

YOU HONOR US

Honors Convocation
April 25, 2019
President Paul Pribbenow. Ph.D.

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?” Perhaps you recall - 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 done 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.

I have the privilege to co-teach the Honors 490 senior seminar each spring. This spring, Jay Walljasper from our Sabo Center and I have had a meaningful experience with our honors students, most of who are here today, exploring why place matters to our vocational journeys – an exploration that has been pursued both in the classroom and in the community through experiential opportunities. A couple of weeks ago, we were in Chicago visiting various places – the site of the 1892 Columbian Exposition, skyscrapers in the Loop, a museum that celebrates literature and place, even the Second City comedy club – to learn how the idea of place – understood both as geography and as networks of relationships – makes a difference in how we live in the world. That is the sort of education we aspire to offer and it is meaningful to be with our students in their last semester at Augsburg – as a co-learner in the course, seeking to make sense of both the mundane and the extraordinary in our world.

And therein is the turn I want to make in my remarks to you on this special occasion. Even as we gather here today to honor and celebrate you, I want to boldly proclaim that each of you honors us, honors our community, honors the world as you have lived out our mission with exceptional intellect, hard work, and moral passion in the classroom, on campus, in the neighborhood and around the world. You honor us.

As I reflect on all that you have accomplished these past several years, I am struck by how Augsburg is made and remade over and over again by the generations of students who have come to this campus to be educated, to meet friends and colleagues for life, to gain the skills and attitude and commitments that will make a life and shape the world, even to discern their callings and find a path forward in their vocational journeys. Our vision statement for Augsburg says that we will be a “new kind of student-centered, urban university, small to our students and big for the world.” And there is, in this aspiration for Augsburg’s future, a clear reverence for our past wherein students have always come to the college, engaged their peers, faculty and staff, and remade this community – remade it to be more mission-focused, more true to its values and commitments, more relevant to the world that so needs our care and compassion.

In this way, Augsburg counters the elitist claim that students ought to be “college-ready” and instead dedicates itself to what our colleague Harry Boyte in the Sabo Center for Democracy and Citizenship calls being a college that is “student-ready!” How about that for turning higher education on its head? We aspire to be student ready and each of you has shown us why that is important as you have pursued your life and work in this community.

I thank each of you for what you’ve done for Augsburg in your time here – in the classroom, laboratory, on athletic fields and performance stages, in the neighborhood and around the world – you’ve made Augsburg stronger and more faithful. You’ve helped build up one of the most robust and successful undergraduate research programs in the country. You’ve won national and international recognition for your scholarship and service. You’ve committed yourself to our nearby neighborhoods, tutoring and serving meals and building community. You’ve taught us about privilege and challenged our community to name its biases and embrace otherness and difference. You’ve stood up for our immigrant neighbors. You’ve fought for justice, on and off campus. You’ve delighted us with theater and music and athletic prowess. You’ve shared your hearts and minds and spirits with a community that now bears your marks. And that is honorable work – work that honors us.

So, what lessons have we learned from you that will continue to shape Augsburg into the future? I trust others gathered here will share why they believe you deserve to be honored, but here are four lessons I’ve gained from your good work here.

First, you’ve shown me over and over again how intellect and experience cannot be separated. You embody the 20th century educational philosopher John Dewey’s idea that education is not preparation for real life, it is real life. I was with a group of our students a few years ago at our campus site in Cuernavaca, Mexico. We spent a couple of days visiting various sites – a bathing suit factory made possible by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and an indigenous village where the residents lived with unhealthy and unjust conditions. These were long and stressful days, full of experiences that challenged our hearts and senses and minds. And I’ll never forget the

moment as we were about to leave the village after a wrenching and exhausting day when one of our students asked for reflection time. And even though a few of us groaned in our weariness, she didn't want to leave the experience she had just had – as difficult as it had been – without seeking to understand, to reflect upon, to integrate into her own thinking what she had just seen and done. This integration of theory and practice that is at the heart of an Augsburg education is not something to be taken for granted. I visit lots of other colleges and universities in my work, and students often comment that they feel “under a bubble” while in school there. There is no Augsburg bubble and we have you to thank for showing us what it means to be what MIT professor, Donald Schön, has called, “reflective practitioners,” those who practice the art of linking reflection and experience in every aspect of your life.

You've also taught me how to love this place. The pride you have in this university and its place in the heart of the city is tangible in your spirit and t-shirts and good work to make this college and neighborhood even stronger. From the time you first arrived for SOAR and were assigned to a neighborhood, you have been stewards of this place in myriad ways. You have settled here and taken good care of what has been entrusted to us on this campus and in our neighborhood. There are tangible results of your stewardship of this place in a Campus Cupboard to meet the needs of your fellow students, in your engagement on behalf of lives that matter, in more and more attention to our carbon footprint, and the care you have taken to create a safer and more vibrant neighborhood. 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. You have taught me again the importance of “sticking,” of staying and settling in. At Augsburg, we accompany and settle alongside our neighbors. We pursue education in this place, equipping each other for lives of meaning and purpose. We welcome each other in this place, sustaining a community of hospitality and mutual respect. We love and are faithful to this place that has been our home for almost 150 years.

And you've taught me not to be afraid of the other, the stranger. We live in a world of fear and violence and separation. We too often marginalize the stranger, retreating to what the late sociologist Robert Bellah called “our lifestyle enclaves,” mingling with those with whom we share culture and skin color and income status, trying to find safety away from the uncomfortable, the unknown. But, of course – as you have taught us well – retreating doesn't work because the world only becomes more dangerous and polarized and frightened. Here at Augsburg you have lived into a community of hospitality and justice that embraces otherness and difference, that faces the tensions and complexities of diverse perspectives and experiences, that seeks to engage what political theorist Michael Walzer calls a “thick” sense of life together, not trying to minimize our differences but calling them into dialogue and mutuality. Your class has been at the heart of this good work here at Augsburg and you've challenged all of us to face our privilege and biases and fears – and some days we get it right, on others we

have so much more to learn – as we embrace the richness of life together in this remarkable community. The late priest Henri Nouwen described our aspirations this way:

Hospitality is the creation of free space where a stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer space where change can take placeThe paradox of hospitality is that it wants to create emptiness, not a fearful emptiness, but a friendly emptiness where strangers can enter and find themselves free; free to sing their own songs, speak their own languages, dance their own dances; free to leave and follow their own vocations.

Finally, you've taught me to hope. For more than 40 years, I have worked at colleges and for all of the messiness that often passes for daily life on a campus, I come back each and every day because of the hope you inspire in all of us. It is hope despite the evidence on many days. When His Holiness, the Dalai Lama was with us in 2014 at the Nobel Peace Prize Forum, someone asked him a question about how he could continue to follow his path toward peace when the world was so violent and there was little evidence of a way forward. His response was quick – “What choice do I have? If I meditate on pessimism, I will die. If I meditate on optimism, I will live.” It is not a naïve hope that you teach us – just wish for it and all will be well with the world. No, you are well-educated individuals, fully aware of the complexities and uncertainties of life in the world – in society, in our environment, in the cosmos even! And yet you hope and you get to work and good things happen. In this way you honor the world you will surely change – as you have changed us in this university.

So this afternoon, you, our honorable students, have our thanks and blessings for all the good you've achieved – in the classroom, laboratories, stages and athletic venues, and in the neighborhoods we call home. And you have our accolades and respect for the lessons you have taught us – reflective practice, place making, embracing the other and keeping hope alive – and the ways you have made Augsburg an even more faithful and relevant place for the world. You surely honor us. Congratulations.