Find Your Voice New Student Convocation August 24, 2011



David L. Parkyn, President

I like to receive gifts—don't we all?—and this summer I received a special one. Carl Balsam, who serves North Park as our Executive Vice President and CFO, walked into my office one day in July with a small shopping bag in his hand. "I found something I immediately knew you would like," he said to me as he handed the bag in my direction.

On opening the bag I found a black tee-shirt emblazoned with just a few short words in white and red letters. On the front of the shirt it read, "Find your voice."

Carl knows that voice is an important metaphor for me, one I speak of frequently. And one you should hear about on your first day at North Park. Narrowly defined, voice is what one speaks. More broadly, however, voice represents all of who we are.

Voice communicates, it connects us to others, it shapes community, it tells story, it makes meaning, it gives identity. Voice belongs to each of us. My voice is uniquely mine; your voice is unique to you.

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.

Six years ago in my inauguration address I wonder whether a university might have a voice, whether North Park University has a voice. Since that time we've worked hard to find our voice as a university.

We've discovered that part of our voice is a voice of faith. We take faith seriously at North Park. It's an eclectic and inclusive voice of faith, to be sure, because this voice of faith is shaped and spoken by each member of this community. We come to faith and we grow in faith through many means—through reading scripture, certainly, but also through worshipping together and learning together and living together. Strange as it may seem we also come to faith and grow in faith by walking the sidewalks of this city—by rubbing shoulders with people of faith gathered in our neighborhoods from places around the world. This faith nurtures our voice as a university.

At North Park we've also discovered that part of our voice is a voice of the city. The city of Chicago is a sanctuary, a holy place. It's a place in which millions of people interact each day. It's a place of music and the arts, of work and manufacturing, of trade and retailing, of healing and learning, of technological advance and growing families. It doesn't take long for every student at North Park to learn that Chicago is our classroom and all Chicagoans are our teachers. This city leavens our voice as a university.

And at North Park we've also discovered that part of our voice is a voice of many languages and cultures. Our campus is located in what is widely regarded as the most diverse zip code in America—a neighborhood as myriad as the world itself. We're privileged to live and learn here. One-half of the residents of our immediate neighborhoods are foreign-born. The people who live in this zip code speak more than 150 languages. In the midst of this human and cultural complexity we recognize and embrace, indeed we celebrate, the image of God revealed in others. These many languages and cultures nourish our voice as a university.

This is the voice of North Park University: nurtured by an inclusive faith, leavened in the sacred space of a global city, and nourished by the complexity of language, culture, and people across our campus and into our neighborhoods.

And it is in this same place, among these same people, that you must now find your voice. This is your sacred obligation: to continue your life's journey, to uncover who you are and want to be, to exercise your voice.

Now, back to the tee-shirt, for there's more to the story. Carl Balsam found the tee-shirt during a visit to Amazwi, a gallery of contemporary African art located in Saugatuck, Michigan. Last year Walter Petersen, who owns and runs Amazwi, wanted to better promote the gallery among the thousands of tourists who visit Saugatuck each year, but he knew he didn't have the expertise required to design and launch a good marketing campaign.

So he contacted a good friend, Lisa Wells, and asked for her help. Lisa is the principal at Wells Consulting, a Chicago-based marketing and communications firm specializing in services to corporate communication departments. She consults frequently for companies such as Kraft Foods and the Tribune Companies.

Lisa wanted to help Walter with this project, but she also knew this small art gallery could never afford her services. So she introduced him to another resource—students in a marketing class at North Park University. You see, Lisa is one of our practitioner faculty: people who work full-time in their respective professions here in Chicago and then bring their highly engaged expertise to students at North Park as part of our cadre of part-time, but very capable, faculty members.

Mr. Petersen visited Professor Wells' marketing class and there he met a small group of North Park students who enthusiastically responded to his need. They did the requisite research, they engaged in the creative process, they tested their ideas in several markets, and eventually they recommended a marketing campaign with a theme based on the indigenous meaning of the gallery's name, "amazwi," the African Zulu word for "voices."

Find your voice. This has become a great marketing campaign for a niche gallery of African art.

It's also a great mandate for your time at North Park. This is your sacred calling: to find your voice, to discover your place in life, to know who you are and who you belong to. To prepare to live, both with significance and in service.

Welcome to North Park University, a place prepared especially for you, a place where you will find your voice.