

NOTES FOR THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

Volume Seven, Number Four (April 2006)

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

NOTES FROM READERS

>>What you think<<

Warm greetings to the faithful readers of these occasional Notes. I hope that your spring is as lovely as ours. I'm navigating at the moment in that intriguing (and sometimes awkward) space between leaving and coming as I transition away from Rockford and to Augsburg. I am grateful for all your kind notes after the announcement of my new post.

I received a couple of lengthier than usual responses to my last issue of Notes and I'm happy to share excerpts:

Dianne Johnson, J.D., a long-time subscriber from St. Louis, writes in response to my note about the idea of a new "Homestead Act" for the 21st century: "As usual, your Notes make their way to me over many months, unread. When I finally take a moment to read one or two issues, I am immediately led on a merry chase of thoughts, imagination, ideas & internet research. I find it refreshing while I'm up too late pondering a client's latest challenge or wondering how I can expand my opportunity to serve my family, friends, neighbors, clients, church, staff, colleagues, Board members, membership, associations, volunteers, community, etc.

From my own personal vantage point, the new "ownership society" is here & not only higher education, but elementary/secondary ed & other traditional community institutions, must catch up. For the sake of my own work & family, I can't wait for higher ed, I have to bridge the gap from the "hi-tech revolution" to this new place now. In the past 5 years, my family & several close friends (ages 36-45), as well as neighbors and donors, have gone from organizationally-based corporate positions to lifestyle entrepreneurs, either by choice or by downsizing, riding an amazing wave that is both exhilarating & fear provoking, especially with young children to bring up, educate & guide on their way.

....as generations before us had to find their own ways, we must build a roadmap for our children & encourage "old style" church, non-governmental organizations, and government to move forward into this new world.

As a result, I'm seeing even professional middle class people with many traditional support systems of church, school & family around them, fraying & losing their ability to

meet their own needs, and maintain a sense of reflection, let alone meet the needs of others in the community.

As you can tell, being someone involved in the non-profit world & more particularly the vocation of philanthropy, I'm passionate & concerned, but hopeful.

More threads have to be identified to weave a new community quilt to support our civic culture.

Hopefully, at Augsburg you can work on several of those in your diverse urban community." We'll do our best – as all of you must do as well.

Robert Hawley of Lifeway Capital Resources in Texas writes in response to my note about teaching Islam: "One thing that does concern me about your understandings from your professor friend is the issue of Islam, especially as you study its world view. Like most major religions the average follower may not understand many things about their faith, but those who lead these organizations do, and they have an agenda. My concern is that Islam is not only what we read in the popular press, or hear from academia, in general...

If we are open to a dialogue that discusses our differences and promotes acceptance with our diversities, I would postulate that the general public will not understand and will judge a religion's world view based on their actions. It would help if those who follow Islam and say that Islam teaches a way of peace would rise up and denounce these actions, . . . then follow their words with actions that help bring these groups to justice."

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

>>Ethics and responsibility<<

I have written in my Notes on occasion about how I believe that ethics (ethical reflection and decision-making) need to be understood as reflective practice. In other words, we need to connect moral action and behavior with a wider context of meaning. I have been struck in recent conversations and reading about how essential this connection is to recovering a sense of meaning and purpose in our moral lives.

I recently attended my first meeting as a member of the Association of Fundraising Professionals (AFP) Ethics Committee, which is charged with overseeing the evolution of the association's code of ethics, enforcement of the code, and most importantly, educating members and the public about the code, its meaning and implications. It was a fascinating meeting, with lots of stimulating conversation among the committee's diverse members. As I reflect on the work of the committee, I am struck again by how moral choices and decisions that are not grounded in a wider context of relationships, values and meaning lead us to more and more fragmented personal, professional and public lives.

One way of understanding this idea of ethics as reflective practice is the concept of an ethics of responsibility. This concept contends that our ethical decisions must be understood as the responses we make to actions taken for us, against us, even in spite of us – and what those various actions mean for understanding the world, our most deeply-held values, and the roles we are called to play. The connection – or lack thereof – between responsibility and meaning is the central ethical challenge of our time.

Every situation that comes before the AFP Ethics Committee in some way reflects this connection (or disconnection) between actions, responses (or choices) and the wider meaning or context in which the situation occurs. A professional who abuses a donor relationship for personal gain chooses to respond to that relationship in an inappropriate way – but that is not the end of the story. It is easy to say that the professional violated the AFP code of ethics and that he or she should be punished for a moral infraction. But the rest of the story is perhaps even more critical to the work of helping to nurture and sustain a professional ethic.

