

NOTES FOR THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

Volume Twenty-Three, Number Six (August, 2022)

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

NOTES FROM READERS

As we turn another page in our agrarian academic calendar, we also conclude 23 years of these Notes. I give thanks for all of you who have found these reflections – which have shifted in subject matter over the years – meaningful and worthy of your time. We commence our 153rd academic year this week at Augsburg, my 17th year as president, still a deep privilege every day to walk alongside our faculty, staff, and students to advance our mission.

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

>>What we require (it never gets old!)<<

As our academic year commenced, I have many opportunities to greet students (and others) who have joined our community. The next two posts include my Opening Convocation Address, entitled “What is required of you,” a talk I have given in pretty much this form for the past 15 years. As one faculty member commented this year, “It never gets old!” The second post is a greeting I brought to a group of Latinx students and their parents. It shows how we use the concept of a promise to talk about the relationship we have with our students.

“What is required of you?”

Today we launch Augsburg’s 153rd academic year and here you are the class of 2026, one of the largest and most diverse classes in our history, along with many new transfer students joining our community for the first time. Now, 153 years is a long time and much has changed in the world and at Augsburg during those many years. Change happens – as it always has – but I also want you to know that there are things that have not changed for this institution because they are at the heart of our identity and values and mission. You will receive the highest quality education we can offer – in partnership with each other and this remarkable faculty. You will be challenged by ideas and experiences and relationships new to you – because that is what it means to be educated. You will meet friends and peers for life. You will be equipped for democratic citizenship – because the world needs you.

And here, then, is what is required of you – as it has been for generations of Auggies who have graced this campus as you do now – here is what you must do to fully embrace all that lies ahead in your Augsburg education.

If you know your Hebrew Bible – and if you don't, don't worry, Religion 100 or 300 will help – you will recognize the allusion in my title this morning to the well-known passage from the prophet Micah, the sixth chapter, verse eight:

6.8 He has showed you, [O man,] what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

And, if I was smart, I might leave it right there, because if each of us were to behave as Micah claims the Lord requires, all would be well with the world.

On the other hand, there are some things that we can and do require of you. And that is the simple message I want to share with you this morning as you commence your Augsburg education. And maybe – just maybe – if you do what we require of you, you will find a pathway to understand what the Lord requires of you. That would be the bold claim at the heart of our education for vocation in the world, that how and what you learn here, that who you meet and engage here, that what you find out here about yourself and your various gifts, will offer you a clearer idea of what it is that you are called to do and be in the world.

In this context, then, what is it that is required of you, our newest colleagues?

Show up - The first requirement is really pretty fundamental and you already have begun to live up to it. You are here – on campus, perhaps on Zoom or a livestream, engaged in your orientation, at this Opening Convocation, about to begin your college classes.

But as the coming days pass, you will be tempted by many distractions and late nights and other obligations to not show up, to miss a class or a meeting, to say that it doesn't matter whether you attend every class session. I know this tendency – I lived it myself, making up elaborate excuses for why I could skip every 7th class session and no one would notice. And we might not notice every time, but you will notice (whether you fully get it now or not) that it is a slippery slope to not show up. Statistics show that skipping even one class session has an impact on whether or not first year college students stay in school, let alone graduate, or perhaps most importantly whether or not they learn something.

But, of course, this is not simply about showing up for class. Showing up is also a sort of spiritual practice. It is about being present now – which will be even more important this year as you interact virtually. Showing up is about being in relationship to a text, a classmate, and/or a teacher. It is about accompanying each other on a journey that is both solitary and social. The famous educational philosopher, John Dewey, said that genuine education is not preparation for life, it is life itself. And if you believe that – as we do here at Augsburg – then showing up, being present now, is the key factor in whether or not you get the education you need in order to live in the world.

Show up, please.

Pay attention - The second requirement is also quite simple. But the equally simple fact is that we live in a world full of distractions and paying attention doesn't come easy.

Like you, I'm on Facebook and Twitter (follow me at @paulpribbenow, if you must). I have an I-Phone and an iPad and a laptop. I read two newspapers each morning and probably have 20 magazine subscriptions. I do my best to lead this wonderful and complex university. I have two adult children, both in college like you, a wonderful spouse who has her own career and also manages Augsburg House, and a life full of things I "must" pay attention to – and it's hard work. And I'm old. You are young and you have grown up in a time when multi-tasking is not an option, it's an expectation. I really can't imagine how you keep it all together. I admire you, but I also worry about you.

So here I stand asking you to pay attention. Yes, I mean put away all the distractions that you can control. Turn off the cell phone occasionally, spend some time away from the computer. Focus in on what your teachers and classmates are saying and doing. Find ways to pay attention.

