

Lena Meyer Lecture
Lutheran Educational Conference of North America
Ann M. Svennungsen
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I'm honored to stand before you today to present the Lena Meyer Lecture. I have to admit I've wondered just some about why I was chosen – one of the greenest presidents in the room – sort of like sending in a rookie for the big game.

However, I can say that I'm a learner, very actively learning a new role. For instance, in the past 8 months, I've learned more acronyms than I ever thought possible. I didn't know the meaning of IPEDS, SACS, CIC, NSYE, QEP, NAICU, CUPAHR, CLA, UCAN. I think I'm going to develop a Periodic Table for the acronyms in higher ed.

Still, that's just one type of learning. And we're here to talk about the vast, wonderful, formative learning that occurs on our campuses. But, before I get into that, I want to tell a story – somewhat relevant. I first told this story when I emceed a fundraiser at Oak Grove Lutheran High School in Fargo – where Paul Dovre, then Concordia, Moorhead's President, and Concordia's Board Chair, Ron Offutt, were being honored. So, the college president Dovre and the board chair Offutt are out on a camping trip in Montana.

In the middle of the night, Dovre awakens Offutt and says, "look at the stars, aren't they beautiful. We can learn so many things from the stars: astronomically, we know it's summer because, otherwise, we wouldn't see that constellation; theologically, we know that God is in his heavens, all's right with the world. Meteorologically, we know that we're going to have clear skies tomorrow for our rafting trip. Then Dovre

turns to Offutt and asks, “What do you learn from looking at the stars? Offutt replies, “I’ve learned that somebody stole our tent.”

We’re here to talk learning – especially the kind of learning that occurs in Lutheran colleges. Some of you know that my inauguration ceremony was held just two weeks ago. We commissioned a hymn for that event – a hymn you have before you. It provides a wonderful mission statement for our work. If you permit me, I would like to sing first stanza, then read stanzas 2-3, and ask you to read stanza 4 with me as a sort of prayer:

O Fire of Love, Creator of all splendor,
In you we live, in you we burn and grow;
Instill in us a mind intent on wonder
And by your image drawn to learn and know.

O Fire of Truth, O Firstborn of creation,
You free, O Christ, all mortals from night's hold;
Enlighten our intent with bold compassion,
That in your name we work for all the world.

O Fire of Life, O Spark of understanding,
You call the smith, the scribe, the bard, to rise;
Inspire all craft, in love God's sway expanding;
No task profane, before God's knowing eyes.

Rejoice in God, who hallows each endeavor;
Exult in God, who kindles just desire,
That earthly craft and mind of Christ together
May hearts arouse and harvest fire from fire.¹

Commissioned for the inauguration of President Ann M. Svennungsen
at Texas Lutheran University,
February 1, 2008

Based on Martin Luther, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Desmond Tutu,
1 Corinthians 2:6-16, Colossians 1:15-18, Acts 17:28,
and the motto of Texas Lutheran University,
Veritas Christi libertat Homines.

¹ Susan Palo Cherwien (text) and Renè Clausen (music), “O Fire of Love,” (2008).

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At my first meeting of Lutheran college presidents, Dr. Stan Olson, ELCA Executive Director for Vocation and Education, shared a wonderful statement of mission – a sort of stair-step poem:

Because of Christ, the World

Because of the World, Vocation

Because of Vocation, Education

(explicate)

It is good – and it is important for the church to be involved in education. Maybe I'm biased, but I believe that education permeates each phrase in that statement. Education is needed to understand the world, to understand this context for Christ's redeeming work; and education is needed to help us discern our vocations, to prepare for our vocations, and to be lifelong learners so we might flourish in our vocations.

So, let's start with the world – what can we learn about it – what are the realities we face – the issues our students will encounter?

Sociologist, Sharon Daloz Parks says, “we live in a cusp time...a turning point in the flow of history, shaped by new technologies that have spawned accelerated, permanent change and unprecedented conditions prompting reconsideration of every feature of life.”²

We've moved from an industrial economy to a new knowledge-based economy. And, that knowledge base expands by the second. Indeed, it's estimated that new technical information doubles every two years. As one educator put it, “we're preparing

² Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 8-9.

students for jobs that don't yet exist, for technologies not yet invented, to solve problems we don't even know about."³ Adaptability is the key in our world and its workforce – the ability to acquire new knowledge often and quickly. Given that, experts suggest that about 80 percent of jobs will require higher education – 80 percent.⁴

