

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<<

I received several heartfelt messages after my last Notes – each with personal comments that I won't share with our entire community – but all of them pointing to an abiding tension in our lives between the realities of work and organizational life and families and personal triumphs and struggles and the longing (sometimes realized, sometimes not) to connect that reality with a deeper sense of faith and hope and community. We hold each other in trust as we seek to name and reflect upon and navigate those tensions.

I had a disturbing experience recently that I will write more about in a future issue but that points to these same tensions – especially as those tensions play themselves out in our civic and public lives. I was presenting to a nonprofit board my thoughts about a more expansive understanding of philanthropy – its personal, organizational and public aspects – and as I often do, I made generous use of various religious concepts to make my points. I used Rabbi Maimonides to talk about donor motivation. I used my own faith story to talk about my vocation or calling. And I used the Christian story of the "Feeding of the 5000" to share a vision of abundance in our public lives. I always preface my use of these diverse sources with my argument that we can learn important lessons from teachers who come out of various religious and intellectual traditions. I was chagrined during a break to have a member of the board chastise me for "preaching" – by which I think she meant proselytizing – the group. My efforts to ask her to consider how interfaith dialogue might be possible – what we might learn from each other out of our diverse traditions – fell on deaf ears. I was left to realize just what an uphill battle we have in engaging the wider public in conversations about faith and public life – there seems little openness to learning and reflecting on the abiding lessons of human experience...no matter their source!

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

>>Liberal arts in China<<

I had the great privilege last November to travel to Zhuhai, China to participate in the first annual United International College/Minnesota Private College Council *Presidential Lecture Series on the Liberal Arts*. I offered an address as part of the conference, excerpts of which are printed below. What a rare opportunity it was to stand in front of a community of students and teachers at a “new” liberal arts college in China and to explore together how our common commitments to the liberal arts might shape leaders for the 21st century.

“It is a deep privilege to be with you today – to celebrate the emerging partnership between the United International College and the Minnesota Private College Council and to offer a few remarks on what we might explore together as global educators in offering our students what I will call “a civic education,” grounded in the liberal arts tradition and preparing our students for lives of leadership and service in the world.

Joining a college is a wondrous thing. The great American poet, Robert Frost, captured my sentiment in his 1936 poem, “Build Soil,” where he wrote:

Steal away and stay away.
Don't join too many gangs. Join few if any.
Join the United States and join the family.
But not much in between unless a college.

This strong link between joining a country, a family and a college – Frost's trio of acceptable commitments – is intriguing to me. In what ways might we as educators – especially in institutions dedicated to the liberal arts – imagine how the teaching and learning we do with our students prepares them to be good learners, good people and good citizens? In other words, how do we combine in the mission and aspirations of our institutions commitments to the liberal arts (shaping the intellect), the moral arts (shaping character) and the civic arts (shaping social responsibility)?

It is an old vision of higher education – perhaps first posited by Cicero in 55 BCE, when he wrote in his *De Oratore*, “Thus I think that no one ought to be numbered among the orators who is not polished in all those arts that are proper for a free citizen” – and it is a vision that has manifested itself in various forms throughout the history of education – it is not, however, a model for higher education that we can take for granted here in the 21st century.

In fact, the notion of the liberal arts college or university is a confusing idea in our times. In the American context, the confusion over whether liberal arts refers to a particular set of courses, a particular set of outcomes, a particular type of context, or some combination of the above, has – to my mind – distracted us from the power of a liberal arts-focused education that is perhaps more urgently relevant than ever. We need reflective and virtuous citizens to lead our world in the 21st century. Especially in this setting, where the United International College is pursuing its own vision of a liberal arts education, we are challenged to identify the abiding principles that may offer all of us guidance in shaping the most effective civic education for our students in our time.

Joining a college then is the first step in the formation of our students to be good learners, people and citizens. I would like to reflect on three simple ideas that I believe illustrate the abiding power of a liberal arts-focused education to educate good citizens: *to learn as an amateur, to learn from strangers and to learn to be a patriot*. Perhaps in these simple ideas we might find common ground for embracing our role in imagining the power of the liberal arts to provide a genuine civic education in the 21st century.

