

Opening Convocation

Augsburg College

Tuesday, September 5, 2006

Welcome to Augsburg College. It is a real joy to have you here with us as part of our community. Now it's time to get to work – the joyful and genuinely vocational work of education, engagement, community life, worship and citizenship. It is work that belongs to all of us – common work. And the challenge I put before all of us today – new and returning students, new and returning faculty, staff members, alumni and Regents – is to commit ourselves to explore together how the work we do here at Augsburg prepares all of us for the common work that is at the core of a vital and good democracy.

I have studied and sought to practice common work throughout my adult life – it is the core value of my life and work in the world – it is my calling and it was given voice, if you will, in large part through my study of Jane Addams, the social reformer who founded Hull-House in Chicago and won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1931. As I begin my service at Augsburg College, it is my deeply-felt hope that we might embrace our work together in ways that are firmly grounded in Addams' sense that we all share a democratic social ethic that is “a rule of living as well as a test of faith.” (Addams, 7) A social ethic, in other words, that calls us to common work.

I wonder if we might pursue that spirit, that ethic, here as an abiding rule of life that defines our aspirations as a college community to educate students for life in the world. I wonder if we might imagine and practice education that calls us all to common work in our democracy.

The principles of common work

What constitutes this vision of common work and why is it relevant to the work we are about here at Augsburg College? The connection between the vision of common work and the mission of our college has become more and more clear to me in these past several months. Whether it is grounded in our Lutheran Free tradition, with its strong advocacy for individual freedom and common purpose; in our dedication to the liberal arts, with its lively and expansive vision of an engaged education; in our abiding citizenship in the city, working to educate and be good neighbors; or in our remarkable claim to honor diversity of all sorts in our daily work – in these commitments and aspirations we are called as a college to common work. Allow me to describe three fundamental principles of common work.

First, it recognizes common needs and aspirations.

In the early 1830s, Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville traveled our country and wrote his still influential *Democracy in America*. Tocqueville wrote about our habits, our mores, our civic beliefs and the roles they played in sustaining our democracy. He

commented especially about the practice of associating and volunteering as particularly strong and distinctive aspects of our common life.

In recent years, many scholars and commentators – from Robert Putnam (*Bowling Alone*) to Robert Bellah (*Habits of the Heart*) to David Brooks (*Bobos and Bohemians*) – have pointed to ways in which Tocqueville’s image of Americans has begun to erode. They claim we are too individualistic, drawn to lifestyle enclaves, more likely to bowl alone than with our fellow citizens.

Still others claim that rapidly changing economies and technology mean that we are no longer the same country and should not expect that we would still reflect Tocqueville’s mid-19th century view of our lives – think blogs and email and chat rooms, not necessarily the means to traditional face-to-face associational lives.

Each day, though, we work in organizations and communities with committed fellow citizens, motivated by a common cause that offers us hope that Americans still possess and aspire to the inclination to serve each other, the impulse to generosity that former Connecticut College President Claire Gaudiani has recently written about in her fine book *The Greater Good*. Gaudiani’s claim is that the American character is grounded in the nexus of philanthropy, capitalism and democracy – and that the observations first made by Tocqueville in the 19th century have their 21st century antecedents in the distinctive quality of our abiding associational lives – despite the obvious challenges and the often different “look” of those lives.

As we reflect on our work in community, what are the abiding themes (despite the changing context) that inspire and motivate us to give of ourselves to serve each other, to be generous, to sustain a strong democracy, and to practice common work?

I believe the answer is grounded in our common needs and aspirations. I am reminded each day, for example, how easy it is to marginalize the work of meeting human needs by “leaving” that sort of work to the good social service and health agencies in the community. But the wonder of common work is the call to recognize that all of us bear responsibility for each other’s needs and aspirations. It is a thin and fragile line that separates my needs from my neighbors – needs for safety, justice, physical well-being, a living wage, and so many others. At the same time, it is a wonderful and awesome thing that I share aspirations with those same neighbors – aspirations for education and beauty and community. Surely our engagement with each other must be grounded in recognition of the common parts of our experience – rather than our differences.

Imbedded in our tradition here at Augsburg is the claim to care about diverse needs and aspirations – of our immigrant ancestors and neighbors, of the city, of humankind. This is a claim that has theological, educational and political meaning to us. Our work here seeks both to meet common needs and to pursue an education that aspires to transform the world that creates those needs.

Second, common work is a labor of love

The connection between love and work seems to me absolutely critical to this vision of common work. Our efforts on behalf of common needs and aspirations comprise our labors of love. This is not work motivated by romantic love or the love between family members. Instead, it is what the Apostle Paul called *caritas*, what the philosopher Aristotle called “civic friendship” – meeting each other as strangers and negotiating our lives together. We must love each other as amateurs, not waiting for the experts to save us. We must love each other with courage and imagination, countering the apathy and even hate of difference that often characterizes life in the world. Surely our common work illustrates the labors of love that sustain a community.

Trudy (not her real name) was a nursing student enrolled in a community health care course that included a service learning component, an opportunity for service that is meant to be an extension of the classroom. Trudy worked with three fellow students at an organization that serves homeless clients with a variety of case management programs. Trudy made a presentation about her experience that included excerpts from her journal, written as part of her course requirements. The first passage she read recounted her real fear about working with homeless people and detailed her sense that “these people” just needed to get a job and get on with their lives. The final passage she read described the friends she had made with the homeless clients – people whose names and stories she now knew well – and what she had learned from her friends about being a nurse and a fellow community member. How do all of us – faculty, students, staff, citizens – engage this labor of love, this education that transforms the stranger from someone we fear to someone we love?

Common work as a labor of love is about how “the other” becomes the beloved, the civic friend, the neighbor with whom we share common cause and purpose.

Finally, common work is a way of life, a set of values, and a democratic social ethic

This understanding of common work ultimately creates a vision of democracy as a social ethic. Democracy, in other words, not as a creed or a sentiment or a political system, but as an ethic that challenges us to balance individual needs and interests with the common good. The genius of democracy is that the self doesn’t go away, but it enters into relationship with others in mutual need and aspiration.

This is not some utopia, but a way of negotiating our lives together in a messy world. As we all recognize, things will not always go well – our Lutheran tradition recognizes the fallen character of human efforts, but it nonetheless challenges us to make the effort to live a democratic way of life that enables us to go forward with each other toward a horizon of shared purpose that inspires and energizes our community.

With all the good we celebrate in our daily work here at the college and in the wider community - all that we give thanks for - our abiding challenge is to find ever more imaginative ways to invite and engage others into this labor (for it is work!) and this love (for it also is love!).

The ethic of common work calls us to build stronger communities, make civic friendships, make education the focus of transforming the world, love our neighbors and our neighborhoods, live as if our common lives really matter. That vision, that hope, that aspiration, is our legacy and promise as a college – and I could not be more pleased that you have joined us in this community, ready to get to work together, recognizing our common needs and aspirations, embracing the fact that work and love are bound up together, and dedicated to pursuing common work as a way of life. Now, let's get to work!