

NOTES FOR THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

Volume Ten, Number Five (June 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<<

Not much percolating up to me since my last issue of Notes. I appreciate the occasional brief nod of thanks – though I understand how hard it can be to focus in the midst of all the distractions and noise out there these days. We're about to celebrate our second commencement of the year (we split between traditional undergraduates in May and non-traditional undergraduates and graduate students in late June). I leave for China with a group of our social work students in early July. I'll report on that adventure in my next issue. Until then, have a safe and relaxing summer!

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

>>The truth laying down your life for another<<

I preached the following sermon at our May Baccalaureate service, and think that it helps summarize some of what I think about the normative claims upon us in various aspects of our life.

We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. (1 John 3: 16)

“It is a wonderful privilege to be with all of you this morning – our graduates, your families and friends; our faculty, staff and Regents; and other members of the Augsburg community. This is a splendid day for all of us as we mark your great achievements and celebrate the mission-based work of Augsburg College. You, our graduates, are our epistles to the world, and we look forward with great anticipation to all of the ways in which your work, commitments, relationships and faith will make God’s world an even more fair, just and compassionate place for all God’s creatures.

Lots of sheep in our scriptural readings for this morning. We've got Psalm 23 with its familiar and soothing images of the shepherd leading me beside still waters, restoring my soul, anointing my head with oil, filling me with goodness and mercy. And then there is John's powerful gospel proclaiming Jesus as the good shepherd; the one who lays down his life for the flock; the one who brings all the sheep into the fold.

Sheep and shepherds – geez, not exactly the sort of urban imagery I might hope for as I offer you this sending forth into the world as Augsburg graduates. I don't know much of anything about sheep. We've got community gardens, and I've heard talk about chickens on campus. We're about to start a farmer's market, and then there's Professor Adamo's dog, which acts a bit like a herder. And I'm sure there are animals in the residence halls, though I really don't want to know. But sheep? Maybe head groundskeeper Bruce Rowe would appreciate the assistance of a flock with all of the lawn mowing. You, however, don't strike me as sorts of students who respond well to being herded. And so I'm wondering where the gospel word is in these scriptural texts for the 4th Sunday in Easter – a word fitting for Augsburg, its graduates and its aspirations for the sorts of lives you might lead in the world.

Where is the gospel truth in these images of the shepherd and the sheep that speak to you, the Augsburg class of 2009? Perhaps the first problem I'm having is with my definition of truth. As good educated people, we like to believe that we're all about seeking the truth in our teaching and learning and scholarship. Why else would we dedicate the time and energy and incredible amount of money in an Augsburg education if not for something as noble as the truth? Who cares about the job market? Who cares about what difference all of this makes, the utility of our education? I want the truth. Good luck with that.

When faced with this challenge of defining truth, I often return to the work of storyteller and English professor, Norman Maclean, who wrote "A River Runs Through It" (1976) and has an important point to make about the role of truth in our lives. Maclean, who began his career as a journalist, is the first-person narrator of the story and near the end of the tale he is speaking with his father, a Presbyterian minister, about the recent murder of his brother. Maclean's father says to him, "You like to tell true stories, don't you?" and Maclean responds, "Yes, I like to tell stories that are true." Then father asks, "After you have finished your true stories sometime, why don't you make up a story and the people to go with it? Only then will you understand what happened and why. It is those we live with and love and should know who elude us."

I wonder whether the gospel truth for this morning demands just this sort of narrative and poetic turn. If it's about sheep and shepherds we may wonder what relevance it has for us. If, on the other hand, it's about being known and being loved, about knowing and loving, then I think there is a powerful and durable idea in our gospel that is more than simply relevant to your lives as Augsburg graduates in the world, it is urgently required. It is about the truth of laying down your life for another. How about that for your final lesson as an Augsburg student? As the good Shepherd lays down his life of his own accord for the sheep, so too you are called to go and do likewise. Yikes.

