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The Black Tradition of Excellence And the Challenge of the Eighties

By Lerone Bennett Jr.

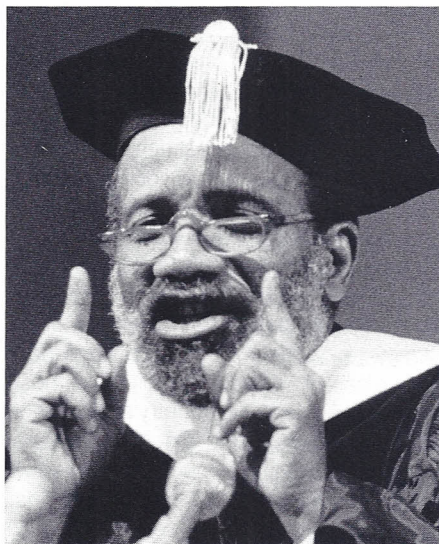
I never come [to Howard University] without a sense that I am visiting holy ground. For it was here, on this sacred soil, on this hilltop, that so many of the great spirits of our tradition—the Johnsons, the Mayses, the Thurmans, Nabrits, Logans, Wesleys, Porters, Woodsons, to name only a few—worked and dreamed and brooded. And I never come here without an eerie feeling that the spirit of these great spirits is blowing in this wind and that I and all other Americans are indebted to them and to this great institution, which has done so much with so little for so many for so long.

For 116 years now, this institution has stood like a beacon on this hill, sending out black rays that lighted the way of thousands of Black boys and girls who would have otherwise stumbled and lost their way in the dazzling whiteness that blinded them.

For 116 years, in good times and bad times, it has been recycling the mangled products of systematic oppression, dehumanization and miseducation. And for all these years it [Howard] has been a living root and a sustaining center of nourishment for battalions of Black scholars who changed our vision of ourselves and the world's vision of us.

Born on the edge of slavery, tempered and toughened by the betrayal of Reconstruction and the ravages of segregation, inadequately funded, inadequately supported, but withal strong and resilient, "reared againts the eastern sky," Howard has endured like a tough pine on a rocky height. And it stands here as a witness and summons, lifting its branches to all winds, guiding us, beckoning us, telling us that the darkness—the darkness of our skin, the darkness of our experience, the darkness of our hope—is light enough.

PHOTO BY HARLEE LITTLE



Lerone Bennett Jr.

It is that message, it is that hope, it is that audacity that we celebrate. And we celebrate it with a sure sense that the situation which made Howard necessary in 1867 makes it indispensable in 1983. For the situation of inequality that called it into being has not changed all that much, and the need—tens of thousands of youths clamoring for air and light—is, if anything, greater. No only that, no white institution—neither Johns Hopkins, nor Harvard, nor Yale—is willing or able to do for our youths what the Howards of this world can do. And so we can say, 116 years after [its] founding, we need Howard today more than ever... and that if it did not exist in its present form it would be necessary to go out into the streets of Washington and invent it.

I stress this point here, at the very beginning, because I don't think we can find our way back to our truth or forward to our

destiny if we don't take seriously the meaning engraved on this landscape by the Howards of this world. That meaning, in the beginning, had to do with the idea of education as a total adventure embracing the liberation of the body, mind and soul. They believed then—the founding spirits and students of Howard and other historically Black institutions—that education was power. They believed then that you attended school not to learn how to make money but to learn how to make freedom. And we are challenged to lift ourselves once again to the high and dangerous and exhilarating ground of their vision.

This [charter day] then has a double simultaneous reference: It points both to the future and the past. It calls us back as it calls us forward. It says that the new frontier for us is the old frontier and that the most immediate task before us is the task of recapturing the spirit of a time when Black education was a total adventure and an educated Black was dangerous to the peace of an unjust society.

In honor of the old-new Howard hope, and the honorees of the day, I want to say a few words here about the Black tradition of excellence and the challenge of the eighties.

In the beginning, our beginning, before we knew the name of Jehovah or Plato, in *that* beginning, in the days of Shango and Damballah and pure black light, the word was one.

The same word healed and revealed.

The same word taught and blessed.

The same word gave heat and light.

But that was a long time ago, in another place. And when we began again in this place, at the dawn of emancipation and the dawn of Howard, this dialectic of oneness, of work and the word, of struggle

and spirit, of the intellectual institutionalized, and the preacher and teacher again embodied the ideals and aspirations of the people.