Further, with companies outsourcing, insourcing and offshoring, our graduates will compete for jobs all across this flattened world. Thomas Friedman remembers his parents telling him as a child: "finish your supper, people in China are starving." Now, Friedman tells his own children, "finish your homework, people in China are starving for your jobs."⁵

In addition, we face an amazingly complex set of moral issues. Robert Franklin, President of Morehouse College and Christian ethicist, lists some of the questions we face: Who should live? Who should be born? Who should die and when? Who is truly...human in the first place? Who should be permitted to marry whom? How far should science be permitted to go to prolong life or to enhance life or even duplicate a person? When is war just? What claims do future generations have upon the choices of those alive today? What claims do other species and the natural world have upon the attention of humans? What claims do people living in poverty have upon those who have prospered?⁶

These are multi-dimensional issues that require the best thinking from all of us – it will require right brain and left brain, all the intelligences – our best of creative thinking,

³ Dr. Beheruz N. Sethna, "Implications of a Flattening World for American Higher Education," Southern Association of Colleges and Schools-Commission on Colleges 2007 Annual Meeting (New Orleans, LA), December 10, 2007.

⁴ Commissioner Ray Paredes, Texas Higher Education Luncheon, October 30, 2007.

⁵ Thomas Friedman, *The World Is Flat* (New York, NY: Picador, 2007), 237.

⁶ Robert M. Franklin, "Church and State; Friends and Foes in the Public Square," Downtown Connector (Atlanta, GA), October 8, 2005.

curiosity, critical inquiry and imagination. We need a whole ecology of learners to address the issues that face us.

Yet, at the same time as we need *learned people of character* --- we are **losing** the very institutions and relationships that provide such formation. We know more about the next American Idol than about our own grandmothers. Having just lived in the very urban area of Atlanta, I am more and more convinced about the ease with which we can live anonymously in this country – without tending to any relationships. Just give me the internet, Tivo, the remote control, and there’s enough to fill the day without the messiness of real people. The philosopher, Albert Borgmann, tells about an average evening for an adult in this country: “You come home from work, frazzled and tired. You get some food from the frig and put it in the microwave. You eat in front of the TV, watching whatever’s on. You go to the computer to finish some work, surf the net, play a new web-based game, and call it a day. You haven’t really sinned. You haven’t coveted your neighbor’s spouse, you haven’t stolen anything. You’ve simply retreated into the “cocoon of autonomy.” And, it’s hard to encounter the world – to meet God or neighbor - from inside a cocoon.⁷

But that’s what many Americans are doing. We know the research. Our participation in regular face-to-face meetings has declined dramatically. PTA, Scouts, labor unions, religious organizations – decline has occurred across the board, except for groups like the AARP, where there’s membership but no meetings – no relationships.

Yet, we hope for people of character – graduates who seek truth, beauty and goodness, who know the value of hard work, delayed gratification and taking

⁷ Albert Borgmann, *Power Failure: Christianity in the Culture of Technology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2003) 114.

responsibility for their actions. And, when we think about our world, we hope and pray we'll encounter people whose formation has made them people of character. Yes, I want my doctor to be a good technician – but also someone who can offer wisdom when I face a wrenching medical decision. I want my child's teacher to know calculus and also to be compassionate – to be there when the hard knocks of high school take their toll. I want business leaders committed to the bottom line – but also passionate about just wages and sustainability. We want people of character to lead us in the amazingly complex issues we face – global warming, genetic cloning, negotiating our role as the world's only superpower, addressing terrorism and the poverty and ignorance that lure people into it. We need good and righteous people – servant leaders.

Yes, such character formation begins in childhood. But, today, many argue formation must continue intentionally through the college years. Sociologist Robert Bellah, who I believe once addressed this group, speaks from his lengthy tenure as professor of University of California, Berkeley, saying that he and his colleagues have seen “a remarkable lack of what social scientists calls ‘cultural capital’ in the students coming from secondary school.” He adds, “whether we like it or not, or even whether we understand it or not, formation is more than ever a central aspect of college education today...”⁸

That is the world our students come from – the world we send our graduates forth to serve. It's flat and changing and complicated and equipped with enough technology and entertainment that you can live your whole life in a cocoon of autonomy.

⁸ Robert N. Bellah, "Education for Justice and the Common Good," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*, 25, Spring (2004), 32.

