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2015 Honors Convocation: Leading Engaged Lives

Steven C. Bahls, President

On behalf of the faculty, staff and trustees at Augustana College, it is my pleasure, and indeed, my honor, to congratulate you for achievements at Augustana. We are so very proud of you.

And parents, congratulations to you. Honor students don't achieve their potential without considerable investment from their parents. As the parent of three honor students myself, I know first-hand how parents encourage their students. I know how many late nights you have spent helping your students stay focused on homework. And how you worked so hard when your students were young to encourage them to be curious about the world around them and creative in their approach to life. You've been your students' constructive critic, cheerleader and mentor. You've made it happen for your students.

And, parents, you've seen how others made it happen for your students, as well. Just as you engaged in your students' lives, so too have others — in schools, arts and athletic programs and similar communities — been engaged in your students' lives. I am particularly proud of those at Augustana who have made a real difference for your students — particularly our faculty; who are invested in both challenging your students and opening doors for them. Students, family and friends, let's take a moment to thank our faculty.

I've been thinking a lot over the last couple of months about what it means to be engaged in a community. In a community like Augustana, our faculty and staff are actively engaged in advancing our mission of helping students grow in mind, spirit, and body, in order to provide students with the highest quality of education possible. The Gallup organization has done extensive global research on what it means to be engaged in the context of the workplace. It defines engaged employees as those who "are involved in, enthusiastic about, and committed to their work... and who contribute to their organization in a positive manner." Engaged employees are the positive difference-makers.

I was surprised to learn that world-wide, only 13% of employees are engaged difference-makers. In the United States, the percentage is higher — about 30%.

I believe that based on your record of achievements at Augustana, you will be an engaged, difference-maker. You've proven that you have been engaged in your studies. But you have a choice to make. Will you have similar levels of high engagement at your place of work? More importantly, will you be engaged in your community? Will you, to modify slightly the Gallup definition, be enthusiastic about and committed to your community and take the steps needed to contribute as a positive difference maker?

Those who are fully engaged in their workplace and community, from my observation, tend to be the kind of people who view the glass as half-full, not half-empty. They see possibilities and refuse to let problems that are beyond their control sap their energy and creativity. They take personal responsibility for making their workplace and their community better. At the personal level, they tend to focus on their assets in pursuing opportunities, rather than contenting themselves with "going with the flow."

Just last week, we named the Center for Student Life in honor of Murry Gerber, Class of 1975, and his wife,

Cindy Murry grew up in the Englewood neighborhood of Chicago, under fairly difficult circumstances. A high school counselor suggested Augustana and he was accepted. But there was a problem. He had no way to get to Augustana. He had no access to a car and his family could not help with the transportation. So he decided to get to Augustana for his first day of classes the way he got around in Chicago — by bike.

He loaded a backpack, hoisted it on his back and rode 180 miles to Rock Island. He got a slow start with his education, becoming sick with mono his first year. When a dean told him that he might not be cut out for college, he redoubled his efforts to be successful. At any point in that first year, he could have viewed the glass as half-empty and asked for a bus ticket back to Chicago. But he chose to engage, fully, in his education. He got active on campus and joined several organizations. By the time of his senior year, he was elected president of the student body. He took that initiative into his life Augustana and became a leader at Shell Oil and later at EQT Corporation, a Fortune 500 firm where he became CEO.

Murry's passion did not stop when he retired from EQT. His first act in retirement was drive a natural gas-powered vehicle, with his wife Cindy and their dog, across the country to advocate for cleaner energy. And he has given countless hours to Augustana as a trustee and a significant portion of his financial assets to Augustana — because he is actively engaged in giving back to those who gave to him.

Murry talked about his career earlier this month to a group of students, faculty, trustees and staff. There were setbacks — personal and professional — but he always remained engaged in making his place of employment, his community, and yes, Augustana a better place.

I was so proud to name the Center for Student Life in honor of Murry and Cindy Gerber because they are engaged in their work, their community and this great college. Because of their generosity and their philosophy of giving back, we were able to build one of the nation's best student centers, as well as develop scholarship funds to keep Augustana affordable to all.

Murry's talk reminded me that we all have a choice to make. Will we be defeated by life's inevitable roadblocks, or will we be able to see life on life's terms and yet be energized by the possibilities of a half-full glass?

So I urge you to decide now that you will be engaged in all of your communities — whether those are grad schools, workplaces, or places of residence. In every community, I urge you to view the glass as half full, to see assets rather than deficiencies. If you do so, you will make a difference.

Now I am certainly aware that some people write off engaged optimists as being blind to the problems in their workplaces or their communities. But that is not the case. Effective optimists are fully aware of the limitations of their workplaces or their communities. They confront the cold, hard facts. But they have an abiding faith that, with commitment and hard work, limitations can be overcome for the common good. They focus on making their organizations and communities better and stronger by being more responsive to the common good.

I strive to be a realistic optimist. Most of whatever success that I have had in life has been because of positive thinking and an abiding belief that if I am fully engaged I can make a difference. And that belief stems from knowing that it is my duty to make this world a better place because of the many gifts I have been given — including a quality education.

My advice to you: Surround yourself with positive people. Fully engage with the here and now, not dwelling on past problems. Be realistic that there will be disappointments, but look at disappointments as opportunities for improvement. Be a life-long learner, so that you develop the tools to respond to change. Bring out the best in people. Focus on what you can control instead of what you can't. Use the power of critical thinking, not simply to be critical, but to be a creative problem solver. Let go of disappointments, and be sure they don't cling to you.

But most of all — consider the advice of Martin Seligman. He's the former head of the American Psychological Association and a professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania. He and others looked rigorously at what makes for happiness and they paid special attention to three inputs — pleasure, engagement, and meaning. What they found was that any one of these alone was not enough for happiness... in fact they found that the pursuit of pleasure has almost no contribution to life satisfaction. But when you combine a life of engagement with something meaningful to you, then you're onto something. Seligman contends that if you engage in meaningful work, you will have a happy, full life.

We all have the power to make this a better world. But may I suggest that as honors graduates of Augustana College, you're starting out with glasses that a little more half-full. No one will require you to use these assets to make the world a better place: You have a choice. Will you engage in your work and your communities as you've engaged in your studies? Will you be a positive difference-maker after Augustana, as you've made a difference here? I believe you will because you have demonstrated the power of engagement at Augustana.

But I'm not the only one who believes in you. Take a look at the faculty members gathered here on this stage. They are very smart, very talented people who tend to invest their time and energy wisely. They have invested in you, because they believe in you, as do I and as do your parents.

Honors students, we believe in you. Believe in yourselves — you will make this world a better place.



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