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***So Many Questions . . . So Few Answers***

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**NORTH PARK  
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I've been in higher education all my adult life, which means I've experienced more than a few beginnings of the academic year. The annual "first day of school" is a great occasion. We have much to anticipate, much to look forward to. Yet, I've also been through the calendar enough times to know that the beginning of an academic year can hit us in the face with a host of questions. And at these times it often seems there are so few answers for these many questions. I'm especially alert to this phenomenon this year as I'm at a new place, in a new role, and this newness gives rise to many questions.

But I'm not alone. I know, with pretty good certainty, I'm not the only one in this room with more questions than answers. Test me on this.

If you're a first year student at the university, and I imagine many of you are, then you're likely asking questions like these:

- Will I be able to find new friends in this new place?
- Am I really capable of doing college work . . . might I actually fail?
- If I take the "L" to downtown Chicago will I be able to find my way back to campus?
- Why can't I decide on a major when it seems so easy for everyone else?
- Will I be able to pay for tuition next semester?
- Should I audition for the orchestra or will I just embarrass myself?
- Can you really believe *that* and still be a Christian?
- Did I choose the right college, or should I have attended one of the others that admitted me?

If you're a returning student, as some of you are, and especially if you are a senior, you may be asking questions like these:

- How hard will it be to land a job after graduation?
- Why didn't I study harder?
- Why didn't I change my major before it was so late?
- Should I attempt graduate school?
- Why should I risk taking that course if it might lower my GPA?

And, I can tell you, if you're the new president at North Park University these are some of the questions racing around in your mind:

- Why did the university choose me?

- Why didn't I simply decide to stay where I was . . . where the work place and its people are familiar and comfortable?
- How can we pay people an adequate wage for their work and still keep tuition to a reasonable level?
- Why can't I remember names more easily?
- When will I make my first big blunder?
- When I make my first big blunder will they forgive me?
- Have I already made the blunder and am I just too blind to see it?

All of these are what we might call personal questions. That is, they are questions which come out of our personal experiences...the life we're living at the moment.

Life, of course, is bigger than our personal concerns. The questions I've noted don't begin to approach the host of other questions around us—questions about economics and politics, faith and commitment, right and wrong, good and bad, justice and fairness, war and peacemaking, stewardship and leisure, want and need—questions which challenge us every time we open the newspaper or walk through the neighborhood.

Both of these are important lists of questions; we should pay attention to them both. For this morning, however, I'm thinking most of the personal ones. We can save the others for other times and places...classes, ministry experiences, residence hall discussions, and the like.

Even when we think only of the personal questions there seem to be so many. And at the same time, answers, at least good answers for these questions, seem to be so hard to come by. Where can we turn?

My response to where we can turn in our search for answers is both very simple and quite familiar. Nonetheless, if you listen further, I think you'll hear something that is both wise and quite helpful (if I may be so bold as to claim this).

And, to frame this simple and familiar response to these questions, I want to tell you a short story from my childhood.

I was probably eight or nine years old at the time (so you can imagine that I remember at least parts of this story only because they were told to me). Along with my family (dad, mom, two brothers and a sister) I lived in a small village located some distance beyond the end of the dirt road, in the highlands of Guatemala in Central America. We were there because my parents served there as missionaries, but from my perspective it was simply home.

One day there was a knock at the front door of our house and my brother (with whom I was constantly competing) raced me to the door to answer the knock. Two men stood before our door; it was obvious, perhaps painfully obvious, they were North

Americans, somewhat out-of-place in this village. We eagerly invited them in and welcomed them to our home. It was good to speak with someone in English. Rarely did any “gringos” other than my family visit this small village of Nebaj.

We were curious, of course. What brought them to Nebaj, and why did they stop by our home? We discovered that these two young, adventurous men were going on a six-week journey into the 12,000 foot high Cuchematane Mountains. They were seeking adventure.

They came well-prepared for this adventure, or so they thought. Before leaving the United States they had visited an army and navy surplus store. Some of you don't know what that is, but let's simply say that if they had made the journey today they would have visited REI, Eastern Mountain Sports, L L Bean, or another outdoor retailer.

At this store they had purchased everything the salesperson (who had never been to Guatemala) told them they would need. And there in front of us, before our eager eyes, they emptied the contents of their back packs onto the floor of our home. They had quite a collection of things:

- A water-proof hammock with built-in mosquito nets
- Canvas water bags
- Snake bite kits
- Machetes
- Pith helmets
- Fancy pocket knives
- Water-proof lanterns
- Floating flashlights
- Safari shirts and shorts
- Guns and ammunition
- Fishhooks, reels, rods, and bait
- Dehydrated food
- Heavy leather combat boots

What more could they want?

But when they arrived in Nebaj, where Spanish is relegated to second language status and several indigenous dialects are the primary language, it dawned on these two adventurers that one thing—the language—might stand in the way of a successful adventure. They hadn't realized this until they arrived in the village. But when someone told them there was an American family living in town they decided to come to us for a bit of language instruction.

