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COMMENTARY

'MOMENTS FOR REFLECTION'

18 By LaSalle D. Leffall, Jr.

There is an aphorism that states there are four things that never come back: (1) times past, (2) the spoken word, (3) the sped arrow, and (4) a neglected opportunity. I cannot neglect this opportunity to express my deep thanks and gratitude to Dr. [Carlton P.] Alexis and the Board of Trustees for the high honor and esteemed privilege of serving as Convocation speaker.

Having entered the Howard University College of Medicine 41 years ago, I am deeply indebted to this university for all it has done for me. I often think, had it not been for Howard I might not be in the medical profession today—a profession I truly love. So, to you Howard University, with humility and gratitude I give my thanks. I will be forever grateful.

Appropriate sentimentality is always in order, and today it is appropriate to pay tribute to those leaders who have gone before. I shall just mention the three presidents of Howard whom I have known: Dr. Mordecai Johnson, Dr. James Nabrit and Dr. James Cheek. All three made contributions to this university that deserve our praise and respect. In today's confrontational climate, groups often present a list of non-negotiable demands as if to say, "Progress can now begin; we are here." But there are always others who have gone before who have made our paths a little smoother. We thank all of those persons for their sterling efforts and contributions.

If what I say happens to strike a familiar chord, I am sure that sometime during my many years here, one of you has mentioned it to me. And if by chance, I strike a discordant note and produce a self-inflicted wound, one that tests the mental and technical prowess of a surgeon, you can be sure that it was

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truly original, with no outside influence whatsoever.

Convocation is an occasion for reaffirmation of fealty to this university's mission: to meet the special educational needs of the nation's Black citizens. But Howard's mission has also fostered an environment that has historically appealed to anyone interested in obtaining a quality education—an attitude that persists today, and we're all the better for it.

As members of the Howard family, we must tell the true story of our university because over the course of its 122 years, the facts may have been altered by the prism of time. And as we tell this true story of Howard, we must also show our tangible support of the university by giving our time, energy and financial resources. This support by all segments of the Howard family is vital.

Genuine concern for the overall well-being of Black Americans has been a hallmark of our university. So when we see social injustice in any area, it is appropriate to ask: Do we still heed the en-

treaties of our conscience? Do the embers of moral sensitivity still burn? When I think of social injustice, I think of W. E. B. Du Bois's book, *The Souls of Black Folk*, published just after the turn of the century. In that monumental work, he wrote so eloquently of the evils of poverty and ignorance. Du Bois wrote, "Herein lies the tragedy of the age . . . that men know so little of men."

The real quality of life will be measured by the extent to which we have had a positive impact on someone or some worthy cause. We will make errors in some of our decisions in life—sometimes egregious ones; but we must never err in our purpose and resolve. We must maintain the requisite faith to do our job well—a combination of stamina, enthusiasm, and dedication which will demonstrate that we are truly committed to help others. For we know that respect and trust are not given in perpetuity but must be earned day by day.

My remarks today are just some thoughts from someone who loves this university. The thoughts that I express shall be entitled for want of a better term, "Moments for Reflection."

To our university leaders—deans, vice presidents and interim president—We look to you for leadership, for a sense of history and a vision for the future; to lead, to show the way, to act rather than react, with at least some input from us in varying amounts that seem appropriate—input from the faculty, students, alumni and community. We know you can't lead by committee; but teamwork, like virtue, never goes out of style. We want you to listen not only to us but also to each other. But we must listen also. In medicine, when we listen, even with CT scans, magnetic resonance imaging and other forms of high technology, we find out what is wrong with our patients. We want you to be thoughtful, fair and decisive in your judg-

ments. You—our leaders—must actively participate in the higher councils of education, locally, nationally and internationally. For example, in our local university consortium, you must be seen, heard and noticed.

To the faculty, my colleagues—and I hope not too many self-serving statements will now come forth—the opening of school is a time for a tribute to the faculty without whose patience, skill and knowledge the true university cannot exist. What a rich faculty heritage we have, the likes of Lula Childers, Flemma Kittrell, Inabel Lindsay, Sterling Brown, Ralph Bunche, Charles Drew, E. Franklin Frazier, Charles Houston, Ernest Just, Alain Locke, Rayford Logan, Howard Thurman. The list goes on and on. I must explain here that prudence dictates that I make no mention of living faculty members—both active and retired who have added such distinction to the university.

It's an honor to be a teacher, so we must be worthy of this trust and this honor. What is the role of the teacher? To instruct, to inspire, to stimulate, to emphasize ethical and moral values, to develop talents, to stretch the imagination and to expand the aspirations of others.

But the faculty must also take seriously its role in governance and formulation of policy by talking with our deans, students and fellow faculty. An honest difference of opinion is to be admired. And on occasion, our tones may be strident. But a faculty must dissect and distill, for only the distillate of criticism nourishes the growth of improvement.

We must avoid the inertia of the discontent which leads to the fear of satiety and the end of desire—like some insidious disease gnawing at our souls and eroding our spirit. We must take all good things and clone them for now and the future. As faculty, we have a moral impera-

Loyalty embodies integrity and honesty, and integrity is the very essence of our souls and our beings.

