

Keynote Address  
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Fellow members of the Augustana Heritage Association!

I will talk to you tonight about heritage – and especially about the Swedish heritage of Augustana – superfluous as it may seem to remind a group that has just finished a hearty meal of lutfisk – in June – of their heritage!

Most of you are probably part of the Swedish heritage of Augustana. I think it is important to you. .

It is important to me – both as one of the many beneficiaries of the college education Augustana has provided for 140 plus years and as a linguist who has done research on the Swedish language as it was transplanted to North America – and flourished for many decades, not least within the Augustana community.

I also believe that the Augustana heritage –as a case study – can teach us important things – about ourselves, about our country, about Sweden, and – ultimately – in its most ambitious extension - perhaps about our emerging global society.

Heritage – what is it?

There are individual versions of heritage – often a family story of some kind, and perhaps Christmas traditions, and food.

There are official versions of heritage – based on grand historical events, heroes of the past, or - as in the US – a set of principles embodied in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

And then there is the complex reality of what we individually or as a group consider OUR heritage

The US is uniquely a nation of heritages – hundreds of heritages.

The heritages are derived from the groups of colonists and immigrants who came to this country over the past several hundred years – and of course from the migrants who came across the land that was to become Bering Strait 10,000 years ago!

At the same time, the US is very much a nation of ONE heritage – that of the Founding Fathers and the Constitution. It has been formed, as it says on our coins, *e pluribus unum* – out of many, one!

Before speaking about the specific Swedish heritage that is so much part of the heritage of Augustana, and about its nature and role, let me say something about the special theme of this meeting of the Augustana Heritage Association.

This is the theme of "unto a good land."

Like heritage, I can imagine that that phrase conjures up different visions in your minds.

There is the version of the good land where, according to immigrant lore, you carve gold with pocket knives. This is the land represented on once- popular postcards of an enormous potato loaded on a wagon pulled by four horses – postcards gleefully sent back to the people in the old country whom the emigrants wanted to impress. This is the hyperbolic America of the tall tales of emigration.

There is the Swedish novelist Vilhelm Moberg's version of "unto a good land" in his novel by that name about Karl Oskar and Kristina, who left poverty in Småland in Sweden to settle in fertile eastern Minnesota. In this case, "good land" has a special connotation, I think, meaning not only "the dream of America" in general, but the dream of GOOD land, fertile soil, deep black soil – not the thin layer of moraine in which the Småland farmers tried to grow enough potatoes and grain to feed their large families.

There is the notion of "the good land" being the pastoral Land of Goshen – some kind of American amalgamation of economic and social success with heavenly rewards (whatever they may be).

Most importantly, I think, when it comes to the Augustana heritage, there is the version of "unto a good land" that is about the political and religious freedom and economic opportunity that America provided.

The idea of heritage, the Swedish heritage, and the idea of "unto a good land," unto an America that was a good land, form the framework within which I am casting my comments.

The idea of "unto a good land" does, of course, imply that the land the emigrants left was not so good. Sweden of the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century did leave a good deal to be desired for many of its citizens when it came to political and religious freedom and economic opportunity. Many Augustana people came to America in search of such freedom and opportunity.

As a parenthesis, it is worth mentioning that the reforms that have ensured that Sweden, too, has achieved political and religious freedom and economic opportunity were inspired in no small measure by the bloodletting of the emigration. The loss of hundreds of thousands of intelligent

and energetic citizens – your ancestors – became a major concern to the Swedish authorities, and reforms were undertaken.

Nevertheless, the Swedish heritage seems by and large to have been looked upon by the Swedish-Americans as something positive, something valuable, in spite of the political and economic conditions that pushed so many into emigration – in fact between 1850 and 1920 about 1.3 million Swedes, or about one fourth of the population at the time!

I want to consider three aspects of heritage, three versions of heritage:

First, my personal notion of heritage, tied to my childhood.

I cannot think of heritage without my thoughts very quickly flying off to the forests and hills, lakes and rivers of western Sweden, where I grew up in the 1930s.

This is a very romantic idea of heritage, the innocent childhood kind of heritage. An idyllic heritage that totally ignores the fact that the depression closed the local factory and put lots of people out of work and that for five years, the Nazis sat on the border and could decide to invade at any time.