My father, who knew these mountains fairly well, asked them exactly where they planned to hike. Well, they weren't sure of their destination; they were just going to hike wherever it seemed interesting to visit. It became apparent, rather quickly, that not only had they not realized that Spanish was not readily spoken in these mountains but they also did not know that depending on where they would hike they could encounter people from any number of indigenous language groups.

So we asked, “Do you want to know Ixil, Mam, Quiche, Cachiuel, Uspantec, or perhaps one of the other regional languages?” Further, and we were quite puzzled with this, exactly what could we teach them in a brief evening in our home that could possibly be of any help to them?

Somewhat exasperated by our response to their inquiry, then simply replied, “Oh well, just give us a few basic phrases. Indigenous languages are pretty much the same anyway, aren’t they?”

Here were two men with an adventurous, but wildly misinformed, spirit. They had described their equipment to us with great pride. Yet, we could see with ease that most of this equipment was going to be of very little help to them. We also knew that the few language phrases Dad eventually wrote down for them would never be properly pronounced. And, we knew that even if they did master the pronunciation of their questions they would never understand the response of anyone they might encounter.

From our experience, especially my father’s experience over the years in these same mountains, we knew what they needed was a guide. What they needed was someone who had been there before, someone who knew the way through these mountains, someone who spoke both their language and the language of the people, someone who could provide for a multitude of needs they would likely encounter but had never dreamed of. What they needed was a guide.

But, they didn’t want our advice. A guide would interfere with, rather than support, their adventure. They left our home undeterred, full of confidence however naïve that confidence might have been. Perhaps they made their way, I don’t know as we never heard from them again.

And now, here I am standing before you at North Park University, many years removed from my childhood, in a big city rather than a small village, in the flat-lands of the mid-western states rather than the mountains of Guatemala. But here I am, with you, embarking on an adventure, with a host of questions staring us in the face. In coming to this place and time, in preparing for this adventure, we are somewhat like the two young men who visited my home. We think we’re well-prepared, only to discover there are challenges we had not anticipated.

You first-year students, for example. No doubt you took the right sequence of courses in high school, and passed most with at least a grade of “B”. You’re smart, decently educated, and ready to enter the college classroom. In addition, you gave a lot of serious thought to which college you would attend. You had other opportunities, scholarship offers from other schools, but you chose North Park. You were confident this was the right place for you. And, perhaps most importantly, you’ve come well-equipped. You bought the new computer, you’ve outfitted your dorm-room with great style, you’ve added all the right clothes to your wardrobe, and you’re on your way. What more could you need?

And then there is me, as another example. I may have been the first person in my family to attend college, but since then I've achieved the right degrees. I went back to school once or twice after my graduate programs were completed, just to learn a little more. I taught for several years in college classrooms, I dabbled in a bit of scholarship, and I worked my way through the faculty ranks. More recently I've been an administrator with a substantial portfolio of responsibilities. I've even worked closely for several years with a Board of Trustees so I have that mastered. What more could I need?

But now the first week of the academic year has arrived, and I'm beginning to panic. I have so many questions, and I'm finding so few answers. I suspect you may be feeling the same...your questions may be a bit different than mine but they lead to the same anxious tight knot in the pit of your stomach. What have we gotten ourselves into? How will we ever survive?

You know the answer, of course. It is the same answer my father gave to those young men in our home. We may think we are well-informed, well-equipped, well-prepared for the adventure on which we have embarked. But what we really need is a guide. Maps, dehydrated food, snake bite kits, and a few useful phrases in a foreign language, these are all good things. So are good high school grades, a decent wardrobe, and a new computer. And so are graduate degrees, teaching experience, and Board relations.

Yet, there is something which is infinitely better than any and all of these. Infinitely better is a guide, someone who has been there before, someone who knows the way.

You know this, of course. As I told you, my response to these questions is both simple and familiar. But sometimes we need to be reminded of the simple and the familiar, and this is my task today. My point is simply this: As you approach this academic year, whether it is your first as a student or your last, whether it is your first on the faculty or your last, even if it is your first in the president's office, remember to take God with you as your guide.

This is the guide who spoke through the prophet Isaiah and proclaims (42:16):  
I will lead the blind by a road they do not know,  
by paths they had not known I will guide them;  
I will turn the darkness before them into light  
the rough places into level ground.  
These are the things I will do;  
and I will not forsake them.

This is the same guide who spoke to Moses when he was commanded to venture beyond Sinai, and said (Exodus 33:14):

My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.

This is the same guide of whom Solomon wrote (Proverbs 3:5-6):

Trust in the Lord with all your heart,  
and do not rely on your own insight.  
In all your ways acknowledge him,  
and he will make straight your paths.

This is the same guide recognized over a hundred years ago by the founders of North Park University. And it was for this reason that they chiseled a verse from Psalm 111 (10) into the cornerstone of Old Main:

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom;  
all those who practice it have a good understanding.

There is in the Bible plenty of evidence that God has guided people in the past. And there is in the Bible assurance that God is willing to guide us—as first-year students, last-year students, and even as a first-year president. This is a simple and familiar assurance, but for me at least, there is none better. Let's walk with the guide.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.