

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<<

Happy New Year! May peace and light be yours and ours in 2006.

I received a few comments in response to the last issue of Notes.

David Tinker from Pittsburgh reflects on my "real and ideal" thoughts about fundraising ethics: "Your comments on the second theme of our moral framework being the notion of philanthropic fundraising as a vocation or calling really struck home with me. I truly believe that my calling from God is to help others through philanthropic fundraising. He has given me the opportunity to help others, as Hank Rosso would have said, through the careful art of giving. By this I mean that I am helping the donor as much as I am helping the beneficiary of the gift."

And Sigrid Trombley, a long-time subscriber from Wichita and a wonderfully reflective practitioner, sent along thanks for the piece on the art of philanthropy in the last issue, but also sent a few intriguing quotes from others. My favorite: "If I can ask my own questions, try out my ideas, experience what's around me, share what I find; if I have plenty of time for my special pace, a nourishing space, things to transform; if you'll be my patient friend, trusted guide, fellow investigator, partner in learning; then I will explore the world, discover my voice, and tell you what I know in a hundred languages." (Pamela Hook) Thank you, Sigrid, for your faithful correspondence and partnership in our reflective practice!

Finally, I was moved by a beautiful passage from Anne Lamott's *Traveling Mercies* (Anchor Books, 1999), quoted by Martin E. Marty in the December 2005 issue of *Context*. It seems fitting to reprint it here in the spirit of a new year. Lamott writes, first quoting a Leonard Cohen song:

"'There are cracks, cracks, in everything, that's how the light gets in.' I loved that line the first time I read it, sleepless at 2 a.m., with my life falling apart around me. Over the last four years, however, I've come to appreciate that thought in an even deeper way. Cracks aren't just how the light gets in to us in our misery and darkness – it's how light shines through us to other people. My life is not held together with brick and mortar; I gave up on that project long ago, thank God! My life is held together now with translucent crazy

glue, and when I cover the cracks in my life I cover up that light that shines through them.

“I may not exactly wear my brokenness on my sleeve these days, but it’s there, right under the cuff. It doesn’t show when I’m not moving. It doesn’t show when I’ve got my arms clasped safely in front of me. But it does show every time I reach out my hands.”

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. The website version of Notes also includes helpful hyperlinks to sources for purchasing or subscribing to the various publications mentioned in Notes. I thank my friends at Johnson, Grossnickle & Associates for their many years of abiding support for our reflective practice.

REFLECT ON THIS

>>Talking about religion (or not)<<

I had the privilege in the fall semester of helping a group of our faculty members prepare for a class discussion in the freshman seminar course about an article written by Stephen Carter on “The Separation of Church and State” (excerpted from *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion*, Basic Books, 1993).

The course is taught by an intellectually diverse group of faculty members (from a variety of disciplines) and covers a range of topics that are meant to introduce students to the liberal arts and critical reading and thinking.

Carter, the Yale law professor whose work on democracy we have considered often in *Notes*, is a provocative thinker and the essay we were discussing raised some difficult issues about how religion is understood in our society.

What struck me about our conversation that afternoon, however, was not how Carter’s work was understood, but more generally how the topic of religion was perceived. These intelligent, capable thinkers and teachers clearly were uncomfortable considering how they would lead their students in a discussion of the intersection of religion and politics in American society. I genuinely respect and admire these teachers as colleagues but I was struck by how difficult it was for them to imagine opening up for discussion the issue of religion with their students. They were open about their concerns. Students are generally conservative in religious background. They take strong positions – often based on literal readings of scripture – on social issues. They retreat into strongly-held beliefs about right and wrong, and are unwilling to engage in civil conversations about religion in society.

But when all was said and done, my sense was that the fear of talking about religion was more about the faculty members than the students. And that, it seems to me, is at the core of our society's dis-ease with public discourse about religion. We clearly need more "civic teachers" for whom religion is a meaningful and natural part of social discourse.

I will grant you that I have a Ph.D. in religious ethics from an institution (University of Chicago) that taught me the critical role that religion plays in public, but in a society that more and more divides along red and blue lines – with religion a key factor in those ideological distinctions – there may be no more pressing issue for our students to explore than the appropriate role of religious discourse in our democracy. We can't be afraid of engaging our students (and our neighbors) in pedagogical conversations about how religion and faith shape the world in which we live together. If we don't teach it, we will continue to experience the sort of polarized and dumbed-down talk about religion that characterizes our public discourse.

