and painful death. Three days and a stone rolled away. Resurrection. Reports of being together again, despite the doubters. That now is done. God loves you. You have been redeemed. But that is not the end...

I need you now to follow again and still, to be my living body on earth, to share the good news. Come and have breakfast with me, for our work together has just begun.

One of the central claims of an Augsburg education, grounded in helping you find vocational meaning or hear your call, is how the various experiences of your life – growing up in a particular family, in a particular place; belonging to a particular religious community (or not); having a certain group of friends; coming to a particular college, where you study in a particular way a particular set of topics; choosing a particular career path, and so forth – how all of these experiences are part of a narrative that has history, that has an “arc” that has been influenced and shaped by the inter-dynamics of relationships and institutions and decisions that are all part of your vocational story. What I believe we do at Augsburg is not to tell you what your vocation should be (though sometimes we all do need advice!), but to help you make sense of your vocational story, to find the coherence in the narrative, to see the significance of the various threads of your story as they weave a life for you in the world. To consider how you will live in the days after...because there will be many days after.

In this understanding of vocation, then, the Easter message about the days after becomes especially important because these are the days when we need to take responsibility for how our story continues to unfold, even when we are away from those advisors and teachers and

friends who perhaps inspired us or motivated us or supported us down this path. As John's gospel concludes, God does not leave us alone in our vocational journeys in the meantime, Jesus is still inviting us to breakfast.

Wendell Berry, in his whimsical poem, "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front", offers us an insightful take on this message for life in the days after:

Love the quick profit, the annual raise,
vacation with pay. Want more
of everything ready-made. Be afraid
to know your neighbors and to die.
And you will have a window in your head.
Not even your future will be a mystery
any more. Your mind will be punched in a card
and shut away in a little drawer.
When they want you to buy something
they will call you. When they want you
to die for profit they will let you know

So, friends, every day do something
that won't compute. Love the Lord.
Love the world. Work for nothing.
Take all that you have and be poor.
Love someone who does not deserve it.
Denounce the government and embrace
the flag. Hope to live in that free
republic for which it stands.
[Give your approval to all you cannot
understand. Praise ignorance, for what man
has not encountered he has not destroyed.

.....

Go with your love to the fields.
Lie down in the shade. Rest your head
in her lap. Swear allegiance
to what is highest in your thoughts.
As soon as the generals and the politicians
can predict the motions of your mind,
lose it. Leave it as a sign
to mark the false trail, the way
you didn't go. Be like the fox
who makes more tracks necessary,

some in the wrong direction.
Practice resurrection.

Practice resurrection. Come and have breakfast. Thanks be to God. Amen.

>>Interrogating our saga<<

We have now completed the manuscript for a book of essays, written by Augsburg faculty, staff, and students, about Augsburg's historic saga and its relevance for our life today and in the future. The manuscript, entitled *From Truth to Freedom: Reconciling a University's Past, Present, and Future*, will be published this summer and includes this introduction.

"Introduction

To accept one's past—one's history—is not the same thing as drowning in it; it is learning how to use it. An invented past can never be used; it cracks and crumbles under the pressures of life like clay in a season of drought... The unprecedented price demanded—and at this embattled hour of the world's history—is the transcendence of the realities of color, of nations, and of altars.

The Fire Next Time, James Baldwin

At the conclusion of its Sesquicentennial year in 2020, Augsburg University stood at the intersection of three pressing issues: the novel coronavirus that caused the COVID-19 pandemic; the ensuing economic disruption from the COVID crisis; and the racial unrest occasioned by the murder of George Floyd a short distance from Augsburg's campus in Minneapolis. At this epicenter, the Augsburg community, which had experienced a radical transformation over the past decade in the profile of its student body to become one of the most diverse private universities in the country, looked to its future by interrogating the threads of its institutional saga—a saga shaped by its Norwegian ancestors, its Lutheran Christian foundations, its location as a dominant institution in a diverse immigrant neighborhood, and its decidedly Western liberal arts tradition.

