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L. Howard Bennett

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Fisk Revisited

By L. Howard Bennett

The View From Jubilee's Tower



Jubilee Hall is more than a beautiful building with excellent architectural lines and is more than “frozen music,” as it was described decades ago. The hall (and its tower) is the embodiment of the earliest struggles for the higher education of Blacks; it is the encapsulment of a significant human saga; it is the triumph of the spirit — the Fisk spirit! It is the manifestation of hope and faith translated into victorious realization by prayerful and persevering souls.

In 1933 the nation was in a deep depression and the usual summer jobs of running on the railroads or waiting tables on the steamship lines were not available to those of us who in previous years went to Chicago, St. Louis and New York and other major cities for summer work. Along with many of my classmates and other students, I elected, rather I was forced, to remain in Nashville to seek employment with the maintenance crew on the campus. I got a job with the wall washing and painting brigade. For reasons unknown to me I was often asked by the head of the painting section to go along on his inspection of the buildings to see and note which places would be painted and in which colors, and which walls were to be only washed. We could not afford to paint all the rooms.

Early one morning, a bright and sunny day in July, I went with Uncle Jimmie, as we called him, to survey the rooms in Jubilee Hall. His correct name was George James. After examining the Jubilee foyer we went to the top floor of Jubilee and then by a ladder up to the tower on the southeast corner of the building. Indeed it required painting. Once up there I took the opportunity to look out over the city of Nashville. It was a beautiful and awe inspiring sight.

On one side was the meandering Cumberland River. On the other was the Stone River. Out in the distance was the range of hills that dominate the Nashville terrain. There were Vanderbilt, Scarritt, Peabody, Centennial Park and the Parthenon, Shelby Park, Bordeaux and the vast acres of the Percy Warner Park. And to the south was the L & N Station. To the west was Tennessee State A & I College. And right under my nose was Meharry Medical College. It seemed as if I could throw a stone and hit Hubbard Hospital.

The view about which I will speak is not scenic and it is not beautiful. It is realism, ideational and developmental.

Fisk University is in a crisis and we must talk sense to each other and deal with the gloomy and dark circumstances which surround the institution.

The Struggle for Survival

The first view from Jubilee's Tower today is a scene of struggle. It is the struggle for survival.

At this very moment our alma mater is engaged in a titanic effort to survive. We need \$3,000,000 to pay off current debts. We need another \$7,000,000 to repair and renovate buildings and grounds. We need an additional \$250,000 to mount a successful fund raising drive. We need \$100,000 to market an effective student recruitment campaign that will provide an annual input of a first year class of 400-500 students. To achieve that goal alone will cost \$750,000 in scholarships and financial grants. The fight for survival requires that we achieve a minimal total student body of no less than 1200 students.

In conversation with one of my colleagues, it has been suggested that Fisk should attempt to obtain a grant that will enable us to re-establish the early entrance program that Charles S. Johnson started around 1950. It was funded by the Ford Foundation for several years.

Early admission enabled the university to take in the brightest and most promising students at the end of their third year in high school and it was possible for them to matriculate in a special college curriculum and program. The suggestion is worthy of the fullest consideration.

In order for us to keep the effective teachers we now have and to attract new teachers of competence requires an additional \$1,000,000 per year. Many of the teachers at Fisk are underpaid and are accepting as salaries "missionary stipends."

The minimum reasonable cost for survival totals: Erasing the deficit, \$3,000,000; making teachers' salaries equitable, \$1,000,000; rehabilitating the existing physical plant, \$7,000,000; pursuing an imperative fund raising drive, \$250,000; establishing a reservoir of scholarships and financial aid, \$750,000; launching an effective student recruitment campaign, \$100,000.

Components of Support

Every constituency of the university must be a productive resource that will yield many, many dollars and in record breaking time. We need today \$12,000,000 and we cannot wait for the money to come from decedent's estates. We want and need lifetime giving now — giving during the

years of productive earning. There are two major constituencies that should and must lead the way. First the alumni and second the Nashville community. There are approximately 8,600 living alumni of Fisk who are on our [the university] mailing lists.

The first question charitable foundations and boards and would-be donors ask, is: How many and to what extent do your alumni contribute? It is clear that alumni giving is the predicate, the basis for others to give to an educational institution.

