

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. I hope that you have found time for rest and renewal in these past several months. As you recall, I am beginning my final year as Augsburg's 10th president, and as I write this issue of Notes, members of the class of 2030 are arriving on campus, excited (and nervous) to begin their educational journeys. I am relishing these final times of greeting new students and faculty members, and I am mindful of how much has changed for the higher education community in these past two decades - changes that few of us could have imagined. For now, I face this academic year with a deep sense of gratitude and pride for all that we have accomplished together, even as I am mindful of the responsibility to continue to advocate for the critical role of our colleges and universities in democracy.

Given my upcoming retirement, I have decided that this will be the final issue of my *Notes for the Reflective Practitioner*. I began these bi-monthly reflections 27 years ago when my good spouse, Abigail, suggested that I had a good bit to say about philanthropy, higher education, and life together, and that I might want to share my thoughts with colleagues who would value these reflections in their own work and lives. It has been a singular joy over these many years to build an on-line community of reflective practitioners, and occasionally to meet a subscriber who was heretofore a stranger. Thank you all for your friendship and leadership across time and space.

The good news is that past issues of Notes (dating back about 10 years) are available on-line at a wonderful new website created by my friends at Johnson, Grossnickle & Associates. Check it out at pribbenownotes.com. I also plan to post occasional pieces to the website during the years ahead and will send a note when new material is available. I am grateful to JGA for their many years of abiding support for our reflective practice.

REFLECT ON THIS

>>An educator-president<<

I am excited that my latest book entitled *Wrestling with Angels: Reflections on Education, Faith, and Leadership* will be published next month by Myers Press. Faithful readers of these Notes will find many familiar essays and homilies in the book, which is framed by the Biblical story of Jacob wrestling with the angel. The opening word in the book is a nod to how I have understood my vocation in higher education. Here is an excerpt...

"After almost 25 years as a university president (more than four times the current average tenure for such roles!), I have plenty of experience and insights related to the various roles a

president plays: chief executive officer, fundraiser, spokesperson, public advocate, and so on. When I ask students what they think my job is, they invariably name these roles. What they don't often name is what I think my main job is, and the reason I do the job at all—that is, an educator.

I am an educator-president. Throughout my professional career, I have sought, both privately and publicly, to articulate what that means to me. In the essays that comprise this volume, I seek to illustrate how I have articulated this role to various audiences, hoping to move beyond the transactional aspects of the job (as important as they are to the well-being of my institution) to the critical role of helping to form and transform the lives of students through their educational journeys.

I have many people to thank for the remarkable opportunities I have had to serve as an educator-president. The good folks at Rockford University (formerly Rockford College), where I served my first presidency, showed an immense amount of grace for a relatively naïve and brash young person just finding his way. The remarkable community at Augsburg University, where I have served as president for more than 20 years, has been my partner in advancing a vision of higher education that embraces our roles in a healthy democracy. The privilege has been all mine.

As for the logic and substance of the essays that follow, I owe a debt of gratitude to my graduate school mentor, the late Martin E. Marty, who taught me what it means to be a public intellectual and who inspired me to forge healthy pluralistic communities. It was in the hallowed halls of the University of Chicago Divinity School where I first shared a version of these essays, in an address offered on the occasion of being named Alumnus of the Year in 2025....”

>>The Pribbenow Seminar<<

As I prepare to retire, many good folks have asked me what they can support at Augsburg in honor of my leadership. I reflected long and hard on the many needs we have, but ultimately decided that what I would like is for folks to help endow a course - a seminar - that will reflect my commitments to our students, to experiential education, and to the values of place. Thus, “The Pribbenow Seminar on Place Matters” is now a thing and my hope is that it will continue long into Augsburg’s future. Here is the seminar description...

The Pribbenow Seminar on Place Matters

During the Spring 2026 semester, Dr. Ashley Baber, Assistant Professor of Sociology and Urban Studies, and President Paul Pribbenow taught a class titled “Place Matters: Exploring Minneapolis and Chicago.” The course built on previous iterations taught by President Pribbenow and Augsburg faculty. This seminar is centered on an engaged learning model that combines classroom instruction, visits with local leaders and organizations with a trip to Chicago. In alignment with the mission of Augsburg University, this course works to encourage students to think critically about the importance of place, become informed on the issues that shape our lived experiences and develop innovative ideas to work with our communities to make better places.

