

NOTES FOR THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

Volume Ten, Number One (October 2008)

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

NOTES FROM READERS

>>What you think<<

This issue commences the tenth year of these Notes and comes at a moment when many of us believe our country is at a crossroads – politically, economically, and morally – as we near the end of a long and contentious electoral season. Has there ever been a time when reflective practice was more needed in all walks of our individual and common lives?

At this moment, I call to our attention the wise words of the late William Sloane Coffin, university chaplain, public activist, and faithful citizen, who wrote these words about the true meaning of patriotism:

“The worst patriots are those who hold certainty dearer than truth, who, in order to spare themselves the pain of thought, are willing to inflict untold sufferings on others. Adolf Eichmann comes to mind.

But if uncritical lovers of their country are the most dangerous of patriots, loveless critics are hardly the best. If you love the good you have to hate evil, else you're sentimental; but if you hate evil more than you love the good, you're a good hater.

Surely the best patriots are those who carry on not a grudge fight but a lover's quarrel with their country.” (*The Nation*, July 1991)

May you all find the courage, resolve and faith to engage in a lover's quarrel with all that you care about.

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. 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

>>To serve our neighbor: Moses and Minneapolis<<

The following homily comes in response to two moments. First, it is part of a series I am preaching this fall in our college chapel about our vision statement – We believe we are called to serve our neighbor. It addresses the final clause – to serve our neighbor. Second, it is a reflection on our life in community after the tragic and senseless murder of one of our students in our neighborhood earlier this fall. It has been a difficult few weeks for our campus community, but we remain steadfast in our commitment to and passion for serving our neighbors.

“You shall not murder” (Exodus 20: 13)

“We are to fear and love God so that we do not hurt our neighbor in any way.” (Martin Luther, Small Catechism)

“Earlier this semester, I promised to offer homiletic comments on the three component parts of the Augsburg vision statement: We believe we are called to serve our neighbor. In September, I reflected on how what we do here as a college, our core academic work, is grounded in the belief that faith is the gift, call and promise from God that offers us (like Job and countless other witnesses to the faith before us) the freedom to ask our questions, to learn from our experience, to explore the riches of creation, to engage the messiness of the world with confidence in God’s redeeming presence. Though logic would argue that I next comment on the second clause of the vision, “we are called,” life is often illogical and the events of the past couple of weeks suggest that it is timely that I consider instead the object of our vision, “to serve our neighbor.”

I was a fairly precocious Sunday School and Confirmation student, and when your Dad is the minister and thus your teacher, there was a good chance that I would regularly push the envelope on Dad’s good lessons. I was thinking about that when I turned to our lesson from the Hebrew scriptures: the sixth commandment as found in the story from Exodus about Moses receiving the Ten Commandments.

One of Dad’s confirmation assignments was to write an essay on the Ten Commandments in the context of the interpretation of the commandments in Martin Luther’s Small Catechism. I remember writing page after page about each of the commandments, extending their reach to create a complete moral code. My Dad smiled and patted me on the head.

But that was just the beginning. I went on to college and then to graduate school in theology and social ethics. I studied with Martin Marty and let me humbly tell you that I know a lot about ethics and moral codes. Professor Marty smiled and patted me on the head.

And then my Dad and Professor Marty sent me into the world to live and work with God’s faithful people, to follow my calling as an educator and a college leader, and now I

know what I didn't know before. These commandments are pretty simple and if you break them, bad and messy stuff happens.

I know this because I now live here with you, God's faithful people who have experienced the bad and messy. Just three weeks ago, our friend and colleague Ahmednur Ali was murdered outside a community center in our Cedar-Riverside neighborhood, gunned down as he left his work-study assignment tutoring neighborhood children. Someone broke the commandment, "You shall not murder," and now I know why God gave Moses the great gift of these commandments.

