

WHAT IS REQUIRED OF YOU?

Opening Convocation

August 27, 2024

Today we launch the Augsburg's 155th academic year – and here you are the class of 2028, one of the largest and most diverse classes in our history – and you all belong here. Now, 155 years is a long time and much has changed in the world and at Augsburg during those many years. Change happens – as it always has – but I also want you to know that there are things that have not changed for this university because they are at the heart of our identity and values and mission. You will receive the highest quality education we can offer – in partnership with each other and this remarkable faculty. You will be challenged by ideas and experiences and relationships new to you – because that is what it means to be educated. You will meet friends and peers for life – here they are. And you will be equipped for democratic citizenship – because the world needs you.

And here, then, is what is required of you – as it has been for generations of Auggies who have graced this campus as you do now – here is what you must do to fully embrace all that lies ahead in your Augsburg education.

If you know your Hebrew Bible – and if you don't, don't worry, Religion 100 will help – you will recognize the allusion in my title this morning to the well-known passage from the Old Testament prophet Micah, the sixth chapter, verse eight:

6.8 He has showed you, [O man,] what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

And, if I was smart, I might leave it right there, because if each of us were to behave as Micah claims the Lord requires, all would be well with the world. Justice, mercy and humility set a high bar for God's faithful people, but the theological claim imbedded in Micah's prophetic words is not mine to negotiate for you. The links between your faith, your relationship with the divine, and how you live in the world, are for you to explore and work out. We will provide a rich and challenging context for you to do just that, but we do not pretend to know how you will make sense of what the Lord requires of you.

On the other hand, there are some things that we can and do require of you. And that is the simple message I want to share with you this morning as you commence your Augsburg education. And maybe – just maybe – if you do what we require of you, you will find a pathway to understand what the Lord requires of you. That would be the bold claim at the heart of our education for vocation in the world, that how and what you learn here, that who you meet and engage here, that what you find out here about yourself and your various gifts, will offer you a clearer idea of what it is that you are called to do and be in the world.

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Especially at the beginning of this academic year – at a time fraught with social and political division and fear – I want to say a bit about the place and space in which you will pursue what is required of you. You come to college at a time when many are questioning whether or not our democracy will survive. Throughout the past few years, our city, country and world have been torn apart by violence fueled by all sorts of isms – racism, nationalism, fundamentalism. During your lifetimes, our economic lives have been marked by a growing gap between those who have and those who have not, a gap that threatens to unravel the social fabric of our communities.

In the midst of all of this volatility, you come to this community – Augsburg University – an institution that at its very core believes in democracy, not simply as a political system, but as an ethic, a way of life. And this democratic ethic means that you become members of a teaching and learning community – students, faculty, staff and partners – that believes that there are clear parameters for our lives together, in classrooms, residence halls, playing fields, in this chapel and everywhere we navigate daily life. There is, in other words, what Yale law professor Stephen Carter has called an “etiquette of democracy,” rules you must follow if we are to live and work and study in ways that live out our mission as a college.

We have always believed that a college education is about challenging ourselves with new ways of thinking, provocative questions, mind-stretching inquiry and conversations, pursuing knowledge and wisdom with abandon. And that is deeply intense and sometimes emotional work. The commitment to our academic vocation – critical thinking, openness to other perspectives and experiences, having your mind changed and your life transformed – may be even more difficult in the midst of our social disruptions. It can be frightening to learn new things; it can make us angry to be challenged by provocative ideas and experiences; it can be threatening to risk our social identities in the midst of those who do not share our paths in the world.

And for all of these reasons, the etiquette of our lives together has perhaps never been more important to the well-being of our common lives here at Augsburg. Perhaps I could suggest a simple rule for our lives together – let us be generous and gentle with each other, perhaps with a portion of forgiveness and grace, not so that freedoms are abridged or opinions squashed – college is not meant to be a safe place for your minds, you will encounter provocative, even troubling ideas here – but so that we might pursue our teaching and learning in ways that advance our mission and our democracy. Gentle and generous, the etiquette of democracy – a claim upon all of us in this place we now call Augsburg University.

In this context, then, what is it that is required of you, our newest colleagues?

Show up

The first requirement is really pretty fundamental and you already have begun to live up to it. You are here – on campus, engaged in your orientation, at this Opening Convocation, about to begin your college classes.

