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Chapel Reflection: Listening for Whispers

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Chapel reflection: Listening for whispers

Chapel Reflection for Tuesday, September 29, 2009

Romans 12:2

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God -- what is good and acceptable and perfect.

The scripture today is one that all church-related college presidents love – it is about the kind of profound, sustained reflection that renews your mind in such a way that it tells you about your place in the world. It is about the process of vocational reflection.

To me, the process of vocational reflection is not about what job I will have. Rather, it's about contemplating my own gifts and passions, while actively looking for the opportunities I am given to use these gifts and passions.

Because of this, vocational reflection has been a life-long journey for me. It has taken me on a path that includes careers as a practicing lawyer in Wisconsin, a law professor in Montana, a law school dean in Ohio, and now a college president here at Augustana. All of these have allowed me to both discern and develop the gifts of leadership and service. But this path is more than a collection of jobs. My vocational journey has also led me to other callings – as a devoted husband to Jane, as an engaged father of three, and as what I confess to be a favorite calling among the vocations in my life: grandfather. Beyond family and profession, my vocational journey has led me into a web of servant leadership in my church and community – a web of commitments I find as deeply engaging as they are intensely rewarding.

Father M. Raymond, in his book *The Family That Overtook Christ*, made two important observations about this kind of vocation, which we often refer to as “calling.” First, while noting that vocations come from God, he wrote that “if ears are not attuned to the whisper of God, vocations will never be answered.” Second, he observed that God often speaks through others to those searching for their calling. Throughout my life, I've been fortunate that others have helped me reflect on my vocation.

When I was in high school, I admired a church-school teacher who was a lawyer. I was always impressed with how he reflected on public policy issues, particularly justice issues associated with the war in Vietnam and the civil rights movement. He explained that he became a lawyer in order that he might follow the biblical injunction of Micah to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God.

Thinking of my college years, although my major was in accounting, I realize today how much I benefited from courses that weren't in my major. Reading Plato's *Allegory of the Cave* in a philosophy course gave me lessons about the ways in which truth – and our perceptions of the truth – are always linked, but are not always identical. And in a religion class, Professor Herbert Richardson had each of us write an autobiography. He contended that by examining where you have been and who has influenced you on your life's journey, you will be better able to discern the hand of God in who you are and who you are becoming. At the time, I thought it was a strange way to learn theology. But now, looking back, I can see that he was right. I might never have

heard God speak in the way the prophets did, but I am convinced that the hand of God has guided both me and my family through life's twists and turns, and led us to where each of us is today.

When I was in college, I joined debate. I was a strong debater, but there were two teams we could never beat – Northwestern and, you guessed it, Augustana. As a college debater, I was interested in public policy issues and advocating for changes in public policy. Building on my love of debate and what I discerned in my religious studies class, I decided that I could best make a difference by pursuing a legal education. I enrolled in Northwestern University Law School. Learning to "think like a lawyer" was a challenging experience for me, but very satisfying.

Although my law career started out in general practice, it evolved into representing entrepreneurs who had to navigate a sea of regulations and legal pitfalls to successfully operate new businesses that created new jobs. During these years, I learned that I had a passion for law reform projects and for engagement with Wauwatosa Presbyterian Church, where Jane and I were members at the time. And I found out that I learned as much about how the world operated through my service as a volunteer probation officer as I did through the practice of corporate law.

And then God whispered into my Presbyterian ears through a couple Catholic nuns. My wife, Jane, taught at a Catholic college, so I got to know the nuns that ran the place. Several concluded that I would be a better academic than a lawyer. After the same message was reinforced by a law professor I met while hiking in Canada, we packed up the family to start an academic career as a law professor in Montana. And I eventually became a law school dean.

While serving as a law school dean, I had opportunities to lead Capital University Law School in crafting programs that prepared students to practice law ethically and to use the law to advance the cause of those underserved by lawyers. While at Capital, we opened The National Center for Adoption Law and started a clinic for victims of domestic violence.

But then I heard another whisper in my ear. During a weekend continuing legal education retreat at an old monastery, a group of lawyers read and discussed great pieces of literature. One was the *Allegory of the Cave*. It had been thirty years since I read it. I again started to think about the essential nature of truth and the core meaning of justice. I had been thinking exclusively about legal doctrine for so long, that it was again time to broaden my horizons.

So when the opportunity came along to serve as president of Augustana College, I eagerly accepted it. To serve as president of a liberal arts college that stresses growth of mind, spirit and body is a great honor and privilege.

During my six years as a college president, I have observed two types of students. One type views education as not much more than a ticket to get a degree. More thoughtful students view their higher education as part of a journey that leads to a fulfilling and rewarding life. This type of student is deeply interested in acquiring the skills of thoughtfulness and critical analysis. These are the students – and may I say this is the type I have found to be prevalent at Augustana – who tend to graduate well-equipped for effective leadership within their communities.

I urge you to be just this kind of student – one whose ears listen to the whisper of God spoken through the voices of other people. It might come in the form of a church-school teacher, a professor, a Catholic nun or someone you meet while hiking in the wilderness. Or it might come from great works like the *Allegory of the Cave*. May you be the kind of student who understands that the college years are not to be rushed through – but are to be savored for their transformative power. And to borrow the words of the Apostle Paul, may this transformation lead to “the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God.”

Amen.



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