

Opening Convocation Address
Valparaiso University
August 26, 2008

Good morning!

Welcome to this, the 80th Opening Convocation of Valparaiso University.

We begin. We begin again.

Convocations are bi-modal affairs.

For some people, such as the new students gathered here today from across the country and around the world, the new faculty and staff, and ... me ...today is a wondrous new day. We are experiencing something new, and something wonderful.

For others gathered here, this is another in a cavalcade of convocations. I surmise that some of you have sat on these benches for 10, 20, 30, maybe all 49 convocations held here in the Chapel of the Resurrection. For those who fall in this category, today might be akin to the experience of audiences at the ancient Greek dramatic rituals at the Temple of Dionysius. Each year Greece gathered to witness dramatic presentations of familiar stories. The delight came not in seeing yet another version of Antigone, but in determining whether Euripides had told the tale better than Sophocles did in a prior festival. Call it Greece's version of American Idol.

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One might assume, given this convocation's position at the start of the academic year, that the word itself must have something to do with "beginning." No. That honor is reserved for commencement, which, of course occurs at the very end of a student's academic career.

"Convocation" has everything to do with being called. "A calling together of an academic assembly" is how Mr. Webster describes it. To "convoke" is to call together.

You and I have been called to be here. Depending on how you view the world and your place in it, that word "call" might have a capital C at the beginning of it. For some people, like me, we believe in our heart that God has called us to this place and that God has a purpose for us here. Others of us searched for a place that would meet our needs, a place that would give our lives a purpose, a good place to live and to work. A place that feels "right." We wanted to be at Valparaiso University. Valpo chose us and we accepted the call to come.

Having been "called" to Valparaiso University, we gather here at this 80th Opening Convocation asking ourselves, to what end? For what purpose? That's where the "vocation" part of convocation kicks in.

Because of our unique history and mission, Valparaiso University distinguishes itself as an international leader in preparing students for vocation. Vocation is a multi-faceted concept involving an intersection of heart, mind, and soul. Today, let me briefly examine just three facets of the word.

- The first facet of vocation has to do with feeling "called" to do something in the world. A person who pursues a vocation has a purpose, a reason for working. That sense of vocation gives one's life and work meaning.
- A second facet of vocation focuses on talent and discernment. Each of us has been given talents or abilities to do some things particularly well. Perhaps you are good with words or facile in mathematics. Maybe you are musical or artistic. Maybe you

can't stop thinking of innovative ways of doing things. These are God-given abilities. Assessing your talents involves discernment—coming to know not only what gifts you have been given and but also discovering the best way for you to use those gifts to engage in God's work.

- Which leads me to a third facet of vocation and the last one I'll touch on this morning, and that is our sense of duty. If we are "called" to do something in this world and God has given us the talents and abilities to do so, then we have a choice to make...either we take God up on the offer, roll up our sleeves, and be about that work...or we allow our fears and inadequacies to get the best of us and we shrink from the responsibility to which we have been called. Vocation demands that we pursue our calling in life with great commitment and with great conviction.

Notice that in describing vocation, I never used the words "job" or "career."

Preparing students for "jobs" implies that Valparaiso University is a job training center whose purpose is to provide students with a set of skills. You earn a set of skills. You get a job. You work. You are paid for the job. And your life is lived whenever the work day is done.

A "career," on the other hand, does imply a purpose. That purpose is movement up the ladder, toward a higher title, increased compensation, a better office, a more prestigious appointment at a place with a better reputation. Like vocation, career pursuit can be all consuming. Life awaits one at retirement or is sandwiched in between meetings, phone calls, and e-mail. A vocation, on the other hand, can allow life and work to occur simultaneously and in concert.

Valparaiso University prepares students for vocations. As we sit here today, thousands of Valpo alumni are actively living out their vocations around the world. To what larger end?

Earlier this month, the world lost a great public intellectual and perhaps Russia's greatest 20th Century writer, novelist and Nobel prize-winner Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. Solzhenitsyn's moral compass led him to speak out against the Soviet government before glasnost, and in 1974 he was exiled from his native land. Four years later at Harvard, Solzhenitsyn delivered a controversial commencement address entitled "A World Split Apart" in which he offered this possible insight into our larger purpose at this historic juncture in world history.

We are now finally experiencing the consequences of historical mistakes which had not been noticed at the beginning of the journey. On the way from the Renaissance, we have enriched our experience in many ways, but we have lost the concept of a Supreme Complete Entity which used to restrain our passions and our irresponsibility. We have placed too much hope in political and social reforms, only to find that we were being deprived of our most precious possession: our spiritual life. . . . If humanism were right in declaring that man is born just to be happy, he would not be born to die. But since his body is doomed to die, surely his task on earth must be of a more spiritual nature. It cannot be unrestrained enjoyment of everyday life. It cannot be the search for the best ways to obtain material goods and then cheerfully get the most out of them. It has to be the fulfillment of a permanent, earnest duty so that one's life journey may become an experience of moral growth, so that one may leave life a better human being than when one started it. ... If the world has not approached its end, it has reached a major watershed in history, perhaps equal in

importance to the turn from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance. It will exact from us a spiritual blaze. We shall have to rise to a new height of vision, to a new level of life where our physical nature will not be cursed as it was in the Middle Ages, but even more importantly, where our spiritual being will not be trampled upon as it is in the modern era.

<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/alexandersolzhenitsynharvard.htm>

Solzhenitsyn challenges us to re-conceptualize vocation, so that our individual callings, our God-given talents and abilities, and our conviction to make a difference in this world might gain greater clarity and an even larger purpose as collective action. His vision offers nothing less than a challenge to humanity to begin a second Renaissance, this time one that fully embraces and integrates mind and body, heart and soul. One that ignites a new intellectual and spiritual transformation, squarely focused on our Creator and our God.

As we contemplate the beginning of this, our 150th year, let us dedicate ourselves as an academic community of scholarship, freedom, and faith, to the discernment of our collective vocation in these watershed times.

We begin. We begin again.