

Opening Convocation: 2007-2008
CLIMATE COMMITMENT: PARK PROTECTING THE
PLANET, PROTECTING THE EARTH
Beverley Byers-Pevitts, President
Park University, September 5, 2007

Mayor Dusenbery, Mr. Ruiz, and members of the Board of Trustees, distinguished guests, alumni, former students, current students, members of the Park Student Government Association and World Student Union, distinguished faculty and staff, to all of those in front of me and those seeing me on the Web – Welcome to the Fall Academic Convocation!

The late John Denver, whose “Rocky Mountain High” you heard earlier, still calls to us:

“Now he walks in quiet solitude
the forest and the streams
Seeking grace in every step he takes
His sight has turned inside himself to try and understand
The serenity of a clear blue mountain lake

Now his life is full of wonder
but his heart still knows some fear
Of a simple thing he cannot comprehend
Why they try to tear the mountains down
to bring in a couple more
More people, more scars upon the land”

Denver inspired members of several generations, including mine, to become stewards of the earth and to hold high our vision for our planet.

One of my favorite poets, Nikki Giovanni, in *Walking on Park* wrote:

“ever wonder why
so much asphalt was laid
in so little space
probably so we would forget
the Iroquois, Algonquin
and Mohicans who could caress the earth”

Several Park employees have responded to my call to send in their favorite quote about the earth, and I will share them throughout the speech. Right now I wish to thank these individuals for offering information for my remarks for this Fall Academic Convocation: Carolyn Elwyss, David Fox, Paul Gault, Brian Hoffman, marsha morgan, Ann Schultis and Jane Wood.

Several of our faculty members find inspiration in Native American teachings, and we can draw from Native wisdom as we consider our relationship with planet Earth.

In the words of an ancient Native American proverb:

“Treat the earth well: it was not given to you by your parents, it was loaned to you by your children. We do not inherit the Earth from our Ancestors, we borrow it from our Children.” (David Fox)

The Lakota people believe that the actions we take today will affect our children’s children at least seven generations into the future. Seven generations into the future.

Today, I ask you to consider carefully what you envision for generations to come.

Jacques Cousteau said: “What we human beings are all living now, whether we are volunteers or not, is an extraordinary but exceptionally dangerous adventure. We have a very small number of years left to fail or to succeed in providing a sustainable future to our species.”

We at Park University have a choice. We can sit on the sidelines or we can join with others to practice sustainability for the earth.

A few weeks ago, I received a reminder of the fragility of our planet. Early one morning as I was brushing my teeth, I listened to a (NPR) National Public Radio story about how in the US we use as much water in a week to brush our teeth as other nations access in months.

Imagine the impact if all of us, our community of over 27,000 Park University students, faculty and staff, every day for one year conserved water while brushing our teeth, turned off and on our faucets to utilize a minimum amount of water, we would collectively save more than 49 million gallons of water - enough to grow wheat for approximately 430,000 loaves of bread. That defines sustainability.

Today, I invite you to make a commitment – a commitment to environmental leadership, a commitment to stewardship, a commitment to the Lakota’s next seven generations.

In her book *Nature*, writer and poet Susan Griffin tells us: “We know ourselves to be made from this earth. We know this earth is made from our bodies. For we see ourselves. And we are nature.

Global warming is a defining challenge. The world’s leading scientists have clarified that fossil fuels are the problem, that greenhouse gas emissions are responsible for climate change and that climate change threatens the planet’s ecosystem, the world economy and the lives of millions. In America, one cannot eat fish from 39% of the rivers. The antidote for climate change is emission control.

Many of you are familiar with the facts surrounding global climate change. The *National Geographic News* has compiled and published the following statistics:

- Average temperatures have climbed 1.4 degrees Fahrenheit (0.8 degree Celsius) around the world since 1880, much of this in recent decades.

- The rate of warming is increasing. The 20th century's last two decades were the hottest in 400 years and possibly the warmest for several millennia, according to a number of climate studies. And the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports that 11 of the past 12 years are among the dozen warmest since 1850.
- Arctic ice is rapidly disappearing, and the region may have its first completely ice-free summer by 2040 or earlier. NPR's year-long series on Climate Change suggest we may have an arctic land rush to claim land where ice is melting.
- Glaciers and mountain snows are rapidly melting—for example, Montana's Glacier National Park now has only 27 glaciers, versus 150 glaciers in 1910.
- In 1998, coral reefs, which are highly sensitive to small changes in water temperature, suffered the worst bleaching or die-off in response to stress ever recorded, with some areas seeing bleach rates of 70 percent. Experts expect these sorts of events to increase in frequency and intensity over the next 50 years as sea temperatures rise.
- An upsurge in the amount of extreme weather events, such as wildfires, heat waves, and strong tropical storms, is also attributed by some scientists in part to climate change.

