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***What Is That In Your Hand?***  
**Fall Academic Convocation**  
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**David L. Parkyn, President**

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Moses was a man who discovered that having a conversation with God sometimes could lead to a very challenging outcome.

In chapters 3 and 4 of Exodus we're told that God had a special assignment for Moses. God had chosen Moses to lead the people of Israel from captivity to freedom. This assignment was more than Moses was looking for so he asked, "Who am I?" In our day we would ask, "Why me?"

God could have said many things in response to this question from Moses. Yet God chose to respond with a simple question. Moses asked, "Who am I?" To which God countered, "What is that in your hand?" This proved to be the defining question, the tipping point, of Moses' entire life.

What is that in your hand? What Moses had in his hand is something we don't commonly use today. Moses carried a walking stick in his hand, an instrument to give him balance, to hold him upright when his feet might slip on the rough terrain. In Moses' day there were no paved roads, no sidewalks of concrete, no smooth lawns, and no stairs to climb to higher ground. Moses needed a walking stick.

But it was more than this, of course. The staff Moses held in his hand defined who he was. It was marked from many years of use by this one man. It was made smooth on the high end by the constant rub of Moses' hand. It was fractured on the lower end by the rough terrain over which Moses had walk through the course of his life.

This was not just a walking stick. What Moses held in his hand was a life-time of experience. The good and the bad; the pleasant and the ugly; the sunshine and the thunderstorms of Moses life, all molded into a single staff. Why did God choose Moses for this assignment? Though Moses did not fully realize it at the time, the fact was that the collective experiences of Moses' life had prepared him for God's call.

Here's the reason for retelling this story from Moses' life: when you finish your studies at North Park people will want to know what is in your hand.

At first you'll answer by saying, "This is my diploma—I have a bachelor's degree." While this will be true, it won't quite satisfy as an answer. People will want to know more. What did you study? What experiences most shaped your work? Where were you most challenged? Who did you learn from? How did achieving this degree change your life?

On one level, the diploma you will receive at graduation from North Park will be just like everyone else's diploma. It will carry the name of the school and the degree you earned. On another level, however, your diploma will be your own, marked very clearly by your specific life experiences over these years.

You see, your task is not so much to complete a degree as to make that degree your own, to mark your walking stick as truly yours. You're at a special moment in life. This is a time like no other. Now is the time to make your walking stick your own. Now is the time to take your staff on a host of adventures and to let each adventure leave its mark on your walking stick. You have time, indeed you have the responsibility, to make your degree, to make your course of learning, your own.

You've chosen to spend these years at North Park. I applaud your choice! But more important than choosing a university to attend is deciding how the years you spend in this learning community will mark what is in your hand? How will your life story be shaped by your presence among us?

As a learning community at North Park we are distinctively Christian; we are intentionally urban; we are purposefully multicultural. Over your time at North Park you'll come to know what we mean by these three and why they are important to us, and to you.

During your years at North Park your walking stick will be marked by these three. Indeed, your life will be transformed through your days and years in this learning community by these three ideals. The transformation won't necessarily happen in the ways you now expect, but it will happen. And the result may surprise you just as it surprised Rebecca, Tyler, Kelli, and Suzana.

### Rebecca

Early in her college studies Rebecca enrolled first in one school and then another. Though capable academically she didn't take especially well to either institution. Then she discovered North Park. What was she looking for? In her words: "I wanted to live and learn in an urban center. I wanted to play my music with people from around the world. I wanted to learn from people living in the school's neighborhood and to know students and traditions from around the world."

Rebecca found what she was looking for at North Park, and then some. This summer her portrait graced the cover of our university magazine, the North Parker. She became the first student in the history of the North Park to receive a nationally recognized Fulbright award. And with this award she left Chicago just 20 days ago to spend the coming year, the first year following her graduation from North Park, using her love of music and her skill as a folk and bass guitarist to teach English to secondary school students in Indonesia.

## Tyler

While at North Park Tyler sang in nearly every vocal ensemble, played keyboard for a host of groups, jammed on his trombone with the jazz band, learned more music theory than he ever thought possible, and in his senior year fell in love with conducting. In a few months he expects to enter graduate school to pursue a career in teaching and conducting at the university level.

But Tyler looked for more from North Park than simply a good education in music. Tyler wanted to renew his life of faith. To this end he took a few courses, visited a number of churches from different Christian traditions, talked with several faculty members about their personal spiritual pilgrimage, and attended chapel more faithfully over four years than nearly any other student.

He didn't really find what he was looking for, however, until one evening toward the end of his junior year. He dropped into a campus lecture by a guest speaker, Phyllis Tickle. She had his ear that evening, and over the course of the following summer Tyler read a couple of books Tickle has written about prayer through the monastic tradition of the divine hours.