What do we mean by an institutional saga? Throughout this volume, we use Burton Clark's definition of saga:

An organizational saga is a collective understanding of a unique accomplishment based on historical exploits of a formal organization, offering strong normative bonds within and outside the organization. Believers give loyalty to the organization and take pride and identity from it. A saga begins as strong purpose, introduced by a man (or small group) with a mission, and is fulfilled as it is embodied in organizational practices and the values of dominant organizational cadres, usually taking decades to develop (Clark, 1972, p. 178)

In other words, a saga reflects the historic threads of an institution that create meaning for its present and future.

There is little doubt that Augsburg's historic threads define much of its current mission and identity.¹ The question is what in this saga can help us look forward to the sort of university our increasingly diverse students and community deserve for the next 150 years. How have the historical ways Augsburg thought about itself made it challenging to hear what our students and community need today? And how do we decide what is good in our saga that should inform a path forward?

To answer these questions, a small group of faculty, students, staff, and alumni met monthly over two years to explore various aspects of Augsburg's institutional saga. Initially, members of the so-called "saga group" worked with the university archivist to identify an issue that seemed relevant to our present reality. For example, Augsburg was founded by Norwegian-American Lutheran Christians. What was found in that faith tradition that shaped the university's mission and identity? Where was this faith tradition still evident in the present daily life of the university? What in that faith tradition required us to wrestle with ways Augsburg had failed to live up to its highest aspirations, and how could we reconcile those failures?

After a year of exploring these historic threads, members of the saga group chose themes that they found most compelling and began to write essays that would appear in a published volume. Those essays were reviewed by the group and often led to further deliberations about whether and how Augsburg's saga was reflected in its present reality.

What became evident in these continuing deliberations is the central claim of this volume: that higher education institutions that seek to educate their students for freedom and liberation—the idea behind the liberal arts—must be prepared to embrace the truths they pursue and to lean into the reconciliation demanded by those truths. In other words, they must journey through truth to freedom, but only by way of reconciliation.

In 1969, during Augsburg's centennial year, the university framed its *raison d'être* as the commitment to educate "From truth to freedom." For Augsburg, this means providing an education for freedom grounded in claims of truth. Above all, these truth claims are grounded in the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ—stated so powerfully in that founding scriptural motto from the first chapter of John's gospel, "And the Word became flesh and lived among us"—a truth that makes all things possible in our lives and work in the world. At the same time, truth for freedom is borne out in our commitment to a liberal arts education—to the belief in scientific knowledge, in social analysis, in artistic expression, in cultural wisdom. And finally the truth we rely upon we find in the lived experiences of our students and the communities from which they come—truths that reside in rituals, traditions, and practices that invite us into worlds rich in knowledge and wonder.

The questions we asked in our explorations delved deep into the heart of our faith tradition, our academic mission, and our commitment to social justice. Where is truth leading to freedom in the midst of the many challenges we face in the world? What truths for freedom are present in the struggles to keep each other healthy in the face of a novel coronavirus? Where is there truth for freedom in an economy that more and more creates remarkable inequities? What is the truth for freedom in centuries of systemic racism and oppression? Through appreciative and critical inquiry, the truths we discovered demanded that we reconcile with our past so that we might be freed for the work we are called to do as "informed citizens, thoughtful stewards, critical thinkers,

¹ The threads are evident in Augsburg's most recent strategic plan, "Augsburg150: The Sesquicentennial Plan," available at www.augsburg.edu/Augsburg150.

and responsible leaders”—Augsburg’s mission! We recognized over and over again that the truth we sought often illuminated barriers to freedom in the present that required reconciliation.

We also found that this commitment to education for truth and freedom required us to embrace another familiar Augsburg motto: “Education for service,” first coined by Augsburg’s 6th President, Bernhard Christensen (Bouzard, et al., 2023, p. 21). Throughout the essays in this volume, you will hear echoes of how reconciliation—the path to freedom—requires a servant perspective.

