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Vocational Reflection | Augustana College

Steven C. Bahls, President of Augustana College

The process of vocational reflection has been a life-long journey for me. My vocational path has led me to a career as a practicing lawyer in Wisconsin, a law professor in Montana, a law school dean in Ohio, and now a college president here at Augustana. All of these have allowed me to develop the gifts of leadership and service. My vocational path has also included serving as a devoted husband to Jane, an active father of three, and a leader in my church and community-commitments I consider just as important as my career.

Father M. Raymond in his book *The Family That Overtook Christ* made two important observations about vocation. First, while noting that vocations come from God, he wrote that "if ears are not attuned to the whisper of God, vocations will never be answered." Second, he observed that God often speaks through others to those searching for their vocational calling. Throughout my life, I've been fortunate that others have helped me reflect on my vocation.

While in high school, I admired a church school teacher who was a lawyer. I was particularly impressed with how he reflected on public policy issues, particularly justice issues associated with the war in Vietnam and the civil rights movement. He explained he became a lawyer in order that he might follow the biblical injunction of Micah to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God.

As a college debater, I was interested in public policy issues and advocating for changes in public policy. Building on my love of debate and what I discerned in the religious studies class, I decided that I could best make a difference by pursuing a legal education. I enrolled in Northwestern University Law School. Learning to "think like a lawyer" was a challenging experience for me, but very satisfying.

Although my practice of law started out as a general practice, it evolved into representing entrepreneurs, who had to navigate a sea of regulations and legal pitfalls to successfully operate new businesses that created new jobs. During these years, I learned that I had a passion for law reform projects. I left the practice of law to become a law professor, not only to have a platform from which to pursue law reform, but also to help prepare a new generation of students to enter the legal profession.

After several years of teaching law students, I concluded that law schools were generally successful in helping students learn about the knowledge base required of lawyers but less proficient in helping law students reflect on the skills and values demanded of lawyers. Likewise, law schools were good at training students to do justice, but placed less emphasis on helping students love mercy and walk humbly. I decided to try my hand at becoming a law school dean to lead a law school to think of law as not only a career but a vocational pursuit of justice.

While serving as a law school dean, I had opportunities to lead Capital University Law School in crafting

programs that prepared students to practice law ethically and to use the law to advance the cause of those underserved by lawyers. We opened The National Center for Adoption Law and a clinic for victims of domestic violence.

During my nine years as a law school dean, I observed two types of law students. One type viewed a legal education as not much more than a ticket to take the bar exam. The first type of student was most interested in acquiring only knowledge of legal rules. More thoughtful students viewed law school as part of a journey to pursue a vocational calling. This type of student was interested in acquiring critical analysis and leadership skills. The second type of law student, I observed, made the more effective leaders within their communities. I began to ponder the relative roles of colleges and law schools in helping students acquire the skills needed to address twenty-first century problems. I became convinced that college had more influence on students' lives in developing critical thinking and leadership skills than graduate schools ever could.

When the opportunity came along to serve as president of Augustana College, I eagerly accepted it. To serve as president of a liberal arts college that stresses growth of mind, body and spirit is a great honor and privilege. It puts me in mind of a course I took in my college's religious studies department that helped students explore vocations. Professor Herbert Richardson had each of us write an autobiography. He contended that, by examining where you have been and who has influenced you in your life journey, you will be able to discern the hand of God in what you have become. At the time, I thought it was a strange way to learn theology. But now, looking back, I can see that he was right. I never heard God speak to me the way he did to the prophets, but I am convinced that the hand of God has guided my family and me through the twists and turns of our lives to bring us here for the next adventure of service.

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