

2-18-2007

Transfiguration and Transformation

Steven C. Bahls
Augustana College

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/presidentsstatements>

Recommended Citation

Bahls, Steven C.. "Transfiguration and Transformation" (2007). *Speeches and Statements*.
<http://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/presidentsstatements/29>

This Speech is brought to you for free and open access by the President's Office at Augustana Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Speeches and Statements by an authorized administrator of Augustana Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@augustana.edu.

Transfiguration and Transformation | Augustana College

A sermon for First Lutheran Church in Moline, Illinois on February 18, 2007

Steven C. Bahls, President of Augustana College

What an honor it is for me to be with you today. First Lutheran in Moline and Augustana have a common history - with early leadership roles in the church and the college being held by the same people - Lars Esbjorn and T.N. Hasselquist. What visionaries these men were. President Hasselquist, who was also a pastor at this church, was president of the college when it moved from Chicago to Paxton, Illinois, and when it moved again to Rock Island. He served from 1863 to 1891. I am humbled to stand today where he stood 130 years ago.

I first visited this church three years ago for an Augustana choir concert. I was impressed, and remain impressed, with how this congregation has preserved and enhanced this sanctuary and the historical structure of the church. This historical structure is certainly a treasure within the ELCA [Evangelical Lutheran Church in America]. But the congregation is also a treasure. Its tenacity in maintaining not only the building but a vibrant ministry, even during tough times, is truly impressive.

In a book called [On the Viking Trail: Travels in Scandinavian America](#), the writer Don Lago recounts a visit he made to our community, and includes his impressions of the Augustana campus. "Augustana, the oldest of the Swedish-founded colleges," he writes, "has one of the most attractive campuses of the Scandinavian colleges, with hills, woods, elegant old architecture, stained glass windows and a wooden bell tower."

He then goes on to relate an observation from the many colleges he visited in researching his book. "Considering how flat most of the Midwest is," he writes, "it is notable that half of the Scandinavian colleges are perched atop river bluffs with grand views. The blandest location and view is the Danish college in the middle of Des Moines, which defiantly calls itself Grand View College." With apologies to any Grand View alumni (my sister is the assistant to the president there) or Des Moines natives (and I happen to be one), I find this author's observation interesting.

It's certainly appropriate to consider high places on a day such as this. Our texts for this Transfiguration Sunday include not one, but two of the most prominent "Mountaintop" stories in the entire Bible. The reading from Exodus tells us about Moses and his encounters on the mountaintop, while the reading from Luke recounts the opening of the minds of Peter, James and John after witnessing the Transfiguration of Jesus . up on a mountain where they had gone to pray.

It would be easy, perhaps, for those of us from Augustana to draw parallels. Our students climb many hills in search of discoveries, epiphanies and wisdom.

Today, however, I would like for us to think about these Mountaintop stories - especially that of the Transfiguration - not so much for what they might tell us about the geography of college campuses, but how they might shed light on the mission of higher education, and, more specifically, of Lutheran higher education.

Both of these stories are about transformation. When Moses returns from the mountain, he is physically changed - his face shines from the radiance of God. Jesus is likewise physically changed in today's Gospel lesson. But as Paul points out in his letter to the Corinthians, this latter event - this Transfiguration - also heralds a spiritual transformation, not just for Peter, John and James, but indeed for all of us.

There are two ways to think about Transfiguration. First, there is the Transfiguration (with a capital "T"), the event we recall today as the mountaintop moment of the earthly ministry of Jesus. But there is another transfiguration (this time with a small "t") which is defined as an extreme transformation or metamorphosis.

In one sense, metamorphosis is what we in Lutheran higher education are all about. But before we think about that *sort* of transfiguration, we would do well to spend some time considering the Transfiguration.

As an aid in doing this, I'd like to share with you some insights from a sermon that was delivered just a few blocks from here, but more than 50 years ago. Edwin Munson, who was pastor of St. John's Lutheran Church in Rock Island from the 1930s to the 1950s, was considered by many to be a leading voice in the former Augustana Synod.