Let's be clear. The Ten Commandments fit into a very specific context for the ancient Israelites. It was a cultural context that we may not be able to understand very well from our 21st century perch. But they also fit into a theological context that may be more relevant than ever to our lives as faithful people in 2008. The commandments are a gift from God that create and sustain a community. For the Israelites, the commandments were a radical new way of being in relationship with God. God spoke these commandments directly to God's people so that they might know that they were chosen, that God loved them, that God wanted them to flourish. And in following the commandments, the Israelites would live into God's will, God's reign, God's intentions for God's people. What a remarkable gift.

And it is God's gift that I am firmly focused on right now as I lead our mourning community in the midst of an anxious and frightened neighborhood. Someone broke a commandment and now we must live in the aftermath. It has become so clear to me during the past couple of weeks that God does not give us commandments primarily to convict the sinner – we all get that, we're broken, we don't live up to the rules, we struggle to hold it all together. God gives us commandments so that we might know the sort of lives God intends for us to live together. God gives us the commandments for our neighbors and our neighborhood.

Martin Luther is helpful here in his explanation of the sixth commandment, "You shall not murder," when he says: This means that "we are to fear and love God so that we do not hurt our neighbor in any way." Simple and yet so remarkably helpful. To kill someone is about much more than the sinful act of murder – the law covers the murderer – it is about our neighbors and our neighborhood. It is about the pain and fear and injustice – it also is about the compassion and consolation and remembering. It is about God in our midst, allowing us to go on, keeping us strong even when we don't believe we can go on because we are sad and desperate and frightened. The commandments are about a loving God with us.

At the neighborhood meeting a couple of weeks ago to address safety concerns in the aftermath of the shooting, we all experienced first hand the wrenching emotional impact of this shooting on our lives together. Though we intended to talk about security cameras and safety patrols, instead we listened to urgent longing for community. When an Imam (a Muslim religious leader) stood to speak, his first words were "God is good," and though we were a room of people of very different faith traditions, we could whisper,

“Yes, God is good, and this is not what our God wants for us.” In that spirit, our community came together to rededicate itself to the well-being of our neighbors – yes, to more security cameras and personnel, but even more urgently to finding common purpose in the health, safety and well-being of our neighbors and neighborhood – I think that is what Martin Luther meant as he explained the commandment!

In a more contemporary comment on commandments, journalist and former war correspondent, Chris Hedges, writes in his *Losing Moses on the Freeway: The 10 Commandments in America* that “The commandments hold community together. It is community that gives our lives, even in pain and grief, a healing solidarity... The commandments call us to reject and defy powerful forces that can rule our lives and to live instead for others... (The commandments) lead us to love, the essence of life.” Hedges makes the critical point that the commandments call us out of ourselves, toward our neighbors, and into the community of God’s good and faithful people, into the world, and into God’s reign in creation.

Here at Augsburg, where we spend a good bit of time exploring this theological idea of “calling” or vocation, we all seek to find ways to listen for, wait upon, discern what God is calling us out to be and do. We know that vocations arise from a wide range of sources – from scripture, from personal experience, from life in community, usually from some combination thereof – and the main challenge we face is how open we are to trusting that God does indeed speak to us of God’s will and intent for our lives.

This concept of vocation, which has become central to our entire educational program at Augsburg, is important both for our individual lives and for our lives together in community. In this sense, then, what happened with the shooting death of our student could be seen as a challenge to our institutional vocation. Dozens of us are sent out into our city neighborhood every day to learn and serve. If the streets are dangerous, how can we responsibly continue to put our students in harm’s way? Let’s pull back into the safety of our campus and go on about our business. I think we all can recognize the allure of that sort of response to a vocational challenge – that is what the world would have us do.

But we have the gift and challenge of God’s word in our midst; the commandments that offer us a vision of life with our neighbors, a call to defy and reject the forces that rule our lives, the command to love each other. And that is the foundation upon which our vocation is understood and practiced. God has called us to be here in Cedar-Riverside, the urban neighborhood where we have been with our immigrant neighbors for 137 years. God has called us to educate students here who are skilled and reflective and committed to service. God has called us to be faithful here, to learn from those who are different from us even as we are firm and confident in our belief that God is good. God has called us to be neighbor here, to do acts of mercy and to make this a place of hospitality and mutual respect.

What a tough message for the world to hear. The world chooses death and darkness and despair. And we live in the world.

