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The Road Not Taken | Augustana College

Williamsfield High School Commencement Address, May 2004

Steven C. Bahls, President of Augustana College

Congratulations, students. You have shown your character by how you have excelled.

Congratulations, parents. You have shown your dedication to your students. I know there have many late nights and many times you have provided an extra measure of encouragement to your sons and daughters. It is a special blessing and privilege to be a parent and you have fulfilled your role well.

Congratulations, teachers. You are America's finest because you are paving the way for our future. You have set high standards, yet you have patiently taken the extra steps to help your students achieve those standards

It is a privilege to serve as your commencement speaker. I told my 13 old year daughter about speaking tonight, she gave me three pieces of advice - use visual aids, be funny and keep it short! I'll try to follow some of that advice.

As you know, I am the president of a small liberal arts college. Though it is larger than Williamsfield High school, the college and high school share many attributes - graduates from each, by going a small school, have taken the road less traveled. When I think about taking the road less traveled, I think about Robert Frost's poem, The Road Not Taken. Frost wrote:

"I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I -
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference."

You have taken the road less traveled. When you reflect back on your high school days will you, like Frost, say it has made all the difference? Will you continue to take the road less traveled in order that you might continue to make a difference? I predict you will. You will, in part, because you have had the good fortune to go to a small high school - one where you cannot blend into the background. Your high school is one where you must develop your own sense of self. Cherish the friendships and the special sense of community you have gained here. Use it as a strong base to build you confidence to control your own destiny. Do not put your fate in the hands of others - be courageous enough to determine your own destiny.

We have been reading a lot about the prisoner abuse scandal in Iraq. Some of the abuse was committed by

people not much older than you are. Right now the media seems obsessed with this coverage. What the media doesn't cover much are the many, many members of the armed forces who had responsibility at the prisons and had opportunities to join in the abuse - but did not.

Buried at the bottom of page A11 of today's New York Times is a story entitled: "Why Some Prison Guards Have Refused To Join in the Abuse." Dr. Thomas Ollendick, a professor of psychology at Virginia Tech, explained the difference between those who participated in the abuse and those who refused. Those who participated in the abuse didn't believe that they controlled their own destiny. As a result: "they put the blame for everything outside of themselves. They are high in conformity because they believe someone else is in charge." Those who refused to participate or who blew the whistle "can go above the situation and survive" because they are in charge of their destiny" Today's New York Times also profiled a couple of guards who abused prisoners. Many were loving spouses, loving sons and daughters - but lost control of the destiny by applying a different set of standards to themselves in Iraq than they would apply to their family back home. They lost control of their destiny.

Be resolved to take control of your own destiny. How do you do so? Do so by asking who you want to be as a person before you ask what you want to be. How many times has someone said the following to you: "So you are graduating from high school - what do you think you want to be?" Perhaps you answered the question by saying you want to be a teacher, a lawyer, or own your own business. My question to you is not what do you want to be, but who do you want to be. You should always ask who you want to be before you ask what you want to be. The question of what you want to be is usually a question of what you want your career to be. The question of who you want to be is a question of your values. Is service important to you? Do you want to be a leader? Do you sympathize with the plight of the less fortunate? Do you feel compelled to give back? Is raising a family important? Think about who you admire most as a person. What are their values and how have they used them to make a difference?

I thought I knew what I wanted to be when I was in your shoes. I thought I wanted to be partner in a big city corporate law firm - better yet I wanted to be a partner in a rich big-city corporate law firm. I achieved my goal, albeit with a law firm that wasn't exactly rich. I enjoyed being a lawyer, but wasn't satisfied. I learned what I thought I wanted to be did not fit with who I thought I wanted to be. Being a corporate lawyer did not satisfy my passions. I have a passion for education and working with the next generation. In selecting my first career, I failed to ask who I wanted to be. So I urge you to ask first who you want to be - what are your passions?

Those soldiers who refused to abuse the prisoners in Iraq knew who they were. They knew the type of persons they were. They were able to resist peer pressure and hold to their values. They also knew how to turn the crystal. By this I mean that the soldiers were able to step back from the situation and look at it differently. They were able to turn the crystal. When you give a crystal to a child, what do they do? The child turns it. They see the same thing from different angles and different facets. Those soldiers who resisted the abuse in Iraq did the same thing - they looked at the situation as not simply a mandate to soften up the Iraqi detainees to get information, they turned the crystal. They looked at the situation from the angle of honoring America, from the angle of how the Islamic community might view them, from the angle of what they had been taught in their churches and high schools and from the angle of their own values. As you prepare for the world, be reflective

like these good soldiers were. Step back from problems. Turn the crystal. Look at problems from several angles - most importantly from the angle of who you are and what values you have. Do not look at problems exclusively from the angle of what others expect you to be. By turning the crystal, you will not only do justice, you will love mercy and walk humbly with God.

As a college president, I have the privilege of spending much of my time with recent high school graduates. I believe that that most recent high school graduates are self-reliant and will take control of their own destinies. In fact, I believe that a very high percentage of recent high school graduates will do so. The percentage is so high that I believe this will be the next great generation. Right now the World War II generation is the greatest generation. They returned from a war and built our country to what it is today. They were committed to service, they were self-reliant and they efficiently responded to a changing world with determination. It reminds me of your generation. You are committed to service. Most young adults today do not believe the government will provide for them - they want to do it on their own. Your generation embraces technology and your generation cherishes the nation's diversity. Many of you have been abroad or will go abroad in college or in your career. Your generation understands better than any other that this is a global village. And your generation is efficient - you multi-task like no other. These ingredients - self reliance, commitment to service, commitment to a global community and a strong work ethic - are the ingredients for the next Greatest Generation. You will take the road less traveled and you are the foundation for a greater America.

Thank you for the honor and privilege of being your commencement speaker. Many God bless and keep the Williamsfield High School class of 2004!



Accounting	Communication Studies	Geography	Music	Pre-Optometry
Africana Studies	Computer Science	Geology	Music Education	Pre-Pharmacy
Anthropology	Creative Writing	German Studies	Music Performance	Pre-Physical Therapy
Art	Economics	Greek	Neuroscience	Pre-Physician Assistant
Art History	Elementary Education	Graphic Design	Non-Profit Leadership	Pre-Seminary
Asian Studies	Engineering	History	Development	Pre-Veterinary Medicine
Biochemistry	Engineering Physics	International Business	Philosophy	Psychology
Biology	English (Literature)	Japanese	Physics	Religion
Business Administration	English (Writing)	Landscape Architecture	Political Science	Scandinavian Studies
Chemistry	Environmental Management	Latin	Pre-Dentistry	Secondary Education
Chinese	& Forestry	Library and Information	Pre-Law	Sociology
Classics	Environmental Studies	Science	Pre-Medicine	Sociology (Social Welfare)
Communication Sciences	Ethics	Mathematics	Pre-Music Therapy	Spanish
& Disorders	French	Multimedia Journalism	Pre-Nursing	Theatre
		& Mass Communication	Pre-Occupational Therapy	Women's & Gender Studies