But it is more than that, of course, because even when you have put away all those sources of distraction, it remains your responsibility to figure out what is most important and how you can make what is important the center of your life. The sociologist, Robert Bellah and his associates, have written that "Democracy means paying attention," (from *The Good Society*) by which they mean that the psychic energy we use to pay attention is the key to the sort of person we hope to be – as individuals and as a society. If we continue to be distracted, our attention and the energy that it requires of us will also be distracted, and the values and people and ideas and causes we should care about and attend to will not get our energy. And we will not become the people we want to be. We will follow someone else's idea of our call.

Pay attention, please.

Do the work - The final requirement follows logically from the first two. If you show up and learn to truly pay attention, you will find that there is work that must be done.

Many days, the work will be assigned to you. Read this text, explore these ideas, test this hypothesis, run this experiment, play this scale, practice this drill. You know all about doing school work already, but please know that this is college and college signals a quantum leap in the work required of you. Don't get behind on reading and papers. Take advantage of the support we offer to help you manage your time and learn to study. Support each other and ask for help when you feel you need it.

Because more and more, on many days the work will be yours to discern and pursue. There will be no one there to tell you what to do. You will need to seize the work that needs to be done. The profound truth at the heart of our academic mission is that the work you learn to do here – in the classroom, on campus, in our neighborhood and around the world – is the basis for pursuing the important work to be done in the world – and we need you to do it. We are counting on you to do it. It is the work for which we were recognized several years ago with President Obama's Award for Community Service. That is why this university exists – to educate you to be informed citizens, thoughtful stewards, critical thinkers and responsible leader – not just because we think it would be nice if you were all of those sorts of citizens and stewards and thinkers and leaders, but because the world needs you. There is utility to this education, there is purpose and direction, there is work to

be done by educated folks. Work they are called to do. Work that might just have to do with what the prophet Micah claimed – the work of justice and compassion and humility.

Do the work, please.

And that is what is required of you. In this university dedicated to democratic engagement, simple lessons that I hope you will remember: show up, pay attention and do the work. Lessons that abide – even after 153 years – lessons that should help you in college, I would argue, but most critically and urgently, lessons that will serve you for a lifetime of following your passions and calls for the good of the world. I can't wait to see what good you will do. Welcome to Augsburg – you belong here – and it's our great privilege to have you all with us!

>>Our promise to each other<<

I am very honored to welcome you to Augsburg University as we come together for the launch of Augsburg's 153rd academic year. You now become part of a very special community that is dedicated to your success as students – you can see already with all of the staff and faculty who are here today that we believe you belong here, you belong here!

As we welcome you, we make a promise to you even as you make a promise to us.

What do you promise us? First, you promise that you will bring your whole self to our community – your gifts and skills as a scholar, as a leader, as an artist, as an advocate for justice and peace, as a family and community member. All of these skills and more help to make Augsburg stronger. We are a small community and we need your many gifts to help us live out our mission. Second, you also promise that you will join us on your life's journey – a journey that has already been underway with your family, in your schools and churches, in your neighborhood. And now we have the privilege to have you join us for these next several years so that your journey to a career, to your own families, to your communities is shaped by what you learn here, by the lifelong friendships you will make with fellow students, faculty, and staff, by the experiences we offer here to help you find your path forward.

With your promise to us, what do we promise you in return? We promise you an educational experience like no other. I have been the president here for more than 16 years and I have witnessed how this university community meets our students where they are – with their remarkable life experiences and gifts – and then offers you, each of you, what you need to be successful. We say that we are “small to our students, and big for the world,” and we mean it. We will walk alongside you with amazing faculty and staff members whose sole purpose is to offer you the support, the challenges, the love (I might say) that you need to be successful. I believe that Augsburg is one of the most mission-driven places I have ever seen. We say that we educate students to be “informed citizens, thoughtful stewards, critical thinkers, and responsible leaders,” and we mean it because the world needs you, we need you to take the education you receive here (in the classroom, on campus, and in the world) and put it to use for the good of your families, your communities, and the world.

And when in a few short years, you walk across the stage at US Bank Stadium (where we hold our commencement ceremonies) and graduate from Augsburg University, the promises we have made and kept to each other will mean that you are equipped to be the change you want to see in the world, to live a good life, to give back to your families and communities.

That's the Augsburg promise. I can't wait to see all of the good you will do as students here at this special university.

PRACTICE THIS

>>Personal reflections on leadership<<

Earlier this summer, I spent time with our President's Council, a group of influential alumni and friends who are recruited to serve as a sounding board for my leadership. I offered these reflections on three abiding frames for our leadership work in the years ahead – work that gets at the challenges coming out of the pandemic and facing a critical moment for higher education in our society. I welcome your thoughts.