Now I would guess that right about here you're hoping for another narrative turn, a poetic moment that relieves you of such a radical claim on your lives. But I'm not inclined to go there because I think Maclean is spot on when he says that only when we allow our made-up stories to unfold will we understand what happened and why. Only our poetic – dare I say,

fictional – accounts of the difference this claim makes on our lives will allow us to authentically understand those we live with and love and should know. I'm talking about turning our worlds upside down, of not accepting the world's definitions of success and progress and goodness, of daring to tell a story that illustrates how laying down our lives of our own accord for the sake of our neighbors is what it means to be faithful disciples and human beings. I'm talking about the same claim that the author of John's letter makes when he writes, "Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action." Truth and action. The truth of laying down your life for another. This is the story I challenge you to tell in your lives as you leave Augsburg.

And there are so many ways in which your unfolding stories of what it means to lay down your lives for others are needed in the world...

Many of you are going off to the workplace – to big companies, small nonprofits, perhaps a family-owned business. What would it look like to lay down your life for another in the context of your work life? Perhaps the person who has had the most influence in shaping a work culture characterized by a sense of service to the other is Robert Greenleaf, a long-time leader at AT&T, whose monograph, *The Leader as Servant*, is a guide to many of us seeking to tell a story of leadership in organizational life that is not primarily about self-interest or material gains, but is focused instead on what has come to be known as "servant leadership."

All of you can be servant-leaders, no matter the size of your organization or business, no matter the role you play. As Greenleaf himself said, "It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve *first*. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead... The best test [of a servant-leader], and difficult to administer, is this: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, *while being served*, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, and more likely themselves to be servants? *And*, what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit, or at least not be further harmed?" The truth of laying down your life for another in your workplace begins with this simple, yet profound, question: Are you willing to serve? If your answer is yes – and I hope it is for each of you – then you have already begun to understand the radical claim of the gospel on your life in the world. And no matter where or with whom you pursue your work, your servant leadership will make organizations and the individuals that inhabit them more fair, just and humane

All of you now enter a society in which your responsibilities as an educated person demand of you the call to citizenship. In what ways does laying down your life for others play itself out in your citizenship? There are to be certain the obvious acts of patriotism and public service that we might associate with the claims of citizenship – serving in the military, giving a year or more of your life to community service, protecting the public safety, even giving up a lucrative career to serve in the legislature or other public office. But I wonder if there is a more pressing claim on all of us as faithful citizens that makes laying down our lives for others more about the daily, mundane acts of civility that help create the kind of society that values all people?

Yale law professor Stephen Carter tells the story of growing up in Washington DC during the late 1960s, part of an African-American family that was a pioneer in neighborhood integration. Carter recalls how he and his family were shunned and ignored by most neighbors, except for one – Sara Kestenbaum, a Jewish woman who lived across the street and who welcomed the Carter family with acts of hospitality and kindness that he has never forgotten. He comments that "Nothing in contemporary secular conversation calls us to

give up anything truly valuable for anybody else...Only religion offers a sacred language of sacrifice-selflessness-awe that enables believers to treat their fellow citizens as fellow passengers...I discovered how a single act of genuine and unassuming civility can change a life forever.” Indeed, laying down your life for another may be just that simple and yet that profound. It may change many lives forever – most especially yours.

You also leave Augsburg challenged by a world in which those who are different from you – the strangers you will encounter – make a claim upon you that is perhaps more real and intense than it has ever been. Whether that difference is ethnic or cultural, religious, intellectual, ability-based, socioeconomic or political, you will not escape the claim of otherness in your lives in the world. What does it mean to lay down your life for someone you do not know or understand or perhaps even like?

I have been reading a good bit lately about the work of Jean Vanier, a Catholic lay leader and founder of L’Arche, an international network of Christian communities where people with or without disabilities share life together in a spirit of mutual dependence. Vanier speaks passionately about how his life was transformed by his decision more than forty years ago to live with people with disabilities. He needed to overcome his own fears and stereotypes of those with disabilities. He needed to deal with social myths about people with disabilities. He did this by finding within himself what he calls the “compassion for life” that came when he faced his fears and learned to be present with another human being who happened to be different than he was. Once he learned this compassion and felt its gentleness in his own life, he then devoted himself to building safe communities for others to be present with each other, to live day by day with each other, to seek justice for those who were often marginalized. Laying down your life for another is not simply an act of sacrifice, it is the lifelong practice of learning to be compassionate, to accompany each other, and to seek justice where the world is not fair.

