

**Community  
Expectations and Visions  
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First of all I feel blessed to be a part of this community. One of the reasons I have stayed at Augustana is because of the faculty, staff, and students that constitute this thing called Augie.

In the next few minutes I hope to explore with you three questions. First, what makes this place worth the efforts we all make? Second, what shouldn't we expect from such a community? Third, what should our expectations and visions be for this community?

**What makes this place worth the effort?**

As a junior faculty member, I vividly remember some of the “giants” of the past that have, in their own ways, nurtured me. If I am just a seed sprouting in the forest, these folks are the mature oaks. Biology folks understand the balance that happens in most ecosystems. The mighty oaks, the woody shrubs, the flowering plants, and the thorny bushes co-exist in competition and cooperation. At times there is a symbiosis that happens, at other times there are parasitic relationships, and still at other times there exists a mutualism that provides a needed balance for all to survive.

Some of the oaks in my development in this forest called Augustana have included Charles Balcer, Evelyn Albritton, Arlen Viste, J.D. Thompson, Sandra Looney, Ralph Wagoner, Gary Olson, Duane Matz, and Joyce Nelson.

In their own ways these individuals have influenced the way I do my work , and the way I frame the Augie community. I would consider them all to be “called servants.”

Collectively, they represent several hundred years of service to this institution. They, and many others, have tilled the soil, prepared the ground, weathered the storms, and nurtured the ecology of this place. For that I am thankful. Because of their efforts, my roots are growing deeper, and I am just beginning to realize the potential and power of a community such as this. Twelve years into my work here, I can safely say that my decisions to come here and stay here have been the right ones. The commitment of others to this place and its people has modeled for me the true meaning of vocation, and of community.

In my role as a Higher Learning Commission Consultant-Evaluator I’ve had numerous opportunities to visit other colleges and universities. I have never returned to Augustana wishing I could work at that “other” school. The grass isn’t greener on the other side. With that said, I am not Polly Annish about this place. It would be easy, I think, to focus on many of the weaknesses of the Augie community. After all, we do have our flaws. We are not unique in this regard, and we shouldn’t expect to find perfection in this or any other human community. Often times, images of individualism and autonomy are far more compelling to us than visions of unity, and at times the fabric of relatedness seems dangerously threadbare and frayed. However, I will argue that while we are in many ways strangers to one another, there are paradoxical ways to strengthen our private lives by becoming more public. This idea leads to my second question.

## What shouldn't we expect from community?

Parker Palmer, in his book *The Company of Strangers* offers us valuable insights regarding our expectations for community. According to Palmer public life is simply and centrally our life among strangers, strangers with whom our lot is cast, with whom we are interdependent whether we like it or not. While one might think of community as something more intimate, it is not necessarily so. We are here, together, at this place and time: (As Paul Sponheim would say) given as gifts to one another. That does not mean, however, that we are intimate or even public with one another.

Parker closely examines how faith confronts the problem of intimacy. He defines the ideology of intimacy through three central tenets. **One**, that a human relationship of closeness and warmth, of depth and duration, is the most valuable – even the only valuable – experience that life affords. **Two**, that such a relationship can be achieved by virtue of personal effort and will. **Three**, that only through such relationships can the individual personality develop to its fullest extent.

According to Palmer, the Christian faith recognizes that we are alienated from one another, incapable (if left to our own devices) of genuine relationships. Our pride our egos, our desires to control others or make them over in our own image---all keep us from connecting with each other, except in the most self-interested ways. How then can a community exist? Certainly, not by human means alone,

since our strategies for closeness will be shaped by the very ego we need to overcome. The irony of the quest for intimacy is that it drives us apart. Like trees in the forest, we need our own soil, sunlight, space, and water. We compete with one another in a delicate dance.

According to Palmer, when we cling to each other in community, we distort the other person and ourselves through false dependencies, unreasonable expectations, and unjustified hopes. We come close to each other not directly, but through God's mediation in our lives. Yes, we are a Christian college of the church. I believe it is through this fundamental value that we have hope for community, for intimacy, for becoming more public. However, we need to understand that our natural instinct is to become more private.

According to Palmer, public life offers us the great and humanizing opportunity to abandon the self-serving search for self (which is bound to disappoint) and take up the service of others. Once again, this calling has been modeled for me in so many ways here at Augie.

