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'Dreams from my Father' lessons for students

Remarks to the First-Year Convocation, August 20, 2009

Steven C. Bahls, President of Augustana College

On behalf of the Augustana College Board of Trustees and Faculty, it is my distinct honor to call this 150th academic year into session!

And it is an honor for me to be among the first to welcome you, the members of the Augustana College Class of 2013. Please allow me to congratulate you, on behalf of the Faculty and staff, for your admission to the College. Applications to Augustana were the highest of any class in the college's history. There were 3630 applications for our class of about 625. Augustana is no longer a well-kept secret! In addition to the 625 first-year students, there are about 35 transfer students joining us and 9 visiting students. You come from 17 states and 9 countries.

Students, we know you've worked hard to gain admission to a selective college like Augustana. You can rightfully be proud of your accomplishments. We thank you for choosing Augustana College. And while I'm at it, congratulations to the parents of our new students. As the parent of two sons who recently graduated from liberal arts colleges and as the parent of a current liberal arts college student, I know the investments parents make of time, energy and money to help students get where they are now. The College sincerely appreciates your commitment to your students.

I would like to take a moment to commend the faculty on their selection of this year's book for the Augie Reads program, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*, by Barack Obama. But I must admit that when I heard that the faculty had recommended this book, I was a bit concerned. The nation had just been through a hotly contested presidential election and I thought a book by the new president might be a bit polarizing, given the nation's division over many of his policies. Of course, I was quickly reminded that the book is not about politics at all. It was written long before President Obama ran for his first political office.

The book does more than simply chronicle Barack Obama's struggle to understand racism and bigotry. It is an exploration of racial, economic and social justice. But it is even more than that – it is an intensely personal story of a younger Barack Obama's struggle to find his identity and his calling in life. I hope the book challenged you to think about your own identity and how *who* you are bears on what you will do in the future.

Admittedly, Barack Obama at the age of 18 had a very different set of experiences than you. But at the core, the questions for you and for Barack Obama, when he was your age, are the same. Who am I and what do I want to do with my life?

Parents – I invite you to read this book. Finding one's calling is a lifelong pursuit that doesn't stop at college. And as most of you parents know, finding your calling in life is usually a winding road with a few dead-end detours. We'll provide an opportunity to discuss the book during Family Weekend.

Students, there are several aspects of young Obama's journey of self discovery that are interesting.

First, the title of the book was a bit surprising – *Dreams from My Father*. The importance of Obama’s father in his life was fascinating. He emphasized that he carried (or even inherited) the dreams of his father, a father whom he barely knew. His direct exposure to his father was limited to one visit and a periodic exchange of letters. Yet he was haunted by the dreams of a man who was practically a stranger.

Most of you are more fortunate than Obama. You know both of your parents well and you know their values and their dreams. For some of you, your values and aspirations are close to those of your parents – you might say the apple didn’t fall far from the tree. For others, that may not be the case.

At Augustana, your professors will challenge you in many ways to find yourself. But be advised: as young Barack Obama found out, finding oneself is not always easy. Your professors will challenge you to ask tough questions. They will urge you to ask the **who** questions before you ask the **what** questions about your life. They will urge you to ask **who** you are before you ask **what** you want to do professionally.

Your professors will also challenge you to probe deeper into your core beliefs. Why do you believe what you believe? How do you know that the assumptions underlying your beliefs are valid? We do this not to change your beliefs and value system – but to do the opposite. By asking the difficult questions and by encouraging you to more closely examine your underlying beliefs and assumptions, we hope to strengthen your beliefs and values – and sometimes refine them in ways to better reflect who you are.

So parents, as your students develop their talents, discover their passions, and ascertain their calling in life over the next four years – sometimes the apple will roll closer to the tree, but often it will move further from the tree. And students, as you explore the values and dreams of your parents, we know that you will develop your own identity and sense of calling. But we also know that you are likely to find out what Obama discovered in Kenya. As you develop a better sense of yourself, you will value family more. As Obama observed – family is more than a genetic chain. It is more than “an economic unit optimal for child rearing and divisions of labor.” It is “a story of shared memories, an ambit of love and a reach across the void.”

