# FROM THE DESK OF PRESIDENT DAVID L. PARKYN

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#### A GRAND WEEKEND

In early May, the community of learners at North Park celebrated in grand style!

It was commencement weekend and proved to be a time our graduates and their families will long remember. I'll long remember it as well, and so will all those who work with me at North Park—how could we respond otherwise after walking alongside our students during their time at North Park?

The highlights of the weekend are many, but two are especially notable. We host a Baccalaureate Service on Friday evening. This event is held in an off-campus location (this year we gathered at Fourth Presbyterian Church on North Michigan Avenue) and brings together graduates and families from all our programs—undergraduate, graduate, and seminarian. The Commencement Program also is memorable to each of our graduates and their families. At North Park there are three commencement programs (one for each of our levels of study), yet we host them on a single day to convey the fact that we are a single learning community, a university.

I feel honored to share this "commencement" year with the class of 2010, in that I arrived at North Park four years ago just as they did. During this time, it has been my privilege to journey with a group of undergraduates who arrived as first-year students, at the same time that I began my service to North Park. This spring they graduated, and I feel that in a certain way, I did as well. I am still here, of course, but I now feel I belong to North Park in the way many of our graduates do after having been part of the University community as students. Some of you may identify with me in this!

During my four years here, I've discovered that the Baccalaureate Service is my favorite moment of the academic year. There are many reasons for this, but I'm certain that one of these rests in the opportunity I have to speak with all our graduates together, at a special time when they are listening in a special way.

What do I say to this group? Well, each year I prepare a distinct message, something freshly minted for this particular group, something coming from my heart to theirs at this once-in-a-lifetime moment. Here's an excerpt from my comments this year:

Very early in life we learn to recognize voice. Here's the evidence: even before she masters how to hold her infant, a mother can calm her young child with the mere whisper of her voice. Why? Because voice communicates. Voice connects us to each other—mother to child, teacher



to student, lover to loved one. Voice makes meaning. Voice identifies. Voice establishes relationship. Voice connects.

Voice, of course, is worthless unless someone listens. We don't speak for ourselves—we speak for others. For voice to be true it must be heard.

Life transitions, like the one we celebrate tonight, are moments ripe for listening. On this night before you receive a North Park diploma and then enter the next part of your life's journey, you would be wise to listen, to listen to voice of God.

Yet listening, especially listening to God, is not easy. God doesn't shout. Rather, in my life I've found that God is much like the teacher who enters a classroom filled with kindergartners having a grand time playing together. To get their attention, the teacher quietly sits on the floor in the middle of the room and begins to whisper each student's name. In my life, I've discovered that God whispers, so if I am to hear God's voice, I must be listening carefully.

As I've listened to God's whisper in my life, here is what I've learned about this process:

God's whisper sometimes confuses before it clarifies. This is not because God is wrong. No, it is because we are not always wise to hear clearly and to understand rightly.

When God whispers, we should listen not so much for information as for story...for the story of our life. God's whispers paint a pathway to follow. God's whispers are mirrors in which to get a good, true look at ourselves. God's whispers shed light on the still, darkened horizon of our life story.

God often whispers through the voices of other people. We are companions in the journey of life; we travel together. As we walk this journey, the Word, Jesus Christ, is made flesh in each of us for the benefit of others.

Listening to God's whisper takes time. God's whisper functions in our life like a comma on the written page. It points to the need for pause in our life. Listening well, hearing God's whisper, takes practice because normally we are restless with this sort of punctuation in life.

Yet listening to God can be the most succulent meal we'll ever taste. The psalmist knew this and wrote, "How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey in my mouth." A great meal is enjoyed most fully when we have been part of the kitchen staff, as Marilyn Chandler McEntyre has written, when we have "lifted the lid of the soup pot and savored the smell of the vegetables mingling."

Is it possible to reliably recognize God's voice when we are listening for it? I believe it is. When God whispers your name in the middle of the night, know that it is God who calls. And when you hear God whisper your name, respond as young Samuel did: "Speak, Lord. Your servant is listening."

May God give each of our graduates faith so that in leaving this place they know firmly and with conviction who made them, and why, and for what purpose.

## SEMINARY TRANSITIONAL LEADERSHIP

With the end of the academic year, we also step into a unique moment in the life of our Seminary. After 14 years of leadership, Dr. Jay Phelan has chosen to focus his life work on teaching and writing; he'll stay with us, but assume a different role. In response to this change, a few months ago the Board of Trustees formed a committee to search for a new leader for the Seminary. This search is underway, and will continue through the coming months.

During the 2010–2011 school year, while the Office of the Seminary President is vacant, we'll rely on a senior leadership team to carry most of the responsibilities for daily life at the Seminary. This team includes Linda Cannell, who will continue her responsibilities as Dean of Academics, Deb Auger, who will continue as Dean of Students, and Tim Johnson, who will continue his responsibilities in field education and also assume the role of primary liaison with groups which support the development and well-being of ordained members in the Covenant Church. I'll work closely with this leadership team, as will others in the University's senior leadership group.

We're confident this will be a good year for the Seminary under the guidance of these individuals. We'll care for the day-to-day needs of our students and faculty, we'll model effective working relationships between personnel within the Seminary and across the University, we'll care for administrative and church functions as necessary, and we'll even be able to model for our students an effective and supportive "interim ministry" within this particular faith community.

#### **BOARD SERVICE**

As the Board of Trustees met for their annual spring meeting, we recognized the service of several members who concluded their five-year term of service. These included Paul Aley, Jimmie Alford, Mark Johnson, Tim Nelson, Kristine Strand, and Don Wahlquist. Several of these individuals have served multiple terms, and collectively they represent more than 60 years of Board service. We'll miss their counsel, and will continue to rely on their prayers.

## SPECIAL ACHIEVEMENT

For the third consecutive year, graduates of North Park University have been selected for prestigious Fulbright Awards. Ruth Blidar is the daughter of Romanian immigrants, a fluent Romanian speaker, a history major, and a commuter student who actively explored North Park University's many opportunities for learning and teaching in a multicultural context. Laura Johnson, a biology and Spanish major, has chosen a career in medicine and an avocation in Spanish as means to serving members of America's Spanish-speaking communities. As a result of their respective awards, Ruth will spend this coming year in two communities in Romania and Laura will reside in a small city in Mexico. Both will teach English in established schools abroad.

# A SUMMER PRAYER

Near the end of the Baccalaureate Service, we offered a Prayer of Blessing for our graduates. This was an opportunity to send them on their way, from their days at North Park into the next season of their lives. In turn, I offer portions of this prayer for you, as you enter summer and seek rest and renewal for your body and spirit.

May God give us peace, a lasting peace that dwells in our heart and enables us to comprehend the breadth and length, the height and depth of Christ's love for us.

May God give us leisure, times for refreshment in the course of this busy life, moments to rebuild our body and renew our mind, that our spirit may be open to the goodness of God's creation.

May God grant us a quiet confidence, periods of solitude to restore our strength, seasons of stillness to know that God is God.

Blessings to each of you,

David L. Parkyn

President, North Park University

