

**Augustana College
Chapel of Reconciliation**

Remembering and Reconciling

President Rob Oliver

9 October 2009

The students, faculty, and staff of Augustana College have gathered each fall for some 149 years. The energy and excitement of coming together is something we always look forward to. But we also recognize that our excitement is a bit curtailed by thoughts of those who we know are missing. This year we acknowledge the loss of Jenna Van Buren, who would have been returning as a sophomore with us were it not for an automobile accident near her home in Wilmar, MN. Similarly, members of our community grieve the sudden loss of recent graduate Bryan Prairie, who was killed in an accident in Minneapolis just as our fall semester was beginning. Clearly these are tragedies which intrude into our lives with a sharp and painful edge. We grieve for the families and friends and try to remember those lost as best we can. At the same time we fight to reconcile the thoughts that swirl about in our minds—Why did this have to happen?

Just as our last spring semester came to a close, Angie and I had the opportunity to travel to the Nebraska sand hill country to participate in a very moving experience. It is one of those events in life that leaves one forever changed and grateful for the experience. It is a long drive home from Anselmo, NE, but Angie and I filled most of the trip talking about our experience and the people we shared it with. It had to do with an event that happened four decades ago.

This experience is a reminder that every day we encounter others who may be navigating through their daily lives in an apparent state of happiness, while under the surface are shouldering the weight of a pain that never leaves. I have come to realize that those who have experienced loss—and it is nearly every one of us—incorporate that loss into their being, while the memory, the pain, the challenge of moving on, never fully leaves a person. Even after the passage of many years, the experience of loss remains close to the surface and can be summoned by events of the day. Sometimes it is a welcomed intrusion – a happy memory – while at others perhaps opens a wound that one would just as soon leave undisturbed.

Particularly when the loss comes unexpectedly, without warning, and outside of the normal course of life's expectations, who among us would not experience a range of emotions that naturally includes deep sadness, but also at times extreme anger—indeed anger at God—for "letting this happen." How does one reconcile all of this?

Some forty years ago, Augustana College and six families associated with Augie went through such a gut-wrenching tragedy. On January 11, 1969, a small airplane carrying two Augustana faculty members and four very talented members of the Augustana debate team was caught up in the terrible fury of a winter storm while returning home from a debate competition in Colorado Springs. This was the kind of storm that most of us know about—the kind where you know with certainty that you dare not be caught outside in it.

Unfortunately this small airplane became snared by the swirling winds and was overpowered by the forces of nature. When it was finally found, the wreckage indicated that the small craft came apart while still in the air as it was ravaged by the storm and the speed of its unfortunate descent. The disintegrating airplane collided with the earth so hard that its engine was buried deep into the sand and parts were strewn across an area spanning more than a quarter of a mile.

Mercifully the passengers died immediately and therefore did not suffer further in the raging blizzard. Killed in the crash were Augustana students Joyce Estwick, a senior from Milan, MN; sophomore Linda Heidemann of Rapid City; and two first-year students, Alan Jensen, from Pipestone, MN, and James Houske from Shawnee Mission, KS. Also killed were their debate coach, Augustana faculty member K. Don Tibbetts, and Frayne Anderson, director of the Mikkelsen Library and the craft's pilot. This was an immensely talented group of students, who competed at the highest level of collegiate forensic competition, and who had even defeated a team from Yale University earlier that season. It was said that Tibbetts and Anderson were enthusiastic mentors who challenged, supported, and encouraged these young debaters to be their best.

As quickly as it had fallen from the sky, the Piper Cherokee aircraft was covered over by the wildly drifting snow. The storm continued on for days afterward, mounding up snow and complicating search efforts. After the storm subsided and was replaced by the bright, sunny, yet frigid January days that we also know well, the multitude of searchers who sought to find the plane were unable to do so. Augustana President Charles Balcer sent thousands of letters to each and every landowner in the farm and ranch country of Nebraska and South Dakota along the route, asking them to undertake a search of their farms and ranches. He received numerous responses to his plea, but in spite of the landowner's efforts and those of law enforcement agencies, National Guard members, local citizens, and hundreds of Augie students who participated in the frantic efforts to find their classmates, they remained missing.