It is a heritage that includes people and events and work and festivals not only of the 1930' and early 1940' but in some sense from the entire history of the community. This history went back well into the Middle Ages – seemingly without much of a break between now and then. A neighbor had a diploma on the living room wall that certified that their farm had been in the family's possession since the 1400s. The local story I heard as a child was that the present owner's wife's father had actually met the "hustomte," the elf that lived in the barn and made sure that it did not burn down – as long as you provided him with his Christmas dish of oatmeal! The earliest name on the list of ministers in the local church, hewn in stone by the front door, was Byrgher from the 1400s. The "new church" was built in 1701, and many of the farmers who built it were the great great great great grandfathers of our neighbors. People in the community seemed to feel that they belonged with the forests and the hills and the lakes and the rivers. They were one with nature itself!

Parenthetically, this is perhaps "ethnicity," heritage, in its most primordial form. You and the land are one!

This is the way I reconstruct my heritage – with much more detail, of course, and with an important set of learned values and behaviors that I received from family and community. As a child I may have experienced something like it - in a vague and inarticulate way, to be sure.

I think that you may all have experienced some form of this romantic idea of heritage – of some kind of bucolic past, if not yours directly at least that of your ancestors back in Sweden! Swedish-American popular culture seems to express much of this notion – in foods, Christmas traditions, songs, accordion music, folk dancing – and in the emphasis on values from a simple – presumably simple – rural existence.

Second, I happened to grow up at a time when the so-called "hembygd movement" in Sweden was strong – a movement to preserve local traditions, local culture, the essentially Swedish rural culture. "Hembygd" is one of those words that you may be able to translate but where the translation loses so much of the connotations, the emotional content, of the Swedish word. "Home place," "neighborhood," "native place." Try to extend the feelings you have about the word "home" to a broader area, to a community. Maybe "home community" is the best translation?

I note as I contemplate the word "hembygd," that it seems to me to include nature, the physical setting in which the "bygd," that which is built, is located. Maybe I have in me some of what I called the most primordial ethnicity, the one that includes some kind of oneness with nature?

My father became heavily involved in the "hembygd movement."

Here was a Skåning, a man from Skåne, which was part of Denmark until 1658, speaking that almost foreign language of that province – here was this enthusiast of a school master and organist who rallied the community to preserve its medieval houses and barns, record its agricultural practices, and save its old tools and farm equipment in order to save the heritage of the community !

It may not have been a coincidence that this movement flourished with such strength during the years of World War II – when so many people had their heritages threatened by the evil force of Nazism – and in at times very confusing ways, Communism!

The Swedish nation rallied its heritage in pursuit of national unity, national self-preservation.

This movement was also part of my experience of heritage as a child. My father's enthusiasm washed over our family as well as the community! What my father said was "det viktigaste just nu," the most important thing right now, he could not fathom being anything but just that for everybody else! He was quite undeterred by other people's possible lack of enthusiasm!

The "hembygd movement" of the 1940s was preceded by earlier periods where the nation seemed to turn to its traditional culture and its past. Best known is probably the so called "national romantic" in the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It produced the outdoor historical park of Skansen in Stockholm and many such permanent exhibitions of old culture around the country. It produced literary works dealing with Sweden's past by authors such as Selma Lagerlöf, Verner von Heidenstam, and Erik Gustaf Karlfeldt. It produced the paintings of Carl Larson of idyllic home scenes from Dalarna, which you today find in reproduction in every respectable Swedish-American gift shop in the country.

As in the 1940s, a national crisis may have spurred this yearning for the past - a romantic, and probably quite idealized past. In the case of national romanticism, it is assumed that it was the impact of industrialization that caused the interest in the past, a calmer, presumably more idyllic, and definitely rural Swedish past.

The view of Sweden that prevailed among the immigrants in America was very much that of this national romanticism!

Third, there is transplanted heritage.

I first experienced transplanted Swedish heritage when I arrived as a student and Swedish teacher at Augustana College in 1956. I spent hours in the then very hot attic of Denkman Library, now the Swenson Swedish Immigration Research Center. I read reams of Swedish-American newspapers, novels, plays, short stories, poetry, all in Swedish – the outpourings of a very active Swedish-American community.

I encountered the culture that had been formed during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in this country on the basis of elements of Swedish heritage, and the influences of the American reality that the immigrants were encountering.

It was, and is, a fascinating story of how immigrants and their descendants coped with their individual transplantation, or that of their families, by creating a new heritage.

Some did move directly into American society, shedding most of what they considered remnants of a Swedish past that they wanted to leave behind – trying even to avoid the Swedish accent in their speech, with limited success!

Others clung to the past, seemingly incapable of adjusting to a new land.

The novelist Vilhelm Moberg's Kristina thought that she was out of the sight of God, lost both geographically and spiritually, while Karl Oskar, her husband, dug his hands into the fertile soil of Minnesota – and a big smile spread across his face – as in the film version with Max von Sydow! Some - ministers, teachers at Augustana College, journalists in the hundreds of Swedish-American newspapers and magazines - some tried to make sense of it as a new, emerging Swedish-American culture with traits from the Swedish heritage but adapted to America.

