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Asking the Inconvenient Question

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Asking the inconvenient question | Augustana College

Honors Convocation

May 14, 2009

Steven C Bahls, President of Augustana College

On behalf of the faculty, staff and board of trustees, it is my honor to congratulate all of our award winners today. We are very proud of the achievements of Augustana College's students over the past year, and are particularly proud of our senior award winners who represent the Class of 2009 so well.

Many of you will be graduating in about ten days. You've seen many changes in your four years at Augustana, including the college's new international programs, new opportunities to work with faculty on Senior Inquiry projects, our award-winning commitment to sustainability, the dedication of Swanson Commons and the Parkander Residence Center and the renovation and rededication of Emmy Evald Hall.

But you've also seen changes in the world around us over the past few years. Many of these changes could not have been foreseen four years ago. In Illinois, we witnessed a disgraced governor impeached for the first time in the state's history. At the same time, and more directly important, you and your families have felt the impact of the melt-down of the nation's and world's economy. Who could have believed that Chrysler would be bankrupt and that General Motors would likely follow? The economic meltdown, I dare say, has impacted each of us in this room. Jobs are harder to find as you graduate and many of you have seen your families' economic security jeopardized.

Those of you in this room have demonstrated that you have the determination, the energy, and the skills to become tomorrow's leaders. As leaders, how will you avoid making the same mistakes that my generation has made? Will your generation tolerate years of corruption in state government, thinking that's just the way it is? Will your generation be overtaken by greed and self-interest, to the extent that the economy will crash in 30 years when you are in control and when your children are ready to graduate from college?

If you learn from history and if you have the courage to embrace the power of critical and creative thinking, I'm optimistic that your generation won't repeat the mistakes of my generation.

Let me tell you why. But first, let's briefly examine why we are in the mess we're in.

First, consider the former governor, Rod Blagojevich. He graduated from a good college – Northwestern University – and even went to law school. An honors student, he was not. Of his law school experience, he once said: "I went to law school at a place called Pepperdine in Malibu, California, overlooking the Pacific Ocean – a lot of surfing and movie stars and the rest. I barely knew where that law library was."

What is intriguing about the Blagojevich administration, to me, is not the governor himself. It is the many people around him who didn't take steps to stop him. Why didn't more people who surrounded him publicly challenge his arrogant and self-serving policies? Why didn't they have the courage to stand up for their convictions and resign from his corrupt administration? Isn't the answer obvious? They lacked the moral courage to do so.

The same thing intrigues me about the financial meltdown. From my vantage point, admittedly with the benefit of hindsight, virtually every system of checks and balances broke down, including those that regulate our financial system. No one seemed to be asking what Professor Pamela Druger, from our accounting department, calls the “*Really* questions.”

- I can get a mortgage even if I don't have a job – *Really?*
- I can enjoy a guaranteed 10% return on this investment without any risk – *Really?*
- There's nothing wrong with slicing and dicing junk mortgages, wrapping them in pretty financial bows, and then palming them off as quality investments to the pension funds that Augustana employees and your parents rely on for retirement – *Really?*
- AIG executives *should* get million-dollar bonuses even though their actions bankrupted their company and nearly bankrupted our economy – *Really?*

What is shocking is that those in the Blagojevich administration and those responsible for regulating our financial system did not ask the most basic questions. They did not ask: *Really?* How can this be? Isn't there something wrong here? And, bottom line: isn't it wrong to do this?

What is more shocking is that those who failed to ask the right question were “the smartest guys in the room.” They were graduates of well-known colleges and universities, top business schools and prestigious law schools.

What happened? How could the “smartest guys in the room” have been so negligent?

Let me offer a simple explanation: they did not have the courage to ask the inconvenient questions. People are afraid to pose inconvenient questions because, as former Vice President Al Gore might observe, inconvenient questions often lead to inconvenient truths. Thus, in many cases inconvenient questions are regarded as impertinent. Yet, had more people in the Illinois state government asked the impertinent questions, perhaps Rod Blagojevich's self-serving policies would not have crippled our great state for so long. And had more people asked the impertinent questions about our financial systems, perhaps we would have learned the pertinent truth – namely, that our financial system was built like a house of cards, ready to collapse on itself.

I know you, our students honored here today, have the critical thinking skills to ask the impertinent questions. You have the ability, if you will, to turn the crystal by standing back from the situation and looking at it from different vantage points. Your professors have taught you how to dig beneath the surface and question assumptions, in order to get to the heart of the matter.

But even though many of those who failed to ask impertinent questions had the critical thinking skills necessary to do so, they remained silent. Why? Because they did not have the courage to ask the tough questions. It was easier to engage in group-think. If other smart people aren't asking questions, it must be OK. Who am I to make waves? And they failed to recognize the ways group-think causes a dangerous alternative reality.

I believe that you have the courage to ask the impertinent questions, even when it is inconvenient. I know. You and your classmates have never been shy about asking me impertinent questions during your years at Augustana. Consider the following:

- Several of you asked me to make sure the college increased its commitment to environmental sustainability.

When you first asked me to do so, I did what many administrators do – agreed to form a committee. But you remained impertinent. You wanted bolder action and about half of you petitioned the administration to take a more active stance. Not only did you petition us to be more aggressive, you offered up well researched suggestions and you gave your time and talent to work hand in hand with the administration in implementing those suggestions. The result: the college now has several award-winning programs demonstrating our commitment to sustainability. And we are committed to doing even more.

- One of your classmates challenged the dean’s office in the following way. Why, the student asked, in a post-9/11 world doesn’t Augustana have an Islamic Studies professor? The result – the college now has a professor to lead our study of Islam and who has helped lead the college to greater interfaith understanding. Could Lars Paul Esbjörn, our Swedish Lutheran founder, have imagined in 1860 that the college one day would have a prayer room for our Muslim students? Probably not, but I firmly believe he would be proud that the college is working to deepen the faith of students by helping every student to explore spirituality and to understand world cultures and world religions.

So students, we are proud of your achievements. But with your honors at Augustana come responsibility – the responsibility to ask the “*Really*” questions, the impertinent questions that reveal the inconvenient truth. And I believe you have the courage to do so.

So let me end where I started. Will your generation avoid the mistakes of my generation? In thirty years, when your children are graduating from college, will the economy be a mess because of your generation’s negligence?

In the words of Maya Angelou: “History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, but if faced with courage, need not be lived again.”

May you have the courage to shine light on the inconvenient truths of your age.

Congratulations to all of our honorees, and especially those in the Class of 2009.



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