—the fabric that joins men of goodwill—to do what is in the best interest of the university.

The value of research resulting in publications cannot be overemphasized. One of the important functions of the university is to engage in research. What can be more exciting than the creation of new knowledge or the expansion of current knowledge? We must improve our research posture. But I submit, if we do our jobs well, we may secure the highest prize of all: immortality in the hearts and minds of our students. For a man lives on in the acts he performs and the attitudes he transmits.

And to our support staff—the true unsung heroes of university life—we need your ideas and suggestions. Your role is vital.

To our alumni—those who represent our past and our future—let us hear from you, and you will hear from us. Howard University needs you and your support. Those in positions of university leadership must maintain communication

with our alumni. If we are to become a great university, our ties to our alumni must be strengthened.

To the community—your support and continued interest are essential—we represent you; you represent us. We need you.

And now some thoughts for our students. You have been called many names over the years—transients, dogooders, idealists. But despite any name you may have been called, you are the life blood—the soul—of this institution. You are the real jewels in Howard University's crown. On some days you have been the sole reason that many of us wanted to come to work, to interact with you—teacher with student; student with teacher—the joining of two synergistic, and on occasion, cataclysmic forces, each bringing out the best in the other. In all of that, you must maintain your sense of humor; you'll need it. And it will help you through some trying times. Take issues seriously but don't take yourself too seriously.

Undoubtedly, at the university one of the most important things that happens is when the matured, disciplined mind of the teacher comes in contact with the budding, unfolding, inquiring, doubting mind of the student. This is sheer joy, true academic ecstasy.

When I think of our rich heritage and of you, our students—our future—I often think of Jean Toomer's classic novel, *Cane*, which dealt with the beauty, passion and vulnerability of Black people—our weaknesses and our strengths.

And now my main message to you: Average is just not good enough; the pursuit of excellence must be maintained. Even if you never achieve your ideals, always be in pursuit of the high ground. Don't compare your efforts with those of others—thus there is no envy inherent in what you do; instead, compare your ef-

forts only with the best of which you are capable.

Excellence implies more than mere competence. It implies a striving for the highest standards in every phase of life. Excellence can be achieved only through the fruits of discipline—the discipline to study, the discipline to work. You must be able to exercise the self-discipline that will allow you to reach your goals. There is no substitute for discipline and perseverance.

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True excellence is the fine line between being the best, rather than appearing to be the best. The thing that really matters in life is to try—the constant striving for perfection, for excellence—with a steadfast refusal to recognize any hardship. We know that one person can make a difference and every person should try to do so. The pursuit of knowledge and the pursuit of excellence are ennobling qualities that herald a bright and productive future.

Howard will broaden your horizons and introduce you to new excitements: the exchange with faculty, the value of debate, the questioning of dogma and the joy of learning. Never stop reading, never stop studying, never stop learning. Education, like success, is a journey not a destination. Learning is a *lifetime* passion.

Cherish and nurture the friendships you've made here. Years from now you may forget many things, but the two or three things that you'll remember are: (1) a few teachers who truly inspired and stimulated you; (2) a few great parties (probably by that time adorned and embellished by the tincture of time) and most of all, (3) you will remember the friendships you made here—those relationships that one chooses for himself. To have the privilege of being a friend is one of life's most sacred gifts, for the true worth of a friend cannot be measured except by the heart.

There are few character traits that exceed loyalty in importance. Loyalty embodies integrity and honesty, and integrity is the very essence of our souls and our beings. We must be loyal to high ideals and principles, and we must be loyal to individuals *only* if they represent those high ideals.

There are two tenets that should be integral parts of your spiritual lives, whatever your religion; they are 1) love of your fellowman and 2) respect for the

A Renaissance of

By Carlton P. Alexis

Throughout the history of this institution, there have remained some constants that undergird all of our efforts: to provide instruction of the highest quality; to help advance the frontiers of knowledge; and to serve the community, the nation and the world.

We have, indeed, come a long way since the first opening of the school year in 1867. . . .

Today we look around us and we see that there have been dramatic increases in enrollment and facilities, and the number and variety of instructional and research programs have grown to keep pace with the ever-changing needs of the constituencies that we serve. Howard students now can select majors from approximately 200 areas of academic offerings reflecting the diverse knowledge and expertise of our faculties.

Clearly, those who have gone before us have charted a good course. In particular, I pay tribute to the legacy of Dr. James E. Cheek for his outstanding accomplishments, for his 20 years of high dedication to the Howard University community, and for his unstinting efforts to create opportunities for all who came to Howard.

Thus, Howard University stands on solid ground, but it is an indisputable fact that all of us must now turn our attention to the exigencies of the present day and the future.