And, finally, you leave Augsburg for a world in which the distinctive faith claims we make as a college community are not necessarily held or perhaps even respected by those you will work alongside, live next to and negotiate life with in the world. How can you imagine laying your life down for others when you don’t see the world the same way, when you don’t share a faith? To this challenge, I return to our spiritual ancestor, Martin Luther, who said lots of wise things (and some not so wise!), but one thing he certainly got right when he stated what we now take as gospel around here: ‘Whatever our roles in the world happen to be, our mutual vocation is to love God and neighbor.’ And whomever we happen to encounter in the world – no matter her faith or lack thereof – we believe that there is a spark of the divine in that person that calls us out of ourselves; that challenges us to lay down our lives for someone whose fears, wants, loves and needs are at least as important as mine; that leads us to proclaim that our God knows us and loves us and therefore that we are called to know and love and serve our neighbor.

This is the gospel truth for this morning – that on this very special day in your lives, surrounded by these colleagues and teachers and friends and family who have meant so much to you, as you commence from Augsburg into the world – you are called to lay down your life for another, for each other. Wherever you go, whatever you do, know this remarkable truth that God so loves the world, that God so loves you, and as the author of John’s letter proclaims: “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.” Thanks be to God – and God’s people say together, Amen.”

>>Words that wear out<<

A wise pastor I greatly admire often begins his preaching by proclaiming (and praying): “We don’t need another sermon, Lord – dear God, not another one – but we are deeply in need of a word, the Word. Send the Word into our midst.” And so we might pray today and everyday in our noisy, full-of-distractions, too much talking lives. Dear God, please send your Word! But words sometimes wear out.

I live in perhaps the quintessential world of words – a college campus – where people like to talk and talk and talk. This is my 34th straight year on a college campus, so you have to wonder how many words I’ve spoken and listened to – and you might also ask how many I remember. Perhaps it is appropriate, then, to reflect on why it is important not to let words wear out.

Eugene Peterson, who has spent much of his professional life trying to make scriptural words more meaningful for contemporary ears (he has published *The Message*, which is one of the versions of the Bible I have on my I-Phone!), writes in *The Christian Century* (10/7/08): “Jesus came to save our souls. He also came to save our words. Word and words are at the very core of God’s revelation of himself to us. If the words are damaged through careless or malicious usage, or are left in bad repair, or pick up barnacle encrustations from hanging around in bad company, the sharp details of the Jesus revelation are blunted.” Peterson continues with this challenge to all of us who rely on words: “Constant and vigilant attention is required to keep our language in good repair. Words wear out. They lose texture and colors fade. They need refurbishing, rehabilitating, renovating....Most of us are more attentive to keeping the dishes and knives and forks clean that we use to eat our meals than to keeping in good repair the words we use to speak our love and promises, our commitments and loyalties.”

Here’s to our work as word refurbishers!

PRACTICE THIS

>>Leading theologically<<

I feel a bit like I’ve been on a year-long roller coaster ride – the really daring kind – and my leadership in this turbulent environment has needed to keep us centered as we navigate through the year and look to a longer horizon. A few words about the ways I’ve thought about this leadership challenge...

First – as is often the case for me – I turn to the scriptures and to a theological lens on my work. On several occasions this year, I’ve suggested that these times demand leaders who can find the appropriate balance between two scriptural themes: “do not be afraid” and “keep awake.”

