

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. Today, I am finishing my 19th year at Augsburg and commencing my 20th. My brother, Dean, coincidentally, is beginning his first year as President of Millikin University in Illinois. I am immensely proud of him and we are both deeply aware of what an honor it is to take on these roles with all of their complexity and privilege. Say a prayer and hold a good thought for both of us, please!

My summer thus far has been full with travel: to Oslo for an alumni event in honor of the 200th anniversary of Norwegian immigration to North America; to Prague for an important conference on higher education and democracy; to Washington, DC for a workshop on faith-based higher education; to Richmond, VA for the 35th anniversary of the Bonner Scholar program; and to Mackinac Island, MI for the Mackinac Talent Summit. I'm now home, thankfully, but also filled with gratitude for the hospitality of strangers and the opportunity to be with those who share my commitments to higher education in our democracy.

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

>>Our students and their hearts<<

I offered these remarks at the 35th anniversary celebration of the Bonner Scholars program, an initiative that offers students the opportunity to serve and learn in community-focused roles. Augsburg is a proud member of the Bonner network.

Good evening, and congratulations to the entire Bonner community on this wonderful milestone of 35 years equipping students for lives as informed and active citizens in our democracy. Augsburg University is immensely proud to be a part of the Bonner network, which has only strengthened the work we do with our remarkably diverse and passionate students.

For those of us in higher education, it is easy to talk about how we focus on the minds of our students, offering an academic experience that enhances their critical thinking and thoughtful analysis. We even do a good job focusing on the practical skills of working with neighbors to create more just and healthy communities. What I believe the Bonner community does goes beyond minds and hands to the hearts of our students.

So perhaps a few words about the vulnerable hearts of our students.

University of Virginia English professor Mark Edmundson once opined in *The New York Times* (4/1/2012) that the students who truly succeed in college are those who show up with what (borrowing from the Boss, Bruce Springsteen) he calls “a hungry heart.” Edmundson argues that students with a “hungry heart” are those who have a love for learning and openness to experience; the courage and curiosity to stare into the Abyss of human experience and get excited; and the willingness to risk beliefs and values because you have confident beliefs and values to risk.

There are ways in which Edmundson’s opinion extends a long-standing fascination in America about the role of the heart as a metaphor for integrating intellect, values and character. Alexis de Tocqueville, the French journalist and chronicler of mid-19th century America, observed in his two volume *Democracy in America* (1835 and 1840) that the vitality of the American democracy was not so much about a political or legal structure as it was about our *mores*, defined variously as “notions, opinions and ideas that shape mental habits”; or again, as the sum of moral and intellectual dispositions of humans in society; or habitual practices with respect to such things as religion, political participation, and economic life; or, on point for our topic here, as “habits of the heart.”

In their mid-1980s book entitled *Habits of the Heart*, Robert Bellah and his colleagues borrowed Tocqueville’s concept to argue that the renewal of our democracy relied on recovering these habits of the heart as a means to navigate between our private and public lives, between individualism of various stripes and a commitment to the wider public good. The genius of our democracy depends, they argued, on a healthy balance between private and public, a balance that is only possible when we cultivate in our citizenry the civic virtues that Tocqueville called habits of the heart.

The problem is, of course, that much too often for too many people our hearts are neither hungry nor habitual. And therein lies the stuff of a pretty dismal diagnosis of our common life.

For those of us who have the privilege to be part of an academic community, dedicated at its core to the liberal arts academic tradition, there is much to celebrate about the promise of our education. At its best and most faithful, the liberal arts tradition claims that genuine learning, grounded in humility and openness, must embrace the experience of difference and otherness, must seek to hold the tension of opposites and conflicting perspectives without falling apart. In fact, I might argue that we are most learned and faithful when we give up attempting to control

our world, when we recognize that the gifts and ideas and experiences of others are at the heart of a community that is healthy and just and compassionate, and when we lift up the ways in which our learning and lives are enhanced by living in the tension of opposites – by seeking to comprehend all sides of an issue, to be comfortable with complexity and ambiguity, to honor paradox in thought, speech and action. For those educated in the liberal arts, the ideal outcome is that our hearts – the intersection of mind and spirit and community – are formed by living in the tensions that define human experience.

Parker Palmer has written compellingly of this challenge for our hearts in his *Healing the Heart of Democracy*. Palmer, who is a student of Tocqueville and Bellah, has firmly in mind this idea of habits of the heart when he suggests that “we are at a heartbreaking moment in American history...the conflicts and contradictions of twenty-first-century life are breaking the American heart and threatening to compromise our democratic values.” He argues that this heartbreak is both a personal and a political condition, and that our ability to navigate the tensions of our lives in a life-giving (and not death-dealing) way are at the core of the future of democracy.

