

NOTES FOR THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

Volume Twenty-Three, Number Three (February, 2022)

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

NOTES FROM READERS

It has been very cold here in Minnesota so far in 2022, which makes the several trips I made to warmer climes during the past few weeks especially welcome. It is good to travel again, to see favorite haunts, to visit with friends and colleagues in person rather than on a screen, to witness how the pandemic has reshaped daily life in so many ways. My reflective practice in these pandemic days returns again and again to lessons learned – lessons about imagination and resilience even in the midst of isolation and loss – lessons that will make a deep difference in our lives in the years ahead. I pray that you are safe and well, and looking forward to warmer and more joyful days.

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

>>Concerned<<

I preached this homily in the Augsburg Chapel during the first weeks of our Spring Semester.

John 2: 1-11

Happy New Year, my friends. We come together in these fraught times – these first weeks in the Epiphany season – seeking to discern God's will for God's faithful people in the here and now. The poet W.H. Auden, offers, in "For the Time Being," these remarkable words of wisdom for all of us looking to live as faithful disciples in the time being:

"Well, so that is that.

Now, we must dismantle the tree,

Putting the decorations back into their cardboard boxes—

Some have gotten broken—and carrying them up to the attic...

To those who have seen The Child, however dimly, however incredulously,

The Time Being is, in a sense, the most trying time of all.

For the innocent children who whispered so excitedly

Outside the locked door where they knew the presents to be

Grew up when it was opened...

In the meantime
There are bills to be paid, machines to keep in repair
Irregular verbs to learn, the Time Being to redeem
From insignificance.”

And there is our vocational task – our calling to be discerned – the time being to be redeemed.

This morning, I’d like to suggest that a compelling part of that discernment is what it means to be “concerned” as part of our vocational lives in the world. How is this “C” word – concerned – an important aspect of our “V” word – our vocations?

Let’s begin with the gospel story for this morning, assigned in the lectionary for this next Sunday, the 2nd week in Epiphany – this familiar tale of Jesus’s first miracle, labeled “The Wedding at Cana.” As an aside, I visited the purported site of this miracle a few years ago during my trip to Israel and was struck by how out of the way, down narrow alleys, in the midst of an ancient neighborhood, it was. Not a grand place at all, and here was where Jesus’s ministry began.

I’m sure we all recognize the broad outlines of the miracle story. At the beginning, Jesus is with his mother and disciples at the wedding, when the wine gives out. The story ends with this surprising act as Jesus turns water into fine wine.

It’s the interactions that happen in the middle of the story that I want to focus on. It’s Mary who comes to Jesus with news that the wine has run out. And Jesus’s reply is where I want to pause: “Woman, what concern is that to you and me? My hour has not yet come.” Now, I don’t know about you, but I’ve always heard this reply as a rebuke of Mary. Go away, Mom, this is not my problem – I’m all about bigger and better things.

But in an article from a few years back, Jesuit theologian Michael Buckley has suggested that there is a deeper and more nuanced meaning to Jesus’s response. Mary does not make a request, she simply states a fact – there is no more wine. Jesus responds with a question that gets at the heart of his entire ministry – Buckley rephrases the response this way: “How do we include essentially within our lives those who we might otherwise forget as we go about the business of our lives.” In other words, Jesus is noting in his question the truth that we are inextricably bound up with each other. To be concerned is to be truly human.

And the interesting thing is that Mary seems to get it. Instead of responding with some sort of moral argument for why Jesus should be concerned, she turns to the servants and tells them to do whatever Jesus tells them. She understands that the concern Jesus has for the needs of others demands obedience, not arguments.

And here is the lesson for us in this story – here is the vocational challenge for faithful people. The gift of faith from our gracious God carries with it both Mary’s statement that the wine is gone and the response Jesus gave to his mother: “What is this to you and me?”

Again, Buckley challenges us with this lesson for our contemporary lives in the world.

