

NOTES FOR THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

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"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, Well, here we are on the cusp of a new academic year – in the midst of a global pandemic. I hope you are all well and safe. Here at Augsburg, we are entering this semester with a complex blend of anxiety and hope. In the new protocols of masking and physical distancing and quarantining, we are challenging ourselves to be open to what we will learn about ourselves, each other, and our community in this historic moment. As I have told our students, the world needs you now more than ever, and though we may be frightened and exhausted, we also must be courageous and imaginative in how we will pursue our passions and commitments to education, service to neighbor, and justice for all. And just as we band together to keep each other safe and healthy by following public health guidelines, we must band together to face this moment with resolve and moral focus. You are on my mind and in my heart in these times – as always.

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

>>Through truth to freedom – by way of reconciliation<<

I wrote the following as an editorial – we'll see if it gets published! – but it reflects my efforts to undo a failure narrative for higher education and remind us of our public purposes.

“As we near the traditional beginning of the academic year, colleges and universities are in the news (“Another plea for college COVID-19 safety amid uptick,” Star Tribune, August 20, 2020). And the news is not good, full of dire warnings about student behavior, online learning, unhappy faculty and staff. In fact, the news and public opinion about higher education seems to foretell failure in the midst of this pandemic.

As a long-time university president, I am not naïve about the unprecedented challenges we face on our campuses this fall and I give thanks for the tireless work of our students, faculty, and staff, along with the public health experts who are helping us keep each other safe and healthy. I wonder,

though, if we might upend this failure narrative with a reminder of the unique role that higher education is called to play in historic moments just like this.

As we conclude our year-long celebration of Augsburg University's 150th anniversary, in the midst of these uncharted times, I have been reflecting on Augsburg's motto "Through truth to freedom." I wonder whether and how we might recover its power for our academic and public missions – especially in a time when the relevance of higher education is being scrutinized. These words from Christian scripture were adopted as our motto in 1969 on the occasion of Augsburg's 100th anniversary at a moment when campuses and the country were reeling from similar forms of anxiety and unrest.

"From truth to freedom" strikes me as a compelling response to this moment when we find ourselves living at the intersection of three pandemics. The novel coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted all aspects of how we live and work, and has pointedly illustrated the tension between public health and economic well-being. Following in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, an economic pandemic threatens our social fabric with massive unemployment and business closures worldwide. And, most recently, the racial inequities exacerbated by the senseless murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers has created a third pandemic that threatens to tear our country apart. Surely this uncharted terrain presents unique challenges for all of us as citizens, trying to imagine how we will navigate to some as yet unknown future.

In a recent public presentation, Professor Mary Lowe from Augsburg's 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.

But is this path from truth to freedom as linear as the motto seems to claim? Here, lessons from our faith tradition offer an important corrective to the power of our truth claims. One such lesson comes from the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden Eden. It reminds us that the sin of seeking perfect knowledge separates us from God, each other, and creation. Therefore, the search for truth uncovers separations and sins that demand reconciliation before there is freedom.

In his recent book, *Begin Again: James Baldwin's America and Its Urgent Lessons For Our Own*, Princeton professor Eddie S. Glaude, Jr. describes the lie that persists in the United States – the lie of white supremacy and its insidious implications – America's own original sin that must be confessed so that there might be reconciliation and finally, freedom, true freedom.

In our own Cedar-Riverside neighborhood in Minneapolis, our remarkably diverse Augsburg students and faculty engage every day with our immigrant neighbors – primarily Somali-Americans, devout Muslims – and we witness their struggles with Islamophobia, with racist behavior, with poverty – all the result of lies we tell each other about Christian exceptionalism, about white supremacy, about capitalism. It is only when we face and confess the lies that we find common ground, reconciliation, the genuine opportunity to live as neighbors aspiring for freedom. This, I would argue, is the authentic work of democracy, an ethic of living "with" each other.

Through truth to freedom – by way of reconciliation – then is a fitting motto for all of American higher education in these times. The questions we will ask at Augsburg – questions at the heart of our academic mission and our commitment to social justice, questions I believe all of higher education is poised to pursue – are about where is the truth in the midst of these pandemics?

Further, what is the truth about keeping each other healthy in the face of a novel coronavirus? What is the truth in an economy that more and more creates remarkable inequities? What is the truth in centuries of systemic racism and oppression?

And in the truths we will find – always evolving and emerging and transforming – the sins and lies that we tell each other about knowledge and privilege and justice. Only when we face the truths we find, confess our complicity in the sin and lies we tell, and humbly seek to be reconciled with each other and the creation, will we be freed for the work we are called to do as “informed citizens, thoughtful stewards, critical thinkers, and responsible leaders” – Augsburg’s mission!

That, it seems to me, is a much more compelling story of higher education in these pandemic times, and I can’t wait to see all that we will do together to strengthen our democracy.”

>>Augsburg’s theological roots<<

In the blog post I shared in the last issue of Notes, I argued for the relevance of settlement house principles to guide our work in the midst of these pandemic times. In subsequent versions of the essay, I have added the following section, which points specifically to the scriptural and theological roots of Augsburg’s commitment to what we call “public work.” I excerpt the section here...

