

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 hope that the summer has been good to you. Abigail and I enjoyed 10 luxurious days in Paris in late May, a wonderful gift (thanks to grandparents and airline mileage awards!)

I received a couple of emails after my last Notes, both of which illustrate ways in which many of you use these bi-monthly reflections.

Penny Wills, a fellow college president at Northeast Iowa Community College, writes: "I've kept the last three editions of your reflections on my computer's laptop with the committed intent to read them when I could thoroughly relax and enjoy and ponder....i.e., not in meeting mode. Now that graduation is now complete, I opened the August (2007) edition. I imagine by now your colleague has received several musings to his/her question about where one would go to re-charge one's battery for two weeks. My thought is to go to a weeklong seminar at Harvard on administration and then find a wonderful mountain cabin outside Asheville and reflect on what I just discovered within myself.

Now I better get back to my reading! Thanks for authoring these reflections."

And this from long-time subscriber Joe Price, who teaches religion at Whittier College in California: "Faithfully I read your reflective practitioner and don't bore you with my often pedantic responses to your incredible sensitivity and insight. Thanks.

In the April issue, I think, there was a reference to a book that included Patriot in the title. I've lost my hard copy...

Since I'm preparing to preach on July 6 at a Presbyterian church that avoids mentioning that it stands within the bounds of two Lutheran kingdoms--even failing to notice that it has two flags by the doors to the choir loft--I aim to do some responsible reflecting on the occasion. The trick is that I prefer to do prophetic challenges, and yet the church, despite its reticence to acknowledge anything American, is in the heart of Orange County! And I'd love to read the book that you referenced. Could you zap me the particular information about its title and author?" Joe refers to Eric Liu and Nick Hanauer's *The True Patriot* (Sasquatch Books, 2007).

No matter how you read these Notes and whether or not you choose to respond to issues that tickle your fancy, please know that I am grateful for the cyber-community we have built

and to know about the many ways in which Notes serve your various efforts to promote reflective practice.

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

>>Charging graduates<<

I preached this homily at the annual Baccalaureate Service for our undergraduates in May. There is a bit of art involved in the baccalaureate sermon given the occasion, the relatively diverse audience and the (at least, my) commitment to honoring the assigned scripture for the day. I'm learning!

“Is this the time?”

So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1: 6)

It is a wonderful privilege to be with all of you this morning – our graduates, your families and friends; our faculty, staff and Regents; and other members of the Augsburg community. This is a splendid day for all of us as we mark your great achievements and celebrate the mission-based work of Augsburg College. You, our graduates, are our epistles to the world, and we look forward with great anticipation to all of the ways in which your work, commitments, relationships and faith will make God’s world an even more fair, just and compassionate place for all God’s creatures.

This morning, as we near the end of the Easter season, we find ourselves walking alongside Jesus’ disciples as they seek to understand what has happened to their lives since the death of their leader. “Is this the time, Lord?” “Is this when our work with you finally will come to completion and we will see God’s reign breaking in?” This deep longing to have a firm answer, to know what God intends, to be vindicated in our life choices, is clearly what the disciples are seeking. And perhaps it also is what we seek, especially as we come together for this commencement ritual in an institution dedicated to learning, to seeking answers to life’s tough questions, at a moment when many of you no doubt feel you’ve done your time, done the work, made the grades...now, tell me, we demand, “Is this the time?” Perhaps your question is even more pointed: Is this my time? Will I find happiness with this Augsburg degree and experience? Will I find a job, a partner, a path to success and meaning in the world?

I hope you will – truly I do – but I’m afraid that there is more to our story than the earnest seeking of Jesus’ disciples, whether they lived 2000 years ago or today. Jesus answers his disciples with the sort of frustrating dodge that none of us want to hear: “It is not for you to know the times or periods...” And the grumbling begins...Come on. What do you mean it is not for us to know? We’ve worked hard, we’ve sacrificed, and we deserve to know. And Jesus continues: “But you will receive power in the Holy Spirit and you will be my witnesses – to the ends of the earth.” Wow. We can’t know all there is to know, but we are called and empowered to do God’s work in the world even so. How is that for a commencement message? Now let’s get to work!

But, here’s the rub. We have followed Jesus in his remarkable ministry, healing and preaching and calling God’s people to discipleship; we have experienced the horrible loss of our leader, only to have him in our midst resurrected; and now, as he is about to depart, he tells us we can’t know what God intends for God’s reign, but that we are called to be God’s witnesses in the world. Overwhelming stuff. So what do we do, what do the disciples do, but stand around gazing into the heavens? Perhaps our gazing takes on other forms. We turn to the distractions of the world – to material happiness, to careers, to gadgets, to relationships and lifestyles that are more focused on me than on others, perhaps even to good works that somehow make us feel better. We need our own messengers in white robes to ask us, “Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” “Why do you turn away from the work God has called you to do?” It’s time to get on with it. This is the time. You are Christ’s body on earth. The world needs your faithful witness and work, your redeeming work for all God’s people.

And so here we are, about to send you forth – your knowledge may be incomplete, but your charge is clear – and I have the great privilege to bring the Word to you; a Word that guides, protects and inspires you along the way; the Word made flesh in Jesus Christ, who, as he ascends to his Father, calls for God’s protection for God’s people. You are not alone.