“Those parents who watch their children grow up without education, without much hope for a better life...they have no wine. The millions of aged, hidden away in our cities or in dreadful

convalescent homes...they have no wine. The despised or feared or uneducated, whose lives are terrorized by the violence on our streets...they have no wine. Women demeaned and threatened by violence and their disproportionate level of financial insecurity...they have no wine.”

And we could go on with the threats against our Muslim neighbors, the systematic racism in our country, the corruption in organizations and countries around the world – they have no wine. To which Jesus calls us to grapple with what concern this is to you and me, to recognize our common human experience, and to get to work as those called to follow him. Obedience, not arguments.

I love how this story is told as the beginning of Jesus’s public ministry, because from here – from this claim that being concerned is at the heart of the life of faith – we then are offered lesson after lesson of what Jesus calls us to be and do. We are called to heal the sick, to free the imprisoned, to feed the hungry, to comfort the heartbroken, to fight for peace and justice for all God’s creation.

So, back to our vocational journeys in the world. One the most distressing ways in which the theological concept of vocation has been corrupted in the public discourse is the idea that a calling is simply a personal possession, unencumbered by the demands of others, and always it seems on an upwardly mobile life trajectory.

Well, no... The message we must proclaim for all to hear is your vocation, your calling, is never separated from the needs and aspirations of the communities and organizations and neighborhoods in which we live and work. Our callings are an obedient response to those who have no wine, because we are called to be concerned. No arguments, follow Jesus. We must reclaim the fact that at the core of our lives together in the world, our gracious and loving God intends for us to love each other as God loves us, to be concerned for each other as our God is concerned for us.

And here’s the cool thing about all of this as we return to our gospel story. Jesus tells the servants to fill the jars with water, to then draw some out and take it to the chief steward, who then exclaims to the bridegroom: “Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now.” The story ends with this powerful lesson. For those who follow Jesus, for those who are called to be concerned and do God’s work in the world, the best, the very best, is yet to come. Thanks be to God. Amen.

>>175 Years at Rockford University<<

Just last week I had the privilege to join with the Rockford University community as they celebrated the 175th anniversary of the signing of the charter that established Rockford Female Seminary in 1847. As you will remember, I served as Rockford’s 16th president from 2002-2006. It was fun to see old friends and colleagues, and also to be joined by Dr. Bill Shields, the 15th president; Dr. Robert Head, the 17th president; and Dr. Eric Fulcomer, the 18th and current president.

I offered the following reflections at a lovely banquet for the university’s faculty and staff.

175th Anniversary of Rockford University

What a joy to be with you and the Rockford community for this momentous occasion, celebrating the 175th anniversary of Rockford University. In a time in our world when institutions are more and more under duress and viewed with a skeptical eye, it is truly remarkable and meaningful to be able

to mark 175 years of mission-based work in the world. We should never take for granted what has been accomplished at this fine university.

I bring you greetings from the Augsburg University community, which just two years ago celebrated its 150th anniversary – brought to an abrupt halt by the pandemic in the spring of 2020. I am now finishing my 16th year as Augsburg's president – and though I might wish to have retired two years ago and not have lived through pandemic times in higher ed, I continue to find deep meaning and purpose in my calling as a university president – a calling that first brought me here in 2002 and for which I am ever grateful.

I also bring you warm greetings from my family. My spouse, Abigail, who found such joy in her engagement with the Rockford community during our time here – especially in the arts and with the Easter Seals organization – and now finds herself engaged with working with families as they grieve the loss of loved ones. She has been licensed as a celebrant for funerals and brings her wonderful hospitality skills to bear in supporting families as they seek to celebrate the lives of dear ones. And then there are the kids! Some of you might remember Thomas, who we brought home from Vietnam just a couple of days before my on-campus interview here in December 2001 – he was running up and down the side aisle as I answered questions in an open session. Well, Thomas is now 21, 6'2", 225 pounds – we fed him well – and a junior at Augsburg. Our daughter Maya, whom we adopted from China while we were here in Rockford, is now a senior in high school and just now choosing where she will attend college. Some of you might remember that when we went to China to adopt Maya, we were delayed because of some health issues, and I did not get back for a scheduled trustee meeting – the only board meeting I have missed in my 20+ years as a college president, but I had the best excuse and you were all so supportive and understanding.

