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Tuesday Reflection

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Augustana College

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Tuesday Reflection - January 14, 2014

January 14, 2014 | Ascension Chapel

Steven C. Bahls, President
My New Year's resolution: I'll receive no more nasty emails!

Scripture: James 1:19-20. "My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires."

If there is one thing I have learned in my 23 years as a senior administrator in higher education is that I, like other college presidents, am a magnet for nasty emails, angry letters, blog posts and insistent face to face interactions. Some are one-line zingers, others are multi-page diatribes.

So I decided for 2014 and would address this problem with a New Year's Resolution: In 2014, I will receive no more nasty emails or condescending letters. There will be no more nasty blog posts or editorials about me. You heard me correctly. December 31, 2013, was the last day I received any nasty communication.

How can that be? Simply put: "Nasty" is in the eyes of the beholder. That's right, if I don't regard an email as nasty, then, to me, it will not be nasty. Instead, I will regard these emails, letters and calls as evidence of strong passions. And usually these strong passions are outward signs of deep love and respect for Augustana - even though they may lead the holder of those passions to conclusions other than my own.

Let me give you a few examples. I remember the first email - which prior to 2014 I might have regarded as nasty - that I received from a faculty member who was frustrated about collapsing enrollment in his classes. The email said that I was a "bean counter." As some of you know, my undergraduate degree is in accounting and I am a CPA. At first, I thought it could be a compliment. Perhaps he was saying I was good at keeping the colleges finances strong. But the academic dean informed me it's wasn't a compliment. The faculty member was saying I cared more about the college being financially viable than the courses he wanted to teach to tiny classes. He was passionate about his subject and upset that students were not.

So this year, instead of getting upset about emails like this, I will take them as evidence that people care deeply about what they do and are passionate about the college. I will be patient and keep lines of communication open. I will understand that these emails are sent out of frustration with the sender's situation, which usually has little to do with me as a person.

This professor's email was not isolated.

Cases in point were my decisions to permit blessings of same gender civil unions and now weddings in this chapel and to encourage readings from the Koran at our Baccalaureate worship service before graduation. I expected a torrent of nasty communications, but received only a few. Several told me they would never donate another dollar to Augustana. One told me he would donate in only Muslim dollars — whatever those are. Many
told me that I was turning my back on Christianity and the college's Lutheran identity — never mind that both
decisions actually emanated from our Lutheran identity. Though I have a thick skin — all leaders must — some
of these comments have been frustrating and hurtful.

So recently, when I receive unfair comments like this, I take a different approach:

- First, I make the choice not to become frustrated, hurt or angry.
- Second, I understand that these comments say more about the person making the comment than they do
  about me. People making these comments are usually grieving some loss. The loss of their world view that
  same-sex couples are evil or that people of different religions are evil. Or in the professor's case, that he was
  offering classes that students were, by-and-large, not interested in.
- Third, these people are passionate about Augustana. Now, since passions are woven from our own stories,
  they are woven from our past. And that means these passions are most often about the way Augustana was
  or the way we remember it to be. Those are two distinct things, but both are different from the Augustana of
today, just as the world in which Augustana operates and to which it is accountable has changed. And yet
  these passions, born of yesterday, result in fervent feeling for the Augustana of today.
- Fourth, I try — in most cases — to start a dialog. The person who told me his donation was going to be in
  Muslim dollars was shocked when I called him. "Sven (I have changed the name), what do you mean by
  Muslim dollars? Where are you going to get them? Did you really mean that? Did you know the presiding
  bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America was also part of the service and that it was a beautiful
  celebration of our students? Did you know the Lutheran expression of higher education is to reach out to
  people of all beliefs, challenging them to deepen their faith?" Did I change his mind? Probably not. Will he be
  more introspective about the issue in the future? Perhaps. Will he be more careful before he fires off angry
  letters? I'd like to think so.
- Finally, I will not be intimidated by those who send these emails. Yes, some are bullies. Most are
  simply wearing their emotions on their shirtsleeves. I will not let attempts to intimidate cause me to lose my
  integrity or act in a way that is not in the best long-term interest of Augustana.

Most of you here in chapel today are leaders or are becoming leaders. This means you are, or will be, magnets
for criticism, some fair and some unfair. You will receive, in this less civil society, too many uncivil,
condescending or overly aggressive emails, letters, blog posts and other communications. But how you react to
them is your choice. It is your decision to escalate or engage.

Or you could rise above it. You could choose, as I resolve to chose, to view overaggressive statements
as evidence of passionate people, whose passions guide them in directions other than your own. And you could
view it as an opportunity for dialog and — who knows? — maybe even a change in your position.

The advice from the Book of James is correct: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to
become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my resolution with you.
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