Albion W. Tourgee was there, at that great and holy beginning. And he tells us that the freed slaves began their new life in freedom almost everywhere by building a rough wooden building. Why did they do this? Listen to Tourgee:

"In every village of the South was erected one or more of these rough wooden buildings, consisting only of a roof, rafter, walls and floor of undressed plank. . . . These houses became to the colored people what the court of the temple was to the Jews — the place of assembly and worship, as well as instruction. They were usually unsectarian; and it was no unusual spectacle to see two or three denominations worshipping in the same house, while the school was under the management and control of still another."

Tourgee went on to say that these rough wooden buildings were better adapted to the needs of the community and produced better educational results than "was ever done in all history with like means."

That was the beginning. And in that beginning, Black people mobbed these buildings and demonstrated a mass passion for education, a mass passion for book learning, a mass passion for excellence that has not been equaled in the modern world. The whole race, eyewitnesses said, wanted to go to school, and schoolchildren preferred classes to play.

Charlotte Forten was there. She was teaching then in the Sea Islands, off the coast of South Carolina, and said she "never before saw children so eager to learn. . . . Coming to school is a constant delight and recreation to them. They come here as other children go to play."

The same thing was observed in Louisiana and Maryland and the District of Columbia. The Rev. Thomas Calahan, a white missionary, said:

"Go out in any direction, and you meet Negroes on horses, Negroes on mules,

Negroes with oxen, Negroes by the wagon, cart and buggy load . . . all hopeful, almost all cheerful, everyone pleading to be taught, willing to do anything for learning. They are never out of our rooms, and their cry is for 'Books! Books!' and 'when will school begin?'"

What a marvelous, what an extraordinary thing to say!

There was a time in this country when you had to whip Black children to make them leave school. Can you believe it?

There was a time in this country when the whole Black population was engaged totally, passionately, persistently, in a mass quest for excellence in education and life. And one of the greatest crimes of this guilty country was the prolonged and systematic undermining of Black American's almost innate love of learning and letters.

Despite this bad faith, the passionate and feverish pursuit of excellence continued. Old men and women sacrificed and worked in white people's kitchens and ditches and dives. They cleaned spittoons and outhouses, they bowed and scraped, they humiliated themselves, they said, "Yes, sir" and "No, sir," so their children could have a chance at the excellence denied them by American law and practice. And the children honored the mothers and fathers by studying day and night while holding two or three jobs on the side.

That's the record. That's the tradition. . . . *our* tradition.

It is a tradition rooted in the African tradition which revered wisdom and wise men and griots.

It is a tradition rooted in the rich soul of "the Black and unknown bards" of slavery, who created the African-American synthesis and transformed themselves and the flora and fauna of America.

It is a tradition, a people's tradition, an anti-elite tradition, rooted in the indomitable tenacity of spirit of a great people who couldn't be stopped or destroyed or turned back by anything. And what the tradition tells us today is that excellence is no respecter of person or place, that it can

come out of Nazareth or out of the projects, that it is in us and around us and that every Black is called, in the Black religious sense, to bear witness to the good news.

*This-a little light of mine,
I'm gonna let it shine.*

It is that light, the light in the humblest man and woman, the light in you and in me, which glows in the Black tradition of excellence, a tradition that expresses itself not only in intellectual products but also in sewing, sweeping floors, cooking, carpentry, masonry and other tasks.

The voices of the tradition are eloquent and insistent and unanimous on this point.

Mary McLeod Bethune extolled the divinity of perspiration and the poetry of ordinary tasks. "Cease to be a drudge. Be an artist."

Howard Thurman extolled the divinity of truth. "Die poor, unknown, unloved, a failure, a disgrace even, but never shut your eyes to the truth."

Benjamin E. Mays extolled the divinity of great ends. "Not failure, but low aim is sin."

These are the voices of the tradition. They come to us across the years. They say: *Strain every sinew, stretch every muscle, sweat, grunt, exert all your powers to gain your rightful place in the sun.*

This is the message of the tradition.

There is something in this tradition which welcomes and even glories in the wall to be climbed, the race to be run, the obstacle to be overcome.

There is something in this tradition which laughs at walls and locked doors and nos.

There is something in this tradition which says that the greater the obstacle, the more glorious the triumph.

"I glory in the conflict," Frederick Douglass said, "so that I may hereafter exult in the victory."

