
**New Student Convocation
August 19, 2009**



David L. Parkyn, President

Three years ago Linda and I moved to North Park and the city of Chicago. I knew very little about the University but I thought I had a fairly good grasp on the city. Cubs and White Sox, Bulls and Bears, Sears and Wrigley, Daley and Daley, Capone and Dillinger, O'Hare and Midway, Northwestern and North Park. There was a beautiful lakefront, snarled freeways, the Magnificent Mile, and the Museum Campus. I knew this city.

We arrived on July 1 and quickly took up residence in our new home. But by the next day I was lost. I began to ask directions, and to my great dismay I discovered that people in Chicago speak a foreign language. Instead of saying "turn left or right" they say "go north or south, east or west." Instead of giving a street address they name a neighborhood. Instead of identifying freeways by interstate numbers (like 90 or 94) they give them names – Dan Ryan, Kennedy, Eisenhower, Edens.

I was lost so I asked for directions. I listened to the directions, and I was still lost.

"Not a problem," I thought. I'm a lover of maps so I bought an atlas of the city, 300 pages of detailed maps of every street and freeway in Chicagoland. This helped, sometimes a great deal. But it was also frustrating and often dangerous. I was so intent on getting where I wanted to go that I missed much of the journey, and with one hand holding the atlas, the other hand on the steering wheel, and both eyes reading the map, we came close to causing a number of accidents.

On July 5, less than a week after arriving in our new city, Linda turned to me in great exasperation as we headed the wrong way down a one way street and yelled, "Close the damn map and just enjoy being lost."

I was hurt – I love maps and can't imagine driving without one.

And I was confused – I hate being lost so how could I ever enjoy it?

But, it turns out that Linda was right. No so much about the map, but about being lost.

Settling into a new place requires getting lost. If you fear getting lost you'll never venture out and you'll never know the neighborhood. The prerequisite to finding your way is getting lost.

It's now three years later and I've found my way. It seems like I've been lost a thousand times, and the miracle is both that I always make my way home and I've often enjoyed the journey. Today if you ask me for directions I'll even name the expressways and

refer to the points of the compass. I was lost but I've found my way; I'm a Chicagoan and a Viking!

Well, this is your year – your year to get lost and enjoy the journey. And you must get lost, whether you like it or not, because being lost is a prerequisite for learning.

What do I mean by getting lost at college? Simply this: You need to enter a world that is entirely new to you, a world so different you hardly know your way.

This new world might be a classroom where a subject is taught that you've never before studied. Here you'll discover a new world – a world with a new vocabulary, a new way of thinking, a new perspective. In this new world you'll be lost because you won't know the language and you won't immediately recognize the way arguments and data are organized. Enroll in a course like this and you're sure to get lost.

You'll also enter this new world when you meet new people – a roommate from a small town when you're from the city, a classmate who speaks Spanish at home when you're comfortable only in English, a musician when you're more familiar with a science lab, a Muslim when you're a Christian. Meet people like this and you're sure to get lost.

Beyond the campus you also should get lost in the city.

- Begin with something comfortable, like food. Within blocks of the campus you can enjoy hamburgers and hotdogs, panang curry and shawarma, baklava and Swedish pancakes, coco bread and kimchi.
- Choose to carry this a bit further by visiting a Thai or Mexican market and ask someone to explain how to cook a couple of the vegetables you've not seen before.
- Choose to get lost again by winding your way through the economic extremes of the city – talk with the homeless on lower Whacker Drive and meet the stockbrokers at the Chicago Board of Trade.
- If you've never been to an art museum here's your chance to get lost again; perhaps you've always wanted to learn the salsa or the merengue so here's your chance to be lost again; jump on the El and take the Red Line north to Evanston and then south to Chatham, the Green Line to Oak Park and the Pink Line to Cicero, get lost once, and then get lost again.
- Choose to get lost in the presence of God as you visit places of Christian worship where languages from around the world are spoken, and then go on to both synagogues and mosques.

Throughout your journey in the city don't give much attention to where you're going, as the goal in all this is to get lost. And in getting lost you'll discover why at North Park we say, Chicago is our classroom, and all Chicagoans are our teachers.

Perhaps you've noticed that at North Park, other than the temporary construction fence which blocks the entrance to Magnuson Campus Center, we have very few fences. Our parking lots are fenced, simply so we can reserve the spaces; and our riverbank is fenced so you won't be tempted to go for a swim. But short of this, there's nothing to

keep you from venturing out, and there's nothing to stop neighbors from coming to visit. The lack of fences is intentional; it promotes getting lost, it promotes learning.

I like to call this the geography of learning. Settling into a new place requires getting lost. And in your new home – North Park University in the heart of Chicago – you must get lost, whether you like it or not, because being lost is a prerequisite to learning.

But here's some good news about getting lost at college. You've enrolled at North Park University where there are a lot of people to help you find your way when you're lost. We've all been lost – every person who works with me at North Park has been lost, lots of times.

In the next two weeks many of you will realize that in at least one of your courses you're lost. There's no other way to put it. You've ventured into a world that is totally new, you don't know where to turn, you're tempted to get out but you have no idea even how to do this. When that happens here is what you must remember. Every faculty member was once lost in the very classroom in which they now teach. There was a day when each faculty member – whether in psychology, Arabic, organic chemistry, calculus, creative writing, or theology – was new just like you are new. And when they were new they were lost, just like you are lost.

What they did when they were lost is exactly what you must do when you are lost. They sidled up to their teacher at the end of a class period and said two simple words, "I'm lost." When you do this you'll see a great big smile break out on your teacher's face, their eyes will begin to twinkle like you can't imagine, and a few of them will even break into a dance. Why? – Because in you they'll recognize themselves when they were young college students. And when this happens they'll remember the teacher who helped them and they'll in turn be eager to help you. Of course it isn't just our faculty who will respond when you're lost – coaches will coach you, counselors will counsel you, tutors will tutor you, pastors will shepherd you – all because your very state of being lost reminds them of when they were lost and someone helped them.

"I'm lost." That's all you need to say, and in saying this you should count your time at college a success rather than a failure, because in getting lost you're on your way to learning.

So, keep your eyes peeled as the school year begins. Let whatever and whoever is near be a magnet to draw you in and to get you lost. When you're lost you'll find things, meet people, and learn skills you never would have discovered if you hadn't gotten lost.

This is your year – your year to get lost and to enjoy the journey of learning in this place. And you must get lost, whether you like it or not, because getting lost is a prerequisite for learning.

As you leave this auditorium and cross the threshold to your life as a college student, be sure to remember Linda's words to me for they will serve you well just as they did me: "Close the map and enjoy being lost."