NOTES FOR THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

Volume Twelve, Number Four (April 2011)

******

"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 – if you call snowflakes on May 1 spring! A long winter here in Minnesota but the calendar says spring and commencement ceremonies are on for this weekend, so we’ll pretend…

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

>>Interfaith living<<

This is a piece I wrote in response to President Obama’s call for colleges and universities to launch interfaith dialogue/community service projects during the coming year. Augsburg is blessed by its location – surrounded by neighbors of different cultures and religions – offering us myriad opportunities to practice interfaith living.

“Connecting colleges to communities is a core value shared by many higher education administrators. As an urban college in one of the most diverse ZIP codes between Chicago and Los Angeles, Augsburg College understands that the connection to community is critical to our institution’s success and to the experience of our students.

Today, more and more communities look more and more like our neighborhood. This diversity is reflected in our student body. More than 40 percent of our last two incoming freshman classes were students of color. This diverse learning community also includes a large portion of first-generation college students and students representing a full spectrum of faith traditions.

The changing face of America, and of our campuses, makes President Barack Obama’s new Interfaith and Community Service Campus Challenge an important – and even critical – call to
service. Colleges must seek ways to become better neighbors, to lead by example, to learn from our communities.

Augsburg College started on this path a number of years ago, and rededicated ourselves to this work in 2008 following a neighborhood tragedy.

That tragedy involved an Augsburg student who was fatally shot outside a community center in our Cedar-Riverside neighborhood of Minneapolis. The student, a young man who was Somali-American and Muslim, had been at the center for a work-study shift to tutor neighborhood children.

As the campus community – grounded in the Lutheran Christian faith – faced this horrific incident, we wrestled with our grief and fear and sought solace in the familiar rituals of our faith. At the same time, we sought to understand our student’s faith traditions, and create space for his family and community to mourn.

Shortly after this event, we gathered to address safety concerns of the community. We intended to talk about security cameras and safety patrols that day. Instead, here’s what happened: An Imam stood to speak. His first words were “God is good.” Though we were a room of people of very different faith traditions, we together could whisper: “Yes, God is good, and this is not what our God wants for us.”

In that spirit, our community came together. We rededicated ourselves to the well being of our neighbors and to interfaith conversation – to talking and living together. Yes, we also have more security cameras and personnel. But the urgency expressed wasn’t about the material. The urgency was to find common purpose in the health, safety and well being of our neighbors and neighborhood.

This desire for community is the same desire with which President Obama during early March invited American colleges and universities to participate in his Interfaith and Community Service Campus Challenge. This year-long project will engage students in interfaith dialogue and community service. This is an important effort as we seek to educate students, not only for professions and careers, but also (and perhaps even more so) for lives of meaning and purpose in a world marked by more urgent attention to the diversity of religions and cultures.

At Augsburg College, we are enthusiastic about supporting the President’s initiative. It helps us lift up work already underway on our campus and in the rich and diverse urban neighborhood that has been our home for nearly 140 years. This presidential initiative is timely in many ways, not the least of which is in recognizing the growing demographic changes to our state. Minnesota ranks 17th in the United States for its rate of immigration. Our new neighbors have come to this state to join their families, to work, or as refugees. They bring with them a diversity of faiths, which are reflected on our campus.

As we consider our interfaith work, we are convinced that dialogue and service must be interwoven in all we do. We believe that what we learned through recent efforts to encourage interfaith dialogue with our neighbors is something we must do each day. We must seek to live side-by-side, day-by-day, within our neighborhood. Interfaith living is what we must – and do – aspire to teach our students.
Our work at Augsburg College is guided by the 20th century political philosopher and theologian John Courtney Murray, SJ, who wrote in his book, *We Hold These Truths* (Sheed and Ward, 1960):

“Barbarism…is the lack of reasonable conversation according to reasonable laws. Here the word ‘conversation’ has its twofold Latin sense. It means living together and talking together. Barbarism threatens when men cease to live together according to reason, embodied in law and custom, and incorporated in a web of institutions that sufficiently reveal rational influences…. Barbarism likewise strikes when men cease to talk together… when dialogue gives way to a series of monologues; when parties to the conversation cease to listen to one another…”

Murray’s challenge is clear: How shall we recover our capacity for conversation – both genuine living and talking together?