We are affectionately known in these parts as God's frozen people. We are generally quite reserved and private. Many members of the Augie community go about their daily work with little or no public recognition. We like it that way. Often times we go to our office or workspace with little or no interaction with others. Palmer challenges us create a more public vision for ourselves. He argues that while we are and will stay strangers for the most part, we occupy common

space, share common resources, have common opportunities, and must somehow learn to live together. To acknowledge that one is a member of the public (he extends this definition to include a larger public as well...the city, the state, the nation, the world.) is to recognize that we are members of one another. How then shall we live a more public life, while nurturing our private lives? This leads me to my third and final question.

### **What should our expectations be for this community?**

Parker Palmer argues that having a public life is as fundamental to our humanness, to our wellbeing, as having a private life; without the two halves, life cannot be whole. Furthermore, he suggests that we should envision a larger and more inviting image of public possibilities. Applying Palmer's ideas to Augustana, imagine the following nine dimensions of living a public life at Augustana.

1. **Strangers meet on common ground.** Our sense of being a community depends on the recognition that our lives are intertwined with each other, and that we must function in ways that takes others into account. In our private dimensions, we find it easy to deny that others exist; that we are somehow not related to or dependent on one another. At times we think we are self-employed. In public we are reminded that the foundation of life together is not the intimacy of friends, but the capacity of strangers to share a common ground, common problems...without ever becoming friends.

2. **Fear of the stranger is faced and dealt with.** In our private life we need deal only with those who are “like us.” The fear of “otherness” is bred in our private world. In public we learn that underneath all surface differences people share a common humanity, and our image of differences diminish. How does Augie publicly embrace difference?
3. **Scarc resources are shared and abundance is generated.** The problem of scarcity is all too familiar at Augustana College. If there were abundant resources we might have the luxury of living in affluent isolation from one another. In a true community, a public must form to decide how those scarce resources can be distributed to the optimum benefit of all. A public response to scarcity has the potential of generating new abundance. Many of us have felt the abundance of community in times of need.
4. **Conflict occurs and is resolved.** Conflict is inevitable in the public realm. When resources are scarce, our private dimensions are all too evident. A healthy community gives us daily experience with conflict, and teaches us that conflict is not terminal, but gives us the skills to work through it. The tradition of this place has been to approach conflict and difficult times with a “we are all in this together” attitude.
5. **Life is given color, texture, drama, and a festive air.** In a healthy community , we meet and entertain each other. The public is inherently interesting. In private we are never taken beyond that which is familiar to us. In public we are introduced to that which is foreign and exotic and

to that which stretches our mind. I hope these types of forums are illustrative of such a public life. Let us celebrate together. Let us entertain each other. Attend a play, go to a ball game, have a cause and make it public.

6. **People are drawn out of themselves.** “He who seeks life shall lose it, while he who loses his life for my sake shall find it. (Matt. 10:34) Community reminds us that the universe is not egocentric. Through our interaction with and service to others, we grow.
7. **Mutual responsibility becomes evident, and mutual aid possible.** Think of the times that this community has responded responsibly to the needs of others. In an authentic community we are able to develop a deeper sense of our need and capacity to assist others.
8. **Opinions become audible and accountable.** When we express ourselves in public others who may hold different points of view hear us. In public we have a chance to respond to what others say. In this process individuals learn that private viewpoints have implications for the common good. How often have we expressed what we really think publicly? How often do we exchange e-mails...in some way hoping to remain private?
9. **Vision is projected and projects are attempted.** No significant vision can find full expression within the confines of private life. If our visions are to be fulfilled, they must find an outlet in the public realm. A play that doesn't open, a book that isn't published, and art work that sits on the easel do not become complete without a

public dimension. Like a plant in the forest seeking light to be nurtured into growth, we all need our work to be seen by the community. How can we as a community nurture visions and projects?

In conclusion, the Augustana College catalogue clearly defines community as one of our five fundamental values. It reads as follows:

Augustana College fosters caring for one another and our environments by responding to needs, respecting human differences, empowering one another, and by tending to the ecology of place.

Is it worth it?

What shouldn't we expect from it?

What is our vision and expectations for it?

After Mary Jane's comments we will have an opportunity to dialogue with one another.

Palmer, P. (1999). *The Company of Strangers: Christians and the Renewal of America's Public Life*. The Crossroad Publishing Company. New York.