

NOTES FOR THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

Volume Twenty-Seven, Number Four (April, 2026)

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

NOTES FROM READERS

Spring greetings, friends. We're in the midst of the busy academic year-end activities here at Augsburg - always a meaningful time of celebration of our students. We also have just launched the search for my successor as Augsburg's 11th president, to begin in the summer of 2027. I am feeling quite good about the process and about the opportunity to close my 21 years here thoughtfully. More to come about what's next! You can read the announcement of my pending retirement [here](#).

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

>>Learning to kneel<<

I preached this homily in the Augsburg University Chapel on Maundy Thursday.

“Learning to Kneel”

John 13: 1-17

Today, on this Maundy Thursday, we are drawn into one of the most intimate and disorienting moments in the Gospel: Jesus kneeling on the floor, taking a towel, and washing the feet of his disciples.

It is a simple act. Quiet. Almost ordinary. And yet, it overturns everything.

At Augsburg University, we are no strangers to the language of vocation, neighbor love, and service. These words are woven into classrooms, residence halls, athletic teams, and community partnerships across this campus.

But on this day, Jesus presses us deeper.

Because what he does is not just “service” as we often understand it—not a project, not a requirement, not even a well-organized day of volunteering.

He kneels.

And in doing so, he redefines what it means to lead, to love, and to belong.

We have to remember what foot-washing meant in his time. It was the task of a servant—the lowest servant. It was physical, intimate, and, frankly, uncomfortable.

And Jesus chooses to do it on the night before everything falls apart. On the night before betrayal. On the night before the cross. He does not assert authority. He does not defend himself. He kneels.

Peter resists, as many of us would. “You will never wash my feet.”

Because this is not how power works. It’s not how success works. It’s not how we’ve been taught to navigate the world—even here, where we talk so often about service.

If we’re honest, many of us—students, faculty, staff—are much more comfortable achieving and giving than receiving. Much more comfortable helping than being helped. We pride ourselves on resilience, independence, making it through.

But Jesus says, “Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.” In other words, this is not optional. This is the heart of the matter.

So today, before we rush to the call to serve, we have to pause with something harder:

Can we receive this?

Can all of us—so capable, so committed, so often carrying so much—allow ourselves to be served?

To be seen in the dust and weariness of late nights, financial stress, family responsibilities, questions about the future, the quiet loneliness that can settle in even in a busy place?

Can we let Christ draw near—not to evaluate us, not to measure us, but simply to love us? Because that is what this moment reveals about God.

God is the one who kneels. God is the one who comes close—close enough to touch the places we would rather hide. Close enough to say: you belong, even here.

And then, having done this, Jesus turns to his disciples—and to us—and says: “You also ought to wash one another’s feet.”

And suddenly, this is no longer just about a moment in an upper room long ago.

It is about life on this campus.

It might look like a student who notices the classmate who hasn’t spoken all semester—and makes space for their voice.

It might look like choosing patience over judgment in a group project that isn't going well.

It might look like showing up for a teammate, a roommate, a colleague—not because it's convenient, but because it's needed.

It might look like crossing the boundaries that can so easily divide us—race, culture, language, politics—and choosing to listen, to learn, to honor the dignity of another.

It might look like the quiet, unseen acts that never make it onto a résumé—but change someone's life.

And here is the part we cannot miss: Jesus washes the feet of people who will fail him.

Who will misunderstand him.

Who will abandon him.

Who will deny him.

He even washes the feet of the one who will betray him.

Which means that the call to love—right here at Augsburg—is not limited to those who are easy to love.

It extends to the difficult roommate.

The frustrating classmate.

The person who sees the world very differently than you do.

It extends to all of us.

This is not easy. In fact, it may be one of the hardest things we are asked to do. But it is also where the deepest transformation happens.

Because a community shaped by this kind of love—this kneeling, towel-in-hand love—becomes something different.

It becomes a place where people are not just known for what they achieve, but for how they care.

A place where dignity is not earned, but honored.

A place where the presence of Christ is not just proclaimed, but embodied.