I find inspiration for this important work in the example of the late Henri Nouwen, a Roman Catholic priest who wrote a moving challenge in his *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (Doubleday, 1975). His challenge illumines for me what we are called to be and do in our interfaith living:

*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.*

This is a vision of faithful living and learning that shapes the sort of education we seek to offer at Augsburg College. We must prepare our students for lives in an interfaith world.

We are pleased to see that our nation’s leader, President Obama, is calling upon colleges and universities to commit to interfaith cooperation and community service. The ability of today’s students to successfully navigate their futures depends upon being able to navigate a world brimming with diverse people with diverse beliefs.”
Ashes

I preached the following homily in our college chapel on Ash Wednesday – it is a short piece I first wrote after Abigail and I returned home from Vietnam with our son, Thomas, almost ten years ago. It still makes me cry.

“A Parable of Ashes”

[Psalm 51]

It was shortly after lunch when our plane landed in Ho Chi Minh City – what we know as Saigon, Vietnam – it was a clear and not too terribly warm day...and as our plane taxied to the terminal, we had our first glimpse of the ashes...along the runway were rusted gunnery positions and burned out hangars, remnants of a time we might wish to forget...the ashes of nationalistic pride and war and violence and suffering.

As we pushed our way out of the airport, and climbed into vans to begin our trip into the city, the teeming masses of people crowding the sidewalks and streets were a blur of activity, but there was another glimpse of ashes...the soot and dust hung in the air, those who cared and knew better wore masks, others were oblivious to the palpable signs of human progress and of their own disease...fossil fuel, spewed into the air, obscured our views...the ashes of greed and progress and pollution and sickness.

That evening as we walked from dinner near our hotel, we had our first encounters with the poor who looked to us for hand-outs, crisp dollar bills were the ticket – for some, nearly a month’s wage – but their pleas did not hide their circumstances, open fires on the city sidewalks, preparing the little food they could gather, the smells and sights of making do, getting by, surviving if they could...the ashes of poverty and injustice and hunger...

The next morning we were up very early, on our way out of the city by 3 am, and the fires blazed on street corners and alongside the road as we drove south toward the Mekong River...open fires to battle the darkness, to offer security, to mark a place – a country awake while we dozed in our comfortable vans, a country fighting to keep the lights shining, to hold off the darkness...the ashes of the night and the frightening and the unexpected...

And six hours later as we pulled into the hidden driveway and parked near the public entrance to the orphanage, we were face to face with the children who had been left behind, children of all ages whose parents were too poor or too sick or too tired to care for them properly – this was our destination – and after a few minutes of governmental formalities, five screaming children appeared from behind a closed door...the ashes of love that did not survive the realities of life, the ashes of our souls...

And then we saw his face – the face we had seen before only in a few sketchy photographs – and he screamed for all of his life as he clung to his new mother’s neck – and we cried and laughed and kissed him and comforted him...and told him how much we loved him...and a few days later when he awoke in our bed, back in the city, and laughed at my funny face and let me hold him tight, I knew that the ashes would never overcome the love we know in the embrace of a child...the ashes are the inevitable and messy stuff of our lives, they are always there with their smells and stains and
reminders of darkness and sin, but they will never win as long as we believe that God loves us and sends us children to share our lives…

And now we’re home and some of the wonder of those days in Vietnam has faded, but once in a while even yet, I am in the basement room where we have several souvenirs from our visit to Vietnam and the smell of the ashes from the baskets and nets still brings me up short, gets under my skin, reminds me of who I am, who I truly am…and then I walk into Thomas’s room to find him playing and smiling. Hi Dad, he says, and I know the love that God intends for God’s people.

