

Engaged: The journal of Tennessee State University

Volume 1 *Centennial Issue*


Article 2

4-1-2012

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Celeste C. Williams
Tennessee State University

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Recommended Citation

Williams, Celeste C. (2013) "Living Our Lives as Elders: A Convocation Address," *Engaged: The journal of Tennessee State University*: Vol. 1, Article 2.
Available at: <http://digitalscholarship.tnstate.edu/ejtsu/vol1/iss1/2>

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Living Our Lives as Elders: A Convocation Address

Celeste C. Williams

Through the chronicling of our lives, we began to see how the relationships that are perhaps the most significant are those that push us forward to make a positive impact in our communities and in the world. These relationships often- times stretch us beyond comfortable limits, yet they help us grow. Several years ago, I was asked to give the convocation address at Tennessee State University. As the Teacher of the Year at the time, I felt obliged to accept the invitation. While crafting the convocation address and examining my life and my experiences at TSU as a student and subsequently a faculty member, I began to realize how important Tennessee State University is in the lives of so many. I learned to live my life as an elder at Tennessee State University because a myriad of individuals modeled behaviors associated with mentorship and leadership for me. The convocation address is a part of Tennessee State University's history. It is personal and far reaching. It is part autobiographical, part motivational, and part historical. It refers to the kind of unity that is subsumed in the African proverb "It takes a Village to Raise a Child." It highlights the behaviors of TSU faculty, administration, and staff that have helped shape thousands of students into mentors, leaders, and extraordinary human beings. Most importantly, it suggests that we are all elders in specific contexts. Therefore, the responsibility for ourselves, others, our communities, and even the world rests with all of us.

As a community, a sense of unity comes as much from our individual experiences as it does from our collective experience. The nature of unity varies as we endeavor to catch the sometimes elusive feeling that we are united as one. "As the U.S. population ages (baby boomers are nearing retirement and people are living longer), competition for scarce resources pits different generations against each other. Intergenerational unity offers opportunities to reduce this tension and create healthy, age-integrated communities that appreciate the cultural heritages, traditions,

histories, and values that affect each generation.”¹ Intergenerational unity may be realized through mentoring. Mentoring is often described as “a formalized process whereby a more knowledgeable and experienced person actuates a supportive role of overseeing and encouraging reflection and learning with a less experienced and knowledgeable person, so as to facilitate that person’s career and personal development.”²

At Tennessee State University, the rich tradition of mentoring produces ties that bind us inextricably to the institution and each other. As a student, I sometimes misunderstood the nature of these ties, characterizing them as a bit too restrictive. As a faculty member, I understand that these ties can’t be relaxed to the extent that students desire. They must have holding power. That is power that helps students stay their course and also leaves room for individual experiences, perceptions, values, and worldviews. As described by Vincenti,

a healthy society (and a healthy organization) has members that respect diverse perceptions and experiences. Age diversity not only provides opportunities for values, knowledge, and insights (that only experience can bring) to be transmitted from the old to the young; but provides opportunities for the young to contribute new insights and world views.³

The following Convocation address was delivered in the fall semester of 2003 to students, faculty, administration, and staff at Tennessee State University. It is offered as a piece of the Tennessee State University historical tapestry that so vividly characterizes the type of learning and reflection that is a direct outgrowth of intergenerational unity and respect.

¹ Virginia B. Vincenti, “Intergenerational Unity Benefits Everyone,” *Journal of Family and Consumer Sciences* 96, no. 2 (2004): 1.

² A. Roberts, “Mentoring Revisited: A Phenomenological Reading of the Literature,” *Mentoring and Tutoring*, 8, no. 2 (2000): 145-170.

³ *Ibid.*

Convocation Address

Good morning, everyone. Thank you for the wonderful introduction, Dr. Hefner.⁴ When Dr. Hefner asked me to speak at this convocation, I was honored, but frankly I didn't know what I was going to say. I asked myself how I could reach this audience, and to be honest, for days I was at a loss, I was simply at a loss. But I thought and thought about it and finally decided that I needed to begin by sharing something with you, something that changed the way I view my place in this world. I will describe it to you in the following way ... like a story.

"Listen to me" were three of the most profound words I had ever heard. They erupted like a thunderstorm from the mouth of a timid-looking little girl who wore her cornrows like a badge of honor. She had coco brown skin and deep-set brown eyes that seemed to be begging me to reach out and hug her. I remember pausing to look at her, and as I stood there, she said it again: "Listen to me."

I was instantly sad because she was crying. I was apprehensive, but I knew I was going to help her. So I took a deep breath, reached down, touched her hand softly, and asked, "What's wrong?"