One can only imagine that the agony of knowing—yet not knowing—was simply dreadful for all involved, and only served to compound their grief.

As spring approached a pair of coyote hunters noticed that their dogs had become unusually agitated by something that only they could sense. As the hunters crested one of the thousands of small sand hills, they came upon the wreckage, and immediately knew what they had found. After summoning the authorities, first the bodies, then the wreckage were carefully and respectfully recovered, to be followed by ceremonies by each of the grieving families whose worst assumptions were now fully confirmed.

Surely one lesson from this incident is that closure from such a tragedy is hard to come by, comes agonizingly slowly, and never fully. Families were left devastated, living with an indescribable emptiness, going through the daily motions of life numbed by loss. One can only surmise that they continued to suffer, and were forever changed by this tragedy.

So here we were, forty years later, summoned by the daughter of Frayne Anderson, to join in the first-ever gathering of surviving family members at the actual site of the crash. You see, the six families had never come together, because with the passage of the 74 days from the accident to recovery they had all dispersed from the common thread that held them together, Augustana College. Augustana was associated with this accident, and was something to be moved beyond and away from. Although Alan Jensen's younger sister had been accepted to Augustana, after the accident she simply could not bring herself to enroll here.

Who would have guessed that forty years later the wife of the current President of Augustana College—yes, my wife Angie—would have been connected to not only one, but two of the families of this tragedy. Angie grew up in Pipestone, MN the home of Alan Jensen, one of the students who perished in the crash. She remembers playing with the Jensen kids who lived just up the street that she walked on her way to school. Although Angie's family had moved to Rapid City the summer before the accident, she remembers hearing from her parents about the tragedy and how it had rocked the Jensen family. Some years later at the University of South Dakota, Angie would befriend a classmate, Heidi Anderson, daughter of Frayne Anderson. Angie came to know that Heidi had lost her Dad, but did not know the details and certainly could never dream that this past and future connection to Augustana might occur. An unlikely connection to not one, but two of six families: For those of you inclined toward mathematics, what do you suppose the odds of this intersection of possibilities would be?

So we were invited to come, and to represent Augustana College, the seventh family forever changed by this accident, to visit the site of the crash, to meet those involved, and to memorialize its fortieth anniversary. I must admit to some reservations, and even to having thoughts about the inconvenience of venturing to Nowhere, Nebraska on a Saturday that I would have preferred to spend in other pursuits. Yet, out of respect for the families involved, a sense of duty to represent Augustana, and the coincidence of this

connection to Angie, we felt compelled to go. I should also mention that Heidi is an incredibly convincing person when she calls you on the phone and shares her anticipation of your coming!

We woke up on a beautiful spring morning in Broken Bow, NE, and traveled for an hour or so to a ranch house out in the sand hills, near Anselmo. From there we all clamored into four wheel drive vehicles and ventured out into the vast and rolling hills in a caravan led by the ranch's owner.

We traveled slowly, as there were no roads, and the terrain was challenging. We drove for nearly forty five minutes before finally coming to a spot where the vehicles came to rest, and we quietly exited. We could sense that we were a very long way from civilization.

People wandered a bit, some in small groups, some alone. The morning was absolutely beautiful and eerily quiet; there was an awkward seriousness about our being there that was undeniable. There was a small crater evident in the terrain that was explained as the sight of the main point of impact where the engine was later extracted from the soft ground. Other places were described as the resting places for the passengers, and for other significant parts of the airplane. After about ten minutes, a small commotion arose—a member of the Jensen family had found a small twisted piece of aluminum, which was confirmed by the Broken Bow airport official to be a piece of the wreckage. Forty years later...go figure. Deb Jensen slipped it into her pocket with a quiet satisfaction of somehow having made a mysterious connection to her long-lost big brother.

