

NOTES FOR THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

Volume Twenty-Seven, Number Five (June, 2026)

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

NOTES FROM READERS

Greetings, friends. I have a countdown app on my phone that tells me that, as of June 30, I have 365 days until my retirement after 21 years as Augsburg's 10th President. And I have begun to experience the bittersweet emotions that inevitably come in such a transition. On the one hand, pride in what we have done together to make Augsburg stronger and even more mission-aligned. And, on the other hand, disappointed that I was not able to accomplish all that I set out to do. But as you faithful Notes readers know, I have long made the case that effective leaders must learn to "overlook" or let things go so as to keep your eye on what is most important. And so it shall be for me as I enter my final year at Augsburg, committed to a smooth and joyous transition to our next leader!

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 a wonderful new website created by my friends at Johnson, Grossnickle & Associates. Check it out at pribbenownotes.com. I am grateful to JGA for their many years of abiding support for our reflective practice.

REFLECT ON THIS

>>The main road<<

In May, I made my final trip as President to visit Augsburg's study away site in Windhoek, Namibia. It was a joyful trip, full of good time with our staff in the country and the opportunity to revisit many of the experiences our students have when there for a semester. I was reminded of a piece I wrote more than 15 years ago, after my first trip to Windhoek, a piece that still resonates after my recent visit.

"The sparkling lights of the city of Windhoek, Namibia were shining below as I looked out from my perch in an ultra-modern restaurant high above the city. All was well, it seemed, as I waited with my colleague, Orv Gingerich, head of Augsburg's international programs, for our dinner companions to arrive. We are in Windhoek visiting Augsburg's 16 year old Center for Global Education and Experience (CGEE) site, where US students come for semester-long programs focused on Namibia's post-colonial experience.

But the view from our perch high above the city, nestled in an obviously affluent subdivision of the burgeoning city, belied our experiences earlier in the day. We had witnessed the remnants of an apartheid system. Formerly separate cemeteries for the whites, colored and blacks. Housing that was clearly demarcated by tribal class. Primary and secondary schools stratified by social class. A sprawling tin village – the so-called "informal settlements" – in which tens of

thousands of Namibians lived in squalor, unable to find work after they arrived in the city and left to their own devices to survive without means. Health clinics with waiting rooms full of women seeking both pre-natal care and HIV tests. Non-governmental organizations struggling to serve the needs of indigenous people whose rights were neglected. The stark contrasts of our day were mind-bending.

Our dinner companions arrived – a labor activist and a teacher working to improve education for indigenous people – and as we described our day in Windhoek, one of them commented that he was grateful that we had witnessed these contrasts because too many outsiders came to Namibia and traveled only “the main road,” from which all seemed well. We had left that main road and experienced the real Namibia.

And so we had – just as the students who come to our CGEE site do each semester as they participate in a variety of intense experiences that open their eyes to the mind-bending and life-transforming dynamics of life in a developing country. Through extended home stays in both urban and rural areas, internships with organizations doing important social and educational work, classes that feature speakers who have firsthand experience of the tensions in Namibia’s life, and opportunities for significant interaction with Namibian people and culture, our students experience life off the main road in this remarkable country, just 22 years after its declared independence.

And when they return home to the US, we know that they carry with them knowledge and experience of this developing country and its good people that will shape the decisions they make about their own lives and what they might be called to do in the world. Some may return here to Africa, perhaps as medical workers or teachers. But most will not and, for them, we trust and know that their experiences off the main road in Namibia will help them understand their own privilege in an increasingly complex world, privilege that must be named and then put to responsible use in the search for equity and justice, both in their personal lives and in the systems they inhabit.

Off the main road in Namibia, I’m only beginning to understand how critical our work as a college in this place is to transforming the lives of students and contributing to a different vision of our common future as global citizens.”

>>Grateful for all that is<<

I wrote the following column for Augsburg’s on-line NOW magazine upon the occasion of the announcement of my retirement in 2027.

“The recent announcement of my retirement as president of Augsburg University in June 2027 has been the occasion to reflect on my deep gratitude for the privilege to serve this remarkable institution for the past 20 years—an experience marked not only by institutional milestones, but by the countless relationships, stories, and shared commitments that have shaped our common journey.

