

NOTES FOR THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

Volume Nine, Number Four (April 2008)

"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 Spring, gentle readers. We are about to commence our students here in Minneapolis and there are forecasts for snow nearby on Commencement Day, May 3. Yikes. Hope the weather is better for you and yours!

A helpful story comes from longtime subscriber, Jay Sperling, in response to my reflections in the last Notes on the negative response to my scriptural allusions in a recent presentation:

"Your story about the reaction to your [presentation] recalled for me a time when I traveled with a youth group to the Haisla First Nations people in British Columbia, where we spent some time working to help their community, and the young people of their tribe and our church spent time together at the very remote and extraordinarily beautiful site of their original village.

The Haisla -- they are the peaceful and exceedingly clever (in their legends) counterparts of the fierce Haida people -- have evolved a religion that is an amalgamation of their traditional beliefs and practices and the Protestantism that was forced upon them, often quite brutally in the early years.

One day, one of their elders, describing the differences between people and religions, explained to our youngsters -- one of whom was my oldest daughter, a treasure that she got to hear this -- "We are traveling in different canoes, but we are paddling the same river and we are trying to get to the same place. Anything we can do to help each other on the way, we should do."

Alas, in America we seem to deteriorated to where many believe there are people don't even deserve canoes. It's appalling."

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

>>Colleges and the city<<

But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare will you find your welfare. (Jeremiah 29:7, RSV)

Over these first months of my time at Augsburg, many of our good faculty and staff members have invited me to visit with them some of the organizations in our urban neighborhood. I love to learn how their personal commitments have shaped their work in service to the city. I love to imagine in these visits the future of Augsburg College, this 21st century version of a settlement house, living with our neighbors in this place.

One particular afternoon last fall, I was shepherded through the nearby Cedar-Riverside neighborhood by the legendary Mary Laurel True, whose cell phone number is on the walls of most Somali homes and businesses in our neighborhood – because they know she will help! Mary Laurel introduced me to good people whose lives and work intersects with the college. We sat in one of the four mosques in the neighborhood and spoke with the elders about peace and the God of Abraham; about our lives here together in Cedar-Riverside; about our children and the aspirations we have that their lives will be meaningful and successful; about the world and how frightening it can be to live with strangers; about democracy and civil discourse. In other words, we spoke as fellow humans living together in the city.

I love the city (which probably still baffles my family with whom I grew up in primary rural settings!) and my recent experiences in our neighborhood lead me to revisit some of the historical themes that fascinate me about city life.

It will come as no surprise that my first thoughts go to the role that neighborhoods play in a strong urban life. Though we are a city, we live our lives in neighborhoods. It is in the neighborhood where I come face to face with the challenges and joys of negotiating my life with others. My primary source for thinking about neighborhood is Jane Addams, who made the west side Chicago neighborhood near Hull-House the sphere of action for her efforts in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to build a stronger democracy. This was the settlement house idea and there are many of us who still believe it has relevance for the 21st century. It is not a philosophical exercise – it is the daily living with, abiding with, meeting the needs and sharing the aspirations of neighbors that defined the work of Miss Addams and her colleagues, and that needs to define our lives in cities as well. As Addams writes in *Twenty Years at Hull-House* (quoting Samuel Barnett, the founder of Toynbee Hall in London), this life in neighborhood requires “the conviction...that the things which make men (sic) alike are finer and better than the things that keep them apart, and that these basic likenesses, if they are properly accentuated, easily transcend the essential differences of race, language, creed and tradition.”

A second theme about cities is the ways in which they reflect our abiding pursuit of civilization. In the west, in particular, cities are the loci for innovation that drives and

defines us as a culture. Sir Peter Hall, in his massive tome *Cities in Civilization* (Pantheon Books, 1998), suggests that during the past 2500 years great cities have been at the center of artistic growth, technological progress, the marriage of culture and technology, and solutions to evolving social problems. As Hall concludes, cities have never been utopias and those who find them distasteful or disagreeable will retreat to suburbs or rural villages. Cities are places “for people who can stand the heat of the kitchen: places where the adrenalin pumps through the bodies of the people and through the streets on which they walk; messy places, sordid places sometimes, but places nevertheless superbly worth living in, long to be remembered and long to be celebrated.”

A final theme of my city reflections comes from the work of the late Jane Jacobs, the legendary urban theorist, whose *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (originally published in 1961) was a clarion call to arms for all those who loved the diversity and energy of cities that was being ravaged by trends in architecture and city planning. One of Jacobs’ main points was that the well-being of cities is defined primarily by common, ordinary things. Common things like sidewalks, parks, defined neighborhoods, and a diversity of architecture styles and buildings of different ages. These common, ordinary things, when thought about with the needs and aspirations of citizens in mind, will create healthy, sustainable and vital urban centers. It is not about spending a huge amount of money, she warned, it is about “the innate abilities (of cities) for understanding, communicating, contriving and inventing what is required to combat their difficulties.” It is about, in other words, a reflective practice of city life – the genuine work of urban planning.

