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Use Power to Empower!

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Use Power to Empower! | Augustana College

Honors Convocation 2013

May 18, 2013

Steven C. Bahls, President

It is my honor to bring you congratulations on behalf of the faculty, staff and trustees of Augustana College. We are proud of you and proud of your accomplishments. You represent all that is best about Augustana College, and your hard work has paid off in the recognition you are receiving today.

Before addressing the students, I want to take just a moment to speak to the parents of those about to be honored. Honor students are not simply born and predestined to be honor students. Honor students are raised, encouraged and mentored by their communities. And the most important members of that community are parents. Parents: thank you for the innumerable hours and immeasurable patience you've had with your students. You've worked together, laughed together and sometimes even cried together. Your role in providing your students with the gifts of determination, persistence and a drive toward excellence is why your students are here today. Parents, would you please stand so you can be recognized by your students and the faculty and staff of Augustana College? Thank you.

Students: you have earned the recognition you are receiving today. Your accomplishments provide evidence that you have acquired those skills that Augustana and its faculty have worked so hard to develop in you. You have gained the power of critical thinking. You have honed the power to solve problems. You know how powerful it is to turn the crystal to look at issues from different viewpoints.

Just as the power of critical thinking has opened the doors to academic achievement, these skills will open doors after you graduate. Most of you will be the leaders of tomorrow in your chosen field. And when you are leaders, you will be entrusted with positions in which you exercise power and privilege. Because of your positions, you will have the power to impact the lives of others.

When you have power, you can use that power to build others up or you can use that power to build up only yourselves, while bringing others down.

Have you heard the saying, "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely?" It was Lord Acton, a British historian, who said this in 1887.

During your four years here, you have seen many examples of this. Trusted servants at all levels of government and public service abusing their trust and engaging in inappropriate activities for their own enrichment. Heads of state in the Middle East who would turn their weapons against their own people instead of trying to lead the people into a better future – even if that means one without their leadership. An Illinois governor who is now sitting in jail because he attempted to sell the power and influence entrusted to him.

These were dramatic abuses of power. But, students, most such abuses you will encounter in your lives are far

less dramatic. And in many cases, it is good people who abuse power. They abuse power because they get closer and closer to an ethical line and suddenly find they have crossed over it.

In the first part of my professional life, I was an attorney. Attorneys are granted significant power by virtue of their license. They can use that power to advance justice or they can use that power to obstruct justice. Too often I observed attorneys that would view lawsuits as a way for their clients to seek revenge, not as a means of pursuing justice. Or those who would write the aggressive letter to intimidate, even though they had little legal basis to do so. These attorneys would rationalize that their aggressive, scorched-earth tactics are justified because they are hired to aggressively pursue their client's interests. But they forget that ends do not always justify the means. And by forgetting that, those charged with creating justice, sometimes pervert justice.

This abuse is not limited to the legal profession. We see it in business also. Last week you might have seen a column in our *Rock Island Argus* newspaper written by Augustana's own Dr. Dan Lee, and titled "Something is out of whack big-time." He wrote about the failed CEO of J.C. Penny whose compensation package was 1,795 times the average wage and benefits of a U.S. department store worker. This CEO may have justified this ridiculously greedy compensation package in his mind because his board awarded it to him and, after all, didn't he have a great pedigree? But does this not sound hollow, especially considering the poor performance of the company during his brief leadership? As a business leader he was entrusted to create prosperity for others, but instead he lined his own pockets.

This type of abuse of power and trust is seen throughout our professions, including in journalism. Our media, sometimes called the Fourth Estate, is charged with shining the light of truth on corruption and injustice. But as journalism has increasingly been confused with entertainment, too often we see reporters justifying a certain political position by slanting the news, not reporting it. And yet these are abuses of power. Often these abuses of power start innocently – shading the facts just a bit, changing the context of quotes and offering unsubstantiated claims as fact. Regardless of the medium, the result is the same: when the power entrusted to shine light on the truth is abused, the truth is distorted.

As Augustana students and soon-to-be graduates, we expect more of ourselves. When you are privileged with power, beware that power can corrupt. Recognize that those who fall to the temptation of abusing power just a bit often find themselves on a slippery slope of abuse that leads very quickly to the bottom.

Students, when you are privileged with power, recognize that it is a gift with which you can empower others. Share that power with which you are entrusted. Use power not to enrich yourself but to empower others. If you enter politics – and I hope for our country's sake some of you will – then when you find yourself in the majority party, reach across the aisle and share power so that you can build compromise for the good of those who elected you. If you become a lawyer, use your power to enable all to enjoy justice. If you are in business, use your power not only for those who own the company, but use your power to benefit your customers, your community and your employees. If you are a journalist, be dogged in shining the light on the facts as they are, not shading or obscuring facts to support your editor's presuppositions. You may, after all, find yourself with an even better story.

But most of all, when you have power, recognize that your Augustana College degree comes with a special responsibility to use that power well and for the benefit of the communities in which you will find yourselves.

That is what your faculty members, coaches, advisors, mentors, and many of the leaders in your own class have done. My hope for you is that should the day arrive when someone tempts you to abuse your power or shade the truth, you will say “No – I can’t do that. I am an Augustana College graduate!” And I have confidence you will.

You are honors students. This means that whether in the classroom, athletic field, performance hall or in any number of student organizations, you have held yourselves to a higher standard. As you commence into new levels of leadership, may you carry these standards with you, to the ultimate benefit of those around you.

Honor students – we are proud of you. Use power to empower. You are the key to a better community, state, nation and world.

Thank you and best wishes.



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