So today, we stand—or perhaps we kneel—at the intersection of grace and calling.

We are washed. And we are sent to wash.

We are loved. And we are called to love in the same way.

And so we leave with this question:

Where are you being invited to kneel?

Not someday. Not in theory. But this week.

In your classes.
In your residence halls.
In your work.
In your relationships.

Whose feet—literal or figurative—are you being asked to wash?

Because in the end, Maundy Thursday is not just about what Jesus did.

It is about who we are becoming.

A people shaped by humility. A community grounded in love. A university that knows how to kneel.

May we have the courage to receive that love.

And may we have the grace to share it. Amen.

>>Called for a moment such as this<<

My brother Dean was inaugurated as the 17th President of Millikin University in Decatur, Illinois earlier this spring, and I had the rare privilege to present him during the ceremony. Here are my remarks...

CALLED FOR A MOMENT SUCH AS THIS

Reflections upon the occasion of the inauguration of Dean A. Pribbenow as the 17th President of Millikin University

April 10, 2026

Good afternoon. It is an immense pleasure to be with you on this auspicious occasion in the life of Millikin University. And it is a privilege to offer these reflections on the leader you have chosen to be your partner in the mission-based work of Millikin in the years ahead - that leader, my brother, Dean, comes before you today, inviting you all to embrace him and Kris, and to share in all that is to come in the future of Forever Blue, its spirit, tradition, and promise. And I am here to testify that Dean is prepared and equipped to lead you well!

Now, you've probably noticed some obvious commonalities between Dean and me. We have this sometimes hard to pronounce last name (just say it fast). We love our bow ties (I hope you appreciate that I located my best blue tie for this occasion). And we both have chosen to follow our calls to higher education leadership (Dean in his first year, me in my 25th). But these commonalities don't begin to tell the story of what truly defines our shared commitments to the role of colleges and universities in our world.

Allow me to share what I believe most authentically describes the skills, attitudes, virtues, and values that your new President brings to the Millikin community in this, its 125th anniversary year.

Called

My title for these reflections, “Called for a moment such as this” points to three intersecting themes to what Dean Pribbenow cares about and lives out in his life.

First, what it means to be called. I am the oldest of six children of Pastor Jerry and Elsie Pribbenow. Mom passed away almost 25 years ago, but Dad, now 93 years old, continues to inspire this large family of children, in-laws, grandchildren, great grandchildren, and more. We are all what are called “cradle Lutherans,” born, baptized, raised, and confirmed in a faith tradition that has shaped our lives.

Now, as an aside, Dean was the youngest child for several years - and he enjoyed that status as the baby of the family - that is, until Mom and Dad announced that there were more on the way, the twins, Beth and Brad, born when Dean was maybe seven years old. I’m not sure he has ever come to terms with that loss of status, but that is a story (actually, lots of stories!) for another time.

One of the central tenets of the faith tradition in which we were raised is this idea of “vocation” or calling, the belief that we are called into roles in the world that have divine meaning. For Dean, those roles are many - he is husband, son, sibling, and father; he is neighbor and citizen; he is university leader and public intellectual. And in all of these roles, Dean embraces the meaning and purpose he is called to embody as he negotiates his way in the world. As he joins the Millikin community, you can count on the fact that Dean will pursue his calling with integrity and honesty because he believes deeply that his calling is more than a job or a profession, it is a way of life, an ethic of care and justice, a commitment to authenticity and wholeness.

This gift of vocation from our faith tradition also points to other important aspects of that tradition that you will witness in Dean’s life and leadership. You will experience Dean’s deep humility, his openness to listening and learning from everyone he encounters, his willingness to be wrong and to ask for forgiveness. You will see Dean’s ability to navigate through paradoxical circumstances with courage and vision, reminding folks that either-or thinking is futile, and that both-and is the best way forward. You will hear about abundance when the world claims scarcity, because Dean understands that abundance is a choice and a practice. And you will see evidence of the most compelling gift of our tradition for leaders; that is, *Semper reformanda*, the belief that we are called to loving reform and innovation in response to the needs of the world.

