

KEEPING OUR PROMISES

Honors Convocation

April 15, 2011

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. You are among the best and brightest, we are proud of you, and it is a privilege for me to offer some brief thoughts this afternoon that might help frame our common understanding of how an Augsburg education – honorably pursued – grounded in the liberal arts – leads us to a deeper understanding of the promises we must make and keep with each other.

I am a long-time student of a sociologist named Robert Bellah, who, with a group of colleagues, published an influential book back in the early 1980s titled *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. It is a compelling book for those of us who care about the social fabric of our country and who believe that we are called to be of service in the world.

Bellah’s most significant point in the book is that contemporary Americans have a first language which is very much focused on our individual lives and especially our economic well-being. When we talk about what we do and why we do it, we tend to talk about how it helps me rather than how it helps the wider community. Even our best work – our most faithful service – tends to be described in language that is individualistic. Bellah argues that this first language is impoverished. He points out that we also have second languages – many of which are religious and theological – that have shaped our country and our experience, and that we need to recover these second languages in order to more meaningfully describe our lives together. Examples of this second language include words like covenant and stewardship and vocation – sound familiar?!

This afternoon I want to focus on the language and concept of covenant and suggest that a recovery of this second language is very much at the heart of Augsburg’s mission to educate students to be informed citizens, thoughtful stewards, critical thinkers and responsible leaders. As we go about our mission-based work here, we are mindful that we are preparing and equipping you for many potential roles in the world – as professionals, citizens, public servants, business leaders, and so forth. The challenge in this work is in finding ways to struggle with how the mythologies of our lives – the stories that define us – in the 21st century are primarily economic and transactional. That is, we send you into a world where your work and service likely will be commodified. You will be paid for your work and recognized for your service (not necessarily bad things!), and the reality of your lives will be defined by the dynamics and relationships that are much more about what we do for each other than what we do with each other.

I want to argue that in the face of the many challenges we face in the world – challenges of justice and fairness, of global citizenship, of economic downturns, of natural and human-made disasters – challenges that will be yours to address as you set forth from this college – we cannot settle for transactional relationships, for purely economic mythologies, for work and service as personal commodities. Instead, we must be much more concerned about the web of promises we make and keep with each other in our daily lives, both personal and common.

So where do we turn for inspiration and guidance in recovering a sense of our covenantal relationships?

I often look to the wisdom of our country's founders, for whom the language of covenant was very much at the heart of their aspirations for independence from tyranny. In fact, I keep a copy of the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution on my desk. Why? So that I never will forget the foundational values and struggles of the society in which we have the privilege to live..."When in the course of human events it becomes necessary for one People to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to Separation." Incredible words. What do they mean to our 21st century lives as we seek to recover this vocabulary of the promises we make and keep to each other as citizens, as fellow travelers on the road of democracy?

The 20th century theological and ethicist, H. Richard Niebuhr, has written of the intentions of our founders in these words: "Covenant meant that political society was neither purely natural nor merely contractual, based on common interest. *Covenant was the binding together in one body politic of persons who assumed through unlimited promise responsibility to and for each other and for the common laws, under God.* It was government of the people, for the people and by the people but always under God, and it was not natural birth into natural society that made one a complete member of the people but always *the moral act of taking upon oneself, through promise, the responsibilities of a citizenship that bound itself in the very act of exercising its freedom.* For in the covenant conception the essence of freedom does not lie in the liberty of choice among goods, but in the ability to commit oneself for the future to a cause and in the terrible liberty of being able to become a breaker of the promise, a traitor to the cause."

The binding together, the body politic, the moral act of taking upon oneself the responsibilities of a citizenship that bound itself in the very act of exercising its freedom. Here is the heart of the covenant, of the promises we make and aspire to keep (though too often break) with each other. Here is one important source of the inspiration and guidance for the education we seek to provide here at Augsburg, education that prepares and equips you to enter into the web of social and moral promises that are at the core of a healthy democracy.

So what does this look like in the education you have received in this college? Can we find it neatly described in a course catalogue or a general education arch or a promise diagram? I fear not. But we can find it in the sort of people and citizens and thinkers and neighbors you have become. We can see it in the aspirations you have begun to imagine and achieve as witnessed to by the honors we confer this afternoon. We can describe it in the difference each of you will make in the world.