Audacity: this tradition is defined by audacity and persistence and grace under pressure and contempt for ease and comfort. It is defined by a refusal to

34 give up, by a willingness to go the second and third mile. It is defined and illustrated by men and women who were willing to pay the price of excellence—the price of sleepless nights and 16-hour days, the price of working while others played, of running while others walked.

Tenacity: the Black tradition of excellence is a tradition of education and skills acquired by prodigious sacrifices and demonstrated in the face of doubt, difficulty and repeated disappointment.

It is a tradition of doing more with less, making bricks without straw, winning races with handicaps, climbing barbed wire fences with bare hands.

It is a tradition, not to mince words, of superspirits and supersouls.

Carter Woodson entering high school at 19 and studying Greek and Latin between trips to the coal mines; Benjamin Mays graduating from high school at 22 and cleaning outhouses to finance his education; Malcom X mastering the English language with a dictionary in a jail cell; Mary McLeod Bethune starting a college on a city dump with \$1.50; John Johnson rising from poverty and the welfare rolls to the ranks of the 400 richest Americans; Howard Thurman reading every book in the Morehouse library; "Dr. J." doing the 360-degree; Duke Ellington loving us madly; Charles Drew and Percy Julian extending the boundaries of human knowledge; W.E.B. Du Bois abandoning pure research and trying, he said, to lift the earth with his bare hands. Has there been anywhere and at any time a more brilliant tradition and a greater passion for light?

Du Bois, Drew, Ellington and Thurman were bone of the bone and blood of the blood of the tradition. But we must not think, we dare not, that they were exceptions. They were not. They were only the highest expression of a passion which reached to unfathomable depths in the soil of Black life. Tens of thousands of Black men and women waited on tables, studied all night and climbed with bruised hands and battered bodies to the heights. Mordecai Wyatt Johnson, John Hope, John Hope Franklin, Ralph Johnson

Bunche, the Marshalls, the Kings, the Nabrits, the Cheeks, the Bowmans, the Chisums, the Allens—they were and are witnesses and guarantors of the greatest tradition of excellence this country has known.

It was that tradition, a tradition older than the University of Virginia, older even than Harvard, a tradition that had known rivers and Pharaohs and griots—it was that tradition, the tradition of Richard Allen and Alexander Crummell and Kelly Miller and Frederick Douglass, it was that tradition which exploded in the post-Civil War crusade that led to the founding of Howard University. And the tradition speaks to us today, calling us to the excellence of a new crusade to save the soul of our country and the spirit of our people.

But we can't meet that challenge, and rise to the level of our destiny, if we don't recognize first that the tradition of excellence this university represents is threatened in this country today as it has never been threatened before. It is threatened on the one hand by a 40-year run of Depression and near-Depression levels of unemployment in Black America. It is threatened on the other hand by a mean-spirited conservative movement and a vast propaganda campaign which has hidden Black people from themselves and the great tradition that defines them. And if we hope and intend to redeem the pledges of the Black spirit, and if there is still time, we must deal with four fundamental tasks that this celebration puts on our agenda.

The first task is the task of doing something, *whatever is required*, about the economic policies which are undermining our ancient traditions. The unemployment rates of Black youths are 30, 40, 50, 70 percent—a national crime. And it is impossible to talk Black excellence or teach it or discuss it if we are not committed body and soul to a total struggle against the forces and men who are undermining it.

The second task, flowing with and out of the first, is the task of creating a new vision of scholarship in this country. It should be

clear by now to almost everyone that white American scholarship cannot solve the race problem because white American scholarship is a part of the problem.

It is a part of the problem because it is permeated by race and class biases against the poor and the disadvantaged.

It is a part of the problem because it is vitiated from top to bottom by an oppressive hyper-empiricism that reinforces and gilds the chains of the oppressed.

It is a part of the problem because it is white-centered, Europe-centered, property-and place-centered.

For all these reasons, and for others as well, we see now through a glass whitely. And the task before us is the task of seeing with our own eyes in living color.

