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The Vocational Calling of Heroes

North Scott High School Honors Assembly

Steven C. Bahls, President of Augustana College

It is an honor to have the opportunity to speak with you today. Congratulations, Inductees into the National Honor Society. You have shown your character by how you have excelled. A considerable amount of hard work is being recognized today, and I feel fortunate to be part of the celebration.

Congratulations, parents. You have shown your dedication to your students. It is a special blessing and privilege to be a parent, and you have fulfilled your role well.

Congratulations, Principal Terry Sherer, Dean of Students Kristen Allen, teachers and administrators. You are America's finest because you are paving the way for our future. You have set high standards, yet you have patiently taken the extra steps to help your students achieve those standards.

North Scott High School is a great American high school in a great American community. Traditions of excellence here extend not only to academics, but also to athletics, music and the many student clubs and organizations. I know first-hand about the excellence here. North Scott High School graduates who come to Augustana are well prepared for the rigors of our nationally-ranked college.

Just two months ago, we witnessed one of the greatest natural disasters in our nation's recent history - you know what I'm talking about - Hurricane Katrina and its devastation of the Gulf Coast region. The scope of this natural disaster both astonished and touched all of us. Many of you, I'm sure, donated or helped raise money for the relief efforts.

As a student of history, I am interested in how the historians of the future will judge our response as a nation. I have been stunned and saddened with all of the finger-pointing . and the ways in which some have tried to use this tragedy for political gain. But - perhaps like you - I am most intrigued by who the heroes of this tragedy are.

The media, of course, tell us not just about the heroes, but also about the "goats" of the tragedy. By some reports, fully one-third of New Orleans police officers were AWOL - they did not report for duty. Likewise, owners of several nursing homes are accused of leaving their helpless residents to fend for themselves in the face of the hurricane and ensuing floodwaters.

Unfortunately, the heroes of this tragedy received less press. Just as many of the heroes after 9/11 were firefighters, many of the heroes of Hurricane Katrina were medical personnel. Consider these stories, often buried in the back pages of the newspaper.

Consider Dr. Norman McSwain, a renowned 68-year old Tulane University trauma surgeon. He stayed with his patients, and then waded through fetid floodwaters to plead for help for thousands of people trapped in hospitals under dismal conditions. He didn't send a subordinate to do it - he did it himself because he felt a

responsibility for his patients.

Consider, too, Dr. Rich Tabor, a physician from Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. He made his own way to New Orleans, climbed on an airboat and went with rescue workers as they searched the city. Paramedic Barry Albertson did the same thing, missing his son's first football game so he could join a caravan of ambulances on a non-stop 30-hour trip to New Orleans.

And there were hundreds of others.

What was it that separated these brave individuals from those who went AWOL? I believe they knew who they were and who they were supposed to be - they knew what they were made of and what calling they had in life. Those who were heroes knew who they were. Those who were not heroes only knew what they were.

Let me elaborate. Those police officers and nursing home operators who walked away from their posts were somehow able to either forget or ignore who they were, and why they were there. They forgot that being a police officer or nursing home operator is more than a career, it is a calling. It is a calling that demands placing others before themselves. And they failed to do so. Dr. McSwain, who trudged through those foul waters, had the resources to get out of New Orleans while the getting-out was good. But he remembered who he was and why he was there - he was a physician because he wanted to save lives. And this 68-year old was willing to risk his own life to save others. It would have been easier for Dr. Tabor and Paramedic Albertson to watch the events in New Orleans on TV from the comfort of their living rooms in Pennsylvania. Instead, they courageously headed for New Orleans, not knowing what was in store.

As you complete high school and look ahead to college, will you have the imagination to do more than ask what you want to be? Will you have the courage to ask who you are? Asking what you want to be is relative easy. Asking who you are is much more complex. You'll get plenty of advice on what you should be - a doctor, a teacher, a lawyer, a marine biologist. But before you ask yourself what you want to be, ask who you are. These heroes of the Hurricane Katrina recovery efforts knew who they were. They were more than doctors and paramedics. They were human beings who sensed a calling in what they were doing - namely, alleviating human suffering. That gave them a passion to serve others, and so becoming doctors and paramedics was more than landing a job, it was answering a call. The so-called "goats" of Hurricane Katrina - perhaps - viewed a career as little more than a means to feather their own nest.

At Augustana College, we call the process of learning who you are "vocational reflection." Here - in a very simplified form - is how it works: Before you decide on a career, ask what your talents and passions are. What do you care about? What have you learned from teachers or school activities that awakens a passion to serve? Once you understand your talents and passions, then ask how you might find a career that helps you advance those talents and passions, and do so in a way that lets you make a difference during your precious time on earth. You will then begin to know your calling or your path in life. Many careers will be options for you - teacher, doctor, lawyer, police officer, nursing home administrator and many more. Just be sure you know whether it fits in with who you are and who you want to be.

As you are thinking about your future, have some imagination - just as the doctors and paramedics had to use their imagination to develop creative solutions to problems, particularly when transportation and communication

networks were broken.

Will you have the sort of imagination that these heroes had? Will you continue to develop your abilities, talents and passions both in college and during your remaining time at North Scott High School? If you go on to work in the medical community, law enforcement or in politics will you have the imagination needed to address the next natural disaster? In other arenas, will you have the imagination to think of new ways to resolve conflict, elevate communities, create beauty, challenge yourself and others to think and act in new ways? Will you have the imagination to help bridge the divides that separate us? I believe you will. As honor students you have demonstrated your potential to be imaginative.

A powerful symbol for me in thinking about how to develop imagination is a crystal or prism, with many facets, each reflecting 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. When you turn the crystal, you change the way it does this, and you see the light differently. In life, those who turn the crystal know how to shed light on problems from different angles. "Turning the crystal" is what our nation's most creative leaders and thinkers know how to do. Learning how to turn the crystal is what an education is all about. Turning the crystal allows us to imagine.

Imaginative leaders have mastered looking at problems from different angles. In addition to being a college president, I'm a lawyer. Great lawyers know how to look at a problem not only from their client's angle, but from the angle of the opposing party, from the angle of the judge and jury, and from the angle of what is right and just for society. The same can be said of doctors, paramedics, Peace Corps volunteers, political leaders, pastors, artists, business executives and people in virtually every other career. Your education - here at North Scott High School and beyond - offers you opportunities to "turn the crystal." Take those opportunities and learn how to look at problems through both your own experience and the experiences of those who are different from you.

As a college president, I have the privilege of spending much of my time with recent high school graduates. I believe that that most recent high school graduates are self-reliant and will take control of their own destinies. You are an imaginative generation and a courageous generation. I firmly believe this will be the next great generation. Right now the World War II generation is the greatest generation. They returned from a war and built our country into what it is today. They were committed to service, they were self-reliant and they efficiently responded to a changing world with determination. It reminds me of your generation. Your generation is efficient - you multi-task like no other. Last night my daughter was doing homework, instant messaging and talking on the phone - all at the same time. (I can hardly chew gum and tie my shoe at the same time.) You are committed to service. Most young adults today don't believe the government will provide for them - they want to do it on their own. Your generation embraces technology and your generation cherishes the nation's diversity. Your generation understands better than any other that this is a global village. These ingredients - self reliance, commitment to service and commitment to a global community - are the ingredients for the next Greatest Generation. I believe you will take the crystal our society gives you and you will turn it in ways that help you build the foundation for a stronger society and a greater America.

Congratulations to our honor students and to all of you who pursue excellence, in class, on stage, on the athletic field, in school activities and community causes. Once again, thank for the honor of joining you today.



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