
**New Student Convocation
August 22, 2012**

**NORTH PARK
UNIVERSITY**
CHICAGO

David L. Parkyn, President

When I tell people across the country that I'm from North Park University in Chicago they often are curious about our campus. What must it be like, they wonder, for a small university to be located in the third largest city in America?

I know what they're thinking. Buildings pushed tightly up against each other, acres of concrete all around, expressways jammed with traffic, streets filled with litter, walls covered with graffiti, sidewalks packed with people.

"What must it be like for a small university to be located in a big city?" they ask. And I respond, "Oh, it's really quite pleasant." They look at me with a skeptical eye, as though saying, "Pleasant isn't the first word I'd use to describe a small campus in a big city."

This is a prompt to say more so I introduce them to Daniel Burnham, the now world-renowned city planner and landscape architect whose dream was for there to be a park within walking distance of every house and apartment building in the city. I tell them our campus is a park, with lots of trees and a river running through it.

Our campus is a pleasant place, with a water feature and marvelous foliage. But it hasn't always been like this. I suppose the river has always been here, but it hasn't always been the controlled flow of water it is today. In fact, there's an early photo of our campus taken when Old Main was the only building and the river had flooded all the way up to the back steps of the building. In this photo a couple of adventurous students are pictured in a canoe, docking at the steps of Old Main.

There's something else curious about this photograph, however. There are no trees. The same thing holds true for other early photographs of Old Main. Near the steps there are a couple of new plants, hardly six feet tall, but beyond this, both close to the building and off into the horizon, there are no trees; there are only farm fields.

It's quite different now. How did a field cleared for farming become a campus of hundreds of trees in the middle of the country's third largest city? We planted them. I don't mean I had anything to do with this; I use "we" in an inclusive sense. When you join North Park you become a North Parker and as a North Parker you can claim as your own all good things done by any North Parker who has come before you. We planted these trees.

We planted them a long time ago, and we planted them just a few years ago. In fact, Carl Wistrom who heads our physical plant office estimates that during your lifetime we've planted nearly 300 trees—that's 18 trees in each of your 18 years.

This planting of trees on North Park's campus reminds me of the first three verses of Psalm 1. Here the poet writes:

Happy are those
 Who do not follow the advice of the wicked,
or take the path that sinners tread,
 or sit in the seat of scoffers;
but their delight is in the law of the Lord,
 and on his law they meditate day and night.
They are like trees
 planted by streams of water,
which yield their fruit in its season,
 and their leaves do not wither.
In all that they do, they prosper.

I don't imagine the person who wrote these words ever visited North Park's campus, and especially not since the river bank has been contained and the campus canopy has been enriched by so many trees. Yet the poet must have been sitting in just such a place to write this Psalm.

Not only does the Psalm remind me of our campus, more than this, the metaphor used by the poet describes so beautifully what happens at North Park. "Trees . . . planted by streams of water . . . which yield their fruit in its season."

As a student at North Park you are like a tree planted along a stream of water. Here your roots are to be strengthened, your branches are to be pruned (that hurts a little), and your first fruit is to be harvested (that's simply delicious). And then there will come a day when we will transplant you as a tree—all your friends will say you're graduating, but really transplanting is such a better word. At your transplanting we will uproot you from this park along the banks of a river so you can be re-planted in another park, some nearby and some in more distant locations.

The poet also reminds us that as our young trees grow, and as they are transplanted, they will prosper. This doesn't mean you'll get rich (though if that happens to you I trust you'll be good to your alma mater). No, to prosper means you'll become prepared for a life of significance and service.

Now you look puzzled. If prosper doesn't mean to get rich, what does it mean to live with significance and in service? Well, that's why you've been planted on this campus along the banks of a river. As your roots run deep in the soil for nourishment, as your branches are pruned, as the wind blows (this is the windy city, after all) and bends you this way and that, as your leaves dry and drop to the ground in the cold of winter and

bud forth again in the warmth of spring, you will bear fruit and in bearing fruit you will discover more and more of life and as you discover more of life you'll discover more of God, and as you discover more of God you'll uncover your place in the world and your way to make the world better, a place more aligned with God's intent.. When you are ready to do this on your own we'll transplant you to bear your fruit in its season, to live with significance and in service.

You're a North Parker. Grow tall. Be pruned. Bear fruit. Prosper. Be transplanted.
Amen.