Though Dean likely will not quote the theology behind these traits - that role was left to his brothers, Brad and me - I know you will experience in his leadership these commitments grounded in his call to serve as your 17th president..

For a moment

Dean Pribbenow is called for this moment in the life of Millikin University and the wider Decatur community. One of the important lessons I have learned in my many years as a President is that our institutions have remarkably rich *and* complex histories; they have futures full of promise *and* challenges; and then we have these moments, these particular times and contexts into which we are called to lead

As the 17th President of Millikin, Dean inherits all that has come before him. And there are many in this community - especially faculty, staff, alumni, and friends - who will be able to share with him what that history means for today, for this moment. Dean also comes as a visionary to help you imagine what that future holds for Millikin. And there are many here - especially students - who will point to what the world demands of this university, and who will join in the good, but also hard, work of dreaming a future.

But today, we lift up the joy of Dean assuming his role as steward of this moment, of his taking on the immense responsibility of caring for other peoples' stuff - the traditional role of a steward - of caring for people and places and values that are not his to own or control, but to embrace and shepherd, and dare I say, to love.

And Dean does love you all - he wouldn't be here if that wasn't the case - but his stewardship will also need to challenge and inspire you to embrace your past without nostalgia and to imagine your future with clear eyes and hearts. He will guide you in the important labors of love that involve appreciative inquiry, critical reflection, reconciliation with each other and your past, and courageous, perhaps even bold and audacious, actions to secure your future as a university.

Such as this

Dean Pribbenow is called for a moment *such as this*. And, as you all know, this is quite the moment for our colleges and universities, and Millikin is not immune from the many pressures and obstacles that threaten to undermine our mission and purpose in our communities and democracy.

I like to begin with some Indigo Girls to make my point...

Closer to fine

*And I went to see the doctor of philosophy
With a poster of Rasputin and a beard down to his knee
He never did marry or see a B-Grade movie
He graded my performance, he said he could see through me*

*I spent four years prostrate to the higher mind
Got my paper and I was free*

Written by Amy Elizabeth Ray, Emily Ann Saliers • Copyright © EMI Music Publishing, Universal Music Publishing Group

“He graded my performance, he said he could see through me. I spent four years prostrate to the higher mind. Got my paper and I was free.”

This hierarchical and transactional depiction of education informs much of how colleges and universities are perceived by the American public today – disengaged, elitist, not open to new or alternative ideas, something to be escaped – not to mention expensive, unproductive, oblivious to its own failings, and increasingly seen as irrelevant.

Across our country, there are many who are promoting a vision of higher education that is using these perceptions to call into question the roles of colleges and universities in our democracy, but, as we all know, on our campus and on campuses across the country, in our neighborhoods, and wherever our alumni live and work, we see just the opposite. We see students who view education as a gift that carries with it a responsibility to give back. We see faculty and staff committed to our vision that students receive a three-dimensional education—an education that equips them to make a living, make a life, and build community. We see alumni and neighbors who care about each other and the world, and who are working each and every day to support a just and inclusive democracy.

For those of us who believe in the public purposes of higher education, we live in this tension between negative perceptions of our worth and the reality of what we do everyday on the ground to support social mobility, economic well-being, and a robust common life - just the sort of work that Millikin University has pursued over its 125-year history. In the context of that tension, I believe that there is a moral claim on those of us who lead colleges and universities, a claim that calls us to articulate a vision of education that challenges the prevailing narrative and makes the case for our roles in educating citizens for a pluralistic democracy.

I know that brother Dean embraces this moral claim in his work as a university leader and is both prepared and committed to being an advocate for Millikin’s mission and community as he shares stories - stories grounded in the life of this university - that offer all with ears to hear and hearts to care the evidence of compelling impact, of joy-filled life together for the good of the world.

Dean Pribbenow is called for a moment such as this... and I could not be more proud of him and more pleased for the Millikin community, that he has accepted this call with a deep sense of gratitude and belief in the promise of this remarkable university.

