

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

It has been a tumultuous time here in Minnesota over the past several months - an exhausting, hard, and unprecedented time. And it has required much of our entire community to withstand a surge of federal enforcement activity that has raised questions about safety, justice, and the rule of law - not to mention, democracy itself. And yet, it also has been a time when our community stood up for the values and principles that define us at our best. Minnesota has become an object lesson for our fellow citizens - not a lesson we necessarily chose to offer, but one that illustrates what democracy looks like in practice. I am grateful for those of you who reached out in solidarity and support. It makes a real difference.

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 experience in the midst of ICE aggression<<

This is the text of an editorial we penned earlier in February that offers insight into our experiences during the so-called Metro Surge. It originally appeared in the Hechinger Report, and subsequently was reprinted in MinnPost. It has gone viral around the world as both an object lesson for others, and a call for leadership grounded in mission and purpose.

"Augsburg University, where I serve as president, is an urban university in every sense. Our campus is seamlessly integrated with the surrounding neighborhood, and our location in the heart of Minneapolis offers our students extraordinary opportunities for learning and service. In every discipline, the city acts as an extension of the classroom.

The reverse is also true: what happens in our city reaches into the heart of Augsburg.

This year, spring semester classes began on January 20—one year after the second Trump inauguration, two weeks after the murder of Renee Good, and four days before the murder of Alex Pretti. In recent years, both in higher education circles and here in Minneapolis, the word “unprecedented” has risked losing its meaning through overexposure. Yet I don’t know how else to describe how profoundly the so-called “Operation Metro Surge” has impacted our students, faculty, staff, neighbors, and community.

We began the spring semester with the constant sound of helicopters overhead but an unusual quiet on campus. Many more of our students than usual have opted for online classes this term. For some, this decision is about personal safety; others are caring for siblings or family members after a parent was taken by ICE. Some had no choice but to take a temporary leave of absence for the spring; others have moved into emergency housing on campus to avoid the risks of a daily commute.

In this fraught time, our goal at Augsburg is to prioritize in-person learning as much as possible while allowing individuals the flexibility to make the best choices they can for their own circumstances. We know this calculus looks different for every student, faculty member, and staff person. After Renee Good was killed, Augsburg immediately pivoted to increase virtual options for students—adding several new online course offerings and increasing caps on existing online courses. This work is ongoing, and our academic advisors continue to meet one-on-one with students to navigate the thorny problem of making satisfactory academic progress in a time of personal and collective crisis.

A sense of danger and anxiety permeates Minneapolis. The ongoing federal operation in our streets, the targeting of immigrant communities, and the killings of U.S. citizens by federal agents raise profound questions about who is safe in our city and what justice looks like in practice. These questions are not hypothetical for the students Augsburg serves. Students have been stopped and interrogated by agents in unmarked cars while crossing from one campus building to the next. Many of our Somali American neighbors—including those with citizenship or legal status—are afraid to go out in public, fearing harassment, detainment, or worse. Swatting attacks that have targeted educational institutions around the Twin Cities have prompted multiple evacuations of campus buildings. Most chillingly, ICE has detained several Augsburg students, including one on campus following a tense confrontation with armed agents in early December.

Navigating all of this has been relentless and exhausting. As with any community, folks at Augsburg have diverse viewpoints, including about how best to respond to our current moment. But a truth we hold in common is that education is resistance—not to any political party or administration, but to the forces of dehumanization, violence, and injustice, wherever they are deployed.

I am not naïve to believe that simply being educated in a university with a deep commitment to the liberal arts will cultivate in students hearts that love the world and their neighbors; they each must make that choice. But for better or worse, the city is our classroom. Our students are

receiving a crash course in what my colleague Najeeba Syeed calls a “lived theology of neighborliness.” In the midst of this crisis, we know that educating students for lives of service has been our core purpose for 157 years. This moment, while difficult, is one we are called to meet in the long arc of higher education’s role in our democracy. The stakes couldn’t be higher.”

>>There is sin in it<<

I preached this homily in the Augsburg University chapel during the first week in Lent.

Matthew 9: 9-13

Several years ago, I was in a meeting of Lutheran church leaders and one of my colleagues suggested that we needed to consider what it was about our Lutheran faith that brought distinction and focus to our understanding of theological education. And then he went on to say that one such distinction might be our belief that there is “always sin in it...,” there is always sin in it.

Now, I suppose you could conclude that this is some sort of Lutheran slogan, inside baseball even, shorthand for our Northern European ancestral bias toward the dark side of human experience, but then my colleague went on to add – “because there is always sin in it, there is always as well God in it, offering us a way forward, a word of grace and reconciliation, the good news that we are loved and forgiven.” And that, I would offer, is a fitting summary of our Lutheran faith: There is sin in it, in every part of our lives, and that is why our loving God sent God’s only son into the world to reconcile us to God, our neighbors and ourselves. Good news, indeed.