This endowed course, now titled “The Pribbenow Seminar on Place Matters”, will be part of President Pribbenow’s legacy at Augsburg University by prioritizing community connections, creative ideas and comparing ways to improve our communities and neighborhoods. The

course will be offered every other year during the Spring semester beginning in Spring 2028. Dr. Baber will serve as the instructor for the course given her expertise in urban studies. The class will cover an array of topics such as neighborhood formation, education and the arts. Faculty from across Augsburg University, community leaders and other guest speakers will be invited to introduce students to the various dynamics that shape the places we live and experience. This course will provide financial support for a required trip to Chicago led by Dr. Baber. The trip will include visits with community organizations, an architectural tour, and neighborhood exploration. This application-based course will be open to students across Augsburg University with the intention of bringing together multiple disciplinary backgrounds and perspectives.

Course Overview: “The Pribbenow Seminar on Place Matters” is an interdisciplinary course focused on Minneapolis, Chicago, and other urban areas 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 urban areas, such as Minneapolis and Chicago, as places 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. Essayist and poet (and farmer) Wendell Berry’s words in his prose-poem “Damage” are 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 the course – 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.

PRACTICE THIS

>>No Matter Who<<

One of my key messages as I conclude my time at Augsburg is how our Lutheran faith and intellectual tradition are the foundation upon which we exist, even as we have become a model for a diverse and inclusive community. A key Lutheran theological concept is the call to serve our neighbor, which is at the heart of the academic and outreach mission of Augsburg. I preached the following homily in 2017, as the world celebrated the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, and I have returned to it many times to remind folks where we come from...

No Matter Who

Isaiah 58: 6-8

*Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the straps of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?
Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly;
your vindicator^{al} shall go before you;
the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.*

*No matter who, no matter who, no matter who, no matter who
No matter who will stumble and fall, we will lift them up...*

[Bret Hesla, "No Matter Who"]

Earlier this summer, I had the privilege to accompany 30-some Augsburg faculty and staff on a tour of the Protestant Reformation and Luther sites in Germany – a special trip to celebrate the legacy of the Lutheran Reformation in its 500th year and to explore the continuing relevance of that legacy to our faithful work in the 21st century. One moment stands out for me with special meaning and power.

We stood on the balcony of the Francke Foundations building in Halle, looking out upon a large campus of buildings that once served as orphanages, schools, libraries, a publishing house and social welfare agencies. Established in 1695 by August Hermann Francke, a pastor and Lutheran theologian at the university in Halle, the foundations were a response by Francke and his colleagues to the ways in which Lutheranism in the 150 years after Luther's death had more and more developed a dogmatic approach to the faith. In response, Francke and his fellow so-called Lutheran Pietists sought to focus on the personal relationship the faithful had with God – the justification by faith alone that Luther had preached – which then freed them to meet the needs of their neighbors in ways that are very much part of our Lutheran faith tradition today – in schools, colleges and universities, hospitals, social service agencies, and so much more.

As I stood on that balcony, I was reminded of what my teacher Martin Marty has said are the distinctive marks of the Lutheran Christian tradition – "acts of mercy," he said. Acts of mercy. We believe we are called to serve our neighbor – no matter who.

Our colleague Marty Stortz reminds us that Luther's focus on what he called the "priesthood of all believers" has concrete implications for our lives of faith in the world. The work of serving those in need, once the exclusive domain of the clergy and the religious (priests and monks and nuns), now belongs to all of us. We now are called to loose the bonds of injustice, to let the oppressed go free, to share our bread, to house the homeless, to cover the naked – as the prophet proclaims, this is the fast we must choose. To walk alongside our immigrant neighbors,

to undo the sins of white privilege and stand up for our fellow citizens, to care for the earth and all God's creatures, to welcome the stranger, to love our enemies – this is the work we are called to do.

As I stand here in this sacred space, able and privileged to peer beyond these walls to the city streets that surround us, I pray that acts of mercy may abide as marks of our faithful lives together in this place. I pray that the wideness of God's mercy may propel us to ever more courage and resolve and imagination as we do God's work with God's good creation – no matter who..