Professor Lori Brandt-Hale recently reminded me of some very wise words from a most wise guide to life in the world, the German theologian and pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who joined the resistance against the Nazis during World War II and who was executed for his role in attempts to assassinate Hitler. Bonhoeffer wrote letters from prison during his final days to his friend, Eberhard Bethge. On July 21, 1944, Bonhoeffer wrote these striking words: "...it is only by living completely in this world that one learns to have faith...By this-worldliness I mean living unreservedly in life's duties, problems, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities. In so doing we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God, taking seriously not our own sufferings, but those of God in the world—watching with Christ in Gethsemane. That, I think, is faith; ...that is how one becomes a human and a Christian."

We believe we are called to serve our neighbor. God is good. And our good God calls us to live faithfully in the world even when bad and messy stuff happens. God calls us to serve our neighbor. Listen to the commandments for God is here, in our midst, offering all of us the grace, the faith, the love and the hope we need to be God's people in the world. We choose life. Thanks be to God. Amen."

>>Dual citizenship<<

In this busy fall, our entire community has been engaged in thinking about and practicing politics, in its most expansive sense. I offered these remarks at our opening convocation to entering students. I begin with an excerpt from Seamus Heaney's "From the Republic of Conscience," a poem that has been influential in my thinking about citizenship.

The old man rose and gazed into my face
and said that was official recognition
that I was now a dual citizen.
He therefore desired me when I got home
to consider myself a representative
and to speak on their behalf in my own tongue.
Their embassies, he said, were everywhere
but operated independently
and no ambassador would ever be relieved.

(Seamus Heaney, "From the Republic of Conscience")

"The next few weeks are going to offer all of us at Augsburg remarkable opportunities to be involved in the work of electoral politics. As we live out our mission and vision here at Augsburg, we are deeply engaged in the electoral process – as our role in helping to sponsor the Republican National Convention student seminar and the Democratic rally on Thursday helps illustrate. In addition, all of you will have the opportunity – an opportunity I hope you will seize – to be closely involved in local political and advocacy efforts, in public service internships, in get-out-the-vote campaigns, and in helping our many new American neighbors to participate in our political system.

But even as this fall offers all of us these opportunities to practice politics in an intense electoral season, I want to suggest that we pay attention to the ideas and practices of a

broader public claim – a claim that calls on all citizens to “get political” – to follow the call of our University of Minnesota friend and colleague, Harry Boyte, who suggests that “Despite its bad reputation, politics is the way people in any setting deal with differences to get something done. Politics means creating alliances, negotiating, and engaging people around self-interests, using levers of change in a strategic way. Politics is how diverse groups of people build a future together. In higher education, disavowal of politics is a sure way to consign civic engagement to marginal status, lodged in centers or courses, or added as a hortatory moment at commencement. Politics is from the Greek root, *politikos*, “of the citizen.”” As Boyte reminds us, “For over two thousand years politics meant not parties or vertical relations with the state but rather horizontal engagement among citizens. In other words, politics – getting political – is the authentic and important work of citizenship, not to be left to “professional politicians” but claimed by all of us as our birthright and moral obligation.

Now, I know that this understanding of politics can be a bit messy. But, then again, life is messy and it seems to me we have just a few ways of responding to that reality. We can deny the messiness and go on as if nothing is amiss. We can see that messiness as something not meant to be and work to resolve the tensions we find. Or we can see the messiness and tensions of our lives as a gift to be lived through, enjoying the richness and adventure we find in different opinions, agendas, perspectives and experiences. Personally, I choose option (c), which I also think is the genius of an Augsburg education, preparing you to live in a messy world. I have come to recognize that our capacity to develop a narrative framework in which these tensions are lived – not just debated – is one of the central features of creating contexts for civic education, of educating you for real politics. In other words, the daily life of places like Augsburg become genuine classrooms for democracy, not just because of what we teach (as important as this is) but also because of how we live our lives together.