Carter offers a final word on this abiding challenge when he claims that "...liberal political theory (the underpinning of our democracy), for all its virtues, is woefully incomplete because of its persistent refusal to accept the force of religion as a genuine and vital expression of human personality. Few Americans see religion as an aberration in the way that many leading theorists of liberalism do. Few religious Americans (and most Americans are religious) will value a theory of the state that not only dismisses their most cherished beliefs from the public sphere but even tries, through the device of public education, to make it harder for those beliefs to function in the private sphere." (*First Things*, March 2002)

This is not easy – there is much about religious discourse that can divide and fragment – but there must be a place at the public banquet table for civil discourse about all that gives our lives meaning and direction. I believe in the promise of that rich conversation around that table – and I contend that teaching our students to talk constructively and imaginatively about religion will only enrich our public discourse and common work.

>>Diversity and democracy<<

Creating, sustaining, celebrating and supporting diversity is an abiding challenge for colleges and universities. Whether it is diversity of perspective, religion, ethnicity, race, social class, and so forth, there are critical voices from all sides pressing the higher education community to make the case for its philosophy, commitment, experience, policies and practices related to diversity on campus.

I spend a good bit of time thinking about diversity (or the lack thereof) on our campus. Certainly there are stereotypical concerns for enrollment demographics and faculty/staff diversity, but more pressing are my moral concerns about the ways in which our institutional commitments to the liberal arts and democracy challenge us to make diversity a priority in our mission-oriented work to educate students.

I have found a valuable guide in my thinking about diversity in the work of Caryn McTighe Musil, senior vice president of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). In a recent issue of *Diversity Digest* (9:1, 2005), Dr. Musil writes about the civic work of diversity.

Her point that diversity is a core value of a strong democracy is a pressing challenge to all of us to make our commitment to diversity not simply a marginal set of goals and programs in our institutions, but a guiding principle of our academic work. Musil suggests that “In the United States, our nation’s identity continues to evolve as excluded groups – citizens and non-citizens – organize civically to insist that our democracy honor its deepest principles. Democracy, at the same time, provides the moral compass for diversity.”

With this twofold claim about diversity in our democracy, Musil argues that our work to educate students for democracy cannot be uncoupled from this commitment to diversity. Musil comments that “To do civic work with integrity and have an impact, students need knowledge about the cultures and communities with which they will interact and understanding of the historic and current inequalities that have defined social locations and opportunities.” This is why diversity on campus (and in society) is important – it is the heart of a healthy democracy.

I recall a nursing student at Rockford College who was part of a practicum course in a homeless shelter commenting that before she went to her assignment at the shelter, her general feeling was that homeless people had done something to “deserve” their fate – she had no sense of how she could interact with these “people.” She was frightened. Once she had begun her assignment, however, she recounted how the residents of the shelter became her fellow citizens, her friends even. She learned their stories, grieved with them about bad decisions, unfair circumstances, sad and distressing experiences. She stood side by side with them in their struggles to find a home, set a new course for their lives. And she rejoiced in the role she could play in listening, empathizing, offering a word or hand or whatever might help.

This is how education for democracy happens. This is the civic work of diversity. This is why I will never give up in our efforts to make diversity a core value of our academic work.

PRACTICE THIS

>>Mapping our assets<<

My wife and I have had the privilege during the past several months of participating in a pilot program of the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC) with the provocative theme, “Presidential Vocation and Institutional Mission.” Funded by Lilly Endowment, the program brings together approximately 20 presidents and their spouses for two sessions in which facilitators use literature, philosophy, theology and poetry to provoke reflection and conversation about the intersection of our personal callings to the work of the

presidency with the sagas and values of our institutions. In between the two sessions, we were asked to reflect on (and practice in some fashion) a more deliberate linking of personal calling and institutional work.

My “in-between sessions” project has been quite intriguing. It was premised on my belief that, though it was important to hear my own calling, an important part of my responsibility was to create opportunities for other members of our college community (students, faculty, staff and alumni) to hear their own calls and to link those calls to our institutional mission. How does a college develop connections between personal and common values and commitments? It seemed to me that if there was a way to answer this fascinating question, we might have the opportunity to build genuine community around our vocational aspirations – the genius of a democratic social ethic.

The project was launched with the help of a consultant who works with community asset-mapping, a theory that contends that community-building is enhanced when you identify and exploit assets already available, as opposed to identifying needs and then seeking ways to meet those needs. He helped us define a process whereby we have trained 20 or so students as Community Connectors who will administer a brief survey of college community members as they walk around campus (on the way to class, in residence halls, getting their mail, returning to a parking lot, etc.) The survey is intended to prompt interviewees to name the connections, talents/skills, relationships and other “assets” they consider important in their lives. These various assets will be mapped (based on constituency, etc.) and then a community visioning summit will look for ways in which the college can use these assets to build a stronger community – both on and off campus. We then will develop specific projects and programs in response to the summit’s findings and recommendations. In this way, my hope is that college commitments and resource deployment will follow and extend personal commitments and assets.

