

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

Well, here we are on the cusp of another new year. I hope and pray that you and yours are safe and healthy (and sane!) in the midst of all the swirl of pandemic hysteria, divisive politics, and the seemingly never-ending stream of difficult news. May the gift of reflective practice be a source of comfort and hope and healing for you in this new year. And may 2022 be easier for all of us!

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

>>Patience: The Advent of God's Time<<

I preached this homily in our university chapel during the first week in Advent.

Psalm 90: 1-4, 10-12

For a thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night. (Psalm 90: 4)

On Sunday, I was thinking about the title of my homily – the first day of a new church year in this liturgical season of preparation that we call Advent – as I spent countless hours helping my high school daughter finish her college applications. Patience, I thought to myself, God give me patience.

It is a prayer we all might offer up as Advent begins and we try to make sense of our life together as God's people in the world – as a people who have received the gift of faith and now must live in the world as those with whom God has come to dwell. Patience, we pray, God give us patience.

As Psalm 90, assigned for this first week in Advent, shows us, patience is a long-standing theological topic. A thousand years for God is like a day just gone by, the Psalmist sings. My theological understanding of patience did not, however, come to me in my long years of divinity school study. Instead, I learned this important theological concept while reading a series of children's books by Madeleine L'Engle, whose *A Wrinkle in Time* (and the series that followed, including *A Swiftly Tilting Planet*) was the story of a quirky girl named Meg, her overly-intelligent little brother, and their time-transcending journey to save their physicist father with the help of three mysterious beings.

L'Engle is the writer who first taught me the incredible difference between two words in Greek, *chronos* and *kairos*, which both are translated in English as "time," but in the original Greek are vastly different. Chronos is the time on your wrist watch, time on the move, passing from present to future and so becoming past. Kairos, on the other hand, is qualitative rather than quantitative. It is time as a moment, a significant occasion, an immeasurable quality. Kairos is God's time, it is real time—it is the *eternal now*.

As the Advent season begins, we recall the remarkable ways in which Kairos has broken into our Chronos – and how our lives will never be the same. When our God broke into human history to proclaim the kingdom among us, God came to show us in *chronos* the reality of *kairos*. Our God, heaven cannot hold him, we proclaim in a favorite Advent hymn. Kairos is that time – God's time – which breaks through chronos with a shock of joy, time where we are far more real than we can ever be when we are continually checking our watches. "Are we willing and able to be surprised?" L'Engle asks. "If we are to be aware of life while we are living it, we must have the courage to relinquish our hard-earned control of ourselves." We must have the courage and patience to live aware that the kingdom of God is *close at hand*.

And here we are, just like the shepherds in Bethlehem 2000 years ago, going about their ordinary work when an angel appears before them and the glory of the Lord shines around them. "Do not be afraid," the angel announced. "I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you" (Luke 2:13-14). At this invasion of kairos into the routine of chronos, the shepherds choose to respond with action: "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about" (2:15).

So what will we do, living in this same curious paradox somewhere between the *already* and the *not yet*, presented with a similar decision. Are we willing to be surprised again by Christ's coming? Are we willing to act on it? Are we able to release the nervous control of our daily schedules in order to stop and see the Christ, the eternal now in our midst? Are we able to find the patience we need to be God's kairos people in the world?

I've been thinking a great deal lately about time and patience and how hard it is to keep up with all of the demands placed upon me (by myself and others!) We are part of a college community in which schedules and time demands mean that we are driven by chronos. And yet the message of the Advent season is "be patient" for there is something remarkable about to happen to and for you – in other words, you are about to know the gift of kairos. And here we are, living in the tension between human time (with all its demands) and God's time (with its gracious and freeing promise).

Several sources have helped me to describe and better understand the tension in my life between the time I do not have and the longer horizon that I believe must guide my life and work.

