

NOTES FOR THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

Volume Twenty-Six, Number One (October, 2024)

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

NOTES FROM READERS

Welcome to the beginning of our 26th year together in these occasional Notes. I am grateful for you and for your witness to the power of reflective practice in the world. It is, of course, an election season, and we might argue that our reflective practice is more important and relevant than ever, though also that it is more in question as well. Mis- and disinformation abound, Fear and division define our common lives. Our future well-being is murky at best. And yet, here we are, called to our better and braver selves, dedicated to the truth, committed to democratic engagement, and keepers of the faith. I wish you peace and compassion in the days 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

>>Wrestling with angels<<

I preached the following homily in our university chapel on the occasion of the 507th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation.

Genesis 32: 22-31

Next week, we will mark the 507th anniversary of the day in 1517 when Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany, thus launching what came to be known as the Reformation. For those of us – personally and institutionally – who are part of the Lutheran faith tradition, these are important moments in which to consider how that tradition continues to shape our lives in the world today.

Here at Augsburg, we claim both a Lutheran faith tradition, as well as a Lutheran intellectual tradition – remember that Luther himself was a university professor – that continues to guide and shape what we do here every day. Though not many of us identify as Lutheran, we all have

the gift of being in and belonging to a tradition that has made Augsburg the place, the university, it is today.

There are many ways to witness how the Lutheran tradition shapes our lives together – think about a liberal arts tradition that honors many ways of knowing, or about a commitment to serving our neighbors and neighborhood, or a willingness to constantly consider how we can do what we do better and more faithfully. These are all aspects of the Lutheran tradition that are integrated into all we do at this university.

This morning, though, I want to focus on the ways we understand the sort of education we seek to offer in what I would call a “Lutheran key” by reflecting on the familiar story of Jacob wrestling with the angel.

Now before I offer a few thoughts about the story, let me say – with all due respect to the Men’s basketball team here with us this morning – that it seems quite remarkable that the top two men’s wrestling teams in the country are found at Lutheran colleges – Augsburg and Wartburg. What is that about? Maybe Jacob is the patron saint for wrestling champions! But I digress...

I want to suggest that wrestling with angels is a fitting way to describe an Augsburg education, shaped by the Lutheran tradition. Let me name three aspects of the story to illustrate what I mean.

First, it’s about wrestling. Now I don’t know much about wrestling moves and our story doesn’t provide any details about how they wrestled, except to say that Jacob never gave up – he never gave up. Such is the path of education. It requires courage, resilience, a willingness to risk and lean into difficult relationships and questions and experiences. You must be persistent and patient. Because it is hard – wrestling in your educational journey challenges your mind, body, and spirit. Not to mention all of the external challenges you face in your life as you pursue your education. One of the many things I value most in our students here at Augsburg is your lack of entitlement. You understand that education is a gift that will equip you to live a better life, to give back to your families and communities, to make a difference in the world. And it’s hard and it’s what you must do – wrestling with your education is the foundation for following your calls in the world. Never give up.

And then there’s these angels that are sent to wrestle with you in your educational journeys. Here’s the thing. What we believe is that God sends us angels in the form of fellow students and teachers, in the questions and experiences you will face, in the surprises and disappointments that we inevitably will find. One of the things Martin Luther taught us about our lives of faith – and I would suggest about our education – is that we are called to ask questions about everything. In his catechism, Luther premises all of his teachings with the charge to ask “What does this mean?” As you engage in the classroom, on campus, and in the world, believing that God is in the questions means that we will see angels in everything you experience in your education. As difficult as it may seem – and we will be tempted to see those difficulties as anything but divinely-sent – we must believe that education is about loving the questions, the

experiences, the relationships, as challenging as they may be, because as the writer of Hebrews exhorts us: “² Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” Remember, the angels we are called to wrestle come in many forms.

