

NOTES FOR THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

Volume Ten, Number Three (February 2009)

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

NOTES FROM READERS

>>What you think<<

Happy winter from snowy Minneapolis (we closed the college early due to weather last week!) I'm a bit tardy with this issue because I've been out and about meeting with alumni and friends – all around the country – work that I tell people seems more like pastoral care than fundraising! But it is important work, I believe, because people need to hear stories about achievement and service and aspiration, stories that point all of us beyond the moments of our anxiety and struggles to the future when we will find some calm and stability, some genuine opportunities and glimpses of grace. I give thanks these days for the gifts of philanthropic work which allow me to be with friends and colleagues who need to be heard even as they are willing to listen...

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 (check out the fine new website!). The website version of Notes also includes helpful hyperlinks to sources for purchasing or subscribing to the various publications mentioned in Notes. I thank my friends at Johnson, Grossnickle & Associates for their many years of abiding support for our reflective practice.

REFLECT ON THIS

>>Greeting this new year<<

I offered this homily in our chapel during the first week of the new term – a time when our country was about to inaugurate a new president even as we dealt with growing economic challenges. I think my thoughts reflect my sense of the leadership challenges we all face in times such as these.

[Scripture readings: Ephesians 2: 1-10 and Mark 1: 40-45]

"I was struck this New Year's – more than I remember in my 52 years – of the blunt proclamation that resonated in press reports and beyond as the new year turned that it was good riddance to 2008 and happy days ahead in 2009. This was not your normal "whew", we made it – instead, it was a deep longing to cross the arbitrary dateline of January 1 and into a new year full of hope and promise – despite the obvious evidence that what we didn't like about 2008 – wars around the world, economic disasters, a real sense of anxiety and fear about our personal and social lives – were still very much a reality in 2009.

Now, I will admit to sharing a bit in this act of delusion. There were parts of our life here at Augsburg this past fall that I would be happy to put behind me – the tragic deaths of three students, the implications of the economic situation for our budgets and fundraising, some of the less than civil behavior that surrounded elections, and the general unease we all felt as we witnessed tumultuous times in our world. But I am quickly jolted back to reality – even in a new year – by the facts of violence, of economic turmoil, of partisan politics, of genuine fear – that continue to rear their ugly heads even here in our college community.

My real concern, though, is not with the facts and reality of the human condition, whether in 2008 or two weeks later in 2009. Rather I want to explore what it is about our sense of responsibility (or lack thereof) for that reality that allows us to believe – however delusionally – that crossing into a new year has even the potential to mean that all will be well. I want to consider what it means to greet this new year as people of faith and responsibility.

Our reading from Paul's letter to the Ephesians offers us a pretty clear picture of the context in which faithful people must face our responsibility in the world. "You were dead through trespasses and sins, in which you once lived, following the course of the world, following the ruler of the power of the air, that spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient," Paul writes, indicting all of us for the ways in which we are complicit in the state of the world and the human condition. Economies and governments and countries and colleges are not disconnected, depersonalized entities. They are not someone else's problem. They are us – each of us, individually and corporately. They bear the mark of what Paul calls the passions of the flesh, our natural inclinations to want more than we need, to take what we want from others, to pursue violence instead of peace, to think it is all right to lie and cheat and steal to get ahead, to use up the earth's resources without considering future generations – the passions of the flesh that lie behind crippled economies, gigantic corporate scandals, senseless murders and wars, a fractured world.

As people of faith, then, what is the responsible and faithful way to enter a new year? I would suggest that we must greet the new year liturgically, if you will, at worship – as we do each day here in our chapel. Our fitting response to the new year is to confess our sins, ask God's gracious forgiveness, and then offer our hearts and minds and hands in service to God's work in the world. We must admit our own complicity in all that we didn't much like about the past, celebrating with the Apostle Paul the essential promise of salvation by God's grace through faith, and then proclaiming with Paul, "For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life." God's promise that calls us to our faithful way of life.

God did not intend for God's people to live this way – to suffer from economic downturns, to kill each other, to cheat and steal, to misuse the gifts of creation – and yet here we are, mired in the darkness and violence of our own making. Can we find a way, like the leper in our gospel lesson for this morning, to kneel before our God with all of our dis-ease and unease, and confess, "If you choose (Jesus), you can make me clean"? Do we believe even more so that we will hear these gracious words in reply from the Great Healer, "I do choose. Be made clean!"?

I remember when growing up that my family and I often spent New Year's Eve at church, where my minister dad organized a "Watch Night" gathering for the community to come together and welcome the New Year. I hadn't really thought much about these events until

reading in the newspapers on New Year's Day reports of the Watch Night services at various churches across the country this year. Intrigued, I did a bit more research, and learned that the first Watch Nights were organized by Moravians in Eastern Europe and then continued by Methodists in England in the 17th century. The services were primarily focused on renewing the covenant between God and God's people at the beginning of a new year. These services were adopted by many African-American churches in the United States when the Emancipation Proclamation took effect on January 1, 1863 – the Watch Night on New Year's Eve marked the vigil of freedom for slaves. The reason the Watch Night services got so much attention this year is because many of the African-American churches were marking Barack Obama's election as an extension of the emancipation of all God's people, his election a symbol of freedom for all.