I've read and re-read James Gleick's fascinating book of essays, entitled *Faster: the Acceleration of Just About Everything* (Pantheon Books, 1999), written on the cusp of the millennium. How about that title? Hits pretty close to home, doesn't it? Listen to Gleick's words: "We are in a rush. We are making haste. A compression of time marks the century now closing. Airport gates are minor intensifiers of the lose-not-a-minute anguish of our age. There are other intensifiers—places and objects that signify impatience...Doctor's anterooms ("waiting" rooms). The DOOR CLOSE button in elevators, so often a placebo, with no function but to distract for a moment those riders to

whom ten seconds seem an eternity. Speed-dial buttons on telephones...Remote controls..." (page 9). Gleick's essay titles read like a summary of my life: "Life as Type A," "Quick—Your Opinion?" "7:15. Took Shower." You get the point – this is our life in chronos!

And then I turn to Witold Rybczynski's biography of the great 19th century landscape designer, Frederick Law Olmsted, entitled *A Clearing in the Distance* (Scribner, 1999). In the précis for the book, we read this simple quote from Olmsted: "I have all my life been considering distant effects and always sacrificing immediate success and applause to that future." With those disquieting words, Olmsted, the designer of Central Park in New York and Mount Royal Park in Montreal, reminds us that the horizon of our lives matters. We must think on the end times, on the future good, on the history of our work and relationships, for only in our distant effects will we find the strength and courage and wisdom and patience to do our best work today—in the midst of this time.

William Schweiker, who teaches ethics at the University of Chicago, offers a theological take on Olmsted's distant effects, when he writes that "We live best as creative stewards of time." He describes two threads of thought in Western thought concerning time: one that time is full; the other that time is empty. We live in the tension between the two threads and creative stewards of time, he argues, are full of patience as they negotiate the tension.

And in the midst of that tension between time that is full and empty, we must act, we must go on, we must do as God intends for us to do. I find my inspiration to act in Biblical passages like this morning's psalm, and in wonderful devotional books like Martin Marty's *Our Hope for Years to Come: The Search for Spiritual Sanctuary* (Augsburg-Fortress Press, 1995), in which Marty offers these spirited and comforting words [about our times] – words that help me find the patience to live and act in the tensions between chronos and kairos...: "From the distance come sounds trumpeting encouragement. They herald reinforcements at hand, to be relied upon in our efforts of any day, of this day and night." (p. 39)

Here is the good news of Advent. God is breaking into our lives, the kingdom is come. Our God, heaven cannot hold him. And as we live in the tension of kairos and chronos, wondering whether we have the courage of the shepherds whose response to the proclamation of kairos was to go and find the Christ child, there are sounds of trumpeting encouragement, there are reinforcements at hand, there is our God who loves us so much...so much so that God came into our midst so that we might know the joy and surprise and grace of God's kingdom come, on earth as in heaven.

Reinforcements are at hand. May they be for all of us the source of comfort and strength and wisdom to live as a Kairos people. Patience, we pray, God give us patience. Advent blessings to you and thanks be to our God, Immanuel, with us forever and ever. Amen.

>>Advent reflections<<

As is the pattern, each Advent season I am asked to contribute devotional reflections to several publications. Here are three such reflections offered this year.

Paying attention to the Word (for Central Lutheran Church, Minneapolis)

I am the eldest child of a Lutheran minister and I recall countless Sunday mornings, sitting in the front pew with Mom, dutifully taking notes on Dad's sermon so that we could have a discussion at

Sunday dinner. “Punitive” comes to my mind when I remember my reaction to this family ritual – “of course I listen to what you’re saying, Dad!” But with plenty of hindsight, I now know deep in my heart that Dad was teaching me a lesson that has shaped my life – he was reminding me to “pay attention,” to attend to the Word, the words of grace and hope and peace, to pay attention to love breaking into our lives as God’s faithful people.

