

**A LIBERAL ARTS LIFE:
SAYING YES IN A NO WORLD**

Honors Convocation
April 19, 2013

This is a fine and important occasion – and we’ve all gathered and dressed up to mark our pride in your many achievements, in the quality of your minds and hearts, in the passion and courage you have shown in your journeys here at Augsburg, in the ways you have made Augsburg and the world better, and in the promise you offer all of us in your leadership. We honor you – lift you up – set you apart with accolades and cords and congratulations.

At the beginning of the past several academic years, I have addressed our incoming students with a simple message regarding “What is required of you?” I suggest three straightforward requirements: show up, pay attention and do the work! There is, of course, more than meets the eye in each of the requirements. Show up means be here, and also means be genuinely present with and for each other. Pay attention means don’t nod off, and also means attend to what is most important in the world. And do the work means get the assignment finished, and also means figure out what needs to be and why you need to do it. You clearly have met these requirements and we are here this afternoon to honor you for inspiring us with your good minds and hearts and hands. Congratulations to you all.

So now what? Especially as we honor you and express our gratitude for all you have done, it seems fitting to reflect on how I hope an Augsburg education – honorably pursued – has taught you to live a liberal arts life and thereby, I would argue, to say yes in a no world.

I begin with a premise. There is in the world’s great spiritual traditions a universal truth that I would contend we all might affirm. That truth is this: “Life is hard.” Now, once affirming that truth, there are various ways we might move forward – some might try to resolve the hardship, others might claim its redemption, others might seek to avoid it and still others might choose to live into it. Suffice to say, though, that affirming the truth, there are really only two basic responses: we can choose to live as if the hardship is a reality that defines us, or we can look the hardship in the eye and seek to live in ways that defy its ability to define us.

It doesn’t take much effort or imagination to recognize the familiar dynamic between these two ways of living in the world each and every day. It also is not difficult to recognize that the world is dominated by those who believe that hardship defines us. Just read the newspapers, watch the television news, listen to your co-workers and fellow students and neighbors. This is mine – don’t take it away. I need more – money, time, friends, stuff. This may be yours – but I want it. Don’t confuse me with your facts – this is what I think. You’re out to get me – I’m scared and will get you back. And on and on.

The world is full of hand-wringing, dark clouds, dire predictions. Consider our current economic, social and political lives. Pretty depressing stuff, lots of whining, plenty of finger-pointing and blame games, everyone in their own corners. claiming they have the one truth The world says no.

I want to argue this afternoon that those of us who are committed to a liberal arts life, to the richness and evocative character of a life well-led, have an alternative way to face the hard realities of the world, a way that doesn't give in to the darkness and polarization – and we must stand up and be counted as those who will not allow our personal and public lives to be defined by someone else's reality. We say yes.

The 20th century British poet, e.e. cummings, offers us these two lovely poems to jar us out of our complacency and to explore how our commitment to a liberal arts education both frees us to live on a different path and to invite others to join us...

love is a place...

love is a place
& through this place of
love move
(with brightness of peace)
all places

yes is a world
& in this world of
yes live
(skilfully curled)
all worlds

i thank You God for most this amazing...

i thank You God for most this amazing
day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

(i who have died am alive again today,
and this is the sun's birthday; this is the birth
day of life and of love and wings: and of the gay
great happening illimitably earth)

how should tasting touching hearing seeing
breathing any--lifted from the no
of all nothing--human merely being

doubt unimaginable You?

(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)

These are poems that challenge us to imagine what it means to live yes lives in a no world.

But, of course, this is not easy. The fact is that we live in a No world and our expectations are based on what it takes to succeed in that world. Toe the line or face the consequences. You promised us we'd have what we need to thrive. You owe me what I've earned. It's hard to say Yes when everything around us seems premised on No.

What a rare gift it is for those of us who are part of an academic community committed to the liberal arts to have this inspiration and challenge in our lives. In our communities of learning, we acknowledge the gifts we have been given – the gifts of education and community and service – even as we embrace the challenge of what it means to pursue Yes lives in the midst of a No world.

So how are we equipped by a liberal arts education to live Yes lives and what might they look like? Here at Augsburg we have sought to learn alongside you how to think critically and imaginatively; to act with resolve and courage and humility; and to care deeply for the world and the neighbor. We have aspired to teach you to live liberal arts lives. I want to posit three claims about our liberal arts lives, our Yes lives – claims that reflect paths forward – paths for which you are now equipped – paths that encourage us to live with imagination and courage and resolve in the tensions between Yes and No.

