

## 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

Hard to believe it's November already – more than halfway through the fall semester here at Augsburg. So far, so good with the pandemic. The joy of being back together in person most days outweighs the dreaded mask-wearing everywhere! I'm traveling again – seeing donors mostly – and it takes a while to get my sea legs back. How are things for you? I'd love to hear from you.

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](http://www.jgacounsel.com). I thank my friends at Johnson, Grossnickle & Associates for their many years of abiding support for our reflective practice.

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### REFLECT ON THIS

>>This threshold moment<<

I preached this homily at the beginning of our fall term in September.

*Psalm 23* (performed by Bobby McFerrin)  
1 Corinthians 13: 8-13

Good morning – how good to be back together in this sacred space for these daily chapel services!

When Pastors Justin and Babette first mentioned the “Courageous Curiosity” theme for this fall’s chapel series, my mind went immediately to the confirmation lessons I learned from my dad, who introduced me to Martin Luther’s *Small Catechism*, in which we are taught to ask “What does this mean?” of the various parts of the Lord’s Prayer and Apostle’s Creed. What does this mean? – perhaps a form of courageous curiosity – perhaps a question we are called to ask always, and especially in this moment.

We find ourselves in liminal space – liminal from the Latin *limin*, meaning threshold – a space, a moment where and when we know what we have been through, but we don’t yet know what is to come – a space and moment that requires faith and hope and vigilance for what God is doing in our midst. What does this mean, we ask?

The social worker and 'Ted Talk' rock star Brene' Brown has called this liminal space "the messy middle" and perhaps that is how we are experiencing this space and moment – stuck in a middle that is very messy. What does this mean?

I chose this haunting version of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm from Bobby McFerrin because of how it provokes our thinking with its alternative language – "though I walk through a dark and dreary land" – "you will not forsake me," "you set a table before me and my foes," "surely goodness and kindness will follow me all the days of my life," – the stuff of faith and hope and God in charge. Liminal space. What does this mean?

The Apostle Paul reminds us that "Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known." Maybe here is the key for God's faithful people: Paul reminds us that, though already known, we only know in part – for now – saved, yet sinful, the messy middle, this threshold moment, is where we must live.

So what to do? Perhaps our courageous curiosity – our questions about what does this mean – will show us a way forward into this messy middle.

There is a liturgical season in the Christian calendar that rather resembles this messy middle – it is the time after Christmas and before Lent, it is called Epiphany, its label perhaps a hint of what we are called to be and do in this threshold moment – to seek, to watch, to uncover, to follow.

One of the signature stories of the Epiphany season is that of the three wise men – these wise ones who come from the East, following a star, seeking a savior, only to find a child, living with his parents. They leave their precious gifts as they give thanks to God and depart by another way to avoid Herod's edict. It is a love story, I believe, a story that offers us a map to our lives of faith in the messy middle.

I have learned much about the wise ones story through the lens of W.H. Auden's magisterial prose poem, "For the Time Being." In a section of the poem entitled "The Summons," Auden has each wise man remark on why he might follow the star. I find in these remarks an intriguing way to consider the logic of the story.

The first wise one comments, "To discover how to be truthful now - Is the reason I follow the star."

Imagine the situation. These mysterious kings from the East see a star – they feel its pull, its majesty, its danger, its promise - and they step outside their positions of power and privilege, they take the risk of leaving comfortable and predictable circumstances to follow a star. They want to know the truth in a world where what passes for truth is wrapped up in narrow and confining formulae, in dizzying reams of information, in insecurity and blind allegiance. They want to be free – and to be free they must be truthful. That is why they follow the star – to find the truth – and therein we learn one of the important lessons of the love story: God calls us out of our ordinary and comfortable circumstances to follow, to discover how to be truthful. Lovers step out of the expected to learn the truth of each other.

And the second wise one adds, "To discover how to be living now – Is the reason I follow the star."

The wise ones undertake the journey occasioned by the pull of the star – who knows the risks, the burden, the sacrifices – and therein they seek not simply to remember a distant past or to dream of a possible future, but to understand what God intends for us now. The star calls them to seek out the glimpses of truthfulness and fidelity and good that are here now to be embraced and engaged – not to dwell on precedent or speculation – and therein to find genuine faith. Here is the second lesson of this love story: God is with us, present now and here, and our journeys must be open to discovering what it means to live faithfully, to do God’s work in the here and now. Lovers don’t glorify the past or put all their hope in the future – they are there for each other in the present, in the messy middle.

