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"In Praise of Reflection"

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2005: Welcome to the First-year Class

"In Praise of Reflection"

It is an honor for me to be among the first to welcome you, the members of the Augustana College Class of 2009. Please allow me to congratulate you, on behalf of the Faculty and our staff, for your admission to the College. Applications to the College were at a record level for your class. We know you've worked hard to gain admission to a selective college like Augustana. You can rightfully be proud of your accomplishments. And while I'm at it, congratulations to the parents of our new students. As the parent of a son who recently graduated this May from a liberal arts college and a second son who starts his senior year at a liberal arts college next week, I know the investments parents make of time, energy and money to help students get where they are now.

The class of 2009 looks to be outstanding. In addition to the 680 first year students, there are about 70 transfer students joining us. And, as of today, we expect 10-15 students from colleges and universities in New Orleans to visit us for a term.

Students, your new classmates are fine students, proven leaders, accomplished athletes and talented musicians. You have distinguished records in your high schools, churches and community organizations. You are committed to public service and volunteerism. In short, you are a group of people who will make a difference.

How will you make a difference at Augustana College? How will Augustana College make a difference for you? I'd like to spend a few minutes reflecting on these questions. I'd like to do so by talking about a book you are familiar with, *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien. Mr. O'Brien will be coming to campus to do a convocation in October.

I must tell you, I found this book to be extremely challenging and disturbing. It is a remarkable story. A liberal arts college graduate from a prestigious college like Augustana, who found himself going to war. When he learned he was drafted, his first thoughts were, "I'm too good for war, too smart, too compassionate, too everything."

It is unlikely, though not impossible, that any of you will be drafted for a war. But, in a sense, during the course of your lifetime most of you will be "drafted" into experiences that you can't foresee now. Perhaps it will be a death of a loved one, a reversal in health, a sudden career change. Those experiences will likely not be as horrible as war, but, for most, you will have experiences that might shake you to your foundation.

When I was your age, the country was just completing its involvement in the war that O'Brien wrote about. When I was a high school and college student, the war in Vietnam was **the** moral issue of the day. But most of us reading the book today could not help but draw parallels with the war in Iraq. The author said of the Vietnam War: "I saw no unity of purpose, no consensus on matters of philosophy or history or law. The very facts were shrouded in uncertainty. . . . A war of national liberation or simple aggression? Who started it, when, and why? .

. . The only certainty . . . was moral confusion." Twenty-eight years later we are asking the same questions about the War in Iraq. What do you think about the war? Is it moral, right and just?

At Augustana College, we like to wrestle with questions like that. Such questions are an important part of the world that you are entering as adults. Is the war just? But there are other questions that are just as important in today's world. What are our responsibilities to our neighbors? To those the less fortunate, especially including those in New Orleans? To the poor? To those in third world countries?

We won't answer these questions for you, but we will help you develop a framework about how to think about the world you are entering. Tim O'Brien had the methodology right. Mr. O'Brien wondered out loud in the book about how matters of philosophy, history, or law related to war and its justification. We hope, when you graduate from Augustana College, that you, too, will draw on what you've learned in philosophy classes, religion classes, psychology classes, economics classes, literature classes, and history classes when thinking about the great issues of your day.

In doing so you will engage in reflective thinking - that is, bringing together several ways at look at issues and creating more reflective analysis of the complex issues found in tomorrow's world. When we are reflective and when our leaders are reflective, we avoid the lack of clarity that O'Brien experienced in Vietnam. When enough of us are truly reflective, we may avoid the horrors of war that O'Brien wrote about. When the world is truly reflective right will not spill over into wrong, order will not blend into chaos, nor civility into savagery.

A powerful symbol for me in thinking about how to develop reflective thinking is a crystal or prism, with many facets, that reflects light in different ways. When you hold a crystal or prism up to the light, it captures that light and breaks it down into its component parts. The nation's most reflective leaders and thinkers know how to turn the crystal. Those who turn the crystal know how to shed light on problems from different angles. "Turning the crystal" is what an education in the liberal arts and sciences is all about. Turning the crystal allows us to reflect, imagine and be creative.

But I think Tim O'Brien's book is more than a sober call for us to be reflective about national and world issues. It is also a more personal call for us to be reflective about our lives - to consider what we are made of, or in his words, what we carry. In O'Brien's Vietnam, he wrote about what the soldiers carried - physical possessions like rations, weaponry, including personal item like photos, books, and letters.

What physical possessions do you carry with you? I helped some of you unload this morning - you carry quite a bit. How do you fit all of that in one room! More seriously, what will you put on your wall, what will you carry in your wallet? How do those possessions help define you?

O'Brien also wrote about what the men carried inside - those things the men felt they had to do. What are you carrying inside of you? O'Brien talked about the stories the soldiers carried to help make sense of war. What stories do you carry to help make sense of your life?

One of our objectives at the College is to help you make greater sense of your life. We want to help you find your groove in life, or as we would put it, your life's calling. Too many first-year students in college are in too much of a hurry. They are not reflective about this critical question. Too many view college as little more than a

ticket to graduate school or a good job. College is a time to ask **who** you want to be. What type of person do you want to be? What are your talents, passions, values and beliefs? And how can you link those to find your life's call?