First, our yes lives recognize common needs and aspirations.

In recent years, many scholars and commentators – from Robert Putnam (*Bowling Alone*) to Robert Bellah (*Habits of the Heart*) to David Brooks (*Bobos and Bohemians*) – have pointed to ways in which Americans have drifted away from doing things together, from associational lives. They claim we are too individualistic, drawn to lifestyle enclaves, more likely to bowl alone than with our fellow citizens.

Still others claim that rapidly changing economies and technology mean that we are no longer the same country and should not expect that we would still reflect a mid-19th century view of our lives – think blogs and email and chat rooms, not necessarily the means to face-to-face associational lives.

Each day, though, those of us who have the privilege of a liberal arts education work in organizations and communities with committed fellow citizens, motivated by a common cause that offers us hope that we still possess and aspire to the inclination to serve each other, the impulse to generosity that serves as a counterbalance to our self-absorption (even as that generosity crosses into innovative uses of new technology and means of associating globally!).

As we reflect on our work in community, what are the abiding themes (despite the changing context) that inspire and motivate us to give of ourselves to serve each other, to be generous, to sustain a good society, and to practice common work?

I believe the answer is grounded in the attention our liberal arts focus pays to our common needs and aspirations. I am reminded each day, for example, how easy it is to leave the work of meeting human needs to the good social service and health agencies in the community, or the work of peacemaking to those who take the time to be active and engaged. But the wonder of a liberal arts education is the call to engage the stranger and the other and to recognize that all of us bear responsibility for each other's needs and aspirations. It is a thin and fragile line that separates my needs from my neighbors – needs for safety, justice, physical well-being, a living wage, and so many others. At the same time, it is a wonderful and awesome thing that I share aspirations with those same neighbors – aspirations for education and beauty and community. Surely our engagement with each other is best grounded in recognition of the common parts of our experience and the richness of our diversity – rather than simply focusing on our differences, which can too often divide and polarize us.

This critical aspect of a liberal arts education was made clear to me most powerfully, when four and a half years ago, Nur Ali, our fellow Augsburg student, was murdered outside the Brian Coyle Center just down the street, gunned down as he left his work-study assignment tutoring neighborhood children.

At a neighborhood meeting after the murder to address safety concerns in the aftermath of the shooting, we all experienced first-hand the wrenching emotional impact of this shooting on our lives together. Though we intended to talk about security cameras and safety patrols, instead we listened to urgent longing for community. When an Imam (a Muslim religious leader) stood to speak, his first words were “God is good,” and though we were a room of people of very different faith traditions, we could whisper, “Yes, God is good, and this is not what our God wants for us.” In that spirit, our community came together to rededicate itself to the well-being of our neighbors – yes, to more security cameras and personnel, but even more urgently to finding common purpose in the health, safety and well-being of our neighbors and neighborhood.

This, I believe, is what a liberal arts education teaches us about common needs and aspirations. We live yes lives when we are open to learning about the needs and aspirations of those who are different from us, those who are strangers in our midst – and then finding ways we might live together as neighbors in the midst of our differences.

Second, our yes lives must be a labor of love

The connection between love and work seems to me absolutely critical to this vision of the liberal arts. Our efforts on behalf of common needs and aspirations comprise our labors of love. This is not work motivated by romantic love or the love between family members.

Instead, it is what the philosopher Aristotle called “civic friendship” – meeting each other as strangers and negotiating our lives together. We must love each other as amateurs, not waiting for the experts to save us. We must love each other with courage and imagination, countering the apathy and even hate of difference that often characterizes life in the world. Surely our common work illustrates the labors of love that sustain a community.

The power of this idea is to consider how our liberal arts education equips us for Yes lives in the various settings that many of us occupy or will occupy – the organizations and businesses and neighborhoods in which you daily live and work and bring your education and gifts to bear. Perhaps it is a corporation or a business or a social service agency or a school or an agency – whatever their size or scope, organizations are the means by which we get things done in the world. Allow me to confess, as a lifelong organizational person, we need all of our glad and generous hearts to help organizations live up to their better natures! We need to discern and embrace what it means to do the work of Yes – in the midst of settings too often shaped by the demands of No.