Our Lutheran Christian and Haugean roots

Among the primary educational resources for Augsburg’s mission and identity are its roots in the Lutheran Christian tradition, and more specifically in the Lutheran popular movement spurred in Norway by Hans Nielsen Hauge and brought to the United States by his followers.

The scriptural foundation for this tradition is found in the writings of the Apostle Paul. An example is found in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians (see especially 1 Corinthians 12: 12-31a), where he uses the body metaphor to charge the young Christian community at Corinth to respect each other’s gifts, arranged as individual members of the one body, with the same care for each other, with honor paid each member so that the body might rejoice. The church itself is lifted up as the body of Christ with its individual apostles, prophets, teachers, healers, leaders, even miracle workers – each individual called to the work for which he or she is best equipped, combining to live as a community, dedicated to being God’s people in the world. These diverse gifts are given even more clear purpose and direction earlier in that same chapter (1 Corinthians 12: 7), when Paul writes that these gifts of the Spirit are given “for the common good.”

This compelling image of humans working individually and together – Paul’s call to be the body of Christ on behalf of the common good – was eroded in the centuries that followed as the church became more and more institutionalized and stratified. The gifts of individual members often were diminished in the name of a hierarchy of roles and skills, and the clergy and other religious orders took on more of the responsibility and privilege, relegating laypeople to lesser work.

And then along came Martin Luther, himself steeped in the religious orders of the early 16th century, an Augustinian monk, but one troubled by what he witnessed in the practices of his fellow clergy and the Roman Catholic Church – especially their greed and corruption. When his calls for reform were ignored, he set about to recover Paul’s vision of the body of Christ with its complementary individual members. From his perch as a university professor, he set about to honor the work of the laypeople in his part of Germany. He translated the scriptures into the German language so that all people could read and benefit. He created and supported businesses in the town of Wittenberg, so that the economy would support the needs of all citizens. He created a community chest so that when there was a crisis for an individual or family, there were resources to help. He wrote with great passion about the dignity of work across all professions and crafts – cobblers and printers, students and shop owners, even shepherds as he wrote in this Christmas sermon from 1521: “Behold how very richly God honors those who are despised of men...Nor could the angels find princes or valiant men to whom to communicate the good news; but only unlearned laymen, the most humble people on the earth...God chose poor shepherds, who, though they were of low estate in the sight of men, were in heaven regarded as worthy of such great grace and honor.” For Luther, we are all called to the work God intends for us.

Now let us jump some 275 years ahead to the Lutheran church in Norway in the late 18th and early 19th century. Though much good had occurred in the years following Luther’s reform movement, it also was the case that the Lutheran church is now more institutionalized and stratified. In fact, the Lutheran church has become the State Church in Norway (and other Northern European countries). And there were reformers at work, calling God’s people back to the Gospel and to the vision of the body first described by Paul.

One such reformer was Hans Nielsen Hauge. Born in 1771, Hauge had a spiritual experience at age 25 that led him to believe that he was called to preach the gospel and to fight against the ways in which the established church in Norway did not create healthy and just communities. Inspired by the idea of the spirit of community practiced by early Christians, Hauge sought to put the idea of common and shared economies into practice in Norway. Hauge was a skilled businessperson and entrepreneur, who would preach the gospel on Sundays and then live out the gospel by creating new businesses in which work was valued. He saw that demands for efficiency and increased production often took precedence over caring for workers and valuing their vocations. He emphasized stewardship of material goods. “The good and the wise live and use their talents, strength and fortune for themselves, so that they can shape it for the good of others; they are stewards and look for possibilities.” He focused on full employment, encouraging business owners to create jobs so that fellow citizens could experience the dignity of working to support themselves.

As is often the case with reformers, the powers that be charged Hauge with crimes against the state and church, jailing him for most of the last twenty years of his life. He died in 1823. But his influence was secure through the businesses he had created, the workers he had encouraged with his preaching and leadership, and the challenge he had brought against a church that separated the faith it preached from the works it supported.

The founders of Augsburg Theological Seminary (then College, now University) were Haugeans, Norwegian Lutheran immigrants who fled from Norway to seek better lives in a new country. These were individuals who believed in the dignity of work as a gift from God and who sought to create healthy economies and communities in their new homes. Here in Minneapolis, the neighborhood

around us was first settled by these Haugeans who created businesses to serve their neighbors and institutions like Augsburg and Fairview Hospital to meet the various needs of a growing population.

Grounded in this scriptural and theological tradition, Augsburg University now faces intersecting pandemics with courage and imagination, seeking to renew the importance of public work – individual callings complementary to other members of the community, pursuing work that has meaning and purpose in the world.

PRACTICE THIS

>>Interrogating institutional sagas<<

I have long used the concept of saga to describe the complex and distinctive stories of the colleges and universities. Recently, though, I have been exploring how a saga may need to be interrogated for the ways in which it does not support our highest aspirations.

