

NOTES FOR THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

Volume Twenty-One, Number Four (April 2020)

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

NOTES FROM READERS

>>What you think<<

Dear friends, I trust that you are safe and well in these frightening times. Surely this is a time when our reflective practice may be more essential than ever as we navigate through uncharted waters. Now, leadership matters as we provide calm and compassionate and transparent direction to those who look to us for how to move forward. And now, we need each other in this together – even if our community must be virtual until it is safe to be together in person. Please know that you are on my mind and in my prayers during this pandemic time.

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. I thank my friends at Johnson, Grossnickle & Associates for their many years of abiding support for our reflective practice.

REFLECT ON THIS

>>Talking with Thomas<<

I preached this homily (virtually!) during the last week of our spring term – in the midst of these pandemic times...

Scripture: John 20: 19-31

I'm trying to imagine the disciple Thomas being interviewed by a modern-day TV talk show host – say, Oprah... "OK, Thomas, what gives here with your behavior?" "Well, Ms. Winfrey, it's really quite simple. I missed a meeting and all of a sudden my fellow disciples are trying to tell me that our leader, who all of us saw hanging on a cross, has shown up behind closed and locked doors. I'm sorry, Oprah – I'm a good sport and a faithful disciple – but this was too much for me – I just couldn't accept this without some evidence. I needed to touch the man before I could get on board. Certainly your audience would agree with me that this was not asking too much?" To which the audience would respond with sincere "Amen"s, empathizing with poor Thomas. And perhaps we might add our own Amens. I know that on many days I would. "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe" – but is it really that simple?

As many of you know, my 19-year-old son and 1st year Auggie is named Thomas – a not insignificant fact to me – and there have been many days that Thomas’s fresh and clear-eyed challenges to what I and his mother (and countless other adults) ask him to accept as gospel strike me as fitting and healthy. Maybe Thomas – both the disciple and my son – ask the questions that the rest of us don’t have the courage to ask. Maybe they remind us that our faith journeys in this world are shaped, not so much by blind allegiance, but by seeking answers to the questions that nag at us about what God intends for us, what God is doing in our midst, and what we are called to do in response to God’s reign breaking in to our lives.

Perhaps, especially in this pandemic time, they remind us that the world can be a scary place and that the way of faith is not about making things easier, but about finding the courage and will to work to overcome the fear. Perhaps asking our questions is how faith grows so that God’s work might be done in the world.

I am struck by the fear that is evident in these stories we read in the days after Easter. Can we imagine what it was like for the early faithful whose leader had been killed like a common criminal? I think maybe we can understand the fear because it remains such a force in our personal and social lives in the 21st century.

Think about the fear that is gripping our public lives these days. How many times do we need to hear from elected officials about who we can trust or not trust to guide us through these uncharted times? How often must we be reminded about race and gender and class as personal liabilities? How will we ever deal with the various intimations of disaster from within and without that are thrown in our path as evidence that we can’t trust, that we dare not forget to be vigilant, that we will not survive?

Where are the voices of civility and trust, the wise and calm counsel, the shouts of affirmation and hope, the dreams of a better life, a more just society, a sense of what is possible?

Or what about the fear that is so present in our relations to our neighbors around the world? As you probably know, just before the pandemic I spent several days at our CGE site in Cuernavaca, Mexico. It is a remarkable place and our staff there is so skilled at introducing their many students and visitors to real people, living meager economic existences. And as we meet these fellow global citizens, we also learn of the many ways in which the policies of our own country, too often based in fear of losing economic power or world status – our corporate fears – have contributed mightily to the state of these good people.

Where are the voices of global fairness and equity, the shouts of empowerment and love, the will to believe that abundance is possible when we learn to share our vast resources?

And there is the fear in our own neighborhood and campus community. Especially now, when we must keep our distance from each other, it is so easy to withdraw into our own silos and to believe that I am alone in this fight. Our many fears – of will I get sick, what’s next for me, who can I trust – leads us to hoard what we have, to refuse to believe that the good of the entire community might be worth pursuing, to criticize those whose efforts are aimed at making us all stronger.

Where are the voices of responsibility and vision, the shouts of commitment and action, the foresight to see our ways together into a remarkable future?

This post-Easter fear is so much a part of our lives that sometimes we are unable to see how it blinds us to its implications, paralyzes us from taking a stand, creates obstacles to activism and change, keeps us ever fearful and unable to see how we might work together to do God's will in the world.

