

## WHAT IN THE WORLD?

Opening Convocation Address  
Augsburg College, September 8, 2009  
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It is a great privilege to welcome you to our annual opening convocation, which marks your formal introduction to this teaching and learning community known as Augsburg College. We are so pleased you are here and look forward with great anticipation to our various adventures together in the years ahead.

I want to talk with you this morning about the world – a rather daunting task in my assigned five to seven minutes, but here goes! Earlier this summer I traveled to China with 20 Augsburg social work students, along with social work professor Tiong Tan, as part of an international travel course called “International Social Welfare East and West.” It was a wonderful trip in many ways, but perhaps the most striking lesson I learned while traveling with the group was how to understand (and to see others begin to understand) what it means to be a global citizen – to imagine ourselves as citizens not simply of this neighborhood or state or country, but of the world.

My message to you this morning is that the call to be citizens of the world is more relevant than ever because our increased access to neighbors with whom we share this globe calls us, challenges us even, to seek to understand the real, everyday lives of these neighbors whose needs must be the primary object of global systems, policies and practices. In other words, the needs of people in China and Nicaragua and Norway – not to mention Cedar-Riverside and Phillips and Seward – are no longer simply theoretical – something we read about in textbooks or in the press. Instead those needs are real, concrete and a pressing challenge to our own ways of living in the world. I want to argue, along with sociologist, journalist and member of the Canadian Parliament, Michael Ignatieff, that we need a new vision for imagining how we meet the needs of strangers – no matter where we find them – and that this vision must address *the fundamental issue of what responsibility we have for each other in the world*. In other words, as my title suggests, I want to ask you: “*What in the world* do we owe each other as human beings, as fellow citizens of the world, as neighbors in this most expansive sense?”

This vision of meeting the needs of strangers will not translate into the same practices, policies and systems for all settings and contexts – that is clear from what I saw and learned about Eastern and Western perspectives on social welfare during the China trip – but it will posit a common claim upon all of us that we are called to meet the needs of our neighbors, no matter where we find them. And in that common claim we have the underpinnings and the inspiration for sharing our personal and cultural stories so that we might better understand and learn from each other about how to pursue our important work together.

I want to suggest that there are four key questions that offer a framework for exploring the meaning of global citizenship in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and that your educational experience here at

Augsburg will offer you the ideas and values and experiences that will enable you to begin to answer these questions and claim your own roles as global citizens. A few thoughts about each of the four questions.

My first question is this: *What is the “social ethic” that grounds your work with neighbors, i.e., what is the normative statement of what we owe each other and why?*

- This is the fundamental question of “what in the world?” we owe each other
- Each of us has beliefs and values and cultural norms – our obligation is to articulate and share them with each other. Here is the connection between what we believe (and value) and what we do (our callings in the world).
- For example, here we are in this sacred space, part of our tradition as a college, a tradition that shapes how and what we teach. But within two blocks of here are a variety of other sacred spaces that shape the lives of fellow believers. How do we understand the differences and similarities in our respective beliefs and the difference they make in our work together here in Cedar-Riverside? In China this summer, we learned important lessons as Westerners when we visited the sacred sites where there were two or three different temples next to each other, each housing an altar dedicated to the worship of a different deity (one for good health, another for the success of children, perhaps one for a profitable business). We learned how these belief systems for Chinese people had a great deal to do with how social welfare was practiced in China.
- The same surely be said of different political, cultural and economic systems, all linked to the underlying social ethic that shapes how we engage and live with each other.
- Asking the question of what we owe each other begins with this deep engagement with beliefs and values that shape behavior and policies in our common lives.

My second question: *How do you engage your neighbors to know who they are, to listen to what they need, and to base a response to their needs on this genuine engagement?*

- This question challenges us to ask how open we are to being with, accompanying our neighbors. In our neighborhood, you will have many opportunities for such engagement and listening and learning.
- And once we listen and learn then there is the call to respond, to join with each other in common purpose, to meet our mutual needs.
- I’ve been struck by experiences here at Augsburg that illustrate just this sort of deep engagement with our neighbors.
- Somali elders with the local media – “we don’t know much about freedom of the press or freedom of speech.”
- Campus Kitchen, community garden, Farmer’s Market, cafeteria – linking our behavior with what our neighbors need from us.

My third question: *What are the organizational and systemic structures that allow us to be pragmatic – nimble, innovative, concrete – in our responses, honoring the needs of our neighbors rather than our own needs to follow the rules, build agencies or pursue our own convenience?*

- This is perhaps the central issue for those of us who live and work in organizations – we have rules and structures in place that are important sources of discipline and accountability, but sometimes they get in the way of meeting needs. Are we willing to suspend our normal ways of doing business to meet the needs of others? Are we willing to admit that we make mistakes or that we can learn from those who are newly involved in our college?
- I think about the Somali elders who want to use campus space for meetings and how we're surprised when the request for a meeting room is not about next week or month, but about right now. I also think about the many neighbors who will be your teachers, your faculty members outside of classroom. Are you willing to learn from a stranger? Our vision of education here at Augsburg calls us to this fluid understanding of the boundaries of our work together.

And my final question: *In what ways do our lives and work in the world recognize that local and global are inextricably bound together – that we learn in our rich and immediate context lessons that are relevant for neighbors around the world?*

- Here then is the call to global citizenship no matter where we find ourselves – whether here in Cedar-Riverside, in Zhuhai, China, Managua, Nicaragua or wherever your journeys take you
- Visit the Starbucks or the Somali malls or the largest urban Native American reservation or the Mexican businesses along Lake Street down the block to learn about local and global – about politics and commerce and technology and science
- Consider the impact of your behavior on those around the world – ask your questions about free and fair trade – as we will do during our Sustainability Month these next few weeks – and then accept the fact that you can make a difference here and around the world with the choices you make, the positions you take, the passion you bring to telling your stories of global citizenship

Here are questions that you will address in your Augsburg education. This commitment to genuine engagement with neighbors is the basis upon which we prepare you to be citizens of the world, and suggests a stance that is at once humble – i.e., admits our own biases and privileges – and respectful – i.e., authentically open to the perspectives and experiences of others. Humility and respect set the foundation for learning and for transforming human relations – in neighborhoods here and around the globe.

Our college is involved daily in engaging our neighbors as they worship, celebrate cultural traditions and holidays, and seek to maintain ties to their home countries. At the same time, we are engaging those same neighbors in the civic work of keeping our neighborhood safe,

participating in the political process, and supporting economic development. And in the midst of it all – in the classroom, in the residence halls, in the cafeteria and on the streets – you, as the newest members of the Augsburg community, will learn what in the world we owe each other as you prepare for lives of meaning and purpose. I can't wait to witness the difference you will make – here on campus, in our neighborhood and in the world.