

NOTES FOR THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

Volume Twenty-Six, Number Two (December, 2024)

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

NOTES FROM READERS

In the midst of this holy season, many of us are struggling with questions and concerns that may seem existential. Into this fraught time we come as reflective practitioners who have learned to be aware of all that is swirling around us, to analyze and go deeper in seeking understanding, and to consider how we might act in ways that reflect our deeply-held commitments and values. It is often difficult and draining, but it is what we must do. I wish all of you rest and renewal in this season, and resolve and courage for the work ahead.

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

>>A weary world<<

I preached the following homily in our chapel during the first week in Advent.

Romans 8:22-24 (NRSV)

22 *We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; **23** and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. **24** For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen?*

John 1:14 (NRSV)

14 *And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.*

Grace and peace to you from God our creator and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ – and blessings to you in this Advent season when love once again breaks into human history to enliven and empower us to live as God's faithful people in the world! Amen.

As we enter this Advent season, the haunting hymn we have just sung – “Light dawns on a weary world” – rings especially true. For surely we all long for the light to break forth in the midst of our darkness, to offer us respite and peace and hope in the midst of a weary world marked by violence and fear and hate. How long, O God, must we wait; how long must we live in the darkness; how long must we despair of your reign breaking in?

How long, indeed?

We grieve over a weary world, a world that groans in labor pains – pains that each of us feels deeply and personally. A weary world where terrorists kill innocent people; where insurgents on all sides garner fear and hatred; where our sacred earth is threatened by our own selfish and foolish behaviors; where communities around our country are torn apart by violence that disproportionately targets people of color; where, even in our own campus community, our fellow travelers experience bias and misunderstanding. How long must we wait for love and justice and mercy and compassion and hope to break into our groaning creation, our weary world?

Surely our gracious God hears our prayers. And yet, one of the temptations of Advent is our often impatient, even passive, waiting for the light to dawn. We grieve and we lament – surely important acts in themselves – and we wait for the light we know has come and will come again, but is that where it ends, is that all there is to do?

As we turn into this liturgical season, let us be reminded of this university’s founding scripture and perhaps the most apt way to sum up what Advent marks for God’s faithful people: “And the Word became flesh, and dwelled among us.” Consider this. God broke into human history. God came into the darkness. God chose to dwell in the weary world, alongside of us, and in so doing offers us all a path forward, an inspiration to move beyond waiting, the stuff of which hope is forged. And that is what we embrace this Advent.

When we are tempted to sit back and wait, we give up on the mystery and work that is all around us - a mystery we are called to embrace, work we are called to do. Poet Wendell Berry invites us to know the dark, for God is in the dark as well, blooming and singing of the promised redemption.

To go in the dark with a light is to know the light.

To know the dark, go dark. Go without sight,

and find that the dark, too, blooms and sings,

and is traveled by dark feet and dark wings.

–Wendell Berry, “To Know the Dark” from *The Selected Poems of Wendell Berry*, 1999.

As theologian Barbara Brown Taylor has written: "...here is the testimony of faith: darkness is not dark to God; the night is as bright as the day." So how shall we go without sight this Advent, how will we join with our awesome God, who walks alongside us on the way to Bethlehem and Jerusalem and Emmaus, to Beirut and Minneapolis - holy cities all?

Surely we must begin by proclaiming that "The Word became flesh and dwelled among us" is both a theological and a practical claim upon us. It is a proclamation that God so loved us that God came into the world, was made incarnate (as we claim in our Christian creeds), chose to live in the darkness, in a weary world, in a groaning creation. That is the theology of the gospel writer, but given John's soaring philosophical, ethereal tendencies, we often forget that the theology demands faithful action; the theology calls us to do God's work, to work alongside God in healing the world, to be the Word made flesh in our own lives of faith in the darkness, in the weary world. That is the practical claim.

And so we commit once again this Advent season, not to be tempted to wait for the light that is to come but to bear witness to the light already come – the Word made flesh – that calls us to action, to go without sight and travel in the darkness, to be of good courage and faith on the path that Jesus first trod for us, to know that God's spirit is here in our midst, never leaving us comfortless or without a horizon of hope.