The power of the liturgies for these Watch Night services – no matter the tradition out of which they arose – is a reminder to all of us of how we might cross responsibly and faithfully into the new year. They begin where we all must begin – confessing our sins – one particular service begins this way: “O God, distant yet near, we gather as witnesses to your promises that if we seek you with all our hearts, we will find you...Hear the confessions of our mouths and the yearnings of our hearts. Help us change the narrowness of our vision and the pettiness of our living.” The service proceeds with testimony and the gospel promise of forgiveness and renewal. And it concludes with this powerful proclamation as the new year begins: “God has done a good and new thing! Our mission is to the world. Let us go forth boldly to proclaim the good news that is Jesus Christ. Christ has died, Christ is risen. Christ will come again. Amen and Amen.”

I find this liturgical form for greeting the new year even more powerful because of what I have learned from the work of Jonathan Sacks, chief rabbi of London, who argues that our ethics must always be linked to our devotion. What and how we worship, he says, defines how we live our lives. Similarly, Marty Haugen, whose hymn we sang to begin our chapel this morning, reminded me in a recent conversation of the inextricable links between what we sing in our liturgy – for example, all are welcome – and the practices and values of our lives in the world – hospitality, welcoming the stranger, openness to the rich diversity of God's world.

I'm thinking again about the leper in our gospel – unclean, kneeling before his redeemer, confessing his faith that Jesus can heal him. I'm celebrating the good news of Jesus' response – “I do choose – choose you, choose healing, choose life.” And then I'm wondering about Jesus' admonition to the leper now healed not to share this news with anyone – that, we're told by the commentators, is part of Mark's theological purposes in this story. But, of course, nothing will keep the newly healed from proclaiming and spreading the good news!

Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again. That is the way to greet each new day, Martin Luther instructed us, perhaps even more so a way to greet the new year, to greet this new year. God's responsible and faithful people know that because we have already been saved from our sins, the sin of the world, we are freed and called to do God's work in the world – to be God's people of peace and reconciliation and justice and love and hope in a world that surely doesn't need any more self-delusion, a world that needs all of us to proclaim and live the good news, to choose healing and life in a fractured world. May it be so, as it was for the leper, that we cannot keep from shouting this good news to all of creation. Thanks be to God. Amen.”

>>Civic story telling<<

Augsburg has a more than twenty year tradition of celebrating Martin Luther King Jr. Day with a convocation that features a distinguished speaker. This year, as you know, we celebrated MLK Day on the day before the presidential inauguration. Our special guest for the day was Hollis Watkins, one of the legends of the civil rights movement. In my welcoming remarks for the convocation, I suggested that there were important links between Dr. King, Mr. Watkins and President Obama – links that teach us all lessons for citizenship.

“There is much to celebrate today. Let us not forget that this is MLK Day and not Barack Obama Day! The legacy and continuing relevance of Dr. King’s life and work is worthy of great festivities, both as reminder of what we have yet to accomplish in his important work and also as inspiration to our ongoing work to follow his lead and struggle for rights and justice and love in a world that so needs our common efforts. The arc of history is long, Dr. King told us, and it bends toward justice – justice for all God’s creatures, justice that is we must seek each and every day wherever we find ourselves.

But this day is, of course, even more special because of what we will celebrate tomorrow – the inauguration of Barack Obama, our country’s first African-American president, a man who has inspired many of us to renew our sense of calling to Dr. King’s legacy and commitment, a man who challenges us with his words and actions (like his service today in honor of MLK) to recognize that the arc of history is not to be passively observed, but energetically and passionately engaged so that justice might prevail.

There are, of course, many commentators out there offering thoughts about what ties Martin Luther King Jr. and Barack Obama together in our history and consciousness – and much of what they say has great merit as part of our unfolding common lives.

I want to say just a word about the fact that both MLK and Barack Obama grew up as community organizers – something that got a lot of attention last fall during the presidential election – but a fact which I’m not sure we fully grasp and understand.

Community organizing is a way of looking at the world – both MLK and Barack Obama believe that the voices and stories of all of us combine to create what has been called a civic narrative, a story that combines our backgrounds, experiences, aspirations, faiths and values to offer a picture of how we might live together. And when you look at the world this way, your work as the organizer is to ensure that all of those voices and experiences get a chance to become part of the story we tell.

Surely Dr. King illustrated in his life and work efforts to ensure that the poor and vulnerable and dispossessed were heard in our civic narrative – his “I have a Dream” speech is the quintessential example of a story of how all of us yearn for a promise, a sense of fairness and justice, a concern for community...

