

**“It’s Your Choices...”**  
**Pacific Lutheran University**  
**Opening Convocation**  
*September 4, 2007*

INTRODUCTION

Just over six weeks ago, on July 21, Harry Potter made his seventh and final appearance in “Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows.” Those of you now living your college years have quite literally grown up with Harry Potter. Since he first arrived in “The Sorcerer’s Stone” back in 1997, your generation, and many much older than you, have been captured by Harry, and by his special brand of magic and wizardry. Harry and his Hogwarts friends have become a global sensation, and the best selling children’s story of all time, as millions have lined-up for each subsequent volume...and the movies that follow.

Harry Potter is a remarkable story. As you know well, it is at one level, the most imaginative and creative tale of fantasy—a wild and engaging story of muggles and wizards. But even more, each volume of the series is filled with important wisdom about life. As the philosopher and author Tom Morris writes, “...whether they are like Harry Potter and his friends or...like headmaster Albus Dumbledore...the characters embody...important insights of the ages about how to live and not to live in this world.”

Today, in these next few moments, I would like to hold up and reflect one of those insights from Volume I, “The Chamber of Secrets.” Some have argued that this maxim may be the most important insight and the underlying theme for the whole Harry Potter series. But I lift it up here, because it is so appropriate for this occasion as we focus on the meaning and possibilities of this new academic year.

Dumbledore speaks, and I quote: “It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities.” “It is our choices, Harry...” “It is our choices... (even)...more than our abilities.”

COLLEGE CHOICES

Dumbledore’s advice certainly proved to be true for Harry, and I believe it is relevant for us as we launch and move into the new academic year at PLU. In so many ways, it is all about “our choices.” Indeed, college is a remarkable time of choosing, a time when you are confronted with countless options, so many that it

will at times seem overwhelming. And, yet, one-by-one, like all previous Lutes, you will make the decisions that shape your PLU experience and together those choices begin to sketch a blueprint for your future.

It all began, of course, when you chose to make PLU your collegiate home, and we are so very glad you did. And it continues today, as immediately following this convocation you are invited to participate in the involvement fair. There you will find dozens of clubs and activities present, so that you can learn about them, pick up a brochure, sign up for their mailing list, and begin to make a series of choices that will shape your cocurricular experience.

In the days ahead, most of you will be living with more personal freedom than you have known before, and you will have a chance to begin making important life style choices. How am I going to prioritize my time? When and where will I study? How can I survive with this other person in my room, and all of these strangers in my bathroom? How will I engage this new college social scene in a way that is right for me, and gives me the courage to make responsible decisions? How will I care for myself, mentally, physically and spiritually?

As you move through the months at PLU, you will face important academic choices. Not only about classes but, down the line, about majors and minors, about study abroad and student-faculty research, about volunteer opportunities and formal internships, about leadership and service, about J-terms and mid-terms, about summer school and graduate school. Yes, PLU'S vast programs offer you a wonderful range of opportunities, and each of you have the chance to choose among them and to build a living learning package that is just right for your unique gifts and interests; as well as your future hopes and dreams.

Yes, these college years are about choices and, as Dumbledore counseled Harry, "it is your choices...that [will] show [who you] are, [even] more than our abilities."

### A LIFETIME OF CHOICES

And your choices are important because college is a time of preparation. Indeed, we express the mission of PLU in future terms when we say that our goal is educate students for "lives of thoughtful inquiry, service, leadership, and care." So while you are here, we pledge to work with you to challenge you and maximize your learning, to develop fully the remarkable abilities and talents that God has given each of you, to be your mentors and advisors as you study and grow, and as you wrestle with is sues of faith and values. We will walk with you as you confront the great questions of purpose and calling and vocation that are at the very heart of a PLU education, "What will you do with your one wild and precious

life?” And through it all, our hope and expectation is that you will graduate from PLU well prepared—informed by all you have learned, and shaped by all you believe and value.

Yes, we wish for you a life of full engagement in the world; a life of thoughtful inquiry and learning driven by a child-like curiosity, a rich and satisfying life of service to great causes and on behalf of other people, a life as a leader always willing to step forward and to take a risk to be counted, and as one who cares mightily and broadly—for others, for their community, and for the entire earth. In short, we want for you a life that seeks to influence the affairs of your world, just like Harry.

### CHOICES IN A LARGE FRAME

Summer is my time for reading and reflection, a time to read some history because I think we have much to learn from the past, read a biography or two as a way of understanding leaders and leadership, and I read broadly about the events and issues of our day. As I read this summer I found myself thinking about you, about this Convocation day, about your years here at PLU, and about some of the really daunting challenges facing our world.

So, my friends and future leaders, as I read about the pollution of our planet, what choices we will make about the environment and global warming? For while there is debate, the vast majority of scientific opinion agrees that the increasing release of carbon dioxide into the air is, in fact, warming the planet. “New studies have shown that the north polar ice cap—which helps the planet cool itself—is melting nearly three times faster than the most pessimistic computer models predicted” and, based on current trends, the summer ice could be gone in 35 years.

In the past six months, my wife, MaryAnn, and I have traveled to Hong Kong, we have toured Northern Norway, Svalbard and the arctic region, we have biked across the mining-ravaged region of northern Minnesota called the “iron range,” and we have visited our farm in North Dakota. Wherever one goes, there is one clear and consistent lesson, we have taken our planet for granted, and it is now under great stress.

Most authorities agree, however, that the cause is not lost; we can reverse the trend lines.

