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<<

You’re all busy out there in 2011 – no chatter after my December 2010 Notes. I trust that you are finding time to reflect in the midst of your hectic schedules. Please let me know what’s on your minds these days.

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.

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REFLECT ON THIS

>>Reflections on Nicaragua<<

Last month, I visited Augsburg’s campus in Managua, Nicaragua, accompanied by a group of our Board members, faculty and staff. It was a moving trip in so many ways and made me proud again of our work around the world. Here are two blog posts from along the journey…

Broken hearts, yes; broken spirits, never

Rosa, the secretary of the 18-member women’s cotton-spinning cooperative in Ciudad Sandino, the poverty-stricken domestic refugee resettlement on the outskirts of Managua, Nicaragua, stood to offer her thoughts on the recent work of the cooperative. Her audience – board members and senior administrators from Augsburg in Nicaragua to experience the work of the Center for Global Education in Managua – knew a bit of the story.

The women’s cooperative, supported in its work by the Jubilee House community, had worked for years to raise the funds and put in the manual labor to build a cotton-spinning operation. The idea was simple. They would raise the cotton in nearby fields, harvest and dry it, and spin it on machines in their newly built factory into fine threads to be sold on the open market. This was how these women would work together to generate wealth to support their families and community. It was an
inspiring story of dreams and sacrifice and back-breaking work to build a factory and to become self-sustaining.

We had just toured the new factory, built from scratch in less than a year by the women themselves, but instead of the hum of spinning machines and spools of fine thread, what we saw was the women standing over piles of harvested cotton, sorting it—by hand—for imperfections and an ancient spinning machine standing quiet on the edge of their work.

They had raised the capital for the new machines – some of it from Minnesota supporters at the Winds of Peace Foundation – and had entered into a contract with a U.S. company for used machines to be delivered to their factory. They had put a considerable amount of money down, inspected machinery and then waited with great anticipation for the delivery. There were delays and more delays, and finally there was a delivery. But the delivered machines were not as promised. These were decrepit machines, declared unfixable by experts. And there was no response from the company with which they had contracted to offer any satisfaction. So now there were lawsuits aimed at recovering their machines (or their down payment) so they could continue to pursue the work and the dream.

There were broken hearts all around. It showed in the faces and stories of the cooperative members. Hearts that had sacrificed so much for this dream, only to have it delayed by greed and corruption in a foreign land far from their control.

And yet as Rosa rose to speak to our group, it was not the broken hearts we were asked to affirm – it was the spirits of these women, who, despite their obvious dismay and pain and anxiety, continued to show up and do whatever work presented itself and believe in a God whose grace had brought them this far and dream of the days soon when the spinning machines would hum in their factory. It was not some sort of naïve sense that all would work out in the end; it was the faithful assurance of those who knew that the realities of their experience could not define them. Broken hearts, yes – broken spirits, never.

These are the sorts of lessons our students in Nicaragua learn every day – lessons of resilience and courage and hard work and faith – lessons of life in one of the most poverty-stricken places in our hemisphere. Lessons of abundance and possibility – not because it means immediate personal gratification, but because it teaches us about what it means to persevere and be patient and help each other and know this is not how our God intends for God’s people to live in the world.

Our hearts may be broken – there is plenty to break our hearts. But our spirits will never be extinguished. Life lessons from our good neighbors in Nicaragua.

You are so far from us…

Maria Blandin, the leader of a Nicaraguan feminist coalition, had just finished her impassioned presentation for our group of U.S. visitors. She had shared the challenges for gender equity in the Latin context – domestic abuse, sexual abuse of minor girls, inequity in economic and political power, opposition to even therapeutic abortions – and now we sat wondering how to respond. One of us asked a simple question, “Do you feel the support of your North American sisters in your struggles?” It was a long while before Ms. Blandin responded, “You are so far from us…”
It was perhaps the most poignant moment of our week in this beautiful country. You are so far from us. A simple truth on many levels.

For 26 years we have sent students from the United States to Augsburg's Center for Global Education site in Managua to study and live. Our students come from lives in the U.S. that are all about privilege – separate bedrooms and electronic gadgets and entitlement – and they encounter good and hard-working people who live in poverty and who struggle with the basic necessities of life. You are so far from us.