(1) *The idea of a saga*

What is a saga? My understanding of the concept of saga comes from research done by Burton Clark on what it is that creates a distinctive character and identity for colleges and universities (see Clark's classic essay, "The Organizational Saga in Higher Education," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, June 1972, Vol. 17, No. 2, pp. 178-184). A saga is more than a story – all of us have stories. A saga is more of a mythology – a sense of history and purpose and direction told in vocabulary and narrative that accounts for a community's DNA, its essence, even. A saga abides in the sort of people, programs and values that define an institution.

Clark contends that not every institution has a saga. Sometimes that is a function of not being true to founding values; at other times it can be occasioned by a change of location or core mission; still other institutions have not found a way to link their pasts, presents, and futures in a coherent narrative. Augsburg University's saga runs deep in the culture and meaning of our work together. An exploration of Augsburg's history surfaces several themes that are central to our saga: an immigrant sensibility shaped in an urban neighborhood, freedom through faith to ask tough questions and engage otherness, a moral commitment to access to quality education for all, and the vocational aspiration to be neighbor to and with each other.

(2) *What if your saga excludes or discriminates?*

The history written for Augsburg University's 150th anniversary in 2019 invoked as its title the scriptural injunction to "hold fast to what is good." As we set our sights on the decades ahead, there are emerging concerns that some of what is good in Augsburg's history may be grounded in the systemic racism that is America's "original sin." The issue before us is how the saga of Augsburg University can be a source of challenge to the underlying assumptions that have shaped our identity, while at the same time shaping a future narrative of an anti-racist, inclusive teaching and learning community. I believe that the Augsburg community is called to grapple with that critical issue.

At the conclusion of its Sesquicentennial year – its 150th anniversary – Augsburg University stands at the intersection of three pressing issues: the novel coronavirus, Covid-19 pandemic; the ensuing economic disruption; and the racial unrest occasioned by the murder of George Floyd a short

distance from Augsburg's campus in Minneapolis. At this epicenter, the Augsburg community, which has experienced a radical transformation over the past decade in the profile of its student body to become one of the most diverse private universities in the country, now looks to its future interrogating the threads of its historic saga – a saga shaped by its Norwegian ancestors, its Lutheran Christian foundations, its location in a diverse immigrant neighborhood, and its decidedly Western liberal arts tradition.

Acknowledging the “whiteness” of these historic threads, it is incumbent upon the Augsburg community to explore whether and how the saga that has unfolded over the past 150 years – a saga that is ripe both for appreciative inquiry and to be problematized – has relevance and meaning for the future of the university. How will we lean into seeing and undoing the systemic racism and oppression that has shaped the university and that is embedded in all aspects of our institutional life and work? How will we admit and uncover all of the ways in which aspects of Augsburg's history convicts the university and demands truth and reconciliation? What are the ways in which we will articulate a saga for our future that acknowledges our complicity and sets a path forward that responds to the times in which we live and the diverse community we have become? What are the new protocols and practices that will define our identity and mission for the next 150 years?

These are the questions that we will explore in the next two years as part of this project, engaging members of the Augsburg community in the urgent and critical work of exploring Augsburg's saga in these pandemic times.

PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<

All of us at Augsburg regularly take something called the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), which shows where you are situated on a continuum of intercultural literacy. We use it because it is not judgmental, it is developmental, and is accompanied by a consultant-led planning exercise that is meant to help you grow in your intercultural literacy and maturity. A part of my annual plan was a deep dive into literature to help me more fully understand the threads of systemic racism in our society and the experience of Black Americans. The pandemic has given me time and inspiration to pursue my reading. Here are some of the books that have been most helpful and meaningful to me...

Isabel Wilkerson's *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* (Random House, 2020) is a masterful comparison of the “caste” systems in India, Nazi Germany and the United States. Wilkerson's in-depth and personal accounts helped me to more fully grasp the impact of what we often call systemic racism.

Eddie S. Glaude, Jr.'s *Begin Again: James Baldwin's America and Its Urgent Lessons for Our Own* (Crown, 2020) recounts the arc of James Baldwin's influence on both white and Black America. Glaude then sent me searching for Baldwin's own *The Fire Next Time* (Vintage International, 1962, 1993), which comprises two letters written on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation calling for all Americans to attack racism.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has written *Stony the Road: Reconstruction, White Supremacy, and the Rise of Jim Crow* (Penguin Press, 2019), an historical overview of how reconstruction after the Civil War was upended and the post-reconstruction era was driven by insidious white supremacy.

Finally, my University of Chicago Divinity School colleague, Robert M. Franklin, former president of Morehouse College, has written *Moral Leadership: Integrity, Courage, Imagination* (Orbis, 2020), calling on both his scholarship and his leadership experience to challenge all of us to a higher ideal of leadership. Dr. Franklin will give the Christensen Lecture at Augsburg later this fall.

>>Our Real Work<<

A colleague recently reminded a group of fellow university presidents of this Wendell Berry poem – a reminder of both the work ahead and the power of a baffled mind to find a way forward!

Our Real Work | Wendell Berry

It may be that when we no longer know what to do
we have come to our real work,
and that when we no longer know which way to go
we have come to our real journey.
The mind that is not baffled is not employed.
The impeded stream is the one that sings.

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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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