

## NOTES FOR THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

Volume Ten, Number Four (April 2009)

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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

>>What you think<<

Happy spring, faithful readers. We commence our class of 2009 tomorrow and are happy that the ice is finally off the lakes in Minnesota! Seriously, we give thanks for this season of promise and rebirth, even in the midst of difficult times. As my Board chair here at Augsburg likes to say, "A good day – tough times."

Along those lines, I received two fitting comments in response to the last issue of Notes. Friend and colleague Ted Grossnickle wrote, "Of more lasting interest, I liked your comments on generosity - and the urgent need for an understanding of that on several levels. As a society, we really need that pretty badly and will need it in coming months as the scary economic times continue. I worry about how the expansiveness of thinking (hope?) that drives projects and ideas may get eroded by continuing depressing news. It seems to me that there are times all we can fall back upon is a generous spirit. Your piece is a good reminder..."

And Linda McGurn from Springfield, Massachusetts comments, "As a Marriage and Family therapist, part time, a full time development professional and the wife of a Lutheran pastor, I truly appreciated your opening remarks from your February notes that relate fundraising work to pastoral care. I agree with you strongly that people yearn to be listened to and also are hungry for the inspirational stories about "achievement and service and aspiration" that have the power to take us beyond our anxieties and into a future where we will find opportunities and glimpses of grace. I think the stories we fundraisers tell are stories about grace, particularly in these challenging times."

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](http://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.

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### REFLECT ON THIS

>>Learning to love stubborn people<<

I preached the following homily in our chapel earlier this semester, and think that it suggests some broad themes for our work as leaders in organizational life.

[Texts for the homily are: Deuteronomy 9: 13-21 and Hebrews 3:12-19]

“I remember the first time I heard the phrase from my youngest, Maya. It was one night when I was trying diligently to get her to go to bed. She looked up at me after one of my exhortations about bedtime and yelled “Never.” Which has become her ready response ever since. Never, never, never. She is a stubborn child, and I love her so much.

So, how do we do this, learn to love stubborn people?

We have a remarkable guide to this question in our reading from Deuteronomy. We’re talking about a whole new level of stubbornness here. These are the stubborn chosen people. These are the Israelites, ransomed out of exile in Egypt, on their extended journey to the promised land. But they’re not happy with this wilderness sojourn, they want to reach their destination, they want what they believe is theirs. And their stubbornness has led them to worship false gods, to build their idols, to question Jehovah’s fidelity, to anger the Lord so much that their very existence is threatened.

And in this familiar scene from cinematic history, here comes their leader, Moses, down from the mountaintop, carrying the sacred tablets of the Ten Commandments, coming upon the chosen people worshipping a golden calf, sinning against their God. In response, Moses throws the tablets to the ground, smashing the commandments, and then there follows this astonishing example of servant leadership as Moses prostrates himself before the Lord for 40 days and nights, denying himself even the basics of human need, assuaging God’s anger against God’s people, destroying the idol and casting its dust into the river so that it might be gone from their presence.

And we, of course, know the rest of the story. The journey in the wilderness continues some forty years; the Israelite’s stubbornness and wickedness continues; Moses delivers the law of the commandments, a sign of God’s renewed covenant with God’s people; and ultimately these stubborn people reach the promised land – though their leader does not cross over with them, the price he must pay for the stubborn people he loved.

There are important lessons here for all of us learning to love stubborn people, to love each other.

First, it is clear that we need intercessors. We need prayers of intercession surely, but we also need people who are willing to prostrate themselves before the Lord on our behalf, to bear the anger intended for us and to make the sacrifice required. We are all stubborn people, set in our ways, sure that we are right all the time, entitled to our due, chasing after false gods who we hope might bring us a quicker, easier way to success and fortune. Who will stand for us, loving us despite our stubbornness? Who will speak truth to our stubbornness? Who will bring us the promises that will sustain and guide us in our own wildernesses?

Second, we need forgiveness. We need to know that, despite our stubbornness, there is the possibility of redemption. We need to know that the smashed tablets will be renewed. We

need to learn to forgive each other, perhaps the moral skill we most need in our contemporary lives, knowing that our stubbornness likely will abide as we traverse the wilderness of our lives, but also knowing that we will survive to keep on our journey. We all know that forgiveness is easier to offer when someone admits his or her sin. But the truth is, stubborn people aren't very good at repenting – are we?