God had a son whose life, death, resurrection, and ascension from the ashes promises us that we shall never be separated from the love of God – a Son whose name and sacrifice we recall today as we are marked with the cross of ashes, the ashes of our own mortality – from dust you have come and to dust you shall return – marked so that we might celebrate the wondrous joy of God’s deep and abiding love, God’s Easter love.

This is my parable of ashes for this Ash Wednesday, a personal story that reminds me of the ashes that mark our existence on this earth, our ashes of pride and war, of greed and progress, of poverty and injustice, of the darkness and unexpected, of the loves that did not survive – this is who we are, whether we live in Vietnam or Minneapolis. But who we are has been transformed by the love of God, the love we know in our communities of faith, in our bonds of love, in the embrace of our children…the love we know in the cross of our Savior, who creates in us a clean heart, a new and right spirit. Thanks be to God who loves us so much that he sent his only Son to save us from our ashes. Amen.

PRACTICE THIS

>>What we count <<

[Philippians 3: 1-14]

I live in a world of metrics.

Each and every day, I must think about budget bottom-lines and fundraising goals and enrollment targets and retention rates and endowment values. I am judged in my work primarily by how well I do – indeed, how well we do – in meeting those various metrics. What counts is making our numbers.

How about you? For our students, it’s about GPAs and test scores. For our faculty, it’s about student evaluations and published research. For our staff, it’s about departmental goals and budgets.

And when we step away from our work, it doesn’t change much. We are judged by our income level, our credit scores, our batting average, our IQ scores, our awards and recognitions. We all know the drill. In the world, success is a commodity – measured, benchmarked and scored. And we live in the world.

And so did Jesus. So it is no great surprise that in our Palm and Passion Sunday liturgies yesterday, many of us reenacted the triumphant entry Jesus made into Jerusalem. Cheered by adoring throngs,
lauded with palm branches, greeted as the one who would be our king – measured by the world’s standards for success and climbing the career ladder.

But we, of course, know the end of this story. And as we read the passion narrative yesterday, we were reminded once again that Jesus did not live up to the world’s metrics and that the world pushed back with the ultimate punishment for failing to meet its goals. What we count is not what God intends.

The Apostle Paul knew this tension between the world’s metrics and God’s plans firsthand. As he writes to the faithful at Philippi: “I have every reason to be confident in the world’s ways – I’ve done what the law requires, I am righteous, I am a success.” And yet, as Paul so eloquently confesses, “…whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ.” Paul has seen that what the world counts as success and righteousness – meeting our goals, following the rules – is rubbish. Instead, as he proclaims, “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death.” I want to know Christ. This, I believe, is what truly counts.

I have been reading the work of Trappist monk and social activist, Thomas Merton, this Lenten season. These powerful words are helpful to me as we turn our faces to Jerusalem during this Holy Week and consider how we, too, might live as Paul instructs the Philippians – as those who count as God’s faithful people….

Do not depend on the hope of results….
you may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and even achieve no result at all, if not perhaps results opposite to what you expect. As you get used to this idea, you start more and more to concentrate not on the results, but on the value, the rightness, the truth of the work itself….
gradually you struggle less and less for an idea and more and more for specific people….
In the end, it is the reality of personal relationships that saves everything.

“I want to know Christ,” Paul confesses. Here is the personal relationship that gives our lives meaning and purpose, which redeems us from the world’s ways. Here is what counts. And when we stand six days from now with the women who first came to the tomb, we will come face to face with the Risen One, and we will know through faith that all has been accomplished, and that we have been freed to live as those who know Christ and who share in God’s loving intentions for all of creation.