As the faithful at Halle understood, the work of the priesthood of all believers – the work we are called to do – is not simply a collection of acts of kindness and charity. Indeed our Lutheran Christian tradition compels us to think and act critically in addressing the root causes of the social ills that make our service to neighbors necessary. In other words, charity is not enough, service is not enough, hospitality is not enough.

In the midst of the flurry of new books and articles about Luther and the Protestant Reformation published in this anniversary year (several of which have been written by our own distinguished colleagues in the Religion department), I am especially intrigued by *The Forgotten Luther: Reclaiming the Social-Economic Dimension of the Reformation*, edited by Carter Lindberg and Paul Wee, which includes several provocative essays drawing our attention to the ways in which Luther and his colleagues offer us a roadmap to the work of reconciliation, restoration and justice in the world today.

In particular, Carter Lindberg's essay "Luther and the Common Chest" shows how Luther and his colleagues fought against an ideology that "dresses up greed," that privileges the building up of personal profit at the expense of the common good, the needs and aspirations of all. As Lindberg states, "the biblical mandate to feed the poor is non-controversial. What is controversial is why people are poor and hungry." Luther focused on analyzing the causes of poverty and promoting government policies that moved beyond remedial philanthropy and charity to address the social and political roots of injustice and need.

The most concrete of these public policies and practices was the so-called Common Chest, established in Wittenberg in 1522, and a precursor of the social welfare systems we still recognize today. Funds intended to meet the needs of the neighbor were collected from various sources and held in common in an actual chest, overseen by wise stewards who would distribute the funds based on need – some were used for medical care, others to educate young children, still others as loans to help artisans establish businesses – a professional and institutional approach to providing health care, social services, education and business development that would build up the community – the precursors to the institutions we know today as expressions of our Lutheran faith – hospitals and universities and immigration agencies and social service providers – faith active in love for the neighbor, no matter who.

As we gather here today – grounded in the belief that we have been freed through faith to serve our neighbor, no matter who, may we find abiding inspiration from St. Francis of Assisi, whose feast day we celebrate today...

Prayer of Saint Francis of Assisi

Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace!

That where there is hatred, I may bring love.
That where there is wrong, I may bring the spirit of forgiveness.
That where there is discord, I may bring harmony.
That where there is error, I may bring truth.
That where there is doubt, I may bring faith.
That where there is despair, I may bring hope.
That where there are shadows, I may bring light.
That where there is sadness, I may bring joy.
Lord, grant that I may seek rather to comfort, than to be comforted.
To understand, than to be understood.
To love, than to be loved.
For it is by self-forgetting that one finds.
It is by forgiving that one is forgiven.
It is by dying that one awakens to Eternal Life.

May we continue to be instruments of peace – may hope and history rhyme in our work together as God's faithful people – may justice rise up in our acts of mercy and our plumbing the root causes of social ills – may the needs and aspirations of our neighbors, no matter who, be the inspiration for our continued proclamation of the wideness of God's mercy. Thanks be to God. Amen.

PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<

I have been culling through my library and finding treasures long forgotten. All of my Wendell Berry and Parker Palmer collections, my Bibles and catechisms and hymnals, my Jane Addams (of course), and so much more. What fun!

But there also continue to be new additions. Right now, I'm reading *Collaborative Thinking: How to Build and Sustain College Consortia* (John Hopkins University Press, 2025), by Sarah K.A. Pfatteicher, who leads the Five Colleges Consortium in Massachusetts. It is a helpful guide for our shared services work.

And I am enjoying Beverly Gage's *This Land is Your Land: A Road Trip through U.S. History* (Simon & Schuster, 2026), which includes notes on some of my favorite people and places.

>>Gratitude<<

And so I close with gratitude in the lovely words of the poet, e.e. Cummings...

*i thank You God for most this amazing
day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes*

*(i who have died am alive again today,
and this is the sun's birthday; this is the birth
day of life and of love and wings: and of the gay
great happening illimitably earth)*

*how should tasting touching hearing seeing
breathing any—lifted from the no
of all nothing—human merely being
doubt unimaginable You?*

*(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)*

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