To learn as an amateur

I love to learn as an amateur. I love to embrace the adventures of human history and experience; the riches of science, literature, philosophy, and the arts; and the wonders of social and cultural studies as someone who is learning anew, whose mind and spirit are being enriched by the wisdom of the ages and the intellectual challenges of the future. I love to find, as educator Parker Palmer so aptly phrases it, “the grace of great things” that comes in the process of joining in a community of teaching and learning.

Our colleges are at their best when they are characterized by the amateur love of learning, the love of seeking truth, of debating theories, of exploring scenarios, and of telling good stories. The genuine seeker – the authentic student – loves for the love of it, loves as an amateur loves. This, of course, runs counter to much of the way our society has come to view education, especially higher education with its preparation for life as an expert, a professional.

We invite our students to take a leap of faith, to join a college and this company of wonderful amateurs loving to learn alongside each other, embracing our common pursuit of knowledge, finding an answer here, a question there; enjoying the conversations that animate a true community of teaching and learning.

Here, we learn to seek wisdom – not necessarily truth! This is the path of the amateur. We seek wisdom – that constellation of knowledge, virtue, perspective and imagination that we might consider as a fitting description of the purposes of a liberal arts education, of learning as an amateur – and we consider how the pursuit of wisdom prepares us for citizenship.

....Perhaps citizenship itself is a vocation, a life in all of its messiness that requires wise people to pay attention. I think in our world of the need for thoughtful, engaged citizens – for finding common purpose in neighborhood associations, for remembering our history in all its glory and ugliness so that we might be accountable for it, for imagining together a global vision for liberal arts education. I think about the joy and wonder of being that weaver of the social fabric who helps others pay attention to the most important things – like my dad, who taught me to pay attention. He’s recently visited Tanzania, fulfilling a commitment he made that extends his world, his wisdom, even as he makes life better for others – he understands citizenship as a vocation.

All of this by way of illustrating how learning as amateurs prepares us for a life of citizenship that is reflective, intentional and in service of a larger good. Here, we learn as amateurs to live as theologian Frederick Buechner has taught us about genuine vocation – at the intersection of my deepest gladness and the world’s greatest need. Here we find that

remarkable place where my vocation and avocation are one. Here, we gather as those who have so much more to learn.

To learn from strangers

I love democracy and all its messiness. I love to think about democracy, to talk about it, to practice it – and to encourage others to do the same. It is one of the reasons I most wanted to be a college president, because I believe that colleges – especially small liberal arts colleges – are the best places to learn to be good citizens of a democracy. Here, we learn from strangers and from the otherness they represent for us.

This is sometimes difficult for us to grasp about life in a democracy. The genius of a democracy is that people from different walks of life – different ethnic, religious, economic, and geographic backgrounds – must learn to navigate their lives together in society. We are strangers to each other on what settlement house leader and social philosopher Jane Addams called the “thronged and mixed” road of democracy, and the needs of strangers demand our attention as we make our best efforts to give voice to those needs.

Our attempts to deny that we are strangers to each other ultimately mean that we deny the reality of the world we inhabit. The historian and journalist, Michael Ignatieff, eloquently reminds us in his *The Needs of Strangers*,

We need justice, we need liberty, and we need as much solidarity as can be reconciled with justice and liberty. But we also need, as much as anything else, language adequate to the times we live in. We need to see how we live now and we can only see with words and images which leave us no escape into nostalgia for some other time and place.

Colleges need to be places that prepare all of us – and particularly our students – for the times in which we live. We need to learn from strangers, as those who look out at this world of difference, this world of otherness, and embrace that difference with all the resources of our hearts and minds.

I want all of our students to hunger for such experiences, to see them as integral to their education. I want us to work together to offer our students what philosopher and classicist, Martha Nussbaum, has called a liberal education that *cultivates humanity* – that teaches critical examination of oneself and one’s traditions, that encourages us to recognize the links we have to other human beings because of recognition and concern, and that helps to cultivate our narrative imaginations, our capacities of empathy and creativity and understanding of difference. Our capacity to learn from strangers.

To learn to be a patriot

A college – like a country – is awash in rituals and traditions and symbols that clearly mark out our histories, our values, our aspirations. Joining a college is an act of faith, faith that this institution will keep its promises, live up to its mission and values, teach me well. In the relationships we develop with our colleges, we learn to be patriots.

