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**State of the University Address  
August 2007  
David L. Parkyn, President**



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I remember well Gathering Day one year ago. For Linda and me it was our first official event with the North Park University community. For many of you it was your first time to meet the new president. No doubt we were equally on edge, anticipating the best but also a bit apprehensive about how things would go.

You entered the dining room chatting with friends. Linda and I met you at the door, shook your hand, you introduced yourself, and then we gathered at tables with friends.

The room was nicely decorated with a central feature. One of our staff members in dining services had gotten up early in the morning to craft an ice sculpture of a large Viking ship. It was a beautiful piece of work. Set near the buffet table we all had occasion to see this ice sculpture up close as we filled our plates. Illuminated with blue and gold spot lights it cheered this gathering of the North Park Viking crew.

We enjoyed breakfast – Swedish pancakes of course, along with eggs, salsa and guacamole, bacon, a bit of fruit and some pastries thrown in for good measure.

Faculty and staff members new to the University were introduced. A few people made announcements. And then I was invited to talk with you.

I walked to the podium, straightened my notes, and took a deep breath. My very first word, however, was accompanied by a loud crash behind me. I spun around to see that the tall mast and sail on the Viking Ship had toppled. Immediately a terrifying thought raced through my mind – Is this ship sinking on my first day as captain?

Certainly there was a bit of humor in this coincidence. The heat of the spot lights had melted the ice and the sculpture was breaking apart. And I wondered whether I also would melt under the spot lights directed on my leadership. More seriously, I wondered if I had really done due diligence, did I know the state of this University, was it really on the upward trajectory I had assumed, or was North Park University, our Viking ship, sinking?

Over this past year, as I've come to better understand the recent history of North Park University, I've discovered this is not an unreasonable fear. I've learned that within my adult lifetime this University has seen some very rough waters. We could even describe North Park as having been a seriously damaged sinking ship.

Another thing I've learned during my first year is that most people either don't know or have chosen to forget these very dark days in the recent history of North Park

University. This is not a familiar story, though it should be. So let me retell by referring to just a few pertinent facts.

- In the very late 1970s the cupola on Old Main was dark, the windows were boarded up, and the doors chained shut, the entire building was moth-balled. Wilson Hall was in a similar state of disrepair.
- In 1979, when a decision was made to keep North Park University in Chicago rather than move the campus to the suburbs, undergraduate enrollment surpassed 1300 students. Yet by just 10 years later in 1989 undergraduate enrollment had dropped by over 40% careening to 770 students. During these same years, total enrollment – including undergraduates, seminarians, and continuing studies students – dropped from over 1500 students to a low point of 1042 students in 1990.
- For over a dozen consecutive years from the early 1980s through the mid 1990s the University carried annual operating deficits which in some years exceeded one million dollars. Our blood wasn't blue and gold, this ship was bleeding red.
- In a healthy institution annual drawn-down on the endowment will be 4.5 to 5.0 percent. In both 1989 and 1990 the Viking Ship required an endowment draw-down exceeding 18% to stay afloat. And it wasn't until 1997 that the University approached a relatively stable draw-down of approximately 5.0%.

So, here's a story we should not soon forget: Within the past two decades, this Viking Ship came very close to being a sinking ship.

The good news in all of this is that, though the mast and sails melted from the ice sculpture last year, the North Park University Viking Ship is no longer sinking. The ship has been repaired and we're no longer taking on water. Enrollment is up, the budget is balanced, the endowment is growing, lights burn in Old Main, and the campus facilities have been much improved.