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But as the coming days pass, you will be tempted by many distractions and late nights and other obligations to not show up, to miss a class or a meeting, to say that it doesn't matter whether you attend every class session. I know this tendency – I lived it myself, making up elaborate excuses for why I could skip every 7th class session and no one would notice. And we might not notice every time, but you will notice (whether you fully get it now or not) that it is a slippery slope to not show up. Statistics show that skipping even one class session has an impact on whether or not first year college students stay in school, let alone graduate, or perhaps most importantly whether or not they learn something.

But, of course, this is not simply about showing up for class. Showing up is also a sort of spiritual practice. It is about being present now. It is about being in relationship to a text, a classmate, and/or a teacher. It is about accompanying each other on a journey that is both solitary and social. The famous educational philosopher, John Dewey, said that genuine education is not preparation for life, it is life itself. And if you believe that – as we do here at Augsburg – then showing up, being present now, is the key factor in whether or not you get the education you need in order to live in the world.

Show up, please.

Pay attention

The second requirement is also quite simple. But the equally simple fact is that we live in a world full of distractions and paying attention doesn't come easy.

Like you, I'm on social media (follow me at @paulpribbenow, if you must). I have an I-Phone and an iPad and a laptop. I read two newspapers each morning and probably have 20 magazine subscriptions. I do my best to lead this wonderful and complex university. I have two children, a wonderful spouse, and a life full of things I "must" pay attention to – and it's hard work. And I'm old. You are young and you have grown up in a time when multi-tasking is not an option, it's an expectation. I really can't imagine how you keep it all together. I admire you, but I also worry about you.

So here I stand asking you to pay attention. Yes, I mean put away all the distractions that you can control. Turn off the cell phone occasionally, spend some time away from the computer. Focus in on what your teachers and classmates are saying and doing. Find ways to pay attention.

But it is more than that, of course, because even when you have put away all those sources of distraction, it remains your responsibility to figure out what is most important and how you can make what is important the center of your life. The sociologist, Robert Bellah and his associates, have written that "Democracy means paying attention," (from *The Good Society*) by which they mean that the psychic energy we use to pay attention is the key to the sort of person we hope to be – as individuals and as a society. If we continue to be distracted, our

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attention and the energy that it requires of us will also be distracted, and the values and people and ideas and causes we should care about and attend to will not get our energy. And we will not become the people we want to be. We will follow someone else's idea of our call.

Pay attention, please.

Do the work

The final requirement follows logically from the first two. If you show up and learn to truly pay attention, you will find that there is work that must be done.

Many days, the work will be assigned to you. Read this text, explore these ideas, test this hypothesis, run this experiment, play this scale, practice this drill. You know all about doing school work already, but please know that this is college and college signals a quantum leap in the work required of you. Don't get behind on reading and papers. Take advantage of the support we offer to help you manage your time and learn to study. Support each other and ask for help when you feel you need it.

Because more and more, on many days the work will be yours to discern and pursue. There will be no one there to tell you what to do. You will need to seize the work that needs to be done. The profound truth at the heart of our academic mission is that the work you learn to do here – in the classroom, on campus, in our neighborhood and around the world – is the basis for pursuing the important work to be done in the world – and we need you to do it. We are counting on you to do it. It is the work for which we were recognized several years ago with President Obama's Award for Community Service. That is why this college exists – to educate you to be informed citizens, thoughtful stewards, critical thinkers and responsible leader – not just because we think it would be nice if you were all of those sorts of citizens and stewards and thinkers and leaders, but because the world needs you. There is utility to this education, there is purpose and direction, there is work to be done by educated folks. Work they are called to do. Work that might just have to do with what the prophet Micah claimed – the work of justice and compassion and humility.

Do the work, please.

And that is what is required of you. In this university dedicated to democratic engagement, simple lessons that I hope you will remember: show up, pay attention and do the work. Lessons that abide – even after 155 years – lessons that should help you in college, I would argue, but most critically and urgently, lessons that will serve you for a lifetime of following your passions and calls for the good of the world. I can't wait to see what good you will do. Welcome to Augsburg – it's our great privilege to have you all here!

Paul C. Pribbenow, Ph.D.
President

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