I have long been a student of democracy and find Roman Catholic political theologian and philosopher, John Courtney Murray’s definition of democracy as “the intersection of conspiracies” especially instructive. The question is whether or not the inevitable tensions of life together can be reframed as intersections within an unfolding narrative that has synergistic and constructive power, and not how we do away with tension or conflict. The question is how do we teach and learn about how to navigate and negotiate these intersections.

The journalist and keen cultural observer Bill Moyers recently suggested that “Watching and listening to our public discourse today, I realize we are all “institutionalized” in one form or another—locked away in our separate realities, our parochial loyalties, our fixed ways of seeing ourselves and others. For democracy to flourish, we need to escape those bonds and join what John Dewey called “a life of free and enriching communion”—an apt description of the conversation of democracy.”

I would go further to suggest that, in order to escape the bonds Moyer describes, we need to become (and to help educate) what political ethicist Jean Bethke Elshtain has called “chastened patriots,” those who are able to navigate the various loyalties and realities of

common life, loving critically if you will. Law professor (and novelist) Stephen Carter contends that one of the central rules of etiquette in democracy is that whenever we enter into conversation, we must be open to the possibility that we could be persuaded of someone else's position. How do we teach and learn this sort of civic education, this openness to being a dual citizen, members of a particular culture and society, but also citizens of a wider community that is our home as well?

The good news is that Augsburg has a long history of addressing these intersections in our lives, theologically and academically, and thus there is a strong foundation upon which to consider how faith and reason, theory and practice, and the academy and world exist alongside each other in an overarching narrative that has both depth and breadth. And upon this foundation, we have the opportunity to explore and practice the daily practices of civic life, balancing sometimes competing interests, loyalties and conspiracies in healthy and constructive ways.

It is only in recent years, though, during the tenure of my predecessor William Frame, that the entire college community was called into conversation about the historical, theological and academic legacies that combine to offer Augsburg its distinctive vocation as a college of the church in the city. In two remarkable documents, *Augsburg 2004: Extending the Vision* and *The Augsburg Vocation: Access and Excellence*, the college community affirmed that:

"If this were an epic, a work that recalls the past to locate the present and chart the future, we might wish to invoke as our muse Thales, truth-seeker and navigator... (We offer) a vision for the educational program at Augsburg College that connects the College's past with its future. It submits that an Augsburg education can and will provide navigational skills: To the extent possible for any institution of higher education, Augsburg will develop graduates who will be prepared for life and work in a complex and increasingly globalized world; equipped to deal with its diversity of peoples, movements and opinions; experienced in the uses and limitations of technology; and possessed with a character and outlook influenced by a rich understanding of the Christian faith." (1998)

In other words, the college affirms its commitment to educating dual citizens who can navigate the inevitable tensions and intersections of life in the world as informed, nimble and faithful people.

So what are the principles of this broader civic education we offer as we learn to live out this vision? How do students, faculty, staff and others gain a civic education within and outside of an institution that has this vision for its work? At the heart of our common work is an unfolding narrative that allows us to understand and negotiate the intersections of conspiracies within our institution, and thereby involve our entire community in the work of educating dual citizens. We have named five abiding principles for our lives together here at Augsburg that I would contend are the building blocks of civic education:

- *We work out of abundance.* This is the promise of abundance in a world of scarcity – this is the promise into which we are called as God's people. This also is the promise of civic prosperity, commonwealth, and the foundation for mature citizenship, doing things together that we cannot do as well alone.

- *We live with generosity* – “And the Word became flesh” (John 1: 14a) is our historic motto. It is the generosity of our lives and whereabouts that we celebrate. It is our nature and identity and character that we lift up, our links to a particular place and culture and set of values and practices that make us Augsburg – as we have been known since 1869
- *We learn through engagement* – In many ways, engagement is an obvious aspect of Augsburg’s longstanding traditions of experiential education and community relations. Engagement involves both attitude and behavior. We engage each other because we are committed to learning from each other. We engage each other because together we are stronger.
- *We educate for service* – Service is by no means an alien concept for Augsburg. In fact, our long-beloved motto, “Education for service,” is ready evidence that Augsburg has made service a central aspect of its curriculum and campus life throughout its history. Education for service focuses on service as a way of life, a set of values, a democratic ethic - It’s about a vision of democracy as a social ethic – the genius of balancing individual needs and interests with the common good.
- *We see things whole* – We see things whole is a “liberal arts” way of holding our lives together in this college community in trust. Seeing things whole provides an organizational framework for planning and problem-solving that is grounded in a vision of wholeness and interrelatedness – we’re all in this together.