The third wise one continues, “To discover how to be loving now – Is the reason I follow the star.”

The wise ones follow where the star leads them – to a surprise, a baby lying in its mother’s arms – so counter-intuitive, so outside the realm of the world’s definition of success. And here is perhaps the most startling aspect of the story. Think about it – you can step out of your comfort zone, even take the risk of a journey that challenges you to be open to life in the here and now, but when it comes down to it, as humans we expect that at the end of this sacrificial, risky journey, we’ll be rewarded with a result that measures up to our sacrifices, that satisfies our human longings in ways we understand. But instead it is a child, living in pretty squalid conditions. This is it? This is what we gave it all up to find? Surprise, yes this is what it is all about. Lovers are open to the awesome and life-transforming surprises we will know in each other.

And finally, Auden has the wise men together proclaim, “To discover how to be human now – Is the reason we follow the star.”

Here is the culmination of our love story. The wise ones have reached their destination and they do only what they can do – they give rare and precious gifts, they stand back in awe at God’s grand and mysterious ways. They suspend disbelief and proclaim God’s great wonders and love for God’s people. They learn to love again, to love a child whose work in the world is to save God’s people. Lovers fall in love with their beloved, and therein find themselves most fully, find what it means to be truly human now.

How do the wise ones offer us a map for our lives of faith in the messy middle? How will we find the truth, the living, the loving, the humanity? Are we willing to be drawn out of our usual places of power and privilege and comfort to undertake the journey of faith, to be open to surprises of love and to offer our gifts in response to the wonder of God breaking into our lives? How do we love as we have been loved? This is the love story of the wise men. This is our love story as God’s faithful people in the world, called to the messy middle, called to be and serve our neighbor, called to fall in love again and again, here and now – and the wise ones teach us how! “And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.” Thanks be to God. Amen.

>>Wrestling with angels<<

This was my homily in chapel when our Board of Regents were on campus for the first time in 20 months!

Genesis 32: 24-28

It is wonderful to be together in person with members of our Board of Regents – the first time in 20 months! And I thought it would be fitting to reflect a bit on our commitment to a Lutheran higher education.

So what do you think of when you hear about our Lutheran colleges and universities? I'm sure there are many alumni of our colleges in the congregation today. I'm a proud Luther College grad and now have the honor to serve as Augsburg's 10th president.

I read this text from Genesis and immediately thought of Augsburg's world class wrestling program - Jacob might have been an NCAA champ. And as you might know, our chief rival for NCAA championships is the team from our sister school, Wartburg College. Who would have imagined two Lutheran colleges vying for wrestling titles!

Or maybe you've had an experience like me when our kids, Thomas and Maya, were maybe seven and four years old. We were at Target after church one Sunday and the kids were a couple of aisles away, and all of a sudden I hear them singing at the top of their lungs, "Jesus Loves Me," but instead of rushing over to quiet them down I thought how wonderful that I was raising future members of the Luther or Augsburg or St. Olaf choirs!

Or maybe your memories of our Lutheran colleges are friends for a lifetime, or that faculty member who changed your life with a class or a word of wise advice, or the daily chapel services that drew the community together.

Whatever your memories - and they all are still important to our lives on campus today - I want to suggest that at the heart of our mission as a university grounded in Lutheran faith and values is our deep and abiding commitment to walking alongside our students as they wrestle with angels - wrestling just like Jacob did millennia ago to secure a blessing, to find a way in the world, to discern a calling, to live faithfully as a child of God.

This thing called faith is so central to our lives, our tradition, and our role in the world, and yet too often we find it extremely difficult to engage each other in conversations about what we believe and why. I believe deeply that our need to talk about faith and its role in our private and public lives is perhaps more relevant than ever before because the world needs people of faith. The evidence is so clear that we are a fallen people – in pain, separated from our better natures, fragmented from each other, at war within and without – surely we all know the reality of what the Apostle Paul called "creation's groaning." And we could leave it just there – as many do – with no evidence for optimism, no sense of what it all means, no horizon that inspires us to go on. Yet we are called to faith and hope. Acknowledging creation's groaning while also believing that the Divine is active in our midst, we find hope in the *glimpses* of God's reign in our history, in our daily lives. Faith is what helps us live in the paradox that Martin Luther called *simul justus et peccator* – people living in the tension of being saved yet still sinful, in the tension of creation's groaning and the mysterious and redemptive work of God in our lives. Wrestling with angels, even.