And into the darkness we go – as God's faithful people – to:

- Stand with our neighbors, near and far, in our common aspirations for healthy communities, fair and just lives together, compassion for the vulnerable, a home for those experiencing homelessness, the beloved community in which dignity and respect for each other inspires our common purpose; to...
- Stand for abundance, when the world says there is never enough; to be beacons of hope in a world where there is too little evidence to hope; to feed hungry bodies and minds and spirits with the plentiful gifts of our good God; and to...
- Stand up and get to work, believing that the Word made flesh calls us to be the body of Christ on earth, in the darkness, in the weary world; to live as 16th century mystic Teresa of Avila charges us in this haunting poem:

Christ Has No Body

Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
Compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.
Christ has no body now but yours,

No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
compassion on this world.
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.

My friends in Christ, stand with someone, stand for something, stand up – for light dawns, love grows, and hope blooms when and where we live as God’s faithful people. May you know God’s grace and truth on your Advent journeys in the weary world until all the world in wonder echoes *Shalom*. Amen.

>>An Advent greeting and a call to be home-makers<<

Here is the text for my annual Advent greeting to the Augsburg community - on campus and across the world.

“Hello, I’m Paul Pribbenow, the President of Augsburg University, and I am pleased to bring greetings this Advent season from the Augsburg community – our students, faculty, staff and neighbors. May this season be a time of reflection and renewal for the important work we are called to do in the world.

This Advent, our community is reflecting on God’s good creation and the many ways in which all of creation is threatened.

We lift up the words of Psalm 84...

How lovely is your dwelling place,
O Lord of hosts!
My soul longs, indeed it faints,
for the courts of the Lord;
my heart and my flesh sing for joy
to the living God. Even the sparrow finds a home
and the swallow a nest for herself,
where she may lay her young,
at your altars, O Lord of hosts,
my King and my God.
Happy are those who live in your house,
ever singing your praise.

We know that all of God’s creatures long for a home, a safe and secure place that is ours. And, as the Psalmist writes, our God is a home-maker who promises us a most lovely dwelling place, a house where we might sing God’s praises.

The truth is, of course, that too many of God’s beloved creatures do not have a home. Too many are unhoused due to a lack of affordable homes or to the ravages of poverty and mental illness. Others are forced out of their homes by disasters, more and more the result of climate change

that leads to devastating weather. And even as the sparrow finds a home in the courts of the Lord, today too many of God's creatures are being forced to abandon their homes as they are washed away or forever changed by human or natural intrusions.

For God's faithful people, our work is clear. Every one of God's creatures needs a home. We are called to be home-makers so that all might sing God's praises.

Peace to you and yours in this sacred Advent season."

PRACTICE THIS

>>Hospitality<<

I return time and again to this excerpt from Henri Nouwen's *Reaching Out* - it helps me make sense of the sort of community I want to help nurture and support...

Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place.

It is not to bring men and women over to our side, but to offer freedom not disturbed by dividing lines.

It is not to lead our neighbor into a corner where there are no alternatives left, but to open a wide spectrum of options for choice and commitment.

It is not an educated intimidation of good books, good stories, and good works, but the liberation of fearful hearts so that words can find root and bear ample fruit.

It is not a method of making our God and our way into the criteria of happiness, but the opening of an opportunity for others to find their God and their way.

The paradox of hospitality is that it wants to create emptiness—not a fearful emptiness, but a friendly emptiness where strangers can enter and discover themselves as created free; free to sing their own songs, speak their own languages, dance their own dances; free also to leave and follow their own vocations.

Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*, New York: Doubleday, 1975.

PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<

My leadership team and I are doing a deep dive into the dynamics of leadership transition and succession planning, and have decided to return to a classic as a starting point. William Bridges originally wrote *Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes* in 1979. *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change* is a follow-up volume, written with his daughter, Susan Bridges, (Hachette Books, 2021). There will be more to come on this theme in future Notes!

Each year, we offer anti-racism training for Augsburg faculty and staff. This year's facilitator for the training was Seena Hodges, whose book *From Ally to Accomplice: How to Lead as a Fierce Antiracist* (Wise Ink, 2024) provides a provocative framing of why allyship is not enough in the struggle for equity and inclusion. We must seek to be accomplices if we hope to create real change.

>>For the Magi<<

Augsburg's annual Advent Vespers services lifted up the theme of "See Revealed Creation's Splendor," a most fitting topic as we consider our call to creation care. One of the concluding readings in the service was this powerful poem from Pastor Meta Herrick Carlson, which calls us to "another road home."

For the Magi

Just when we think
we have a handle on
the boundaries of a blessing,
a timeline worth trusting
the full setting
of a scene and story

Witnesses arrive
with scents and sage
from so far off we can't
make sense of how they knew
or why they came
all this way to worship

So we make room for magic
receiving the gifts with grace
pondering these things
in the depths of our hearts
changed by the scope of love
and another road home

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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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