On our flight to Managua, we are surrounded by a large group of good U.S. citizens wearing t-shirts that proclaim their participation in a medical mission to Nicaragua. Well-intentioned and faithful people, coming to this developing country to be of service, to step out of their comfort zones and seek to make a difference for the many people in need. This is a country that inspires charity. But what do we know of this need? Do we know what they need – or, do we know what we think they need? You are so far from us.

Our days in Managua are full of meetings with a wide swath of the Nicaraguan populace. Artisans in the mountains of Masaya, producing crafts and selling them on the international market with the help of an economic development institute at the Jesuit university – lives of hope on the edge of poverty. Poor women seeking to make a life for their families through cooperative efforts, supported by an intentional community of faithful North Americans who listen carefully and seek to be good neighbors. Sandinista officials in power for a second time, arguing that there is a way to redistribute wealth and ensure a more just and humane existence for the Nicaraguan people. Leaders at the national Free Trade Zone, recounting their efforts to bring jobs and capital to their country as they support the production of luxury goods for the United States and Europe. And finally, a simply Jesuit priest, Father Fernando Cardenal, who swore an oath 40 years ago that he would never give up in his struggle for justice for the poor – a struggle that continues still. You are so far from us.

And now we are on our way back to our North American lives – lives far from what we have experienced during our Nicaraguan sojourn. And what will we do? If we are to be true to this experience, we will admit our privilege. We will listen carefully. We will seek to know the needs of our neighbors. We will admit that we don’t always understand, that we don’t share this experience, that there are many different perspectives on this reality. And we will make an oath, an oath of hope for those who are near and far from us. Those who have reason to expect more of us. Yes, we are far from this reality and from these good people. And they have reason to expect so much more of us.

>>To know as we are known<<

I preached this homily in our college chapel on Valentine’s Day – it is a love letter of sorts for the sort of education we aspire to offer at Augsburg.

“To know as we are known

[Acts 17: 22-31 and John 3: 16]
Happy Valentine’s Day – and that’s about all I’m going to say about that except perhaps to suggest that one of the themes of this festival of love has to do with how well we are known, how well those whom we love know and embrace us, name and accept us, engage and complete us. Here is a way of knowing – perhaps odd to your ears – that is social, grounded in relationship, possible because of our connection to the other; a way of knowing that is at the heart of the gospel message of a God who, as Paul proclaims in our reading from Acts, is known and who knows us.

I love this rare reading from the Acts of the Apostles. Often called the Mars Hill scene, we meet this account of the Apostle Paul, deep into his ministry to the Gentiles, here gathered with learned Greek citizens on the steps of the Areopagus, engaged in a spirited conversation about religion. Here is the founding narrative for our Lutheran vision of higher education, a narrative that helps explain what it is that we are about in places like Augsburg.

Paul is speaking to those who do not share his faith. And listen to how he engages the conversation. You clearly are religious people, he begins. It is the classic rhetorical move, flattering his audience and seeking common ground for the point he is about to make. I see, he tells them, your statues throughout Athens, inscribed to an Unknown God. But what if I were to tell you that there is a God who has become known; known in relationship to a privileged people, known in the flesh of a martyred prophet; known in the spirit in which we live and move and have our being. This is the God who made the world and all that is in it, and who does not leave us alone and unknown. This is the God who continues to reach into our lives, not because this God needs our gold and silver idols, but because this God knows us and loves us without measure. You are known and loved by this known God, Paul teaches. You can’t capture this God in your human forms. This God – our God – has done the unimaginable. Reached into our midst to name and claim us, to free us so that we might use our intellects and hearts and hands to serve the One who knows us. In other words, so that we might know as we are known – know as those known and loved and claimed and freed for the sake of the world God created and loves so much.

There is a vision of education in this scene that I find most compelling and that I think characterizes the best of what we do here at Augsburg. It is a vision that has been interpreted in recent years by Parker Palmer, educator par excellence (who just happens to be an honorary alumnus of Augsburg!) In his book entitled To Know As We Are Known, Palmer argues that knowledge is about so much more than sensation and rationality. He asks, “Why assume (such a limited view of knowledge) when the human self is rich with other capacities — intuition, empathy, emotion, and faith, to name but a few? If there is nothing to be known by these faculties, why do we have them?”