In the context of this elegant tension, I've been thinking about faith a good bit over the past few months as we try to imagine the role that faith plays in the Augsburg University community and I'd like to offer a brief glimpse of some of my thinking and see if it makes sense to you as we all seek to grasp what it means to be faithful people in the world. How are we called to wrestle with angels in our lives of faith in the world?

Story of Thomas' adoption: Imagine this situation – five families gathered in an orphanage conference room in Soc Trang, Vietnam, brief speeches, food is served, and all of a sudden five children are carried out from the back room. There ensues this remarkable cacophony of screaming and crying and picture-taking – and then we are off, loaded into vans and on our way back to our lives, changed forever by what happened in that orphanage.

This scene, it seems to me, is a glimpse of what happens to all of us when faith breaks into our lives: a ceremony, cacophony, and our lives are changed forever – it is this wondrous moment of transformation, of being claimed and named, of becoming part of a new family, of receiving the greatest gift we could ever imagine to receive.

It is this story that helps me to understand that faith truly is a gift – not to be coveted or expected, but to be received – we are chosen by God to be God's child, to become a part of God's family, to belong as a child of God. Faith disrupts our lives, surprises us, transforms what we expect to happen, changes us forever – and there is nothing we can do but receive the gift and then live as gifted people.

Story of Betsy, an Augsburg student: Betsy is like many of our students who come to the college not sure exactly what she believes – and yet she jumps into the life of the college, a good student, a good citizen, and more and more an active participant in our Campus Kitchens program. Betsy begins to understand through her work with our neighbors how much she values the opportunity to be of service, perhaps initially because it feels good, but more and more because she begins to understand what she learns in relationship with neighbor. She is disappointed when she is asked simply to deliver meals – she wants fellowship and community.

Surely Betsy shows us what it means to think about faith as a call, not a finished product, but a story unfolding where faith is not a certain fact, but an evolving narrative of a life that comes to understand what it means to live as a gifted person of faith.

My teacher, Martin Marty, says that the distinctive mark of faithful people is “acts of mercy” – Luther uses the word “neighbor” more often than any other word in his voluminous works.

Faith as call teaches us that there is not necessarily one destination point – one place where we can call it a day. Faith as call reminds us of the seeking and searching that accompanies a life of faith – faith is loving the neighbor, doing acts of mercy – faith is an unfolding story to our lives that may not be what we expected.

Story of my mother, Elsie My mom died 19 years ago this past summer and during her final couple of weeks, she was surrounded by the vigil of friends and family in the hospice care center where she was lodged. My mother, who was a most remarkable woman, had been battling cancer for several years, and, now having made some difficult decisions about her treatment alternatives, was in a time of peaceful and faithful waiting for the disease to run its course. Her large family—I am the oldest of six children, all married with children of their own—made frequent visits to see mom/grandma, valuing the time together and with her.

Our visits struck me as instructive for all of us as we “keep vigil” with and for mom. I wonder what we might all learn from those times when we band together with family, friends, co-workers, fellow

citizens to pay attention, to wait for, to mark out the time in preparation for some impending moment.

Here, then, is faith as promise, the ways in which we suspend our own notions of time and progress and success to wait patiently and prayerfully for God's will to be done. This is faith reaching to a deeper place in our lives, asking us to remember all the ways in which our lives are shaped by the people we care about; to console each other, to be faithful partners in the work of grieving loss and celebrating lives well lived; to learn how healing is more often about broken hearts and spirits than about broken bodies; to be patient, to wait for things beyond our control to show us the way to a new place; to wonder at the awesome power of life and death, and of our grand and mysterious God; and to hope for the things to come.

And when my mom passed into our God's embrace, we experienced what the hymnwriter John Ylvisaker has called "just one last surprise," God's promise of abundant and eternal life.

