

Generosity and Faithfulness: A Meditation on Why Place Matters for Higher Education

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Campus Compact Presidential Essay

The intrepid Norwegian-American immigrants who founded Augsburg Theological Seminary (now Augsburg College) almost 150 years ago chose as the institution's founding motto a simple claim from the New Testament Gospel of John: "And the Word became flesh" (John 1:14, NRSV). That has made all the difference for Augsburg's abiding commitment to place as the center of its academic mission and public purposes.

Allow me to explain why. First is the theological claim in that simple passage. The gospel writer points to an incarnational proclamation: God came into human history, lived among us, and loved the world. In theological terms, this incarnation is the ultimate act of generosity and fulfills a covenant promise first made in the Hebrew scriptures. In other words, in this passage from John, we proclaim that God is generous and faithful on the ground, in our midst, and in the places we inhabit.

Enough theology. There follows from this theological claim a very real practical guide to life in the world for God's people. If God has been generous and faithful to us, the only fitting response is for us to be generous and faithful wherever we are found. In this way, John 1:14 stands the test of time as a guide to Augsburg's deep commitment to place as a source of its mission and identity. Place matters for Augsburg as it lives out its academic mission in service to the public good. Augsburg believes that it is called to be generous and faithful in its place.

My teacher, Martin E. Marty (2003), taught me that colleges are indigenous communities. That is, they are native to a particular place. They are native to a particular environment and to a particular set of values and practices that define the institution. And that means something for the way they live their lives; it means something for the ways in which they understand what it means to be faithful and generous with their place and values and presence.

As an indigenous community, Augsburg lives out its faithfulness and generosity in a particular place—a neighborhood called Cedar-Riverside in the heart of Minneapolis, Minnesota—that has been its home for 145 years. It is a neighborhood of Native peoples

and immigrants—currently, primarily Somalis and Ethiopians, but over the years Scandinavians (our founders), Vietnamese, Koreans, and others. And with these Native and immigrant neighbors we share in what I call the saga of our life as an urban settlement (*Pribbenow, 2014*).

What is a saga? My understanding of the concept of saga comes from research done by Burton Clark on what it is that creates a distinctive character and identity for colleges and universities (*Clark, 1970*). A saga is more than a story—all of us have stories. A saga is more of a mythology—a sense of history and purpose and direction told in vocabulary and narrative that accounts for a community’s DNA—its essence, even. A saga abides in the sort of people, programs, and values that define an institution.

Clark contends that not every institution has a saga. Sometimes that is a function of not being true to founding values; at other times, it can be occasioned by a change of location or core mission. Other institutions have still not found a way to link their pasts, presents, and futures in a coherent narrative.

Augsburg College’s saga runs deep in the culture and meaning of our work together. An exploration of Augsburg’s history reveals several themes that are central to our saga: an immigrant sensibility shaped in an urban neighborhood, freedom through faith to ask tough questions and engage otherness, a moral commitment to access to quality education for all, and the vocational aspiration to be neighbor to and with each other (*Augsburg College, 2008*). Together, these themes inform Augsburg’s identity and its abiding commitment to faithfulness and generosity in its place.

These themes also provide the foundation for seeing Augsburg as a 21st-century urban settlement, a place-based institution settled in a particular neighborhood, seeking to serve its neighbors and neighborhood in mutually beneficial ways (*Pribbenow, 2014*). In fact, we have articulated our calling as a college in this way: “We believe we are called to serve our neighbor” (*Augsburg College, 2015*). In that simple formula, we name our commitment to the inextricable links between faith, education, place, and service to and with neighbors.

The novelist Wallace Stegner once wrote that the American psyche is in tension between what he calls “the boomers”—those who go into a place, use it up, and then leave—and “the stickers,” those who settle in a place and work to renew it and make it better (*Stegner, 1992, p. xxii, 4*). Augsburg is committed to “sticking,” to staying and settling in. At Augsburg, we accompany and settle alongside our neighbors. We pursue education in our place, equip-

ping each other for lives of meaning and purpose. We welcome each other in our place, sustaining a community of hospitality and mutual respect. We love and are faithful to the place that has been our home for almost 145 years.

How do we live out this commitment to “sticking” in and with our place? We begin with the wise words of poet and essayist Wendell Berry, whose work I return to often for guidance, in his prose poem “Damage”:

No expert knows everything about every place, not even everything about any place. If one’s knowledge of one’s whereabouts is insufficient, if one’s judgment is unsound, then expert advice is of little use. (Berry, 1990, p. 5)

I sometimes think about this quote when talking with all the experts who are happy to offer their advice (for free and for a fee!) about running a college. Our responsibility as “stickers” is to have knowledge of our whereabouts; otherwise, all the experts in the world will be of little use. If we don’t know our place, our mission, our history, how can we expect to enlist others in pursuit of our aspirations? We know and care about our whereabouts so that we can be generous and faithful.

There are three simple aspects of our whereabouts, three ways in which place matters and in which faithfulness and generosity are practiced, that are at the heart of Augsburg’s mission and identity. Perhaps the central focus of our whereabouts is that wherever Augsburg College is found—in our neighborhood, in the city, or around the world—*our most authentic work is learning and teaching*. And the wonder of learning is that it involves acts of generosity and faithfulness in its every detail—from teachers who teach what they love; to students who seek to learn out of curiosity and passion; to texts that bear the wisdom of the ages for our reflection; to conversations that help us pay attention to the Word, to each other, and to the world.

