

NOTES FOR THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

Volume Fourteen, Number Three (February 2013)

"What we have loved, others will love, and we will teach them how."

(W. Wordsworth, from "The Prelude")

NOTES FROM READERS

>>What you think<<

Late winter greetings. Not much chatter out there since my last Notes. I like this concept of meteorological winter coming to an end on March 1 – I need that glimpse of spring this year especially! I hope that you are all well and keeping your head above water in these volatile 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. 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

>>Loving reform<<

Here is the third (of five) chapel homilies based on my summer 2012 sabbatical research on the relevance and sustainability of Lutheran higher education.

Scripture assigned: John 2: 1-11

[The third of five chapel homilies on the gifts of the Lutheran tradition that ground the relevance and sustainability of Lutheran higher education in the 21st century, Augsburg College Chapel, January 25, 2013]

This morning I continue with the third of five chapel homilies dedicated to the charisms (or gifts) of the Lutheran theological tradition that help to shape the identity and character of our college. Last semester, we explored the Lutheran concept of vocation, offering a nuanced understanding of the arc of human experience in the world. We also pondered our commitment to humble and critical inquiry, the freedom to ask our critical questions with the understanding that human knowledge is ever evolving and never complete. And then we considered our tradition's embrace of otherness and difference – the rich diversity of God's creation – and how our experience of otherness leads us to see the stranger as neighbor.

Today I point to the concept of *semper reformanda*, the underlying contention of our Lutheran heritage that we are called always to be open to new and different ways of being in the world, to watching for God's activity in our midst and bringing our hearts and minds and hands to bear as co-creators of God's plan for God's people.

Our exploration of *semper reformanda* seems especially fitting on this day when our Board of Regents have gathered for their winter meetings and when they have invited into an historic conversation almost 60 of us – faculty, staff and students – a conversation about the future of Augsburg College.

There is genuine enthusiasm and anxiety about these conversations, in part because at the heart of planning for the future we must face the difficult, complex and challenging questions that portend change – change that is inevitable, some would argue; but change that will not be easy, we all agree.

In the midst of this swirling discussion of change – within our academic community and in the wider society – we here at Augsburg have the gift of the theological concept of *semper reformanda* which offers a framework that may be more relevant than ever to helping us negotiate a path forward together, faithful to who we are and at the same time fresh and relevant to the needs of the world – a world that God loves so much.

A few thoughts about what *semper reformanda* means to us and to our work as a college.

First, what is the character of the reformation tradition of which we are a part? My title for this homily, “Loving Reform,” might be read in at least two ways. The first way is likely the worst fear of many of us. And that is that you have a crazy president and perhaps a few others who simply love change and will pursue it with abandon no matter the cost, no matter the damage to our underlying values, no matter what... In other words, loving reform means exactly that – we must love change for change’s sake.

I stand here today to firmly reject this attitude about reform and change. Instead, I call for us to embrace the stance of Martin Luther himself, who believed that reform must be loving, that change – inevitable as it may be – is never an end in itself. Reform happens in the context of communities of memory and faith and values, whose underlying commitments set firm boundaries on who we are, what we do and where we are headed. Augsburg College is such a community, firmly rooted in its values as a liberal arts college, preparing students for lives of purpose and meaning, guided by its Lutheran Christian heritage, shaped by its distinctive setting in the city. These core values are the “loving” we bring to any exploration of reform.

Martin Luther wrote in perhaps his most well known treatise, *The Freedom of a Christian* (1520, M. Tranvik, trans.) these famous lines:

A Christian is lord of all, completely free of everything...

A Christian is a servant, completely attentive to the needs of all

Here is the creative tension at the heart of Luther’s vision of reform: because we have been saved already, our freedom assured through Christ’s death and resurrection, we are freed not to do whatever we desire, but to be of service, to follow our calls to be God’s co-creators in the world. And there we are situated, freed and at the same time bound, saved and called to love the neighbor and the world, to be God’s people and do God’s work. Luther’s vision of reform was pastoral. We are called to be loving reformers.

So the next question is what exactly this call to be loving reformers sounds and looks like? There appear to be many options before us. How will we know what God intends for us? Here we are drawn back to the gospel to listen carefully and discern what God has in mind for God’s faithful people. And the passage from John’s gospel, assigned for the 2nd Sunday in Epiphany, may offer us some guidance.