Blessings to you all on the journey ahead!

PRACTICE THIS

>>Teaching an old dog new tricks: What I learned this semester about teaching<<

I wrote the following piece anonymously for an online column about presidential perspectives. It was a fun semester with a great group of students, an impressive colleague, and lots of eye-opening lessons for this old dog...

As a long-time university president, I don't get many opportunities to be in the classroom with undergraduate students, but when the occasion presents itself, I am "all in" as an opportunity to be reminded of why we do what we do.

I am teaching this semester with a colleague and I am finding the experience to be meaningful and joy-filled.

As I return to the classroom, however, I have in the back of mind the many exhortations from faculty members about how today's students aren't ready for college, they can't (or won't) do the work, they're needy and disinterested, they make teaching a drag instead of the joyful profession we recall.

Let's put aside nostalgia and take at the face value what our faculty are experiencing in the classroom - and then let's explore what we are called to do as educators when the lived experiences of our students collide with our own notions of what counts for academic success.

Now, I will admit that I am an educator of a certain age who was formed by traditional pedagogical methods, but I am experiencing in the classroom this semester what it means to teach the students who are in front of us - and it is driven by my much younger colleague who helps me understand two critically important aspects of teaching and learning for this generation.

Each week, I come into the classroom and my colleague has put on the sound system some piece of contemporary music that I don't recognize. Last week, it was Chance the Rapper, whose Chicago-based experiences inform his (often profane!) lyrics, but tell a compelling story of life in the city for those marginalized and victimized. As the students explored the story behind those lyrics, they came forward with insights and nuances that stretched my understanding.

This is pedagogy that adapts to the learner and that refuses to impose methods that stifle creativity and the voices that matter, the voices of students. Combined with innovative experiential learning opportunities, co-creation of the course curriculum, and paying attention to what keeps students engaged, our course is showing me what our students deserve in their college experience, not as an entitlement, but as a gift that invites them into the wonder of learning for the moment we find ourselves in.

And that serves as a foundation for the second aspect of teaching and learning for this generation: how do we honor what our students bring to the classroom from their own lived experiences that reflects excellences beyond our traditional Western values and attitudes? I believe our students are teaching me the value of what might be called “democratic excellences.”

In a discussion of climate justice, the Native student shares ways of caring for creation that don't always pop up in the literature. In a discussion of architecture, a formerly unhoused student describes the brutalist features of urban architecture that are meant to exclude rather than offer sanctuary. In a session on immigration, a refugee student provides a compelling alternative narrative of our country's broken immigration system. The challenge for those of us who teach this generation is to embrace these forms of wisdom, these democratic excellences, that make our teaching and learning richer and more authentic.

Adaptive pedagogy and democratic excellences - lessons even an educator of a certain age can learn - and lessons that all of us must embrace if we hope to meet the needs and aspirations of our students today. I give thanks everyday for my “hip” colleague (as the students describe her) who is showing me a promising way forward.

PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<

I'm actually trying to deaccession books as I prepare for retirement. That said, I do have a few relatively slight volumes to share:

How Books Can Save Democracy, by Michael Fischer (Trinity University Press, 2026)

Against Breaking: On the Power of Poetry, by Ada Limón (Scribner, 2026)

Dreaming Lost Bodies Back, by Augsburg's own Neajeeba Syeed (Cascade Books, 2026)

>>Sometimes<<

Apropos the season, here are thoughts from Sheenagh Pugh that express our fondest hopes for our graduates, about to take on the world...

“Sometimes”

Sometimes things don't go, after all,
from bad to worse. Some years, muscadel
faces down frost; green thrives; the crops don't fail,
sometimes a man aims high, and all goes well.

A people sometimes will step back from war;
elect an honest man; decide they care
enough, that they can't leave some stranger poor.
Some men become what they were born for.

Sometimes our best efforts do not go
amiss; sometimes we do as we meant to.
The sun will sometimes melt a field of sorrow
that seemed hard frozen: may it happen for you.

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>>Topics for upcoming issues<<

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

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