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Andrew Young

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Bridging the Gap

The following is an excerpt from the address of the Honorable Andrew Young, U. S. Ambassador to the United Nations, on the occasion of Howard University's Charter Day Convocation on March 2, 1977, commemorating the 110th anniversary of the founding of the university. Ed.

By Andrew Young

It is really my privilege to accept from you my second honorary degree from this institution. Those who were around here when I was, know very well what I am talking about. Yet, I say that the education I received at Howard University far exceeded the work which I pursued in my studies. If I did neglect my studies, the Howard University community did not neglect producing an educational environment that both positively and negatively prepared me to deal with the world in which we now live.

I cannot help but reminisce a bit. There is a sense in which my life was shaped by the years that I spent here, by the things that I did as well as by the things that I did not do. So, I say to the students who are out there feeling kind of sorry for themselves—wondering whether they are going to be here when the grass turns green—Hang on in there. It all works out good in the end.

There is a phenomenal environment produced by this institution—the bringing of an oppressed people from all across this nation and from around the world to think and to work together. To be together, and to understand each other, produces a learning experience that I think is not often repeated. I think about my experience now in the United Nations, especially in view of the recent success that was attributed to me in terms of our relationship with the nation of Nigeria. In a sense, that success started when I lived in Cook Hall with one of the most

the recently deceased neurosurgeon, Dr. Emanuel L. Odeku—who set a standard for academic excellence on the third floor of Cook Hall that none of the rest of us could ever touch. He finished in two and a half years, summa cum laude, with double majors in chemistry and physics. And he always lectured us about being trifling and trivial and not taking seriously our educational opportunities. At the same time, on a different part of the campus, was Ambassador Sanu (Edward O.).

When we met after he was named ambassador to the United States from Nigeria, and as I have travelled to Nigeria with him, it was not as if I were going to a foreign land; it was as if I were going to meet classmates and brothers because of the experience we shared here. Yet, there were many people who were here at the same time who did not take the advantage or the opportunity of getting to know the people who were here from other countries.

There were many people who missed an important part of the educational experience of this institution because they narrowed rather than broadened their circle of friends.

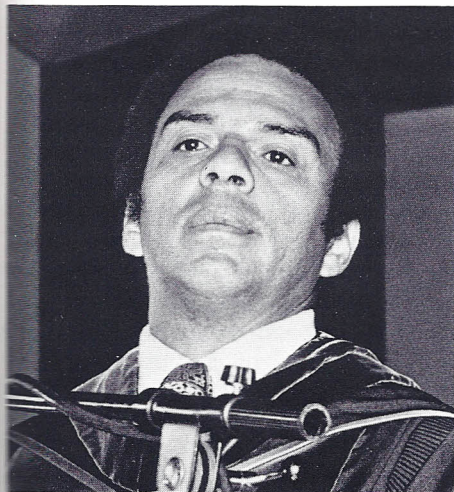
It was, in fact, from the broadening of the circle of friends and the curiosity about people from other lands that one received an education that was far more valuable than anything I read in any of the textbooks assigned. At the same time, there was an experience of going to chapel, not because I wanted to but because of a certain residual deference to my upbringing, and agonizing through the long hours of sermons by our previous president (Mordecai W. Johnson). My interest in Mahatma Gandhi came about as a result of the fact that I knew that when he got around to talking about Gandhi, he was almost through. Yet, Gandhi became more than just a symbol that I was 10 minutes away from lunch. Once I left Howard University, something

check out Gandhi's work. A few years later when I met Martin Luther King, I was well prepared to move with him into the Southern civil rights movement. We were grounded in a philosophy of non-violence and with a conviction that change could come in this country and anywhere else if one would reduce one's hostilities, and seek to organize methods of power which were non-destructive of either person or property that sought to find common ground on which all human beings could live and share in the abundance of this world's resources. Out of that experience, we began to achieve a measure of racial justice in the deep South of the United States.

"I have often attributed some of the impact on this nation to the impact which came to us from the liberation movements."

Howard University brought to one of its Convocations a young man by the name of Tom Mboya from Kenya. He was not yet 30 years old. He was running his country—or preparing to assume leadership in the days when Jomo Kenyatta was in prison. As much as it was a white missionary who was an influence in my life a little earlier, the influence of Tom Mboya, who was actually assuming the destiny of his people, said to me and to literally thousands of other students across this land that perhaps we, too, have a destiny in this nation; and perhaps we ought to get about the business of shaping the destiny of this nation for it has shaped us too much, and we do not like the image up to now.

Not long after that, student sit-ins spread across the Southland. I have often attributed some of the impact on this nation to the impact which came to us from the liberation movements and from



Andrew Young

which a profound and meaningful educational process goes on within this community. Those who come from here just happen to emerge somehow in a leadership experience almost anywhere and everywhere they go. The difference is not in the preparation and the training, it is in what you do with it when you leave. And I would contend that there are somethings that you might begin to do with it while you are yet here.

