

NOTES FOR THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

Volume Ten, Number Two (December 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<<

Pretty quiet out there since my last Notes – plenty to keep us busy, I guess, with these turbulent times!

Abigail and I have just returned from a week in Norway, where we attended the Nobel Peace Prize festivities and extended a personal invitation to this year's laureate, Martti Ahtisaari, the former Finnish president and international diplomat, to come to Augsburg in March 2010 for our annual Nobel Peace Prize Forum. It was a real privilege to be part of the Peace Prize events and to honor the remarkable work that Ahtisaari has done in Namibia, Kosovo and Indonesia during his distinguished career. We also had the opportunity to visit several partner colleges and universities, greet Augsburg alumni in Norway and soak up a bit of the Nordic culture, including that of the indigenous Sami in the very northern climes. Our dog-sledding adventure and traditional reindeer stew in a Sami tent were highlights, as was my personal audience with King Harald!

But perhaps the most striking thing about our Norwegian visit was the darkness that pervades the country during the winter. Especially in the north – but even in Oslo – there are just a few hours of daylight in December. For me, the experience of the darkness and how the Norwegians use fire and lights to fight it off was a reminder of the power of the Advent season in the Christian church. As faithful people in this season we wait and watch for the light shining in the darkness. Now I better understand what that means.

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

>>We are called<<

I offered this homily in the Augsburg Chapel as the third of a series of comments on our college's vision statement, "We believe we are called to serve our neighbor." The text for the day was Luke 19: 11-28

"This homily concludes the series of three comments I have offered this fall on the component phrases in the Augsburg vision statement: *We believe we are called to serve our neighbor*. Early in the fall, I suggested that the story of Job offers us a way of understanding how the firm and confident statement, "We believe" grounds all that we are and do as a college – our pursuit of knowledge, our teaching and learning, our lives together in community, our acts of mercy, are all possible because we believe that our lives already have been redeemed and thereby we are freed to explore all of God's good creation, in its remarkable diversity of experience and awe and sadness and joy and beauty and messiness and wonder.

A few weeks ago, I turned to the outcome of our vision, "to serve our neighbor" by suggesting that our response as a community to Nur Ali's tragic and senseless murder was an important declaration of how our faith and our calling lead us – in the face of commandments broken – to accompany our neighbors in building up community, in being of service to each other.

And today, we turn to the core of our vision, "We are called." And we do so in the context of today's assigned gospel from Luke. Parallel to the gospel most of us heard this past Sunday – Matthew's account of the trusted servants who were given talents to invest on behalf of their master; some delivering, others not – we have this more difficult passage. Luke's particular concern to position Jesus' parable in the context of his journey toward Jerusalem means that the passage is pregnant with meaning around how the prospective king was rejected by his potential subjects. And yet we are left with the core message: Jesus entrusts his servants with gifts to be invested wisely, and when the master returns he expects that those gifts have been stewarded well. The lesson is clear: our God is active in the world, our God trusts us to be partners in God's work by giving us gifts unearned and undeserved to use wisely, and our God expects us to use those gifts to further God's will in the world.

One thing I find particularly intriguing about this parable is something that is unstated, except by implication in the behavior of the third trusted servant. The question that is raised by this servant's (we might say) prudent contention that, given the possibility he might lose the pound he had been given he chose to bury it, what about the possibility that we return with nothing to show for the risk we take in investing our gifts (this possibility rings more than true in the current economic climate)? How would the master have responded if servants one and two had taken reasonable efforts to invest their pounds wisely and instead of the manifold return they earned, ended up with nothing? I think we are left to assume a meaningful part of the character of the master – of Jesus, if you will; of our God – which is given that he trusts us enough to give us these undeserved gifts, his expectation is that we will have the faith and courage and imagination to use them, even to risk them, for the sake of serving God's intentions.