The story is simple and familiar – sometimes referred to as Jesus’ first miracle, performed at a wedding banquet. Jesus is at the wedding with his disciples and his mother. We learn that the wedding hosts have run out of wine. Jesus’ mother says to him, “They have no wine,” to which Jesus responds rather impatiently, “Woman, what concern is that to you and me? My hour has yet to come.” Surely this is meant by the evangelist as a glimpse of the future – Jesus can’t be bothered with these mundane problems, there are bigger challenges ahead. But his mother jumps right back in, telling the servants to “Do whatever he tells you.”

And perhaps to make the point that Jesus is a good son, he proceeds without further protest to have the servants take six stone water jars, fill them with water, and then take a draw to the chief steward, who compliments the bridegroom on the unusual practice of saving the best wine for the conclusion of the banquet.

We can draw many lessons from this simple story, but allow me to suggest three points that offer us guidance as loving reformers. First the role of Mary, who doesn’t allow Jesus off the hook when he claims to have more important things on his mind. She reminds us that we too are called – as she was – to pay attention to the moment, the sphere of human experience right in front of us with all of its ordinary, mundane, perhaps even trivial, and yet also significant and meaningful, aspects. And she teaches us this lesson most simply by saying to the servants and to us, “Do whatever he tells you.”

The second lesson we might draw from the gospel story is how the instructions Jesus offers the servants do not call for some supernatural hocus-pocus; they point them back to their work. “Fill the stone jars with water, take a draw to the chief stewards,” he tells them. The servants may have witnessed a miracle – the miracle of abundance in the midst of scarcity – but the fact is that they participated in the miracle by doing what they were called to do. We, too, are called to participate in the miracle of God’s abundance right here in the midst of our daily lives.

And finally, there is the startling outcome of this story. Fine wine is served at the conclusion of the banquet. This is counter-cultural – no one saves the best wine for last, the steward says to the bridegroom. But there you have it, perhaps the most hopeful and inspiring lesson of the entire gospel: Since you follow Jesus, since you do what he calls and tells you to do, you can believe that the best, the very best, is yet to come. This is God’s way. This is why we embrace loving reform. Because the best is yet to come.

And so, what shall we do? Do we sit back and wait for God to speak out of a pillar of fire or a cloud, telling us what to do, calling us to this blissful future state? That, of course, is one way the concept of vocation or calling has been (I would say) misunderstood. Our callings do not denote some sort of passive form of agency. Instead, they call us out of ourselves, into community, into the world, constantly vigilant and active in pursuit of our God-given role in creating this better future. We are called to bring the best of our hearts and minds and hands to bear in being co-creators of God’s loving intentions for all of creation. “Do whatever he tells you,” Mary says to the servants. Use your gifts to help perform a miracle.

Our friend and colleague, Christensen professor Marty Stortz, recently reminded me of a 2010 *New York Times* opinion piece by columnist David Brooks entitled “The Summoned Self.” In the column, Brooks outlines two ways of thinking about our lives. Coincidentally the first way he suggests is based on a commencement speech by Clayton Christensen, a Harvard Business School professor, whose book, *The Innovative University*, is the beginning point for our planning conversations this afternoon. Brooks labels Christensen’s way of thinking about life as “The Well-

Planned Life.” In the well-planned life, you spend time when young finding a clear purpose for your life and then you dedicate and discipline yourself to live with that purpose clearly in mind – granted, with a few tweaks and refinements along the way, but ultimately leading to a well-rounded fruition.

Brooks then describes a second way of thinking about life, which he calls “The Summoned Life.” In the summoned life, you do not live as an unfolding project to be completed, but rather as an unknowable landscape to be explored. In this mode of living, you focus on the important commitments that precede choices you make – commitments to faith, family, nation or some other cause – and you tend to be skeptical about applying so-called business concepts, with their focus on utility, to other realms of life.

The well-planned life emphasizes individual agency and is widely admired in our American context as we lift up the entrepreneur, the pioneer, the lone free agent who blazes new trails and creates new worlds. The summoned life focuses on context and circumstances, observes the world carefully and asks questions about how we can be most useful in this time and place.

We might recognize the summoned life as a fairly close description of what we describe as “the called life,” and I would contend that at our best as a college, we keep this vocational focus firmly in mind as a way of understanding our roles in the world. It is counter-cultural and deeply rooted in our faith tradition. I couldn’t be more proud of our commitments to the summoned life.