And maybe that's a good way to say how grateful I am for all of the ways in which you all supported and encouraged me – a relatively young, probably a bit arrogant, leader, sometimes stumbling along (how many of you remember that Chris Hedges commencement debacle in my first year?) but always learning from you what a college needs from its president – lessons that have served me well in my long tenure at Augsburg. Thank you for your patience, your generosity, and your genuine commitment to our work together to further Rockford's important mission.

I will close by sharing with you three lessons I learned here at Rockford that have been central to my work over the past fifteen+ years at Augsburg, and that are worth celebrating as abiding values of this university over its 175 years:

- It's all about mission – even when we face challenges, never forget why we do what we do – here at Rockford, the Jane Addams legacy was and continues to be central to your mission-based work, and you won't be surprised to know that I have focused at Augsburg on what it means to be an urban settlement in the 21st century
- It's also about place – the importance of Rockford Female Seminary, Rockford College, and now Rockford University to its neighborhood, its city, and its region – and the university's commitment to its place – both geographically and in the relationships it has built over 175 years with its fellow citizens – means that it was never all about us and our internal needs and work, it is also about the well-being of the wider community, our neighbors, our fellow travelers. I learned here to think beyond the boundaries of campus and to embrace the city as a classroom, where we all teach and learn together.

- And finally, it's about community, about what I've come to understand as our common work – certainly shared governance in our higher education jargon – but more than that. Our small universities will never have the numbers of staff and faculty to specialize in every area necessary, so we figure out how to share the work, to step outside of our silos and comfort zones to do the work, supporting each other, building trustworthy relationships, all for the sake of our students and our communities.

And so tonight, I give thanks for 175 years at Rockford University – for important, life-giving lessons about mission, about place, and about community. And I look forward to watching with great pride as this remarkable university sets off on its next 175 years! Thank you.

PRACTICE THIS

>>Hospitality and leadership<<

I wrote the following column for our *Augsburg Now* magazine, in which I lift up the legacy of hospitality and leadership of the late Anne Frame, spouse of Augsburg's 9th president (my immediate predecessor) Bill Frame. I think it is critical that we are intentional in remembering that our work today is always built on foundations set by those who came before us.

A legacy of hospitality and leadership

My wife, Abigail, and I first met Anne and Bill Frame some 18 years ago when we were chosen to be part of a new program, sponsored by the Council of Independent Colleges and designed by Bill, that helped college presidents and their partners to explore the links between their callings or vocations and the missions of the institutions they served. At that point, I was president of Rockford College in Illinois, and of course, Bill and Anne were at Augsburg. It was a remarkable experience for all of us involved and we remain friends and colleagues with many of those who shared the program with us. It was during this time that we first witnessed the delightful partnership that Anne and Bill had created – in their marriage, in their leadership of the program, and in their work at Augsburg. Those of us in the program all came to count on Bill for thoughtful and weighty treatises (one of us once proclaimed, “Give me a thesaurus” when Bill’s vocabulary got to be a bit much!) while Anne’s gracious and calm presence brought us back to the joy of the work at hand.

Little did we know that just a few months after the program concluded that Abigail and I would be elected as Anne and Bill’s successors as Augsburg’s leader. It was during the leadership transition and over the past 15 years that I have come to know the many ways in which Anne’s presence and engagement with the Augsburg community during Bill’s presidency have made a lasting impact.

Ann Frame passed away this past summer, but her legacy lives on the many ways her life and work have graced the Augsburg community, I would highlight just a few...