You are surrounded by the company of witnesses, the community of saints, whose lives of faith offer all of us inspiration and strength. A few weeks ago I had the rare privilege to be in Nicaragua visiting Augsburg’s Center for Global Education campus and learning a great deal about the lives and well-being of the Nicaraguan people. Among the remarkable people we met in Nicaragua was Father Fernando Cardenal, a Jesuit priest, now in his 80’s, who in the early 1980s, joined with the Sandinista government as leader of a literacy campaign. Over the course of a few short years, Father Cardenal recruited 60,000 young people who ventured into the countryside, living with farmers and peasants, teaching them and their families to read. Threatened by reactionaries – threats that resulted in the tragic deaths of several of the young people – Father Cardenal persisted with courage and pursued God’s work in his country. And when the project was completed, the literacy rate in Nicaragua had risen from 50% to more than 85%, a remarkable accomplishment in any context. Fast forward some 25 years and find yourself in a country where economic and political well-being are in short supply, where people still suffer in poverty, where government corruption and foreign influences have stripped citizens of their rights and livelihood – and Father Cardenal, sitting in a small

seminar room, is asked how he keeps hope and faith alive when his important work seems to have not had a lasting impact. And his answer is simple. “That was our time. We heard the call and responded, despite the odds, and we succeeded with God’s help. This is the time for others – especially our young people – to listen for and follow their calls. I have hope because God is in our time, in our history, and God will call God’s people to the work that must be done.”

This is the time – your time – and there are countless saints like Father Cardenal who offer you both an example of faithful living and the courage and imagination to do God’s work here and now.

You are surrounded by the simple words of challenge and understanding, found in sacred scripture and its interpreters, which offer us a worldview and pathway to do God’s work in the world. The Letter to Peter offers these comforting words: “And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you.” It is a promise. I have found similar comfort and strength in the familiar words of the Lord’s Prayer, words we all know – perhaps too well. In a wise reflection on Jesus’ prayer, Pastor Art Simon, who founded the organization, Bread for the World, suggests that when we pray this simple phrase, “Give us today our daily bread,” we are, in fact, asking God for just enough of what we need. It is, in that way, a modest prayer. But then Simon asks whether we have considered that “just enough” may be more than we can imagine when we realize that this prayer for daily bread is about what we need, not simply to live, but to live as God’s faithful and abundant people. It is a prayer that we might have, in this moment, what we need to live as people, confident in our faith, free to love each other and all of God’s creation. It is the simple prayer we make as a college community to have what we need in order to educate students and serve our neighbors. It is the modest and simple prayer that you must utter as you leave this community. Give me what I need, dear Lord, to do your will in this time, on this day.

This is the time – your time – and God will provide all that you need if you but remember to ask.

And finally, you are surrounded by the Holy Spirit, the advocate sent by God to God’s faithful people on earth – and you already have received and known the work of the spirit here at Augsburg. You leave Augsburg to do God’s work in the world infused with the spirit of this remarkable college. It is the spirit you have known in the classroom, the laboratory, the residence hall, the playing field, on stage and in this chapel. It is the spirit of faith seeking understanding; it is the spirit of hospitality and welcome; it is the spirit of justice and compassion; it is the spirit of service to neighbor, here and far; it is the spirit of immigrants who founded this college and who continue to keep it strong; it is the spirit of your own vocations, your various calls, combining to create a college that educates you – yes – but more than that, a college that forms you as well, that calls the spirit to work in you so that God’s reign might break in to the world through you. Our original college motto – on the seal outside this chapel – is John 1: 14, “And the Word became

flesh.” And so it does, so it does in and through you, as the Holy Spirit calls you to your work in this time.

This is the time – your time – and the Holy Spirit goes with you from this special place so that you might never be alone.

In her insightful book, *Receiving the Day*, Valparaiso University professor Dorothy Bass suggests that one of the wondrous messages in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures – a word we hear in our scripture this morning – is the intersection of two kinds of time – “our short sigh and God’s mountainous eternity.” We know the true value of our limited knowledge and time only when we allow God’s kairos, God’s time, to surround us as gift and call. When we pay attention to the community of saints, to the simple words uttered in deep faith, and to the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, we not only learn how to live as disciples and witnesses, but also how to accept the gift of this time.

This is the time – your time – when God calls you to the great gift of God’s time, what Professor Bass provocatively calls “a meeting place, a rendezvous with God,” and there we shall find all that we need to get to work. Thanks be to God! Amen.”

>>Going green: toward a hopeful narrative<<

This is a time of some fairly remarkable activism on our college campuses related to environmental sustainability. I am proud of our students (and others) here at Augsburg who are working hard to educate us, challenge and inspire us, and promote various practices that might change the dynamic of our relationship to the natural environment.

