

Thanksgiving

Inaugural Address

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11th President of Augsburg College

October 20, 2006

Thank you for being here today for this celebration of Augsburg College. I am inspired by your faithful lives, and I accept the call to be your partner in service to Augsburg with gratitude, resolve, and humility. Abigail, Thomas, Maya and I are quickly learning to love our new home - for that is how we see Augsburg - and you all are teaching us how.

As I offer my inaugural remarks this afternoon, there are two distinct voices I hear most clearly. The first is the voice of a student, whose name I do not know, who was part of a listening session with me last spring during one of my transition visits to campus. Even as she recited the many reasons she was glad to be an Augsburg student – a fine and dedicated faculty, a vital urban setting and life, a rich and challenging education – she also offered this keen observation about the college: “For all of the good and important work that goes on here, Augsburg needs to have a more joyful countenance – we need to learn how to rejoice and be glad!” Say what you may about Norwegian-American and Lutheran modesty, surely she was correct that we have every reason to give thanks for all that is Augsburg College. In fact, I originally proposed that we refer to the inauguration as “Joy to the World” but was outvoted by those who thought a Christmas carol and Three Dog Night anthem might not carry the appropriate weight for the occasion.

The other voice I hear is from my new colleague, Professor Bob Cowgill of our English department, who urged me in the early planning meetings for this inauguration to “keep it simple.”

These two encounters have taught me something about Augsburg College. First, that its students and faculty have no problem speaking their mind to the president. This is the heritage of the Lutheran Free Church at its best, and the wonderful, messy practice of democracy at its most powerful. This is a good thing. For this inauguration, this portent of the future, is not about me, but about us—all of us, at this college and in this neighborhood, and beyond.

So I hope to honor these two members of our community, who have already taught me so much, with remarks that are both joyful and simple. This is what we need, and what we deserve for this wonderful moment in Augsburg's history.

Let me begin with something simple, and ultimately joyful.

Authentic life—especially a life of faith—begins and ends in gratitude and in thanksgiving. We come together with the humility of thanksgiving, the recognition that life is a gift and a privilege not to be misused or misled, and, I might add, not to be missed. The late Henri Nouwen once wrote that “Gratitude ... goes beyond the ‘mine’ and ‘thine’ and claims the truth that all of life is a pure gift.”

All of life is a pure gift.

Let these words of mine, then, become my thanksgiving to God and to all of you, my psalm of gratitude for this college, for its mission and values, and for the cloud of witnesses gathered here today and scattered across time and space that hold Augsburg College in their hearts and minds.

The theme of this inauguration is not “Joy to the World” — okay, right sentiment, wrong choice, I get it. The theme is “Ages of Imagination.” The passage you heard Doug Green read is an interesting choice because it is so full of promise, that the power of belief, that “firm persuasion” as Blake calls it, is enough even to move mountains. We have many

mountains to move here at Augsburg. Some of them seem like the Rocky Mountains, steep and tall and treacherous. Others seem like molehills, but even these can stop us in our tracks if we don't have the key ingredient Blake calls for in his poem. It's not material resources; money; or human resources: smart and talented people. It is imagination. "In ages of imagination," Blake tells us, the power of the imagination, the power of belief, the power of a "firm persuasion" can move mountains. We must decide, today, to live in one of those ages of imagination, in fact, to use our imaginations to create a new era for the college.

I am thankful for all of you here today who already have that firm persuasion.

But that last bit in the Blake quotation also tells us that "some people are not capable of a firm persuasion of anything." Does that mean that there are some people who don't believe? Who resist the notion that we can move mountains? Who resist the possibility that Augsburg can be more than it is? Yes. And I am thankful for the opportunity to work with all of you who do believe, to prove otherwise. There is work to be done here. Join us.

There are four themes to my presidency. If you've been coming to chapel this week you've heard me talk about them, but they bear repeating here. These four themes are abundance, generosity, engagement, and service. Think of them as the "AGES" in Ages of Imagination. A-G-E-S: abundance, generosity, engagement, and service. Okay, it's a little hokey, but at least you'll remember. Augsburg is already blessed to have all of these things, though we sometimes don't recognize these great gifts—gifts that God has given us, and gifts that we were meant to care for and pass on.

Abundance, which is not just what we have but also who we are. Generosity, which is not just what we give, but also where we are and what we do. Engagement, which is not just what we offer to others, but also what we receive from them. You will hear these ideas

again in the course of my presidency, and I am thankful for the chance to help you, and to have you help me, put these ideas into action.