And now comes Barack Obama – listen to his speeches, his stories – they are the stuff of all of us – see how he sits in African-American churches and in the living rooms of conservative pundits, see how he listens to people of meager means and those of great wealth, see how he engages people in their neighborhoods even as he walks the halls of national power – and you see a community organizer at work as our president-elect, telling

our story, our civic narrative to us so that we might live into our promise as a country, as a people, no matter how rough the circumstances might be.

And so today, we celebrate community organizing in Dr. King and Pres-elect Obama and in the thousands, perhaps millions, of others who share their commitment to listening carefully so that all might be heard – many of you are part of this college community with our commitment to being neighbor in this city and to telling the stories we share as a neighborhood. And we give thanks for civic story-tellers and civic teachers and civic musicians – like Hollis Watkins – who tell us our story and help us sing our songs and remind us of our promise for the future.

That is worth celebrating!”

PRACTICE THIS

>>Generosity<<

My teacher, Martin Marty, has been working lately on a theological dictionary, offering his distinctive perspectives on terms that are part of our Biblical and theological lexicons. As is often his wont, Marty seeks to retrieve a meaning, a link to other ideas, a counter-common wisdom point that illumine the terms he glosses. In a recent entry, Marty turns his eye to “generosity” and offers thoughts that, I believe, are relevant to our work in philanthropy and beyond (*The Christian Century*, November 4, 2008)..

Marty’s point is that faithful people must pay attention to the ways in which God is depicted in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures as generous, a generosity that runs counter to careful, rational, human calculations. From acts of creation to covenants with chosen people to presence in the midst of anguish and suffering, the character of God is marked with generous self-giving. And the appropriate response to this generous God is to give thanks and get to work – with glad and generous hearts.

I find inspiration in this theological idea for the work I do everyday, giving thanks for a generous God who calls me to generosity of spirit and means.

>>Redeeming politics<<

There is so much to celebrate in the dynamics of the recent electoral season – apart from the remarkable and historic results, it also occasioned good thought and practice around the nature of politics and citizenship. I’ve paid close attention to various of these wise commentators and am struck by the fact that so many of them find guidance in the work of Reinhold Niebuhr, the 20th century political theologian whose “optimistic pessimism” marked a realistic and mediating antidote to the extremes of cynicism and naiveté.

Writing in *The Progressive Christian* (September/October 2008), Stephen Swecker offers this Niebuhrean call to redeem our politics. He writes:

“As members of the Body Politic, both our participation and non-participation affect the outcome of elections. And, no matter who gets elected, our lives and those of our loved

ones are affected by the results...it's not pretty...it stinks to highest heaven at times. But, that's how the political process works—always has...”

“But, it's equally true that civility, reason and sound moral judgment still count in politics. Compassion counts. An instinct and passion for justice count. And, a vision that inspires us to be better than we are—that counts a lot...”

“[We must] accept conflict, including politics, not as an end but as a means for exercising the powers of character and spirit needed to heal the nation—and to redeem politics itself.”

And as we face these first days of new political leadership, my sense is that we may need to keep this Niebuhrean vision of politics firmly in sight because it is so easy to slip back into our respective corners and accomplish little of common good.

PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<

I'm reading a good bit of John Dewey these days – finding his pragmatist perspective helpful on many fronts. On the secondary source front, I have found Lee Benson, Ira Harkavy and John Puckett's *Dewey's Dream: Universities and Democracies in an Age of Education Reform* (Temple University Press, 2007) especially helpful for our work here at Augsburg.

As I mentioned in my last Notes, I am teaching an Honors course this semester and one of our texts is Julian Barnes's *The History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*. In order to better understand Barnes's project, I recently read his memoir, *Nothing To Be Frightened Of* (Knopf, 2008), which begins with this provocative line: “I don't believe in God, but I miss Him.”

The Chicago lover in me finally found time to read *The Devil in the White City: Murder, Magic and Madness at the Fair that Changed America*, by Erik Larson (Vintage Books, 2003), a historical romp through late 19th century Chicago, with references to people (Jane Addams) and places (the Hyde Park neighborhood) that I know and love.

>>Personal address<<

This lovely poem offers a glimpse into the dynamic of prayer – of conversations with the divine in which the response might surprise us.

Personal Address

To you only I speak,
although you are forever
changing names, places
of residence, appearance,
affect. Reputation.

When I was a child
you hovered in the rafters

of the tabernacle, above
the visiting evangelist's head.
My mother said I should repent,
and so I did. Of what,
I have forgotten. I was
five years old. I do remember
how the tree, under which she knelt
and prayed with me for my salvation,
bore a single peach that year:
the hard, green bud of it. How
all the summer long I watched it grow.

There was something that I asked of you
in that worn-out orchard.
Although I don't remember what it was
I asked, I do know
I took the peach for answer.

"Personal Address" by Pat Schneider from *Another River: New and Selected Poems*. (c) Amherst Writers and Artists Press, 2005.

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>>Topics for the next issue (April 2009)<<

- Stubbornness and the moral life
- Philanthropy and navigating tough times

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