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**Commencement Address**

**December 12, 2008**

**David L. Parkyn, President**

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Readings:

Isaiah 35:1-10

Luke 1:46-54

A few weeks ago a group of undergraduates gathered in our home for dinner and conversation. At their initiative we talked about life – their life, course, but also about my life, and the lives of others. Our life is our own, but how do we transform it into a life for others as well, perhaps even a life of God’s own choosing and direction?

One of the students remembered a comment I made at the fall semester convocation in 2006 when she was a first-year student. On that occasion I had challenged our new students with these words:

At birth we are each given a blank book. At the time of our death we present a full and complete novel. We write the story of our lives in this novel one word, one line, one page, one chapter at a time.

I had reminded these students that at the beginning of their studies they were writing the first words of a new chapter in their novel. And tonight we’ve gathered to mark the end of this chapter.

In that fall convocation I had encouraged these new students to consider what they would write in this chapter. So think with me for a moment about the chapter you have written. I’m sure changed occurred in this life-chapter. Was it subtle or seismic? Who most influence the events of this chapter? What new people came into your story? What people from earlier chapters in your life did you hear more of in this chapter, and who dropped out of your story? Perhaps most important, how will the events of this chapter frame the rest of your life-story?

Of course, as one chapter ends, another begins. So we have a two-fold interest tonight—to look back at your years at North Park and to look forward toward the future that waits for you.

This novel you write is your voice, it speaks to your place in the world, it expresses who you are and who you want to be. We give voice to life by the narrative we write, by the story we tell.

Voice. Voice is the cry young parents eagerly wait to hear when their infant is first born. Voice is the spoken word, our means of communication as rational beings. But voice is also the style of the writer, the fingerprint of the author.

Voice communicates. Voice connects us to others. Voice shapes community. Voice tells story. Voice makes meaning. Voice gives identity. And in moments of idealism we call our careers, our professions, a vocation, a voice speaking from within us to those around us.

Psychologist and author Mary Pipher, in her recent book *Writing to Change the World*, tells us that

Voice is everything we are, all that we have observed, the emotional chords that are uniquely ours—all our flaws and all our strengths, expressed in the words that best reflect us. Voice is like a snowflake—complicated, beautiful, and individual. It is the essence of self, distilled, and offered in service to the world.

Pipher continues,

Individual voices can be quiet or noisy, wry or schmaltzy, self-disclosing or guarded, kind or angry. Voice comes from genetics, gender, relationships, place; from ethnic background and emotional experience. Voice resonates with our sorrows and fears, but also our joys and it sings out all of who we are.

Voice belongs to each of us. It is uniquely mine, uniquely yours.

My thoughts tonight are about you, and the voice you speak as a graduate of North Park University. What sort of voice do you claim? Does your voice as a graduate of North Park University mark a fingerprint?

Your voice as a graduate of North Park University—is it predominantly quiet or noisy, wry or schmaltzy, self-disclosing or guarded, kind or angry? How is your voice different today from when you first stepped on to this campus? How will the years of study at North Park University bring an intonation to your voice in years to come?

Voice, as I am using this word, is synonymous with life. To speak. To live. To give voice to—to intone, modulate, enunciate, express, declare, proclaim, utter, articulate, sing. To live—draw breath, exist, be, see the light of day, walk on earth. Parker Palmer connects these two directly in the title of one of his books. He urges his readers to *Let Your Life Speak*.

Because you have life you also have a voice. But what kind of voice is it? You've heard that by studying and learning at North Park you will be prepared to live a life of significance and service. What kind of voice is one which declares significance and

expresses service? By what kind of life will people recognize you as a graduate of North Park University? With what voice will you speak?

The reading from Isaiah guides us.

- Do people who live and work with you see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of God in your life?
- Does your voice strengthen their weak hands and make firm their feeble knees?
- Does your voice open the eyes of the blind?
- Does your voice unstop the ears of the deaf?
- Does your voice cause the lame to leap like a deer?
- Is your tongue an instrument through which those who cannot speak sing for joy?

Mitch Albom is a sports columnist who had an extraordinary experience. Twenty years after completing his undergraduate studies 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 record in the 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. It transforms his voice. Perhaps this should be a requirement for graduation from North Park: Has your life brought you into contact with people who are worth crying over? Has your voice been transformed?

Tonight we close one chapter in your life-story and simultaneously begin the next chapter. Through your years at North Park your voice has been transformed to become, in Pipher's words, "like a snowflake—complicated, beautiful, and individual. It is the essence of [your]self, distilled, and offered in service to the world." You have been prepared to speak, so now and for the rest of your days offer your voice as a life of significance and service to all those around you.