At the same time – as Brooks concludes in his column – if we choose only one of these two options for looking at life, we may miss important guidance for what he names as a third option, “the well-considered life.” Looking only at context and circumstance without a longer horizon of naming our life’s purpose can lead to passivity. On the other hand, focusing only on achieving long-term goals by planning out well in advance the steps we will follow, may well lead to rigidity and disappointment.

I would argue that our Lutheran heritage actually leads us to embrace the well-considered life. We believe that we are called to serve our neighbor. We are freed for service in the context of our daily lives in the world. At the same time, we also believe that God has a plan for all of creation and that the best is yet to come. There is a clear purpose for our lives in the world.

Loving reform – *semper reformanda* – is the challenge to live at the intersections of God’s call and God’s plan, to bring all of our God-given gifts – gifts of intellect and imagination and passion and faith – to bear as co-creators of a future that unfolds in our midst, a miracle even of abundance in the midst of scarcity, of love and compassion in the midst of violence and mistrust, of grace and forgiveness in the midst of legalism and finger-pointing.

Loving reform calls us to believe and act as if the best is yet to come. And so it is, thanks be to God. Amen.

>>Create in me<<

A few weeks back, I preached the following homily on Ash Wednesday and captured some of the meaningful experiences of returning to son Thomas’ birthplace near Soc Trang, Vietnam during our family adventure in December 2012.

Scripture assigned: Psalm 51: 1-12

[Ash Wednesday, 13 February 2013, Augsburg College Chapel]

Eleven years ago, I preached an Ash Wednesday sermon that recounted the trip to Vietnam that Abigail and I took to find and adopt our son, Thomas. It has become an anthem of sorts for our family. We had just returned from Vietnam and I was struck by the many ways in which “ashes” were part of our experience there – both symbolic ashes of war and poverty and injustice, and the very real ashes of fires burning on sidewalks and in the countryside for cooking and manufacturing and fighting off the darkness.

That Ash Wednesday homily included these words:

And now we're home and some of the wonder of those days in Vietnam has faded, but once in a while I am in the basement room where we have several souvenirs from our visit to Vietnam and the smell of the ashes from the baskets and nets still brings me up short, gets under my skin, reminds me of who I am, who I truly am...and then I walk into Thomas's room to find him ready to get up from his nap, and he smiles and reaches for me, and I know the love that God intends for his people.

God had a son whose life, death, resurrection, and ascension from the ashes promises us that we shall never be separated from the love of God – a Son whose name and sacrifice we recall today as we are marked with the cross of ashes, the ashes of our own mortality – from dust you have come and to dust you shall return – marked so that we might celebrate the wondrous joy of God's deep and abiding love, God's Easter love.

I still remember that first trip to Vietnam vividly – it was full of both ashes and promise, as we expanded our family to include Thomas. Many of you know that in December, Abigail, Thomas, Maya and I returned to Vietnam to help Thomas understand more about his home country, to visit the part of Vietnam where he was born, and most significantly, to meet his birth mother and grandmother. It was a remarkable trip in so many ways – here is a picture of an especially meaningful moment we experienced in this beautiful country half a world away.



[Son Thomas, with his birth mother and half sister, December 2012]

As I think back on our time in Vietnam, perhaps the real gift we received was coming to see how, over the past eleven years, we have come full circle out of the ashes to learn that hearts can be

created new, that there is genuine joy in our salvation, that our mortality can be reconciled to God's loving intentions for us. See the joy in those faces!

And on this Ash Wednesday, eleven years later, I stand before you to humbly proclaim that the ashes of our lives, the ashes we are marked with this morning, have been redeemed by God's awesome Easter love. And here we live, as those marked by the ashes of the world, our iniquities, the power of darkness, and at the same time, those reconciled to God's good creation, to each other and to our astonishing God, who loves us so much.

My favorite poet, Wendell Berry, says it clearly in his "Original Sin":

*Well, anyhow, it preserves us from the pride
of thinking that we invented sin ourselves
by our originality, that famous modern power.
In fact, we have it from the beginning
of the world by the errors of being born
being young, being old, causing pain
to ourselves, to others, to the world, to God
by ignorance, by knowledge, by intention,
by accident. Something is bad the matter
here, informing us of itself, handing down
its old instruction. We know it
when we see it, don't we? Innocence
would never recognize it. We need it
too, for without it we would not know
forgiveness, goodness, gratitude,
that fund of grace by which alone we live.*

And there you have it. Out of the ashes – out of our mortality and iniquity, our injustice and violence, our indifference and pain – we know the wonder of God's remarkable promise – the promise of reconciliation and peace and compassion and love; of forgiveness and goodness and gratitude and grace.