Faith as gift, call and promise – faith as a life unfolding. We join together to proclaim "Lord, I believe" – I believe in your gift, your call, your promise – even as we admit, "help my unbelief" – my struggles to receive the gift, to discern and live the call, to wait for the promise. This is faith living in the world, full of tensions and full of grace! This is our call to wrestle with angels! Thanks be to God. Amen.

## PRACTICE THIS

>>Our values<<

As I mentioned in the last Notes, I am participating in an effort with the Association of Fundraising Professionals (AFP) to explore the core values that guide the work of philanthropic fundraisers. Our initial work has involved attempting to define those core values and arguing for and against including them as part of a values statement. It has been an inspiring exercise as members of the group have been candid and vulnerable in expressing their opinions about the values framework – the sort of work that ethicists believe should be part of our everyday lives!

Here are two values that I defined and provided pro and con arguments for including them in our values framework:

### *INTEGRITY*

#### *Why integrity?*

Integrity is critical to our work as philanthropic fundraisers both as a professional value and as an institutional value. Integrity is the alignment between values and actions. It includes honesty and trust in relationships. It includes institutional policies and practices that ensure transparency and confidence. It refers to the ways in which we keep our promises to each other, to donors, and to the public trust.

#### *Why not integrity?*

The main argument against including integrity as a core value for our work as philanthropic fundraisers is that it may be redundant with the various other core values we claim, such as trust, honesty, transparency, and adherence.

## COURAGE

### *Why courage?*

Philanthropic fundraisers engage in their work at the boundaries between an organization's mission, vision, and highest priorities, and the wider community, including donors, friends, board members, and so forth. In that boundary space, fundraisers become moral teachers, giving voice to the values of the organization and those who seek to support it. To be a moral teacher requires the courage to be a conscience, to navigate conflicts of values and interests, to recognize and respond to sometimes competing needs and intentions, to say no when it is right to say no, and to be resolute in those boundary spaces.

### *Why not courage?*

An argument against including courage as a core value for philanthropic fundraisers is primarily based in rejecting a "heroic" view of the profession. For those of us who do this work, we do all that courage demands of us as humble guardians of the public trust, as public servants even.

Among the other values under discussion are accountability, adherence, transparency, honesty/trust, responsibility, community, equity and inclusion, and justice. What do you think? What other values should be included in a values framework for philanthropic fundraisers – why or why not? I welcome your thoughts.

## PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<

A good friend of my spouse, Abigail, has recently published an important book about living in the midst of the opioid epidemic. Amy C. Sullivan is an independent scholar and faculty member at Macalester College – her book is *Opioid Reckoning: Love, Loss, and Redemption in the Rehab State* (University of Minnesota Press, 2021), a most personal tale with critical implications for all of us.

I've returned to my Jane Addams research and have found a wonderful resource in Marilyn Fischer's *Jane Addams's Evolutionary Theorizing: Constructing "Democracy and Social Ethics"* (University of Chicago Press, 2019). Marilyn – a colleague of many years in the ethics field – also edited a set of essays (with Carol Nackenoff and Wendy Chmielewski) entitled *Jane Addams and the Practice of Democracy* (University of Illinois Press, 2009).

In an earlier issue of Notes, I recommended David Mathews's *With*; he now has issued *Together: Building Better, Stronger Communities* (Kettering Foundation, 2021), a companion volume in working draft form (available from [www.kettering.org](http://www.kettering.org)).

>>Angels<<

Our Advent celebrations here at Augsburg are all about angels (more about that in the next issue of Notes). Here is a wonderful poem along those lines from Mary Oliver.

*You might see an angel anytime  
and anywhere. Of course you have  
to open your eyes to a kind of  
second level, but it's not really  
hard. The whole business of  
what's reality and what isn't has  
never been solved and probably  
never will be. So I don't care to  
be too definite about anything.  
I have a lot of edges called Perhaps  
and almost nothing you can call  
Certainty. For myself, but not  
for other people. That's a place  
you just can't get into, not  
entirely anyway, other people's  
heads.*

*I'll just leave you with this.*

*I don't care how many angels can  
dance on the head of a pin. It's  
enough to know that for some people  
they exist, and that they dance.*

>>Subscription information<<

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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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