This assumption about a gifting God then sets in place this faithful logic for us as individuals and as community. For Augsburg, in particular, the claim upon our college with a calling is to know that we are trusted and gifted through God's good grace and that we are called

thereby to use all of our courage, ingenuity, intellect, passion and faith to use our gifts to be God's people and do God's work in the world. Simple, right? There is no place in this story for hiding our gifts away for fear of losing them. There is no place in this story for apologetics about our God who loves us and the world so much. There is no place in this story for the passive, the middle way, for mediocrity or modesty – this is about the joy and wonder and adventure of gifts abundantly and creatively put to work to serve our God

This notion that we are called then is a genuinely bold statement about the God who loves us so much as to trust us with remarkable gifts and about the world God has created that so needs these gifts deployed to serve our neighbors well. So what are the gifts entrusted to Augsburg College by our gracious God and how are we doing?

The first gift we have is an active faith, a gift we recognize in the first clause of the vision statement. We believe – and thereby we are free to live out our call in service to the world and neighbor; we are free for education and service. I want to be clear that the gift of this active faith is not bounded by existing ideas or images of church and religious doctrine, though we would be foolish not to explore and even embrace those ideas and doctrines to learn what God's faithful people through the ages have found meaningful as they live in the world. The gift of active faith means that this college is free to explore here and now (and in an ongoing way) how God needs God's people to be present, to organize their work, to meet the needs for education and community and service. The gift of active faith means a curiosity about life in God's world with all of God's diverse creatures, a curiosity that knows no bounds.

Our second gift is an immigrant sensibility, a perspective and a sensitivity shaped by our neighbors who have always been immigrants. We have the gift of seeing the world through the eyes of those who have made great journeys, at great peril, to build better lives. We have the gift of not taking for granted the freedoms won for us in great battles at great cost. We have the gift of learning new languages and customs and traditions so that our worldview might be expanded. We have the gift of friends and neighbors whose love for us is authentic and unconditional; whose hard work and enthusiasm for life challenges our complacency and cynicism; whose pursuit of justice and fairness and engagement in a new world is inspiring.

Our third gift is an accessible education, this remarkable legacy from our founders who believed that education should be for all, no matter their circumstances, and that the quality of that education should be of the highest order because that is what God expects of those faithful servants who have been given the gift to teach. This is our distinctive gift for the world, an educational experience like no other available to those who might otherwise not have the opportunity. This is our distinctive gift for students from many different backgrounds and experiences. This is our distinctive gift to have a community in which access to education is celebrated and encouraged and yes, even demanded. We dare not keep back any of the educational opportunity with which we have been entrusted because it is our distinctive gift from our gracious and loving God.

And finally, our fourth gift is an engaging urban place, the gift of our location in the midst of a thriving city. The city where God is in our midst, calling us to seek the welfare of this place, to settle here with our neighbors, to be generous, to struggle against injustice and

poverty and violence. The city where God calls us to learn from our ancestors and elders and indigenous neighbors. The city where God calls us to be hospitable and gracious, to share our abundance with those in need. The city where God calls us to stand shoulder to shoulder with our fellow citizens to build community. The city which God calls us to love.

An active faith, an immigrant sensibility, an accessible education and an engaging urban place – the gifts of God for God’s faithful people here at Augsburg; gifts to be invested and used with joyful and faithful abandon so that we might stand before our God and proclaim that our love affair with God and God’s world is at the heart of all we do as a college.

We believe we are called to serve our neighbor. So how are we doing? I actually think we’re doing pretty well – the return on God’s investment here at Augsburg seems pretty substantial given our almost 140 years of work in the educational vineyards. But, of course, it is not the point of this vocational business to assess our progress to date – there is nothing to be *earned* by a good report card! Following our call, using our gifts wisely and faithfully, is work that continues without ceasing, for our God has entrusted us with these gifts and sometime soon, we believe, the master will return and we must be prepared. But that is for another day! Thanks be to God. Amen.”

>>Public education and civic prosperity<<

I had several opportunities this fall to offer comments from my perspective on the challenges of renewing public education – an issue that has long been important to me and even more so now that I lead a college. Here is what I had to say.