Our gospel reading for this morning reads like a script for this dramatic claim about sin and redemption. Jesus, early in his public ministry, is out recruiting disciples. And here sits Matthew, the tax collector, and then there is the meal together with an even wider assortment of those labeled as sinners. And there is Jesus in their midst, claiming in response to the Pharisaic self-righteousness, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice. For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”

There are three critical theological ideas in that last sentence – enough for another couple of sermons! The first is Jesus’s reminder that he has “come” for this. God has sent Jesus for this reason, that God’s love for God’s people might be known and experienced. The second idea is that Jesus “calls” his disciples to this same work, not to a withdrawal from the world, but rather to be disciples in and for the world. And third, that the call comes not because we are blameless or pure or righteous, but precisely because we are human, sinful and fallen.

This is the remarkable word of grace and reconciliation that is at the heart of our faith. I’m drawn again and again to Lutheran theologian Joseph Sittler’s thought that the entire Christian faith can be summed up in the liturgical formula, “Almighty God, from whom no secrets are hid.” This is a prayer of confession that reminds us, challenges us and comforts us with the good

news that we are known – fully and genuinely known, like it or not – by the One who loves us, and once we accept that gift of faith, we will find the remarkable centering power of lifting up our sins, our lack of knowledge, our pride, and letting the gift of forgiveness and reconciliation free us to be loved, to keep on learning, to serve others who also need the embrace of forgiveness. We are called by our God in Jesus Christ to follow, not because we are righteous, but because we are sinners all, sinners who are forgiven and reconciled so that God's good work in the world might be accomplished in and through us.

There is sin in it, no doubt about it, but that sin does not define God's people, redeemed, called and equipped for the work of hope and reconciliation. In fact, our Lutheran faith demands that we face the reality of a sinful world with clear-eyed focus. We recognize the messiness, the complexity, the self-interest and greed, the violence and deception. We ask tough questions and call into question the ways of the world. And then we get to work with a sense of hope and promise, believing that we are called to live as those reconciled and redeemed, offering that same wellspring of hope and reconciliation to all.

And that brings it back to us – each of us who believe in this God of reconciliation – and to our work in the world. It is easy to fall into the traps the world sets for us. Because there is sin in all aspects of our lives together, we are sometimes tempted to believe there is nothing we can do. We might be overwhelmed or depressed by the ways human beings treat each other and not sure why or how we can respond. Or maybe we are like the Pharisees of Biblical times, wondering what we have to do with all this sin when we are the righteous ones and we don't want to be tainted by sin and sinners.

But once again our Gospel offers a simple message about what we are called to be and do – and it is summed up in the call to fellowship, the simple act of sitting at table with all God's sinful creatures, sharing the word of reconciliation, of love and compassion, of forgiveness, of hope for a new way forward together.

What would it look like to follow this faithful call to be wellsprings of reconciliation and hope as we face the pressing ways in which "sin is in it" in our lives today? Perhaps it looks like this...

Here on campus, it's the work we are called to do with our sisters and brothers to face the realities of environmental sins by advocating for solar panels and composting. And it's the efforts to know that some among us go hungry – often invisibly – and we must stock a food shelf to meet their needs. And it's our vigilance in facing the sin of bias and discrimination and working like hell to ensure that we are reconciled with each other – that we love each other – despite our different ethnic, religious, socio-economic, gender and sexual identities.

In our neighborhood, it's the work we are called to do in naming and addressing the sin of targeting our Somali neighbors as terrorists whenever one of their country men does something amiss. And it's the work of recognizing health and educational disparities that keep good people from living to their full potential, and putting in place tutoring programs and health clinics that reach into the lives of our neighbors and help them help themselves. And it's all we do to

ensure that the sins of violence are addressed with both policies and practices that build a neighborhood safe for all.

And in our world, it's the work we are called to do to name the sins of systematic racism and economic injustice that keep people oppressed and hungry, and to become truth tellers to those who propagate falsehoods. It's the effort to address incivility and polarization by showing that reconciled people find common purpose that crosses over political and ideological boundaries and serves God's purposes in the world. It's the work of building what Martin Luther King Jr. called a "world house" – a commitment to fellowship and being at table with each other even when all we see is "the sin in it" and sinners all around – sinners just like us.

The great prophet of 20th century Christian realism, Reinhold Niebuhr, wrote in his *The Irony of American History* (1952) this passage that summarizes how we might live in the world as sinners already saved and called to do God's work of reconciliation: "Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime; therefore we are saved by hope. Nothing true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we are saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore, we are saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as from our own; therefore we are saved by the final form of love, which is forgiveness."

There is sin in it – and precisely for that reason, we believe that God is in it all – the God of hope and faith and love and forgiveness. What good and grace-filled news! Thanks be to God. Amen.

PRACTICE THIS

>>Place matters<<

I am teaching - for one last time before retirement (coming in June 2027) - a course called *Place Matters: Exploring Minneapolis and Chicago*, which I previously taught as part of Augsburg's Honors Program. Here is the description of the course. More to come in future issues of *Notes* about what we learned alongside our students about how place matters!

