
A Voice of One's Own
University Commencement
December 11, 2009



David L. Parkyn, President

My grandson, William David, just two years old, made his debut film appearance this past summer on Facebook. He charmed the world with his renditions of several well-known songs. His current greatest hit is "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star."

He's my grandson so of course I've been impressed. But what is really amazing is that Will learned to sing several songs, each of them with a reasonably complex array of vocabulary, before he learned to speak a single meaningful word. He found his voice before he could meaningfully speak.

Will doesn't know what "twinkle" means; in fact he's probably never heard it other than in this song. The same is true for "wonder," "diamond," "above," "world," "bright." The video was recorded when Will had just turned two, when he was not yet speaking in any fashion other than to voice sounds recognized by only his parents to mean "mommy" and "daddy." He memorized an entire tune and text before he spoke a single word. He sang before he spoke; he memorized and recited lines of poetry before he could utter a single word of his own. He discovered his voice before he could meaningfully speak.

My grandson, William David, is named for me, but he is first named for his great-grandfather. My father-in-law, the other William in our clan, is well regarded in our family for his ability to recite from memory. To this day, at 83 years, he will spontaneously break out in Antony's funeral oration for Caesar, verse learned in a ninth grade Latin course:

Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears;
I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him.
The evil that men do lives after them;
The good is oft interred with their bones;
So let it be with Caesar. ...

Dad renders the complete oration, ending with these words:

. . . Bear with me;
My heart is in the coffin there with Caesar,
And I must pause till it come back to me.

Both young Will and his great-grandfather William will be visiting with us for Christmas this year. I expect to be entertained with a full-fledged poetry slam.

Yet, the story of the developing voice of young Will and the aging voice of great-grandfather William actually goes further than this.

During the recent Thanksgiving holiday I was with my father-in-law, great-grandfather William for a few days. He and I rose early one morning that weekend, before all others in the house. We met in the kitchen where I prepared a simple breakfast for the two of us and then we got to work. In the quiet of that Saturday morning we got to work on a voice recording.

Great-grandfather William made a recording for great-grandson Will. A recording in his own voice of the popular verse, “’Twas the Night Before Christmas.” We used a technology sold this year by Hallmark in which this popular Christmas poem can be read and recorded in one’s own voice. In this way, wherever Will is he can have his great-grandfather read to him, in his own voice.

Listen for just a moment. (Play short part of page one.)

With the inventive combination of printed pages and a built-in record and play device Will, who lives in Massachusetts, will be able to turn the pages of this book and hear the story read by his great-grandfather, who lives in Pennsylvania, in his own voice.

Voice. Voice connects us to others. Voice communicates.

Yet it is more than this. Voice shapes community. Voice tells story. Voice makes meaning. Voice gives identity. In moments of idealism we call our careers, our professions, a vocation, a calling, a voice speaking from within us to those around us.

When young Will opens his Christmas gift he will hear a voice. But he will hear more than this. He will hear and recognize his great-grandfather, he will know the voice who speaks this popular Christmas poem.

Psychologist and author Mary Pipher, in her 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 of all of who we are.

Your task as a student has been to discover your voice. To learn who you are, to identify the commitments which will guide your life, to explore the place and community in which you will speak, to determine how you will make this a better place and a more loving world. Your task as a student has been to discover your voice, to know your vocation.

Your responsibility as a graduate moves beyond this. Your responsibility now is to let your life speak—to live your voice; to change your world by being present in it; to be significant; to serve.

In other venues, some of you have previously heard me say that while learning always is a noble endeavor, learning is most noble when used to benefit others. Today, this is your opportunity. To take what you have learned over your years at North Park and to now live your life, to speak your vocation, in the world you enter, consistent with what you have learned. Your opportunity now is to transform the privilege which has been yours as a student, as one who learns, and to recast it as a responsible citizen within the community you now enter. Your opportunity now is to speak, to live, in significance and service.

This will be your voice. It will be a voice learned at North Park University—a voice nurtured by faith, a voice leavened in the city, a voice nourished by the multitude of people from around the world among whom and from whom you have learned.

We Chicagoans are quite proud these days of our city's stunning lakefront of public parks, gardens, lagoons, marinas, and beaches. It is unique among the world's great cities. We owe it primarily to one man, city planner and architect Daniel Burnham. In his famous Chicago Plan of 1909, Burnham spoke with a prophetic voice which forever changed the face of this city. By reorienting the city to face the lake and by setting aside vast tracks of land for flower beds, fountains, and public parks Burnham declared that "every citizen should be within walking distance of a park."

Now one hundred years later in 2009, your year of graduation from North Park University, the city of Chicago has celebrated his voice. Burnham's was a single voice, a single life. Yet his was a voice which sought change and environmental justice for all people. He dared to dream big dreams because the cause demanded only big dreams. "Make no little plans," Burnham said, "They have no magic to stir man's blood."

You too must make no little plans for your life. Your voice must be bold. Your voice must envision a better world, a world which is more just, more loving, more hope-filled. Our faith demands it. Our communities, both large and small, near and far, need it. Our people—all of them—are depending on it.

You know your voice. From this night forward, speak. Speak your voice learned at North Park University. Speak with significance; live in service.