Here then are the guiding values, principles and practices of a community that is dedicated to an authentic civic education. Here are the practices of citizenship for democracy. We are, in a very real sense, committed to educating “dual citizens,” those who understand and practice within the broader narrative which recognizes that we must not attempt prematurely to resolve the messiness, the tensions of our lives, but instead find in those tensions the “stuff” of lively public discourse, civic literacy and engagement, and the promise of mature and meaningful common work. We are called to be people of abundance, generosity, engagement and service – people who see things whole and hold common purpose in trust – people who grasp the call to citizenship and politics as a distinctive and meaningful vocation in the world.

It is a great gift to this college that you are here and I look forward to the many ways in which we might work together in the years ahead to make real Seamus Heaney’s idea that we are dual citizens, those who understand that we must share aspirations for our lives together in our own tongues, as ambassadors whose embassies are everywhere and who will never be relieved!”

PRACTICE THIS

>>Grub<<

Bryant Terry, an eco-chef and food activist, recently visited our community as a convocation speaker and brought an inspiring message about food and its relationship to social justice. Terry, along with his co-author Anna Lappé, has written *Grub: Ideas for an Urban Organic Kitchen* (Penguin Books, 2006), which proposes the following definition for “grub”: “a term that (goes beyond) describing the quality of food (and includes) things like workers’ rights and food equity.” Terry and Lappé point to food that is accessible to all – that’s grown locally and that respects the farmer and farm workers.

On our campus, there are a growing number of initiatives linked to the eco-food movement: tray-less days in the cafeteria (which greatly reduces waste); cafeteria composting; a student program called Campus Kitchen that takes leftover food from the cafeteria and uses it to prepare 2,000 meals a month for our neighbors; an urban community garden on campus; partnerships with organic farmers to deliver food on campus; Fair Trade items in our cafeteria and bookstore; and a new urban environmental studies major that is helping us focus on the links between food, the environment and neighborhood well-being.

In the end, it’s about paying attention to how what we eat is part of both our individual and social character. As Terry says: “if we’re talking about creating a social justice movement, if we’re helping young people to be healthy adults, then what they’re eating and how they’re connecting with food is essential.”

For more about Terry and his important and groundbreaking work, visit his website at www.bryant-terry.com.

PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<

I’ve just begun to review three of the central recent texts on the social entrepreneur movement – a topic that will undoubtedly demand attention in a future Notes. I’m exploring *The Power of Unreasonable People: How Social Entrepreneurs Create Markets That Change the World* by John Elkington (Harvard Business School Press, 2008); *The Search for Social Entrepreneurship* by Paul Charles Light (Brookings Institution Press, 2008); and *How to Change the World: Social Entrepreneurs and the Power of New Ideas*, Updated Edition, by David Bornstein (Oxford University Press, 2007).

Also, check out a wonderful and inventive new compilation of readings on American philanthropy: William J. Jackson has edited *The Wisdom of Generosity: A Reader in American Philanthropy* (Baylor University Press, 2008). Jackson is on the faculty at Indiana University-Purdue University, Indianapolis (IUPUI) and serves as the inaugural Lake Fellow at the Lake Family Institute on Faith and Giving at the Center on Philanthropy.

>>Hope is...<<

I remain full of hope these days and grateful for words like these from poet Emily Dickinson that inspire our continuing reflection and activism.

Hope

Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul,
And sings the tune--without the words,
And never stops at all,

And sweetest in the gale is heard;
And sore must be the storm
That could abash the little bird
That kept so many warm.

I've heard it in the chillest land,
And on the strangest sea;
Yet, never, in extremity,
It asked a crumb of me.

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>>Topics for the next issue (December 2008)<<

- Public education
- Peace studies and friendly disentangling

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