Palmer’s distinction between hearts “broken apart” and “broken open” offers a profound lens through which to understand the transformative impact of the Bonner Scholars program. A heart broken apart turns inward, succumbing to fear, cynicism, or isolation. A heart broken open, by contrast, grows in compassion, resilience, and capacity for justice. The Bonner Scholars program prepares students to live with hearts broken open—ready to engage the world’s pain not with despair, but with deepened commitment and courage.

Bonner students are immersed in communities where they confront the realities of inequality, injustice, and human suffering. These experiences can be heartbreaking. But instead of turning away, students are supported to reflect deeply, to integrate what they learn in service with their academic and personal growth. In this way, a Bonner Scholar’s heart is not shattered by the weight of injustice—it is opened, made more spacious, more capable of loving fiercely and acting boldly.

For example, a Bonner Scholar working in a food justice initiative may witness the challenges of food insecurity faced by families just blocks from campus. Rather than becoming overwhelmed or numbed, they are encouraged to ask difficult questions, explore systemic solutions, and build authentic relationships with community members. Through this, their heartbreak becomes a source of moral energy—a driving force toward equity.

In another instance, a Bonner student partnering with immigrants or refugees may experience the ache of hearing stories of displacement and resilience. Yet through structured reflection and learning, that ache becomes empathy, and empathy becomes advocacy. The student emerges not hardened, but humbled and resolved to serve as a compassionate bridge-builder.

In every way, the Bonner program cultivates the kind of leadership our world most needs—leaders whose hearts are broken open, not apart; leaders who can hold the complexity of suffering and joy, and who step into the work of justice with courage, humility, and hope.

As I ponder the vulnerability of the hearts of our students - students who may be wounded by all they encounter in the world, I often turn to these remarkable words from Lawrence Siegel's *Kaddish* - words first uttered by Rabbi Nachman of Breslau.

*Nothing is as whole as a heart that has been broken.
All time is made up of healing of the world.
Return to your ships, which are your broken bodies.
Return to your ships, which have been rebuilt.*

[after Rabbi Nachman of Breslav; from *Kaddish*, Lawrence Siegel]

Nothing is as whole as a heart that has been broken, all time is made up of healing of the world. I give thanks this evening for the Bonner community that embraces this critically important work of equipping our students with hearts broken open to the world that so needs their commitment to justice and compassion and the common good.

>>Wrestling with angels<<

I mentioned in my last Notes that I was honored to be named the Alumnus of the Year for the University of Chicago Divinity School and was asked to offer an address on the occasion of the award being conferred. Here is an excerpt from my address, the remainder of which you can find here: [Wrestling with angels](#).

A summary of my thesis

At a time when higher education is often characterized as a private, transactional good, and colleges and universities are perceived as woke, elitist, out of touch, and unaccountable, it is incumbent for higher education leaders to step forward with an alternative narrative. In this address, I will use the narrative framework of the Biblical story of Jacob wrestling with the angel at Peniel to articulate a moral case for higher education as an engine for a robust, pluralistic democracy. My argument is that higher education is about learning to “wrestle” with ideas and values and relationships that demand our attention. And I further argue that students must learn to see the topics they wrestle with, not as obstacles to overcome or defeat, but as “angels” that demand respect and thoughtful attention. The purpose of this vision of education is like it was for Jacob, to be named and claimed as those called to meaning and purpose in the world. But it is also the case that, like Jacob/Israel, wrestling with angels leaves students wounded, vulnerable, humbled, and yet also appropriately equipped for the work they are called to do.

A debt of gratitude

It all started in 1979 when then Dean Joseph Kitagawa asked a number of first-year Div School students to help move his extensive book collection from the Dean's office to his faculty office. As we finished the work, he handed each of us a volume from his collection - mine was a first edition of R.G. Collingwood's *The Idea of History*. I still have it as a first glimpse of the personal and intellectual generosity that characterizes this remarkable place.

It continued when Professor Robin Lovin, then a new member of the Div School faculty, shepherded a small group of 1st year ethics students, introducing us to the rigorous study of philosophical and theological theories, while also challenging us to find non-profit organizations in which to volunteer. Mine was Shalom Education, a faith-based organization committed to teaching high school students how to fight world hunger. Several years of sleeping on church floor basements and working with these young people to make a difference in alleviating food insecurity taught me the importance of reflective practice, linking theory and experience in all that I do.

It also continued with the Swift Kick, the then name for what is now Grounds of Being - different names for the Div School Coffee Shop. Mentored by my friend, Joe Price, who managed the shop, I then became the manager when Joe finished his degree and headed off to teach at Whittier College in California. Little did I know that those couple of years managing people and inventory and cash flow would someday prepare me for a university presidency!