“I’ve been asked to say just a few words about the state of our education systems from the perspective of a college president – I want to focus especially on how our work together might help all of us understand the challenges of linking public education with (what I want to call) civic prosperity, the mature work of citizenship.

Shortly after I became a college president several years ago, I attended a gathering in DC where Kati Haycock from the Education Trust looked out at the group of college presidents and said something to the effect that if we were not spending a good bit of time thinking about and working to improve public education in our country, we were missing out on at least two important aspects of our work: one was practical, that is ensuring that the students who would come to our institutions one day were prepared to be college and university students – the challenge of college readiness; the other aspect was civic, that is living up to the public roles that all higher education institutions have in telling a story about, being an advocate for, the best public education system in the world.

It is about what John Dewey, the father of public education in our country once said “What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for *all* of its children.” It is the crux of the matter for those of us who care deeply about our community – what do we aspire to in the education of our children? What will they learn, how will they be taught?

It also is about what David Mathews, head of the Kettering Foundation, has provocatively asked, “Where is the public in public education?” In other words, how do we engage the

body politic in on-going conversations about what they expect from our schools, and in continued engagement in ensuring that the schools are supported, challenged, held in trust as they seek to live out our public vision and aspiration for the schools?

Now, of course, colleges like Augsburg (and the others who share our commitment) have long histories of preparing teachers for our schools. We take that responsibility most seriously as a continuing commitment. We're especially concerned about teachers of science and math. We also are actively working with various collaborative projects throughout the region – example in St. Cloud, providing continuing professional development for teachers. We are proud to host the Minnesota Math League on the Augsburg campus and to have a faculty member from our math department leading that effort. At the same time, most of us have come more and more to realize that we also need to be involved in a wide variety of college readiness programs, reaching way back in high school and middle school and elementary school to help students imagine themselves in college, get the academic preparation they need, develop the social and civic skills to be ready for what post-secondary education of any type demands.

The state of the P-16 educational system in our state and country is clearly high on our list of priorities. And yet, as all of us in this room are painfully aware, and as recent news only goes to confirm, our schools are troubled. For all the resources and talent and commitment that go into our schools, we simply are not accomplishing what we aspire to accomplish for our children. Just look at achievement gaps, student drop-out rates, graduation rates, teacher retention, college readiness...and so forth.

Now, I will not tell you that I have any magical solutions to this pressing dilemma. At Augsburg, we will continue to prepare teachers, to reach out and help students and families prepare for college, to partner with organizations and individuals who share our commitments and dreams for our children. We also will continue to advocate for a more seamless understanding of P-16 (and even 20!) education in our state and country – and for the policies and resources needed to make the systems work.

On this advocacy issue, we share with many of our colleagues in higher education a clear sense of policy lever priorities for public education:

- Standards alignment between high school and college for course, content and assessment;
- Student financial support and incentives for higher education institutions to provide better student support services;
- A data system that tracks the progress of all students, pre-K through college, and;
- Accountability measures that link secondary schools and colleges to student outcomes, like the completion of college.

These policy levers were first proposed in 2005 and I think most of us would agree that we have a long way to go in moving from rhetoric to reality. On standards alignment, there is progress in easing the successful transition from school to college in 31 states – and yet a clear definition of college readiness is still lacking, especially in a substantive way. On financial aid, too much state funding still goes to students who are unprepared (i.e., we have not tied aid to college readiness as well as need). This is especially true for community

college students, perhaps a group that most needs this support. At the same time, colleges have not done a great job of improving student outcomes. There often is a question of just how well state funds are being used to accomplish these objectives. We're also making progress on data systems – but we're still far off from the sort of system that truly helps us track student progress and outcomes. Finally there are deeply rooted differences in policy between secondary and post-secondary systems. Can we work together across the systems or are we destined to the incrementalism that deals only with part of the problem? Michael Kirst, emeritus professor at Stanford, has recently suggested that one such way to overcome this policy gap between systems is to build secondary school improvement into the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) reauthorization and to take away negative incentives for keeping high school assessments lower in order to meet the current 2014 proficiency goals. Surely, whatever the potential policy solutions, the point is that we need to have a vision of cross-system initiative that overcomes the current cultural and political differences.