Abundance vs. scarcity – toward a sustainable financial model – “We need a moratorium on abundance” and “It's no longer more with less, it's less with less,” and so on – these are the sorts of things we hear from our community when we are faced with financial challenges. For 16+ years, I have preached and attempted to model a commitment to abundance, the belief and reality that we have more than enough if we bring our best thinking and imagination to bear on how to practice abundance – leveraging assets, shared services, partnerships, putting things together in ways that undo redundancies and build more focused organizational structures. This is not to deny that we may fall short with tuition revenue or auxiliary revenue, but if we default into scarcity thinking, we will wallow in our self-pity and victim mentalities, and not get to the work that truly is sustainable.

Our commitments to diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice in a cancel culture – When we decided to create a Critical Race and Ethnic Studies program a couple of years ago, we lost donors and others who jumped to the conclusion that we were all about being “woke” – in other words, we were cancelled because we responded to the needs and expectations of the students and faculty we are privileged to have as part of the Augsburg community. In our hyper-partisan culture, even good, well-intentioned folks jump to conclusions without taking the time to reflect, consider, understand. For example, when I went to Luther College in 1975 and read Ole Rolvaag's *Giants in the Earth*, this harrowing tale of the Norwegian immigrants who settled our part of the world, I was learning about the lived experience of my ancestors – and that was a core aspect of my liberal arts education. Today, our students – who look very different than most of us – are asking us to let them do the same thing, study the lived experience of their ancestors and culture – that, too, is at the core of a liberal arts education in the 21st century. This is not about being politically correct, this is about doing what Augsburg has always done – meet students where they are, educate them well for lives of meaning and purpose, and send them out into the world to be socially mobile, to make a good living, to support their families, to give back to their communities.

The opportunities of legacy and succession – It's a bit weird for me to be in conversations about “my” legacy at Augsburg, but I guess at 16+ years and just a few more to go, it is a relevant topic. We've done such important work together over these many years – especially as our student body and faculty have been transformed, as we've achieved national and international recognition for our commitments to community engagement, as we've crafted an institutional culture of learning and results, as we've raised record amounts of money for key strategic priorities, as we've put in place new academic programs that meet pressing needs, and so on – and now we must ensure that these

commitments are firmly integrated into all aspects of Augsburg's organizational structure and cultural commitments. The more I think about the opportunities for legacy work, yes, there are building projects, program development, endowment growth, that I might like to see and will continue to pursue, but perhaps most important is the work I am engaging right now to interrogate Augsburg's saga, to find in the threads of Augsburg's history a coherent narrative that makes sense of who we are today and that binds our community together for its future work. If I can get that right, I believe the Augsburg we all love will thrive for another 150 years!

PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<

I love libraries and recently received *The Private Library: The History of the Architecture and Furnishing of the Domestic Bookroom*, by Reid Byers (Oak Knoll Books, 2021). And though I would rather think of libraries as public rather than private spaces, this beautiful book does offer historical insight into the creation of personal libraries, many of which, of course, became the foundation of public libraries (think Thomas Jefferson and the Library of Congress).

I have had the privilege recently of engaging with Dr. Johnetta Betsch Cole, former president of both Spelman and Bennett colleges, and author of *Racism in American Public Life: A Call to Action* (University Virginia Press, 2021). It is an honor to share a commitment to anti-racist action with such a remarkable leader.

Finally, in my ongoing fascination with urban life, I have *Four Lost Cities: A Secret History of the Urban Age* by Annalee Newitz (W.W. Norton, 2021), which recounts the history of four ancient cities and why they were abandoned.

>>The Trough<<

A colleague recently brought to my attention this poem by Judy Brown, which offers wise advice about how to survive both treacherous waters and treacherous circumstances of all sorts.

There is a trough in waves,
a low spot
where horizon disappears
and only sky
and water
are our company.
And there we lose our way
unless
we rest, knowing the wave will bring us
to its crest again.
There we may drown
if we let fear
hold us in its grip and shake us
side to side,

and leave us flailing, torn, disoriented.
But if we rest there
in the trough,
in silence,
being in the low part of the wave,
keeping our energy and
noticing the shape of things,
the flow,
then time alone
will bring us to another
place
where we can see
horizon, see land again,
regain our sense
of where
we are,
and where we need to swim.

Judy Brown

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>>Topics for upcoming issues<<

- Trusting institutions - again
- Stories we tell to ourselves and each other
- Big ideas!
- How the gifts of our faith helped us navigate the pandemic!

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