Now, I am no Apostle (though I am proud to bear Paul’s name!) and I am no Thomas Merton, and all of this is well and good, and I do believe – but I also live in the world, in the world where what counts is, in fact, results and metrics. How do I make sense of this tension in my daily life? How do I balance what the world demands with what God requires of me? Lord, I believe, help my unbelief.
As we enter these holy days, allow me to suggest that God calls us not to seek balance – as if that would help us live in the tension. Instead, we are called to a way of being that is, in fact, out of balance, leaving us to rely on the pull of a divine force and power that draws us in, that centers us – rather than the false assumption that we can find that fulcrum of balance within ourselves. This is the centered life, as our Augsburg colleague Jack Fortin teaches us. Balance is our human longing, the world’s metrics – surely if we get our lives in balance, all will work out, and all will be well. We’ve all been there in this eternal quest for balance in our lives – it’s wrapped up in the metrics and standards imposed by and on us. But these attempts at balance distract us from what God calls us to be and do. Balance is the wrong metaphor for the life of faith (not to mention it is impossible to achieve) – instead, the center holds us in God’s orbit…and centered in God, we suspend our efforts to make everything work out, to pursue what we believe we deserve, to rely on the opinions of others to measure our worth in the world, to count as the world would have us count. Centered in God, we know what really counts as we live into what God intends for us to do as partners in the work of resurrection and of making new things happen.

In Dr. Fortin’s lovely book entitled *The Centered Life* (which I highly recommend), he illustrates through many compelling stories how what counts in the world distracts us from what truly gives our lives meaning and purpose. He urges us:

- To be **awakened** to what God is doing in our lives and how our futile efforts to live up to the world’s metrics distract and exhaust us. I have been awakened this Lent by Thomas Merton to what really counts.
- To be **called** to what God intends for us to do as faithful people witnessing in all we do to what God intends for all of creation.
- To be **freed** from the world’s demands, knowing that in Christ we have the gift of the freedom for our neighbor, and
- To be **nurtured** in communities of faith and memory and practice so that together we might find the strength and courage and abundance to stay centered even when it is so easy to give into the world’s measures of what counts.

This call to a centered life is not some naïve claim that we can escape the tensions of our lives in the world, but it is a bold invitation to know Christ and the power of the resurrection. We can live in the tensions between what counts in the world and what God requires, and yet not be defined by those tensions. We have a center – now we must learn to live as if that were true.

What does it look like to live a centered life?

The author Will Campbell tells a story about meeting a high wire artist one night when the circus rolled into town. Campbell asked him why he got up there night after night, flinging himself through the air, relying totally on others to earn his living. At first the high wire artist said he appreciated the cheers, the applause, making "children of all ages" happy, and then became more transparent. "Now you really want to know why I go up there on that damned thing night after night after night?" I said I did. 'Man, I would have quit it a long time ago. But my sister is up there. And my wife and my father are up there. My sister has more troubles than Job. My wife is a devil-may-care nut and my old man is getting older. If I wasn't up there, some bad night, man...smash!' His foot stomped on the floor with a bone cracking thud...'But why do _they_ stay up there?' [I asked]...'Because I drink too

This is what the centered life looks like – it knows what counts.

I live in the world of metrics and yet I know that the Risen Christ is my center, my rock, my stronghold, my salvation. Blessings during these holy days ahead and thanks be to our awesome God. Amen.

PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<


I’ve also recently picked up two new books on Chicago: Larry Bennett’s The Third City: Chicago and American Urbanism (University of Chicago Press, 2010) and Sharon Haar’s The City as Campus: Urbanism and Higher Education in Chicago (University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

>>Benediction<<

Here is my favorite benediction as we send our students out into the world, crafted originally for the Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary community by one of its distinguished faculty members.

“Because the world is poor and starving,
   Go with bread.
Because the world is filled with fear,
   Go with courage.
Because the world is in despair,
   Go with hope.
Because the world is living lies,
   Go with truth.
Because the world is sick with sorrow,
   Go with joy.
Because the world is weary of wars,
   Go with peace.
Because the world is seldom fair,
   Go with justice.
Because the world is under judgment,
   Go with mercy.
Because the world will die without it,
   Go with love.”
Subscription information

Subscriptions to Notes are simple to establish. Send me an email at augpres@augsburg.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 2011)

- Stay with us…
- Evolving social arrangements
- An ethics inventory and the possibility of formation

(c) Paul Pribbenow, 2011