But today is different as we come together as God's people in this place, to take an important stand at this time; to proclaim that this community will not live in fear; that we will not give in to those who would tear apart rather than build up our lives together. Today we proclaim that ours is a community of hospitality for our fellow travelers in the journey of faith, asking our tough questions together, seeking to know God's will for our lives, committed to doing God's work in the world. And we will not be afraid.

And here comes Thomas, the absent and doubting disciple, looking for evidence. Here, too, is Peter, who denied that he knew Jesus three times. And here are the others who ran away in fear as the cross was lifted on that fateful hill. Here is a room full of disciples – not unlike all of us – flawed, anxious, seeking, but also present, listening for a call, recognizing the gift, ready for a promise. And here is Jesus the Risen Christ, in our midst, with nary a word of condemnation (what's with you guys, he might ask?) Instead these words of comfort and redemption for all of us who live in fear: "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Thanks be to God! Amen.

>>From truth to freedom<<

Here is the text for my column in Augsburg's magazine, written before the pandemic and intended to reflect on the conclusion of our 150th anniversary year. I stand by my words and see our commitments as foundational to our sustainability in the years ahead!

"As we near the end of our year-long celebration of Augsburg's 150th anniversary, I have been reflecting on some of the mottos and slogans Augsburg has used throughout its history. From our founding scriptural motto – "And the Word became flesh and lived among us" (John 1: 14) – to the familiar "Education for Service" to the more recent "We believe we are called to serve our neighbor" to the iconic phrase first used as part of Augsburg's 100th anniversary, "From truth to freedom," each phrase points to abiding values that are at the heart of the education Augsburg offers to its students.

I am particularly struck by the claim made in that centennial motto and I wonder what it might mean to explore how "From truth to freedom" shapes our teaching and learning community in our sesquicentennial year and beyond.

In a recent public presentation, Professor Mary Lowe from the Religion department offered a provocative challenge when she asked us what it might mean to educate our students for freedom. What a counter-cultural notion! Educated for freedom from ignorance, from oppression, from division and hatred and violence. Educated for freedom to make the world fairer and more just and healthier, to be good neighbors, to take care of creation. Educated for freedom for the sake of the world, for the good of others, for the promise of wonder and creativity.

At Augsburg, the possibility of this education for freedom is grounded in claims of truth. Above all, a theological claim of the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ – stated so powerfully in that founding

scriptural motto from the first chapter of John's gospel – a truth that makes all things possible in our lives and work in the world. At the same time, the truth we find in our commitment to a liberal arts education – to the belief in scientific knowledge, in social analysis, in artistic expression, in cultural wisdom. And finally the truth we find in the lived experiences of our students and the communities from which they come – truths that reside in rituals and traditions and practices that invite us into worlds rich in knowledge and wonder.

Let us go forward together into the next 150 years of Augsburg's life recommitted to education guided by the belief that from truth there is indeed freedom. I believe we see glimpses already of the difference such an education makes. I can only wonder what such a counter-cultural belief will mean for stories yet to be told."

PRACTICE THIS

>>Place matters<<

Though the course I teach (with colleague, Jay Walljasper) has moved on-line for the second half of our spring semester, I still have been struck by the relevance of our focus on how "Place Matters" for decisions we make in our lives. Now, as we are called and challenged to "shelter in place," we can pursue renewal in the places we inhabit. We can be, as novelist Wallace Stegner coined it, "stickers" rather than "boomers," those who settle in place and make it better rather than those who use a place until there is nothing more to use and then move on.

I want to share just a few of the compelling ideas from the course that have become particularly meaningful to my students during this unprecedented time.

First, these words from poet and essayist Wendell Berry, who writes that "I believe that the community – in the fullest sense: a place and all its creatures – is the smallest unit of health and that to speak of the health of an isolated individual is a contradiction in terms." ("Health is Membership")

Students were introduced to Augsburg's Health Commons (led by faculty member, Dr. Katie Clark), which is a drop-in center focused on promoting health and building relationships, primarily for those experiencing homelessness. Many of the students did a volunteer shift at the Health Commons. After the pandemic was announced, other students listened and watched a presentation from Dr. Clark that recounted how those experiencing homelessness were navigating the threat of the virus, given their lack of access to housing, food and good information. If we ever needed to face the contradiction in terms that Berry suggests, it was in the experience of these "isolated individuals" for whom community – a place and all its creatures – was lost.