How did this turn-around happen? This about-face evolved by the mercy and grace of God expressed through the lives of many people who cared very deeply for this place and who came to its rescue during those frightful days. A dedicated, visionary, and risk-taking president led the way, supported by a hard-working and creative administrative team. Faculty continued to teach, and to teach well, and staff worked diligently to support students, even though compensation was dreadfully inadequate and too often there were no annual raises. The Board of Trustees was attentive and gave good support to campus initiatives. Alums who remembered their own experience at North Park were brave enough to send their children to this school in spite of its apparent decline. Donors who had many other ways to spend their money chose to give to North Park, and to give abundantly, even though this ship was taking on water and approaching a "mayday" call. The Evangelical Covenant Church continued to allocate a growing unrestricted annual gift to the University. But much more significant

than this was the church's extraordinary and sacrificial unrestricted gifts drawn from a denominational capital campaign and directed specifically to counter significant red ink at the University. Other ministries in the church were not supported as they might have been because the need at North Park was so great and church leaders chose to favor our need over that of others.

All of these actions – by campus leaders, faculty and staff, trustees and church members, alums and donors – all of these actions were risky to the point of irrationality. Anyone of sound mind would have quickly concluded – “This ship is sinking, and I'm not going to go down with it.”

It was risky to the point of irrationality, but look what has happened: The past fifteen years have been nothing short of a miracle (though I have been cautioned by some in my use of this word). No one present on this campus in 1990 could have imagined the North Park University of 2007. Something extraordinary has transpired around us.

Of course there is much more to do. Compensation for all our employees (except for the president) is too low. Some of our student residences need renovation, we need new and improved classrooms, and we have no common place on campus for students and all of us to gather. We are in Chicago but we have not fully embraced the city, and though we are an ethnically diverse university community and growing more so each year too often we are divided and sometimes bitterly so. Our enrollment has increased but we are still not a school of choice.

Nonetheless, our environment has changed in very significant ways. And because our environment has changed our task today is different than it was just 15 years ago. Here's my point. When the ship is close to sinking, the captain, crew and passengers don't have the luxury to spend much time dreaming about where they'd like to go; rather, they dedicate their primary efforts to bailing water and mending the ship. But when the ship is seaworthy, the captain, crew and passengers can more fully consider their future, they can look forward, they can choose to sail toward any number of ports.

Today, our Viking Ship is seaworthy. Now we can, indeed we must, envision a destination, we must dream about where we want to go. Of course, we must be sure our ship remains seaworthy – potential dangers wait in these waters, our mast and sails can still melt and crash upon us. But we must do more than watch the weather and drift with the current. We must set our course.

Ten years ago out of necessity our leaders concentrated their attention on making this ship seaworthy. And as the ship was mended they considered what waters the ship could sail in most successfully.

Today we have two primary tasks. The first is to assure that the ship remains seaworthy. We will do this by proposing and following a strategic plan for the

University. During the fall semester my administrative colleagues and I will outline a plan for North Park that will consider the next five years. Some parts of the plan will guide numerous operational functions and thereby will include targets for enrollment, student/faculty ratios, compensation, facilities improvement and development, fund raising, budget management, educational assessment and institutional effectiveness, and other like concerns. The campus community will participate in developing and commenting on this plan and it will subsequently be presented for endorsement by the Board of Trustees. Following the operational components of this plan will be essential to our continued seaworthiness.

The second task we have is no less important, and it is one I find to be a great deal more interesting and engaging. It too will be reflected in the strategic plan but it is a task I want to address more fully today. It is this: we must dream about and identify our destination, where we want to sail in this Viking ship which is now seaworthy.

So, we must set our course.

### **Setting the Course**

How shall we set our course? My answer may surprise you, perhaps confuse you. I'll speak it nonetheless. We shall set our course as North Park University by first learning, and then telling, our story.

In my inauguration address I spoke of the need to recognize and claim the "voice" of North Park. I described it this way:

Voice communicates. Voice connects us to others. Voice shapes community. Voice tells story. Voice makes meaning. Voice gives identity. And in moments of idealism we call our careers, our professions, a vocation, a calling, a voice speaking from within us to those around us.

I noted further:

Voice is the cry young parents eagerly wait to hear when their infant is first born. Voice is the spoken word, our means of communication as rational beings. But voice is also the style of the writer, the fingerprint of the author. It is syntax and diction; it is punctuation and grammar.