In this case, why does the professional abuse the donor relationship? Why does personal gain overtake all the good that donor relationships provide for meeting needs and creating a better society? How does the professional view personal relationships and where did he or she learn how to relate to others? What do relationships mean? In what ways are they part of a web of commitments and values that point us beyond ourselves? A disconnect between the relationship in question and a wider understanding of what relationships mean lead to a deeply-fragmented moral life. Many of us experience just such fragmentation in our personal and professional lives. None of this sort of consideration excuses the moral infraction – it is easy to apply the rules in a given situation. But it is critical that all of us who care about social ethics – whether in professions, organizations or society as a whole – also wrestle with the important, constructive work of teaching each other how moral decision-making is tied to our aspirations for a better, more compassionate and just, good world. I am convinced that helping each other to grasp the expansive range of good and meaning in our lives should be the focus of moral education. If all we focus on is solving ethical dilemmas, we will simply perpetuate the notion that ethics is essentially about transactions – and transactions are not good enough!

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks' recent *To Heal a Fractured World: The Ethics of Responsibility* (Schocken Books, 2005) – grounded in the Jewish tradition – offers all of us a helpful framework for understanding this link between responsibility and meaning. For Sacks,

human beings have an innate moral goodness that has been corrupted by the many ways in which we are separated or fragmented from each other (and from God). Sacks argues that the true meaning of religion is a partnership with God in the work of moral and ethical living. Life, according to Sacks, is God's call to responsibility. As Sacks writes, "the ethics of responsibility is the key that unlocks a satisfying life. In the end what makes us feel fulfilled is not how much we earn, or what we own, but the sense that we contributed something of value to the world. The book is my way of saying thank you to the thousands of Jews I have met who engage in acts of compassion or generosity, tending the sick, comforting the bereaved, offering hospitality to the lonely and helping those in need. (The books) tells their story and the faith on which it is built – that every act of kindness lights a candle of hope in an often dark and dangerous world." Sacks' many examples of people and communities who have lived out the ethics of responsibility are a wonderful way to remind ourselves of similar examples in our communities – whose lives become a guide and inspiration to the links between responsibility and meaning.

What Sacks is arguing for is the inextricable link between ethics and devotion – between doing good and understanding and believing why. Whether we come to the issue from within the Jewish tradition – with all of its powerful role models of good and faithful lives – or from our own traditions, we still can learn from the message that ethics fragmented from meaning leads to a fractured world.

I find great motivation in this argument for an ethics of responsibility and for what it might teach all of us who are seeking to create a more meaningful, compassionate and just world.

>>A commonplace on children<<

My children are a source of constant amazement – as are yours, I am sure. Allow me a few moments to offer these diverse reflections on children in our lives. What a joy – and most of them become college students, sooner or later!

"I must study politics and war that my sons may have liberty to study mathematics and philosophy. My sons ought to study mathematics and philosophy, geography, natural history, naval architecture, navigation, commerce and agriculture in order to give their children a right to study painting, poetry, music, architecture, statuary, tapestry, and porcelain." -- John Adams

"You can learn many things from children. How much patience you have, for instance." -- Franklin Adams

"Our earth is degenerate in these latter days; bribery and corruption are common; children no longer obey their parents; and the end of the world is evidently approaching."-- Assyrian clay tablet 2800 B.C.

"Children have never been very good at listening to their elders, but they have never failed to imitate them."--James Baldwin

"You must work--- we must all work/to make the world worthy of its children."-- Pablo Casals

"Grown-ups never understand anything for themselves, and it is tiresome for children to be always and forever explaining things to them."-- Antoine de Saint Exupery

"Nothing you do for children is ever wasted. They seem not to notice us, hovering, averting our eyes, and they seldom offer thanks, but what we do for them is never wasted."-- Garrison Keillor

"I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."-- Martin Luther King, Jr.