A fine Swedish historian, Dag Blanck, is one of several scholars who have written about this development of a transplanted Swedish heritage – and an emerging Swedish-American culture. Blanck has focused especially on the role of the Augustana Synod in the development of a Swedish-American cultural identity. The Synod was, he maintains, by far the most important institution founded by the Swedes. Although there were many other organizations, and different developments in different parts of the Swedish immigrant community, the "Augustana people" were both most numerous and best organized – and produced most of the leaders in what became "Swedish-America."

Blanck says: "It [the ethnic identity in the Augustana Synod] was constructed or invented through a gradual selection process, consisting of cultural elements from both old and new world experiences. This duality means that the new ethnic culture which emerged in America was, literally, Swedish-American." (Dag Blanck, *Becoming Swedish-American : The construction of an ethnic identity in the Augustana Synod, 1860-1917*, 1997, pp. 210-211).

Many public manifestations of the Swedish-American community occurred during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century: The 1888 celebration of the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of New Sweden; a campaign in Chicago for the Linnaeus statue that still graces one of its parks; and many others.

These were the expressions of a Swedish-American community – with strong Augustana leadership – that was flexing its muscles in the competition among ethnic heritages in America for a place of national recognition.

This is where famous Swedish-American orators would thrill their audiences with great flourishes about the virtues of the Swedish people, about the greatness of the Swedish nation – especially in the past – but also always about the greatness of America, "the good land."

It is, by the way, not hard to see parallels with the ethnic and racial movements of self-definition and political self-assertion that we have witnessed in recent decades among, for example, African-Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans. It is, I think, useful to consider the similarities!

Blanck describes the process whereby this transplanted Swedish-American heritage was created, including the role of colleges and academies, prolific publication of books and newspapers and periodicals, and the extraordinarily rich Swedish-American organizational life also outside the Augustana Synod. It's a rich picture of ethnic self-definition and self-assertion!

What about the Swedish-American identity that emerged?

Blanck summarizes as follows: "The sense of self drew on selected cultural elements from a Swedish and Swedish-American, and to a lesser extent American, repertoire of 'high culture,' such as literature, history, and religion. It emphasized great Swedish and Swedish-American accomplishments and underscored character traits, such as freedom, bravery, and religiosity thought to be characteristic of both Swedes and Swedish-Americans." (Blanck 1997, pp. 215-216).

Gustavus Adolphus emerged as THE great Swedish hero, having been both the founder of the so called Era of Great Power for Sweden in the 17th century, and of course the protector of the Lutheran faith against the nefarious forces of Papism!

The literary works that were treasured were romantic and nationalistic in tone .

The iconoclastic Swedish playwright August Strindberg – a model for American playwrights such as Eugene O'Neil and Tennessee Williams – was roundly ignored, if not condemned! It was a highly selective version of Swedish history and culture that became part of Swedish-American culture.

What was drawn from Swedish-American history?

Although there was really no connection between the founding of the New Sweden colony in Delaware in 1638 and the later emigration, the early presence of Swedes in America – even back in the exclusive colonial period – became part of the new Myth of Swedish-America that was constructed.

Even the early landings of the Vikings in North America were included in the brew – although Leif Eriksson's successors, who actually landed, were very quickly chased back to sea by the "Skraelings," the local inhabitants at the time!

The Swedish engineer John Ericksson, the inventor of the battle ship the "Monitor," became a favorite Swedish-American culture hero, although he arrived in America well before Swedish mass emigration.

The formation of a Swedish-American identity was not a casual matter, simply something that occurred on great festive occasions.

Blanck points out that "[F]rom 1903, the Augustana College catalogs stated that one of the missions of the school was to be an 'exponent of Swedish-American culture,' and President Andreen spoke of the importance of the Swedish-American colleges in making 'thoroughly dedicated' Swedish-Americans out of their students." (Blanck 1997, p 217).

A number of Swedish-American authors dealt with the nature of Swedish-Americanism.

A prolific essayist, Johan Person, who was among those I found in the Denkman attic in 1956, maintained that the Swedish-Americans were becoming a separate people, and were "neither Swedish, nor American, but a combination of both." Person argued that the Swedish-Americans had to be "kulturbärare," carriers of culture, if the American nation was going to fulfill its promise of becoming a combination of all that was best in the many immigrant cultures.

So did the Lindsborg, Kansas, novelist and playwright – and incidentally also successful interior decorator and altar painter – Gustav Malm.

