

9-9-2014

You are the River of Change - transcript of speech

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Repository Citation

Williams, Yohuru, "You are the River of Change - transcript of speech" (2014). *History Faculty Publications*. 63.
<http://digitalcommons.fairfield.edu/history-facultypubs/63>

Published Citation

Williams, Yohuru. (2014) You are the River of Change. Speech given at Fairfield University's 2014 Convocation, September 9, 2014.

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You are the River of Change

By Yohuru Williams, PhD

Class of 2018 it is my distinct honor to formally welcome you to Fairfield University. I am happy to be with you on this day in particular as you embark on this new chapter in your lives. It is not a stretch to say—whether you recognize it at this moment or not—that you may one day look back on this day and recall that here on this beautiful lawn is where you began the magnificent metamorphosis, the inspired transformation from high school student to university student, from adolescent to young adult, from dependent to ascendant.

While I greet you today in joy and fellowship I would also like to emphasize the great responsibility that comes along with this transition. Over the next four years you will begin class, by class, experience-by-experience, relationship-by-relationship to build the foundations of your future. It can be overwhelming. You may feel at this moment, a lot like single drop of water cast into a vast sea or the powerful current of a mighty ocean, flowing, though not at your own pace, surrounded yet alone, surging with the current but not exactly sure how to harness the power it represents. You are not alone.

It is precisely at these moments, that we need to pause, as the Reverend Dr. King memorably did at his kitchen table for a bit of deep contemplation. What should guide that period of deliberation and reflection is a clear and conscious engagement of the three questions that form the cornerstones of Jesuit education, for in this great wave of life, this incredible journey we must all be prepared to ask and answer the fundamental questions Who am I, Whose am I and Who am I called to be?

Answering these questions openly and honestly, and constantly reflecting on their meaning, will not only help you find your bearings in the sea of life, they may also help you master the tide. They will allow you to appreciate your ties to the storm without being lost in the flood. They will anchor you in the cloud, allowing you to gather and absorb all that is necessary before you fall like rain to refuel, restore or to fertilize other fields. And if you allow them to they will drive you to respond in the same way the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King and those six Jesuit priests murdered in El Salvador did, by seeing, along you're your own desires for self fulfillment, your duty and responsibility to live a life for others.

There has, perhaps, never been a more pressing need for people committed to this premise than the moment in which you are living. As we speak, the flames of discontent and injustice smolder in Ferguson, Missouri, the fires of hate simmer in the Middle East, and the putrid combination of poverty and violence scorch the lives of millions worldwide. They all cry out for water to extinguish the flames. The flames of human trafficking and political corruption, corporate malfeasance, and environmental destruction—they demand the cooling rain of human care and compassion not the fires of indifference.

And if these issues seem to you so large— like being cast into a vast sea or a powerful ocean that you feel you could never impact—that you are powerless to control I'd like to invite you to explore with me for a short time this afternoon the ways that you can make a difference—the ways in which each and everyone of you can help form the droplets of the healing rain.

It begins by recognizing that feelings of powerlessness are not invitations to indifference but calls to action. In 2005 the United States witnessed one of the worst natural disasters in our nation's history in the form of Hurricane Katrina. It was my first semester at Fairfield. I had been in New Orleans working with teachers only 72 hours before the hurricane hit—leaving the city my flight had been delayed under the threat of violent weather. As I watched the devastation that rocked the city I was torn between feelings of gratitude

and suffering. How fortunate I had been to have escaped, how responsible I felt toward those suffering, how disappointed I was in the immediate aftermath of the storm of the government's response.

One of the worst consequences of any disaster can be found in the human errors that in hindsight stare accusingly back at us in the mirror of our own reflection. They mock our sorrow because they remind us, at least to some degree, that what happened was preventable, avoidable or altogether unnecessary. Often in the sea of blame that accompanies such terrible moments in history we pacify the demons of our inhumanity to one another masking our collective complicity in a chorus of blame. Natural disasters after all cannot be avoided, but what of man-made ones. The painful reminder of what was in our power to change but what we neglected to address haunt the pages of history and the present. When the cameras treat the lives of celebrities on par with the immense loss of human life in the Middle East, the Ukraine, or on the streets of an American city one has to wonder. Over the Fourth of July weekend in the city of Chicago there were reportedly more than 80 people shot and 14 were killed—we have to ask the question who will extinguish the flames?