Finally, there is where all of this education – this wrestling with angels – leads. For Jacob, his night of wrestling with the angel leads to his demanding a blessing, and the angel then claiming and naming him for the journey ahead. Jacob is now Israel, the one who carries the covenant for his people – his calling. For all of us – and especially for our students – wrestling with angels in our education leads to callings discerned, lives transformed, promises made and kept, blessings conferred. You are claimed and named as those called to do God’s work in the world – in your careers and professions, in your families and neighborhoods, in the institutions and organizations that help build public trust. We wrestle with angels – we strive (as Jacob did) with humans and the divine – so that justice and compassion and love might flourish.

But there’s one thing more – a thing we must acknowledge and embrace as we wrestle with angels. For Jacob, wrestling with the angel led to an injury that would stay with him for his life – his hip was put out of its joint. Likewise, for those of us who wrestle with angels in our educational journeys, we too may be wounded. Perhaps it won’t be a physical wound, but wounds to our minds and hearts and spirits are very possible, wounds that are the result of the hard questions and experiences that education requires. And those wounds will stay with us for our entire lives. Here is what that will mean for us: We will never be able to do anything meaningful on our own without the help of others. Therein is the fact that following our calls in the world is never a solitary affair; it always means that my education, my gifts and talents, my call, is followed in community with those whose calls complement mine, ensuring that our work together models the covenant God has made with God’s people.

God keep you as you wrestle with angels – an education made possible because we are grounded in a faith and intellectual tradition that may be more relevant than ever before. Thanks be to God. Amen.

>>In a time of skepticism, higher ed’s public purposes matter<<

I published the following editorial in the Minnesota Star Tribune earlier this month...

“Sixty years ago, Joel Torstenson returned from sabbatical to his Augsburg College teaching position with a radical proposal that changed the trajectory of the Minneapolis college.

Torstenson, a sociologist, was keenly interested in the role of the city as a dominant community reality in American life, and he challenged his faculty colleagues to embrace Augsburg’s urban setting as a laboratory for learning and research. Nothing would ever be the same on campus.

Today, a mission-based embrace of place infuses every aspect of Augsburg. From curriculum to campus life to community engagement, we don’t just say we are *in* this place. Rather, as a

college of the city, we are *of* and *with* this place—with our neighbors and neighborhood to build and sustain safe, healthy, and just communities.

Torstenson's legacy reminds us that urban colleges and universities are crucial incubators of democracy as a social ethic—a bedrock for life in community. Next week, more than 300 leaders of urban colleges and universities will gather in Minneapolis for the annual Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities conference, co-hosted this year by Augsburg, Metro State University, St. Paul College, and the University of Minnesota. CUMU's 120 member institutions are leading critical efforts to advance the public purposes of higher education. In a time of great skepticism about the value of higher education, cultivating an inclusive democracy is chief among them.

This work is about more than the machinery of government, although it encompasses the democratic process. (To this end, Augsburg recognizes election day as a holiday, hosts a polling place on campus, and helps students register to vote during residence hall move-in.) CUMU's member institutions prepare students to be engaged citizens, helping them understand education not as a simple means to an end, like a degree or a job, but as a way to create meaningful change in their communities.

What does it look like for higher education to be place-based, to settle into urban settings and be good neighbors, and to believe that our academic missions compel us to both educate students and care about the world into which they will graduate?

At Augsburg, our location in Minneapolis' Cedar-Riverside neighborhood means the “classroom” is porous—intentionally so. Through our Campus Kitchen program, students glean produce at the Mill City Farmers Market, serve meals at Pillsbury United Communities' Brian Coyle Center, and operate an on-campus food pantry. Graphic design students solve real-world problems for local clients through Design & Agency, an on-campus design studio. At five Augsburg Health Commons drop-in centers, health care students experience a radical approach to health equity based in accompaniment and mutuality.

But it's not simply a matter of sending individual students out into the city. One-way engagement is not sustainable. Instead, place-making work only succeeds if it is grounded in *mutual* benefit with community partners. Long-term relationships must be built and sustained through consistent, intentional efforts to listen to each other and align our work together around creating shared value.

