
**New Student Convocation
August 24, 2010**



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Some years ago I picked up a book by Nancy Pearl, a librarian in Seattle. Its title is *Book Lust*. The book offers a librarian's answer to the question, "Have you read any good books lately?"

I imagine some of you like to read books a great deal and others are less fond of reading. Some of you enjoy reading but prefer a digital tablet format rather than paper and print. Some of you like a good story but would prefer to see the story unfold on a DVD rather than read it in a book. Some of you think the only really good way of telling a story is through live theater. If we define "reading" as broadly as these various means we probably are all active readers of one sort or another.

In the preface to her book Nancy Pearl writes briefly about reading. This is what she says:

Reading has always brought me pure joy. I read to encounter new worlds and new ways of looking at our own world. I read to enlarge my horizons, to gain wisdom, to experience beauty, to understand myself better, and for the pure wonderment of it all. I read and marvel over how writers use language in ways I never thought of. I read for company, for escape. Because I am incurably interested in the lives of other people, both friends and strangers, I read to meet myriad folks and enter their lives.

Whenever I begin reading a new book, I am embarking on a new, uncharted journey with an unmarked destination. I never know where a particular book will take me, toward what others books I will be led.

I'm intrigued by these brief thoughts on reading for two reasons. First, it seems to me, what Pearl writes about reading is equally true about learning. It's possible to substitute the word "learn" in her paragraphs each time she uses the word "read." And this should interest us today because this is the first day of school...your first day of learning at North Park.

Let's test out this substitution of "learn" for "read." "I learn to encounter new worlds and new ways of looking at our own world. I learn to enlarge my horizons, to gain wisdom, to experience beauty, to understand myself better, and for the pure wonderment of it all." I hope this sounds familiar to you, that it mirrors the dreams you've had during the past year about the adventure you are embarking on this year as a college student. In coming to North Park I hope you are filled with a deep passion for learning.

The second thing I'm intrigued by is Pearl's notion that reading a book often leads to reading another book, and then another still. In this same way, I believe, learning one thing often leads to another discovery, and then yet another. Learning, like reading, is an adventure with an uncharted journey and an unmarked destination.

I remember a special time when as a young boy the step I took to learn one thing actually led me on a detour in which I learned something quite different.

One summer morning when I was a young adolescent I skipped through the kitchen of our home on the way out of the house to play with friends. I wound past the cookie jar, and just as I was leaving the kitchen I heard my father's voice. "Son," he said, "where are you going?" His voice startled me as I hadn't seen him in the room. I looked around quickly, didn't see him still, and started to leave again. As he heard my footsteps near the door, dad called out again, "Son." I looked around the kitchen more carefully, and then I saw him. My father was on his hands and knees with his head stuck into the counter under the kitchen sink.

He invited me to join him. There were two doors to the cabinet and if I stuck my head through the other one I could learn how to repair the sink drain. Of course this was less an invitation from my father and more a directive, so I dropped down beside him and stuck my head into the other cabinet, side-by-side with my father to check out the drain.

Dad had taken the pipes apart, and after he cleaned the drain we started to reassemble the parts of the sink's underbelly. He asked me to hand him one of the pieces, and when I did he responded quickly, "No, I need the male." I wasn't sure what he meant but I grabbed another piece I thought he was pointing to and gave it to him.

After a few minutes dad decided it was time for a break so we backed out of the cabinet. He told me to grab us a few more cookies and we sat side-by-side on the floor enjoying the moment.

When we were on the third cookie, dad pulled out the various parts we still had to reassemble—a couple of extensions, an elbow, a coupling, and two valves—and he spread them on the floor in front of us. He looked at the parts of the drain we had yet to repair, and then asked me a question which caught me entirely off guard. He asked: "Do you know why plumbers label some parts male and others female?" And with this simple question, my learning about how to repair the drain of a kitchen sink was transformed, by this wise teacher, into a basic sex education lesson I've long remembered.

You see, learning is an adventure with an undisclosed destination. Just when you think you're learning about sinks and drains you discover human sexuality.

Here's what I can promise you on the first day of college: your experience in learning at North Park will surprise you just as much as I was surprised that day when I stuck my head into the cabinet under the kitchen sink.

- The first course in your major may lead you to an entirely different major.
- The relationship born earlier today when you met your roommate for the first time may take you to places you've never before imagined.
- The benediction offered on Sunday night in CollegeLife may ever-so-gently prompt you closer to God, or to others.
- The ride you take later this week on the EI to discover the city of Chicago may open a grand new world of adventure.
- The disappointment you endure when you fail to make the varsity soccer team may show you an inner strength you never before drew from.
- The smile she gives you when you pass on the sidewalk may bring you to a sudden about face.
- The internship during your junior year may introduce you to your first employer.
- The team project you undertake this semester in Dialogue I may be the place where you meet your new best friend, or discover your major, or begin to understand yourself in a whole new way.

This is the adventure you begin today. Learning enlarges our horizons. Learning makes us wise. Learning introduces us to beauty. Learning makes us better. Learning helps us escape. Learning leads us toward God. Learning exposes our shortcomings. Learning builds character. Learning transforms us into the person God intends.

Learning is a grand adventure, “an uncharted journey with an unmarked destination.” This is now your sacred calling—to become the person God desires through a deep passion for learning in all its dimensions, following wherever it may lead. This is the threshold you cross today.

Welcome to the adventure of learning at North Park University—an uncharted journey with an unmarked destination.