"She discovered with great delight that one does not love one's children just because they are one's children but because of the friendship formed while raising them."-- Gabriel Garcia Marquez

"We do not inherit the land, we borrow it from our children."-- Native American Proverb

"Play is often talked about as if it were a relief from serious learning. But for children play is serious learning. Play is really the work of childhood."-- Fred Rogers

"The training of children is a profession, where we must know how to waste time in order to save it" -- Jean Jacques Rousseau

"Your children are not your children. / They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself." -- Kahlil Gibran

"Before you were conceived I wanted you
Before you were born I loved you
Before you were here an hour I would die for you
This is the miracle of life." -- Maureen Hawkins

"All children are artists. The problem is how to remain an artist once he grows up." -- Pablo Picasso

"There never was a child so lovely, but his mother was glad to get him asleep." -- Ralph Waldo Emerson

"People usually consider walking on water or in thin air a miracle. But I think the real miracle is not to walk either on water or in thin air, but to walk on earth. Every day we are engaged in a miracle which we don't even recognize: a blue sky, white clouds, green

leaves, the black, curious eyes of a child -- our own two eyes. All is a miracle." -- Thich Nhat Hanh

>>The disciplines of our lives<<

This is an essay that first appeared in Notes 1:3 (February 2000) and one that continues to have immense meaning for me, especially as I transition into a new phase of my personal formation.

"I have long been intrigued by the practices of spiritual formation, the disciplines that clergy-in-training learn as part of their seminary training. I have learned in my own experience and from those who I trust and respect that formation is a crucial aspect of any life well lived. Who are you? How have you been formed and by whom? What disciplines do you maintain as a means of on-going formation?

I believe that those of us in the professions need to think more deliberately about formation. Professional disciplines may be the key to recovering a sense of the awe and wonder of the work we have the privilege to do.

A few years back, I wrote an essay titled "And we will teach them how: Professional formation and public accountability," (in "Critical Issues in Fund Raising," edited by D. Burlingame, New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1997) in which I argued that there are four central aspects to the professional disciplines.

First, the discipline challenges us to be imaginative and expansive in our ways of learning about ourselves, about our work, and about our world. Though this discipline might involve traditional forms of professional education, it also might challenge us to participate in experiences that broaden our perspectives. For example, how does my volunteer service to the local community foundation expand my understanding of the various motivations of the volunteers at my own institution? This discipline also challenges us to make connections between literature and art and the work we do. My experience working in an art school and museum taught me valuable lessons about the visual nature of learning, which I now use everyday in my work in a more "text-oriented" organization.

Second, the discipline challenges us to understand the need for silence as a way of freeing our weary minds to receive the humbling truths found in our everyday lives. This is perhaps the most difficult discipline to grasp. It is not necessarily about finding some quiet space. Rather, it is about an attitude or openness to being quiet. Silence is about genuine listening, I think. We live in a noisy world, full of sounds and distractions. The discipline of silence challenges us to listen, to pay attention, to be still and thereby open to the lessons of our ordinary experience. We may need a quiet space to find the silence—we also need lots of practice for that is the nature of a discipline. Only in the ordinary will we find the truths of the world that help us create the extraordinary.

Third, the discipline of professional formation presents a challenge to understand the role of solitude, of being alone, detached from normal routines, reliances, and roles. If silence gives us knowledge of the world, solitude gives us knowledge of ourselves. Solitude offers the moments when we can face our own self-deception and distortion. Think of how easy it is to deceive ourselves with notions of our personal power or knowledge or expertise—all potentially damaging aspects of the professional persona. Solitude offers opportunities to recapture humility. Might we recover the genuine sense of retreats as opportunities for solitude, detached from the routines and roles that too often keep us from connecting with the passion and purpose of our lives?

Finally, the discipline of professional formation also challenges us to find a place in our lives for some sort of prayer. This is a provocative claim, given the natural links to religious experience that prayer elicits. For me, however, prayer is a metaphor for admitting that I do not understand everything that is happening around me. Prayer is the form that knowledge takes when I accept responsibility for the fact that I cannot solve every problem, control every situation. Prayer is the means by which I ask for help. Prayer is a way of professing faith in something larger and wiser than my own powers.”

PRACTICE THIS

>>Listening skills<<

Training consultant Karen E. Osborne, writing in the February 2006 issue of *CaseCurrents* magazine, suggests that “the best way to accomplish connection is to ask quality questions and listen to, as well as act on, the answers.” She argues that this personal connection is the key to motivating donors, staff members and others to accomplish our goals.

She quotes the late Peter Drucker, who said that “people tend to ‘listen to respond’ rather than ‘listen to understand’” Osborne then describes several categories of listening challenges – perhaps you recognize yourself in one of the categories – I do!

Are you an *interrupter*? Not allowing your conversation partner to finish a phrase, perhaps even completing sentences for her, and thus not genuinely hearing what she has to say.