Some of this work takes place at the institutional level. Augsburg serves as a convener for cross-sector collaborations like the Central Corridor Anchor Partnership and the Cedar Riverside Partnership, both of which promote investments to sustain vibrant neighborhoods. Some of it is programmatic, like our partnership with Soomaal House of Arts, which provides studio space, technical assistance, and an exhibition in the Augsburg art galleries for rising Somali artists.

And some of it is fundamentally relational. In 2017, the opening of our newest building, the Hagfors Center, included the creation of a welcoming community garden at the northwest corner of campus, facing our nearest neighbors. When a magnificent cottonwood tree near the garden came down in a storm this past August, dozens of neighbors and gardeners joined us on campus for a time of shared grief and remembrance. It was a powerful reminder that in a time of polarization, fraying social connections, and decline in institutional trust, another story is possible—and it starts right here in our neighborhood.

With the national election looming, it can be easy to overlook the significance of these daily, local commitments. Our colleagues at CUMU institutions know well the slow work of tackling intractable urban problems, from criminal justice reform to economic mobility. But this is the work of democracy: Sustained engagement over time. Building relationships across lines of difference. Working collaboratively to think beyond the barriers that keep our communities from flourishing. Urban colleges and universities are uniquely equipped to model and cultivate this way of life with our students.

This is the public purpose to which we are called.”

PRACTICE THIS

>>Blessing for urban colleagues<<

I shared this blessing with fellow university leaders who serve in urban institutions and who gathered in the Twin Cities for our annual Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities (CUMU) conference earlier this month.

A blessing before dinner

In the Hebrew scriptures, the Prophet Jeremiah writes (29:7):

⁷ But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

Such is the divine call for those of us gathered here this evening...

It is a call for imagination, that we might see visions of city neighborhoods where battlegrounds become playgrounds.

It is a call for courage, that we might have the strength and resilience to pursue the work of justice and compassion and well-being.

It is a call for hope, that we might stay the course even when evidence and naysayers would have us surrender to cynicism and doubt.

It is a call for love, for only when we love the places we inhabit will we truly embrace the work to which we are called – the work of walking alongside our neighbors to create and sustain vibrant, healthy, and just cities.

In your Holy Names, we seek your wisdom and grace to discern our call so that your will might be done in our time.

And now, we gather together in this fellowship and around these plentiful tables, mindful of the needs of others, so that we might be strengthened for service in the world. Amen.

PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<

Keith Ellison, Minnesota's Attorney General, was a plenary speaker at the CUMU conference I mentioned above. He spoke in part on the theme of his book, *Break the Wheel: Ending the Cycle of Police Violence* (Twelve, 2023), which challenges us to break the cycle of inaction.

The concept of belonging is central to our work with students at Augsburg. We have recently begun to explore John A. Powell and Stephen Medendorp's *Belonging without Othering: How We Save Ourselves and the World* (Stanford University Press, 2024), which challenges the fears and division that arise when we label "the other."

>>A ritual to read to each other<<

This William Stafford poem sums up my deepest fears and fondest hopes for the moment we find ourselves in as the election looms. May it guide our work together...

A Ritual to Read to Each Other

By [William E. Stafford](#)

If you don't know the kind of person I am
and I don't know the kind of person you are
a pattern that others made may prevail in the world
and following the wrong god home we may miss our star.

For there is many a small betrayal in the mind,
a shrug that lets the fragile sequence break
sending with shouts the horrible errors of childhood
storming out to play through the broken dike.

And as elephants parade holding each elephant's tail,
but if one wanders the circus won't find the park,

I call it cruel and maybe the root of all cruelty
to know what occurs but not recognize the fact.

And so I appeal to a voice, to something shadowy,
a remote important region in all who talk:
though we could fool each other, we should consider—
lest the parade of our mutual life get lost in the dark.

For it is important that awake people be awake,
or a breaking line may discourage them back to sleep;
the signals we give — yes or no, or maybe —
should be clear: the darkness around us is deep.

© William Stafford, 1998

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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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