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# Sept. 11: Using Uncertainty to Reflect on Our Calling

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# Sept. 11: Using Uncertainty to Reflect on our Calling

## Sept. 11: Using Uncertainty to Reflect on our Calling

**Steve Bahls, President of Augustana College**

**Tuesday Reflection, Ascension Chapel**

**September 11, 2012**

Today is September 11, and this year we mark the 11th anniversary of the terrorist attack on the United States that none of us will ever forget. Not only did nearly 3,000 people lose their lives in the coordinated attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, thousands more have lost their lives in subsequent terrorist attacks or in military actions occasioned, at least in part, by our response to September 11, 2001. Would you please join me in a moment of silence to remember the victims of that day and those who heroically attended to them?

I'd venture to say that virtually all of us recall that awful day, though there will be a year soon when Augustana freshmen will be too young to recall 9/11. On September 11, 2001, I was having breakfast with a group of law students at Capital University in Columbus, Ohio, when we heard the first reports. My daughter's school was let out early. She was in fifth grade and brought home a sealed note saying we shouldn't let her watch TV because the scenes of the collapsing building would be too disturbing. We should be careful about how we talked to her, the note said, because it might be too much for her. Angela is a senior at Augustana now and, true to her form, she peppered us with question after question about what was going on and demanded to watch the news, as the rest of the family was doing.

Why is the memory of September 11 so "top of mind" and so disturbing? After all, there have been horrible disasters since then that we don't think as much about. On December 26 of 2004, the Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami killed more than 230,000 people in 14 countries. On January 12 of 2010, the earthquake in Haiti killed 300,000 people. And here on our own shores, Hurricane Katrina caused nearly 2,000 deaths and disrupted hundreds of thousands of lives in August 2005.

September 11 lives on because it challenged our assumptions about safety: A terrorist attack could happen in the United States. Fanatical forces over which we have little control could hit any of us at home. In a sense, our feelings of security were irrevocably challenged.

There have been similar "9/11" events that have affected our society and others, perhaps the most well-known of which is the 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor. Jane and I learned of another such event, impacting a culture other than our own, this summer. The events happened more than a century ago off the coast of British Columbia. Have you heard of the Queen Charlotte Islands? They were recently renamed Haida Gwaii, because these were the lands of the First Nations people known as the Haida. One hundred and fifty years ago, the Haida people numbered 20,000. They were a proud people with a sophisticated culture. They were the "North American Vikings," a prosperous group of seafarers who ruled the coastline. Theirs was a highly developed society with an emphasis on art and culture.

But then they had their 9/11 event. Their bodies were attacked by disease brought into their midst by European traders. Small pox and other epidemics are believed to have wiped out 90% of the Haida people over a century. Villages of a 100 families were reduced to a handful. The Canadian government and missionaries rounded up the survivors from the villages (which had become ghost towns) and concentrated them in several mid-sized settlements, with the effect of again concentrating the disease and killing still more Haida.

My wife, Jane, and I had a chance to visit three of the original villages, all of them still deserted. Fewer than 2,000 people visit these villages each year – they are remote and can only be accessed by boat. They are minded by the Haida Watchmen, who must give their permission to enter the villages and watch over the artifacts that remain.

In one of the Haida villages, SGAang Gwaay Llnagaay, we were granted permission to tour the village. A young man, college-aged, named Doug greeted us. He was cleaning nearly 200 pound of Halibut caught that morning. Doug took us on a tour of the village, explaining the art on the totem poles and showing us the remains of the once-grand homes. Doug talked about the sad history of the Haida people. What had been a proud people of 20,000 in 1770 had been reduced to just 600 by the beginning of the 20th century. The language is nearly lost.

Doug tipped his New York Yankees ball cap when he reflected wistfully that he would give anything to go back 150 years and experience the grand culture. He said his generation struggled with how to retain their connection with that history, but put their own mark on it. He was still struggling with the Haida “9/11” event 150 years later. Doug said that he was going to take up carving in the Haida tradition. Like traditional carving, his art would tell the culture’s history. When asked which traditional artist he would most like to be like, he said he wanted put his own spin on it. In that way he could do his part not just in preserving the culture, but in advancing it. After we spent a couple of hours in a riveting conversation with Doug, he sent us on our way with 10 pounds of fresh halibut to enjoy.

Events like 9/11 are difficult to embrace and understand, as my daughter’s fifth-grade teacher warned. But when events knock us off center, they often create fertile ground for us to ponder, like Doug, about what our calling in life is. Most in my generation looked at their lives in the days and months after 9/11 and asked about their calling. I examined my calling, and within two years pursued a new call – serving as your president.

September 11, for many of our students, is starting to feel like a distant memory. But I would submit that there are times when, like 9/11, your world views are challenged. Events challenging your assumptions may not be as horrific as 9/11. But at Augustana, you will have those moments of challenge. Maybe it is moving away from the protective shelter of your parent. Maybe your new-found critical thinking skills will rock your world by challenging basic assumptions you’ve held.

Like my Haida friend Doug, use these challenges to reflect on your calling in life. Heed the Apostle Peter’s admonition: “As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace.” Doug’s gift is the gift of art and passion for his culture. What are your gifts? Use your journey at Augustana to challenge your assumptions, explore your passions and find your calling in life.



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