

Who in the world is my neighbor?

High Table Address
United International College
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Brief

As educated people, we must address *the fundamental issue of what responsibility we have for each other in the world*. In other words, as my title suggests: “*Who in the world is my neighbor* and what 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 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. This, it seems to me, is a core aspect of a whole person, liberal arts education in the 21st century.

I want to talk with you this evening about the world – a rather daunting task in my assigned time, but here goes! I have the great privilege of traveling fairly often around the world as part of my duties as the president of Augsburg College – here in Asia, in Latin America, Africa and in northern Europe. And during those travels, in addition to doing what is required of me in my official duties, I bring the lens of my academic training as a social ethicist. With that perspective, the questions I often ask on my journeys are how to understand what it means to be a global citizen – to imagine ourselves as citizens both of particular neighborhoods or states or countries, but of the world. In other words, to ask “Who in the world is my neighbor?”

My message to you this evening is that the call to be citizens of the world is more relevant than ever because our increased access to those with whom we share this globe calls us, challenges us even, to seek to understand the real, everyday lives of these strangers 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 my local neighbors in Minneapolis and the United States – 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 former 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: “*Who in the world is my neighbor* and what 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 have seen and learned about Eastern and Western perspectives on various social and economic issues – but it will posit a common claim upon all of us that we are called to understand and meet the needs of fellow citizens, 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 work and lives together.

I want to suggest that there are four key questions that offer a framework for exploring the meaning of global citizenship in the 21st century and that the educational experiences here at United International College and at the colleges and universities we represent in the United States should help equip us to answer these questions and claim our 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 our work with others, 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), who we are (our identity), and what we do (our work in the world).
- For example, when I visited China a few years ago with a group of social work students, 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 can 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, and then seeks to find a way forward together.

My second question: *How do you engage fellow citizens 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 fellow global citizens. In all communities, we 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 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 communities, in our lives?
- 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 are your teachers, your faculty members outside of classroom. Are you willing to learn from a stranger? A liberal arts, whole person vision of education, calls us to this fluid understanding of the boundaries of our teaching and learning community, and challenges us to engage the other and respond in ways that honor the needs of the other.

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 others around the world?*

- Here then is the call to global citizenship no matter where we find ourselves – whether here in Zhuhai, China, in Managua, Nicaragua, in Minneapolis, USA or wherever our journeys take us
- We encourage our students in Minneapolis to visit the local Starbucks or the Somali malls or the largest urban Native American community or the Mexican-American businesses along Lake Street down the block to learn about local and global – about politics and commerce and technology and science across ethnic and cultural and religious boundaries
- Consider the impact of our behavior on those around the world – ask tough questions about free and fair trade, for example, and then embrace the fact that

we can make a difference here and around the world with the choices we make, the positions we take, the passion we bring to telling our stories of global citizenship

These then are the questions that we address in a liberal arts, whole person education., questions of who are our neighbors in the world and what do we owe each other. The commitment to genuine engagement with neighbors is the basis upon which we are prepared 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 communities around the globe.

And then it's time to get to work, alongside of our global neighbors...so what is required of you as a global citizen to those we with whom we share this globe?

In the Hebrew scriptures, there is a well-known passage from the prophet Micah, which reads:

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.

Now, if I was smart, I might leave it right there, because if each of us would behave as Micah claims the Lord requires, all would be well with the world. Justice, mercy and humility set a high bar for human behavior.

On the other hand, things are not that easy so I offer the following simple (and perhaps not so simple) things that I believe are required of us as we pursue our educations here at UIC and at the other colleges and universities that share our commitments to the liberal arts and the well being of our globe. There is a bold claim at the heart of a liberal arts education, 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 required to do and be in the world.

So, what is it that is required of you?

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 education, at this High Table dinner. Good for you.

But as the 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 don't know about you but 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 someone 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 in the US, for example, 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 American 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 at Augsburg and you do here at UIC – 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 all kinds of social media. 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 a wonderful and complex college. I have two young children, a remarkable spouse who works at the kids' school and also manages our household, 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 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 what is important.

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 is assigned to us. 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, and you likely know that college signals a quantum leap in the work required of you. We don't dare get behind on reading and papers.

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 missions as colleges and universities dedicated to the liberal arts is that the work you learn to do here – in the classroom, on campus, in the city 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. That is why Augsburg exists – our mission is to educate our students to be informed citizens, thoughtful stewards, critical thinkers and responsible leader – not just because we think it would be nice if our students were all of those sorts of citizens and stewards and thinkers and leaders, but because the world needs them and you. There is utility to this education, there is purpose and direction, there is work to be done by educated men and women. Work you 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. Ask who in the world is my neighbor and then get to it: show up, pay attention and do the work. 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 and all its citizens. I can't wait to see what good you will do.