The story of the Word – the afflicting, difficult, divine, prophetic word – is found throughout the scriptures, and especially in the Apostle Paul’s epistles. Garry Wills, in his wonderful little book, *What Paul Meant*, reminds us that Paul’s letters are the first accounts we have available of how the early faithful understood Jesus’ ministry, his death and resurrection. Paul’s missives provide a perspective on what the early Christians (a term that Paul and the early faithful would not have used) struggled with as they sought to understand how to live as faithful people in the time being.

In particular, the lens of Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, the 13th chapter – the love chapter – is especially meaningful as it provides a still (and perhaps never more urgent) relevant blueprint of how the Living Word will be proclaimed by the community of believers. I think we can assume that the Corinthians were having their own issues in hearing and living the Word in the midst of the noisy and frightening early days after Jesus had left them. So Paul offers this remarkable hymn of love as a pattern for their lives – Paul offers the Word of Love to help the Corinthians (and us) make sense of our lives. If all I have are the words of mortals (or even angels), I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If all I have are human power and knowledge, I am nothing. Even if I give away all I have and give up my body, I gain nothing. Unless I have the Word, unless I have Love, I will not find the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

Wow – this concrete word to a very real community of the faithful – just like this one at Central Lutheran – is the call to live as the beloved, to live in the midst of the world as the Living Word, the body of Christ. It is the call to pay attention.

And so the story continues – as it has now for more than 2000 years – here at Central, as we seek to live as the beloved community, to be the living Word in a world that more than ever needs to know the Word. Pay attention, my friends!

An Advent Message to alumni and friends of Augsburg

Advent greetings from the Augsburg University community – our faculty, staff, students, and neighbors. We pray that you and yours are safe and well during this sacred time.

This Advent at Augsburg, we are reflecting on the role of angels in our lives. Our annual Advent Vespers has the theme of “Angel Voices, Again Now Sing,” reminding us of the many ways in which angels are part of the Nativity stories: Angels who share news of impending and unexpected births. Angels who comfort the frightened. Angels who sing loud alleluias upon the birth of a Savior.

And, of course, we also point to the abiding role of angels in our lives – perhaps most powerfully described in these words from Paul’s letter to the Hebrews, chapter 13, verse 2:

“Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.”

May the angels in your life continue to bring good tidings of great joy: For unto us a child is born... Wonderful Counselor, Prince of Peace, Mighty God. Glory to God in the highest!

A devotion for Christmas Day

Saturday, December 25: Colossians 3:12-17

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

On this most sacred morning, whether you slip on your favorite bathrobe to greet the day with family and friends around the tree or put on your holiday finery to join with fellow faithful in the sanctuary, know that you are clothed in Christ Jesus – the gift of our baptisms – so that we might pursue the holy work of compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. And in that holy work, we live as one body, praising our awesome God, through whom all things are made new. May it be so. Alleluia!

PRACTICE THIS

>>Taking a stand<<

I am often asked how I decide whether or not to take a stand on important social issues on behalf of Augsburg. Several years ago, our Board of Regents adopted the following “Public Will Framework” as a guide to such decisions. I share it as an example that many other leaders have adopted for their own institutions. Perhaps it will be helpful for you.

Building Public Will Decision-making Guide

What is building public will? Generating awareness, discussion, and providing opportunity for action that builds on community values to achieve change over the long term. In particular, for Augsburg the work of building public will should always reflect our academic mission that values conversation, civility and citizen engagement.

Augsburg participates in public will building by:

- Leading by doing. Through leadership in educating students, innovation in programs and services, and advocacy in public policy, Augsburg models a way of being in community that illustrates how institutions can help solve public challenges.
- Sharing stories and information about issues through Augsburg publications and through public commentary from Augsburg leaders.
- Publicly engaging students, faculty, staff, alumni and neighbors to be part of the solution and encouraging a sharing of various perspectives and experiences in a civil manner.

Public will decision criteria – when does Augsburg build public will around an issue?