“... the vote on the repeal of the Byrd Amendment in the House and in the Senate is a referendum on the commitment of the United States toward majority rule in Africa.”

You are in *the capital* of the world. The decisions made in this city affect the destinies of people all over this planet. Yet, I see far too few of you coming down on Capitol Hill where all those decisions are being made. I see decisions being made that will influence your life for decades to come, and they will determine the destiny of your children. You are right here—a walking distance away—and have no awareness of what those decisions are. Yet, you will thrive on them or suffer under them throughout the rest of the days of your life.

If you do nothing else, visit your congressman one time. Go down there now and see him about the repeal of the Byrd Amendment. Understand, in a sense, that is the first vote in this Administration on the extent to which we have coped with racism in America today. There will be all kinds of questions about the quality of chrome and about the technical process. Essentially, the liberation struggle in Rhodesia has made all of them irrelevant. As the rest of the world looks at the United States, the vote on

the repeal of the Byrd Amendment in the House and in the Senate is referendum on the commitment of the United States toward majority rule in Africa, and, toward an opposition to racism all over the globe.

In a sense, we are still living under the prophecy of W.E.B. Dubois who in 1906 said “the problem of the 20th Century will be the problem of the color line.” We have been dogged by that problem throughout the days of our lives—and will be throughout our future unless we can somehow wipe out racism from the face of this earth. You can make an impact on that by letting your congressman and senator know that you are concerned.

Politically, God put us in a strange and powerful position before we even knew where we were and why we were here. We somehow were congregated in the South and made cotton king, and then escaped to the North and centered in the major urban areas. That, somehow, produced the difference in winning and losing. We produced the difference between this nation moving forward and this nation slipping back.

In 1960, Black men and women responded to the leadership of Martin Luther King, Jr., and they saw in John F. Kennedy someone who would be concerned about their well-being and they went to the polls in greater numbers than before and elected John F. Kennedy President of the United States by less than one vote per precinct. Dick Gregory said they did it in Chicago where folks from Mississippi voted four and five times for all the years they would not let them vote down there.

But the fact remains that when there was a massive understanding of the political situation and when Black voters got involved in determining the destiny of this nation, this nation moved forward under the leadership of John F. Kennedy. Even after his assassination, we con-

the freedom ceremonies of the newly-emerging nations of Africa. So, there is a remarkable climate here, one which affords us enormous benefits beyond those which occur in the classroom.

I think of the time that I wasted—and I tend to put a lot of the fraternity time in that category—that last year (of college) when a bunch of poor niggers scraped up all of the money they could to give a dance. It was almost the straw that broke the camel's back. I said: “There has got to be something better in life than the bigger and better balls and wilder and wilder cocktail parties.” I was really ashamed to come for my graduation; I was ashamed to stand up and receive that first degree because I knew how little I knew. Perhaps that is the purpose of education—not to teach you everything that you should know, but to instill in you a desire to know and a determination to continue learning. Howard University, by hook and by crook, did that.

It is hard to say that as I have seen the products of this university both before and since, it continues that mission. No matter how you complain about it, no matter how disappointed the members of the faculty are in students, no matter how sensitive sometimes you think the

tinued to fulfill the promises of the New Frontier in a Great Society under the leadership of Lyndon Johnson. Yet, the politics of assassination set us back. We suffered as we lost the leadership of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, back-to-back. We floundered in our ghettos when the leadership of Malcolm X was taken from us. As a result of a few assassinations, we found the strongest nation in the history of mankind literally morally retarded under the leadership of Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford. In a sense, they are not solely to blame, for people in 1968 said: "The vote does not make any difference. All white folks are the same. You cannot trust any of them." We know better now, and for eight years we have paid for that misinformation. I think in this present election, we came back and redeemed ourselves once again.

For the first time in the history of the United States of America, almost from beginning to end, the Black community determined who would be President. I do not know about you, but from where I sit on the inside, I have not been disappointed in that decision. Hardly a cabinet meeting passes that the President does not ask members of the cabinet how they are doing in hiring members of minority groups and women. Hardly an opportunity comes up for him to remind them of his commitment to the poor and the oppressed in this nation that he does not take that opportunity to urge upon them the kinds of appointments and policies that will involve all Americans in the mainstream of this wonderful experiment in democracy.

Yes, we have come a long way, but we still have a long way to go. Perhaps this South Georgia President who knows how difficult that road might be, and who has trodded it himself throughout all of his life, might well be the one who can lead this nation—with our help—to move

between the shores of these two mighty oceans.

"The burden is still on us to cry out in our demand for freedom and justice. . . . Black men and women in America can never be free so long as Black men and women in South Africa are not free."