Finally, we must learn to see the arc of God's grace. Forty years seems like a long time to wander in the wilderness. We feel for the Israelites; surely this was cruel and unusual punishment – it was a promise, wasn't it? And as stubborn people, we too want our due as soon as possible. But God's time is not ours – thank heavens for that – and our impatience clearly exacerbates our stubbornness, leading us to turn away again and again from the love of a gracious God. Yet God keeps God's promises – the arc of God's goodness and grace is sure. Are we willing to wait to see how much God loves God's stubborn people?

There are parent lessons here. Maya's brother is a good intercessor for his little sister, explaining, standing in for her, urging me to understand. My suggestions that Maya say she is sorry are met with a resounding "never" and yet how can I not forgive her – and try again to get her into bed? And surely the arc of grace is a reminder that sooner or later she will grow up and on to more mature forms of stubbornness. My stubborn child whom I love so much.

All of us will agree, I assume, that our own times offer myriad examples of stubbornness – in our own community, in our economic lives, in the world. We are stubborn people who need intercessors and forgiveness and a longer view of God's goodness. We want our college to keep its promises. We want our financial systems to work for our benefits. We want our politics to be aimed at our needs and interests. And when it doesn't happen as we would like, we turn away – to our fears, to false gods, to the easy fix, to tearing down those who would guide us to a better place.

This morning, I call us back as God's faithful people, stubborn still but redeemed as well, to the good news that, as the author of the letter to the Hebrews says, we are partners with Christ, disciples of the one who has interceded for us, who has died to forgive our sins, and who has offered us a horizon of abundant love and grace that is ours from our gracious God.

I've always liked the essayist Annie Lamott's line, "I went around saying for a long time that I am not one of those Christians who is heavily into forgiveness—that I am one of the other kind." Funny for sure, but perhaps more true than we would like to admit, the stubborn people we are. And yet there is but one way to be faithful, to follow our God who loves us so much – despite our stubbornness – and that is the way of discipleship. He is the Way, the Truth and the Life. We are stubborn people, my friends, and our God loves us so much; so much that God sent God's only Son into the world to save us from our stubbornness. Thanks be to God. Amen, amen, amen."

>>The architecture of our lives<<

This short piece originally appeared in the February 2003 issue of Notes (4:3), and has been helpful to me once again as a framework for thinking about campus master planning here at

Augsburg, as well as our work with architects on a new Center for Science, Business and Religion.

“For my birthday last month, I received five beautifully framed prints of historic institutions of higher learning in the US – the College of William and Mary, Harvard, Columbia, Yale, and Dartmouth. I thought of those collegiate scenes when I heard a local architect suggest that he thought of architecture as the celebration of space. Colleges are often remarkable celebrations of space – in ways that perhaps expand our understanding of the architecture of our lives.

The same local architect talked about his work in three helpful categories.

First, architecture is a vocation, a calling. In a recent article in *Preservation* (January/February 2003), author Michael Byers describes a visit to the Mall in Washington, DC and suggests that the various monuments there – all architectural icons – attest to our better natures. As he navigates the mall, commenting on the quality of each monument’s design and function, Byers reminds us that, at its best, architecture challenges us to face the truth that “I am a participant in a world civilization, I have history entrusted to me, we are all in this together.” Who can stand on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, in the shadow of the mighty columns, beneath the inscripted “With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right...” where King spoke and Anderson sang – and not feel the call?

Second, architecture is a theory, an explanation of how to build, a set of ideas about the process of building. In an elegant essay entitled “Why Space Matters for the Liberal Arts,” Mount Holyoke German professor Karen Remmler quotes Emily Dickinson: “I dwell in possibility/A fairer House than Prose/More numerous of windows/Superior for Doors.” Remmler suggests that architecture is about dwelling in possibilities. Its theories are about the entire fabric of human interaction and expression. She reminds us that the theories of architecture help all of us to see our surroundings through different eyes and to recognize the impact that buildings have on our lives. All citizens, she argues, must be architects in this way, using ideas about building to take responsibility for our surroundings.