Following that summer Tyler returned to North Park for his senior year ready to offer a gift to our campus community. One day each week he invited anyone who was interested to gather with him for a few minutes at noontime to pray in the tradition of the divine hours. He had found a spiritual home in this ancient prayer tradition and during his final year at the University he shared this as a special gift with many on our campus. Through Tyler's commitment and dedication one day each week North Park became a place with a special focus on prayer.

## Kelli

A good student in her own right, with majors in Spanish and education, Kelli too found a special place at North Park. After sharpening her Spanish skills in the classroom, she spent a semester during her junior year in North Park's program in Morelia, Mexico. In this setting she saw life, and she saw her faith, from a new perspective—she was now a stranger, an immigrant, living in a foreign land. She learned to see people differently than she had ever seen them before. And in doing so she learned to see herself, and God, as never before.

When she returned to North Park for her senior year Kelli quickly discovered that though she was now back on her familiar campus speaking her first language there were a host of people living in the neighborhoods around the campus who were strangers in a foreign land. And when she listened, she heard these strangers calling her name.

Kelli returned their call by asking "Who am I?" And that question brought to her the challenge to be the student director of North Park's Urban Outreach program during her senior year. Even while taking on a full schedule of courses to complete her

undergraduate studies, Kelli directed the weekly involvement of over 350 North Park students in volunteer capacities through an array of churches and social service agencies across the city—tutoring at-risk youth, assisting the elderly, feeding the hungry and homeless, working with refugees, laboring with Habitat for Humanity, organizing community basketball games, being neighbors to strangers. After all this, imagine what Kelli has in her hand today.

### Suzana

When she was six years old war broke out in Suzana's country. She knows the sounds of bombs exploding nearby; she recognizes the fear of death; she remembers the pangs of hunger; she recalls the loss of family, home, and possessions.

When Suzana was 13 years old war made her a refugee in a foreign land. Over the course of months she traveled from her family's home in Kosovo, Serbia to a new community, a new nation, a new language, in the Rogers Park neighborhood of Chicago. The good people at Catholic Charities extended love and hospitality to her family, helped them get settled, find jobs, and start the long process of becoming American citizens.

Without a single English word in her vocabulary Suzana enrolled as a ninth grader at Sullivan High School. By the beginning of her sophomore year in high school she had transferred out of the English as a Second Language curriculum and moved into grade-level classes. By her senior year she was at the top of her high school class in English and had begun to think about attending college. A high school guidance counselor suggested North Park University as a good option.

Now four years later Suzana is a college graduate. She completed a communications major and rounded out her course load with classes in psychology and advanced Spanish. As a communications major she took full advantage of North Park's location in Chicago, leading to an internship with a local Chicago CBS correspondent. Under the leadership of this mentor Suzana became a participating investigator for a series of news stories on the practice of towing cars illegally and pocketing the fines for personal gain. Suzana and the team she worked with named the players and exposed their tactics.

Suzana's commitment to journalism results from her childhood in a war-torn nation. Now multi-lingual, Suzana dreams of the opportunity to be a war correspondent, someone who ventures into the fray of conflict, explores the facts, and communicates the news to those who need so desperately to hear. She will become a journalist because of what she holds in her hand.

When she first came to North Park Rebecca wasn't looking to spend a year in Indonesia, Tyler didn't imagine he would influence campus prayer life, Kelli didn't think she'd lead a 350-student volunteer organization, and Suzana didn't imagine a life in

journalism. But each was transformed, each embarked on a journey toward living a life of significance and service.

Perhaps most importantly, each of these four discovered that at North Park they did not need to go it alone. They discovered that learning is best done in the company of others, and at North Park there are many others—faculty and staff who teach and mentor, peers who love and challenge, Chicagoans who live and work in our neighborhood. These formed the learning community for Rebecca, Tyler, Kelli, and Suzana, and these too are ready to form a learning community for you at North Park.

Here, then, is my question to you: Are you ready to enter this learning community? Are you ready to cross the threshold from prospective student to North Park student? Are you ready to join the people in whose presence you will mark what you will have in your hand for the rest of your life?

I believe you are ready. And it is for this reason that we have gathered. We want to symbolically transfer you from being an applicant for study at North Park to being an actual student at North Park. We want to pray for you, and for your family, at this moment of transition and change. And then we will invite all of you to follow the faculty as they leave this auditorium. Outside the faculty will form a receiving line to welcome and embrace you as you cross the threshold into the learning community which is North Park University.

A few years from now at commencement each of you will cross a platform to greet me. I will extend my right hand to congratulate you on an important accomplishment in your life, and then with my left hand I will give you a North Park diploma. This degree will be marked by the University, but the degree will also be marked by the choices you've made, the experiences you've embraced, the people on this campus and across the city of Chicago you have chosen as teachers and mentors. This degree will be yours, to have in your hand for the rest of your life, a life of significance and service.

Welcome to the adventure of learning at North Park University.