As the product of Jesuit education, (I went to high school right up the hill at the Fairfield Prep) and completed my undergraduate studies at another Jesuit institution I came to appreciate the power and value of Jesuit education and its emphasis social justice not just for reflection but action. It is the profound recognition that in the Ukraine, in the Middle East and on the streets of Ferguson, it is not only the immediate crisis but also larger issues of equality and justice, the sanctity of human life and the need to confront cultural misunderstandings but also the disparities in wealth that often drive them that remain important. These problems, of course, are the very essence of the seven themes of Catholic social teaching. In privileging principles such as the Life and Dignity of the Human Person, Call to Family and Community Participation, Caring for the Poor and Vulnerable and Human Solidarity, Catholic social teaching resonates in all these cases regardless of one's faith.

It is not dependent on a course of study and transcends disciplinary boundaries but it will require you to open both your hearts and minds to the possibility that you can be the agents of change, that you have it in your power not only to weather the storm, but also to master the tide. In 1926 Russian author Yevgeny Zamyatin observed, "It is not possible to build on negative emotions." "Genuine literature" he continued "will come only when we replace hatred for man with love for man." In Politics President Dwight David Eisenhower was fond of saying, "Pessimism never won any battle." In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina I was encouraged by the active role Fairfield University faculty and students played in helping restore the city of New Orleans. In teach-ins and service trips, lectures and fundraising campaigns, the helped to bring a different kind of storm to the city—the life affirming rain of human caring. The future calls for women and men of this type of vision and compassion who believe they have the power to shape the future.

In this regard your education here will be empowering, it will invite you to take a hold of the ideas that have shaped our world and reshape them in your image, to not only dream of brighter times but to work actively toward a world where the promise of peace trumps the politics of fear and where education re-acquaints us with great noble truths elucidated by ancient philosophers, chiseled by great scientific minds, nurtured by masters of medicine and carried forth by the champions of peace and justice across the globe who seek to rescue humanity from the chains of ignorance and despair to fashion governments that celebrate the best elements of the human spirit, to privileged science, engineering, nursing and medicine that earnestly seek to improve the human condition.

But before you can effectively trouble the water you must confront your fear, and master your doubt. One drop of dye can color a pool; a few drips of poison can pollute a lake, fear left unchecked can result in the

paralysis of indecision while doubt left unchecked can sink both the spirit and the soul—that which can buoy can also drown. In this regard you must be prepared to embrace the water and the idea that even a tiny drop can produce hope and change the course of seas.

The Chinese philosopher and founder of the Taoism Tao Te Ching (The Way and Its Power) Lao Tzu once observed, “Nothing in the world is more flexible and yielding than water. Yet when it attacks the firm and the strong, none can withstand it, because they have no way to change it. So the flexible overcomes the adamant, the yielding overcomes the forceful.”

When those six Jesuit priests found themselves in the midst of conflict.

They had choices.

They were priests and scholars, with resources and connections.

They could have chosen to flee.

They were intellectuals, with ideas to share; they could have been more concerned with their careers.

They were clergy, they could have remained neutral, chosen to meet the spiritual needs of the people they served but avoid politics.

But they didn't.

They stood powerfully and purposefully for justice.

They checked their privilege.