We circled around this dent in the earth for a small ceremony, where six crosses and six roses were laid on the ground one at a time, each accompanied by a remembrance either read or spontaneously shared about their loved one. Heidi Anderson offered a short excerpt (in English) from a Navaho prayer, clearly unaware that one of Alan Jensen's sisters was married to a Navaho tribal member. When Jana Jensen stepped forward to speak that *same prayer* in its entirety in the Navaho language, it was a wonderful coincidence and a moment that unexpectedly bound them, and us all, together. I spoke on behalf of Augustana, offering words which acknowledged their estrangement from Augustana College and inviting them to know of the art piece on the wall of our newly renovated library by Augie alum Warren Hanson, a classmate to those lost in the crash. This piece is a part of a beautifully crafted work called "The Next Place," and was given by Warren as a memorial to those lost in the accident. Readings from his book are a part of our service today.

To conclude the service, the son of one of the coyote hunters stepped to the top of the hill and played taps on his bugle—it was solemn and beautiful, and brought tears to many eyes. We all stood in silence for a while, then hugs and handshakes came, and slowly voices pierced the silence... and eventually, after a long while... even some laughter came; perhaps another step in the long journey toward that fleeting objective of closure.

Somehow that day a long-awaited reconciliation happened between those families, and between them and Augustana College. Also the people of Broken Bow and Anselmo were reconciled to the survivors of these strangers who had tragically come to rest in *their* sand hills. People acknowledged not only their own individual loss, but the losses of the others; the enormity of it all taken together as well as in its individual parts.

Before leaving, we gathered some of the sandy soil into jars, one of which I brought home. Shortly we will process outside by the trees planted to honor those lost, to join this soil with the grounds of Augustana College, so that it, and we, might be reconciled to the events of the past and to our futures.

As we travel through this life, and experiences add to our resume and our memories, I encourage us all to become more aware of the fact that many among us live with an element of grief, some just below the surface. The shock of loss of a loved one never fully leaves us, particularly if the event is one such as this, so sudden and which cuts short the promise of those so young.

To all who these days carry grief in your hearts for someone no longer with us, let us pause to remember, take steps to reconcile with others, and with God, and speak words of love and encouragement. Grief is a heavy burden. It is an overwhelming load when borne alone. I believe the lesson here is to acknowledge the great privilege we have to know and care for each other, and to be there to help bear grief when it penetrates the lives of others. It will not make it go completely but can help everyone cope, and encourages life to proceed to honor those we have lost.

Amen

October 9, 2009

**The Next Place of a Journey:
Remembering the Past, Reconciling in Christ,
Creating Anew in God's future**

**In memory of Frayne Anderson, K. Don Tibbetts,
Joyce Estwick, Linda Heidemann,
Alan Jensen and James Houske**

October 9, 2009

The Next Place of a Journey: Remembering the Past, Reconciling in Christ, Creating Anew in God's future (adapted from Warren Hanson's *The Next Place*)

Prelude

"Shepherd Me O God"

Welcome and Announcements

Invocation and Prayer:

Reading: "The next place that I go will be as peaceful and familiar as a sleepy summer Sunday and a sweet, untroubled mind. And yet. . . it won't be anything like any place I've ever been. . . or seen. . . or even dreamed of in the place I leave behind. I won't know where I'm going, and I won't know where I've been as I tumble through the always and look back toward the when. I'll glide beyond the rainbows. I'll drift above the sky. I'll fly into the wonder, without ever wondering why. I won't remember getting there. Somehow I'll just arrive. But I'll know that I belong there and will feel much more alive than I have ever felt before. I will be absolutely free of the things that I held onto that were holding onto me."