She replied, "You hear me, you hear me, everybody else just keeps walking by, they didn't hear but you did." "They heard," I thought, but I didn't say it. She clung to my hand with an urgency that overtly revealed her desperation. She was scared. She told me that she was hurt and lost. She had ridden her bicycle several blocks ahead of her mother and had turned off of the big street, which I knew was Broadway, onto the little street which I knew was 122nd street. When she looked back over her shoulder, she couldn't see her mom. My guess is that's when she panicked and crashed into the parking meter. Her bike was broken and so was the skin on both of her knees. And in that moment, I just hoped that her spirit hadn't received the same kind of damage. She told me that she had just moved to New York City with her mom, and everything seemed new to her. Her voice was so shaky, but she stood up. She looked down at her knees, looked up at me and closed her eyes tightly. She was fighting back tears she had yet to shed. I gave her little hand a gentle

⁴ Tennessee State University President 1991-2005

squeeze and said, “Let me help you find your mom, I know she’s looking for you.” I reached for her bike, and we both pushed it down the hill of 122nd street, turned right back onto Broadway, and proceeded to push the bike back up the hill. The front wheel wobbled a bit, which made this a very challenging proposition, but we struggled on up the hill anyway. As we approached the crest of the hill, we heard someone yelling a name, her name as it turned out, Lena. Her mom reached us in record time. Before she could call Lena’s name a third time, she was upon us. She looked at me strangely but gave me a half smile just the same. I’m sure she was suspicious of me; after all, we were in New York City. She did, however, thank me, and Lena gave me a great big hug. I hugged her back and turned to leave, wanting to get back to my slightly aloof New York lifestyle. As I walked away, I heard Lena say, “It is true mom, it really is true the Elders are listening.” I smiled and chuckled because at the time I was only nineteen. I had never thought of myself as an elder anything, much less one of the Elders. At the time, I thought of Elders as beings that had sort of gone before my generation. To me, Elders were really, really, really old people, you know around forty who were full of wisdom and courage and a profound sense of knowing about the world, but little Miss Lena changed that for me. She helped me realize that once you are born, one hour later, five minutes later, one second later you become an elder. Someone arrives in this world after you.

How will you live your lives as Elders?

For me, the Elders wander the past and occupy the present. They are the ones who are the keepers and the sharers of knowledge. They took and the take the kinds of risks that make it possible for the people who come after them to succeed and live fulfilled lives. We stand on their shoulders. They are at the very heart of the cycle of life for they make it possible for us to thrive. We gain access to them by accepting their existence and embracing all that they know. They mentor us into knowing and they urge us to take our place beside them.

How will you live your lives as Elders?

The family stories that permeate my existence tell of lives lived and lessons learned. They keep the ancestors alive for us. The ancestors, my ancestors are my

first Elders. The content of their lived experiences exists in the oral tradition that is a part of my family culture. My people, my family are storytellers. That would explain why I am going to tell you another story now. Let me tell you about the Old Indian. Anytime we honor him by speaking of him and his life, he is referred to as the Old Indian. I must admit that I am a bit ashamed that it never occurred to me to ask his name, I still don't know his name. I just know him as the Old Indian. My great-great-grandfather on my mother's side was a Cherokee Indian (it is believed). He was spared the Trail of Tears because he married the daughter of a former slave owner and an African Slave. As my 95-year-old grandmother said, "The white folks spared his life by saving him from the walk." He watched his sisters, brother, and mother walk out of his embrace into their prescribed genocide. He never saw any of his Cherokee relatives again. They died on the great walk that was appropriately renamed the Trail of Tears because many of the Indians who began the walk died before they could finish it. Have no doubt, no doubt at all that at that time the governmental desire to displace Indians and claim their lands circumvented any sensible notions about humanity. Well, the Old Indian was sad, so very sad, but he made a family of his own with his wife. He never forgot how his first family was pushed off of the land they called home and made to walk to their deaths. Maybe that is what made him so mean.

Oh, he was mean. All accounts of him say he had great regard, concern, and respect for his wife, children, and grandchildren, but apparently he had no use for anyone else. If you dared to approach his property without invitation, he would swiftly reach for his shotgun, take aim, and fire. He was a great shot, so he never actually shot anyone that he didn't mean to shoot. But everyone knew that they would be taking a great risk by stepping one foot on his property uninvited. They had to send word through his wife, children, or one of his grandchildren if they wanted an audience with him and wait for his reply. He seldom granted an audience to anyone outside his family. The accounts of his experiences as an Indian living in the South center on his unyielding determination to protect his family and home. That's how he

spent his life. For him and his family, there would be no unjust confiscation of land. He simply wouldn't have it.

It wasn't until last year that I actually saw a picture of him. In the picture he was very old; he looked to be around ninety. His skin was still smooth though and his hair braided. But his eyes caught my attention. I'll never forget them. They shone with sadness like I had never seen. They revealed the depths of his sorrow. He stood in front of the small house that he so diligently protected all of his life. It was to be his legacy to his children and grandchildren. You see, he had a great desire to leave something behind for those that were to come later. He knew then as I know now that we are responsible for those that come after us. I believe the Old Indian taught me that.