And privileged their humanity

They defied their distress

And found courage in that defiance

They quieted their fears

And in the silence found a voice of passion to speak against injustice

They troubled the water and left a mighty, moving ripple in their wake. A ripple of hope, a ripple of cheer, a ripple that began in the water of tears

Shed for a people denied to be free and live without fear like you and me

They didn't set out to be martyrs anymore than the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King; they simply refused to turn a blind eye to injustice and in the process found the gift of what Dr. King, described as the Strength to Love

And make no mistake Class of 2018 it takes strength to love

Strength, with the properties of water flexible and yielding

Strength to wash away doubt

Strength to embrace those that are different than us

Strength that not only acknowledges our privilege but also finds ways to use it for the benefit of others

Strength to speak truth to power

Strength to care for and forgive even those who would do us harm

Strength to stand when the world sits

And Strength to sit when the world stands

Strength to extend a hand in sisterhood and brotherhood

Strength to embrace the confraternity of man

In the process such strength must also be flexible, yielding, elastic

Flexible enough to sacrifice in the name of justice

Flexible enough to see only the humanity even of those with whom we disagree

Flexible enough to climb a mountain on roller skates recognizing that the challenge is not to reach the peak, but to serve as an example of one who never stops trying even with odds are stacked against them

I came today to plant a seed in the flexible folds of the foundations of the fountain of strength and knowledge you will build here with this amazing faculty, these dedicated administrators, and this wonderful collection of students. But it comes with warning. Lao Tzu advised:

“Be careful what you water your dreams with. Water them with worry and fear and you will produce weeds that choke the life from your dream. Water them with optimism and solutions and you will cultivate success. Always be on the lookout for ways to turn a problem into an opportunity for success. Always be on the lookout for ways to nurture your dream.”

Every wave is made up of thousands of tiny drops . . . whether you are at the crest of the wave or the back strive to be a part of the wave for justice. “The arc of the universe,” Dr. King famously observed, “is long but it bends toward justice.” If you master the lessons here with an eye toward benefitting humanity and lead with the magnificent creation that is the human heart it will point you in the right direction.

More than ever 21st century problems and the need for global humanitarian action push us to appreciate the need to embrace foreign languages, cultural geography and history, as well as math and science to deliver in the language of nursing critical patient care to world in need of women and men of the highest integrity. A Fairfield education will challenge you to evolve, to study the past in order to understand the present, to embrace science and literature and to share and exchange with the world, to speak and appreciate many languages but to communicate one common goal, a respect for human life, an appreciation of the delicacy of nature and the need to preserve it, a commitment to peace, and an earnest desire to be able to appreciate and accept our differences as an essential strength.

While some might dismiss these as fanciful dreams, they are dreams we share with millions world wide, that begins in the hearts and minds of individuals and have the power to move mountains. I recall the last passage in the second epilogue of Dostoevsky’s masterpiece *Crime and Punishment*. “This is the beginning of a new story, though; the story of a man’s gradual renewal and rebirth, of his gradual transition from one world to another, of his acquaintance with a new reality of which he had previously been completely ignorant.” Today is the beginning of your tomorrow. You are the drop of water that has the power to transform, its starts with you.

I have been searching for the origins of this anonymous quote but I share it with you today because it is so appropriate to this moment. “Always remember the smallest pebble creates a ripple. The simplest thought can cause a chain reactions of events. The air I breathe in You had breathed out. What I do touches you and what you do touches me. Exploring these connections and embracing these overlaps is the joy that we discover together” and it has the power to change the world.

It’s not enough to say what we should have done, or where we should have been, or to point to what was and lament it’s loss. No, we must actively pursue the opportunity to be apart of what is to be. What

promising student among you will dedicate your life to designing a stronger levee system for New Orleans, or creatively thinking about interventions for community policing, conquering food deserts, meeting the long term care needs of the elderly, or even documenting the history of past tragedies to help plan for those which inevitably await us in the future. Water that sits becomes stagnate and breeds disease and death. Water that moves and flows, cleanses and brings life circulates fresh ideas even when it starts as a simple ripple.

You are the ripples of hope, the seeds of the future, the waters of change. Your sacrifice need not be as dramatic as those whom you have studied. It may be as modest as embracing the words of Wilhelm Stekel shared quietly by Mr. Antolini with Holden Caulfield in Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*, "The mark of an immature man is that he is willing to die for a cause, while the mark of a mature one is that he is willing to live humbly for one." Allow me to say to you in conclusion, Live humbly for love, speak powerfully for peace embody the words of Martin Luther King, in the pursuit of justice never "be satisfied until justice rolls down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream." Class of 2018, you are the river of change.

Thank you.