Pastor Munson found much that was interesting in Luke's account of this pivotal event. For example, he was intrigued that Jesus chose only three apostles to accompany him - Peter, James and John. Could it be, Munson wondered, that the other disciples were not regarded by Jesus as ready for the revelation about to be granted?

"This necessity of preparation for spiritual experiences," Munson wrote, "is emphasized in Christ's words [prior to his arrest]: 'I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.'" Munson believed preparation is required in order to grasp what he called "the spiritual implications of life."

Something else he found noteworthy especially about Luke's account of the Transfiguration is what it has to say about the importance of maintaining an atmosphere of prayer. Luke notes that it was while Jesus was praying that his appearance changed before his disciples' eyes. This is a sign to Munson that Prayer is, as he puts it, "practicing the presence of God."

Another striking feature of the Transfiguration highlighted by this sermon is what it teaches us about the nearness of the spiritual world. Having faith, for Munson, went hand-in-hand with having knowledge that we are never far from God as a source of peace and strength. People who have a well-developed faith, according to Munson, "will find balance, poise, courage and hope, as they sense the reality of the unseen and eternal in the midst of the visible and temporal."

Finally, Munson finds in the Transfiguration an emphasis on the transitoriness of what he called "exalted experiences." Like Peter, we all wish to capture and prolong our mountaintop moments, even though it is, of

course, impossible to do so. Still, Munson believed that such exalted moments were nonetheless of vital importance in all of our lives, and that the memory of them serves a valuable purpose. As he saw it, "We should believe in our best moments, in our noblest impulses, and in our most spiritual insights. Then we are able to live up to them," he wrote.

As I mentioned earlier, one of the hallmarks of Lutheran higher education is that for us, profound transformation is not an aberration, but an expectation. In Lutheran higher education, we see as central to our work the creation and cultivation of an environment in which small-T transfiguration - or, what one dictionary defines as "radical transformation" - is not only allowed, but encouraged.

I would like to consider how this is done in the context of at least one college of the ELCA by using the framework from Munson's sermon. How might he have applied those aspects of Christ's Transfiguration which he found so noteworthy to the ideal of transformation to which our college holds? How might our Lutheran College help students prepare for spiritual experiences, commit to practicing what they've learned from those spiritual experiences in the presence of God, and commit to better engaging in this world as a result of those spiritual experiences. For Augustana College it means how can we help students have those mountaintop experiences?

We do so by being deliberate in developing mountaintop experiences through which students can find their vocational calling. Augustana's Center for Vocational Reflection describes our philosophy on vocation this way: a calling is realized when one's skills, gifts, and talents combine with one's passions to meet the needs of the community. The Center represents one of several ways in which Augustana works to create times and spaces for mountaintops to be reached, in order that vocations might be discerned. The Center does this in part by helping fund students at unfunded internships with not-for-profit organizations. These organizations, many of them church related and/or social service oriented, often do not have the resources to offer internships. even though we have found that what students receive from such internships is nothing short of priceless.

Another way we help students have mountaintop experiences is by funding and staffing a strong Campus Ministries program which encourages members of our campus community to explore spirituality in a variety of ways, including worship, Bible study, and reflection. Augustana has the largest, and I think most diverse, professional ministry staff of any ELCA college. In addition to Chaplain Richard Priggie, our staff includes Sister Marilyn Ring, a Benedictine nun; Larry Peterson, who directs the music ministry and is not only very gifted as a musician but also a composer of liturgical music. The fourth and newest member of the professional staff - the Reverend Julio Cruz-Natal, an ELCA pastor who comes to us from Puerto Rico - has already had a considerable impact on our efforts to make Campus Ministries accessible and engaging to as wide an array of students as possible.

At the start of each new school year, Campus Ministries offers first-year students a camping trip over the first weekend after classes start. In addition to being a great deal of fun, it gives the students who participate a ready-made pool of friendships, some of which will sustain them throughout their four years with us.