Palmer finds inspiration for his vision of knowledge and education in the New Testament and other Christian writings. He believes that as a teacher, Jesus is a model of personal truth — of abstract moral principles given “a human frame”; “his call to truth is a call to community — with him, with each other, with creation and its Creator.” In other words, Jesus is God in the flesh, making known the divine to the world. Based on this claim, Palmer argues for the profound universal message that modern objectivist culture needs to become grounded in a moral, spiritual and communal dimension that it presently lacks and, indeed, actively discourages.

Knowledge and education, then, require a different way of teaching and learning. For Palmer, “to teach is to create a space in which the community of truth is practiced,” where we seek to know as we are known, and he writes in much detail about the attitudes, skills and approaches an educator
might need to create such a space. He emphasizes openness (willingness to encounter what is new), boundaries (appropriate structure) and “hospitality” (a welcoming, compassionate environment).

I reflect on this vision of knowledge and education often as we explore how our community can create spaces in which the community of truth is practiced. It is a counter-cultural vision, but one I believe that is in our DNA as a college. Allow me to suggest three simple thoughts, inspired by other fellow travelers on this road, which I hope might guide our work together in ensuring that we live up to our aspirations as a college guided by the faith and values of the Lutheran church.

My first point is about how this vision of education demands an expansive understanding and practice of hospitality. And I turn to the late Henri Nouwen, Roman Catholic priest and servant to the vulnerable in God’s creation, who writes in his Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life (Doubleday, 1975) this moving challenge:

*Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place.*

*It is not to bring men and women over to our side, but to offer freedom not disturbed by dividing lines.*

*It is not to lead our neighbor into a corner where there are no alternatives left, but to open a wide spectrum of options for choice and commitment.*

*It is not an educated intimidation of good books, good stories, and good works, but the liberation of fearful hearts so that words can find root and bear ample fruit.*

*It is not a method of making our God and our way into the criteria of happiness, but the opening of an opportunity for others to find their God and their way.*

*The paradox of hospitality is that it wants to create emptiness—not a fearful emptiness, but a friendly emptiness where strangers can enter and discover themselves as created free; free to sing their own songs, speak their own languages, dance their own dances; free also to leave and follow their own vocations.*

To know as we are known is to genuinely welcome the stranger into our midst, to learn from difference and otherness, and to be enriched by the guest now become friend.

My second point is informed by Martin Luther King, Jr., whose remarkable life and work changed the world we inhabit. King’s vision of the beloved community moves us beyond hospitality to the claims of justice, demanding that we use our gifts to ensure a better life for all God’s creatures. In a sermon preached just days before his assassination in Memphis, King proclaimed:

*I know you are asking today, "How long will it take?"....

"I came to say to you this afternoon, however difficult the moment, however frustrating the hour, it will not be long, because truth crushed to earth will rise again.*
"How long? Not long, because no lie can live forever.

"How long? Not long, because you shall reap what you sow....

"How long? Not long, because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.

To know as we are known means that our knowledge is a gift that is to be used to secure the justice that God envisions for all God’s people. Our teaching and learning is not an end in itself – we are called to serve our neighbors. We are known and we are called to join our minds and hearts and hands to the work of the One who knows and loves us.

My final point is summarized in the familiar verse from the gospel of John:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

Our good former colleague, Dr. David Tiede, is always fond of reminding us that the gospel of John does not say, “For God so loved the church,” or even “For God so loved the college,” it’s always been “For God so loved the world.” But that can be a hard message for God’s people to hear when the world so often places obstacles in our faithful way – obstacles of inequity and violence and anxiety and fear and injustice – obstacles that make it really tough to see how God can have a plan for this world. Welcome and learn from the stranger – come on! Do justice, take risks for the vulnerable in our midst, love those who hate us – you’ve got to be kidding. “For God so loved the world” – really, we ask?