In a February report based on the work of some 2,500 scientists in more than 130 countries, the United Nations Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change, the IPCC, concluded that humans have caused all or most of the current planetary warming.

A follow-up report by the IPCC released in April 2007 warned that global warming could lead to large-scale food and water shortages and have catastrophic effects on wildlife.

Students today might witness in their lifetimes a range of ecological catastrophes, including massive flooding as a result of rising sea levels. Strong hurricanes, droughts, heat waves, wildfires, and other natural disasters may become commonplace in many parts of the world. People on this planet need to break the dependency on fossil fuels and go to sustainable energy. Park students are thinking of how to solve this problem.

We know that rapid and unfettered economic development has contributed and continues to contribute to the degradation of our planet's physical well-being. A recent article in *The New York Times* chronicled the rise of China as a major economic power and the concomitant pollution, which has resulted from China's growth. (Sunday NYT, August 26, 2007, Section A., p. 1, 6-7.)

The authors cite: "No country in history has emerged as a major industrial power without creating a legacy of environmental damage that can take decades and big dollops of public wealth to undo."

The authors note that "Britain, the United States and Japan polluted their way to prosperity and worried about environmental damage only after their economies matured and their urban middle classes demanded blue skies and safe drinking water."

China is following the lead of these countries and their flourishing economies, but the impact of China's decisions can be felt halfway across the world. *The Wall Street Journal*

recently cited research by Scripps Institution of Oceanography atmospheric physicist V. Ramanathan finding that “on some days, almost a third of the air over Los Angeles and San Francisco can be traced directly to Asia.”

Human activities around the globe are responsible for the problem, and working together, humans have the capacity to solve the problem. That means taking care of our earth, and working to reverse global warming through sustainable actions that protect the planet. Park University is committed to leading the way to sustainability for our students and our community.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said recently, “We cannot continue with business as usual.” He has called for “new thinking” to tackle the challenge of climate change, since how it is addressed “will define us, our era, and ultimately, our global legacy.”

Michael McCloskey, the former chair of the Sierra Club who delivered the inaugural Civic Engagement Lecture here at the Parkville Campus in May, said: “Society will treat us as an important player if we engage ourselves in addressing its ills ... and we must not shrink from addressing tough issues.”

Park University has joined more than 340 other colleges and universities in formally committing to sharply reduce and eventually eliminate the global warming emissions of our respective institutions.

At a ceremony in Washington, DC in June, with some key Members of Congress in attendance, I signed the *American College and University Presidents Climate Commitment*. Earlier last spring I appointed a *President’s Climate Commitment Commission (PCCC)*, who met over this past summer to develop a comprehensive plan for Park University to achieve climate neutrality on the Parkville Campus and to initiate tangible actions to reduce greenhouse gases while our more comprehensive plan is being developed. David Fox is chairing the Commission and is joined by students, faculty, staff and alumni representatives. I want to ask all the members of the Climate Commitment Commission to please stand and be recognized for your efforts. Thank you. The Commission has recommended a set of immediate actions the University can take and has begun drafting the broader comprehensive plan.

Even before the adoption of this plan, Park is moving forward to meet its commitment and is building a 250 bed student residence hall to Green LEED Standards, i.e., Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design Green Building Rating System Standards. We are currently evaluating recycling options and are reviewing our purchasing policies to ensure that we buy ENERGY STAR certified products. I am deeply grateful to the PSGA for working on recycling.

More than seven centuries ago, the Sufi poet Mevlana Rumi wrote, “People of the world don’t look at themselves, and so they blame one another.” Through the leadership of the Climate Commitment Commission, Park University is taking a hard look at itself, with an eye toward curtailing practices which might harm our environment.

Together, we will make Park a sustainable university, which is defined by *The Chronicle of Higher Education* as one “that promotes the concept of meeting present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”

Everyone at Park University can join this climate commitment!