To learn to be a patriot is slippery territory, I recognize. Surely none of us believes that blind allegiance to a college (or a family or a country) – Frost’s trio of patriotic options – is acceptable, and yet there is this deep affection, this loyalty and dedication, this abiding belief in the work of our common purpose that we must learn if we are to truly join a college, a family, a neighborhood or a country. We must help our students to develop deep and passionate commitments to the causes and communities they will serve.

And yet, these common efforts go astray. Colleges lose their way. Families are dysfunctional. Countries break their promises. What then are we left to learn and to love? Some golden era of days gone by, some moral or spiritual value that remains in name alone, some sense of promise as yet unfulfilled. Or perhaps we learn to love, as political ethicist Jean Bethke Elshtain has so aptly put it, as “chastened patriots”. We learn to be realistic about how a college (like a family and a country) can make mistakes and what our responsibility is to critique, to effect change, to disobey civilly if needed, so that the college or family or country we love might once again live up to the trust we have put in her.

To learn as a chastened patriot is to be both visionary about what is possible and realistic about how things go wrong – to hold each other accountable for missteps, to take appropriate responsibility – but then to fight like hell to make things right, to get things back on track, to help make sense now of the values and aspirations for our college we learned to love, perhaps long ago.

And in the face of that wonderful, albeit messy, reality, we must name a future grounded in the promises we made long ago to our students and to the world – come here, learn to think and write and serve, and then go out and change the world. As chastened patriots, can we hope for anything less for those who will come to join us in the years ahead? Changing the world is what it means to be a chastened patriot!

To learn as amateurs, to learn from strangers and to learn to be a patriot – my own trio of lessons from the liberal arts tradition. Can we find here the inspiration to imagine the liberal arts as a civic education for the 21st century? I trust so, for it is what the world so needs from us.”

>>Separated<<

I preached the following homily in our college chapel on Ash Wednesday, the beginning of the Christian liturgical season of Lent. I was struck by the response I received from our community, especially as folks resonated with the ways in which we are “separated” from our true selves.

(Romans 8: 35-39)

This morning we will join fellow faithful around the world who come together for two important acts on Ash Wednesday: the imposition of ashes and the celebration of Holy Communion. When I served a small Lutheran church in Indiana, I was always moved by the ritual of parishioners coming to the altar to kneel and have the ashes imposed on their foreheads in the sign of the cross, as I said to them, “Remember, that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” And shortly thereafter gathering together for the Lord’s Supper, and

hearing the remarkable promise: "This is my body given for you, my blood shed for you." This morning, my thoughts are with one of their company, whose illness became a metaphor for my reflections on Ash Wednesday. Allow me to tell you about my friend, Marie.

Marie is a lifelong member of First Lutheran Church (a cradle to grave Lutheran), baptized, confirmed, married, buried a husband, a faithful participant in worship and hospitality, the one entrusted with church collections and record-keeping, a wise, cheerful presence for almost 90 years of life.

Late one summer, Marie – who often reminded me as less senior members of the congregation were taken ill and, in a couple instances, died, that she had never been sick a day in her life – did something to her back that just wouldn't go away. She struggled with it for a while, made a few trips to a chiropractor, but finally could not stand the pain any longer, and started on a track of medical treatment that was not out of the ordinary (especially for someone her age) but which had a huge impact on her life and outlook – suffice to say, she did not take it very well – drugs, walkers, lots of x-rays and cat scans, finally surgery – the end result was that Marie had been separated from the people and things and values that were her bearings in life.

Separated from her body – it had failed her, walker is a nuisance, blames herself for a life where she did not pay attention to her body.

Separated from her history – lives in a wonderful house that she and her late husband built from scratch on the Wabash River – but now she thinks about how all the lifting she did back then probably contributed to her illness.

Separated from her community – can't get to church, can't drive herself anywhere, which isn't so bad, except that her euchre partners relied on her to get them to senior center, now they can't go – a poignant part of life.

Separated from her calling – even late in her life, Marie was a partner in various relationships, she kept the church books and she has given that up.

I remember a promo for a new television show about a young mother who becomes a social activist that proclaimed, "The world is not perfect, so fix it!" which of course is what many of us faced with the Maries of our own lives seek to do – fix the separation, say the words, prescribe the solution, read the scripture...