And then I asked:

Might North Park University have a voice? Might North University have syntax and diction, punctuation and grammar? Might North Park University have a fingerprint?

I mean much the same today by referring to our story. Story is how we make meaning of our lives, as individuals but also as communities, and as a university. To

understand this concept of story and its place in the life of an organization such as North Park, listen to excerpts from a recent book by Christiana Baldwin titled *Storycatcher: Making Sense of Our Lives through the Power and Practice of Story*. She writes:

Story is the narrative thread of our experience—not what literally happens but what we make out of what happens, what we tell each other and what we remember. (p. ix)

A bit further:

We make our lives bigger or smaller, more expansive or more limited, according to the interpretation of life that is our story. (p. ix)

Once again:

In the midst of overwhelming noise and distraction, the voice of story is calling us to remember our true selves. (p. xii)

Some pages later:

In the act of telling story, we create a world we invite others into. And in the act of listening to story, we accept an invitation into experiences that are not our own, although they seem to be. . . . Story weaves a sense of familiarity. (p. 7)

Our task as a University is to set our course, to give voice to our story. We need to develop the story we tell ourselves about this place, and we need to tell this story to others. We need to adopt a common set of words, a vocabulary, to tell this story. So we must ask: What are the words which have been, or which will become, the words used to tell the story of North Park University?

In writing this story we will create a narrative thread of our experience as educators and as learners. We will create a world we invite others into. We will sort out from the noise and distraction around us to remember our true self as a University. In our story we will develop a sense of familiarity with who we are, what we do, and why we live in this manner and in this place. We will discover our fingerprint.

In setting our course, in telling our story, we should look to achieve two things:

- To begin, we need to affirm a distinctive, own-able, and sustainable “space” for North Park University in American higher education. We must know who we are and who we want to become, and we need to affirm this story together.
- Furthermore, we need to offer students an education of high quality which reflects the distinctive learning community at North Park University. In studying

at North Park the lives of our students will be formed in many of the same ways and to many of the same ends that student lives are shaped in colleges and universities across our land—they will learn to think and to communicate, to analyze and to synthesize, they will become proficient in a field of study and prepared for a related workplace. BUT through learning at North Park the lives of our students will also be transformed as their development is shaped by what is distinctive to the learning community at North Park University.

Our task is to identify and claim our distinctive space, and determine how student lives will be transformed within this space. This will be our story, and this story will be our vision, the course we will follow. And with this story in place, familiar to each of us, we will be able to focus our energies and our resources on those things—the people, the programs, the structures—that will enable us to achieve this vision, to follow this course, to reach this destination, to transform student lives, both with excellence and with a sense of urgency.

### **Our Story – Identity, Mission and Vision**

The story we tell is not new. It is a story shaped by a strong and lasting heritage, a tradition of 115 years of education at the corner of Foster and Kedzie Avenues in the city of Chicago. Yet this familiar story will be cast in today's learning environment, for the community and world our graduates will live in and to which they are called. Our story will clarify our identity (who we are), make explicit our mission (what our purpose is), and single out the ideals which guide and shape our life together (the vision we follow). In these three we will discover our destination, we will set our course, we will mark our space, we will write our fingerprint.

As I describe these, you will see that I have borrowed very heavily from existing statements which describe North Park and its educational program. Presidents are allowed to plagiarize in this manner! Indeed, effective leadership requires it. Our story must not be my story alone, nor must it be your story alone. It must be our story, a story we tell together. And our story must be drawn from the legacy of those who have come before us.

Here, then, is our story.

#### Identity – Who are we?

North Park University is a mid-size, Christian academic community, sponsored by the Evangelical Covenant Church, offering a comprehensive course of study at the undergraduate and graduate levels.

#### Mission – What is our purpose?

The mission of North Park University is to prepare students for lives of significance and service through liberal arts, professional, and theological education.