During my short time here at Augsburg, I have been challenged to think again about the role of colleges and universities in an urban setting. I am committed to the mutual dependency of colleges and the city. The paradigm for the relationships between cities and higher education must be less about extracting benefits from each other, less dependent on incidental impact, and more focused on the various resources that can be shared in the pursuit of a more robust, healthy and meaningful urban life. I look forward to our efforts at Augsburg to give substance to this new (but not really so new!) paradigm of urban citizenship.

>>Talking with Thomas<<

I preached this brief homily in the Augsburg Chapel on the occasion of the posting of our Reconciling in Christ certificate, a recognition of our hospitality to our fellow faithful whose sexual and gender identities may be different than our own. It seems relevant to more generally as we deal with the fear that too often defines life in contemporary America.

[Scripture: John 20: 19-31]

I’m trying to imagine the disciple Thomas being interviewed by a modern-day TV talk show host – say, Oprah... “OK, Thomas, what gives here with your behavior?” “Well, Ms. Winfrey, it’s really quite simple. I missed a meeting and all of a sudden my fellow disciples are trying to tell me that our leader, who all of us saw hanging on a cross, has

shown up behind closed and locked doors. I'm sorry, Oprah – I'm a good sport and a faithful disciple – but this was too much for me – I just couldn't accept this without some evidence. I needed to touch the man before I could get on board. Certainly your audience would agree with me that this was not asking too much?" To which the audience would respond with sincere "Amen"s, empathizing with poor Thomas. And perhaps we might add our own Amens. I know that on most days I would. "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe" – but is it really that simple?

My seven year old son is named Thomas – a not insignificant fact to me – and there are many days that Thomas's fresh and clear-eyed challenges to what I and his mother (and countless other adults) ask him to accept as gospel strike me as fitting and healthy. Maybe Thomas – both the disciple and my son – ask the questions that the rest of us don't have the courage to ask. Maybe they remind us that our faith journeys in this world are shaped, not so much by blind allegiance, but by seeking answers to the questions that nag at us about what God intends for us, what God is doing in our midst, and what we are called to do in response to God's reign breaking in to our lives.

Maybe they remind us that the world can be a scary place and that the way of faith is not about making things easier, but about finding the courage and will to work to overcome the fear. Perhaps asking our questions is how faith grows that so God's work might be done in the world.

I am struck by the fear that is evident in these stories we read in the days after Easter. Can we imagine what it was like for the early faithful whose leader had been killed like a common criminal? I think maybe we can understand the fear because it remains such a force in our personal and social lives in the 21st century.

Think about the fear that is gripping our political lives these days. How many times do we need to hear from presidential candidates about who we can trust to answer the telephone at 3 am with the right credentials and wisdom? How often must we be reminded about race and gender as personal liabilities? How will we ever deal with the various intimations of disaster from within and without that are thrown in our path as evidence that we can't trust, that we dare not forget to be vigilant, that we will not survive? And what about those pastors whose messages from the pulpit are a threat to national security?

Where are the voices of civility and trust, the shouts of affirmation and hope, the dreams of a better life, a more just society, a sense of what is possible?

Or what about the fear that is so present in our relations to our neighbors around the world? As you probably know, I've recently spent a week at our CGE site in Managua, Nicaragua. It is a remarkable place and our staff there is so skilled at introducing their many students and visitors to real people, living meager economic existences. And as we meet these fellow global citizens, we also learn of the many ways in which the policies of our own country, too often based in fear of losing economic power or world status – our corporate fears – have contributed mightily to the state of these good people.

Where are the voices of global fairness and equity, the shouts of empowerment and love, the will to believe that abundance is possible when we learn to share our vast resources?

And there is the fear in our own neighborhood and campus community. It is so easy to withdraw into our own silos and to believe that I am entitled to my due. Our fear of losing out – losing power or resources or influence – leads us to hoard what we have, to refuse to believe that the good of the entire community might be worth pursuing, to criticize those whose efforts are aimed at making us all stronger.

Where are the voices of responsibility and vision, the shouts of commitment and action, the foresight to see our ways together into a remarkable future?

This post-Easter fear is so much a part of our lives that sometimes we are unable to see how it blinds us to its implications, paralyzes us from taking a stand, creates obstacles to activism and change, keeps us ever fearful and unable to see how we might work together to do God's will in the world.

But today is different as we come together as God's people in this place to take an important stand; to proclaim that this community will not live in fear; that we will not give in to those who would tear apart rather than build up our lives together. Today we post in this sacred space the certificate that tells the world that this is a community of reconciliation, a Reconciled in Christ community, welcoming and embracing and engaging as fellow members of God's family those of all sexual and gender identities – a simple, mundane event; an act that says this a community of hospitality for our fellow travelers in the journey of faith, asking our tough questions together, seeking to know God's will for our lives, committed to doing God's work in the world. And we will not be afraid.

