

2020

Through Truth to Freedom - by Way of Reconciliation

Paul Pribbenow

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/intersections>



Part of the [Higher Education Commons](#), and the [Religion Commons](#)

Augustana Digital Commons Citation

Pribbenow, Paul (2020) "Through Truth to Freedom - by Way of Reconciliation," *Intersections*: Vol. 2020 : No. 52 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/intersections/vol2020/iss52/9>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Augustana Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Intersections* by an authorized editor of Augustana Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@augustana.edu.

PAUL PRIBBENOW

Through Truth to Freedom— by Way of Reconciliation

As the traditional academic year begins, colleges and universities are in the news. The news is not good, full of dire warnings about student behavior, online learning, unhappy faculty and staff. In fact, the news and public opinion about higher education seems to foretell failure in the midst of this pandemic.

As a long-time university president, I am not naive about the unprecedented challenges we face on our campuses this fall. I give thanks for the tireless work of our students, faculty, and staff, along with the public health experts who are helping us keep each other safe and healthy. I wonder, though, if we might upend this failure narrative with a reminder of the unique role that higher education is called to play in historic moments just like this.

As we conclude our year-long celebration of Augsburg University's 150th anniversary, in the midst of these uncharted times, I have been reflecting on Augsburg's motto, "Through truth to freedom." I wonder whether and how we might recover its power for our academic and public missions, especially in a time when the relevance of higher education is being scrutinized. These words from Christian scripture were adopted as our motto in 1969, on the occasion of Augsburg's 100th anniversary. That was also a moment when campuses and the country were reeling from similar forms of anxiety and unrest.

"Through truth to freedom" strikes me as a compelling response to a moment when we find ourselves living at the intersection of three pandemics. The Covid-19 pandemic

has disrupted all aspects of how we live and work, and has pointedly illustrated the tension between public health and economic well-being. Following in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, an economic pandemic threatens our social fabric with massive unemployment and business closures worldwide. And, most recently, the racial inequities exacerbated by the senseless murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers has created a third pandemic, which threatens to tear our country apart. Surely, this uncharted terrain presents unique challenges for all of us as citizens. We are trying to imagine how we will navigate to some as-yet-unknown future.



"I wonder, though, if we might upend this failure narrative with a reminder of the unique role that higher education is called to play in historic moments just like this.

In a recent public presentation, Mary Lowe from Augsburg's religion department offered a provocative challenge when she asked us what it might mean to educate

Paul C. Pribbenow is the 10th president of Augsburg University in Minneapolis, Minnesota. An original version of this essay was published in the opinion section the Pioneer Press, Oct. 1, 2020.

our students for freedom. What a countercultural notion! Educated for freedom from ignorance, from oppression, from division and hatred and violence. Educated for freedom to make the world fairer and more just and healthier, to be good neighbors, to take care of creation. Educated for freedom for the sake of the world, for the good of others, for the promise of wonder and creativity.

But is this path through truth to freedom as linear as the motto seems to claim? Often, the search for truth uncovers separations and sins that demand reconciliation before there is freedom. This, in fact, may be the most important work for our colleges and universities: to educate for truth and freedom—but by way of reconciliation.

In his recent book, *Begin Again: James Baldwin's America and Its Urgent Lessons For Our Own*, Princeton Professor Eddie S. Glaude, Jr. describes the lie that persists in the United States—the lie of white supremacy and its insidious implications, America's own original sin that must be confessed so that there might be reconciliation and finally, freedom, true freedom.

In our Cedar-Riverside neighborhood in Minneapolis, our remarkably diverse Augsburg students and faculty engage every day with our immigrant neighbors—primarily Somali-Americans, devout Muslims—and we witness to their struggles with Islamophobia, racist behavior, with poverty. It is only when we face and confess the lies, that we find common ground, reconciliation, the genuine opportunity to live as neighbors aspiring for freedom. This, I would argue, is the authentic work of democracy, an ethic of living *with* each other.

Through truth to freedom by way of reconciliation is a fitting motto for all higher education in these times. The

questions we will ask at Augsburg are at the heart of our academic mission and our commitment to social justice. They are questions I believe all of higher education is poised to pursue. They include this one at the core: Where is the truth in the midst of these pandemics?

"It is only when we face and confess the lies, that we find common ground, reconciliation, the genuine opportunity to live as neighbors aspiring for freedom."

Further, what is the truth about keeping each other healthy in the face of a novel coronavirus? What is the truth in an economy that more and more creates remarkable inequities? What is the truth in centuries of systemic racism and oppression?

In pursuing the truths, we will find the sins and lies that we tell each other about knowledge and privilege and justice. Only when we face the truth, will we confess our complicity in the sin and lies we tell, and humbly seek to be reconciled with each other and with the creation. Only then will we be freed for the work we are called to do as "informed citizens, thoughtful stewards, critical thinkers, and responsible leaders" (Augsburg's mission).

That, it seems to me, is a much more compelling story of higher education in these pandemic times. I can't wait to see all that we will do together to strengthen our democracy.