### Vision – What ideals guide us?

- Our vision for North Park University begins with three commitments, three ideals which shape the distinctive community which molds the University's academic programs and supportive learning environment. This distinctive community is:
  - Christian – We encompass the full breadth of understanding and expression of Christian faith drawn from the deep heritage of the Church worldwide, even as we welcome students from many faith traditions.
  - Urban – We engage Chicago as our dynamic text and context for learning and service.
  - Culturally Inclusive – We embrace people of national, racial, ethnic and linguistic difference as reflective of the world we live in and the mandate of the Gospel of Jesus.
- Our vision for North Park University is shaped by common values.
  - NPU is a “collegiate university” where learning is advanced through *personal relationships and interpersonal engagement*, and courses of study include an array of academic disciplines in the liberal arts, professional studies, and theological education.
  - NPU is an academic community where *learning* in all its forms—in the classroom and beyond—*is valued* as a gift, joy, and sacred obligation.
  - NPU fosters a personal concern for students and devotion to their *development as whole students*.
  - NPU provides *diverse opportunities which engage students* to learn from and serve alongside people in communities across the city of Chicago and from around the world.
- Within this distinctive academic community, our vision for North Park University culminates with a commitment to fashion a university of uncommon character and enduring excellence where learning is informed by and student lives are transformed through the biblically rooted values of doing justice, loving kindness, and walking with God.

## **Reflective Comments**

What I have just described is not new to us. All of the ideals expressed in these statements of identity, mission and vision have been tenets of North Park University for a long time. In fact, most of the vocabulary is familiar. If anything is different it will be in the way we embrace these statements. Will these be statements found in official documents and then placed on a shelf, or will they become our story, the very threads which form the tapestry of this place? Will these be gratuitous statements used by admissions counselors with parents of prospective students and by the president with promising donors, or will they become our story, the essence of our distinctive educational ethos? Will these statements be appendages to dust off on special occasions or will they be our story, ideals central to the voice of this University? Will these statements be our story, will they set our course, will they define our destination, will they be our fingerprint?

None of you should be surprised by my insistence on these things. It is why I came to North Park, and I believe it is why you came to North Park and have chosen to remain here.

This has been our course; this will continue to be our course. The principle difference between yesterday and tomorrow at North Park is simply this: Yesterday the Viking Ship was taking on water—it was coming close to sinking—so we dedicated ourselves to bailing water and repairing the damage even as we made some progress toward our destination. Today the Viking Ship is seaworthy so tomorrow we will raise the sail and breathe new life into the course long established for this place. We will tell with new energy and a renewed sense of urgency the familiar story which is the story of North Park University.

Our primary need, now that the ship is afloat, is to have a captain and crew who serve our students out of a deep passion for the central ideals of this University. Each day this passion must come into sharper focus in each of us. A passion for learning that addresses the deep needs of the world around us. A passion for a community that is culturally inclusive. A passion for relationships which are multilingual. A passion for Christian commitment which grows out of the rich soil of the church's many heritages and traditions. A passion for what our students can learn as they meet the people of Chicago—from Albany Park to the Loop, from Jefferson Park to Chatham, from Humbolt Park to Woodlawn, from Morgan Park to Pilsen. Our passion for this story is the secret to the future of North Park University.

## **Selective Initiatives for 2007-2008**

How then do we put this in motion?

There are selective steps we can take even early in the academic year to draw our attention to the University's story. I'll mention a few of these below, in outline form. You can expect to hear more about each of these during the next few of weeks.