For those of us who are called to know as we are known, those of us who inhabit this community of teaching and learning, the great gift we have from our good God is that we are not alone in our faithful work. We’re in good and gracious company – called by our loving God who names and claims us at our baptisms to do God’s work, to be God’s people, to heal the world, to be instruments of God’s loving and reconciling and justice-filled intentions for the world. For God so loved the world, he sent his only Son that we might be saved. And then he sent us and the great cloud of witnesses throughout the ages to know as we are known, to be God’s faithful people in this world God loves so much. What a remarkable vision for our work here at Augsburg and what good news for the world! Thanks be to God. Amen.

PRACTICE THIS

>>Our ideal neighborhood<<

I am teaching my Chicago course to Augsburg Honors students again this spring and gave them this assignment last week. I wonder how you would respond to these questions.

(1) Name 3-5 criteria that are important from your perspective for the sort of neighborhood you would want to inhabit and tell us why. For example, you might say that you want to live in a neighborhood with a vibrant public transportation system because you don’t want to own a car and you want to be able to get to work, entertainment, etc.
(2) Describe your ideal neighborhood. Examples of questions you might answer in your description: What does the neighborhood look and feel like? What is the architecture? Who lives there and why? What sorts of public spaces are there? What sort of businesses and other organizations are there? How does the neighborhood function as a community (or does it)? What amenities are in the neighborhood? What does not need to be in the neighborhood and why?

As background to this assignment, I asked students to read the introduction to Jay Walljasper’s The Great Neighborhood Book: A Do-It-Yourself Guide to Placemaking (New Society Publishers, 2007), excerpts of which I first shared in my June 2008 Notes. 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.

>>Governance Gremlins<<

Richard Chait, Harvard professor and renowned expert on non-profit boards, has been a guide to many of us on issues of college governance. In a 2009 interview in Trusteeship (July/August 2009), a publication of the Association of Governing Boards (AGB), Chait identified three gremlins of governance that he believes get in the way of effective Board work. See what you think based on your experiences with non-profit boards.

Gremlin #1: “The allure of board structure over board culture.” We think we can organize ourselves into effective governance, rather than struggle with ways we can create board cultures that promote engagement on consequential matters that lead to significant outcomes.
Gremlin #2: “The allure of strategic planning over strategic thinking.” Instead of setting off on complicated planning processes, can boards articulate a few sensible, feasible and comprehensible ideas that create competitive advantage and galvanize internal constituencies?

Gremlin #3: “The allure of philanthropy over governance.” Perhaps a tough one for those of us who work in philanthropy and count on boards for leadership, but Chait’s position is clear. When organizations recruit board members, identify board leadership, make important decisions and attempt to build a cohesive and collegial board culture, a Board formed primarily of those who have philanthropic potential may not serve the sort of strategic, mission-based, overseer role that is their primary duty.

Important insights for our work with boards.

PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<

I just received a copy of Rethinking Stewardship: Our Culture, Our Theology, Our Practices, published as a supplement for the journal Word and World (Luther Seminary, October 2010). Excellent background essays for a more expansive understanding of stewardship. For more information, go to www.luthersem.edu/wordandworld.

A fine biographical essay entitled ‘Jane Addams’ Democratic Journey,” by Tom O’Connell (professor at Metropolitan State University in Denver) was published last fall in the journal Contexts (Vol. 9, No. 4, 2010, pp. 22-27). I’ve found it very helpful in considering the relevance of Addams’ life and work for today’s students.

Bill McKibben, who has been important to my thinking about sustainability, has a new book, earth: Making a Life on a Tough New Planet (Times Books, 2010).

>>Conflict and learning <<

Here’s a quote from 19th and 20th century educator and philosopher, John Dewey, which I have found particularly instructive as I reflect on all the conflict and change around the world (and close to home!) these days. Conflict and learning – the stuff of a liberal arts education!

Conflict is the gadfly of thought. It stirs us to observation and memory. It instigates to invention. It shocks us out of sheep-like passivity, and sets us at noting and contriving. Not that it always effects this result; but conflict is a ‘sine qua non’ of reflection and ingenuity.

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Topics for the next issue (April 2011)

- Evolving social arrangements
- An ethics inventory and the possibility of formation

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