
Baccalaureate Address
May 11, 2007
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On a recent plane ride home from Seattle I re-read a short book by Parker Palmer titled *Let Your Life Speak*. On one of the pages tucked in the middle of this volume, Palmer writes about a metaphor we use to describe our life. The metaphor is taken from the world of manufacturing, and it asserts a common belief that we “make” our lives. Palmer writes: “Just listen to how we use the word in everyday speech: we make time, make friends, make meaning, make money, make a living, make love.”

As an alternative, Palmer uses an agricultural metaphor; he prefers to say that we “grow” our lives. I think he is on to something, and it may be relevant at a baccalaureate service.

We’ve gathered to recognize each of you, soon-to-be graduates of North Park University. Tomorrow you will receive your degree. Most often we think that a degree recognizes something you’ve done (or made). Much more than this, however, I believe a degree points to who you have become. Or to put it another way, we’re here to proclaim that you’ve “grown up.”

Education, and learning, is not a one-time act. It is something which begins probably even before our birth and continues to the moment we die. It is ongoing, it is life-long, it evolves, and it grows. We don’t make smart people; rather we become scholars and teachers, business people and communicators, pastors and priests, musicians and politicians, social workers and artists, nurses and scientists. We become people of vocation.

This word “vocation” is an interesting term. The contemporary author, Frederick Buechner, describes vocation as “the place where your gladness meets the world’s deep need.” Vocation is about you, about me, AND about our lives with others.

One purpose, perhaps a primary purpose, of studying at North Park is to discover your vocation—the place where who you are, and what you are gifted at meets a particular need in the world around us. Our vocation is not something we make; rather our vocation is something we grow into. And as you grow into your particular vocation, now that you are ready to leave North Park, I offer the four pieces of advice.

First, vocation requires that we pay attention to ourselves. Notice that Buechner’s definition of vocation begins with self—“the place where your gladness...”

One aspect of paying attention to our self is to discover our particular abilities and limitations. We all have both—abilities and limitations. We discover what makes us

“glad” when we find how our limits and abilities intersect. In another passage in *Let Your Life Speak*, Parker Palmer writes about himself, and what makes him glad:

I am less gifted at building on other people’s discoveries than at tinkering in my own garage; less gifted at slipping slowly into a subject than at jumping into the deep end to see if I can swim; less gifted at making outlines than at writing myself into a corner and trying to find a way out; less gifted at tracking a tight chain of logic than at leaping from one metaphor to another.

There’s nothing special about Palmer’s array of abilities and limitations; it doesn’t make him good or bad, strong or weak. What matters is that he has discovered what is true for him. Someone here tonight might describe herself in exactly the opposite ways: gifted at building on other people’s discoveries, gifted at making outlines, gifted at tracking a tight chain of logic, and gifted at so many other things. What matters, in pursuing our vocation, is that we pay enough attention to ourselves to discover what makes us glad.

Here’s a second piece of advice: vocation requires that we pay attention to others. This represents the second half of Buechner’s definition of vocation; “the place where your gladness meets the world’s deep need.” It also reflects the mission of North Park University: to foster “lives of significance and service.” We have this as our mission because learning is most noble when used to benefit others.

Mitch Albom is a sports columnist who had an extraordinary experience. Twenty years after graduating from college he had the chance to spend time with one of his college professors, Morrie Schwartz, who at the time was very near death. Their conversations are recorded in a best-selling book, *Tuesdays with Morrie*.

In one of their conversations Morrie explains how he sees the world differently, and knows the world differently, now that his body is wracked with illness. Morrie says:

Now that I’m suffering, I feel closer to people who suffer than I ever did before. The other night, on TV, I saw people in Bosnia running across the street, getting fired upon, killed, innocent victims . . . and I just started to cry. I feel their anguish as if it were my own. I don’t know any of these people. But—how can I put this?—I’m almost . . . drawn to them.

Morrie sees the deep need of others, and it makes him cry.

A few months ago in my inauguration address I suggested that perhaps this should be a requirement for receiving a degree from North Park. Have you shed any tears recently? Perhaps not for people in Bosnia. But what of those in Iraq? Or the millions in Africa infected by AIDS? Or others much closer to home with their backs pressed hard against the wall? Or people who have suffered loss, who have been disadvantaged, people who have experienced hatred and prejudice—around the world,

across our country, in this city, and even on our campus? Or doesn't your life bring you into contact with people who are worth crying over?