I know this because I've seen it first hand in the gift of my son – born in the midst of ashes and now reconciled to a world of love that surpasses all human understanding. Look at the joy in those faces!

This is my parable of ashes for this Ash Wednesday, a personal story that reminds me of the ashes that mark our existence on this earth, our ashes of pride and war, of greed and progress, of poverty and injustice, of the darkness and unexpected, of the loves that did not survive – this is who we are,

whether we live in Vietnam or Minneapolis. But who we are has been transformed by the love of God, the love we know in our communities of faith, in our bonds of love, in the embrace of our children...the love we know in the cross of our Savior, who creates in us a clean heart, a new and right spirit. Thanks be to God who loves us so much that he sent his only Son to save us from our ashes. Amen.

PRACTICE THIS

>>Tactics for changing minds<<

I found this very helpful advice as I contemplate navigating with our community a new vision for Augsburg College – lots of ways to change minds.

How do we get our colleagues to see the potential of an exciting new idea we believe will transform our organization, our work, our community? Over and over I have workshop participants tell me that, though they believe an idea or strategy will make a real difference in their organization, they just can't fight through the bureaucracy or resistance they find all around them. What to do?

Harvard education professor Howard Gardner (of multiple intelligence fame) writes in his new book, *Changing Minds: The Art and Science of Changing Our Own and Other People's Minds* (Harvard Business School Press, 2004) about seven levers for breaking through resistance to new ideas.

To persuade someone to embrace a new idea, use:

- Reason, presenting all relevant considerations of an issue, pro and con
- Research, relevant data and information about your idea
- Resonance, convincing your listener because of your track record, effective presentation, sense of audience
- Representational redescription, recalling that different people learn in different ways and delivering your idea in a variety of formats
- Resources and rewards, find resources to present your idea and incentives for others to adopt it
- Real-world events, drawing on current affairs to make a persuasive and concrete case for your idea
- Resistances, using considerable energy to identify and overcome the main resistances to your idea

Multiple intelligences applied to one of the vexing issues of managing change – know how people learn and meet them there. Good teaching!

PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<

In honor of the two Nobel Peace Prize laureates who will be on Augsburg's campus next week for the Nobel Peace Prize Forum, here are two recommendations for your reflective practice:

Creating a World Without Poverty: Social Business and the Future of Capitalism by Muhammad Yunus (2008, PublicAffairs Books). Yunus, who won the prize with the Grameen Bank in 2006, is known as the father of micro-lending.

And the Nobel Lecture given by Tawakkol Karman, the Yemenese journalist and activist who won the prize in 2011, for her efforts as one of the “mothers of the Arab Spring” – found at http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2011/karman-lecture_en.html

>>Republics and conscience<<

Next week we will celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Nobel Peace Prize Forum here at Augsburg and I thought it fitting to include a poem from a Nobel-prize winning poet – in this case, one of my favorites, Irish poet Seamus Heaney. Heaney gave the poem to Amnesty International, which now uses it to honor good work around the world. May we all be dual citizens!

From the Republic of Conscience

by Seamus Heaney

When I landed in the republic of conscience
it was so noiseless when the engines stopped
I could hear a curlew high above the runway.
At immigration, the clerk was an old man
who produced a wallet from his homespun coat
and showed me a photograph of my grandfather.
The woman in customs asked me to declare
the words of our traditional cures and charms
to heal dumbness and avert the evil eye.
No porters. No interpreter. No taxi.
You carried your own burden and very soon
your symptoms of creeping privilege disappeared.
Fog is a dreaded omen there but lightning
spells universal good and parents hang
swaddled infants in trees during thunderstorms.
Salt is their precious mineral. And seashells
are held to the ear during births and funerals.
The base of all inks and pigments is seawater.
Their sacred symbol is a stylized boat.
The sail is an ear, the mast a sloping pen,
the hull a mouth-shape, the keel an open eye.
At their inauguration, public leaders
must swear to uphold unwritten law and weep
to atone for their presumption to hold office –
and to affirm their faith that all life sprang
from salt in tears which the sky-god wept
after he dreamt his solitude was endless.
I came back from that frugal republic
with my two arms the one length, the customs
woman having insisted my allowance was myself.
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.

"From the Republic of Conscience," from *Opened Ground: Selected Poems 1966-1996* by Seamus Heaney.
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>>Topics for upcoming issues<<

- Reinventing governance
- Lutheran identity and higher education (continued)

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