I said earlier that the story depends on our passion, the involvement of every member of this community in our respective areas of responsibility. We can assume, thereby, that matters of personnel are central to this story. Accordingly, we will institute the following activities this semester:

- a. We will create a database as an inventory of selective characteristics of our faculty and staff which are directly relevant to our institutional story. Specifically, we will identify the languages spoken by each faculty member and staff person, the nations in which we have lived abroad, the ethnicities we claim, and the churches in which we most regularly worship. Because this has long been our story I believe we have particular characteristics in our faculty and staff which strengthen our work and shape our community. The purpose of this initiative is to quantify some components of this distinctive community and thereby shape our self-understanding. The Human Resources Office will oversee this inventory and keep it current over the years ahead.
- b. In the hiring process for all full-time faculty positions as well as selective administrative positions we will require candidates to submit reflective essays on their understanding of, experience in, and commitment to the three ideals central to the identity of our distinctive community – Christian, urban, and culturally inclusive. We experimented with this process as part of the search for a new provost and the results are impressive!
- c. Likewise in the hiring process for all full-time faculty positions and selective administrative positions we will expect that the group of candidates brought to campus for public interviews will include at least one female candidate and at least one person of color. We introduced this approach during the past semester with several faculty searches as well as the provost search, again with good results. Searches which don't lead to such an inclusive list of candidates generally will be continued into the next year. In like manner, we will expect that every search committee will include at least one woman and one person of color. These expectations are consistent with the recommendations of a faculty task force appointed last year. I trust that this year we will develop an institutional culture in which these become normative practices.
- d. I will propose to the faculty that one part of the assessment of faculty for tenure and promotion will reflect the three ideals which mold our distinctive community. Specifically, faculty members will be expected to write about and will be assessed on the ways they have contributed to the development of these institutional ideals in their teaching, scholarship, and service. The structure for this will need to be incorporated in the appropriate faculty manuals. And we can expect that the full application of these standards will not take place until some time after they have been adopted as part of our tenure and promotion policies.

Beyond being reflected in the people of this place, our story is expressed most clearly through our educational programs. Accordingly, during the coming year we will set out to enhance this part of our work as well. Specifically:

- e. I will ask the faculty in their respective schools and departments (including the Dialogue Program) to inventory the various ways in which the ideals of our distinctive university story are inculcated within the curricula for which they are responsible. A component of this inventory will involve an assessment of what approaches work particularly well, and where improvement might be expected. In addition, the inventory will systematically identify the many organizations, institutions, businesses, and individuals in Chicago who partner with us in this work.
- f. In a similar way, I will ask leaders in our various co-curricular programs, such as residence life, university ministries, athletics, and seminary field experiences (to name just four) to inventory those aspects of programs in their respective departments which directly support student development around the ideals of our university story. We'll assess these efforts, make sure we support those which work particularly well, and consider where improvements can be expected.
- g. I have asked Joseph Jones, our new provost, to appoint and work with a task force to review our common, university-wide learning objectives for all undergraduates. Specific attention will be directed to the congruence between our expected learning outcomes and the ideals of the University's story. In like manner, the provost will also work with a group to review common learning objectives for all graduate students, and Jay Phelan as Seminary president and dean will oversee a similar process within the Seminary.
- h. I have asked Provost Jones to consider the mission and organizational structure of, and present institutional support for, several existing work units which directly link to this story. I am specifically interested in the five cultural centers, the office of multicultural development, and the international studies office. Under the leadership of Jay Phelan we will give similar attention to the centers sponsored by the seminary to orient them as closely as possible to our common story.

There is also a segment of our university community who breathe story-telling—the telling of the University story specifically. This segment includes student recruitment, fund raising, alumni programs, and external relations.

- i. I have asked Senior Vice President Dan Tepke to oversee a review of our story-telling in these areas. How effectively are we telling our story on the web site, in printed material, in communication with friends and donors? How consistent is the language we use to tell this story? How might we better coordinate our story-telling across all university programs and departments? Professionals in the field call this brand identification and integrated marketing. I don't care what we call it, so long as we do it well.

Finally, it is apparent that though we all may be committed to the ideals of the University story we will not all understand them, articulate them, or promote them in the same way. And this is as it should be. Our passion for these ideals, however, will be enhanced as we talk with each other about them. And our success in finding a common language to express these ideals—to tell our story—will come about only as we walk with each other and hear each other’s voice. We can expect that sometimes we will disagree in these conversations. In fact, because we hold these ideals with passion, we can expect sometimes to disagree passionately. Yet we must converse, we must talk, we must dialog with each other. Accordingly, I propose two additional activities.