In *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien tells a story of how he struggled with his life's calling. It was the story of fishing on Rainy River with Elroy Berdahl. The river is on the border of the United States and Canada. O'Brien, of course, was considering whether to flee to Canada to avoid service in Vietnam or report for duty in the military. He was almost paralyzed with indecision. He could hear his parents, his brother and sister, townsfolk, old teacher and old girlfriend urging him to do different things - Swim to Canada, some said. Others said, don't embarrass your family . come home. O'Brien was paralyzed. In the end, Elroy Berdahl pronounced that the fish weren't biting and returned the boat to Minnesota. When Elroy turned the boat with O'Brien in it, O'Brien took the path of least resistance and returned home.

We will all have moments like that. Moments when we need to make a major decision. Perhaps the decision has to do with whom to marry, what career to pick, whether to make a major move, whether to quit a job. These are moments when those on the sidelines give us conflicting advice. Moments when we need to decide whether to make a bold move or take the path of least resistance.

During your years at Augustana, we hope you will do more than simply become wise. While reflective thinking might help us address world events in a more rational way, when we are in situations like O'Brien on the Rainy River, we must employ other skills. College is a time to develop those skills. It is a time for you to ascertain your life's calling and build a framework in your life to support your life's calling. The next four years are a time to ask who we are, what we are made of and what **is** our life's calling? If we can answer those questions when **we** are in the Rainy River, we won't be paralyzed by the screams from the shores or sideline. We will know what we are and what our life's call is.

We hope that Augustana will be a rare feast for you. In your first year you'll discover the bits and crumbs of different disciplines and different ways of knowing. You will start to join them together. As you become involved in our Learning Communities and as you take courses in your second and third years, you'll see knowledge and reasoning spread out more clearly. You'll learn to separate the authentic from the inauthentic. And as a senior, in many departments, you'll have the opportunity to use your reflective thinking while working on a project that draws all your learning together, like the blending of voices in Mozart's masterful operas. In the end, you will learn more about yourself - your talents, your passions and your life's calling.

Please allow me to close with five bits of practical advice about how to fully invest yourself at the College and, in doing so, making the most of this rare feast called Augustana College.

First, recognize that learning at Augustana is about more than the classroom. Much happens outside of the classroom. You'll have many opportunities to get involved in campus life, choosing from nearly two hundred clubs and organized activities. Many of you will organize service projects. Still others will travel abroad or do externships with businesses, non-profit or government organizations. But, beware: no one will force you to get to know your professors or to take advantage of our clubs, our sports teams or our service projects. You must take the initiative.

And let me be clear about that. There will be no one to force you to take advantage of the many opportunities you have here. You must take the initiative. That being said, Augustana is a community of doers, not observers. Resolve now to be a doer at the college. Resolve to be fully invested in the Augustana experience, but in a way that is unique to who **you** are.

Do something new and outside your comfort zone. Try out for a theater production, join the choir, join debate, or join the Model UN. Join with campus ministry. Participate in a new club sport or intramural sport. In most cases, not much experience is necessary. You'll meet new friends and broaden your horizons - not to mention the fun you will have.

Second, don't take yourself too seriously. Have some fun. And we like to have fun at Augustana College. It isn't only academics here. This is a seven-day-a-week, 16-hour-a-day campus. The friendships you build here will last a lifetime. When most of you reach age 50, you will count your college years among the most important, and most enjoyable, years of your life. I know. Take advantage of it.

Third, take advantage of an international experience. We have numerous international summer programs and international quarters. These are high-quality programs. In most of these programs, you will travel with Augustana faculty. The world is becoming a global village, and there is no better way to prepare you than traveling to some other part of the world.

Fourth, consider a double major or a minor. You need not make that decision now, but combining two areas of study will enhance your experience here. If you are in a preprofessional major, minor in a discipline within the liberal arts. It's not uncommon at Augustana to pair business with classics. But a word of caution here - don't become wed to a major too soon. Think about what you've enjoyed most in your first trimesters here and then pick a major accordingly.

Fifth, and perhaps most important, get to know your professors outside the classroom. Augustana College has one of the most favorable student/faculty ratios in the Midwest. Our faculty members are among the most impressive and brightest people I know. And - they are here for **you**. Most of you will have the opportunity to work on a research project of your choosing with a faculty member. This is an important opportunity at Augustana, one that most schools do not make available to undergraduates. Take advantage of these opportunities. There is no better way to finish your college years than to add to the body of knowledge or to serve the community through a senior research project. And besides, getting to know your professors will help them write good letters of reference!

A final few words about your education. Only about 3% of college graduates are educated at a residential liberal arts college like Augustana. Graduating from a liberal arts college will open doors. As a graduate of a residential liberal arts college, you will be nearly three times as likely to be on the Forbes list of the nation's most successful CEOs. But at the same time, you will be nearly three times as likely to be a Peace Corps volunteer. Graduates of liberal arts colleges are twice as likely to earn a PhD as graduates of other types of colleges and universities, and much more likely to win a Pulitzer Prize or be a leader in the scientific community. One third of you will pursue graduate or professional education upon graduation from the College and about half of you will do so within 5 years of graduation.

In closing, let me invite you to consider your years here as a "once-in-a-lifetime opportunity." Invest yourselves fully in the Augustana experience, for you'll never have an opportunity like this again. You have sacrificed, your parents have sacrificed, and those who have endowed the college have sacrificed to get you here. Your years here are more than a path to get the title to a college degree. It is a journey to be savored. Develop your imagination. Imagine the possibilities. Invest yourselves well.



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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 |