We also explored the various tensions that arise within places – especially in cities like Chicago, which was a special focus for the class. We read excerpts from Alex Kotlowitz's *There Are No Children Here* (Doubleday, 1992), his story of boys growing up in Chicago's Henry Horner Homes, a public housing project. In the introduction to the book, Kotlowitz writes, "LaJoe (the boys' mother) was not only agreeable to the project, she felt it important that their stories be told. She had once said to me that she occasionally wished she were deaf. The shooting. The screaming. Babies crying. Children shrieking. Sometimes she thought it would all drive her insane. So maybe it would

be best if she couldn't hear at all. Her hope – and mine – was that a book about children would make us all hear, that it would make us all stop and listen.”

Juxtapose this book and its tales of systemic poverty and violence with our review of Chicago's skyscrapers in the nearby Loop – buildings built to mark out grand dreams and aspirations for greatness in the city.

Finally, after all our in-person experiences were cancelled, we engaged in Zoom conversations with leaders from the Twin Cities arts and urban planning community. They shared some of the good news about how walkability and public transit and community-building and public art were shaping life in neighborhoods once blighted and sparsely populated. In particular, we learned about the Creative Enterprise Zone in Saint Paul, led by Catherine Reid Day, where public murals have become a sign of urban renewal.

And we read a powerful essay by Marcia Good, a DePaul University faculty member, entitled “The Writing's on the Wall” (*Sojourners*, March 2017). She writes, “Education is not an act of consuming ideas but of creating them. The words come from a banner across the top of my course site...Students get a simple assignment at the beginning of the course. I ask them to walk a few blocks around their homes and take pictures of the scriptorial landscape they find...Some students share their surprise that a few-block walk in their own neighborhood easily nets them at least 10 photos. Sometimes we are lucky enough to have a student who has actually done street art, and they find out to their surprise that they have skills and knowledge that give them an advantage in the discussion board. Someone wrote something on a wall with an intention. Whether or not one agrees with that intent, you should still be able to ‘see’ it.”

Perhaps the greatest compliment I've ever received as a faculty member was from a student who took the “Place Matters” course and who, several years after graduating, posted a picture of an architectural feature on a wall, and said “I never would have noticed this if I hadn't taken the Place Matters course.”

Maybe that's the lesson for all of us in the pandemic time, as we consider all we take for granted in the places we inhabit. Place matters and paying attention to our places, attending to them, caring for them, noticing the messages they communicate to us, may be more important than ever before.

PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<

I've had more time to read during this stay at home time, so am pleased to recommend several wonderful books:

Erik Larson, author of *Devil in the White City*, has penned *The Splendid and the Vile* (Crown Publishers, 2020), the story of Winston Churchill's first year as Prime Minister as World War II raged. Larson is a remarkable storyteller!

As is Minnesota's own William Kent Krueger, whose recent *This Tender Land* (Atria Books, 2020) is a compelling tale of escape from a Native American boarding school in the 1930s. Set in Minnesota

and beyond, it recounts the horrors of how the Native peoples were subject to all forms of discrimination and violence.

My Augsburg colleague, Dr. Ann Lutterman-Aguilar, who leads Augsburg's site in Cuernavaca, Mexico, shared *Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in Forty Questions* by Valeria Luiselli (Coffee House Press, 2017) which is a first-hand account of how undocumented children are often treated in federal immigration courts.

Patrick Lencioni, who many of us know for his leadership books, has written *The Motive: A Leadership Fable* (Jossey-Bass, 2020), calling all leaders to reflect on “why” they lead and not just on “how.”

>>Grace Before Sleep<<

My friend and colleague, Bill Craft, president of Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota, brought this lovely poem to my attention as the pandemic began to demand our attention. I, too, am grateful that we are together in “this generous room.” If you are so inclined, there is a beautiful choral setting of the poem that you can find on the Luther College Nordic Choir YouTube channel.

Grace Before Sleep

How can our minds and bodies be
Grateful enough that we have spent
Here in this generous room, we three,
This evening of content?
Each one of us has walked through storm
And fled the wolves along the road;
But here the hearth is wide and warm,
And for this shelter and this light
Accept, O Lord, our thanks to-night.

Sara Teasdale
(1884-1933)

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>>Topics for upcoming issues<<

- Trusting institutions - again
- Stories we tell to ourselves and each other
- Big ideas!

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