And it culminated in 1991, when after being away from the Divinity School for a few years, and alas, a dreaded ABD (All But Dissertation), I was named associate dean of the Div School, and Dean Clark Gilpin (whose presence here today is most meaningful to me) said something to the effect: it is not a good look to have an associate dean who has not finished his dissertation; find someone on the faculty who will help you finish. That someone was Martin E. Marty and with Clark's generous offer of a hybrid schedule, I finished my formal education at the Div School and was launched in my vocation to be a college leader.

This afternoon, I dedicate this talk to Mr. Marty, whose memorial service a few weeks ago reminded all of us once again that kindness and generosity are wonderful companions to scholarship and leadership. Mr. Marty's deep commitments to personal humility and pluralistic communities have shaped and informed my leadership in profound ways - ways that equip me to speak this afternoon of higher education leadership in a moral key.

PRACTICE THIS

>>Third Way Civics<<

In a time when civics education has been diminished across our entire educational ecosphere, we are signing on to an innovative model of teaching civics called "Third Way Civics." Recently, thirty Augsburg faculty members participated in a workshop to learn how to integrate this model in their classrooms across diverse disciplines (from the arts to social sciences to physics!).

Learn more here:

<https://www.mnhum.org/third-way-civics-educating-undergraduates-for-american-democracy/>

Here is my summary of its key principles:

Third Way Civics is an approach to civic education that seeks to bridge the gap between traditional civics education and contemporary societal needs. It emphasizes the importance of preparing students not only to understand government and civic institutions but also to actively engage in their communities and advocate for social change.

Key elements of Third Way Civics include:

1. ****Inclusive Education****: It promotes a curriculum that reflects diverse perspectives and experiences, ensuring that all students see themselves in the civic narrative.
2. ****Critical Thinking****: This approach encourages students to critically analyze civic issues, fostering skills that enable them to navigate complex social and political landscapes.
3. ****Active Engagement****: Third Way Civics emphasizes experiential learning, encouraging students to participate in community service, advocacy, and other forms of civic engagement.
4. ****Collaboration****: It supports partnerships between schools, community organizations, and local governments to create a more integrated approach to civic education.
5. ****Focus on Values****: The initiative stresses the importance of civic values such as empathy, respect, and responsibility, helping students understand their role in a democratic society.

Overall, Third Way Civics aims to create informed, active citizens who are prepared to contribute positively to their communities and engage in the democratic process. It is an evolving framework designed to meet the challenges of today's society while fostering a lifelong commitment to civic engagement.

PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<

I have been reflecting lately on what Martin Marty taught me about the value of pluralism in our organizations and society - lessons that seem more relevant than ever. John Inazu teaches law and religion at Washington University in St. Louis and has written two important books on the topic: *Confident Pluralism: Surviving and Thriving through Deep Difference* (University of Chicago Press, 2016) and *Learning to Disagree: The Surprising Path to Navigating Difference with Empathy and Respect* (Zondervan Books, 2024).

Given the current political environment and the efforts to discount any consideration of race in our common lives, I find Heather McGee's *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together* (One World Books, 2021) a helpful counter-argument. If only folks would listen!

>>Joy and sorrow<<

The political violence that led to the murder of Minnesota legislator Melissa Hortman and her husband, Mark, and the attempted assassination of Senator John Hoffman and his wife, Yvette, has caused all of us pause to consider what we have come to as a country. In the midst of these deeply troubling times, I have found Khalil Gibran's words of considerable comfort.

Then a woman said, Speak to us of Joy and Sorrow.

And he answered:

Your joy is your sorrow unmasked.

And the selfsame well from which your laughter rises was oftentimes filled with your tears.

And how else can it be?

The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain.

Is not the cup that holds your wine the very cup that was burned in the potter's oven?

And is not the lute that soothes your spirit, the very wood that was hollowed with knives?

When you are joyous, look deep into your heart and you shall find it is only that which has given you sorrow that is giving you joy.

When you are sorrowful look again in your heart, and you shall see that in truth you are weeping for that which has been your delight.

Some of you say, "Joy is greater than sorrow," and others say, "Nay, sorrow is the greater."

But I say unto you, they are inseparable.

Together they come, and when one sits alone with you at your board, remember that the other is asleep upon your bed.

Verily you are suspended like scales between your sorrow and your joy.

Only when you are empty are you at standstill and balanced.

When the treasure-keeper lifts you to weigh his gold and his silver, needs must your joy or your sorrow rise or fall.

This poem is in the public domain.

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>>Topics for upcoming issues<<

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

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