Or are you a *dreamer*, always thinking of something else, easily distracted by what is going on outside your window or office door, but never quite capturing the points being made by your partner?

Maybe your challenge is too easily *identifying* with people, hearing what someone says and then needing to tell your own similar story, sharing your version of the issue at hand, always trying to get the last word.

Some of us are *evaluators*, judging the speaker rather than seeking understanding.

Still others are *placators*, nodding throughout a conversation to demonstrate agreement without really hearing what is being said.

Or you may be a *derailer*, intent on moving your agenda forward while missing the nuances of other perspectives.

And then there are the dreaded *talkers*, talking more than listening.

Osborne advises a 70/30 ratio of listening to talking if you truly are going to hear and understand what someone else is saying.

We also need to learn how to ask better questions, Osborn points out, because the best way to ensure that someone understands what we are saying is to elicit through good questions responses that show understanding of our messages. Someone is much more likely to remember our message if he or she says it than if we say it for them!

>>Boards and strategic thinking<<

The March/April 2006 issue of *Board Member* (published by BoardSource, www.boardsource.org) continues its series on the twelve principles of governance for exceptional boards with a fine piece by retired McKinsey director Terry Williams on strategic thinking.

Williams' main point is that great boards find ways to integrate strategic thinking into all of their meetings and governance initiatives. He defines strategic thinking as "inquiries, dialogue and stories.... (that help ensure that you are) ready for whatever (the future) brings..." Williams suggests that strategic meeting agendas, a willingness to hold organizational leadership and fellow board members accountable for pressing strategic questions at every turn, and a board that constantly works to strengthen its membership and work are the key to making strategic thinking an integrated aspect of a board's efforts.

Williams borrows from Richard Chait, William Ryan and Barbara Taylor's *Governance as Leadership* (John Wiley & Sons, 2005) to offer these fascinating techniques for making board discussions more robust, participative and productive:

Silent starts – two minutes at the beginning of each meeting for members to write (anonymously) that most important questions the board and management must address. Read and tally to capture the most crucial issues.

One minute memos – a minute at the end of each discussion item for board members to write down one more question or idea they would have shared if time allowed. Collect for review by CEO and chair to ensure that the board's perspective is understood.

Future perfect history – small group exercise to develop future-perfect narratives of the organization moving from its present to a future desired state. Compare story lines, pathways and detours.

Counterpoints – randomly ask two board members to make counterproposals to staff recommendations/

Role plays – Ask subsets of the board to assume the perspectives of different constituent groups likely to be affected by the issue at hand. What can we learn about process and potential outcomes from such role-playing?

Surveys – prior to discussing a major issue, use an anonymous survey among board members to gather a comprehensive report on priority topics for conversation, steps the board might take to strengthen its work, how members really feel about a potential strategic initiative or plan, and so forth. Analyzing the responses will offer a balanced perspective on the issue – rather than the loudest voices.

PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<

I've received a couple of copies already of Jim Collins' (he of *Good to Great* fame) new monograph entitled *Good to Great and the Social Sectors: A Monograph to Accompany Good to Great*. It is a helpful translation of the five core concepts of the great company to nonprofit organizations. More information about Collins and the book is available at www.jimcollins.com.

I have referenced on occasion essays and interviews that have appeared on the American Public Media radio show "Speaking of Faith," which is hosted by Krista Tippett. Perhaps you hear the show in your area. If not (or even if you do), you may enjoy the website for the show, www.speakingoffaith.org, which has comments from Ms. Tippett, additional readings, and transcripts of the fascinating interviews she does.

>>An anniversary poem<<

This week marks a significant anniversary for my wife and me – and I'm mindful of how much our lives together are often focused on children and colleges and communities rather than on our kindred spirits. Here is a reminder from Billy Collins.

Carry

I want to carry you
and for you to carry me
the way voices are said to carry over water.

Just this morning on the shore,
I could hear two people talking quietly
in a rowboat on the far side of the lake.

They were talking about fishing,
then one changed the subject,
and, I swear, they began talking about you.

>>Subscription information<<

Subscriptions to Notes are simple to establish. Send me an email at president@rockford.edu, ask to be added to the list, and the listserv will confirm that you have been subscribed to the list. Please feel free to forward your email versions of Notes to others—they then can subscribe by contacting me. The current and archive issues of Notes are available on-line at www.jgacounsel.com.

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

- Higher education and paying attention
- Centered lives
- Thoughts on transitions

(c) Paul Pribbenow, 2006