Members of our staff play a leadership role in developing environmentally-friendly solutions for our University. For example, Donna Gifford, Assistant Director of Purchasing and a Climate Commission member, discovered that just by using bathroom towels on the Parkville campus made from recycled paper, we can save 37,940 gallons of water, 21,680 kilowatts of energy, 325 pounds of air pollutants and 92 trees per year. Imagine what other savings we can appreciate if we all get creative!

Michael M’Gonigle and Justine Starke, authors of *Planet U: Sustaining the World, Reinventing the University*, describe the university as “a contested site for experimentation and innovation.” They invite universities, “every university, ...to...begin in a place where it can truly act, which is to say, in a place where the university actually is—the place where the sod’s been turned.” I encourage Park students, faculty, and staff to explore opportunities that provide solutions to address our global climate challenges.

Anthony Cortese, President of Second Nature, says: “You have 4000 universities in the country spending \$190 billion on goods and services annually. That’s greater than the GDP of all but 20 nations. If schools were practicing renewable energy and buying environmentally sound products, it would have a huge impact.” (Brian Hoffman)

Park University touches the world. Today’s student learners will be the change leaders that propel the United States, Kenya, China, India, Brazil and other nations to 21st century global economic and environmental ascendancy.

According to a Chinese proverb, “The miracle is not to fly in the air, or to walk on the water, but to walk on the earth.” (marsha morgan)

I have pledged to the Climate Commitment Commission to work with faculty to integrate sustainability into Park’s curriculum thereby better serving Park’s students, and fulfilling Park’s obligation to help create a sustainable, ethical, thriving, and civil global society for your children, your children’s children and, hopefully, your children’s, children’s children.

Sustainability is not just a pertinent issue for the sciences. It is multi-disciplinary. We can teach as a community toward carbon neutrality. Sustainability cuts across the curriculum and touches all of education, management, the humanities, arts, and the social sciences as evidenced in the closing lines from Robert Frost’s “Directive,”

“I have kept hidden in the instep arch
Of an old cedar at the waterside
A broken drinking goblet like the Grail
Under a spell so the wrong ones can’t find it,
So can’t get saved, as Saint Mark says they mustn’t.
(I stole the goblet from the children’s playhouse.)
Here are your waters and your watering place.

Drink and be whole again beyond confusion.” (Jane Wood)

Students prompt us to action. They come to the University, not just to be taught but also to be engaged. My first year at Park, I responded to a request from student organizations sponsoring “Earth Day.”

Matthew St. Clair, the University of California System’s sustainability specialist said, “Students (really) are the drivers of sustainability efforts. They push to get things done.” The cost of not acting is far greater than the cost of acting.

At Park University, we celebrate a thirteen-decade long tradition of co-existing with our environment. Few locales in this country are as sweepingly picturesque as our Parkville campus. Our forbearers understood this and took great measures to preserve the beauty that we have come to expect every day. That is our heritage and our responsibility. Visionary Park leaders of the past also helped to develop green spaces, the Parkville Nature Sanctuary to the north of our campus and English Landing Park to our south.

As a historically innovative, intercultural institution, we must constantly apply our 19th century values within the context of a rapidly changing 21st century environment.

Pulitzer Prize winning poet Gary Snyder provides a unique perspective on nature and history as he considers the ecological consequences of our collective actions for this earth, Turtle Island, as the Native Americans named it.

Snyder has said, “I hold the most archaic values on earth. They go back to the late Paleolithic: the fertility of the soil, the magic of animals, the power-vision in solitude, the terrifying initiation and rebirth, the love and ecstasy of the dance, the common work of the tribe.”

Snyder holds both history and wilderness in mind. In Snyder’s own words:

**“This living flowing land is all there is forever
We *are* it
It sings through us”**

Helen Caldicott told us that, “We are the curators of life on earth. We hold it in the palm of our hand.” (Ann Schultis, Librarian)

Please join the Climate Commitment Commission and me as we chart a course of sustainability and stewardship for the next seven generations.

Jane Wood’s selection of a Frost poem inspired me to go to my volume of Robert Frost which my father gave me and to read the following, the first verse of “The Pasture”:

**“I’m going out to clean the pasture spring;
I’ll only stop to rake the leaves away
(And wait to watch the water clear, I may):
I sha’n’t be gone long.—You come too.”**

Thank you.

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Park University
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