

A LIBERAL ARTS LIFE

Honors Convocation

April 16, 2010

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 to a way of life, what I am bold to call “a liberal arts life.”

I think it is fair to say that there is considerable confusion among diverse audiences in 21st century America about the meaning of the liberal arts. I have spent a good bit of my career studying the issues raised by this confusion and I could spend a good bit of my time this afternoon exploring why it is that this ancient tradition of education for citizenship suffers for lack of public understanding – but I won’t rehearse those arguments here (big sigh of relief!)

Instead I want to consider a different beginning point, i.e., what we might learn about the liberal arts by focusing on what we hope it might mean for the world that there is such a thing as an education grounded in the liberal arts – by focusing on you, our honored graduates, and what we hope for and expect from you as you go into the world to live as liberal arts graduates. What does a liberal arts life look like?

Allow me to suggest three ideas that might begin our conversation. I want to suggest that these three ideas follow a simple pattern or formula that sum up my understanding of a liberal arts life. That simple, and admittedly provocative, pattern is this: the liberal arts have prepared you to “Think, Act, and Give a Damn.” With all respect to those who might object to my language, I need to tell you that I once promoted this summary of the liberal arts as a marketing scheme for prospective college students – and it actually worked well, even as I answered all of the phone calls and emails from local clergy. I finally called my Lutheran pastor dad, who gave me a pass – thanks, dad.

So, here are some initial thoughts about thinking, acting and giving a damn – about your liberal arts lives.

THINK: PAYING ATTENTION

Paying attention may be the most important lesson you have learned about how to think as you go out from Augsburg College to make your mark and to be good citizens of the world...

What does paying attention have to do with the liberal arts?

I had a revelation a few years ago about liberal arts education while listening to a presentation by a religion professor at Rockford College, where I served before coming to Augsburg. He described his work over a couple of years with a small group of Muslim students to develop a new introductory religion course on Islam. As I listened to his engaging story, I was reminded of what I believe deeply about the challenge we have in the 21st century when it is easy to be more worried about education for a career than about learning that stretches the imagination and offers us the skills, knowledge and values to live in a complex world. What this faculty member taught me is that to genuinely embrace liberal arts learning, we need to pay attention, to attend to each other and to what is good and valuable in our lives, and to practice extreme patience, deep humility and a suspension of disbelief in our learning and in our lives – all attitudes and characteristics that are rare in our culture (and in our colleges).

He told a story of how he – on the cusp of retirement – set out to learn as an amateur. He admitted the mistakes he made in describing Islam to students. He described his childlike efforts to learn a bit of Arabic. He described being corrected in class by the Muslim students. He talked about misconceptions of the Islamic faith and tradition that he (and we) needed to debunk. What I learned from him was that education in the liberal arts – a core pillar of our mission at Augsburg – is about so much more than what we learn; it is about why and how we learn. Liberal arts learning – whether in the traditional disciplines or in professional studies – is about the love, patience and humility it takes to learn to pay attention, to attend to what we most value.

Simone Weil has said that “Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity.” A liberal arts approach to education – no matter the subject or topic – is well-suited to cultivate attention, “And *attention*, like listening, engenders genuine and lasting learning.”

Brad Sullivan, who teaches at Western New England College, has recently challenged all of us who care about education to consider attention as a topic of focused inquiry. Sullivan’s argument is that the ways of knowing most conducive to the purposes of a liberal arts education – grounded in a historical perspective and having their genesis in personal engagement, inquiry and critical consideration – are inextricably bound up with the cultivation of attention. “Experience-centered, inquiry-centered liberal arts learning helps them to cultivate and practice the kinds of attention that will make them intelligent observers, diligent critics, and thoughtful actors on the stage of human life.”

Further, sociologist Robert Bellah and his colleagues define paying attention in *The Good Society* as the core skill of a strong democracy. Attending to the things we most value, being mindful of the most important values and relationships and principles (and not getting distracted by all the rest) and taking responsibility both individually and as a society (through institutions) for what we most care about, are ways of thinking and knowing that you learn from the liberal arts and that prepare you to lead in the world. That is how paying attention is

at the core of a healthy democracy and that is what I challenge you to do as you go out into the world – and what you have learned here at Augsburg College and from all your teachers, families, churches, friends, and so forth, is the “stuff” of a good life, the lens through which you pay attention as you live in the world.

So what is it that I would have you pay attention to? I can’t prescribe that for you – that is the genius of the liberal arts and democracy, it demands that you take responsibility for what you and your community care about – it links personal responsibility with common purpose – and when we get distracted, or stop paying attention, the personal and common often get separated and in most cases we stop caring about the most important things for our society. Important and valuable things like learning about those who are different than we are and engaging in healthy and civil conversations about the common good and seeking to understand and embrace the needs of our neighbors. Thinking – paying attention – is at the heart of a liberal arts life, marked by patience, humility and love.

ACT: COMMON WORK

I believe that one of the most overlooked aspects of a liberal arts education is actually what I might call the rules of engagement in our institutions. We have opportunities each and every day on our campuses to model for students and each other what it means to live together in a healthy community, neighborhood and democracy – in other words, we teach each other how to “act.” From the residence halls to the classroom; from participation in decision-making to communication practices; from accountability for actions to fair and transparent policies – I think we need to consider how institutions dedicated to the liberal arts are promoting good citizenship in consistent and effective ways. I have labeled this way of acting “common work,” and want to suggest that daily life at Augsburg is a source of much wisdom for a liberal arts life that seeks to promote common work.

