

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

I am grieving these days...

For our students and university community, suddenly under attack from those in our government who seek to undermine our mission and values.

For our immigrant neighbors, living in fear of discrimination and deportation.

For our allies around the world, now wondering whether a global order will hold in the face of dictators and authoritarians.

For our hard-working civil servants, whose commitment to public service is being questioned and eliminated.

For our transgender friends, whose identity is being erased.

For our country, our beloved country, whose democratic institutions and practices are eroding before our eyes.

And even more personally, I am grieving for my mentor and friend, Martin E. Marty, whose death this past week at the grand age of 97 reminds us of those who have gone before us, challenging and inspiring us to live up to our highest ideals - ideals now being targeted and denied.

My friends, I am grieving, and wonder whether our common grief might be the force that insists on love and hope and grace as the only antidote to resist and overcome. May it be so.

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 sort of republican banquet table<<

Seven years ago, on the occasion of Martin Marty's 90th birthday, I shared these reflections on the various ways in which he influenced my life and work. I share them again here, because I believe that Marty's deep commitment to pluralism, to the one in the midst of many, is more relevant than ever. These reflections are enough for me in this moment!

““God is good,” murmured the Imam as he stepped to the microphone, to which we people of diverse faiths and experiences responded in our hearts, “Yes, God is good, and this is not what our God intends for us.”

The occasion was a neighborhood meeting in 2008 following the murder of Ahmednur Ali, one of our Augsburg students – a young Somali-American who broke up a fight while he was tutoring children at the local community center and was gunned down outside the center. The meeting was to address safety concerns in the aftermath of the shooting, and we all experienced first-hand the wrenching emotional impact of this shooting on our lives together. Though we intended to talk about more security cameras and heightened safety patrols, instead we listened to urgent longing for community. Instead of hearts breaking apart, the Imam broke our hearts open to a new path forward. In that spirit, our community came together to rededicate itself to the well-being of our neighbors – yes, to more security cameras and personnel, but even more urgently to finding common purpose in the health, safety and well-being of our neighbors and neighborhood.

It is what has happened on our campus and in our neighborhood since this incident in 2008 that I want to describe briefly this afternoon, and in particular how Marty shaped my response to this event and gave me direction that orients my leadership at Augsburg University and in the world.

First, a brief autobiographical note that informs my contribution to this occasion. I am an unusual Marty student (aren't we all!). I am not a historian of any stripe. I began at the Divinity School in 1978, first as a master's student and then as a doctoral candidate in Ethics and Society. After finishing my doctoral exams, I was distracted by the opportunity to take on an administrative post in the development office at the University – a move that led me eventually through a succession of roles at the University and the Art Institute of Chicago, and further away from finishing a dissertation in ethics. It was upon my return to the Divinity School in 1991 as the associate dean that then Dean Clark Gilpin challenged me to complete my doctoral studies – something about modeling good graduate student behavior, I believe was his point. Given the time that had passed, none of my ethics faculty mentors were still at the Divinity School, so Dean Gilpin offered the most helpful advice I've perhaps ever received. Find someone who will help you finish. That is how it came to be that I am one of the 128 advisees on that card in Marty's wallet! And I stand as just one example – as this afternoon's program illustrates – of the diverse students Marty attracts and mentors and the influence they have across the academy, the church and the world.

I had the same experience many of you in this room enjoyed with Marty – summers on the porch in Riverside, thoughtful guidance on all things related to dissertation writing, provocative challenges to thesis and exposition – but our conversations weren't about American religious history, instead they veered to the role of professions and institutions in American public life, in fact to our shared commitment to understanding how faith informs our roles in democracy. In that way, Marty helped me understand how my academic pursuits set a foundation for leadership in higher education and beyond – and my path forward has never been the same.

I am a social ethicist now in my 16th year as a university president, and I know that my calling as a leader in higher education has been shaped by several fundamental themes in Marty's life and work – themes that I believe are at the heart of the Marty Center's mission and programs. Allow me to name three "compass points," if you will, in Marty's work that are relevant to my story.

In 1979, Marty penned an essay in *The Journal of Religion* entitled "A sort of republican banquet." Borrowing William James's concept of the republican banquet table, Marty offers a masterful overview of the dynamic ways in which faith and religion have played critical roles in the history of our republic. From the deism of the founders to DeTocqueville's mid-19th century curiosity about how diverse faith communities tolerated each other to John Dewey's "common faith," Robert Bellah's "civil religion" and Peter Berger's "canopy of the sacred," Marty suggests that the willingness (or not) of diverse faiths to come to the banquet table, share their particularities, engage in conversation and seek common purpose has been one of the markers of the well-being of our republic. Stopping short of a normative claim, Marty concludes that "sightings" – or perhaps more fittingly, "seatings" - of the faithful at the banquet table are worthy of our abiding attention.

Hold that image for now – "a sort of republican banquet table."

And then to Marty's 1997 book, *The One and the Many: America's Struggle for the Common Good*, in which he seeks to name the threads of diverse myths, symbols and stories that enable us to craft a robust and vital body politic – not with some grand narrative of oneness or community, but with "associations" that come together in pursuit of, and grounded by, cohesive affections and sentiments. Imagine the common good pursued through an "association of associations."

Another image to hold – "an association of associations."

And finally to a more recent book, *Building Cultures of Trust*, Marty's 2010 expansive argument for the need to restore trust in our institutions and systems – trust that makes possible the sort of common work that undergirds healthy communities and organizations and societies. Here he both names the risks associated with building and restoring trust – risks many of us as leaders and citizens have experienced – while at the same time pointing to the need to build and rebuild trust from the bottom up, on the ground in everyday public life.

A final image – "cultures of trust."