But what can we do? I am a student of the literature about helping organizations to embrace and sustain a culture of innovation – i.e., to create organizational cultures that are constantly looking for new and different ways to do things, to make products, to deliver services; to save souls, educate students, heal the sick. You get the picture. I’m not surprised by most of what I read about this work. Make a plan, think outside of whatever box you’re in, provide incentives for innovative work, and hold people accountable for being innovative – pretty standard leadership work. But then I happened upon the writing of Mark Federman, a Canadian scholar, whose writings on innovation include this provocative suggestion: “Multiply your mind by giving it away.” And Federman means exactly what he says – be generous, be charitable, give instead of always taking. Because when you are generous with your mind, with your knowledge and education and other gifts, you help to create organizations and neighborhoods and agencies and churches and schools that are marked not by the scarcity of the world, but by the abundance of what’s possible when generosity of mind and heart and hands and spirit is our guiding principle.

How will you give away your mind in the organizations and communities you serve? I’m sure you have your own examples of how someone in your college or workplace or neighborhood has multiplied his or her mind by giving it away. These days I continue to be struck by the ways in which Augsburg staff member Brian Noy and his many student colleagues (many of you!) who run our Campus Kitchen program are illustrating this generosity of mind and spirit. Campus Kitchen’s core work is led by students who collect leftover foodstuffs from our cafeteria and area restaurants, prepare and then deliver more than 3,000 meals a month to our neighbors in Phillips and Cedar-Riverside. It is good and important work. What I have seen in the past couple of years, though, is that Brian and his colleagues have not been content simply to stay the course. They have focused our 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. They have multiplied their minds by giving them away to all of us. And the results are staggering – community gardens on the edge of campus

that bring together neighbors and students and children; a Farmer's Market on campus each week and relationships with organic farmers from across the region; composting of leftover everything in the cafeteria; and now (in partnership with many faculty and students) a food pantry here at the back of this chapel to meet the needs of our own community members whose hunger may be invisible to us – yes lives in a no world, food and justice in a world where too many people go hungry.

Here are the labors of love that say yes, that show how the liberal arts equips us for the work of civic friendship, the work of justice and compassion, the work of community-building, the work of global citizenship.

Finally, yes is a way of life, a set of values, and a democratic social ethic

This understanding of the liberal arts and common work ultimately creates a vision of democracy as a social ethic. Democracy, in other words, not as a creed or a sentiment or a political system, but as an ethic that challenges us to balance individual needs and interests with the common good. The genius of democracy is that the self doesn't go away, but it enters into relationship with others in mutual need and aspiration.

This is not some utopia, but a way of negotiating our lives together in a messy world. As we all recognize, things will not always go well, but with a democratic way of life they will go forward toward a horizon of shared purpose that inspires and energizes our community.

And of course you might expect me to argue that our yes lives are defined by a theological idea we call our vocations or callings. We believe God calls us to lives of meaning and purpose in the world. We educate diverse students (most of whom do not share our faith commitments) so that they might discern and be equipped to live their callings in the world. These callings are both personal and social – they are a way of life that gives meaning to our individual lives but that are never disconnected from the communities in which they are lived.

A quick story illustrates this point well. The pastor and author Will Campbell tells 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 he 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]...and he replied quietly, 'Because I drink too much!'" (from William D. Campbell, "Vocation as Grace," in *Callings!* ed. James Y. Holloway and Will D. Campbell [New York, Paulist Press, 1974], pp. 279-280.)

So this afternoon, I challenge all of us dedicated to the liberal arts – especially those we honor for your exemplary work at this college – to imagine and practice how our education challenges and equips us to live Yes lives in a No world. With all of our knowledge and privilege, with all the good we celebrate in our daily work in the wider community - all that we give thanks for - our abiding challenge is to find ever more imaginative ways to invite and engage others into this labor (for it is work!), into this love (for it also is love!), and into a way of life that places our many gifts in service of the communities we will inhabit. Our education calls us to say Yes when the world says No - it calls us to build stronger communities, make civic friendships, love our neighbors and our neighborhoods, live as if our common lives really matter. That vision, that hope, that aspiration, is our legacy as those liberally educated – as those freed and called to live yes lives in a no world. And you, our honorable students, have our thanks and blessings as you seek to show us the way. We're so very proud of you.

I say Yes. What say you?