Let me mention another part of the book that intrigued me and I hope intrigued you. As Obama was searching for himself, he was constantly looking at the world through the eyes of others. Like you will, he looked at the world through those he studied in school, but whom he never met – Frederick Douglass, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr. He looked at the world through the eyes of his grandfather, who was a physical presence in his life, and his father, whom he barely knew. Of course, he also looked at the world through the positive and optimistic lens of his mother. And as he continued to explore who he was, he looked at the world through the eyes of poor people in the slums of Jakarta, in the ramshackle Chicago housing projects, and in the heart of Africa. When he did this, he was finally able to see what he called “truths that are self-evident.”

We can learn from Obama that the sum of our experiences creates a lens through which we engage the world, and no two of these lenses are identical. While you are at Augustana, I hope that you will step back from your lens and work to examine your lens. You do so by being open to seeing the world through the lenses of others – whether those of your fellow students, your faculty, or the great scholars whose ideas you will encounter here. Try to think about what it would be like to walk in their shoes.

By stepping outside of yourself and looking at things from a different angle, you will engage in an important type of thinking – reflective, critical thinking. A powerful symbol for me in thinking about how to develop reflective, critical 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.

Your generation is faced with many significant and vexing problems – the war on terror, climate change, a health care crisis and an economy in the dumps. One needs to turn the crystal by viewing the monumental problems of your time through the lenses of a historian, a theologian, a humanist, an economist, a political scientist and a psychologist. Could we have avoided the meltdown of our financial systems and of the economy, if the nation's business and policy leaders had been more reflective? What if they had graduated from a liberal arts college like Augustana that combines business courses with ethics courses? What if they had taken a few more economics courses or history courses so as not to repeat past mistakes with the economy? What if they had taken a few more philosophy, religion and ethics courses to get their priorities in line? Had our business leaders looked at the economy not only through the eyes of those with stock option plans, but through the eyes of a widow with a fixed pension, would they have been more reflective about not putting short-term gain before the long-term health of our economy? And would they have been more careful had they looked at the economy through the eyes of your generation – a self-reliant generation of people who are not only concerned about more than profit and year-end bonuses, but are also concerned about economic, social and environmental justice.

During the next four years, you'll learn to turn the crystal in a way that helps you will discover those self-evident truths Obama wrote about by viewing problems from many angles.

Well, enough high-mindedness – not that high mindedness is all bad. But let's get down to the nitty-gritty. I'd like to share four bits of practical advice about how to make the most of this special community 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 internships with businesses, non-profit or government organizations. Through our Augie Choice program, we'll help you fund those projects. But, beware: no one will force you to take advantage of the many opportunities outside of the classroom at Augustana. You must take the initiative. 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. Row crew, try out for a theater production, join a choir or dance club, start a radio show on WAUG, join debate, or get active in student government. Join with campus ministry. Participate in intramurals or a new club 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. If we don't have a club that

meets your interests, come to me with your friends and I will try to provide the seed money to start a new club. We've started thirty new clubs here in the last five years.

Second, and very 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**. Many 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 few years from now!

Third, **don't take yourself too seriously**. Be a bit easy on yourself. You all have distinguished high school records, but for most there will be a few bumps in the road. You might find the courses here a bit difficult at first. You might not hit a home run on every exam. Socially, you may not click immediately. You might find the transition to college is a time of soul-searching, which is not always easy. You may find that the major you thought was a good fit is not, after all, and that another major appears to be a better fit. That is OK. Be easy on yourself. Give it time. Few students flunk out of Augustana College and almost all students eventually find the right major, the right activities, and a good group of friends. And speaking about being easy on yourself – have some fun at Augustana College. Study hard, but do more than study. 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. Most of you, when you reach your parents' age, will count your college years among the most important, and most enjoyable, years of your life. Take advantage of this time. Look around the room. Many of your lifelong friendships will start here.

Fourth, **enjoy the journey**. Your college years are not to be rushed through. Don't regard Augustana as little more than a ticket to get a degree and then a job. Regard it as a place of growth. Regard Augustana as a "once-in-a-lifetime opportunity." Invest yourselves fully in the Augustana experience, because you'll never have an opportunity like this again.

Well, my time is nearly up. Let me conclude by saying I look forward to getting to know each of you a bit better. Parents, we invite you back for Family Weekend. My wife and I will have an open house so we might get to know you better. Students, stop by to visit me during my open hours in our library coffee shop. And we also hope to see each student at events at the presidential home.

Best wishes to the class of 2013. I strongly suspect the next four years may be some of the best years of your lives!



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