I also think a good bit about the need to consider teacher preparation in all of this – a recent Bush Foundation communiqué suggests that creating a Minnesota “Teach for America,” the sort of alternative teacher certification system, is a high priority for their future funding. All well and good, but as a state (compared to states like Wisconsin and Illinois) we are far off from getting higher education, unions and public schools to see this issue similarly. Do we have the imagination and resolve to keep the needs of our children as our utmost concern?

In the end, though, perhaps we need to begin to articulate our reasons for doing all of this work as part of a vision that sets the bar higher and the horizon longer for the well-being of our democracy and our world. We need to recognize that our policy initiatives and partnerships and collaborations are actually the mature work of citizenship – what I call civic prosperity or common wealth – and if we lose sight of the civic purposes of this work, then, for all the good we do and aspire to do, we risk losing the courage, imagination, sense of purpose and hope, and the resolve to make the tough choices, to develop the public will to deal with the pathologies that undermine our efforts to educate our students well.

I'm in too many meetings with all of our well-intentioned partners in the work of making our schools stronger in which each of us is able to tell a story of good and effective work, and yet the impact of that work is less than successful because we haven't yet figured out how to do it together. As a theological ethicist, I find the language of abundance and scarcity helpful in describing our situation. It is so easy to fall into the trap (even when our personal and organizational commitments are clear) of suggesting that we don't have enough funding, enough people, adequate public understanding and support to get the job done – this is the scarcity mentality. What if we can imagine a way to do this work together, to cross the turf and resource boundaries, to allow ourselves to accept different sorts of institutional arrangements, to share what we have without fear that we'll lose something in the process? Then we will be doing this work in the spirit of abundance, in pursuit of our common aspirations to give all our children the education we want for our own kids! In other words, we will recover the “public” in our commitment to public education by modeling a way of working together that is at the heart of a strong community.

As an example of this “abundant” perspective, I'm especially proud of work we did in Rockford, Illinois, where I was president of Rockford College, in bringing the entire community together to discuss our shared sense of the purposes of public education in our

community. We organized community forums, proactively made sure that all voices were included in the conversations, asked tough questions of each other about what we wanted for our children's education, and then held the local school board accountable for listening to our aspirations and concerns. The result was at least the beginnings of a sense that "the public" actually cared about and had some say in public education in our community. It was an important initiative that I believe is relevant to all of our communities – we all need to engage each other in these sorts of conversations about what we expect from our public educational system. Only then can we hope to begin to have a system that is mutually accountable for community engagement and student achievement. This is an example of what it means to pursue civic prosperity, to pursue an education worthy of our democracy.

And so, I lift up for all of us this example (and others that we are involved in together) of civic prosperity, this example of abundance in practice, this coming together of various partners to help model mature civic work – to model for other citizens, but also for our children themselves, who go to our schools not just to learn algebra and reading and history and literature and biology, but also to learn how to be the next generation of good citizens, committed to education as a fundamental and inalienable obligation of a good society. In the final chapter of her autobiography, *Twenty Years at Hull-House*, the early 20th century social reformer, Jane Addams (who served on the Chicago school board!) declared, "that those "best results of civilization" upon which depend the finer and freer aspects of living must be incorporated into our common life and have free mobility through all elements of society if we would have our democracy endure." To that we all say "so be it" as we work together to put the public back in public education!"

PRACTICE THIS

>>Personal peacemaking<<

One of Nobel Peace prize laureate Martti Ahtisaari's key messages in his Nobel address earlier this month was that peacemaking is work that belongs to all of us. He urged us to think about the ways in which we are and can be peacemakers in our families, communities, neighborhoods, countries and even in the world. This is a message that we want our students to hear and to act upon in their own lives, believing that peacemaking is not something simply for the professional diplomats to pursue.