The result of this interrogation of Augsburg’s saga is this monograph, comprising essays written by members of the Augsburg community—students, faculty, staff, and alumni—that lift up, explore, challenge, and appreciate how the threads of Augsburg’s history set a path forward for the university. These essays address diverse aspects of Augsburg’s saga, including its connection to its place, its faith tradition, its distinctive educational mission, its commitment to social justice for its students and community, and its consistent focus on welcoming those who are “first” to pave a path forward. At the same time, these essays offer a compelling example to other institutions about the important work of connecting past, present, and future—of seeking truth through freedom by way of reconciliation—work that is foundational to an institution’s mission, identity, and future planning.

Though this volume focuses on Augsburg University’s saga—and for that reason will be a most valuable resource for the diverse students, faculty, staff, alumni, and neighbors who comprise the Augsburg community—we believe these various essays also suggest both themes and methods for other communities that wish to wrestle with their institutional sagas. Through truth to freedom—by way of reconciliation—enables us to reshape the narrative of American higher education as we explore our commitments to particular places, faith traditions, academic missions, and public goods. We invite you to join us on this journey.

In addition to the essays here, we direct the reader to www.augsburg.edu/saga, a website that accompanies this book with links to resources that complement and extend the material in this volume, including archival materials, bibliographic recommendations, timelines, and maps.

References

Baldwin, J. (1963). *The Fire Next Time*. Dial Press.

Bouzard, G., Clark, K., Pippert, T., Pribbenow, P. (2023). *Radical roots: How one professor changed a university’s legacy*. Myers Education Press.

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PRACTICE THIS

>>Our strategic work<<

We are working on a refresh of our Augsburg strategic plan, Augsburg150, first approved in fall 2019. Our iterative process over the past year culminated in a Board retreat in March that brought together board members, faculty, staff, and students, to deliberate on key strategic issues for Augsburg’s future. I thought it would be interesting to share the topics and the

highlights from the conversations so that you might get a sense of how one higher education institution is focusing its work in these turbulent times.

Strategic Enrollment Planning: Our Sustainable Future as a Medium-Sized University

- Growing to 5000 is key to Augsburg's sustainability
- Requires driving enrollment demand across *all* market segments:
3600UG/400AU/1000Grad
- Greatest challenge is our own program development in AU and grad segments

Augsburg's Five-School Structure

- Augsburg's Five-School structure offers new opportunities for meeting strategic goals for curricular innovation, student success, and advancement/sustainability
- The design and implementation of the Five-School model is guided by values important to faculty, students and donors
- The full impact will unfold over the next 5-7 years

Preparing Tomorrow's Professionals

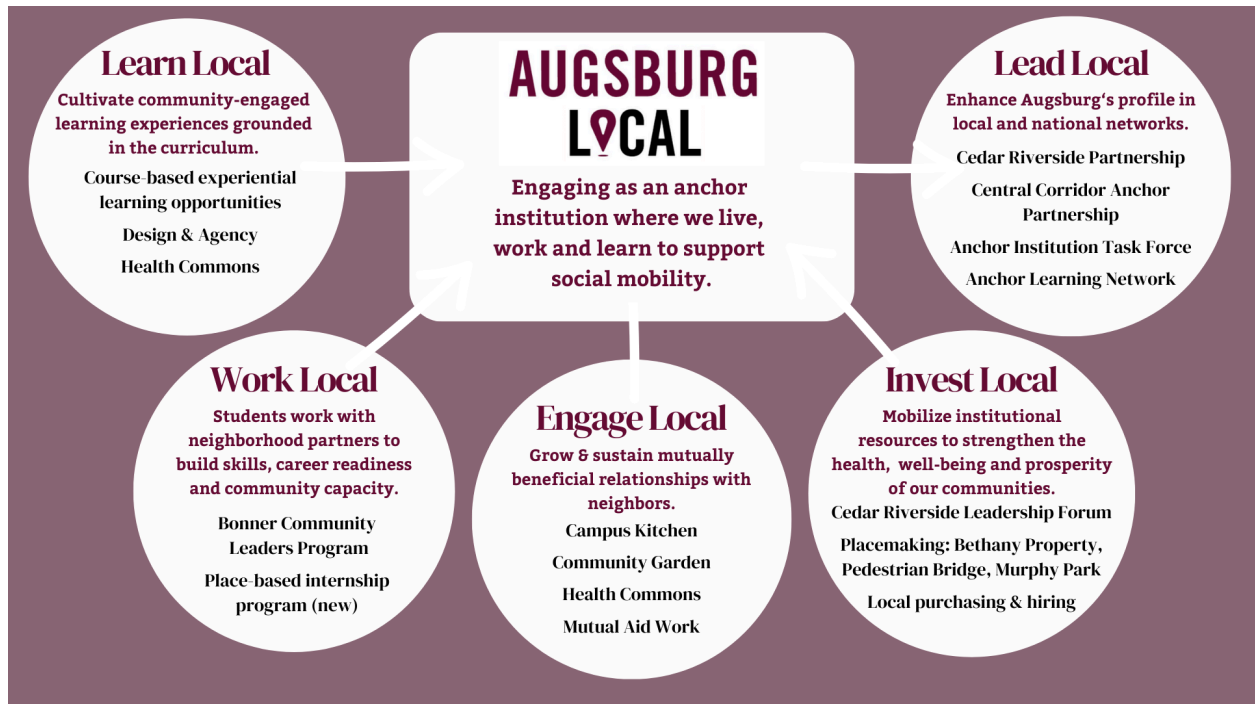
- Faculty and staff across Augsburg must be oriented and dedicated to helping students connect their classes and activities to career options
- Students should be helped to identify and broaden their range of career options without focusing too early on options that may not be best for them
- Academic programs need connections to employers that create meaningful opportunities for students

