

*Gathering grain: reflections on vocation, common work and democracy*

LILLY VOCATION LUNCHEON

September 20, 2006

*Narrative quality of vocational experience*

I have two sources for thinking about the narrative quality of vocational experience. Stephen Crites, who wrote in 1971 about the narrative quality of human experience, which, he believed, accounted for the “tensed unity between past, present and future.”

And also, Norman MacLean, who in his “A River Runs Through It” (1976) recounts a conversation between he and his father, a Presbyterian minister, after MacLean’s brother has been killed in a barroom fight.

“You like to tell true stories, don’t you?” he asked, and I answered, “Yes, I like to tell stories that are true.”

Then he asked, “After you have finished your true stories sometime, why don’t you make up a story and the people who go with it?”

“Only then will you understand what happened and why.”

“It is those we live with and love and should know who elude us.”

Vocation, for me, is an unfolding story or narrative that:

- Embraces the rich texture of human experience and helps us understand what happened and why
- Helps to articulate the intersection of commitments, values and relationships (the links to the stories of others)
- Offers the opportunity to recount the history of my life – naming the past, understanding the present, imagining the future – here is where I find hope!

Here, then, is a brief story that helps me make sense of my vocation – how my work relates to broader goods and purposes. All of us need words and ideas and values that bring us back to why we do what we do, who we do it for, and what difference it makes.

*Gathering grain*

I remember a Saturday morning some 35 years ago, when my father, a Lutheran minister, and I hopped into a borrowed pick-up truck to commence a day of work on behalf of the Church World Service’s CROP program. Though most of you probably know CROP today through its annual “walks,” in rural areas CROP has long sponsored the grain contribution effort we helped with that day.

For eight or nine hours that Saturday, my dad and I drove from farm to farm in our southern Wisconsin community gathering contributions of grain from generous farmers. When our pick-up truck was full, we would drive to the local grain elevator to unload. At

the end of the day, our various contributions were totaled by the elevator operator and the contributed grain was transported to the Church World Service barge or flatbed, ultimately ending up in Africa or Asia as part of U.S. efforts to alleviate world hunger.

On that Saturday, my dad and I were grain-gatherers. Along with the grain donors (the farmers), the grain-storers and counters (the elevator operator), the grain brokers (Church World Service), and the grain recipients (the hungry of the world), we participated in the common work of a community where each member did his/her part, helping to relieve a need, building a healthier world.

It is a simple picture of a complex set of dynamics. It is, however, a picture that defines who I am and what it is I care about in my work. I was called to be a grain-gatherer. I live out that vocation every day in my professional life. From my early experience, however, I know well that my work makes no sense outside of the community of grain donors, counters, brokers, and recipients, who share my commitment to a more humane and responsible world.

### *Common work*

It is about common work—celebrating all of the ways in which we join together to live out our most deeply held commitments and values.

- Common work that is grounded in common needs and aspirations.
- Common work that reflects the labors of love.
- Common work that is a democratic social ethic – a way of living our lives together.

What are some of the vocational lessons I learned some 35 years ago about common work, democracy and the role of education that are relevant to my work here at Augsburg?

### *To love as an amateur*

Grain gatherers are amateurs!

I love to learn and live as an amateur. I love to embrace the adventures of human history and experience; the riches of science, literature, philosophy, and the arts; and the wonders of social and cultural studies as someone who is learning anew, whose mind and spirit are being enriched by the wisdom of the ages and the intellectual challenges of the future. I love to find, as Parker Palmer so aptly phrases it, “the grace of great things” that comes in the process of joining in a community of teaching and learning.

Liberal arts colleges are at their best when they are characterized by the amateur love of learning, the love of seeking truth, of debating theories, of exploring scenarios, of telling good stories, of working together to address problems and meet needs. The genuine seeker – the authentic student – loves for the love of it, loves as an amateur loves. This, of course, runs counter to much of the way our society has come to view education, especially higher education with its preparation for life as an expert, a professional.

Wendell Berry, the Kentucky farmer and poet and essayist has written persuasively about the links between the liberal and domestic arts, calling to mind a connection in our experience at places such as Augsburg between what we learn and what we do. (Addams experience at Hull-House and as the sanitary commissioner).

Here, we learn to live as theologian Frederick Buechner has taught us about genuine vocation – at the intersection of my deepest gladness and the world’s greatest need. Here we find that remarkable place where my vocation and avocation are one. Here, we love and live as amateurs, those who know they have so much more to learn.

*To love as a stranger*

Grain gatherers do their work among and for strangers.

I love democracy and all its messiness. I love to think about democracy, to talk about it, to practice it – and to encourage others to do the same. It is one of the reasons I most wanted to be a college president, because I believe that colleges – especially small liberal arts colleges – are the best places to learn to be good citizens of a democracy. Here, we learn to love as strangers.