- j. Again under the direction of the Provost, beginning in the spring semester and continuing into the coming years we will organize a program we’ll call “Conversations on the North Park University Story.” The participants will all come from our campus – our faculty, administrators, program leaders, perhaps some students. Some conversations will center on just one of the ideals of our story; other conversations will focus on how the various parts of the story meet and intersect. Some conversations will include formal presentations, others may be discussions based on a reading or a film. All conversations will be cross-disciplinary. All conversations will be civil.
- k. This year we will dedicate a portion of each monthly meeting of the University Council to discussing a recent book about the city of Chicago written by Alex Kotlowitz and titled *Never a City So Real*. And I invite any other interested group on our campus – whether it is an established department or an informal group of individuals from across the campus who gathers for a brown-bag lunch once each month – to discuss this book as well. Kotlowitz describes some of Chicago’s celebrated neighborhoods and introduces us to a sample of the city’s interesting people. The city of Chicago is our home. As I said so often during my first year – the city of Chicago is both text and context for learning. And we must be deliberate about how this home shapes the distinctive education students receive at North Park. My expectation is that reading and discussing Kotlowitz’s book will spark renewed deliberation about our institutional story.

This is where we will begin. I’m sure you’ll also have ideas of your own to put forward, and I will endeavor to be attentive to these. In our work in institutional planning throughout the year we may also identify further initiatives which bear consideration. My goal is to drop a pebble or two into the pond and see where the ripples will take our common story. Of one thing I am confident: Our Viking ship will stay afloat even as these ripples disturb the water around us.

## Concluding Comments

Several assumptions have guided my address.

First, North Park University is much stronger and more viable today than it was fifteen years ago. Our responsibility today is twofold: to further strengthen the institution and to set a specific course for the University in the near future.

Second, planning for our future includes both (a) assuring a strong foundation and infrastructure and (b) identifying and supporting what is the distinctive character of this University. The first we will address in the operational components of our strategic plan and the second we will address by telling the particular story of North Park University and moving forward those commitments and activities which enhance the story, the identity, which is distinctive to this University.

Third, the outcomes we anticipate for our students include both those which form their identity as adults (a formation which generally is common to all undergraduates) and those which transform their character as adults (a transformation which is unique to students at North Park University, and which reflects the distinctive story of this place).

Fourth, students are formed and transformed by three elements – who they meet and know, what they study, and where they live and learn.

My goal today has been to remind us of who we are and what responsibility is ours as members of the North Park University community. It is important that we hold this understanding in common. As Christina Baldwin has written, “Where the cohesion of the people’s story is lost, people start to scatter like meteorites freed from gravitational pull.”

There must be a strong and vital gravitational pull at North Park; our story must draw us together. Our story, as we hold it in common, will give meaning and purpose to our work. The North Park story is a noble story, one which is worthy of our loyalty and best efforts. Our story can draw us together, for our common good, for the good of our students, and for the good of the God we love and follow.

The three ideals which mold our distinctive community of learning – Christian, urban, and culturally inclusive – are three seeds we plant in each student. Much else happens of course. The ground is tilled, weeds are removed, fertilizer is usually necessary, the sun must shine, and the rain must fall . . . and through this, these three small seeds are mysteriously transformed, preparing students to lead lives of significance and service. We plant the seed which blossoms over time into the very good fruit of doing justice, loving kindness, and walking with God.

The story is ours, collectively. And the story is ours to tell. We each have the ability, indeed the responsibility, to find good ways to live out the story within our respective work units and in collaboration with others within the University, across the

city, and around the world. North Park University is a place of enormous potential because we claim a story which holds enormous promise. I look forward to continuing our work together as we transform this promise into its true potential.

May God bless us in this work, and this University to God's glory.