And here comes Thomas, the absent and doubting disciple, looking for evidence. Here, too, is Peter, who denied that he knew Jesus three times. And here are the others who ran away in fear as the cross was lifted on that fateful hill. Here is a room full of disciples – not unlike all of us – flawed, anxious, seeking, but also present, listening for a call, recognizing the gift, ready for a promise. And here is Jesus the Risen Christ, in our midst, with nary a word of condemnation (what's with you guys, he might ask?) Instead he brings these words of comfort and redemption for all of us who live in fear: "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Thanks be to God! Amen.

PRACTICE THIS

>>Ethics as a growth industry<<

My graduate school ethics professor once suggested that ethics had become a growth industry – an enterprise in which so-called ethics experts serve (for a price!) those who want

someone else to tell them what to do. I'm often asked in ethics presentations whether we are more or less ethical today – an always baffling query, but always sincerely offered.

A recent issue of *The Rotarian* (September 2007) included a question and answer conversation with ethicists H. Woods Bowman (DePaul University) and Tom Hooyman (Regis University) entitled “Got Ethics?” It includes some insightful thoughts about the state of our moral lives. A few highlights...

When asked “Why is there such a hunger for ethics lately?,” Hooyman responds, “Is there?” and continues: “...much of the ethics conversation today is not really about ethics, but the minimal requirements of following the law.” Bowman adds, “I think people basically want to do the right thing – even people who end up not doing the right thing. Sometimes they just can't tell the difference between right and wrong...Typically, when people fail to take the long view of things, they make decisions they regret later.”

And how about whether or not we are more or less ethical than we were a generation or two ago? Bowman suggests, “I think these things come and go. I don't see any downward spiral, nor do I see perfection in the immediate future”

As for how I know whether or not my actions are ethical, Hooyman says, “The first thing is a gut check....Ethics involves consistency between our identity and our actions.”

When asked what the greatest ethical dilemma facing nonprofit organizations is today, Bowman points to what he sees as “The biggest ethical dilemma, since time immemorial...conflict of interest. People tend to lose perspective when they have a personal stake in the outcome, and then they begin to make bad decisions.”

Wise words all around, and as Bowman concludes, “there will always be a job for ethicists.”

>>Convening as leadership<<

I have always found management consultant Peter Block's work challenging and constructive. His *Stewardship: Choosing Service over Self Interest* (Berrett-Koehler, 1993) is one of the formative texts for my understanding of organizational leadership, giving power back to all the citizens of an organization.

Block has just published his newest book, *Community: The Structure of Belonging* (Berrett-Koehler, 2008), in which one of his central themes is the idea that leadership is not a personality characteristic or a matter of style, but is about intention, convening, valuing relatedness and presenting choices. Leadership is about creating experiences for others—“experiences that in themselves are examples of our desired futures.” The core task of leaders is to create the conditions for civic or institutional engagement. These conditions are created primarily through the power of leaders to name debate and design gatherings.

There are several important themes to this vision of leadership:

- Engagement is the point – each gathering is an opportunity to deepen accountability and commitment through engagement. “The world does not need leaders to better

define issues, or to orchestrate better planning or project management. What it needs is for the issues and the plans to have more of an impact, and that comes from citizen accountability and commitment.

- Convening is an art – tending to the social fabric is not a top-down function. Leadership instead is about creating a context that nurtures an alternative future, one based on gifts, generosity, accountability, and commitment. It is about initiating and convening conversations that shift people’s experience. It is about listening and paying attention.
- Engagement – and the accountability that grows out of it – occurs when we ask people to be in charge of their own experience and act on the well-being of the whole.

I’ve already found Block’s new work instructive in my leadership work around some tough budget issues. Important (and difficult!) stuff.

PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<

Greg Mortenson *Three Cups of Tea*

Bill McKibben’s *Deep Economy* and Alan Weisman’s *The World Without Us*

>>A ritual<<

I have shared this favorite poem before, but it is worth repeating. I find William Stafford’s provocative words a powerful reminder to stay awake!

A Ritual to Read to Each Other

If you don't know the kind of person I am
and I don't know the kind of person you are
a pattern that others made may prevail in the world
and following the wrong god home we may miss our star.

For there is many a small betrayal in the mind,
a shrug that lets the fragile sequence break
sending with shouts the horrible errors of childhood
storming out to play through the broken dyke.

And as elephants parade holding each elephant's tail,
but if one wanders the circus won't find the park,
I call it cruel and maybe the root of all cruelty
to know what occurs but not recognize the fact.

And so I appeal to a voice, to something shadowy,
a remote important region in all who talk:
though we could fool each other, we should consider--
lest the parade of our mutual life get lost in the dark.

For it is important that awake people be awake,
or a breaking line may discourage them back to sleep;
the signals we give--yes, no, or maybe--
should be clear: the darkness around us is deep.

-- William Stafford

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

- Charging graduates
- Going green...
- A Latin American journey

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