So, one could argue, perhaps, that our students may come to our schools with less preparation to address the question: How God calling **me** to be a part of God's healing work? Where do I fit in the ecology of partners that God is calling? No one can do it all. And, without a sense of particular calling, we despair that we will make any difference – we're paralyzed by the terrifying vastness of the issues.

Education is needed to understand the world – **and** to understand our part in the world's healing. Our schools provide the best context for that type of vocational education.

In one of the most quoted definitions of vocation, Frederick Buechner writes: "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." Earlier, he said (I quote) : "The kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work that (a) you need most to do and that (b) the world most needs to have done. If you really get a kick out of your work, you've probably met requirement (a) but if your work is writing deodorant commercials, chances are you've missed requirement (b)."⁹

Though it's hard to beat the eloquence of Buechner, I'm also rather fond of a definition for vocation put forth by a small group from Gustavus in St. Peter. As they were preparing to develop the program for students to explore vocation, they developed this definition. "We understand vocation to be a sense of responsibility encompassing multiple areas of one's life (work, family, citizenship, etc.) so that the person lives life in such a way as to benefit the community."¹⁰

⁹ Frederick Buechner, *Listening to Your Life* (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 1992) 185.

¹⁰ Darrel Jodock, "Vocational Discernment—A Comprehensive College Program," ELCA Conference on the Vocation of a Lutheran College (Valparaiso, IN) August 2, 2001.

A sense of Responsibility – encompassing multiple areas of life – benefiting community. It's not as poetic as Buechner, but it has a bit more room in it. Further, it's pretty Lutheran. Luther was always pushing Christians back into the community. "If your town needs a mayor," he said, "become a mayor. If it needs a school, help build a school." What action will benefit the community? How can I help my neighbor? Vocation is a sense of responsibility encompassing multiple areas of your life, so that you live to benefit the community.

So, how does a person discern these things? There isn't a blue print, a road map, some sort of Robert's Rules of Order for vocational discernment. Yet, I would suggest that, fundamentally, discernment comes in the context of relationships: primarily our relationship with God (formed by weekly worship, prayer and meditation, immersion in God's word), our relationships in community (with its mentors and models and prayer partners), and our relationship with the world – particularly the poor, the vulnerable, and the oppressed.

From their awareness of these realities, the Gustavus program developed a list of seven experiences that they believe are fundamental for enhancing a person's sense of vocation.

1. A sense of connectedness with others. Any experience which enhances that sense of being "nested" in a larger whole.
2. A safe place in which to consider alternatives. During their deliberations, the Gustavus committee met with Sharon Daloz Parks, co-author of *Common Fire: Leading Lives of Commitment in a Complex World*, a study of 100 persons from across the U.S. whose lives exhibit a commitment to the betterment of their

communities. Many of the people interviewed spoke of their dinner table as a safe place where they explored political, religious and other issues. Others told about grandfather who offered a safe place for conversation while baking doughnuts every Friday night, or a grandmother who would talk with her grandchild while chucking peas.

3. Modeling. Hearing other people talk seriously about responsibility, about significant community matters.
4. Mentoring. Being asked the right questions by others, questions which prompt thinking about vocation. Several years ago, a Harvard professor volunteered to serve as mentor for a young African American student. When the student asked what a mentor was, the professor, in true Harvard form, said, "I care about you enough to sacrifice some of my precious time to meet with you on a regular basis, and you promise not to make a single important decision without asking me first."
5. "A constructive engagement with otherness." The formulation comes from the authors of *Common Fire* and entails discovering a bond of humanity across some social boundary. For one woman, a sense of vocation emerged when she visited a nearby prison and discovered a common bond of humanity with its inmates. She now runs a large program that brings teachers and counselors into the prison to provide opportunities for those inmates. This is not just exposure, but involvement, something critical to overcome the tendency toward tribalism.
6. A sense of agency and influence. Some experiences which affirm: "What I do really matters – it can make a difference."

7. Religious reflection on questions of meaning and purpose in life.¹¹

There's a lot about relationships – about community in those seven steps.

And, unlike bigger schools, our colleges are communities – where we actually get to know one another by name. The Harvard professor, Robert Kegan, has studied educational institutions throughout the centuries. He writes, “if I had to summarize ...I would say people grow best where they continually experience an ingenious blend of support and challenge.”¹² A blend of support and challenge.

Well, that's what we seek to provide – support and challenge – and people who know students well enough to provide the right amount of each – teachers, coaches, conductors, staff, teammates, friends – who can sense when folks are down and give them encouragement, who can see when they are slacking and hold them accountable, who can see gifts they don't see yet see in themselves.