Augsburg has always been more than a university. It is a community where faith seeks understanding, where diversity is embraced as a gift, and where education is grounded in a profound sense of purpose. Over the years, I have witnessed our students’ courage and resilience, our faculty’s dedication to teaching and scholarship, and our staff’s unwavering commitment to hospitality and care. Together, we have made Augsburg a living expression of its mission.

We have navigated challenges that tested us—moments of uncertainty, societal upheaval, and the evolving landscape of higher education. And yet, again and again, this community has responded with creativity, compassion, and conviction. We have deepened our commitments to equity and inclusion, strengthened our academic programs, and expanded the ways we live out our calling in the city and the world.

What I will carry with me most are the moments that cannot be measured: conversations with students discovering their vocations, gatherings that celebrate our many cultures and identities, and the quiet acts of service that reveal who we are at our best. These are the signs of a community rooted in something enduring and hopeful.

As I prepare to step away from this role, I do so with great confidence in Augsburg's future. The challenges ahead are real, but so too are the opportunities—and this community is more than capable of meeting them with integrity and imagination. Augsburg's mission remains as vital as ever, and its people are its greatest strength.

Thank you for the trust you have placed in me, for the work we have shared, and for the ways you continue to live out Augsburg's values each day. It has been an honor to serve alongside you. I will leave this role after 21 years with a full heart, hopeful for all that lies ahead for Augsburg University.

PRACTICE THIS

>>Breakfast with Jesus: reflections on transitions<<

I have returned to the following homily time and again these past several months to share how our community might think about the upcoming leadership transition. Change happens - the opportunity and challenge is to live into the ways we have been changed...

[John 21: 1-14]

"Biblical commentators suggest that the 21st chapter of John's gospel, from which we have read this morning, was added to the original narrative. And as is always the case in such findings, the question is why. What was it that those who edited the gospel felt needed to be added to complete the story? What was going on in the community of those for whom John's gospel account was meaningful that required 25 additional verses?

For some of us, these are intriguing questions of Biblical and theological scholarship; for some of us, not so much so. I might suggest, though, that for all of us – situated here some 1900 years after the gospel was circulated – these additional verses are most relevant. In fact, I might be so bold as to say that chapter 21 is meant especially for you and me here at Augsburg, in this chapel, during this Easter season, near the end of our 143rd academic year.

Let's imagine ourselves in the place of the disciples in these days after: after the intense years of ministry across the countryside, after the triumphal entry to Jerusalem, after the Passover, after poignant and emotional final meals together, after betrayal and denials, after the cross, after an empty tomb. Now what do we do?

Well, I guess you do what you know how to do. Simon Peter says it plainly, "I am going fishing." I'm going back to the life I knew before I was called away. I'm going back to the familiar and mundane, as if these years with Jesus were simply a dream, ultimately a nightmare. I can go

back and earn a living and get on with things, and the others join in. But there are no fish to find – the familiar and mundane is empty and disappointing.

And then there he is on the lakeshore. A vague figure, who knows of their disappointment and emptiness. “You have no fish, have you?” he asks. “No,” they answer. “Cast your nets again and you will find some,” and so their nets are filled beyond measure (153 fish, we’re told a few verses later!) and they recognize him as Jesus their Lord.

And as they rush to greet him, filled once again with the joy and abundance they have known in their lives together, Jesus says simply “Come and have breakfast.” There they are, gathered around the campfire, breaking bread together and eating the fish he helped them to catch. There they are, afraid to ask how this was possible, afraid to break the spell of the moment – and yet they knew it was the Lord! He is Risen, He is Risen Indeed.

I would guess that all of us have had moments when we have this sense of living in the days after ... My spouse, Abigail, has worked over the years in the arts community and she talks about how the preparation for an art exhibit or performance and production leads you through a series of emotions that can leave you pretty dejected when the production is over. Post-production blues, she calls them. Others of us might feel that way about the end of our college years here at Augsburg – what do I do now? Others among us may be retiring, wondering what will offer meaning and direction in the days ahead. Perhaps your examples are less extreme, though still unsettling. A relationship ends, a job search falls apart, a family splits...what do we do in the days after?