Finally, architecture is a practice, the concrete activities of building. Here is a reminder that understanding architecture as calling and theory necessarily leads us to shape our spaces to serve the purposes we intend. I always return to sociologist Ray Oldenburg’s *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Community Centers, Beauty Parlors, General Stores, Bars, Hangouts, and How They Get You Through the Day* (Paragon House, 1989), which argues that informal public spaces are an integral aspect of “feeling at home.” Practicing architecture means creating spaces that serve public purposes. In a different ‘practice’ vein, my former Wabash College colleague, Steve Webb, has recently suggested that colleges should pay more attention to the connection between space and sound (*LiberalArtsOnline*, 12/13/02), because sound creates space. People gather in spaces to hear each other, thus forming community in the nexus between soundscape and landscape. Thus, the practice of architecture shapes the environments we inhabit and the lives we lead.

My historic college scenes are a daily reminder for me that the architecture of our lives – calling, theory, and practice – has long shaped the places where we find meaning and purpose in the world, forums where we belong, spaces in which we feel at home.”

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## PRACTICE THIS

### >>Deep economy<<

I've written here before about our various efforts at Augsburg to be more environmentally conscious, to "go green" as they say. The current issue of our college magazine, the *Augsburg NOW* (Volume 71, No. 2) is on-line at [http://www.augsburg.edu/now/2008\\_2009/april/](http://www.augsburg.edu/now/2008_2009/april/) and provides a great overview of our various initiatives. The transformation of our community around these issues has been organic in the broadest sense of that term.

I've been thinking about the dynamics of change for our college in relation to the work of Bill McKibben, whose recent book *Deep Economy: The Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future*, is a map to how communities like ours can link local initiative with these really important economic and social issues. McKibben, who will come to our campus in September to speak on these topics, writes:

"Every new farmers' market is a small step in this direction (toward reclaiming our economic lives). It requires new connections between people who came together to found it, the farmers who come in from the country to meet their suburban and urban customers, the customers who emerge from the supermarket trance to meet their neighbors. The market begins to build a different reality, one that uses less oil and is therefore less vulnerable to the end of cheap energy. But, more important, the new reality responds to all the parts of who we are, including the parts that crave connection. One-tenth the energy; ten times the conversations—that's an equation worth contemplating."

### >>Understanding philanthropy<<

I mentioned several issues ago that my friend and teacher Bob Payton, founding director of the Indiana University Center on Philanthropy, had published (along with his colleague, Michael Moody), a valedictory set of essays entitled *Understanding Philanthropy: Its Meaning and Mission* (Indiana University Press, 2008). The book draws together some of the insightful themes that have characterized Bob's scholarship over the past several decades – scholarship that genuinely extends our thinking about philanthropy and its role in our lives.

A theme from Bob's work that has been especially relevant to me during these past few months is the idea of "meliorism," an unfamiliar word defined as a "doctrine, intermediate between pessimism and optimism, that the world can be made better through rightly-directed human effort." For Payton and Moody, meliorism is a fitting description of what philanthropy means in our contemporary society – it is a pragmatic philosophy of philanthropy. In further elaboration on the concept, the authors argue that philanthropy as meliorism suggests that we view life as problematic with no certain or final solutions. "Philanthropy proceeds as moral action—guided by principles such as 'seek to do good, but do no harm' and 'give back'—despite the fact that we cannot know with certainty that our intended good works will have good results. In the face of such uncertainty and of things continuing to go wrong in the world, philanthropy is our best hope to make the world better."

Philanthropy and hope in a messy world – an idea that inspires me every day.

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## PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<

For some fun and funny reading, check out *Crazy Book: A Not-So-Stuffy Dictionary of Biblical Terms* (Augsburg Books, 2009), written by Augsburg faculty (or former faculty) Rolf Jacobson, Karl Jacobson and Hans Wiersma.

Barbara Brown Taylor's *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith* (HarperOne, 2009) continues her elegant and provocative narrative on being faithful in the world even when it is not clear what that means.

>>Peace<<

I return to a familiar guide for my life, Kentucky farmer, poet and novelist, Wendell Berry, for this fitting spring, economic turbulence, commencement poem. Enjoy!

*The Peace of Wild Things*

When despair for the world grows in me  
and I wake in the night at the least sound  
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,  
I go and lie down where the wood drake  
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.  
I come into the peace of wild things  
who do not tax their lives with forethought  
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.  
And I feel above me the day-blind stars  
waiting with their light. For a time  
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

— Wendell Berry

From *Collected Poems* (North Point Press), © 1985.

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

- Laying down your life for another
- Words wear out...

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