I came to college with only a hint of what I might do with my life – becoming a pastor was the furthest thing from my mind.

I came following a social script about what I should do with my life. I left with a **vocation** – a deep sense that God had given me gifts to be used for the common good.

My college years were among the most transformative of my entire life. The classes, the music and arts, the athletics, the mentors among faculty and administration – all shaped my life in ways too many to name. They saw things in me that I had never seen myself – they opened my imagination – inspired my confidence. Such mentors continued through seminary and my professional life and growth – some of them sit here in this room.

¹¹ Jaddock, “Vocational Discernment.”

¹² Robert Kegan, *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1994)

Clearly, a small, liberal arts college can provide many of the formative opportunities for vocational discernment that I've mentioned to this point. But, we are also communities of *faith*, approaching the work of education in distinctive ways. We're Lutheran schools – and that's not just about the church that supports us or the proportion of Lutheran faculty or students who come here. It's about a philosophy that guides us – a theology that gives shape to our community. And, that theology may best be articulated by the hymn we just sang. Created in the image of God, all humans are drawn to learn and to know. That's who we are. Made by the God of wonder, the God of all creation, we are created to be curious, to grow in body, mind and spirit. And, the message of Christ is that, no matter what our past, no matter what darkness we've encountered, we can receive a new beginning. The truth of Christ can set us free. For each one of us is precious to God – created to experience the fullness of life – to learn and to grow.

But, our growth is not just for ourselves. We're created in the image of the compassionate God – the One who seeks wholeness for all the world. And we trust that each is called – each given vocations to further God's healing work. One of my favorite phrases in the hymn is: "Inspire all craft, in love God's sway expanding; No task profane, before God's knowing eyes."¹³

A Lutheran university is shaped by a particular philosophy. We're not a secular university, we're not fundamentalists. We believe that faith has "something to say about every aspect of human life and study,"¹⁴ but that faith does not claim a technical authority within any particular discipline. We're not looking for a Christian chemistry –

¹³ Palo and Clausen, "O Fire Of Love."

¹⁴ Harold Ditmanson, Introduction to *Faith, Learning, and the Church College* (Northfield, MN: St. Olaf College, 1989) 7.

we're looking for the best chemistry, the most rigorous, objective and thorough. But, we're also looking for opportunities where our chemists can be in dialogue with our philosophers and theologians – preparing graduates for that moment when they counsel the family of a dying person about prolonging life support.

Further, the many opportunities for worship provide the context for God's calling made known through prayer and scripture.

That doesn't mean that our schools are only for Lutherans – only for Christians. By no means. Yet, for all students, the study of religion is significant. Most would agree that there's no way to understand our world today without understanding the plurality of religions that shape it. As Martin Marty has put it, "A church-related university that takes its heritage seriously and still welcomes diversity and pluralism – provides a context that will prepare students well for participating in the public world of differences and yet show them that they can hold on to their particular faith."¹⁵ This may be a challenge – but also a wonderful way to prepare students for our pluralistic world, where so much of the world's troubles arise from religious conflict. We hope that at our schools, students can experience a community where people are both deeply rooted in faith – and also deeply respectful of others.

In arguing for the church's role in education, Joseph Sittler, in his amazing eloquence, once said: If we're called to partner with God in the redemption of the entire world, we can only "unfold to the dimensions we have dreamed; we can only do what

¹⁵ Martin E. Marty, *Education, Religion and the Common Good: Advancing a Distinctly American Conversation About Religion's Role in Our Shared Life* (San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass, Inc., 2000) 98.

we have envisioned as possible. The church must help people dream the shape and substance of the world's redemption..."¹⁶

We don't just come up with this ability to dream and imagine and address complex issues. We're not born with it. We learn, we grow – and we do that best in a community of support and challenge – a community like a Lutheran liberal arts university.

The poet, Mary Oliver, concludes one of her poems with the question:

Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?¹⁷

We, in this room, believe that our colleges are the perfect place to explore such a question – the perfect place to learn. And, we in this room, believe that leading such communities of faith and learning is the way we are privileged to use our God-given wild and precious life. May God bless, guide, strengthen, encourage and keep us all in the calling we share. Thank you very much.

¹⁶ Joseph Sittler, *Faith, Learning, and the Church College* (Northfield, MN: St. Olaf College, 1989) 13.

¹⁷ Mary Oliver, *New & Selected Poems*, "The Summer Day" (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1992)