

CONVOCATION ADDRESS: “Charting the Course”

*The human mind plans the way,
but the Lord directs the steps.*

-Proverbs 16:9

On January 13, 1914, the following advertisement appeared in the London newspapers:

Men wanted for Hazardous Journey. Small wages, bitter cold, long months of complete darkness, constant danger, safe return doubtful. Honour and recognition in case of success. (Perkins, 2000)

I hope this doesn't sound vaguely like an advertisement for spending the winter in Valparaiso, Indiana.

Rather, this advertisement solicited seafarers for a treacherous journey across the Antarctic continent, under the leadership of Captain Ernest Shackleton. Hazardous journey. Small wages. Bitter cold. Constant danger. Safe return doubtful.

Nearly 5,000 people applied. It seems that folks were up for a challenge, were willing to take the risks in order to do something extraordinary together.

If you know something of Ernest Shackleton and his crew, then you know that what began as an heroic attempt to cross the Antarctic continent on foot ended up being quite another story.

Shackleton's ship, aptly named the *Endurance*, was trapped in the ice before it reached the continent. The crew hunkered down and lived on the ship for 281 days through the bleak winter of 1915. When spring came, the conflicting pressures of the ice floes crushed the ship. The crew abandoned the *Endurance*. Over the course of another full year, the crew made their way across the ice floes in a harrowing journey to the tip of Antarctica, Shackleton and a small crew set sail on a lifeboat in search of rescuers, and nearly a year later, all were rescued and returned to civilization. It is an heroic adventure and well worth reading if you have the interest.

Ernest Shackleton has been on my mind this summer. Not so much because of his exceptional leadership or the personal sacrifices he made to ensure the survival and rescue of his crew. Rather, I reflect upon Shackleton's ability to respond to rapidly changing conditions, to alter strategies and plans, but to reach a seemingly impossible destination through a combination of dogged determination, ingenuity, and inspiration.

Here we are—new and returning students, faculty and staff, at the 81st Opening Convocation of Valparaiso University—ready to chart the course toward our collective future. The destination is clear. For new students, the goal is to march down the aisles at Commencement in four years, very much like you have done this afternoon. Your aim is to receive a diploma from Valparaiso University. But you will receive much more than that. You will be equipped to lead and challenged to make a difference in the world. You

may discover a calling in your life and you will leave here eager to make your mark in the world. Today, you begin the voyage. The destination is set, and today you chart the course.

I cannot predict where this voyage may take you, but I can promise you that all of us here—the faculty and staff, your fellow students, and the thousands of alumni who have come before you—will do all we can to get you to your destination. You, however, must now chart your course. No one else can do it for you. It is a journey that is only yours to take.

For faculty and staff, students, alumni and friends, we have an equally challenging and hopefully fulfilling journey ahead of us. After a year spent imagining and articulating the most desired future for Valparaiso University, the destination is clear. Together, we intend to create a University that will be renowned worldwide for preparing women and men who are highly sought for their knowledge, character, integrity, and wisdom. We will provide an intellectually rigorous and innovative education that is grounded firmly in the liberal arts tradition and intentionally integrates liberal education and professional studies.

We seek to be a distinguished Lutheran community of learning constituted by people of many and various beliefs and backgrounds in dialogue with one another in common pursuit of truth. Ours will be a vibrant community that integrates learning experiences both inside and outside of the classroom so our students build enduring friendships and capacities for lifelong learning, leadership, and service.

The Valparaiso University of the future will be diverse, a community which includes and purposefully supports diversity in all of its aspects, here on campus and in our larger community. We envision a University that will be acclaimed for the vitality of its international programs, which empower both U.S. and international students to lead and thrive in a global community.

We seek to create a place that fosters the personal and professional development of each member of the faculty and staff, a place where alumni feel connected and are actively involved their entire lives.

Finally, we imagine Valparaiso University as a place of human flourishing, an engine of prosperity and vitality for our region, a model of sustainability in its economic, environmental, and social dimensions, a vibrant place that leads and serves our region and contributes significantly to its social and cultural milieu.

This is our destination. And now we chart the course. We now begin the most extensive and comprehensive planning process in Valparaiso University's 150-year history. Faculty, staff, students, alumni, and community leaders will all have the opportunity to contribute your creativity, ingenuity, and imagination to the development of bold goals and objectives that will set the direction of the University for the next decade or more. At

the end of this year of planning, Valparaiso University will embark on an ambitious journey. We will, no doubt, enter uncharted waters.

Like Ernest Shackleton and the crew of the *Endurance*, we cannot know the challenges ahead of us. The journey is daunting, filled with danger, seemingly impossible. It will require each one of us to work together as a team. It will take risks and require sacrifices. Most of all, it will demand that we lift our eyes heavenward and open our hearts to God for guidance.

Students, faculty, staff, alumni, and friends: the destination is clear. We are up to the challenge. And now we chart the course.

-Mark A. Heckler
President
August 25, 2009

References

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