For many students, this begins a long and rewarding relationship with Campus Ministries in which they learn to

be leaders not just of worship but of service. Each spring break our students mount Habitat for Humanity mission trips where they are needed, whether in the Appalachian Mountains or, as in the case the past two years, the Gulf Coast.

Another way in which Augustana has been able to provide meaningful mountaintop experiences is under the auspices of international study. In just the current academic year, our students will have had opportunities to study in England, France, Germany and Italy through our fall term program - which is now almost 40 years old. We are launching three new terms this year, in Ghana, India and Ireland, and next winter we hope to offer a term-long program at Holden Village. To be certain, Holden is not a foreign destination, though for many of our students it definitely represents another world.

Another key way in which we help students chart their own course to their own mountaintops is through our Senior Inquiry program. Not just a senior capstone research project, Senior Inquiry is distinctive in that it includes a reflective component in which students must place their work - be it a research project or a creative work - in the context of community, and reflect on the ways in which their work has meaning for the communities in which they find themselves.

Sometimes, this is very personal. For example, a senior this year named Dan Pearson based his Senior Inquiry project on some extraordinary research he was able to work on last summer at the M.D. Anderson Cancer Center in Dallas. In a special program normally open only to graduate students, Dan was able to work with Dr. Rajagopal Ramesh in advancing our knowledge concerning drug sensitivity to various resistant strains of ovarian cancer. Dan has been accepted into the St. Louis University School of Medicine, where he intends to further his dream of a career in medical research. What makes this so personal is that cancer has touched Dan's family, and he hopes his work while at Augustana and beyond will one day help families just like his.

These are just a few of the ways in which we try to provide students with transformative experiences during their college years. Have we made a difference? When our students are freshman, only 43% percent of them think it is important to develop a meaningful philosophy of life. At graduate that percentage merely doubles to 83%. As freshmen only 37% think it is important to influence social values - by graduation that number more than doubles to 75%. College can be, and is, a mountain top experience that transforms student's lives.

Let me close by telling you about my two favorite times at Augustana - one is the first year convocation and one is the 50th class reunion.

When we meet students I know we will transform lives - but of course no one knows for sure how this will be done. This gives my colleagues and I the rare privilege of meeting people with considerable gifts, but with a sense of calling which remains just out of focus. We meet:

- . Pastors - who have never given a sermon
- . Attorneys - who have never been in a courtroom
- . Doctors - who have never cared for a patient
- . Scientists - who have yet to push forward the bounds of the known

- . Social workers - who have never been with poor families
- . International aid workers - who have never traveled beyond the boundaries of the US

At the opposite end of our school year from the opening convocation is our Commencement. By tradition, this is when Augustana hosts a special celebration for its 50th year reunion classes. It is a great treat for me to take part in these, and to learn about vocation from the perspective very different than that our students might have.

For one thing, many of these alumni tell me that just as they weren't fully-formed at age 22, they're not entirely sure they're fully-formed at age 72. Indeed, many of them are still finding new mountaintop experiences which hone their sense of calling. Some examples include:

- . A very successful real estate developer who has a passion for international development
- . A lifelong professor who, because of illness in the family, is now raising grandchildren
- . A dentist who discovered a passion for meeting the needs of Latin America's poorest communities
- . A teacher whose appreciation for beauty and design is now expressed in making furniture
- . A career business person, now teaching part-time at Augustana

One thing is certain: all of these life-stories reflect the power of transformation.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul offers powerful insight about the importance of transformation. In fact, one verse from the 12th Chapter of Romans happens to be among my favorite passages of scripture, and was adopted as a year-long programmatic theme by Augustana Campus Ministries. As Paul writes: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God-what is good and acceptable and perfect."

That, then, is perhaps the goal of all of our work at Augustana - and, indeed, at all 28 of the colleges and universities related to the ELCA. To be about the business of renewing minds, in order that they might better discern what is good, and acceptable, and perfect. And to be in the business of helping people understand that vocation is a lifelong pursuit and there are mountaintop experiences at all stages in life. It is an honor for me to be a part of facilitating those experiences.

Amen.



- | | | | | |
|-------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|
| 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 |