It is very important for us to reevaluate ourselves within the context of this challenge. For it is becoming increasingly clear that a major factor in the continued exploitation of Blacks is the white American academic community. I was reminded of this recently while reading a newspaper series on the economic plight of Black Americans. And it was interesting and revealing to read the comments of the experts quoted in the article. They admitted to an expert that the problem is intolerable. But they said to an expert that nothing can be done about the problem. By that they meant that nothing conventional can be done about the problem. By that they meant that their training made it impossible for them to think of alternatives that might be unconventional or even radical. And I was reminded, as I read the article, of the words of Dr. Dan Dodson, a sensitive white scholar, who said once that the principal function of scholarship in a situation of oppression is to keep the oppressed oppressed.

"At the middle of the last century," Dr. Dodson wrote, "the theologians were called on to provide the rationalizations as to why the power order could not get creativity from some people. Thus was born the theory of infant damnation. By the end of the century the psychologists had emerged with status. Hence they provided a new and secular version of in-

fant damnation which was the low I.Q. Very rapidly we sociologists are providing our own version of infant damnation which is low social class. Thus it goes. If one reads the literature of 'validated hypotheses' about those outside the power order, he is impressed with the endless clichés of 'low I.Q.,' 'low social class,' 'weak ego strength,' 'lack of father image with which to relate,' 'inability to forego immediate pleasures for long-range goals,' 'matriarchal domination,' 'cultural deprivation,' etc., etc., etc."

Dr. Dodson concluded that if the oppressed ever succeed in making their outreach to full selfhood, their first job will be to beat down the mythologies the behavioral scientists have created about them. And when they make that leap, it will be our task to articulate, from the foundations of our tradition, a new philosophy and vision of scholarship and education. This brings us to the third task, the task of mobilizing Black America, of mobilizing businesses, churches, schools, fraternities and sororities, for a mammoth educational crusade. One of our major problems today is that millions of our youths have been intimidated by the prevailing myth of Black deficiency. How could it be otherwise, since we have not tempted them with the good. How could it be otherwise, since they are subjected in our society to a process of mystification which confirms the oppression and makes the victims precisely what they would have to be in order to justify the oppression.

The process is clear, ominous and devastating. First, our children are inadequately trained by school systems which doubt their abilities. They are then bamboozled by batteries of tests which cunningly confuse the effects of oppression with the expression or non-expression of an undefined concept — intelligence. How can anyone be surprised by the results? Insulted and undervalued, lacking words to name or exorcise the injury done them, and traumatized by the white terror of the media, many Black youths fall into the trap set for them by doubting themselves and their abilities. Not knowing,

having no way of knowing the power of their own minds and the greatness of their tradition, they lower their sights and dim their own lights.

We've got to reverse that process. We've got to rebuild the shrines of Black greatness in our children's minds. We've got to lift their eyes—and our eyes—once again to the high hills of our ancient hopes. We've got to say to them, and to ourselves:

Awake, awake

Put on thy strength,

O Zion;

Put on thy beautiful garments. . . .

This is the challenge. We must tell our youths, before it is too late, that excellence is their heritage and their only hope. We must tell them, as I have said before, that the Black cause will not be safe in America until Black students are as proficient and as visible and as acclaimed in the field of scholarship as they are now on the basketball court and the baseball field.

Beyond all that, deeper than all that, we — students, teachers, writers, workers — must struggle for the soul of our people. We have lost something wandering in the white alleys of this land. We have lost, we are losing, that toughness of spirit and that certain dark joy that enabled our ancestors to survive slavery and segregation. And we are challenged today to re-evaluate ourselves in the light of their legacy. They came down the same road we are travelling when the road was harder, the ditches deeper and the mountains higher. They came up from slavery, up from segregation, up through the storm, up through the fire, up through the blood, and they never once considered turning back. And we are invited on this 116th anniversary of the founding of Howard to renew ourselves and all our projects in the great Black fire of their hope: Excellence in life. Excellence in education. Excellence in struggle.

This is the challenge and the opportunity before us. It is the challenge of internalizing and carrying around with us the reborn Black community. It is the chal-

lenge of letting our light shine, not only because it is our light but also because in the world in which we live the Black light we reflect is almost the only light left.

And if the stones in the building on this campus could speak, if they could convey to us the message of our founding spirits, they would tell us that nothing can destroy us here if we keep the faith of Howard and put our hands to plow and hold on.

They would say in the words of the great spiritual of the tradition:

Hold your light, Brother Robert.

Hold your light, Brother Robert.

Hold your light on Canaan's shore. □

Lerone Bennett, Jr., senior editor of *Ebony* magazine, spoke at Howard University's 116th Charter Day celebration, March 2, 1983.