Lessons from the Elders come in many forms. They can reach out to us from the past and touch our spirits, thus igniting the sparks of humanity that dwell inside each of us. It matters what we do in this life to help those that come after us. Think for a moment of all the Elders who risked life and limb in the civil rights struggles of the 1960s. Those who marched the streets of cities like Birmingham, Selma, Montgomery, and Nashville so that we all could live better lives. As each march began, they understood that they might not make it through to the end of the march, the police, k-9 patrol or a bullet might take them out, but they persisted because of their overwhelming sense of responsibility to those that were to come later, us. The inhumanity that was suffered by Elders like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, and countless others was unspeakable. They suffered the inhumanity courageously so that we could live better lives. How can you not be moved by that? How can you not be overcome with emotion because people who didn't even know you would risk it all so that you could be happy, healthy, and respected?

How can you not be humbled by our Jewish Elders who survived the Holocaust and tell of their horrifying experiences in the death camps even though it causes considerable emotional turmoil to do so? They want the world to be a better place for everyone. They care about what happens to the people that will come later. They never want to see another holocaust, so they give of themselves, even though it hurts

each time they do it. The tears that they shed as they tell of the ones they lost are in mourning for the ones who did not survive and in hope that we will survive. How can you not be moved by that?

We have work to do because, whether we like it or not, we are responsible for those that come after us, and with that responsibility comes choices, choices regarding the way we are living our lives right now. What we do today will impact generations to come. Let me tell you another story. My father's family was po', not poor but po'. That meant that they had about half as much as what poor people had, which was pretty much nothing. As a matter of fact, my uncle Harold can often be quoted as saying that "when we ate, if we didn't lick our plates clean, we would miss thirty percent of the meal." My father's mother was a domestic worker, a maid. His dad left her with seven children, and she struggled to feed them. She only had a 3rd grade education, so it was a real struggle, but she wanted so much for her children. Granny, that's what the grandchildren called her. Granny scrubbed floors and took in extra work to help put my dad through college. She wanted to see her child succeed. My dad went to college and struggled hard. He worked three jobs and studied extra hard. You see, when he got to Oakwood College, he was tested, and they found out that he didn't read or write very well. But he was determined to succeed. He knew the sacrifices his mother was making so that he could earn a degree, so failure or dropping out was not an option. They were hard years. My dad became the first college graduate in his family.

He returned home to Louisville, Kentucky, with a degree and found my mom, and they married. They had four children. My parents struggled forward and they both earned doctorates from Ivy League Institutions while raising four children. They made monumental sacrifices so that they could help their kids live a better quality of life than they lived when they were children. That's what their Elders did for them, and that's what they did for us. I am proud of my parents' accomplishments as scholars, but I am even prouder of their accomplishments as human beings. They stepped up each time the Elders called on them for service; that's how they began to embrace their role as Elders.

When the Elders call on you for service, you have to step up, to do anything else brings dishonor. So, I stand before you quaking in my shoes. I am nervous and I am scared, but my Elders called on me to step up and act like an Elder, and that's what I am doing. My Elders literally sit behind me on this stage and in front of me in the audience, and they figuratively stand beside me as I speak to all of you. I spoke to Dr. Augustus Bankhead⁵ last week and told him I was nervous and scared, and you know what he said, he said, "Oh, you don't have to be, if you want me to, if you need me to, I will stand beside you as you speak and hold your hand." I have no doubt that he meant that. I am certain that if I falter now he will be at my side to help me. I found a family of peers and Elders here at Tennessee State University. My TSU family supports me, encourages me, offers constructive criticism when I need it, and embraces me in all of my flawed magnificence and that is a beautiful thing. That's waiting here at Tennessee State University for you, too.

I started my TSU family when I was a student. I found peers, faculty members, and administrators that have served and continue to serve as mentors, colleagues, and friends. Your Elders at TSU are waiting to embrace you. They want you to be like Lena and ask them to listen to you. What you think and feel is important to your Elders. They rejoice in the possibility of your success. Help them to hear you. Be respectful and listen to them. Your Elders have earned that respect in blood, sweat, and tears; don't you dare act like they haven't. Be mindful that just as my Granny and my parents made countless sacrifices so that I can be here today, so have your Elders. Do not dishonor them by carrying yourself in a manner that would bring them shame. They have earned at least that.

Determining how to live your lives as Elders is all about choices. The choices we make today do have consequences tomorrow. Dr. James Hefner wrote an impassioned memo to the student body that I hope you all read. But I'd like to quote from that memo now, if you don't mind, Dr. Hefner:

Make choices that are reasoned not mindless. By mid century, your children and grandchildren will be glad

⁵ Vice President, Academic Affairs, Tennessee State University, 1994 - 2006

Williams: Living Our Lives as Elders: A Convocation Address
you did. Always remember that the learning enterprise
is one of the greatest experiences of a lifetime. Excel
in it by constantly choosing to renew your mind.⁶

Relate to your Elders in a way that contributes to your intellectual growth
and theirs. Understand that you too are an Elder; someone will be looking to you for
mentorship and friendship. The way that you cultivate your relationships with your
Elders now will influence the role that you play as an Elder in someone else's life
later. I conclude by posing a question that is rhetorical in the sense that I am not
expecting an answer to it right now, but is not rhetorical in that searching for the
answer to this question may help you begin to discover who you really are: How will
you live your lives as Elders?

Thank you for listening to me.

⁶ James A. Hefner, "Memorandum to the Student Body," Tennessee State University, 2003.