Malm's novel *Charli Johnson, svenskamerikan*, Charlie Johnson, Swedish-American, describes how a young Swede – arrogant and ignorant of the virtues of Swedish-America – how this young Swede comes to understand the new culture of which he has become a part – aided by his girl friend Änni and the magnificent performances of Handel's Messiah at Bethany College in Lindsborg.

A charming view of the Swedish heritage was expressed by my colorful predecessor as professor of Scandinavian languages and literature at the University of Minnesota, J.S. Carlson – early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He maintained that the Swedish immigrants did not need to become American – because they were already American when they arrived! Why? Because Sweden was the original home of freedom (and America the new home of freedom)!

Ultimately, the formation of a Swedish-American identity, and expressions of Swedish-American self-assertion became a means of dealing with American reality.

For some, Swedish-Americanism may have been a means of protecting themselves from a bewildering new reality. They could hide in ethnic security – or at least withdraw into ethnicity to lick the wounds inflicted by a harsh reality.

It seems, however, that, for most immigrants, Swedish-Americanism became a bridge into American society.

It is striking, for example, how well Swedish-language newspapers in America covered American life and politics. I have read many years of such papers, and I believe that any of the readers could have followed very well what was happening in America through their coverage.

And emerging from the ranks of Swedish-Americans were not only leaders within the Swedish-American community but also Swedish politicians in state legislatures, in governorships, and eventually in Congress.

There are many examples of a successful transition from the transplanted Swedish heritage to full participation in American society via the Swedish-American bridge built by the Augustana Synod – with its network of congregations around the country, its publications, and – not least – its educational institutions.

It has been pointed out by various scholars that the way American society, American culture, is different from other cultures has to do with its lack of an "American ethnicity," or at least a relative lack of emphasis on a national ethnicity. This has been called "voluntary pluralism." (Lawrence Fuchs, Blanck 1997, p. 221). Being American is more a matter of being part of a community that subscribes to certain values than of genetic or cultural blood lines.

Being Swedish or German or Italian or Chinese is different in that it seems – according to this view – to be based on other kinds of features, including the food one eats, the way one celebrates Christmas – or other traditional festivals – the way one dresses, dances, comes of age, gets married, and is buried. The absence of an American ethnicity has left for various ethnic groups the possibility of filling this void – if that is what it is – with something drawn from their own particular backgrounds. It has left the possibility of adding to a basic set of "American values" a whole range of traditional behaviors – a heritage, if you so will – drawn from the background of the immigrant group.

The American values I refer to are democracy, equality before the law, freedom of speech, the right to the pursuit of happiness, that is, what provided the foundation for the "dream of America" for millions of people. These values are what "unto a good land" was fundamentally about – values most, maybe all, of which could be embraced while one held on to some of the heritage from "the old country."

Blanck states it this way: "As long as the members of an ethnic group loyally adhered to the abstract political philosophies that formed the basis for the United States, the American national idea allowed for the maintenance of the groups' ancestral cultures. It was thus possible for the Swedish immigrants and their children to affirm and even develop their ethnic identities and



express support for Swedish and Swedish-American cultural symbols, while at the same time remaining loyal Americans." (Blanck 1997, p. 221).

If this is so, dare we think in global terms about something like that?

At this time in world history, it seems that we are facing - in sometimes murderous forms - the fact that our global society not only consists of multiple heritages, but that those heritages can be in deadly conflict, at least in their more perverse forms. On a global scale, we face the question of whether we can achieve some kind of viable *e pluribus unum* – from many, one – a world society where heritages flourish but within some kind of unity that can ensure peace and justice! That's a question worth pondering as a long-term solution to the horrendous conflicts we face!

In conclusion:

The Augustana heritage is well worth studying and celebrating.

It does warm our hearts when we sing the well known hymns or participate in the familiar liturgy, and when we indulge in romantic notions of hills and lakes and forests and little red cottages in the old country – and maybe even an occasional elf peaking out from behind a tree!

We can take pride in the fact that this heritage was a means of sustaining generations of Swedish-Americans as they coped with a new world – a "good land" to be sure, but one that presented them with many challenges.

It is well to remember that the heritage of the Augustana Synod became for many, not a barrier to entry into American society but a bridge to full and constructive participation!

Most importantly, the study of the Augustana heritage can help us understand our country better. It can help us understand what *e pluribus unum* – from many, one – really means. It can help us understand that much cultural variety can be combined with devotion and loyalty to a set of national values – to a nation. It can help us better understand the tensions and conflicts that surround us as this nation still continues to try to realize the idea of *e pluribus unum* – from many, one. Maybe it can even help us understand – or at least glimpse dimly – what a global society must some day be like.

Thank you!

