
**New Student Convocation
August 21, 2013**



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Four words. A noun, a verb, an article, and a pronoun. Four simple words. That's all it took to inspire a nation.

Four words that inspired a nation fifty years ago; four words that have inspired each succeeding generation.

Four words: perhaps the best known four words in all of American history. Better known than "four score and seven;" better known than "we hold these truths;" better known than "A more perfect union."

Fifty years ago—fifty years ago from next Wednesday, the third day of classes in your first semester at North Park—Martin Luther King greeted a crowd of hundreds of thousands on the mall in Washington, DC, on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial.

Fifty years ago, Martin Luther King proclaim, "I have a dream."

"I have a dream," he declared, "that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal.'"

"I have a dream," he professed, "that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."

"I have a dream," he trumpeted, "that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together."

How did Martin Luther King come to this dream? Certainly it came over the course of his entire life, short as this was. Yet it was a dream, historians tell us, rooted in substantial measure by what he learned, by who he met, and by what he experienced while in school.

In a short work titled "The Book of My Lives," which all first-year students will be reading in the next couple of weeks, author Aleksandar Hemon describes his undergraduate years in this way: "I'm afraid," Hemon writes, "we were not taking advantage of the great opportunities provided to us by this particular moment in human history." He might have said, "I'm afraid we weren't making the most of our time in college."

At North Park we're dedicated to making sure this doesn't happen to you. In words already becoming very familiar to you, at North Park we are committed to a single purpose: "to prepare students for lives of significance and service."

What does this mean, to live with significance and in service? It means this: to live with a dream. Our purpose at North Park is to help you discover your dream.

How do you do this? Where do you discover your dream?

In service. That's right, discovering your dream starts in serving others. And during your years at North Park you'll be invited, encouraged, cajoled, sometimes even required, to serve others. Call it service, call it loving your neighbor as Jesus does, call it loving kindness as the Hebrew prophet does—call it anything you like but get ahold of it because discovering your dream starts in serving others.

Jesus told people they would find God, they would discover their dream, when they fed the hungry, gave water to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, cared for the sick, visited those in prison. When the Hebrew prophet commands that we love kindness it wasn't an esoteric ideal—it had a reality rooted in the lives of those around us. See someone who is hungry, offer them food. Or thirsty, share your water. Or in need of winter clothing, give them your coat. Or ill, take their temperature. Or in prison, make a visit. Or new to the neighborhood, open your borders.

Serve, North Park proclaims, and in service you'll begin to discover your dream.

But what of significance? Here's the secret of significance: join your service with your learning, join your service with intellectual curiosity and insight, and you'll uncover significance. Bring the two together, let one inform the other, and then reverse the order. Learning of this magnitude frames a dream.

We are to clothe the naked, yet in doing so we must ask why in our world some have so much while others have next to nothing.

We are to feed the hungry, yet in doing so we must ask why millions in some countries die of hunger while millions in other countries battle obesity.

We are to heal the sick, yet in doing so we must ask why in a country with some of the best medical resources in the world so many lack the ability – we can't insurance – to access this care.

We are to care for the poor, yet in doing so we must ask whether the poor are poor by choice or poor because other people have more than their fair share.

The thirsty? What do we know about being thirsty in a land that packages water in nice small bottles when all we need to do is run to the closest spigot for fresh, clean water.

Not so in much of the rest of the world. We must ask, what does it mean to give water to those who are thirsty in a world of unclean water?

Linking serving to learning, and intellectual curiosity to serving. We call this significance. The Hebrew prophet called it doing justice.

The Hebrew prophet also links these two—loving kindness and doing justice, service and significance—to our encounter with God. “What does the Lord require of you,” the prophet asks rhetorically. And then answers: “To do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God.”

That’s our purpose: to help you bring these three together—our walk with God, our love of others, our reflection on the world around us—to bring these three together and frame a dream, a dream for the rest of your life.

It happened to Martin Luther King. It can happen to you.

Some of you have been in college already for a year or two, for others today is your first day of college. It makes no difference. All of you will have the opportunity to attend commencement two years, three years, four years, perhaps five years from now. In this same auditorium. With these same people and many others. Your name will be called, you’ll climb steps to the platform, and you’ll walk across to greet me. I’ll have two things for you—a diploma and a hand shake.

But you and I will also exchange a few words. My words are very simple. You’ll hear me say, “Congratulations Tim.” “Congratulations Fatima.” “Ingrid, congratulations.” Ernesto, congratulations.” And then quickly it will be your turn to respond. And like generations of North Park graduates who have come before you, you’ll be tempted, because your parents taught you so well, to say “thank you.” But on this occasion, these will be the wrong words. It is better, much better, for you to quote Martin Luther King.

On the day of your graduation from North Park:

Congratulations Tim. – I have a dream.

Fatima, congratulations. – I have a dream.

Congratulations Ingrid. – I have a dream.

Ernesto, congratulations. – I have a dream.

To live with significance and in service. This is the purpose of learning at North Park. To do justice, to love kindness, to walk with God. To have a dream.

As of today you’re a North Parker. Now start making your dream.