When I came to Howard University 36 years ago as a freshman medical student, I nurtured the idea that I would earn my degree in medicine and go to Brooklyn, New York, to practice medicine. Fate decreed otherwise, however, and seven years out of medical school, in 1964, I returned to Howard. My life and that of my family have been tied to this university ever

since. My daughter, Carla, is a graduate of the College of Liberal Arts. My son, Anthony, is a graduate of the Howard law school, and my daughter, Lisa, is currently a sophomore in the College of Medicine. As for me, I have been a student, faculty member, administrator, and parent here at Howard. Thus, I have had the distinct advantage and honor of having had the Howard experience from a variety of perspectives.

Since my training and my inclinations are in the field of medicine, I am often given to using medical metaphors. I utter this warning, and I ask you to forgive that tendency.

As interim president, one of my major responsibilities is to doctor to the university.

In the quest for good health for the university, we must reaffirm Howard's mission and its unique role in the affairs of the world.

Our job, once again, as George Washington once put it, is to "raise a standard to which the good and the wise can repair."

The things by which our character will be tested, formed and judged can only be known if we enter fully into the life of the community that is Howard University.

What our university needs now and must have is what I term "A renaissance of the Howard spirit," a rebirth of that spirit of togetherness in which there will be an opportunity for all to participate fully in the life of the university.

What this means, more specifically, is that we must be unequivocally committed to solving the problems before us. We must hold ourselves accountable to the tradition that a university should be a place of openness, honesty, energy, and decency.

the Howard Spirit

Furthermore, we must not allow the routines and the pressures of each day to diminish us.

As I walk about this campus these days, I sense a need to participate in what we all recognize as the special mission, the special destiny of Howard University.

The students, the faculty, the staff and the administration of this university need a climate where open dialogue is the common practice and where collegiality is the common condition.

In this context, I have therefore instituted the practice of having monthly dialogue with student leaders, of having periodic discussion with the supporting staff—those unsung heroes of this campus—of being true to my meetings with the University Senate, and having bimonthly meetings with the deans. I have been meeting with the administrative cabinet on a monthly basis, but more correctly, I have been meeting with my cabinet colleagues as often as is necessary.

It must be our priority to create a responsiveness among ourselves, starting with the central administration and creating a pervasive ethic of accountability throughout the university—among students, faculty, staff and administration.

This sense of responsibility must be accompanied by respect for all that is best in our character and our deepest convictions. In every area there must be mechanisms for discourse and feedback. It is my hope that we will be inspired with renewed purpose for the creation of an environment that is befitting this university.

As I see it, what is at stake now is not only the credibility and viability of this great institution, but also the credibility and viability of each one of

us who is a part of Howard. We face in this challenge something more than the mere dramatization of issues and problems that confront us. We must now fit action to the word.

We must also realize that we need to be fiscally responsible and fiscally responsive. Our first priority has to be to provide adequate funding for the education of our students, thus providing the proper teaching-learning environment.

Possessing as we do the opportunity to grapple freely and openly with the issues that confront us, we must be aware that we are writing our history. History, as we well know, is the doings of human beings, and what history represents depends upon what human beings decide to do by their decisions, with their conscience, and, most importantly, with their actions.

As I look to the future, I see that there will be opportunities to prescribe needed medicine, but I have no intention to be overly prescriptive. I note, however, that there will be times when the prescription will be bitter medicine, but I promise, never bad medicine, so I look to the day when good health and restored vitality will mark the countenance of this university.

It is my heartfelt desire that all of us will remain faithful to the high resolve of this hour and persevere in all that we are given to do. □

Carlton P. Alexis, M.D., is the university's interim president. The above was excerpted from his remarks at the Opening Convocation, September 22, 1989.

dignity of the other person. In addition to these two "givens," I believe that the following can serve as your moral compass, your collective talisman: 1) tenacity for principle; 2) magnanimity in victory; 3) grace in disappointment; 4) perseverance with humor; 5) loyalty with conscience; 6) courage in adversity; 7) fairness with compassion; 8) resilience in crisis; 9) excellence with humility; 10) commitment with integrity and above all; 11) equanimity under duress.

Along with all of these traits—loyalty, excellence, friendship, passionate learning, sensitivity to our fellowman—one more, one very essential one, must be added to our personal armamentarium of life. It was perhaps pronounced and explained best by one of medicine's most illustrious sons, Dr. William Osler, professor of medicine at Johns Hopkins, later to become Sir William Osler. In 1904, speaking to the senior medical class at Yale just prior to leaving for Oxford to become the Regius professor of medicine, Dr. Osler was asked what was the secret to success in medicine. Osler replied: "I'll tell you what it is. I'll even spell it for you—W O R K. It is the 'open sesame' to all portals, the great equalizer in the world, the true philosopher's stone which transmutes all of the base metal of humanity into gold, the stupid among you, it will make bright, the bright it will make brilliant and the brilliant it will make steady. With this magic word in your heart, all things are possible and without it, all is mere vanity and vexation."

I wholeheartedly concur with Dr. Osler about the magical powers of work. And mine is a vast and perhaps extravagant hope but I believe if we all work together as we go forward from this place, we will make Howard an even greater university.

LaSalle D. Leffall, Jr., M.D., is professor and chairman, Department of Surgery, Howard University College of Medicine. The above was excerpted from his address at the university's Opening Convocation, September 22, 1989.