A sort of republican banquet table; an association of associations; and cultures of trust. I believe it is at the intersection of these themes that robust democratic engagement happens. People of faith come to the banquet table, able and willing to share their diverse and particular stories when there is trust that deeply held beliefs will be taken seriously and that there is a foundation for moving forward together.

Now back to my story. Augsburg University, one of the 26 colleges and universities of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) is located in a Minneapolis neighborhood that comprises the most diverse zip code between Chicago and Los Angeles, where most of our neighbors are Somali-Americans, the largest Somali community outside of Mogadishu.

Ten years ago, someone broke the commandment, “You shall not murder,” and now I know why God gave Moses the great gift of these commandments. Offered in a specific context to the Israelites, God spoke these commandments directly to God’s people so that they might know that they were chosen, that God loved them, that God wanted them to flourish. And in following the commandments, the Israelites would live into God’s will, God’s reign, God’s intentions for God’s people.

With a nod to my own faith tradition, Martin Luther also is helpful here in his explanation of the sixth commandment, “You shall not murder,” when he says: This means that “we are to fear and love God so that we do not hurt our neighbor in any way.” Simple and yet so remarkably helpful. To kill someone is about much more than the sinful act of murder – the law covers the murderer – it is about our neighbors and our neighborhood. It is about the pain and fear and injustice – it also is about the compassion and consolation and remembering. It is about God in our midst, allowing us to go on, keeping us strong even when we don’t believe we can go on because we are sad and desperate and frightened. The commandments are about a loving God with us. A remarkable gift.

And it is God’s gift that I was firmly focused on as I led a mourning community in the midst of an anxious and frightened neighborhood. Someone broke a commandment and now we lived in the aftermath. It is clear to me that God does not give us commandments primarily to convict the sinner – we all get that, we’re broken, we don’t live up to the rules, we struggle to hold it all together. God gives us commandments so that we might know the sort of lives God intends for us to live together.

What this has meant for Augsburg and our neighborhood during these past ten years is an agenda of work and conversation – I’m drawn to mid-20th century Roman Catholic political philosopher John Courtney Murray’s reminder that the Latin root of conversation means both to talk together and to live together – an agenda we pursue together at the republican banquet table, sharing our diverse stories as we associate, and building trust as we build a healthier, more just, more equitable and compassionate neighborhood.

And it happens in very practical, concrete, even mundane and ordinary ways – though often with extraordinary impact. Four quick themes of our interfaith work and lives...

- In our undergraduate curriculum, one of our required religion courses introduces our students of diverse faiths and backgrounds to the Lutheran Christian theological concept of vocation. As our faculty report, these classes quickly turn into interfaith conversations as students share how the concepts they are learning (“thick” stories from our institutional tradition) relate, intersect and perhaps clash with their own beliefs. A sort of republican banquet table right there in the classroom.
- In our campus life, we have sought ways to clearly state the firm character of our particular faith tradition – daily chapel services, carrying the cross for university events, sharing how the charisms of our tradition shape our identity – while at the same time being hospitable and embracing of the diverse students we educate – a Muslim chaplain in our campus ministry office and a vital Muslim Student Association, prayer spaces and dining options, orientation for residence life staff about interfaith issues, a new Hillel has been organized. Building a culture of trust on campus and beyond.
- In our institutional practices, our Board of Regents has adopted policies that embrace our commitments to hospitality and justice for those of diverse faiths. We have integrated interfaith prayers, alongside our traditional Christian prayers, into our institutional rituals. A credit-bearing interfaith scholars program deploys students of diverse faith backgrounds as ambassadors of interfaith living across campus – seeking to share information about diverse faiths, build relationships between people of diverse faiths, and help shape positive attitudes toward those of different faith traditions. We monitor these efforts intentionally and vigilantly, knowing that we cannot leave the work to chance.
- In our community engagement, we host (alongside two Lutheran congregations and two Muslim communities) weekly interfaith meals, conversations and service projects. The local Jewish federation has partnered with us to send our students to Israel for study trips. We have three Interfaith fellows (representing Jewish, Muslim and Humanist leaders) from the community serving as resource people on campus. We are seen more and more as a model for interfaith living by our sister colleges and universities who are learning from our work. Lots of associations in association!

I’ll conclude here with a word of appreciation to Marty (90 years young!), The Marty Center, and the Divinity School for 40 years of forming my leadership in higher education and society. And I know that similar gratitude flows from a cloud of witnesses across the globe, for whom Marty’s legacy has shaped the public understanding and practice of religion. I have the great privilege to witness to the power of “a sort of republican banquet table” – the lesson I learned from my teacher, Martin Marty – as we pursue the common good in the academy and in public. Perhaps even as we attend to the “seatings” at the banquet table – our good work as scholars – we are called more and more to take our own seat there on behalf of a more robust and vital republic and democracy. May it be so.”

PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<

Just this past week, our Augsburg community experienced a powerful presentation by Valarie Kaur, who out of her own Sikh faith tradition calls us to what she calls Revolutionary Love, an ethic that engages allies, opponents, and ourselves in the labors of love that offer us a path forward - even in the midst of our grief. Learn more at <https://valariekaur.com/>. Among her many books, I am reading *See No Stranger: A Memoir and Manifesto of Revolutionary Love* (One World, 2020).

>>Hope<<

And then there is Emily Dickinson on “Hope is the thing with feathers.”

“Hope” is the thing with feathers -
That perches in the soul -
And sings the tune without the words -
And never stops - at all -

And sweetest - in the Gale - is heard -
And sore must be the storm -
That could abash the little Bird
That kept so many warm -

I’ve heard it in the chilliest land -
And on the strangest Sea -
Yet - never - in Extremity,
It asked a crumb - of me.

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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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