1. Is it literally our mission or vision?
2. Is it of obvious strategic interest?
3. Is this an area where Augsburg has unique experience or expertise?
4. Does it affect the students, faculty, staff, alumni and neighbors we support and serve?
5. Is Augsburg called to leadership?
 1. Will an Augsburg stand change or reframe the debate?
 2. Are there partner organizations with whom to collaborate?
 3. Does Augsburg's role in local community life further define a need to respond?
6. Do we align with or bring value to our church body by taking a position?
7. Can the Augsburg stand speak to the value of nonpartisanship?

What level of visibility should our public will-building take?

Lead (high) – The issue IS Augsburg's mission or vision or represents an obvious strategic priority. Augsburg provides high visibility and high public leadership.

Access to and readiness for higher education (supporting, for example, Generation Next, College Possible, the Wallin Foundation, AVID); government policy on higher education (supporting, for example, Minnesota Private College Council, Council of Independent Colleges, National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities); the command to love the stranger as neighbor (supporting, for example, immigration policy, community-building, public safety).

Engage (medium) - Clearly a priority based on criteria and based on available resources, Augsburg will take leadership, often with other partners.

Equality and equity issues for all people (Marriage Amendment); same-sex relationships (Reconciling in Christ); neighborhood infrastructure and place-making (Cedar Riverside Partnership and Central Corridor Anchor Institutions); Voter ID; charitable deduction; anti-racism (YWCA); anti-poverty; climate change and environmental policy (Presidents' Climate Commitment); veterans' services (Yellow Ribbon); peace and justice issues (Nobel Peace Prize Forum).

Position (low) – Augsburg holds a position and selectively shares the position as needed with key constituencies, often privately.

Nonprofit property tax exemption; specific neighborhood issues (Minneapolis Park District, Minneapolis City Council and city departments); raising taxes (as relates to funding higher education priorities).

No Position – Augsburg defers to the social teachings of the ELCA or the issue doesn't meet our criteria.

For example, Abortion and health care coverage.

PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<

I am just a couple of weeks away from turning 65, and apart from all the correspondence related to Medicare plans, I am re-reading Parker Palmer's *On the Brink of Everything: Gravity, Grace, and Getting Old* (Berrett-Koehler, 2018), his beautiful reflections on how to see past, present, and future with a sense of the fullness of things.

I also have returned to Wendell Berry's inspiring Jefferson Lecture, *It All Turns on Affection* (Counterpoint, 2012), which in many ways is a summation of Berry's lifelong argument with our voracious, Capitalist ways. His call for repair and healing centers on the need for "affection" for each other and for all of creation. And he concludes his lecture with this haunting final paragraph: "But this has not been inevitable. We do not need to live as if we are alone."

I have just received (and will soon read) an important book by Johns Hopkins University president Ronald Daniels, who with Grant Shreve and Phillip Spector, has written *What Universities Owe Democracy* (John Hopkins University Press, 2021). Though I may not agree completely with his assessment of that obligation, it is nevertheless a critical call to reflection, conversation, and action for all of higher education.

>>The Singing of Angels<<

Howard Thurman's beautiful call to listen for the singing of angels was included in Augsburg's Advent Vespers service this year. Life is saved, he reminds us, by the singing of angels!

THE SINGING OF ANGELS

There must be always remaining in every man's life some place for the singing of angels -- some place for that which in itself is breathlessly beautiful and by an inherent prerogative, throwing all the rest of life into a new and creative relatedness -- something that gathers up in itself all the freshets of experience from drab and commonplace areas of living and glows in one bright light of penetrating beauty and meaning -- then passes. The commonplace is shot through with new glory -- old burdens become lighter, deep and ancient wounds lose much of their old, old hurting. A crown is placed over our heads that for the rest of our lives we are trying to grow tall enough to wear. Despite all the crassness of life, despite all the hardness of life, despite all of the harsh discords of life, life is saved by the singing of angels.

Howard Thurman

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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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