Three years ago in the spring of 1982, John Hope Franklin, Robert S. Poole and I spent a Friday, Saturday and Sunday reviewing the names and potential giving capacity of all the Fisk alumni recorded at that time. Among the three of us we know or knew practically every graduate in classes [up to] 1981. We had seen them at work, visited the cities in which they lived; we know of the positions they held and the successes with which they had met. We conservatively estimated that the Fisk alumni had a capacity in 1981 to raise annually between \$650,000 and \$750,000. We have not reached our potential. The alumni have not come forward in accordance with their financial and economic capacity to contribute to the support of their alma mater. This malfunction should not and must not continue any longer. The survival of Fisk cannot tolerate alumni indifference.

I must ask the sons and daughters and the friends of this university: Are you willing to make the commitment? Are you willing to make the sacrifice? Are you willing to come forward with the dollars required to save and revitalize this institution?

The second most vital constituency of Fisk University is the community in which it is situated, Nashville, Tennessee. As an alumnus and trustee of this university let me publicly express what I am sure is a consensus of gratitude that Fisk is deeply appreciative of the rallying support that Nashville gave during the "no gas available" crisis. What we ask and implore Nashville to do at this time is to help Fisk raise several *millions* of dollars right here in our hometown. What a catalytic and magnetic effect that would have! Just as would-be donors make the first inquiry as to what the Fisk alumni are doing, the second inquiry is what is Nashville doing to help Fisk survive,

revive and achieve renaissance? I know there are indigenous resources and support in Nashville for Fisk. Several years ago when we were in a severe cash flow crunch Albert Werthan, an officer of the Board of Trustees and a prominent citizen of Nashville, singlehandedly raised \$400,000 from the Nashville corporate sector alone to meet urgent fiscal needs. I know; I went with him on many of the visits.

Nashville is a prosperous, growing and wealthy business, banking, insurance and entertainment center that can be a tremendous resource for Fisk. We implore this community to do its best by Fisk. We need Nashville's unstinted help now.

Further I suggest that we take steps to obtain financial help from the Tennessee State Legislature. I am not unmindful of the state's primary responsibility to fund its own public institutions of higher learning, but there are several states in the South and North that are contributing to private, traditionally Black colleges. The state of Alabama is a prime example. It supports Alabama State University in Montgomery, but it has for nearly 40 years made substantial contributions to Tuskegee Institute. During the most recent fiscal year Alabama made a grant of \$1,400,000 to Tuskegee. Fisk should approach the Tennessee Legislature for that kind of support and funding.

Just a few years ago the United Board of College Development made a survey (really an in-depth study) of private philanthropy of 10 southern states and the extent to which the traditionally Black colleges were beneficiaries of these substantial trusts. In 10 southern states surveyed there were 3,621 trusts or foundations with combined assets of \$2,933,569,000, (nearly \$3 billion.) Tennessee was one of the states studied. Tennessee had 339 philanthropies with combined assets totaling \$341,000,000. They made grants in 1981 totaling \$16,955,000. A total of 190 grants amounting to \$4,925,000 was made to institutions of higher education. But of that amount only \$82,231 from 32 foundations went to Black colleges. I am persuaded that with proper approaches we can make a dent in these charitable and philanthropic trusts in the state of Tennessee.

We must begin plowing and cultivating the fields adjacent and close to us.

I recall a story that one of my students

at Avery Institute told more than 43 years ago. The story is this:

On the afternoon of the 19th of May 1790 it grew so dark in Connecticut that the chickens went to roost. "It is the day of Judgment" said the frightened people. The legislature was in session in Hartford and the House of Representatives adjourned with that fear in their hearts. The Council also would have adjourned but for Colonel Edwin Davenport who said: "The day of judgment is either here or it is not. If it is I want to be found doing my duty; if it is not there is no need to adjourn. Let us light the candles."

I say to you "let us light the candles" and dispel all doubt, fear and darkness. Let us light the candles of reason and objectivity so that we will accurately plan and chart our course and establish our goals.

Let us light the candles of personal sacrifice and generous giving so that all of us will contribute to Fisk to our maximum capacity. And lastly, let us light the candles of Hope and Faith so that we will be resolute and determined to ensure that Fisk University survives, attains full restoration and achieves renaissance.

The Quest for Revival

The second view from Jubilee's Tower is a vision of recovery and revival. I see here a period of growth and development. I see many new projects and efforts being conceived, conceptualized, planned and implemented.

But before I enter into the broad areas of recovery and revival let me take you to the 31 years between 1925-1956 — the "Golden Era." I do this because it is valuable to enumerate factors, conditions and cite personnel that contributed to our eminence at that time. It serves as a norm against which to measure progress.