For example:

- This past semester our students voted to tax themselves \$30 a year (on top of tuition and other fees) to help support the college’s efforts to move to wind power for our electric service. The referendum to add this fee came after several months of significant education and advocacy initiatives and reflects a real sense of hope for our ability to effect change in our environmental policies and practices.
- Our campus community has quickly become a role model for promoting the use of public transportation – including effective communications about alternatives, subsidizing public transport passes, etc.
- In addition, our faculty decided, earlier this semester, to create a new major in urban environmental studies.
- Also, a couple of months ago we announced that one of our senior chemistry students had played a key role in developing an alternative (and more effective and economical) way to produce bio-diesel fuel (for more on all these efforts, go to www.augsburg.edu/green/).

I think you get the picture. When I arrived on campus two years ago, I met with one of the two campus-wide committees that reported directly to the president – the so-called Environmental Concerns Committee (the other direct report is Diversity) – and heard a good bit about all of the ways in which our community was not living up to its values –

not enough recycling, not enough public transport, a lack of commitment to personal and social practices that might reduce our environmental impact. The first thing I asked the committee to do was to choose a different name. A few weeks later, rechristened the Environmental Stewardship Committee, this same group of students, faculty and staff (supplemented by many others who have since decided to join the committee) began to map out future strategy that, in just a few short months, has begun to reshape our institutional commitment to sustainability.

What happened? I would suggest that, most critically, we changed the guiding narrative of our environmental work. One of the challenges we face in the environmental movement (not to mention other important public causes) is not to let the apocalyptic doom scenario come to define our efforts. There certainly is room for alarm – and the environmental movement has a long tradition of doom and gloom spanning Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* to All Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth* – but if our defining narrative is only about redressing our dysfunctional environmental practices, then we may find our important work marginalized and ultimately ineffective. If, instead, we can imagine together a different future, build a sense of hope, educate each other about various behaviors and perspectives, and begin to implement practices that both respond to our harmful past and present behavior and offer innovative and hopeful future behaviors, then I think our commitment to environmental sustainability will have an opportunity to succeed. I think I’ve already seen glimpses of that success in our campus efforts.

For a broader view of this challenge to effective and responsible environmental work, you might enjoy “A manifesto for a new environmentalism,” by Ted Nordhaus and Michael Shellenberger, in *The New Republic* (9/24/07). Also, Bill McKibben’s *Deep Economy: The Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future* (Times Books, 2007) is itself a hopeful narrative.

PRACTICE THIS

>>Placemaking<<

As an urbanist, I am always on the lookout for guidance on how to build stronger neighborhoods. I’ve come upon the work of a fellow Minneapolitan, Jay Walljasper, who recently published *The Great Neighborhood Book: A Do-It-Yourself Guide to Placemaking* (New Society Publishers, 2007). Walljasper, a senior fellow for the Project for Public Spaces, draws us into his “neighborhood love story” with lots of practical advice and examples of great neighborhoods around the world.

I’ll leave it to you to track down some of Walljasper’s ideas, but here are his 11 principles of Placemaking:

- (1) The community is the expert (no, consultants aren’t better than your neighbors when it comes to good ideas for our neighborhood!)

- (2) You are creating a place, not a design (a concrete plan and citizen involvement are key)
- (3) You can't do it alone (look for the right partners)
- (4) They'll always say "It can't be done" (take it as a good sign when others tell you why it won't work – you're probably on the right track)
- (5) You can see a lot by just observing (look for what works)
- (6) Develop a vision (citizen involvement needs to lead to a community vision)
- (7) Form supports function (the use of place should be a top priority)
- (8) Make the connections (working together adds up to more than the sum of the parts)
- (9) Start with petunias (sweat the small things because they set the stage for real change)
- (10) Money is not the issue (a spirited community will find ways around financial obstacles)
- (11) You are never finished (managing after a project is finished will ensure that great places abide.)

Walljasper quotes Mexican novelist, Carols Fuentes, who says "The citizen takes his city for granted far too often. He forgets to marvel." (So does she,) and Walljasper offers an inspiring call to action to marvel again at the places we call home. Have fun.

>>Why presidents fail!<<

Former college and university presidents seem to be full of advice these days for new and sitting presidents. A recent issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (6/13/08) offers words of wisdom from no less than three former (and successful!) presidents.

Stephen J. Trachtenberg, long-time leader of George Washington University, is candid about his own experience and suggests the following:

- Don't make everybody mad at you at the same time – pick your battles
- Make your message uplifting – no matter what you think, you'll be more effective if you lead with a positive message (even as you fight to make the institution stronger)
- Avoid introducing more than one idea at a time – there are limits to an institution's attention span and you'll get more done when you focus on what is most important
- Make the place look better – people will notice and feel better about all sorts of things
- Heed the warning: Computers can perpetrate myths and complicate communications – be careful about what you say and where because it won't take long for too many people to know what you have said and it won't matter what you meant

Harry Peterson, former president of Western State College of Colorado, offers all sorts of reasons why presidents fail and ways in which they can succeed. Perhaps this is his most helpful advice: "A...president should remember that almost everyone involved with the institution wants her to succeed, even though on bad days it may not seem that way. Confronted with issues and seemingly intractable problems, (you) should take a break, talk to someone (you) trust, think about the problem over the weekend, and try again on Monday morning." Here, here!

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

- Radical hospitality
- Dual citizenship

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