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The Habit of Understanding before Disagreeing

Augustana College Honors Convocation

Steven C. Bahls, President

May 22, 2010

On behalf of the faculty, staff and board of trustees, it is my pleasure to congratulate our honor students and award winners. We are proud of your many accomplishments at Augustana and it has been our honor to work with you.

As honor students at Augustana, you've demonstrated your capacity to be the leaders of tomorrow. That is why I'd like to spend the next few minutes challenging you to be a new generation of leaders who use their critical thinking skills in ways that develop creative solutions to the many challenges our nation and world are facing. Today's leaders don't do that often enough.

Shortly after I graduated from college, I met one of the nation's most thoughtful leaders. I was a law student at Northwestern University and newly appointed Supreme Court Justice John Paul Stevens had come back to visit his alma mater. Justice Stevens is now retiring.

When President Obama introduced his nominee to replace Justice Stevens, Elena Kagan, he said she had the "habit of understanding before disagreeing." That phrase struck me — the "habit of understanding before disagreeing" — so I researched where it came from. This phrase comes from Justice Stevens himself. When he first used this phrase in a book published in 1956, he was referring to his mentor, Justice Wiley Rutledge.

Rutledge, Stevens pointed out, made a "painstaking review" of all aspects of his cases, before he would come to a judgment. He would reserve judgment until he could consider a "full statement of opposing arguments and countervailing considerations." Stevens admired Rutledge because he did not make decisions based on the "application of unbending principles," but instead made decisions based on reasoned judgment.

As soon-to-be graduates of a liberal arts college, I hope you have developed the habit of understanding before disagreeing. At Augustana, we are proud that our graduates master the power of critical thinking... and the ability to turn the crystal by looking at a problem from various viewpoints, in order to develop a creative solution. While the skill of critical thinking can be a powerful tool, it is sometimes misused. Some confuse critical thinking with being critical. Critical thinking, when used properly, leads to solutions-oriented creative thinking.

It was in 1956 that Justice Stevens praised the habit of understand before disagreeing. It was earlier this week that Justice Stevens had another insight which is equally instructive to us.

This past Monday, in the case of *Graham v. Florida*, he wrote a brief opinion supporting the decision that non-homicide crimes committed by juveniles could not be punished by a lifetime in prison. The decision overturned the sentencing of a 16-year old Florida youth to life in prison for burglary. While at least one justice favored imposing the harsh sentences of generations past, Justice Stevens observed:

Society changes. Knowledge accumulates. We learn, sometimes, from our mistakes. Punishments that did not

seem cruel and unusual at one time may, in the light of reason and experience, be found cruel and usual at a later time.

I agree with Justice Stevens that knowledge is not constant. Though in college we all develop beliefs and perspectives in our field of study, we continually need to apply the skills of critical thinking to our own positions, or they will become unbending ideologies devoid of reason.

Consider these examples of disagreeing before understanding, all in the name of unbending ideologies:

- Most political campaigns have "rapid response teams," with the stated goal of criticizing the opponent's latest proposals within less than an hour.
- Bloggers react immediately with *ad hominem* attacks on those who have the courage to step forward with new ideas, simply because it's easier to personally attack than to develop a well-constructed responsive argument.
- Legislators in the state of Illinois adopt a "take no hostages" attitude immediately blocking the proposals of the other party, with the result that the state can't pay its bills on time and abdicates its role in basic services. These legislators often place ideology over reasoned judgment that, with hard work, could lead to a consensus.

None of this surprises me. Critical thinking, at its best, is hard work. It requires us to take the time and effort to fully understand an argument before we take a position, and it requires us to reexamine our own ideologies. It requires us to peel away at the arguments advanced for and against. Are the assumptions underpinning the argument valid? Is the argument logical?

From what I can tell of the class of 2010, you know how to do the hard work of understanding before disagreeing. Consider:

- After the earthquake in Haiti, there was an outpouring of student sympathy. Our students raised thousands of dollars for relief, but debated which agency should benefit from their work. After understanding and exploring the missions of several relief agencies, the students made the careful decision that their dollars should go to Partners-In-Health, the agency that will be represented by our graduation speaker tomorrow.
- Over the past four years, our community has struggled with how a small liberal arts college in the Midwest could be a model for other schools. After substantial debate and careful analysis, this community decided to become a model for other colleges and universities in sustainable food service practices. The result has been numerous awards and national recognition for our efforts.
- But most impressive to me, as I was watching you present your research presentations at the Celebration of Learning or other Senior Inquiry presentations, I was taken with how you deliberately and carefully analyzed data, considered arguments and crafted your own positions. Many of you admitted having preconceived notions about where your findings would lead you, but found that with careful understanding, your preconceived notions were changed.

So, once again, congratulations, honor students. As you head off from Augustana and become one of tomorrow's leaders, remember to understand before you agree or disagree. And though you may have developed strong ideologies in your area of student, understand that Justice Stevens is correct — society changes and knowledge accumulates. Even with strong ideologies, we are never done learning.



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