

1-1-2005

"Trees of Life and Knowledge"

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Recommended Citation

Bahls, Steven C.. ""Trees of Life and Knowledge"" (2005). *Speeches and Statements*.
<http://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/presidentsstatements/21>

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Honors Convocation 2005 | Augustana College

"Trees of Life and Knowledge"

Whenever I step out of my office in Founders Hall and head up the steps to Ascension Chapel, my eye is caught by the stained glass window on the landing of the staircase. Maybe you've noticed it, too. There are depictions of four historic buildings in the life of Augustana College, which create a frame around two trees, both laden with fruit. On the left is the Tree of Life, and on the right is the Tree of Knowledge.

I find the use of trees and fruit as symbols of life and knowledge to be especially meaningful to us and what we - together - do here at Augustana.

Fruit is a symbol with many meanings. It represents both that which sustains us, and that toward which we strive: fruit is food, yes; but it also symbolizes the pay-off of our efforts.

Trees ... well, trees have a fairly obvious meaning to those of us at Augustana College. John Henry Cardinal Newman said the world's first university, in Athens, was situated in a shaded grove surrounded by trees, since that was thought to be the setting most conducive to deep thought. Some people think we may have taken that idea a little too far here at Augustana, but we do certainly have plenty of shade in which to create and share ideas.

An interesting thing about trees - and a trait they share with people - is that their growth, though almost imperceptible on a day-to-day basis, is stunning when viewed over time. To think that each of the stately oaks on campus started as an acorn is astonishing. But the same holds true for all of us gathered here today, especially the students.

Whether you are in your first year or are sophomores, juniors, or soon-to-be graduates, you are remarkably different from when you enrolled here. You have been transformed.

Oliver Wendell Holmes has been credited with observing that a "mind, once stretched by a new idea, never regains its original dimensions." The more we learn about the world around us and the world within us, the more responsibility we shoulder for the well-being of those worlds.

As we learn here - from professors, from colleagues, from students - we must be prepared to be transformed into something other, something bigger, and, I believe, something better than we were. And especially for those here today who will soon leave *this* quiet shaded grove, it is important to remember that with this transformation comes a higher expectation.

We are called to take the ideas which others have shared with us, especially those which have stretched our minds, and put them to work.

I'd like to give you two examples of how this works. Brenda Barnes studied at Augustana College in the 1970s. She was raised in a Southern suburb of Chicago, in a modest home. After graduation she took a job at Wilson Sporting Goods paying \$10,000. She went on to become CEO of PepsiCo North America. There she did an

outstanding job, helping sharpen Pepsi's brand through successful marketing. But, during her years at Augustana, she learned that leading a meaningful life involves more than work. At the pinnacle of her success at Pepsi, she left - to spend more time with her children. The media couldn't believe it. Her resignation set off a nation-wide discussion of the role of women at home and in the work place. As her children approached college age, Brenda entered the work world once again - this time as CEO of Sara Lee. Sara Lee has a workforce of 150,400 employees and is the largest corporation with a female CEO. Recently she told *USA Today* about how her mind was stretched at Augustana. She told *USA Today* that attending Augustana College "made me CEO of Sara Lee."

Another graduate who found his vocation is Murry Gerber, a 1970s grad who was a geology major. He is now CEO of Equitable Resources, one of the nation's largest energy companies. When I first met him two years ago, the Enron scandal was still unfolding. Enron, also in the energy business, was run by a group of managers corrupted by greed - thinking only of themselves. Murry was a stark contrast. First, as geology major he actually understood the science of energy. But more importantly, as an Augustana graduate, he was able to place business in a larger context. Yes, it is important for business to make a fair profit for shareholders, but it is also important for businesses to strengthen communities. From the top floor of Equitable Resources high rise building in Pittsburgh, he explained to me how he and Equitable Resources had made it a priority to strengthen downtown Pittsburgh and the surrounding neighborhoods. He recently told *USA Today*: "I don't believe someone from Augustana College would end up with the mess of Enron, to put it bluntly".

Like Brenda and Murry, experiences you have had at Augustana will have a transformative effect on your lives.

The final thought I'd like to share with you deals with the manner in which this process of transformation occurs. Also ascribed to Oliver Wendell Holmes is the observation that "Many ideas grow better when transplanted into another mind than in the one where they sprung up."

The science historian James Burke - who spoke at Augustana some years ago - puts this rather well by asserting that the only way to create a new idea is to allow two existing thoughts to collide in a new way, usually in the mind of someone who had nothing to do with either of those existing thoughts.

The point is this: the process of encountering new ideas does not end in our sophomore, junior or senior years. And it's up to us to keep the landscape of our minds fertile so that when the opportunity for a new idea comes along, we will be prepared.

The Roman scholar Cicero said that "the cultivation of the mind is a kind of food supplied for the soul." In order to ensure that our minds are fertile places in which new ideas can not only be transplanted, but can grow into newer and better ideas, we must cultivate them.

How do we do this? You already know, because it's what you and your professors have been engaged in the whole time you've been at Augustana. They challenge you with ideas that are new, foreign, sometimes unsettling and, sometimes, disagreeable. And then what do they do? Often, they seem to enjoy it when you push back with your own ideas. More often, they provide a wider field of context in which these new ideas can find fertile soil for transplantation, where they may yet bloom into new thoughts, years down the road.

We are blessed, I think, to be part of this community of learners and teachers - to be part of a place where ideas are the stock in trade. In this community, ideas regularly stretch our minds. We treat ideas as a kind of food for the soul. Those of you whom we honor today are - as evidenced by the awards you are receiving - leaders in this community and, as such, well-versed in this notion of planting and harvesting ideas. I urge you, and especially the seniors here today, to continue using this knowledge in every field to which your life takes you, long after you have left this garden

Congratulations on your awards, and thank you for your leadership.



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