Since I've talked about the first three in chapel, let me focus on the last one, service, and particularly service in the city, something we do brilliantly here at Augsburg, and something that brings us national recognition again and again.

Over the past few weeks, many of our good faculty and staff members have invited me to visit with them some of the organizations in our urban neighborhood. I love to learn how their personal commitments have shaped their work in service to the city. I love to imagine in these visits the future of Augsburg College, living with our neighbors in this, our neighborhood.

One particular afternoon, I visited the Darul Uba Mosque, one of four mosques in the neighborhood. The imam from that mosque, Sheikh Nur, is sitting right here. We sat together in the mosque worship space, in our stocking feet, in a circle, and spoke with each other about our faith and lives. I spoke for some time with the elders about peace and the God of Abraham; about our lives here together in Cedar-Riverside; about our children and the aspirations we have that their lives will be meaningful and successful; about the world and how frightening it can be to live with strangers; about democracy and civil discourse. In other words, we spoke as fellow humans living together in the city.

I love the city—which probably still baffles my family with whom I grew up in primarily rural settings! It will come as no surprise that my first thoughts go to the role that neighborhoods play in a strong urban life. Though we are a city, we live our lives in neighborhoods. It is in the neighborhood where I come face to face with the challenges and joys of negotiating my life with others. I think this is why I learn so much from the poet and essayist, Wendell Berry, who says of the interplay between people and their neighborhoods,

“...our culture must be our response to our place, our culture and our place are images of each other and inseparable from each other, so neither can be better than the other.”

Here in our neighborhood, we build a culture; negotiate our lives together; sustain a rich (and sometimes messy) democracy; renew civilized life again and again in our common work and civic dialogue; and celebrate the ordinary, everyday character of life together. What a joy to be neighbors to each other in this place.

During my short time here at Augsburg, I have been challenged to think again about the role of colleges and universities in an urban setting. I am committed to the mutual dependency of colleges and the city. The paradigm for the relationships between cities and higher education must be less about extracting benefits from each other, less dependent on incidental impact, and more focused on the various resources that can be shared in the pursuit of a more robust, healthy, and meaningful urban life.

I am thankful for the opportunity to lead Augsburg to give substance to this renewed paradigm of urban and neighborhood citizenship.

There is much more that could be said in an inaugural address - much more that should be said about teaching and learning, about diversity, about faith. The truth is, we need a science building. We need a science building, but we also need a fine arts building. But more than new buildings, we need a renewed commitment to the mission of the college. This means that we need an endowment that will enable us to continue our tradition of teaching Christian values through the lens of the liberal arts, and the liberal arts through the lens of Christian values. Our faculty and staff, so dedicated to Augsburg's mission, work hard and deserve to be paid more than they are. Our students, who more than ever need to be exposed to the world, to learn about its complexity and take in its rich diversity, need support, so that every one of them might have the opportunity to study abroad. The

marvelous access that we provide to so many students needs to be enhanced by more excellence. There are many excellent programs at Augsburg, but we should not and cannot rest on these alone. Can we have too much excellence? Would students who came to Augsburg because we offer access, be turned off by more excellence? I submit to you that they would not. These are huge mountains that need to be moved. I don't claim to have all the answers about how to move them, but I see these mountains, clearly, on the horizon, and they will not escape my gaze, nor will they resist my resolve. I will need your help, the help of everyone in this room and of many people beyond this room. But we will move them.

In ages of imagination, a firm persuasion can move mountains. I believe that we live in such an age. I am thankful for the opportunity to persuade all of you of the same. You have my promise that I will work tirelessly on your behalf, and on behalf of this college.

All of life is a pure gift. Augsburg is a gift. It has become a gift to me and to my family. I intend to take good care of that gift: to cherish it, to love it, and to fight for its cause.

I give thanks to God and to all of you for entrusting me with the gift that is Augsburg College.

I know that you share with me this deep sense of thanksgiving for this college and its remarkable commitments. What we do here matters – to our students, our neighborhood, our city, the church and the world.

What we do here is significant—because our work is grounded in a deep and confident faith, because it enjoys a history of love in a community of memory and tradition, because it believes deeply in intellectual curiosity and personal courage, and because it is full of hope.

What we need now is imagination—and faith, and fearlessness—to hear and follow the call to be a college committed to the liberal arts in all that we learn and teach; a college grounded in faith and values that are the source of our firm persuasion; a college located in a place full of life and urgency that draws us out of our insular selves; a college engaged with a creation rich in difference that constantly surprises us.

What fun we're going to have!

Thanks for this invitation to come along with you! Thank you from the bottom of my heart. Thanks be to God, and to all of you.