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"Philosopher Servants"

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Honors Convocation 2006 | Augustana College

"Philosopher Servants"

Let me be the first to congratulate those we honor today for their achievements. On behalf of the faculty and administration, I want to tell you how proud we are of you. Augustana is a select, top-tier liberal arts college. As such, you can be rightfully proud of the honors you are receiving today, as well as the achievements those honors represent.

The accomplishments for which you are being recognized today show more than aptitude for academic achievement, they also show that you have leadership potential. I believe a special potential for leadership already belongs to all graduates of small, residential liberal arts colleges. Let me remind you that graduates of colleges like Augustana represent only three percent of America's college graduates. And yet they are nearly three times as likely to be CEO of America's largest corporations - and they are three times as likely to be Peace Corps volunteers. Further, graduates of colleges like ours are nearly seven times as likely to be inducted into the prestigious National Academy of Sciences. Finally, although we only account for three percent of America's college graduates, graduates of liberal arts colleges make up for a fifth of United States Presidents. Perhaps you could be the first Augustana graduate to achieve that distinction.

In years to come, who will make up America's greatest leaders, and what makes me think you have the potential to be one of them? I believe tomorrow's greatest leaders will be part philosopher-kings and part servant-leaders. Let's call them philosopher-servants.

First, the Philosopher-King part. Do you remember the first time you read about the philosopher who would be king in Plato's *The Republic*? I remember the first time I did. I was a college freshman. At that time, I didn't know what to think about it. Socrates said that the ideal society can "never grow into a reality or see the light of day and there will be no end to the troubles of states, or ... of humanity itself, till philosophers become kings in this world, or till those we now call kings and rulers really and truly become philosophers."

When I first read this, I thought it was almost preposterous. Aren't those in positions of power pragmatists and not philosophers? My initial response was similar to Socrates' student's immediate response. His student replied "My dear Socrates, if you produce theories of that sort, you can't be surprised if most decent people take their coats off, pick up the nearest weapon, and come after you in their shirt sleeves to do something terrible to you."(2) Socrates himself admitted that he hesitated to raise the concept of philosopher kings, noting how paradoxical "it would sound."(3)

Socrates' idea of philosopher-kings didn't get much traction. My experience has shown that few "academic philosophers" aspire to national leadership positions. Likewise, our nation's leaders often seem to be guided more by hastily formed opinions than philosophical reflection. The philosopher Kant observed, "That a king should philosophize or philosophers become kings is not to be expected. But neither is it to be desired; for the possession of power is inevitably fatal to the free exercise of reason."(4)

Is that necessarily so? Is the possession of power always fatal to the exercise of free reason? I don't accept this dismal outlook. I believe that it is not the case that all leaders are bound to fail because power, of necessity, kills reason. I submit that when leaders combine reason with a commitment to being servant leaders, then they are prepared to address tomorrow's problems. They do so because they possess both reason and compassion.

Robert Greenleaf, who taught at both MIT and Harvard, is one of the most influential modern authors about servant-leadership. He wrote:

The servant-leader is servant first ... It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to

"serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead ... [Servant Leaders ask how] those served grow as persons; do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?" (5)

I ask you to consider one of our own, who would have sat on this stage when he was a student. He is Murry Gerber, who graduated from Augustana in 1975. He is a servant leader. Today, he is president of Equitable Resources, one of the larger energy companies in the United States. Its business is in many ways similar to that of the fallen energy giant Enron. How did Equitable Resources thrive under the leadership of an Augie graduate, when Enron stumbled? I believe that part of the answer lies in the fact that Murry learned to be both a philosopher and a servant at Augustana. Last year, he told *USA Today* that his success was due to Augustana, where he engaged a wide range of thoughts and ideas beyond his chosen major.

Murry told *USA Today* that at Augustana College, he was introduced to philosophy, and the notion of "making good with your life while you're on this planet." (6) When he was asked about the difference between his business and Enron, Murry replied, "I don't believe someone from Augustana College would end up with the mess of Enron, to put it bluntly. We don't turn out those types of people." His management approach sounds like part philosopher and part servant-leader. In another interview, with the VoiceAmerica radio program, Murry described his approach to community service, sounding like both a philosopher and a servant. He said:

I think that community service is ... every bit as important for employees as doing their job. It builds character ... It builds a sense of responsibility for those of us that are fortunate enough to have jobs and to be working. It builds an appreciation and humility for what we are doing. Our jobs are one thing ... but at the end of the day we are part of a large community and we need to give back to that community as much as we can. (7)

And like the servant he is, he carried through with his vision by building a socially responsible company.

Along another vein, consider the headlines that dominate today's paper. The chaos in Iraq is once again the lead story in today's *New York Times*. We need leaders who are philosophers to address tough issues like Iraq. Leaders who ask the difficult why questions. Leaders who probe behind the conventional wisdom, sound-bites, party dogma and rules-of-thumb. Leaders who wonder about the role of a superpower in today's world - what it is and what it might be. Leaders who consider the history of Iraq and the Middle East and the ways in which history can inform us about the present. Leaders who understand that Islam is not monolithic, and that Muslim expressions of faith can be as diverse as Christian expressions of faith. Leaders who understand how hearts are won, and the difficulty of winning hearts after a military intervention. Leaders who recognize that those who

invade are held to the highest ethical standards.

As you enter the world ahead of you, be a bit of a philosopher. Ask the tough questions. Ask the impertinent questions. Reject rules-of-thumb, hastily-formed opinions and simple solutions. Bring all the critical thinking, the integrative thinking and the creative thinking you can to every problem you encounter. Encourage those around you to pause, to step back from a problem, and to consider it from different angles. Turn the crystal, but do so with the attitude and determination of a servant. Combine the best of a philosopher-king and servant-leader.

Well, once again ... congratulations. And best wishes to you, the next generation of philosopher servants.

1 Plato, *The Republic*, 473

2 Ibid, page 473-474

3 Ibid, page 473

4 Kant, *Perpetual Peace*, Second Supplement

5 Robert Greenleaf, *Servant as Leader* (1970)

6 "Wanted: CEO, No Ivy Required", USA Today, April 7, 2005, page 2A

7 VoiceAmerica radio show, January 4, 2004 (hosted by Joyce Bender) found at

<http://www.benderconsult.com/radiocaption/010405VA.html>



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