The Class of 1935 entered Fisk in the fall of 1931. Thomas Elsa Jones, an Earlham College graduate and a member of the Society of Friends, was president. He was president of Fisk from 1925 to 1944. Tom Jones was succeeded by Charles Spurgeon Johnson in 1947. Johnson died unexpectedly in 1956. This 31 year span can indeed be called the "Golden Era." When we arrived in September 1931 we found a new \$350,000 library which had been dedicated in 1930. At that time it was reputed to be the

finest college library in the South. In 1931 a new chemistry building was opened and was hailed as the best equipped in the region. It cost approximately \$250,000.

Jones found the campus buildings and grounds in advanced deterioration. He obtained a \$500,000 grant from the General Education Board for rehabilitation of most buildings, including Jubilee, Livingstone and Bennett Halls.

It was not the physical improvements that constituted the great advance at Fisk. It was the ability of Tom Jones to assemble a galaxy of academic stars. Not only were they distinguished scholars but they were authors, teachers, experimental scientists involved in significant research projects. There was St. Elmo Brady in chemistry, engaged in research on the castor bean. There was Homer Morris in economics studying the problems of the bituminous coal industry and its miners. Charles S. Johnson had established Fisk as the research center about Black Americans in the United States. And Johnson himself was either researching or writing books (or doing both). He studied and wrote the book on "The Negro College Graduate." He directed the study on cotton tenancy, which was the basis for his book, "The Shadow of the Plantation." He was also author of "The Negro in American Civilization."

A colleague of Johnson's in the Department of Social Sciences was E. Franklin Frazier, undertaking his studies for his book, "The Negro Family." Bertram W. Doyle was also here, teaching and writing on the "Etiquette of Race Relations." Horace Mann Bond was a professor researching, teaching and writing on the higher education of Blacks in Alabama. Elmer S. Imes was professor of physics and pioneered in infra-red spectroscopy. Time forces me to only mention the names of some of the other intellectual and academic greats at Fisk at that time: Theodore S. Currier, in history; Lorenzo Dow Turner, in English; Arthur Schomburg, the curator of the Negro Collection.

Alretherus Ambush Taylor was professor of history. James Weldon Johnson occupied an endowed chair in creative literature. While at Fisk he completed his autobiography, "Along this Way." Harry T. Folger and Lloyd Alexander were here in biology. March Hannah Watkins was here in sociology and anthropology, and Robert E. Park was a stimulating lecturer

and teacher in sociology. Dora Anna Scribner taught us English, Thomas W. Talley, chemistry, and John R. Cottin, the Romance languages. They made us toe the mark. John W. Work and Warner Copeland Lawson and Harold Brown held chairs in the Music Department, and C. E. Van Horn in mathematics, and Paul K. Edwards in economics.

During 1931-1956 Fisk was recognized for its faculty and its excellent student body. By 1955 it had the security of a \$14,000,000 endowment.

There are several approaches we should take to bring about a revival of Fisk which will restore much of its lost lustre. I will suggest only a few:

There should be developed a program that brings to Fisk a corps of distinguished professors from the nation's 15 or 20 most prestigious and outstanding universities. Indeed we would seek to effect a working relationship — a linkage between and consortium with Fisk and these schools with the goal of making our departmental offerings among the best being provided at colleges in the size range of 600-1500 students.

Fisk should establish a corps of outstanding and distinguished professors akin to the cadre of Distinguished Service Professors at the University of Chicago. Some of them will rise through the ranks here at Fisk, but others will be drafted from the ranks of distinguished scholars who have been forced into retirement by the policies of the institutions at which they had taught for 15-20 years. They would be the "young" and vital scholars who at 65 and 70 still have many more good years within which to impart knowledge and inspire youth. The great sociologist Robert E. Park spent four years of his retirement here at this university associated with Charles S. Johnson, 1932-1935. They would be persons who during their tenured years would have commanded salaries beyond our financial capacity.

We should seek to obtain these retired professors from Chicago, Yale, Columbia, Howard, Princeton, Duke, Atlanta, Vanderbilt, Harvard and the University of California — to cite a few.

In addition we should seek foundation support to have at least one distinguished service professor in each of the college's departments which offers a major in its discipline.