This is sometimes difficult for Americans to grasp about life in a democracy. The genius of a democracy is that people from different walks of life – different ethnic, religious, economic, and geographic backgrounds – must learn to navigate their lives together in society. We are strangers to each other and the needs of strangers on what Jane Addams called the “thronged and mixed” road of democracy demand our attention as we make our best efforts to give voice to those needs.

Our attempts to deny that we are strangers to each other ultimately mean that we deny the reality of the world we inhabit. The historian and journalist, Michael Ignatieff, eloquently reminds us in his *The Needs of Strangers*,

We need justice, we need liberty, and we need as much solidarity as can be reconciled with justice and liberty. But we also need, as much as anything else, language adequate to the times we live in. We need to see how we live now and we can only see with words and images which leave us no escape into nostalgia for some other time and place.

Colleges need to be places that prepare all of us – and particularly our students – for the times in which we live. We need to learn to love as strangers, as those who look out at this world of difference, this world of otherness, and embrace that difference with all the resources of our hearts and minds.

Abigail and I have traveled to Vietnam and China on remarkable journeys to find our children, Thomas and Maya. Our unbounded joy for our children is enriched by the experiences we had together in their home countries, with the people who raised them, learning about the history and culture of strange lands. I still am still learning to live with these wonderful strangers who have been entrusted to us, as parents and stewards and family.

I want all of us to hunger for such experiences, to see them as integral to our liberal arts education. I want us to work together to offer our students what philosopher and classicist, Martha Nussbaum, has called a liberal education that cultivates humanity – that teaches critical examination of oneself and one’s traditions, that encourages us to recognize the links we have to other human beings because of recognition and concern, and that helps to cultivate our narrative imaginations, our capacities of empathy and creativity and understanding of difference. Our capacity to love as strangers.

*To love as a patriot*

Grain gathering builds community – calls people together to be nourished, to be well, to be together at table, in fellowship – and together we make the world better, more humane and just, more faithful.

Communities are awash in rituals and traditions and symbols that clearly mark out our histories, our values, our aspirations. Joining a community (like a college) is an act of faith, faith that this institution will keep its promises, live up to its mission and values, teach me well. In the relationships we develop with our communities, we learn to love as patriots.

To love as a patriot is slippery territory, I recognize. Surely none of us believes that blind allegiance to a college (or a family or a country) – the poet Robert Frost’s trio of patriotic options – is acceptable, and yet there is this deep affection, this loyalty and dedication, this abiding belief in the work of our communities that we must learn if we are to truly join.

And yet, communities go astray. Communities lose their way. They break their promises. What then are we left to love? Some golden era of days gone by, some moral or spiritual value that remains in name alone, some sense of promise as yet unfulfilled. Or perhaps we learn to love, as political ethicist (and Jane Addams biographer) Jean Bethke Elshtain has so aptly put it, as *chastened patriots*. We learn to be realistic about how a community (like a family and a college and a country) can make mistakes and what our responsibility is to critique, to effect change, to disobey civilly if needed, so that the community we love might once again live up to the trust we have put in her.

A friend of mine who counts herself a student of American college histories recently suggested to me that the many colleges she has studied often find that founding values get pushed aside – sometimes for economic or market reasons, often through neglect, maybe in attempts to keep up with current fads and trends. What she finds, however, is that even when the core values seem lost from view or influence, they are always there, perhaps below the surface like the “second languages” of covenant and stewardship and vocation that sociologist Robert Bellah has suggested still define our American democracy in important ways.

To love as a chastened patriot is to be realistic about how things go wrong – to hold each other accountable for missteps, to take appropriate responsibility – but then to fight like hell to make things right, to get things back on track, to help make sense now of the values and aspirations for the communities, the colleges, we learned to love, perhaps long ago.

And in the face of that wonderful, albeit messy, reality, we must name a future grounded in the promises we made long ago to our students and to the world – come here, learn to think and write and serve, and then go out and change the world. Countless others have done just that here. As chastened patriots, can we hope for anything less for those who will come to join this college in the years ahead? Changing the world is what it means to love as a chastened patriot!

Those of us who love our college as chastened patriots are emboldened to find the wisdom and truth that is embodied in relationships of unconditional love, relationships that accept reality and are marked by forgiveness and empathy, relationships that last a lifetime, relationships that change us forever, relationships we discover in the colleges we join.

The story of Augsburg College now intersects with my story – just as it does for each of you. Our vocations join together in this place – as amateurs, strangers and patriots, engaged in the common work of education and democracy – and I could not be happier or more privileged to gather grain here.