"Place Matters: Exploring Minneapolis and Chicago" is an interdisciplinary course focused on Minneapolis and Chicago as cities that have generated ideas and networks of activity that reflect the character of the particular geographical, cultural, economic and social place they inhabit. We will explore various legacies – education, neighborhoods, urban sociology, architecture, sports, community organizing, literature and film, and even improvisational theater – that are connected to Minneapolis and Chicago as places and that help students understand how place is linked to important aspects of our lives in the world.

It is a profound insight – at the heart of all education, we would argue – that demands that we pay attention to our place in the world. I find essayist and poet (and farmer) Wendell Berry's words in his prose-poem "Damage" particularly instructive when he writes: "No expert knows

everything about every place, not even everything about any place. If one's knowledge of one's whereabouts is insufficient, if one's judgment is unsound, then expert advice is of little use." Education, in other words, is not about taking someone else's word for it; it is about finding our own way into an understanding of our world, our whereabouts. And education is at its best when you are asking questions of all the wisdom of the world; when you are engaging science and common sense and expert knowledge from across the span of human history and experience in dialogue; when you are seeking to know and understand and live so that you might use your education to make your whereabouts safer and healthier and fairer and more just.

This is how we think about education here at Augsburg. Students come here not to be filled up with someone else's knowledge, but to ask their own questions, to test their own hypotheses, to create their own art and music, and to engage our neighborhood and world as they learn and serve.

This is what we will explore in our course on Minneapolis and Chicago – knowing your whereabouts, your place – finding there the ideas and networks of activity connected to place – and considering what difference it all makes to those who inhabit that place.

>>What we stand for<<

I offered these remarks at our annual Martin Luther King, Jr. Convocation in January. It was an opportunity to be clear - in the midst of much turmoil - what our university stands for.

"Good afternoon, Augsburg community — students, faculty, staff, alumni, neighbors, and friends.

Today we come together on Martin Luther King Jr. Day, a moment to reflect on the enduring legacy of Dr. King — on his vision of justice, his call to courageous action, and his unshakable belief that "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

This year, celebrating Dr. King's life and work takes on particular urgency here in the Twin Cities.

In recent weeks, our region has been the focus of one of the largest federal immigration enforcement operations in U.S. history, with up to 2,000 agents from Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Homeland Security Investigations, and other departments mobilized across Minneapolis–St. Paul. Federal authorities describe the operation as the largest ever and say it targets alleged immigration fraud and individuals with outstanding orders of removal. This federal presence has reverberated far beyond law-enforcement circles. We have seen protests grow into the tens of thousands as community members voice grief and outrage — particularly following the shooting death of Renée Nicole Good, a Minneapolis resident killed during an ICE enforcement action, which has become a rallying point for calls for accountability and justice.

Many in our own Augsburg community have felt the impact directly. Last December, federal immigration officers entered our campus and detained a student in a parking lot without a warrant, an action I publicly condemned as unlawful and inconsistent with our core values of dignity and due process.

These events raise profound questions about who is safe in our city and in our campus community — and what justice looks like in practice.

Dr. King taught that the arc of the moral universe bends toward justice only when people of conscience act. He understood that justice cannot be separated from human dignity — that policies and tactics that instill fear, erode trust, or divide communities must be confronted with moral clarity, compassion, and courage.

So today, I reaffirm Augsburg University's commitment to:

- **Standing for the dignity of every human being**

Our mission calls us to support the whole person — not just in words, but through policies and action that protect the rights and humanity of all who study, work, and live here.

- **Defending academic freedom and sanctuary for learning**

Our campuses must be spaces of inquiry, safety, and belonging. No student or scholar should feel unsafe seeking an education or walking across this quad because of where they were born, whom they love, or how they came to this country.

- **Advocating for justice grounded in law and human rights**

We believe in fairness, due process, and adherence to law — not only in laws that protect public safety but also in those that protect civil liberties and human rights. Justice without mercy is neither just nor merciful.

On this MLK Day, let us remember that Dr. King's dream was not only about racial equality — it was about extending full human dignity to every person. That means speaking for those whose voices are muted by fear. It means standing with neighbors whose rights and sense of safety have been shaken. And it means working together — across differences — to build a community that truly reflects our best values.

As I look out at this community, I see the courage, heart, and commitment that Dr. King called forth in all of us. May this day be not just a commemoration, but a renewal of our shared work for justice, peace, and beloved community.

Thank you.”

PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<

As I was preparing for the Place Matters course I describe above, I returned to several readings that powerfully illustrate urban life - in all of its facets. Among the books I find most compelling is Alex Kotlowitz's *There Are No Children Here: The Story of Two Boys Growing Up in the Other America* (Anchor Books, 1991).

I am a big fan of the poetry of Seamus Heaney, the Irish poet laureate, who died in 2013. Heaney's entire corpus has recently been published in *The Poems of Seamus Heaney*, edited by R. Lavan, B. O'Donoghue, and M. Hollis (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2025). It is a weighty tome full of wisdom!

>>A dream deferred<<

Langston Hughes was born on February 1 and is an important voice for all of us during the month of his birth, also now known as Black History Month.

Harlem

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

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>>Topics for upcoming issues<<

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

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