I always say that we politicians do not do anything that we do not have to . . . you grease the wheel that squeaks. After three girls, we waited 12 years to have a little boy. You know, I was proud to have a little boy. But we did not get up in the middle of the night to feed him unless he was raising hell. The point I am trying to make is that any Administration, no matter how noble and decent, gets caught up in its own immediate priorities. It gets paralyzed by bureaucratic necessities and if there is to be any breakthrough of any significance, it is going to be produced by people who require it and who need it—demanding that their problems be met, that their needs be responded to, and their hunger be fed. Just because we elected a President does not assure us that "the Kingdom has come." It only assures us that there is an Administration in power that will respond to those questions which we raise and those issues which we urgently put forward.

The burden is still on us to cry out in our demand for freedom and justice. I hope that in our cries for freedom and justice, we will not cry only for ourselves—because when you cry only for yourself, the tendency is for people not to pay much attention to you. I think, the extent to which we are committed to justice and to freedom will be determined by how much we cry out for others who help themselves. Black men and

women in America can never be free so long as Black men and women in South Africa are not free.

There is a sense of the continued prophecy of Martin Luther King, that all men are bound together in a single garment of destiny inextricably woven into a network of mutuality, that the problems of Southern Africa will inevitably be reflected in the Middle East—when they are reflected in the Middle East, inevitably it has something to do with the price of oil. And when the price of oil is affected, the number of jobs in the ghetto are affected. We are still, no matter how much we have progressed, the last hired and the first to be fired. When there are economic fluctuations in this nation's economy, more often than not, they are brought on by economic fluctuations in the world.

In the area of foreign policy, we found Martin Luther King telling us that the bombs you drop on Vietnam will explode at home. They will explode at home in unemployment; they will explode at home in violence and despair; they will explode at home in drug addiction; and they will explode at home in racism and right-wing reactions. They will polarize your society and when you are immoral in your practices abroad, inevitably down the road at home you will end up in a Watergate and pay the price for your immorality at home.

There comes a point in the affairs of man when moral preachments are not just philosophy and theology. In today's world, morality becomes economic and political reality. If one is insensitive and if a nation such as ours loses its claim to moral credibility, then our ability to lead in almost any issue in the world is affected. I think we have taken a step in the right direction and I would hope that as a fulfillment of the promise that we made to this Administration by our support—and that this Administration made to us—that we will have an integration of the foreign and domestic policies of this

nation; that we will help this nation to realize that there is an interdependence in this world that must be adhered to; that we cannot just turn our backs on the problems of the rest of the world without somehow suffering from them ourselves; and that we have been given too much.

With all its faults, this political system and this economic order has produced more in the way of revolutionary changes for more people than any other on earth. While we are on the short-end of the stick sometimes, as far as this order is concerned, we are its best critics. I think we also have the responsibility to be its advocates.

“... there will be no danger that we—and all that we stand for—shall overcome.”

Ambassador Sanu and I talk all the time about Nigeria's development, which in some sense is dependent on access to Western technology. And the survival of Western technology, too, is dependent on the natural resources which flow to us from Nigeria. Even the presence of jobs for you as you graduate from this institution may well be determined on the basis of how this economy expands to meet the requirements of world markets.

All the talk about systems, whether we can live within this system or whether we can live somewhere else, has got to end. It came to an end for me when I first went to Africa and (in Nairobi) on the corner of Jomo Kenyatta Avenue and Uhuru Boulevard, there was a Kentucky Fried Chicken stand. You just have to come to the point if you are going to be on this planet that you cannot escape “The Man.” You might just as well deal with it right where you are.

Nobody is better prepared to deal than those Black Americans who have a history of being one of the true hybrids

that the world has produced. In a sense, Alex Haley has reminded us of our African heritage which we tended to ignore or to forget. The significance of *Roots* is perhaps that it forced us together to face the horror of slavery, and to understand the nature of our African identity. At the same time, if we got so absorbed into that and forget that we were Americans, then I think that we would be of little or no help to the peoples of the world. The strength of the Afro-American, the strength of the Black man in this country, is his or her ability to understand the tensions between Black and white, because, we have lived them all our lives; to understand the dynamics of the relationship which dominates this part of our century—the so-called North-South dialogue; and the tension between the “haves” and the “have-nots.” You have become the “haves” by virtue of your coming here. But do not forget where you came from, do not forget the suffering and the sacrifice of your parents and grandparents that made it possible for you to get here.

This is for me perhaps the best of all times. It is a time of tremendous pressure; it is also a time of tremendous opportunity. It is a time when we see clearly all the problems of the world; it is also a time when we have more resources at our command to deal with all those problems than mankind has ever had in history. So, I would say to you, we who are the descendants of Black men and women in slavery should face the future with the same faith, hope and promise with which they faced it. Then, there will be no danger that we—and all that we stand for—shall overcome. □