But of course, I can't fix it (as Lutherans, we all know that somewhere deep inside), so Marie and I would sit at her kitchen table and share the Eucharist, the bread and wine, body and blood – right next to the cookies she always wanted to give me – and as I looked into her eyes while sharing the sacrament, I knew that nothing can separate us, nothing can keep us from the Love of God in Christ Jesus.

And there we are, all of us, in this awkward, painful tension between the separations we all know: from each other, ourselves, our communities of memory and meaning and faith, from the things and people that matter – and the separation that is not possible for those who believe - nothing can separate us, nothing, I believe

What a mess – T.S. Eliot sums it up pretty well in his 1930 poem, “Ash Wednesday”

*“This is the time of tension between dying and birth,
The place of solitude where three dreams cross Between blue rocks...
Blessed sister, holy mother, spirit of the mountain, spirit of the garden,
Suffer us not to mock ourselves with falsehood,
Teach us to care and not to care,
Teach us to sit still Even among these rocks,
Our peace is in His will And even among these rocks,
Sister, mother, and spirit of the river, spirit of the sea,
Suffer me not to be separated.
And let my cry come unto thee.”*

Let my cry come unto Thee – I believe, Lord, help my unbelief

My dad is a retired Lutheran minister, the one who taught me to “pay attention” to the things that are most important – sermon note-taking, other exercises meant to teach me to listen carefully.

A few years ago, before my first ever imposition of ashes, I called dad and asked his advice – he told me how to burn the palm fronds from last Palm Sunday, mix them with a little oil, etc... and then he said exactly what I needed to hear: “Make sure you have a clean damp cloth with you when you’re imposing the ashes, because they’re a real mess.”

Ashes are a mess, just like life in the mean time – what better reminder could we want as we enter Lent – there are so many illnesses and diseases and pathologies and injustices that separate us from all that we care about and love, but we believe that the separations of our lives have been redeemed by our God who loves us so much that he sent his only Son to save us, to conquer our illnesses, to shower us with abundant and steadfast grace.

Anne Lamott writes in her wonderful book, “Traveling Mercies” about her personal experiences with Ash Wednesday. She recalls her efforts to spread the ashes of a friend, and how brittle and messy the ashes were – they did not cooperate, got stuck to her fingers, were easily blown away by the wind, made a real mess of well-intentioned plans – and she then writes about her son, Sam, on an Ash Wednesday: “More than anything else on earth, I do not want Sam ever to blow away, but you know what? He will. His ashes will stick to the fingers of someone who loves him. Maybe his ashes will blow that person into a place where things do not come out right, where things cannot be boxed up or spackled back together, but where somehow he or she can see, with whatever joy can be mustered, the four or five leaves on the formerly barren tree.”

So here, as we receive the ashes and gather at our Lord’s table, may we find the strength and wisdom to debark on our Lenten journeys, and to live both with our separations and the faith to know that the joyous Easter promises us an eternal Eucharist – nothing can separate us from that love – and perhaps Marie will bring some of her cookies!

and balancing role that allows you to lead from the middle, where your moral authority is most needed.

PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<

I have just finished Krista Tippett's *Speaking of Faith* (Viking Press, 2007), a beautiful recounting of how she came to launch her weekly public radio show of the same name. It is a powerful tale of her own faith journey and her seeking to engage others in conversations about faith that are mutually informative.

The summer 2005 issue of *Daedalus*, the journal of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences, featured a number of fine articles on professions and professionals – a subject near and dear to my heart.

I am proud to say that an article of mine, "Are You a Force for Good?" has been included in Amy Kass's new reader, *Giving Well, Doing Good: Reading for Thoughtful Philanthropists* (Indiana University Press, 2008).

>>Here<<

Wendell Berry's poems are an abiding source of inspiration, especially as they point us all to the importance of place. Here is another favorite...

What We Need Is Here

Geese appear high over us,
pass, and the sky closes. Abandon,
as in love or sleep, holds
them to their way, clear
in the ancient faith: what we need
is here. And we pray, not
for new earth or heaven, but to be
quiet in heart, and in eye,
clear. What we need is here.

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>>Topics for the next issue (April 2008)<<

- Going green...
- A Latin American journey
- Colleges in the city

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