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## Tuesday Reflection: My Secret to Reduce Stress

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## Tuesday Reflection: My secret to reduce stress

### President Steve Bahls' talk at the weekly Tuesday Reflection on Nov. 18, 2014:

I admit it. I love to surround myself with optimistic people. I like people who love life, who seek out the best in people and who are upbeat. I don't like grumblers. I like people who first think about the possibilities, not the problems. And I go out of my way to seek positive, beautiful experiences — whether it is a walk through the Augustana campus every day or summer trips to some of the most beautiful wilderness area in the United States and Canada. This is my form of stress control. I try to surround myself with friends and colleagues who give me energy through their optimism and who do not bring me down due to their negativity. And I try to surround myself with the beauty created by God.

That is why I have always appreciated the scripture that I selected for today. It's a passage that means so much to my wife, Jane, and me that we had it printed and framed, giving it to our oldest son, Dan, upon his confirmation, hoping it would be a guiding principle for his life.

**Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable — if anything is excellent or praiseworthy — think about such things.**

The book of Philipians admonishes us to think positively. It encourages us to be optimists, I believe.

Martin Seligman, in his book, "Learned Optimism," writes that the benefits of optimism are significant — longer life spans, higher achievement, better mental health and less likelihood to give up in the face of adversity.

Seligman argues that being optimistic is a choice. It can be learned. While we can't always control bad events, we can control how we reaction to them. Whether we view the glass as half empty or half full is our choice.

Let me give you an example.

Dan, the son to whom we dedicated today's scripture upon his confirmation, is a 2004 graduate of Williams College, a liberal arts college much like Augustana. Today, he is a legal services lawyer in Springfield, Massachusetts. Dan represents people whose homes are being foreclosed and possibly taken away by banks. It would be easy to focus on the negative in his position. Legal services offices are chronically underfunded — meaning that legal services lawyers have high caseloads and work long hours. Legal services lawyers make only a fraction of the compensation that most other lawyers make.

Dan's cases are against well-funded banks that have enormous resources to put people out of their homes when they don't follow, to the T, the terms of the bank documents. And many of Dan's clients have had a rough life, including unemployment, victims of abuse, dire poverty and serious physical and mental health problems. His job is among the most difficult of any lawyer. But he believes that he is called to help people who are less fortunate, even when they have stumbled in life. And he believes that people who have stumbled do not deserve to be taken advantage of by anyone — including banks.

My son's work inspires me. Daniel chooses to focus on what is true — all people should have safe shelter. What

is honorable — all people are created by God and should be treated with dignity. What is just — powerful interests should not take advantage of the less powerful. What is pure — everyone should have a safe place to raise their family. What is lovely — we can be enriched by all people, even those in poverty. And what is commendable — no one should be unjustly forced from their home. Daniel thinks about excellence in representing his clients, treating each case as the most important. Daniel lives in the central part of the city, not the wealthy suburbs, so he can better understand his clients and share part of their experience.

How does he remain optimistic with such a difficult assignment? He is passionate about his work. He focuses on the good in people. He surrounds himself with co-workers he admires — who focus on the possibilities and not the liabilities. He values things in life that sustain him — his wonderful wife, his family, his church and his community. He dreams a big dream: of a day when no one in Springfield, Massachusetts, will be unjustly forced from their home. And he takes time to recharge — walks in the wood, singing in the church choir and cooking gourmet meals with his wife. He follows the advice of Philippians 4:8. He knows his calling in life.

I've learned a lot from my son Dan about optimism. And students, you've learned a lot from your parents. But in the coming years as you grow in mind, body and spirit, I bet they will learn a lot from you.

Optimistic people, I find, have a real sense of calling. They know their calling in life. They know who they are and they, as Fredrick Buechner would say, recognize "the place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." Students, think about your calling. What is your deep gladness? Is it the deep gladness of relationships with family and friends? Is it the deep gladness of study and work? Is it the deep gladness of faith and spirituality? When you connect that deep gladness with others, you will be focusing on what is good, what is pure, what is right and what is noble.

One final lesson I'd like to pass along: Jane and I enjoy spending our "time to recharge" in the Arctic — camping, rafting and hiking. We've learned a valuable lesson from the Arctic's mosquitos. Arctic mosquitos are not like Midwest mosquitos. They swarm... hundreds of them at once. We've watched people we travel with become obsessed with mosquitos and the annoyances they cause. But we chose to put on our bug shirts and head nets — and enjoy the wonder of the vast open spaces and open-hearted people of the Arctic. We chose to focus on the positives, not the mere annoyances.

Friends, this is my wish for you, that you won't focus on the mosquitos — the petty annoyances of life — but that you will, like my son Daniel, start to find your calling and life's passion during your years in college. May you focus on what is true, what is honorable, what is just, what is pure, what is lovely and what is commendable.

Amen.



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