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## "Critical Thinking about Critical Thinking"

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# Honors Convocation 2008 | Augustana College

## "Critical Thinking about Critical Thinking"

May 15, 2008 Honors Convocation

Steve Bahls, President of Augustana College

On behalf of the faculty, staff and board of trustees, I offer my congratulations to each of you being honored here today. We are proud of your achievements.

Many of you will be graduating in less than two weeks. You are graduating at an interesting time in our history. I agree with those presidential candidates who say that the next eight years could be historic and could set the tone for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. America seems finally ready to address most of the difficult issues before it: environmental justice; access to quality health care; equal opportunities regardless of gender, race, or sexual orientation; and the need to be a responsible world citizen as we continue to exercise leadership in the global war on terror.

Why is it that America seems finally ready to address these problems? Though the presidential candidates are impressive in many ways, I do not sense it is because of them. I sense it is because your generation thirsts for change - and is no longer willing to wait for my generation to address these issues only one small step at a time.

Your education at Augustana has given you one of the most powerful tools to be a leader in this changing world. That is the power of critical thinking. When we engage in critical thinking, we seek the truth. We do so by clearly examining, in an unbiased way, the facts. We identify the applicable issues and justify applying various ways of thinking when analyzing the issue. We turn the crystal by looking at issues from different angles - from the perspective of a philosopher, an economist, a scientist, a theologian, a psychologist, a sociologist. We look at issues from not only our own culture but different cultures. We consider seriously the arguments of people who disagree with us. Using what we learn, we then develop a conclusion and, often, an action plan to persuade others of our conclusion.

For most of you, your achievements - celebrated here today - demonstrate that you are beginning to master the power of critical thinking. But beware, critical thinking *alone* is not enough to address complex problems like global warming and solving the health care crisis. Critical thinking can be used for the common good or, alternatively, the power of critical thinking can be used to satisfy one's own ego or as a vehicle to obtain an unfair advantage over others. Those who use critical thinking most effectively also have the trait of humility.

Consider the examples of two organizations on campus that, I believe, engage in critical thinking in this more effective manner. One is Fair Trade Matters. This new student organization has initiated a dialog on campus to help us think about issues of international poverty, economics and trade relations. The organization, by making sound and compelling arguments, has stimulated discussions across the campus on how it buys coffee. By

using the power of critical thinking and persuasion, the group has helped many of us think through how something as simple as drinking a cup of coffee impacts others in different corners of the world.

Global Affect is another example of an organization using the power of critical thinking in a positive way. By working with the College administration, they have changed the way the college does business. Through their advocacy and the advocacy of faculty, the college has an aggressive environmental sustainability action plan - one that Global Affect is helping us implement. Global Affect was successful because it made careful and persuasive arguments to the administration - successfully building the case for change.

Fair Trade Matters and Global Affect, I suspect, had a choice. Instead of doing the hard work of building an effective case for change and then persuading others to buy into it, they could have taken a less ambitious route. They could have attempted to marginalize those who differed with them by demonizing them and engaging in ad hominem attacks. Had they used their critical thinking skills in this way, they might have satisfied the egos of a few of their members, but at the cost of making no substantial difference.

Instead, they had the courage and humility to use critical thinking in an effective way - by having face-to-face conversations in an atmosphere of mutual respect...the kind of atmosphere that makes those who differ from you want to work with you in finding common ground.

In his book, Audacity of Hope, Barack Obama talked about the power of critical thinking and humility. He admonished us to "talk and reach for common understandings, precisely because all of us are imperfect and can never act with the certainty that God is on our side...." He went on to invoke the memory of Abraham Lincoln's First Inaugural Address, by stating that we can advance our principles through "reasoned arguments that might appeal to the better angels of our nature ...". Fair Trade Matters and Global Affect have successfully used reason and debate to appeal to our better side - or, as Lincoln put it, "the better angels of our nature"

I know you and your generation will use the power of critical thinking in ways better than my generation has. In politics, for example, too often my generation has used its power of critical thinking to tear down rather than to build up. Too often we have viewed critical thinking as a weapon, not a solution. If Fair Trade Matters and Global Affect are any indication of how your generation will use the power of critical thinking, then I am very optimistic about your ability to effect change in a world that cries out for it. I think you will do so by effectively appealing to the better angels of our nature.

Once again, congratulations, students for your achievement. We are very proud of you.



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