Allow me to translate. I have long believed that one of the central challenges of leadership is to “pay attention” and to help others to pay attention. Keep awake or pay attention is about helping our institutions to attend to the most important values and initiatives – despite the

temptations to get distracted. For example, during budget negotiations this year, our commitment to being student-centered and to honoring our academic core gave us a focal point for difficult resource decisions. Our choices to increase student aid, to increase faculty salaries, to decrease or eliminate some ancillary programs, etc. were all premised on the priorities we had set. My leadership was about reminding my board, leadership team and wider community why the student and academic priorities were critical and then holding them accountable for the ways our key priorities were honored in the budget.

As for “do not be afraid,” my other primary leadership value for the year was in building and sustaining trust within the organization. A recent issue of the *Harvard Business Review* suggests in a series of articles that there needs to be a new metric for evaluating leadership performance, namely the extent to which leaders create organizations that are economically, ethically and socially sustainable. To make this happen, leaders are encouraged to develop a culture of candor, to be more transparent and to not be naïve about what it takes to build trust in an institution. This trust-building challenge was a key one for me during this year as we sought more and more effective ways of communicating key information, of engaging the entire campus in important conversations about our progress and challenges, of admitting when I didn’t know the answer or when I or we had made a mistake. This, of course, is work that will never end, but especially in this turbulent year, my leadership in seeking to build trust became a critical backdrop for helping to overcome the fear and anxiety in our organization. And sometimes it is so simple – as was the case when I stood in front of an all-campus meeting and was able to give clear and honest answers to straightforward questions about our finances and enrollments, not all the answers the community wanted to hear, but realistic answers that showed that we knew what was going on and had a plan to respond. Such assurances build trust and confidence – such assurances say to our community, “do not be afraid.”

In this dynamic between keeping awake and vigilant and calming peoples’ fears, leadership takes on concrete and practical forms. For Augsburg and me, this has meant several key strategies:

- Mission and vision focus – keep going back to who we are and why we exist, and the historic and present values reflected therein – fight distractions but not necessarily status quo either; can’t be afraid to try new ideas that are grounded in the mission (e.g., new site at St. Stephen’s in Bloomington)
- Presence and accompaniment – communication is critical in all forms, but so is a sense of being there with each other – the sense of sanctuary in the midst of turbulent times is critical – and though I can’t be everywhere, good choices about where to be can help to build trust and keep focus
- Absorb the pain – sometimes there is no answer, no acceptable resolution, and we simply need to absorb the pain that members of our organizations are feeling – it may come out in anger, in criticism, even in actions that warrant discipline, but emotional intelligence for leaders requires that we understand and accept our roles as servants of both mission and community, and one of the ways we practice servant-leadership is with our humble bearing of corporate pain
- Finally, be a realistic optimist (or an optimistic realist) – face the facts and find hope even in the midst of reality. This may require a sense of humor and irony more than anything else. We need to believe that there is a longer horizon and here I turn again to my favorite Reinhold Niebuhr quote:

“Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime; therefore we are saved by hope. Nothing true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we are saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore, we are saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as from our own; therefore we are saved by the final form of love, which is forgiveness.”

PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<

I'm reading in an eclectic set of areas of interest right now...here are a few recommendations:

- *Dewey's Dream: Universities and Democracies in an Age of Education Reform*, by Lee Benson, Ira Harkavy and John Puckett (Temple University Press, 2007) – a provocative call for a return to the role of community schools (and the role of higher education in establishing them) in a healthy democracy.
- *Discover Your Inner Economist: Use Incentives to Fall in Love, Survive Your Next Meeting, and Motivate Your Dentist*, by Tyler Cowen (Penguin Group, PLUME, 2007) – I heard Cowen at a conference discuss his theories as related to college and university finances – a fairly sensible economist.
- *The New Asian Hemisphere: The Irresistible Shift of Global Power to the East*, by Kishore Mahbubani (Public Affairs, 2008) – I'm reading this fascinating account of how the Asian economy is being built (and its links to our Western lives) by a Singapore academic – a helpful foundation for my upcoming visit to China!

>>Your place<<

Someone recently pointed me back to Mary Oliver, whose elegant poems speak so deeply. Here is a favorite.

Wild Geese

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,

are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting--
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.

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

- Generous undertakings
- Jane Addams in China

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