For in this place, all of us gathered here to honor you (and the myriad others who have been our partners) have sought to educate you for lives in the world that are characterized by our commitments to a society grounded in the promises we make and keep with each other, We have sought to prepare and equip you to:

Live and learn as amateurs

I love to learn as an amateur. I love to embrace the adventures of human history and experience; the riches of science, literature, philosophy, and the arts; and the wonders of social and cultural studies as someone who is learning anew, whose mind and spirit are being enriched by the wisdom of the ages and the intellectual challenges of the future. I love to find, as educator Parker Palmer so aptly phrases it, “the grace of great things” that comes in the process of joining in a community of teaching and learning.

Our college is at its best when focused on the amateur love of learning, the love of seeking truth, of debating theories, of exploring scenarios, and of telling good stories. The genuine seeker – the authentic student – loves for the love of it, loves as an amateur loves. This, of course, runs counter to much of the way our society has come to view education, especially higher education with its preparation for life as an expert, a professional.

Knowledge and technical skills are important, but I invite you to take a leap of faith and to seek to learn and live as an amateur. I urge you to find ways to use your education, not simply as a way of fixing problems and providing needed expertise, but as the impetus to seek common wisdom – wisdom found in that constellation of knowledge, virtue, perspective and imagination that is at the heart of a liberal arts education and at the center of a healthy body politic. I challenge you to recognize that in the promises we make and keep with each other in the world, we have the responsibility to see our particular gifts and knowledge and expertise not as things that divide us from each other (“you have needs that I will meet”) but as the impetus for seeking the common purpose and practices that link us in a covenantal relationship.

I have found inspiration for this vision of living and learning as amateurs in the work of Augsburg’s nursing department. In a recent visit to the Augsburg Central Nursing Clinic at Central Lutheran Church, I was struck by the lack of the normal clinical accessories – no waiting room, no separate treatment rooms, no distinctions between expert (in the white coat) and patient. Instead, I witnessed our nursing students engaging their “patients” not as customers to be served, but as human beings, asking about their lives, giving them soap and deodorant and pairs of socks, referring them of course if needed to clinical services, but primarily focused

on shared aspirations for health and well-being. Amateurs – in relationship – sharing in the promise of life together.

The farmer-poet-essayist Wendell Berry names this great conflict between what he calls the world of efficiency and the world of love. Within the modern health care system and its hospitals, he argues that the world of efficiency ignores the world of love, because “by definition it must reduce experience to computation, particularity to abstraction, and mystery to a small comprehensibility.” And yet, the world of love would stubbornly hold that this sick human body cannot be reduced to a chart or a law. This body is my father or brother or daughter—a living creature, a small, fragile light in the dark.

Here, we gather as those who have so much more to learn from and with each other.

Live and learn with strangers

I love democracy and all its messiness. I love to think about democracy, to talk about it, to practice it – and to encourage others to do the same. It is one of the reasons I most wanted to be a college president, because I believe that colleges – especially liberal arts colleges like Augsburg – are the best places to learn to be good citizens of a democracy. Here, we learn from strangers and from the otherness they represent for us.

This is sometimes difficult for us to grasp about life in a democracy. The genius of a democracy is that people from different walks of life – different ethnic, religious, economic, and geographic backgrounds – must learn to navigate their lives together in society. We are strangers to each other on what settlement house leader and social philosopher Jane Addams called the “thronged and mixed” road of democracy, and the needs of strangers demand our attention as we make our best efforts to give voice to those needs.

Our attempts to deny that we are strangers to each other ultimately mean that we deny the reality of the world we inhabit, of the promises we must make and keep with each other. The historian and journalist, Michael Ignatieff, eloquently reminds us in his *The Needs of Strangers*,

We need justice, we need liberty, and we need as much solidarity as can be reconciled with justice and liberty. But we also need, as much as anything else, language adequate to the times we live in. We need to see how we live now and we can only see with words and images which leave us no escape into nostalgia for some other time and place.

Colleges need to be places that prepare all of us for the times in which we live. We need to learn from strangers, as those who look out at this world of difference, this world of otherness, and embrace that difference with all the resources of our hearts and minds.

Here at Augsburg, we want all of you to hunger for such experiences, to see them as integral to your education. I want us to work together to find what philosopher and classicist, Martha

Nussbaum, has called a liberal education that *cultivates humanity* – that teaches critical examination of oneself and one’s traditions, that encourages us to recognize the links we have to other human beings because of recognition and concern, and that helps to cultivate our narrative imaginations, our capacities of empathy and creativity and understanding of difference.