One concrete example of how personal callings and institutional mission intersect is already in place at Rockford College. Early in 2005, in the wake of the horrible ravages of the tsunami disaster in Asia, a small group of our faculty and students began to meet and explore how they might help. Out of these conversations developed an organization known as the Humanitarian Action Response Team (HART), whose members made plans (and raised funds) to be in Thailand this month to build a shelter for a village that is in harm’s way for such floods. As the group prepared for its trip, they engaged other members of our faculty and staff in helping them understand more about Thailand, tsunamis, and the work of disaster relief. They are in Thailand now and I am so proud of them because they have linked their personal values, commitments and skills (their assets) to the academic work of Rockford College (institutional values and assets) – exemplifying for all of us how learning and engagement with the world are at the core of global citizenship.

I’ll let you know how the project works out. If we get it right, my sense is that we will have drawn a meaningful circle around a diverse group of personal assets and commitments – and hopefully will find how the Rockford College saga and mission is extended by these many gifts. Surely this is philanthropy at its best and most abundant.

>>Administrative case rounds<<

This item originally appeared in Notes 1:3 (February 2000), but I was reminded of the concept of administrative case rounds while reading a recent essay by Lee Shulman, head of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, entitled “Excellence: An Immodest Proposal” (Carnegie Perspectives, September 2005). In the essay, Shulman describes his experience observing the daily ritual of clinical case rounds in a teaching hospital. Shulman suggests that the role of clinical case rounds – actively investigating the quality of work, knowing, caring, and operating corporately to improve and learn from its collective experience – are an important model for all of higher education. They offer a model for teaching, and for demanding and working together to achieve excellence in our common work. I think he is right and Stanley Reiser’s notion of administrative case rounds offers us all a similar tool to integrate good teaching and quality improvement into our organizations.

“I have long been intrigued by Stanley Reiser's concept of administrative case rounds as a strategy for using the discussion of specific situations in our organizations as opportunities to examine the links between organizational values and practices. Adapted from the concept of medical case rounds, where a case is presented to a group of doctors and nurses from various specialties for discussion, administrative case rounds bring together diverse administrative, program, and board constituencies for discussions of cases that are of some common concern.

For example, at Wabash College (where I worked before coming to Rockford), we used our development office stewardship plans and practices as a common theme for cross-departmental conversations. Instead of bringing together just the usual suspects (from the development staff), we also invited representatives from the President's office, the Dean of Students office, and the admissions office, to join in a conversation about what stewardship means for our college. They were fascinating conversations that resulted in both a better stewardship plan and a better sense across our campus of how stewardship is part of our common work. Perhaps the best outcome was the off-hand comment from one member of the discussion group that she now understood how much of her job involved stewardship. We had a convert.

For more about administrative case rounds, see Reiser's article "The Ethical Life of Health Care Organizations," (in the *Hastings Center Report*, November-December 1994, pp. 28-35). “

PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<

I've received and/or acquired so many wonderful books in the past couple of months, I don't know where to begin with my recommendations, but here are a few highlights.

Former Wabash College colleague, William Placher, has edited a helpful volume entitled *Callings: Twenty Centuries of Christian Wisdom on Vocation* (Eerdmans, 2005).

There are many new Wendell Berry titles available, thanks perhaps to a new publishing relationship. I think I have them all and have delved a bit into a fine set of essays, *The Way of Ignorance* (Shoemaker and Hoard, 2005); an elegant compilation, *Blessed are the Peacemakers: Christ's Teachings about Love, Compassion and Forgiveness* (Shoemaker and Hoard, 2005); and a reissued volume of essays written 20-30 years ago, *Standing By Words: Essays* (Shoemaker and Hoard, originally 1983, 2005).

For Christmas I received the five volume set, *Institutions of American Democracy* (Oxford, 2005), which includes individual volumes on the three branches of government (legislative, executive and judicial), along with public schools and the press. My kids really love me!

I've just begun Rabbi Jonathan Sacks' *To Heal A Fractured World: The Ethics of Responsibility* (Schocken Books, 2005). Sacks is the chief rabbi of Great Britain and a wise voice on faith and life in the world.

>>Wise ones<<

In the spirit of the season and what of the season might abide in the days ahead, I offer these wise words from poet Muriel Spark.

The Three Kings

Where do we go from here?
We left our country,
Bore gifts,
Followed a star.
We were questioned.
We answered.
We reached our objective.
We enjoyed the trip.
Then we came back by a different way.
And now the people are demonstrating in the streets,
They say they don't need the Kings any more.
They did very well in our absence.
Everything was all right without us.
They are out on the streets with placards:
Wise Men? What's wise about them?
There are plenty of Wise Men,
And who needs them?—and so on.

Perhaps they will be better off without us,
But where do we go from here?

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>>Topics for the next issue (February 2006)<<

- Benjamin Franklin on leadership: 300 years later
- Cultivating attention and the relevance of higher education
- An ethics of responsibility

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