In that spirit, I found Lynn Fitz-Hugh's "21 Tips on Personal Peacemaking" in the August 2008 issue of *Friends Journal* very helpful. I won't list all 21 tips, but here are a few to get you started on your peacemaking in the new year!

- (1) *Nothing is gained in trying to decide whose version of what happened is true.* We must be honest with ourselves and each other, but in the end we truly experience what we experience and that may be very different from the experiences of others. We start from there.
- (2) *Blame is not a helpful concept.* It does not move things forward – it simply leads to defensiveness and a lack of listening, not a pathway a peace.

- (3) *Running away from conflict does not solve it.* It is best to address conflict as soon as one has control over emotions and the other person is able to engage.
- (4) *Timing of efforts to address a conflict is a two-party affair.* Our willingness to engage falls along a broad spectrum – sometimes we will need to compromise our own feelings to either rush in or avoid engagement so that we can find a time when both parties can fruitfully engage.
- (5) *Each person has something to teach us.* People do not arrive in our lives by mistake – we must be open to what we can learn from anyone who comes into our lives, even if we don't like what we learn!
- (6) *When someone else is disappointed or angry with us, this does not mean that we are bad or unworthy.* Our emotional response of unworthiness may get in the way of the reason for the disappointment or anger the other feels – once both of us are upset, it will be more difficult to address our conflict.
- (7) *Dragging other people in by trying to convince them of our point of view or trying to get others to choose sides just makes the conflict bigger and worse.* It is one thing to ask someone to help process feelings, but seeking to “compile a case” together against another is not helpful.
- (8) *Culture does impact conflict.* We can be ignorant of both our own cultural assumptions about conflict and the assumptions of those we engage from different cultures. We must educate ourselves about these cultural assumptions if we hope to make peace.
- (9) *When we have made a mistake, it is best to apologize immediately.* Don't try to justify or rationalize or cover up, admit the mistake, ask for forgiveness and move on. Peace depends on candor and forgiveness.

PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<

Perhaps you'd like to read along with the course I am teaching this spring. It is a senior Honors program course, meant to help students integrate their academic work at the close of their time at the college. I am team-teaching with a talented member of our History department and we have chosen the provocative theme of “Game as Life, Life as Game” to challenge students to explore roles, rules, relationships, outcomes and other “game” components as ways of understanding life in the world.

We begin our reading with Stefan Zweig's short story, “The Royal Game” (in *The Royal Game and Other Stories*, Holmes and Meier, 2000), which uses a chess game as metaphor for life in brutal World War II Germany.

We then read Julian Barnes's *The History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* (Vintage Books, 1989), a set of fictional essays revolving around the story of Noah's Ark.

We also read Michael Ignatieff's *The Needs of Strangers* (Penguin Books, 1984) – my choice for the course – which considers the meaning of privacy and solidarity in the social welfare state.

We intersperse the reading with presentations on game theory from various disciplinary experts (sociology, computer science, theology, etc.). The final assignment is for students to work in groups to create their own games – just as they must create their own lives! I'll let you know how it goes.

>>Christmas then and now<<

This simple poem struck me as relevant to our own times as we celebrate this season perhaps less sure than we might like that all will be well – and yet we must celebrate and give thanks for all we have.

“Christmas 1963”
by Joseph Enzweiler

Because we wanted much that year
and had little. Because the winter phone
for days stayed silent that would call
our father back to work, and he
kept silent too with our mother,
fearfully proud before us.

Because I was young that morning
in gray light untouched on the rug
and our gifts were so few, propped
along the furniture, for a second
my heart fell, then saw how large
they made the spaces between them

to take the place of less. Because
the curtained sun rose brightly
on our discarded paper and the things
themselves, these forty years,
have grown too small to see, the emptiness
measured out remains the gift,

fills the whole room now, that whole year
out across the snowy lawn. Because
a drop of shame burned quietly
in the province of love. Because
we had little that year
and were given much.

From *The Man Who Ordered Perch*. (c) Iris Press, 2004. Reprinted with permission.

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

- Redeeming politics
- Generosity

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