As many of you know – since many of you entered the Augsburg community when I did four years ago – we have named five abiding principles for our lives together at Augsburg that I would contend are the building blocks of common work:

- *We work out of abundance.* This is the promise of abundance in a world of scarcity – this is the promise into which we are called as God’s people. This also is the promise of civic prosperity, commonwealth, and the foundation for mature citizenship, doing things together that we cannot do as well alone.
- *We live with generosity* – “And the Word became flesh” (John 1: 14a) is our historic motto. It is the generosity of our lives and whereabouts that we celebrate. It is our nature and identity and character that we lift up, our links to a particular place and culture and set of values and practices that make us Augsburg – as we have been known since 1869.
- *We learn through engagement* – In many ways, engagement is an obvious aspect of Augsburg’s longstanding traditions of experiential education and community relations. Engagement involves both attitude and behavior. We engage each other because we

are committed to learning from each other. We engage each other because together we are stronger.

- *We educate for service* – Service is by no means an alien concept for Augsburg. In fact, our long-beloved motto, “Education for service,” is ready evidence that Augsburg has made service a central aspect of its curriculum and campus life throughout its history. The sort of service I most value at Augsburg is the sort of reciprocity and mutuality that characterizes service not as an array of random acts, but as a way of life, a set of values, a democratic ethic. It’s about a vision of democracy as a social ethic – the genius of balancing individual needs and interests with the common good.
- *We see things whole* – We see things whole is a “liberal arts” way of holding our lives together in this college community in trust. Seeing things whole provides an organizational framework for planning and problem-solving that is grounded in a vision of wholeness and interrelatedness – we’re all in this together and our various voices and perspectives together best ensure our common purpose and engagement.

Here then are the guiding values, principles and practices of a community that is dedicated to what I would call an authentic civic education. Here are the practices of citizenship for democracy. We are, in a very real sense, committed to educating students who understand and practice within the broader narrative which recognizes that we must not attempt prematurely to resolve the messiness, the tensions of our lives, but instead find in those tensions the “stuff” of lively public discourse, civic literacy and engagement, and the promise of mature and meaningful common work. We are called to be people of abundance, generosity, engagement and service – people who see things whole and hold common purpose in trust – people who grasp the call to citizenship as a distinctive and meaningful vocation in the world.

I want to offer a concrete example of where a lesson about common work might be learned from our recent experience here on campus. And it has to do with the selection of our speaker for the May commencement, Governor Pawlenty. I, of course, am aware that some of you are unhappy about this choice of a speaker! But the lesson for me is not about who the speaker is – there are plenty of reasons why we might bring the chief executive of our state to campus for this special occasion, agree with him or not. Instead, the lesson for me is that I did not put a process in place that gave students a voice in the selection of the honorary degree candidates and commencement speakers. I did not model the sort of practice that will teach you how I hope you will lead in your workplace and neighborhood and the other settings where common work is the way we should act. If I had done so, we might have learned more together about how we make these decisions, about what is important for a college dedicated to the liberal arts when it comes to selecting public figures to address our community, about how we might disagree with a choice and yet value the practice of civil discourse when we don’t agree.

Lessons can be both positive and negative – and still be constructive. I made a mistake in not involving students more directly in this important process. I admit my mistake – which, I hope, is a lesson we all will learn. And we work together to make things right. Earlier this afternoon, deans Farley and Garvey met with a group of student leaders to discuss how we plan to involve students in the commencement planning in the future years.

Common work – acting together as those committed to stronger organizations and neighborhoods and societies – a liberal arts way of living.

GIVE A DAMN: THE CALL TO JUSTICE

You all know that I could go on and on about what it means for a liberal arts life to be characterized by a commitment to justice. Earlier this winter, Professor Lori Brandt-Hale offered wise words in a chapel homily in which she suggested that the work of hospitality is not enough if it is not accompanied by the work of seeking justice. We must have the passion and commitment, the sense of unrest and dis-ease, the anger perhaps, to recognize that all of our thinking and acting must seek to make a difference for those in our midst who deserve better. And we can – we must – help to make things better. That is a central tenet of the liberal arts life.

Paying attention to what is most important and valuable. Working together as citizens to achieve more than we can accomplish alone. Caring so much that it hurts. I'll leave you with a poem to make this point. Here comes Seamus Heaney, the Welsh poet, who writes the following in "The Cure at Troy:"

from "The Cure at Troy"

Human beings suffer,
they torture one another,
they get hurt and get hard.
No poem or play or song
can fully right a wrong
inflicted or endured.

The innocent in gaols
beat on their bars together.
A hunger-striker's father
stands in the graveyard dumb.
The police widow in veils
faints at the funeral home.

History says, Don't hope
on this side of the grave.
But then, once in a lifetime
the longed for tidal wave
of justice can rise up,
and hope and history rhyme.

So hope for a great sea-change

on the far side of revenge.
Believe that a further shore
is reachable from here.
Believe in miracles
and cures and healing wells.

Call the miracle self-healing:
The utter self-revealing
double-take of feeling.
If there's fire on the mountain
Or lightning and storm
And a god speaks from the sky

That means someone is hearing
the outcry and the birth-cry
of new life at its term.

We honor you this afternoon, our most distinguished students, and I leave you with the challenge to live a liberal arts life. We've done our best to prepare you to pay attention, to work together and to seek justice – to think, act and give a damn. We await with great anticipation how you will make us proud and the world a better place. Congratulations and thank you.