Reading:

Colossians 1:15–20

Homily

Rob Oliver, President, Augustana College

Hymn

"Jesus, Remember Me"

ELW #616

Reading: "The next place that I go will be so quiet and so still that the whispered song of sweet belonging will rise up to fill the listening sky with joyful silence, and with unheard harmonies of music made by no one playing, like a hush upon a breeze. There will be no room for darkness in that place of living light, where an ever-dawning morning pushes back the dying night. The very air will fill with brilliance, as the brightly shining sun and the moon and half a million stars are married into one."

Reading

Revelation 21:1–4

Hymn

"Jesus, Remember Me"

ELW 616

Reading: "The next place that I go won't really be a place at all. There won't be any seasons—winter, summer, spring or fall—nor a Monday, nor a Friday, nor December, nor July. The seconds will be standing still while hours hurry by. I will not be a boy or girl, a woman or a man. I'll simply be, just simply, me. Nor worse or better than. My skin will not be dark or light. I won't be fat or tall. The body I once lived in won't be a part of me at all. I will finally be perfect. I will be without a flaw. I will never make one more mistake, or break the smallest law. And the me that was impatient, or was angry, or unkind, will simply be a memory. The me I left behind. I will travel empty-handed. There is not a single thing I have collected in my life that I would ever want to bring except the love of those who loved me, and the warmth of those who cared."

The happiness and memories and magic that we shared. Though I will know the joy of solitude. . . I'll never be alone. I'll be embraced by all the family and friends I've ever known. Although I might not see their faces, all our hearts will beat as one, and the circle of our spirits will shine brighter than the sun. I will cherish all the friendship I was fortunate to find, the love and all the laughter in the place I leave behind. All these good things will go with me. They will make my spirit glow. And that light will shine forever in the next place that I go."

A reading from Isaiah: Thus says the LORD, who created you, O Jacob, who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. (Isaiah 43:1-3)

Closing Hymn

"You Are Mine"

ELW #581

Benediction, Dismissal/Procession to Site of Remembrance

AT THE SITE OF REMEMBRANCE:

Leader: When we remember those who died 40 years ago, we can say together,

All: We remember great courage.

Leader: When we recall the loss of family and friends, of our grief and sadness, we can say together,

All: We remember the loss of human life.

Leader: When we recall those who rushed to help, did all they could to help, we can say together,

All: We remember and give thanks for dutiful commitment to those in distress.

Leader: Remembrance begins with deep, personal identification. It begins with remembering the affliction of our brothers and sisters, and marking their pain as our own. Remembrance is a sacred moment when we raise up and hold to the light of the eternal moment, the good who have passed. We also mark this moment from remembrance to reconciliation by scattering the soil from the place we know as sacred ground.

All: We recall the names of those gone before us. We remember the promise of God to hold us all in his love.

Leader: We recall with joy the gratitude we feel in this time of remembrance and reconciliation. We recall the thoughtful words and deeds from those here today.

All: We must hold firmly to our hope, borne forward now not of tragedy but of loving kindness.

Moments of Silence while musicians sing

Prayer:

All: O God of grace and glory, we remember before you today our sisters and brothers, Joyce Estwick, Linda Heidemann, Alan Jensen, and James Houske; their debate coach K. Don Tibbetts and the pilot, Frayne Andersen . We thank you for giving them to us to know and to love as companions in our pilgrimage on earth. In your boundless compassion, console those who mourn and give courage to those who face hurt and loss of all kinds. Give us faith to know that death has been swallowed up in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, so that we may now live in confidence and hope until, by your name, we are all gathered to your home in You, in the company of all the saints, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen

Benediction: Said to each other

**May God heal your broken heart and bind up the wounds of our pain and affliction.
May God strengthen us in our weakness, calm our troubled spirits, and cast out our doubts
and fears.
May God give us grace and compassion to remember, to forgive, and to hope that all things
will be made new.
In the name of the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.**