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Avoiding the Lazy Approach to Critical Thinking

Augustana College Honors Convocation

Steven C. Bahls, President

May 19, 2011

On behalf of the faculty, staff and board of trustees, it is my pleasure to congratulate our honor students and award winners. We are proud of your many accomplishments at Augustana and it has been our privilege to work with you.

As honor students at Augustana, you've demonstrated your capacity to be leaders. You've demonstrated to your faculty the ability to use the power of critical thinking. Of the many skills and tools you take from the college, the skill of critical thinking, in my judgment, is the most important.

I am sad to say that my generation, in many ways, has failed to use effectively the tools of critical thinking, particularly as it relates to public policy. The impact of this shortcoming, sadly, threatens your generation.

Consider the following:

- The federal debt has grown during your years at Augustana from \$9 trillion to nearly \$15 trillion, and is now at \$31,000 for every man, woman and child in the United States. Yes, some of this was necessary to recover from the worst recession since the great depression, but transferring this debt to your generation is one of the greatest intergenerational injustices ever. Our politicians talk past each other and seem incapable of developing a responsible solution to this problem.
- And speaking of problems – the State of Illinois – need I say more? Huge state budget deficits threaten the future of our state, making continued growth and job creation problematic. Up to this point, the state has chosen to cut those areas that benefit you and your generation the most – higher education and those areas that impact the least fortunate among us.
- Transferring the responsibility for debt and deficits to your generation is not the only issue. We have transferred other problems to your generation. Whether it is increasing greenhouse gases, depleted and wasted natural resources, or lack of understanding between faithful members of the great religions of the world, we have exacerbated many of the problems we faced and have transferred them to you.

How did we get to this point – the point where we have saddled your generation with a huge mountain to climb in order to enjoy the prosperity that my generation has enjoyed? And will your generation have the considerable skills necessary be able to fix it?

First, how did we get here? How did my generation allow these intergenerational equity issues to mount? It was, in my view, through a lack of critical thinking. In so many ways, my generation has had all the advantages – more education than ever, more technology than ever, more wealth than ever and more opportunities than ever. Unlike my generation's parents and grandparents, we had not been confronted by a world war.

Yet, in our relative comfort, we took our eye off the ball when it came to doing the hard work of effectively using critical thinking. From your Senior Inquiry project, you know effective critical thinking is hard work.

There are two common traps we can fall into that keep us from effectively using critical thinking, and both involve the unwillingness to do the hard work that such reflection requires – you might call it laziness. If there were a spectrum of the possible ways to engaging in critical thought, these two traps would lie at opposite ends. At one end of the spectrum is a “go along, get along mentality” and at the other is a “cynic’s mentality.”

The “go along and get along” mentality is sometimes seen as an easier course to pursue than rocking the boat. Too often, people make decisions based on how much “push-back” they will get. And too often, the course of action with the least push-back is to doing nothing. Solving the nation’s budget deficit or addressing in a serious way greenhouse gas emissions will necessarily entail push-back. Being diligent in applying critical thinking is sometimes uncomfortable, particularly when we inevitably make enemies.

We see this “go along, get along” attitude among our many of our elected officials. Because the party caucus says to vote this way, they do so because it is easier to toe the line than persuade others to take a more nuanced and thoughtful approach.

One of Illinois’ greatest attorneys, Clarence Darrow, spoke about this. You remember Darrow, the lawyer who is famous for his role in the Scopes “monkey” trial. He famously said in one of his most noted closing arguments: “If you haven’t made three or four enemies ... you have lived a very weak and useless life.”¹

Mastering critical thinking is one thing – having the courage to use it even when you know you’ll rock the boat is another.

At the other end of the spectrum is cynicism. The cynic differs from the “go along, get along” approach in that the cynic uses critical thinking – but doesn’t use it effectively. The cynic views himself or herself as the smartest person in the room – who either won’t take the time or doesn’t have the courage or skills to engage others in the hard task of solving problems through thoughtful deliberation. We hear this from politicians frequently – particularly those that are regulars on cable TV. This kind of cynicism leads to indignation at the thought of working with others to solve problems collectively. Considering the viewpoints of others is not allowed by this kind of certainty. The fact that it also requires hard work somehow escapes notice.

Here is what Stephen Colbert said about cynicism a few years ago: “Cynicism masquerades as wisdom, but it is the farthest thing from it. Because cynics don’t learn anything. Because cynicism is a self-imposed blindness, a rejection of the world because we are afraid it will hurt us or disappoint us.”²

Both habits – “go along, get along” and abject cynicism – provide an easy way out to avoid doing the hard work that critical thinking asks of us. To be change agents, students, you will need to work to build the most persuasive arguments. To do so, you will need to listen to others, build coalitions with others and at times be prepared to compromise for the common good. You will have to develop not only your intellectual skills – you will also need to develop your people skills.

From what I can tell of the class of 2011, you know how to do the hard of responding to problems and bringing about change. Consider:

- After the earthquake in Haiti and the devastating earthquake and tsunami in Japan, your class helped lead efforts here on campus and elsewhere to address the suffering. You helped raise thousands of dollars for relief, and took seriously the charge to explore how to contribute those funds most effectively.
- Through your urging, Augustana has become a leader among small colleges in developing sustainable practices, particularly as it relates to food service. You and your classmates, instead of remaining silent or being cynical, worked with the administration and faculty to develop local purchasing guidelines and sustainability policies for our food service. And, in large part because of your urging, our Board of Trustees last week reinforced its commitment that new buildings at Augustana be constructed to nationally recognized standards of sustainability.
- Through your efforts, you've encouraged us to understand how all people of faith might come together in dialog. Your efforts to develop interfaith programs have put us on the leading edge of liberal arts colleges.
- But most impressive to me has been watching you work on your Senior Inquiry projects. Many of you have reached out to our area's schools and nonprofit organizations in ways that will benefit our Quad Cities community for years to come.

So, once, again, congratulations, honor students. We are so very proud of you. As you leave Augustana, take with you what you have developed, practiced and honed here – the power of critical thinking. But also make a commitment to **use** it. Augustana graduates, as a whole, are neither from the “go along/get along camp” nor the better-than-thou cynics’ camp. Augustana graduates have the courage to the hard work necessary to employ their powers of critical thing in a way that will change this world.

Thank you.

¹ Michael S. Lief, H, Mitchell Caldwell and Ben Bycel, *Greatest Closing Arguments in Modern Law: Ladies and Gentlemen of the Jury* (1998), page 70.² Stephen Colbert, Knox College Commencement Address (3 June 2006)



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