Our vocation is clear when we discover how who we are links to what others need. We enter our vocation when we realize how what we learn can be used to benefit others.

A third guideline: vocation requires that we risk. Here's an important secret to life: sometimes when we reach for the stars we fall short. But this shouldn't scare us from reaching. Just before he died, the ethicist Lewis Smedes wrote a short compendium as his memoirs. In this book he described the fear of risk he had as a teenager. He wrote:

What I did not want was to try to succeed and then fail. I would rather be known as the boy who might have succeeded had he tried than as a poor sucker who tried and failed.

No doubt at some point in your life you have been just like Lewis Smedes, perhaps even in recent years here at North Park. I know I was like Smedes when I was younger.

One piece of evidence that might suggest this is the heroes I've chosen as an adult. Those of you who have visited our home know that as a hobby I collect pins from presidential campaigns. I have a fairly extensive collection from elections dating back to the 1930s. But there are clear limits to my collection. The candidates must have achieved their party's nomination. No wannabe candidates in my collection. And, more important, for pins to be included in my collection the candidate must have lost the election.

You see, I like losers. I like losers who are democrats, and losers who are republicans. I like losers who were conservatives, and losers who were liberals. All I care about is that the candidate tried, and lost. So I admire Bush, Sr., but I'm not a fan of Bush, Jr. I like John Kerry and Al Gore. There is a fond place in my heart for Barry Goldwater, Michael Dukakis, George McGovern, Al Stevenson, Thomas Dewey, Wendell Wilkie, and Alfred Landon.

People who know their vocation embrace risk. And with risk, sometimes we win, and sometimes we lose. But it is more important that we risk, than that we win. In another portion of his book, Parker Palmer writes: "There is as much guidance in what does not or cannot happen in my life as there is in what can and does—perhaps more."

So my advice is this: as you move into your life beyond North Park University decide occasionally to risk; don't fear ending up in second place.

Now, a final guideline: vocation requires that we follow the rules. This may seem a bit out of place, given what else I've said tonight, but listen for a moment.

When my children were young, I taught them certain rules to govern their behavior.

- Don't cross the street without holding my hand.
- Say "thank you."
- We can't start the car until you buckle your seatbelt.

As they grew older, into adolescence, the rules changed a little.

- Call if you're going to be home late.
- You may drive, but you can only have one other person in the car.
- Be in my midnight.

These rules probably sound familiar to you and to your parents gathered with us tonight.

But as my children grew up all of this changed. Even before they went off to college, it was pretty difficult for me as a father to govern my children's behavior. So the rules changed. When my kids were nearing graduation from high school I stopped saying who could be in the car, where they could go, and even what time they needed to be home. Rather, I reduced all the rules to one: "Remember who you are." I had had 16 or 17 years with my son and my daughter. Over that time, I hoped, I had taught them something. There came a point when I simply needed to trust them, I couldn't govern them. So I appealed to the collective effect of a life-time, hoping they would remember to be the people their mother and I had helped them become.

Did it work? Probably not all the time. But I do have one piece of evidence to suggest that this grand rule had sunk in. About five years ago I took a new job. On the morning I was headed off for my first day at this new job I rose early, full of energy and excitement. That morning I ate breakfast as usual, read the newspaper, and picked up my things for my office. As I headed out the door, however, my 21-year old son rolled out of bed, scrambled down the stairs, put his arm around my shoulders, and wearing only his boxer shorts he walked me to the car. As he opened the car door, he turned to me and said, "Dad, remember who you are."

Vocation requires that we remember who we are. And this is who you are: graduates of North Park University who have been prepared to lead lives of significance and service. This is well-expressed in Buechner's definition of vocation. Our gladness must meet the world's deep need, and when this happens our life is marked by both significance and service.

All of this characterizes the journey toward learning which is our common cause at North Park University. During your years here you've grown up. Regardless of how old you are, or what experiences you've had in life, you're not fully grown, but you've grown up. There is more growing to do, but for this night we are celebrating the fact that you have begun the journey of your own vocation. Certainly, there is further to go on this journey, but tonight we pause for you to catch your breath and to celebrate the journey as you've known it to this point in your lives. Tonight we celebrate your blossoming vocation, the place where your gladness meets the world's deep need.