Improving Student Success / Retention / Graduation Rate

- Data shows Augsburg's retention and graduation rates reflect broader performance trends of schools serving our student profile. To improve, we need to focus on many smaller fronts— data-driven interventions (“positive deviants”) / multiple tactics running at once
- The key is being “small to every student.” Which students? How? New data such as Ruffalo Noel Levitz (RNL) surveys, will give us more granular data against peers.
- Discussion themes include deeper faculty engagement in student success leadership and finding new ways to have students take advantage of academic support services

Strengthening Augsburg as an Anchor Institution

- The new ***Augsburg Local*** framework sets out five dimensions of our place-based commitment: Learn, Work Engage, Invest, Lead
- Need to address value proposition more boldly and directly—the benefits and outcomes of this work for Augsburg, for students
- Integration is key - need sustained efforts that are embedded in the curriculum and within the institution



Leveraging Signature Partnerships and Shared Services

- Building on our existing shared services success, Augsburg should evaluate additional creatively structured collaborations to improve institutional strength and sustainability; New models have emerged in higher ed around 5 basic types
- The environment for collaboration/sharing is changing quickly and significantly due to pressure on higher ed institutions, so there may be new openness to collaborations that would not have been possible
- Partnerships open up powerful opportunities, but come with complex challenges and must be closely managed to achieve the promised value

PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<

I was excited to receive the new Erik Larson (he of *Devil in the White City* fame) historical novel, *The Demon of Unrest: A Saga of Hubris, Heartbreak, and Heroism at the Dawn of the Civil War* (Crown, 2024) - his storytelling is always compelling!

I'm off to visit Augsburg's study away site in Derry, Northern Ireland early this summer, and I've received a strong recommendation to read Patrick Radden Keefe's *Say Nothing: A True Story of Murder and Memory in Northern Ireland* (Anchor Books, 2019).

>>More than enough<<

A poem for springtime from the wonderful Marge Piercy...

More than enough

The first lily of June opens its red mouth.
All over the sand road where we walk
multiflora rose climbs trees cascading
white or pink blossoms, simple, intense
the scene drifting like colored mist.

The arrowhead is spreading its creamy
clumps of flower and the blackberries
are blooming in the thickets. Season of
joy for the bee. The green will never
again be so green, so purely and lushly

new, grass lifting its wheaty seedheads
into the wind. Rich fresh wine
of June, we stagger into you smeared
with pollen, overcome as the turtle
laying her eggs in roadside sand.

>>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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