There is another approach in the quest

for revival that I suggest we consider. Fisk could establish substantial working relationships with major educational institutions. The relationship would embrace exchange of faculty and students with well-defined programs that supported and reinforced and enriched university curricula. There could be a working relationship with Oberlin College and the Julliard School of Music in the field of music. Fisk and the University of Chicago could pursue joint programs in the social and political sciences, race and human relations, political science and government.

We could improve and expand upon our beginnings with Vanderbilt in economics and business. We could seek to engage with Harvard in public administration and business administration. There is the area of teacher education with which we could collaborate with Columbia University's Teachers College. We could find and develop meaningful areas for joint ventures and collaboration with such schools as Duke, Yale, Purdue and Howard.

What I am discussing may sound like "pie in the sky," — or maybe worse — to many, but let me emphasize that the revival and preservation of Fisk depend on our capacity to develop and implement programs that are not only excellent, but unique and beneficial not only to Blacks, but also to the larger society. What we do must be of such excellence, uniqueness and social significance that it catches the eye and attention of the major foundations and elicits from them generous support and funding.

In addition we should consider developing a constellation of institutes that are relevant to the needs of the society, and plan and conduct seminars and workshops that address the needs of the region, the nation and the race.

The Race Relations Institute needs an infusion of relevance, talent and resources.

We should initiate and develop an Institute for Leadership Training that would educate, train and equip our talented youth to provide effective leadership in seeking solution to the myriad of problems which confront us. Such leadership is in the tradition of this great institution.

All through the academic year we could develop seminars and workshops that would bring recognized experts and professional persons to consider, analyze,

review and construct solutions to the germane issues for which society seeks answers.

Achieving Renaissance

The third view from Jubilee's Tower is a view of prophecy and fulfillment.

It is based on the assumption that the alumni, the City of Nashville, and the philanthropic boards and foundations will affirmatively respond to the requests and campaigns of Fisk. I believe that in the next three to five years we will see a student enrollment that approaches or reaches 1200 students, maybe more. I can see our buildings rehabilitated and reopened. I can envision our library having each year acquisitions adequate and sufficient to meet the criteria of the accrediting agencies. And that we will have the required books, journals and newspapers that a first rate library must possess.

In three to seven years I see a faculty assembled consisting of distinguished scholars who are part of the permanent teaching corps. In addition I see an adjunct faculty of visiting professors who represent some of the most distinguished names in academia.

I see from Jubilee's Tower a physical plant and campus that is modernized and made up-to-date. At the least three new buildings: A new science building, a new fine arts building and a modern dormitory.

I see this university becoming one of the best institutions in the country for preparing young men and women going into the health sciences. And why shouldn't we be? Here we are next door to Meharry Medical College, a few blocks from Vanderbilt School of Medicine. Fisk should become a nationally recognized institution affording the best in curriculum and training for those seeking to enter the health sciences. With that reputation firmly established we would attract an increasing number of students who are planning careers in dentistry, medicine, nursing and the allied disciplines. I believe we can and will effect a more cohesive working relationship with these neighboring institutions.

I see this institution being restored to its financial soundness with a solid endowment of \$20,000,000-\$25,000,000. I see us being able to support a realistic annual operating budget of \$10,-\$12,000,000.

I see the flowering of Fisk that truly ushers us into a period of renaissance. I see this institution succeeding in the Quest for Revival. Yes, matching and equaling its Golden Era. Indeed we shall go beyond and eclipse it. This dream, our dream, can be realized. We must work to see it realized. We shall all work for its fulfillment.

Fisk shall recover. Fisk is too great a national resource for this nation to abandon. I am convinced we shall succeed. I embrace the faith of David Henry Thoreau who said:

If one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with success unexpected in common hours. He will put some things behind, will pass an invisible boundary; new universal, and more liberal laws will begin to establish themselves around and within him; or the old laws will be expanded, and interpreted in his favour in a more liberal sense, and he will live with the license of a higher order of beings.

If you have built castles in the air your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put foundations under them.

Let the declaration go forth that all of the constituent elements of the Fisk community are resolved and committed to the proposition that we will forge, construct and put in place the foundations.

The foundation of a relevant and socially significant curriculum and total educational program.

The foundation of an increasingly eminent and distinguished faculty.

The foundation of 1200 or more of the brightest and most talented youth in this land and from abroad.

And the foundation of a sound, viable and strong financial support. □

L. Howard Bennett is a trustee of Fisk University. The above is an excerpt from a commencement address he gave at Fisk last May.

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