

Convocation Address: August 23, 2011

What an auspicious occasion!

What an extraordinary celebration!

Valparaiso University does many things exceptionally well, but I can tell you that we just get better and better at ceremonies and processions! Well done, Marshall Shingleton! Well done!

Let's take a moment to look around us. Class of 2015 ... new and returning students, faculty and staff ... let's take a moment to remember and savor the joy and the pleasure of being gathered here today, because it is an hour of joining together in solidarity across our many differences, an hour reminding us of our virtues as a community of learning, an hour of refreshment and renewal that will become a touchstone for us throughout the coming year.

Look around at this amazing chapel that, for more than a half-century, has borne witness to so many stories. To laughter and sorrow ... to pledges of matrimony and pledges of character. To confession and forgiveness. It stands as a silent witness to our triumphs and failures. It reminds us that we are never alone, even in our darkest hour.

At this very moment, here in the Chapel of the Resurrection, we recall the University's motto: In Thy Light, We See Light.

We need God's light to navigate through these turbulent and unpredictable times.

Intractable politics nearly grind our nation to a halt. Society itself seems more polarized than ever. Opposing camps stubbornly stake their territory and dialogue falls by the wayside. Economic pressures weigh heavily on so many. Although more information is accessible to more people than ever before, so, too, is more misinformation. No wonder, so many are confused. No wonder that there seems to be more personal despair. And, no wonder that people flock to simplistic stances that permit no argument, no questioning, no dissent.

Not at Valpo. We offer an antidote to these times. Our distinctive Lutheran character calls for thoughtful leadership, critical thinking and open minds. We develop thinkers who act, who serve and lead. Through academic rigor, through wrestling with matters of faith, through roll-up-your-sleeves, out-in-the-world service, we make sense of times that, at first glance, might seem senseless.

Yes, we live in turbulent and unpredictable times. But this day we find the path ahead illuminated because we see more clearly the light of God's promise and the promise of all that we can do freely in response. We may not know every step of the way – or even the next step – but we see a future lit with possibilities as we embark on an intellectual, spiritual, and social journey together, in community.

The Zen teacher Shunryu Suzuki wrote, "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's there are few."¹

For the experts here today, I challenge you to reignite the sense of the possible.

To incoming students, I say: "Do not limit yourselves." View your personal journey as filled with limitless possibilities. Because this is a wonderful time in your life when *possible* looms larger than *impossible*. When "*I can*" outweighs "*I can't*." You are at the perfect place to explore and nurture possibilities – a supportive learning community.

A community of faith ... but one of many and various beliefs.

A community in common pursuit of truth ... recognizing that the quest for truth will take us all our days on earth.

A community of high expectations ... but no single expectation.

A community as rich, diverse and fertile with possibilities as the world itself.

Today, Class of 2015, new graduate students and law students, and new faculty and staff, I invite you to embrace the inherent possibilities of this community. Join us fully in this journey, join us in this quest for truth. To those returning, let this day be a potent reminder of what we have pledged to one another as a community of learning, Lutheran in character and ethos, preparing graduates to lead and serve in church and society.

Together, this is our quest and our legacy. We continue in the storied traditions forged by the students, staff and faculty who have come before us. A legacy of academic achievement ... of generosity ... of leadership ... and service. Together, we are responsible to ensure this legacy for the future.

Incoming students, I ask you to join us in this responsibility and contribute to this extraordinary legacy.

Stand with us at the nexus of scholarship, freedom, and faith. Join with us in the pursuit of life as a calling, and find yourself suddenly opened to unimagined opportunities ... and taken to places you never expected to go.

Helen Keller said, "I cannot do everything, but I can do something. I must not fail to do the something I can do."²

May you make the most of every opportunity here at Valpo to find that "something" that speaks to you so personally and powerfully that you feel compelled to make it your vocation. That is where

responsibility and possibility intersect. That is where scholarship and faith, and service and leadership create a life fully realized.

I return now to this place and to this moment. For the past 82 years, this community has gathered together to commemorate the beginning of the academic year. For more than half a century, new students have gathered in these pews and thought about their journey at Valparaiso University. They have raised prayers. Sung hymns. Listened to presidential addresses. They have gone from this extraordinary place and accomplished extraordinary things.

They have returned years later, grateful for what they have learned, grateful for their teachers and for their friends, and grateful for the ways in which Valparaiso University helped forge their character and nurture their virtues. The students who sat where you sit today built these buildings, created the scholarships that you received, endowed the positions that brought the exceptional scholars and teachers who will teach you. Because of their generosity, their commitment to this community of learning, and their love of this place, our journey will be richer and more fruitful.

Many of you who are gathered here this first day will also accomplish great things. And a student will sit here 50 years from now because you will make it possible. Let us all remember, with gratitude, those who have come before us and embrace with gratitude the opportunity to fulfill their legacy. And to remain true to our shared motto from Psalm 36, inscribed on these magnificent windows: ***In luce tua videmus lucem***

In Thy Light, We See Light

Embrace this community and its celebration of both differences and commonalities. Embark on your personal quest for truth. Recognize that assuming the responsibility this community offers is also a gift.

As you learn and serve and lead ... you will find your step lighter ... your heart full ... your imagination liberated ... your spirit lifted by possibility and by faith. You will discover the path forward illuminated, shimmering, unfolding in the Light.

Welcome to Valpo.

--Mark A. Heckler
President
August 23, 2011

References

¹Suzuki, S. *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind: Informal Talks on Zen Meditation and Practice*. Shambhala Publications, Inc. [2011]

²Helen Keller, original source unknown. Possibly paraphrasing her close friend, Edward Everett Hale, author and Unitarian clergyman.