We can do it one person at a time, we can do our part as a PLU learning community, and we can inspire others to follow. Al Gore put it this way: “The climate crisis offers us the chance to experience what few generations in history

have had the privilege of experiencing: a generational mission; a compelling moral purpose; a shared cause; and the thrill of being forced by circumstances to put aside the pettiness and conflict of politics and to embrace a genuine moral and spiritual challenge.”

And, I expect he would add, the choice is ours to make!

This summer I also read about world health and some of the pressing issues that will be the focus of the February 2008 Wang Symposium on global health on our campus. Jeffrey Sachs of the Earth Institute at Columbia University frames the challenge when he writes, “It’s all about choices...it really is. There is nothing about fate. It’s all about values, creativity, (and) leadership.” Sachs goes on to provide an example: this year 2 million children will die of malaria in Africa, a disease that is both preventable and treatable. The treatment costs 80 cents, but is not available. Prevention requires a \$5 mosquito net; 300 million vulnerable sleeping sites could be covered for \$1.5 billion, but the money is not forth coming.

Sach’s conclusion: “Preventing and treating malaria is a choice. We haven’t made it.”

In an even more dramatic example, Nicholas Kristoff writes with passion about the east Congo where over 4 million people have died in a war than began in 1998. Kristoff notes that “Even 21st-century wars like the Congo’s—the most lethal conflict since World War II—kill the old fashioned way by starving people and exposing them to disease,” including diarrhea, malaria, and AIDS. Yet, the carnage continues, largely off the world’s radar, with little relief aid in sight, and virtually no international attention.

At the same time, there are great reasons for hope. Private organizations such as World Vision and Doctors Without Borders are engaged in the most difficult medical issues around the globe. They keynote speaker for the Wang Symposium will be diplomat and internationalist Stephen Lewis whose foundation is funding grass roots projects that address the pain of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in Africa. Right here in the Puget Sound, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has raised the visibility and priority of public health issues globally. There are reasons to be hopeful.

And, our choices about world health matter and can not be avoided because, as South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu says: “We have the capacity to feed everyone... to ensure that everybody has clean water...the capacity to ensure that

everybody has affordable health care...the capacity...to prevent many of the diseases to which our children succumb.” And I expect Tutu might go on to wonder, ‘When will we choose to do so?’

I also read this summer about economics and poverty, about the great gulf between rich and poor, a divide that seems to be getting deeper and wider, as one-half of our global family lives on \$2 a day or less while the rest of us gather the world’s riches and resources. Poverty, one quickly learns, is a complex issue with many causes, and countless effects, and there is wide spread disagreement about the impact of globalization, the efforts of trade regulations, and the efficacy of international aid.

As the debate goes on, others are taking action. Jeffrey Sachs, for example, has raised private donations and launched his “millennium village” project. Seventy-nine villages in 10 African countries have been selected to participate, and \$110 per person is being allocated to support five basic “interventions:” fertilizer and high yield seeds, clean water, basic health care, education, and a communication link to the outside world. While Sachs’ theory of poverty alleviation remains controversial, the early villages in the project are showing new signs of economic progress. And, Sachs would argue, this too is finally a matter of choice because, in his words, “the basic truth is that for less than a percent of the income of the rich world nobody has to die of poverty on the planet.”

### CHOICES FOR ME

Now I realize that as you sit in this audience on the first day of a new academic year, for many of you the very first day in your PLU education, you have a lot on your mind—and reducing pollution, preventing disease, and eliminating poverty may not be at the top of your “do list.” Yet, I set these issues before us today because all of us are Lutes, and as Lutes we inherit a legacy of commitment and service, that is both inspiring and demanding. It is a legacy of great people, well educated, strong in faith, committed to service who over the decades have courageously reached out and engaged the entire breadth of human experience all its pain and potential, and who, in doing so, have made a major difference.

--It is the legacy of Bill Foege, PLU class of ’57, who chose to become a medical doctor, a public health expert, and played a major role in eliminating small pox from the world.

--It is the legacy of Lois Capps, PLU class of '59, who after a career in public health nursing, chose to run for the U.S. House of Representatives. Now in her 5<sup>th</sup> term, health issues are her primary legislative focus.

--It is the legacy of Peter Wang, PLU class of 1960, and his wife, Grace, who six years ago endowed our Wang Center for International Programs, and through their Wang Foundation, are funding a landmark service-learning program, based in Beijing, focused on poverty alleviation in rural China.

--It is the legacy of Joyce Barr, PLU class 1972, who joined the Foreign Service and just concluded her terms as U.S. ambassador to Namibia where she worked on the U.S. AIDS Initiative in Southern Africa. She will be our commencement speaker next May.

--It is the legacy of Tom Vraalsen, PLU friend and Regent, who is chairing the international commission monitoring the implementation of the peace agreement in Sudan.

--And in recent years, it is a legacy of 76 Fulbright scholars, a Rhodes Scholar, a Pickering Fellowship scholar, and hundreds of PLU graduates living lives of inquiry, leadership and service “right here in the Puget Sound and increasingly around the whole of Planet Earth.”

As of today, this legacy belongs to you!

### CONCLUSION

As we open this new school year, the Harry Potter analogy is irresistible: each of you, like Harry, has been given the gift of life. Each of you, like Harry, have talents; Harry's talent was magic, yours are, in their own way, magical, too—unique, different, and yours alone. Now, you, like Harry, have come to your Hogwarts to discover your mission, to refine and sharpen and build your talents, so that you, like Harry, might choose wisely; so that you, like Harry, might always be a force for good and against evil in ways that are sometimes, well,...sometimes simply magical.

God bless you all. Have a wonderful academic year.

Loren Anderson  
President