Anne and Bill made the case for and then created a place of wonderful hospitality and fellowship at Augsburg House, the residence for Augsburg’s president and family, but more importantly a place at which to gather students, faculty, staff, alumni, and friends to celebrate and build community. In fact, Anne and Bill set important traditions at the House that we still celebrate, including a festive

holiday party for neighbors who are often inconvenienced by all the cars parked along West River Parkway for our many parties!

Anne loved to engage with students, participating in activities like Late Night Breakfasts at the end of each semester and City Service Days at the beginning of each term. It was deeply meaningful to students to see the president and family involved in the life of the campus.

Anne also served as a board member for the Augsburg Associates, a group of committed volunteers who organized fundraising events to raise funds for student scholarships. The annual Velkommen Yul celebrations remain a highlight of the academic year. Lifting up our Norwegian heritage.

Finally, Anne accompanied Bill on many international trips – to Augsburg's campus site in South Africa and Namibia; to Norway as part of our relationship with the Norwegian Nobel Institute, and perhaps most memorably to China with a group of Minnesota private college presidents and partners to explore a relationship with a newly formed liberal arts college on the mainland, now known as United International College.

After Bill and Anne retired from Augsburg in 2006, they continued to be engaged in the Augsburg community, attending events, visiting donors, cheering us on in our various efforts to make Augsburg the remarkably diverse institution it is today. At the same time, it was a joy for me to see the meaning that Anne found in returning to her chosen profession – her calling – as an accountant for various organizations in the Tacoma area. In that way, Anne continued to model for all of us what it means to follow the divine call, wherever it leads us – even when the call is surprising and unexpected.

We celebrate the ways in which presidential leadership over 150 years – shared in partnership with remarkable spouses – sets a foundation for the work we do today!

PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<

In these increasingly digital times (which is not necessarily a bad thing!), many of us are still drawn to the printed word in books, and also to the repositories of those books known as libraries. Scottish authors Andrew Pettegree and Arthur Der Weduwen have published *The Library: A Fragile History* (Basic Books, 2021), which is a comprehensive account from scrolls to the digital revolution.

My friend and colleague Richard Guarasci, president emeritus of Wagner College in Staten Island, has published *Neighborhood Democracy: Building Anchor Partnerships Between Colleges and their Communities* (Stylus Publishing, 2022), which makes the case for stronger college-community partnerships and also includes models of such partnerships, including Augsburg University (see pp. 86-89).

In my pursuit of compelling cases for our equity and inclusion efforts at Augsburg, I was pleased to receive Darrell Jodock and William Nelsen's *Embracing Diversity: Faith, Vocation, and the Promise of America* (Fortress Press, 2022). Jodock and Nelsen both have deep roots in Lutheran higher education and argue that the theological roots of our tradition call us to welcome and embrace the pluralism of our democracy.

Finally, I am proud to lift up the inspiring work of my Augsburg colleague, Dr. Katie Clark, associate professor of nursing and Executive Director of the Augsburg Health Commons. In the 2021 issue of *Higher Education Exchange, Institutions and the Public: A Troubled Relationship*, published by the Kettering Foundation and available to download at www.kettering.org, Katie's essay "Treating An Ailing Society: Citizen Nursing in an Era of Crisis" recounts her work with those experiencing homelessness in the midst of the pandemic.

>>Infirm<<

The late Chicago poet laureate, Gwendolyn Brooks, captured the spirit and tensions of life in Chicago after the great Northern migration by African-Americans. I share the following poem, *Infirm*, at the beginning of any session I lead on equity, inclusion, and anti-racism work, because it succinctly names the challenge to live as those both infirm, in need of mending, and beautiful, enough for the journey.

Infirm
("For handicapped all")

*Everybody here
is infirm.
Everybody here is infirm.
Oh. Mend me. Mend me. Lord.*

*Today I
say to them
say to them
say to them, Lord:
look! I am beautiful, beautiful with
my wing that is wounded
my eye that is bonded
or my ear not funded
or my walk all a-wobble.
I'm enough to be beautiful.*

You are beautiful too.

[Gwendolyn Brooks]

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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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