One of the joys of my life at Augsburg is teaching the senior honors seminar each spring. In the classroom, I witness the generosity of what educator Parker Palmer (1998) has called “the grace of great things” (p. 107), the gathering of a community around important issues and problems—great things! I think about a recent course I taught on homelessness and affluence—on income inequality—and how students wrestled with issues of justice and compassion and the social realities of inequity and people living

with both too little and too much. These issues were both studied in the classroom and experienced in the neighborhood. And around these difficult issues, we found the grace of great things, the generosity of learning from and with each other, and the connection to our place in the world.

For the Augsburg community, the commitment to teaching and learning and the connection to place are grounded in our mission statement, wherein we say that “an Augsburg education is... shaped by its urban and global settings” (*Augsburg, 2010*). That mission is part of a historic narrative that led the college in the 1960s to view its urban location as an extended classroom and to choose not simply to be located “in the city” but to embrace what it means to be “of the city” (*Chrislock, 1969, 235*). This important distinction sets a foundation for curricular and cocurricular programs that see our place as central to our academic mission and experience.

A second aspect of our whereabouts is the way in which our neighborhood and city is *a place that demands our presence as neighbor*. This particular neighborhood—much changed since 1869, when the Scandinavian founders of Augsburg lived nearby—now calls for us to be neighbor to those of very different backgrounds. And democracy still is practiced in this place with our neighbors. Education still happens in this place with learners and teachers all around us. Engagement and service still are at the center of our lives with each other in this place. Sustaining this urban place, this urban environment, is an act of generosity and faithfulness—for our diverse neighbors, for our diverse selves, for the whole of creation, now and into the future.

One of my favorite programs at Augsburg is our Campus Kitchen. Campus Kitchen’s core work is led by students who collect leftover foodstuffs from our cafeteria and area restaurants, then prepare and deliver to our neighbors more than 2,000 meals a month. It is good and important work. What I have seen in the past several years, though, is that our students have not been content simply to stay the course. They have focused their attention on the important role that food plays in our lives—as sustenance for our bodies, as fellowship for our community, as politics and economics in our neighborhood and world. And the results are staggering—yes, thousands of meals prepared and delivered, but also community gardens on the edge of campus that bring together neighbors and students and children; a farmer’s market on campus, which involves relationships with organic farmers from across the region; composting of leftover everything in the cafeteria; and most recently, the opening of a food pantry on campus for students who

go hungry. Here is an example of generosity and faithfulness in our place, attention and respect and concern for all of us who inhabit this neighborhood.

Our presence here cannot be passive or defensive. It must embrace the challenge of an indigenous place, loving and caring for the land, the river, the environment, and the people. Our Augsburg colleague Jay Walljasper (2006), a senior fellow in the Sabo Center for Democracy and Citizenship, quotes Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes, who says, “The citizen takes his [*sic*] city for granted too often. He [*sic*] forgets to marvel” (p. 7). We are generous and faithful in our place when we don’t forget to marvel at all that is being done in our midst and all that we are called to do in return!

A final aspect of our whereabouts I want to lift up is our commitment to our broader role in what I call our “public work,” positioning the work of the college community in the context of claims for social justice and community-building. Higher education institutions long have privileged their academic missions and often have found ways to care for their immediate environs through student service and civic engagement programs. But I want to argue that a commitment to generosity and faithfulness in place demands more of us. It demands bringing our many resources—intellectual, moral, and human resources—to bear in addressing the strengthening of democratic institutions and civic life.

Our public work at Augsburg is best exemplified by our leadership in the anchor institution movement in the Twin Cities of Minnesota. Augsburg has come together with sister higher education institutions, with major health care organizations, and with regional public agencies to understand how our self-interests as institutions can combine to create shared value for the neighborhoods along a new light rail transit line. We now are engaged together in shared purchasing to support local businesses; workforce development, encouraging the hiring of local companies and individuals; and place-making, helping to create healthier and more sustainable neighborhoods. The results thus far illustrate positive economic impact on the region, but perhaps more importantly, they show an intentionality about how the place we share can be strengthened through our collective efforts. This is not charity; this is a network business model that serves all of us and at the same time creates a more robust and vital civic life.

This is about paying attention to our place in ever more sophisticated and effective ways, recognizing that our ability to scale these sorts of place-based initiatives means that our underlying commit-

ment to our place can be extended and made even more central to our work as a college. As Rutgers University–Newark chancellor Nancy Cantor (*Cantor & Englot, 2015*) pointedly challenges us, colleges and universities must be “citizens of a place, not on the sidelines studying it” (p. 75).

I’ll end with another brief quote from Wendell Berry (1990), who, a few years after writing “Damage”—when he clearly was skeptical of our abilities to care adequately for our places in the world—wrote “Healing” to point to a more promising way:

The teachings of unsuspecting teachers belong to the task and are its hope. The love and work of friends and lovers belong to the task, and are its health. Rest and rejoicing belong to the task, and are its grace. Let tomorrow come tomorrow. Not by your will is the house carried through the night. Order is the only possibility of rest. (p. 13)

“The Word became flesh” thus is both a theological and a practical claim for Augsburg College. In response to the many gifts we have been given, we ask how we can be even more generous and faithful in our whereabouts and place. We accompany and settle alongside our neighbors, even when we come from very different cultures and religions and experiences. And together we are creating and sustaining a safer, healthier, more vibrant place where generosity and faithfulness abound. I think our founders would be proud.

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