Perhaps, like the disciples, it’s back to what is familiar, to what we’ve always done. Or maybe it’s coping with the disappointment and anxiety with a sense of fatalism – this is the best I can do and hope for. And perhaps, we too find our nets empty. The world defines success in ways we simply can’t live up to.

And then he is there, standing on the lakeshore – just as when he first called to us, “follow me” – sending words of encouragement our way, instructing us to cast our nets again. And all of a sudden, we recognize our Lord and he invites us to come to the table, to break the bread together, to lay at the altar our burdens and joys, our disappointments as well as the bounty and abundance of our nets overflowing. He is risen; He is risen indeed.

Here is the powerful Easter message in these days after... the message we have from John’s gospel that is so relevant to our 21st century lives of faith.

Yes, you must go back to your lives in the world. But now, your lives in the world have been transformed by the power of the resurrection. Now the calls you have received – your vocations – have a different meaning and trajectory. In your daily lives, God is alive and acting so that you might know and make real God’s will for the world. What the world counts as success has been set aside for all time. Now your lives serve the Risen Lord.

No, I have not left you alone. I am here with you in your daily lives. I know you may be disappointed and dejected and anxious and afraid. Remember how I called to you from the lakeshore. Remember how you recognized me in the breaking of bread. Remember how I invited you into community. Know that I am with you, offering my comfort and encouragement and guidance and love – even when you feel lost and alone.

Yes, all has changed...so follow me again and still. We can't deny all that happened. Healing and compassion, love for our neighbors. Triumphant entries, frightening times of betrayal and denial. Feet washed and bread broken. Government and religious pageants aimed at dousing God's love. Horrific and painful death. Three days and a stone rolled away. Resurrection. Reports of being together again, despite the doubters. That now is done. God loves you. You have been redeemed. But that is not the end...

I need you now to follow again and still, to be my living body on earth, to share the good news. Come and have breakfast with me, for our work together has just begun.

One of the central claims of an Augsburg education, grounded in helping you find vocational meaning or hear your call, is how the various experiences of your life – growing up in a particular family, in a particular place; belonging to a particular religious community (or not); having a certain group of friends; coming to a particular college, where you study in a particular way a particular set of topics; choosing a particular career path, and so forth – how all of these experiences are part of a narrative that has history, that has an “arc” that has been influenced and shaped by the inter-dynamics of relationships and institutions and decisions that are all part of your vocational story. What I believe we do at Augsburg is not to tell you what your vocation should be (though sometimes we all do need advice!), but to help you make sense of your vocational story, to find the coherence in the narrative, to see the significance of the various threads of your story as they weave a life for you in the world. To consider how you will live in the days after...because there will be many days after.

In this understanding of vocation, then, the Easter message about the days after becomes especially important because these are the days when we need to take responsibility for how our story continues to unfold, even when we are away from those advisors and teachers and friends who perhaps inspired us or motivated us or supported us down this path. As John's gospel concludes, God does not leave us alone in our vocational journeys in the meantime, Jesus is still inviting us to breakfast.

Wendell Berry, in his whimsical poem, “Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front”, offers us an insightful take on this message for life in the days after:

*Go with your love to the fields.
Lie down in the shade. Rest your head
in her lap. Swear allegiance
to what is highest in your thoughts.
As soon as the generals and the politicians
can predict the motions of your mind,
lose it. Leave it as a sign
to mark the false trail, the way
you didn't go. Be like the fox
who makes more tracks necessary,
some in the wrong direction.
Practice resurrection.*

Practice resurrection. Come and have breakfast. Thanks be to God. Amen.

PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<

Augsburg is featured in Byron P. White's recent book, *The Community-Centric Path to Rebuilding Trust in Higher Education* (Routledge, 2026). Byron's vision for higher education is compelling and aligns with many of the initiatives we have launched here at Augsburg.

>>A Small Theology<<

Here comes Wendell Berry again, this time with a brief word about the Divine and how humans fail to understand...

A Small Theology

"With God all things are possible" –
that's the beginning and the end
of theology. If all things are possible,
nothing is impossible.
Why do the godly then
keep slinging out their nooses?

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>>Topics for upcoming issues<<

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

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