
**The Beginning, the End, and the Time Between
Charge to Graduates
Commencement – December 2007**



David L. Parkyn, President

I frequently tell students that one of the most important learning resources at North Park University is the city of Chicago. I don't know of a better place for undergraduate and graduate studies than our specific neighborhood and the larger city itself. Chicago is our classroom and all Chicagoans are our teachers.

It's easy to imagine the possibilities for learning in this setting—from cultural and artistic venues to places of business; from churches to social service agencies; from hospitals to neighborhood schools. Beyond this we can imagine the rich resources for learning provided by the millions of people in this city, representing the cultures of the world.

Yet there is one resource in the city of Chicago we don't often reference and which we ought to mention at least in passing before you graduate. This resource is—now bear with me, I haven't lost my mind—this resource is our city cemeteries.

Take a walk west of the campus and within a half mile you'll come to the Bohemian National Cemetery. Established in 1877 this is a Chicago landmark. It is a place which contains an extraordinary collection of funerary art—a spectacular chapel and columbarium building, and some outstanding life-size sculptures. The majority of people buried here are of Czech descent. Many are veterans of either the Spanish American War or World War I.

Among Chicago's most prominent Bohemian citizens buried in this cemetery is former Mayor Anton Cermak. He was assassinated in 1933 when he was riding in a motorcade seated next to President Franklin Roosevelt.

Take a walk east of the campus and within a mile you'll come to the Rosehill Cemetery. It is older still, established in 1850, and encompasses over 350 acres. Those who rest here include a large number of Chicago mayors, several generals from the civil war, and a man by the name of Charles Gates Dawes – 30th vice president of the United States serving under President Calvin Coolidge, and like vice president Al Gore, a recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize. There are other notables buried in this cemetery, men with household names like Montgomery Ward, Richard Sears, and Oscar Mayer.

Whether the deceased is of international fame or known only by a few family members, all tombstones have at least two things in common. They include the individual's name, and they post the year of birth and year of death.

For our purposes tonight, I'm not much interested in the name on the tombstones. The dates, however, are more intriguing. Two years, with a dash between them. The beginning of the person's life is designated by the first year, the end of the person's life is designated by the second year, and the time between is noted by the dash.

A dash. Our life—the time between our birth and our death—is noted simply by a dash. There is a distance between the year of our birth and the year of our death but they are intimately linked. And this link, on the tombstone, is noted by a dash.

At birth we are each given a blank book. At the time of our death we present a full and complete story. The amazing thing is that we write the story of our own lives. We write this story one chapter, one page, one line, one word at a time. We don't control when the story begins, and we don't decide when the story ends, but between these two we write the story of our lives.

A commencement ceremony may not be the best time to be thinking about cemeteries, but it is a good time to be thinking of the story of our life, about the dash on our tombstone between the year of our birth and the year of our death. What kind of story are we writing? When our story is complete, when the blank pages we were given at our birth have been fully written upon, and when the story of our life is read by others, what sort of story will be told?

More specifically, in words adopted everyday at North Park University: Did she live a life of significance? Was his a life of service?

In the words of the psalmist read just minutes ago: Did she execute justice for the oppressed? Did he give food to the hungry? Did she lift up those who are bowed down? Did he uphold the stranger, the orphan, the widow?

In the words of Jesus read from the Gospel: Have we lent our eyes to the blind, have we walked with the lame, cared for the lepers, brought good news to the poor?

In this Season of Advent with Christians around the world we anticipate the coming of the Christ, the one announced as the prince of peace, the one who proclaimed the blessedness of all who make peace. How does the story of our life measure up to the standard of the Christ to be peacemakers?

- We cannot herald peace if we carry the sword.
- We cannot be people of love if we are equipped with weapons which kill and destroy.
- We cannot give voice to hope if we wield instruments which take away life.

Will the dash on our tombstone give reason for God to call us blessed because our story is one of peacemaking?

The beginning is not ours to decide. The end is not ours to determine. But the blank pages between the book jacket of our life, the dash between the years on our tombstone, this story is ours to write.

- To write the story between the beginning and the end.
- To write the story of our life one chapter, one page, one sentence, one word at a time.
- To live with significance and to do service.

This is our sacred obligation.

So then, let us be just, be kind, and walk with God.

But more than this, let us be peacemakers, and God will call us blessed.