There are so many compelling examples of this challenge to live and learn with strangers here at Augsburg. I have been thinking a good bit in recent weeks that Nur Ali, our student who was killed in the neighborhood in fall 2008, would have graduated this spring. During those terrible days after his murder, I recall the fear and anxiety we all were feeling about how we could live together in this neighborhood.

And at a neighborhood meeting shortly 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. We rededicated ourselves to the covenant of life together in our neighborhood. We honor Nur today as we continue to live in those promises.

Here, we learn to live with strangers.

Live and learn as patriots

A college – like a country – is awash in rituals and traditions and symbols that clearly mark out our histories, our values, our aspirations. This ceremony is a prime example of how Augsburg seeks to keep its promises to you, to live up to its mission and values, to teach you well. In the relationships we develop with our colleges, we learn to be patriots. We learn to love communities and causes and values that matter to us.

To learn to be a patriot is slippery territory, I recognize. Surely none of us believes that blind allegiance to a college or a family or a country is acceptable, and yet there is this deep affection, this loyalty and dedication, this abiding belief in the work of our common purpose that we must learn if we are to truly join in covenantal relationships with a college, a family, a neighborhood or a country. We must learn to develop deep and passionate commitments to the causes and communities we would serve.

And yet, these common efforts go astray. Colleges lose their way. Families are dysfunctional. Countries break their promises. What then are we left to learn and to love? Some golden era of days gone by, some moral or spiritual value that remains in name alone, some sense of

promise as yet unfulfilled. Or perhaps we learn to love, as political ethicist Jean Bethke Elshtain has so aptly put it, as “chastened patriots”. We learn to be realistic about how any community can make mistakes and what our responsibility is to critique, to effect change, to disobey civilly if needed, so that the college or family or country we love might once again live up to the trust we have put in her.

I find these wise words of the late William Sloane Coffin, university chaplain, public activist, and faithful citizen, inspiring as I think about the true meaning of patriotism:

“The worst patriots are those who hold certainty dearer than truth, who, in order to spare themselves the pain of thought, are willing to inflict untold sufferings on others. Adolf Eichmann comes to mind.

But if uncritical lovers of their country are the most dangerous of patriots, loveless critics are hardly the best. If you love the good you have to hate evil, else you're sentimental; but if you hate evil more than you love the good, you're a good hater.

Surely the best patriots are those who carry on not a grudge fight but a lover's quarrel with their country.” (*The Nation*, July 1991)

To learn as a chastened patriot is to be both visionary about what is possible and realistic about how things go wrong – to hold each other accountable for missteps, to take appropriate responsibility – but then to fight like hell to make things right, to get things back on track, to help make sense now of the values and aspirations we learned to love, perhaps long ago.

I find this sort of vision embedded in the work of Augsburg’s Center for Global Education, which has educated students for almost three decades in developing countries around the world. During this academic year, I have had the privilege to visit CGE sites in both Namibia and Nicaragua, and to be reminded there of the opportunities our students have to see chastened patriotism in action. Here is a story from my trip to Nicaragua that illustrates this point.

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.

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 downpayment) 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.

Father Fernando Cardenal, the Jesuit priest who led Nicaragua's literacy efforts in the 1980s and who received an honorary degree from Augsburg last June, joined us near the end of our time in Managua. He told of his early days as a priest, assigned to Medellin, Columbia, where he lived in a poverty-stricken neighborhood. He learned to love his flock and suffered alongside them in their daily lives, doing what he could do to help. When he was reassigned to his home country of Nicaragua, his parishioners in Medellin lamented his leaving them behind. And he recounted his deep sadness as they met for the last time. All I could do, he said, was to make an oath, to promise them that I would never stop believing in, hoping for and working to make a reality God's loving intentions for the poor. It was an oath of hope in the midst of despair. And it is an oath he has spent his life keeping.

In the face of this wonderful, albeit messy, reality, we name a future grounded in the promises our ancestors made long ago – we are bound together in the promises we make and keep each other. We need to love the reasons we come together – the missions and values and sense of common purpose – and we also need to recognize that we will not always keep our promises to each other. And then we will need to regroup and ask forgiveness and slog on even when it is too painful and we would rather just go it on our own.

Here, we learn to live as those who love a cause enough to make it better.

We, too, are called to make an oath of hope – to make and keep promises with each other – to recognize that the education we have received in this college prepares and equips us for many good things, perhaps the most compelling of which is to live as people of promise, as those who choose to bind themselves together for the sake of each other and our common freedom and purpose. Congratulations and godspeed.