



GRADUATION SUNDAY

CULTURAL RESOURCES

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I. The History Section

Since our forced arrival to these shores, African Americans have waged an epic battle for educational access, equity and advancement. Bearing the dubious historic distinction as the only Americans ever legally barred from education across the centuries, from clandestine tutorial sessions hidden away from the slave master's wrath to the first "normal" schools for Negroes, our people have fought valiantly – with and without allies – for reading, writing and 'rithmetic.

As early as 1661, legalized slavery was accompanied by a ban on teaching our foreparents to read and write.¹ Still, many struggled to attain literacy, often at great risk and, by 1773, even while in bondage in Boston, Phillis Wheatley's Poems on Various Subjects Religious and Moral was published in England.²

Throughout our history in the United States, a chorus of great Americans has intoned the merits and necessity of education for our community. Though their approaches, philosophies and methodologies frequently differed, their aim was the same: tapping education as the more excellent way for the future life and livelihood of black Americans. Here is a sampling of voices addressing the subject:³

A little learning, indeed, may be a dangerous thing, but the want of learning is a calamity to any people.

– Frederick Douglass

Education is the key to unlock the golden door of freedom.

– George Washington Carver

Education is the medium by which a people are prepared for the creation of their own particular civilization, and the advancement and glory of their own race.

– Marcus Garvey

When bright young minds can't afford college, America pays the price.

– Arthur Ashe

Without education, you are not going anywhere in this world.

– Malcolm X

Books were my pass to personal freedom. I learned to read at age three, and soon discovered there was a whole world to conquer that went beyond our farm in Mississippi.

– Oprah Winfrey

Education is a precondition to survival in America today.

– Marian Wright Edelman

II. The Fight for Post-Secondary Education

Historically, higher education was most difficult to attain. Pre-Civil War, we were virtually excluded from post-secondary education. An all too infrequent few of our people, such as Fredrick Douglass, received formal instruction but often in informal or hostile environments. And while the South was vehemently opposed to educating black folk, two historically black private colleges, Lincoln University (founded 1854) in Pennsylvania and Wilberforce University (founded 1856) in Ohio were educating African Americans before the Civil War. After the war and with the passage of the 13th Amendment (1865) abolishing slavery, a limited number of black students began to gain entrance in predominantly white institutions, such as Oberlin College in Ohio and Berea College in Kentucky, as well as state-run land grant colleges for African-American students only.⁴

Though the journey to literacy was full of social, cultural and economic obstacles, by 1900, fifty-five percent of the African American population was literate and approximately 2,600 black Americans had earned postsecondary credentials.⁵

Near the middle of the century, a consortium of thirty-nine private, regionally accredited, four-year Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) formed The United Negro College Fund (UNCF).⁶ Today, these UNCF schools award eighteen percent of all baccalaureate degrees received by African Americans. The brainchild of Dr. Frederick D. Patterson, who was president of what was then known as Tuskegee Institute, UNCF's founding membership included Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune and other HBCU college presidents who joined Dr. Patterson in an "appeal to the national conscience" to raise funds to provide financial assistance to black students. That initial campaign attracted \$760,000 which, in today's dollars, equates to about \$8.6 million.⁷ In this its 65th

anniversary year, the UNCF continues to play “a critical role in enabling more than 65,000 students each year to attend college and get the education they want and deserve.”⁸

III. Personal Testimony

As early as I can remember, I knew that I would go to college. As the daughter of parents who were both the eldest siblings in their families *and* the first to attend college, I was pretty much programmed and wired for higher education. Truly, I believe if you had asked me in kindergarten what I was going to do after high school, I would have answered without hesitation, “Go to college.”

When it came to education, my parents were high achievers with high expectations and standards for themselves — as well as for my brother and me. Excellence was the goal. It’s funny. Even as I grew into adulthood, I don’t remember my mother ever retiring her smoldering frustration that she fell just short of being her class valedictorian. According to family legend, my father missed only one day of school during his primary years; that’s right, he was known for perfect attendance all 13 years, except for missing one day for an out-of-town family funeral. And while I cannot vouch for the complete authenticity of that spectacular claim, I do have a book given him by one of his elementary school teachers. Still taped to the aged inside cover of The Town Mouse and the Country Mouse is a handwritten note that reads:

Dear Eddie:

What a fine boy you are Eddie. Besides being at the head of your class, you never missed on day this term – ninety-one days, thru snow and cold winds – you came right thru it all.

You are strong and brave and I hope you will do the same next term. This book is a little reward for your perfect attendance.

*Your teacher,
Mrs. Loesch
June 15, 1945*

Both my parents went on to graduate school. My father graduated from Howard University’s College of Medicine before I was born. After her call to ministry, my mother attended Wesley Theological Seminary while I was in high school. It was during that time that I started to get a little lax about school. My mother was then not only a widow but also the primary breadwinner in our home and a part-time graduate student. When a church friend got wind of my new laziness and lack of focus in school, he pulled me aside and scolded me, “Girl, don’t you know A is for Afro-American, B is for Black, C is for Colored, D is for Darkie and F is for Fool?!” I thought Mr. Moody was kind of radical, if not ridiculous, with all his Afrocentric ways and all his sayings (he seemed to have one for *everything!*). Still I never forgot what he said.

When I found myself grown and teaching journalism at Florida A&M University, I remembered my own “that’ll do” attitude, and I found myself dusting off Mr. Moody’s words to inspire and motivate under-performing students. “Hey! Don’t you know that the world’s perception of you as African Americans is often based on what you do academically? Don’t you know that your grades symbolically reflect our struggle for educational advancement and how folk viewed us, our progress as a people? Don’t you know that you have to be on point, because A is for African-American, B is for Black, C is for Colored, D is for Darkie and F is for Fool?!”

IV. Music for the Moment

Every graduate at every level is a testament to the battle not only for educational access but also the excellence that our people have fought to achieve for generations – and for which they continue to fight. As I witnessed FAMU’s recent graduates make that symbolic sweep of their tassels to the graduate side of their flat hats, several contemporary songs held particular meaning:

If It Wasn't For Your Love

Would I be standing here
After all these years
Among the stars above
Maybe not, if it wasn't for your love
Smiling faces all around
Like when a king that has just been crowned
A battle has been won
That I'd have lost
If it wasn't for you love
A fairy tale unfolds
More true than stories I've been told
At last my chance to shine
And all in perfect time
The life I once dreamed of
Who'd have thought
If it wasn't for your love
And oh the wonderful surprise
To have a light so bright it blinds my eyes
And finally I see, how it feels to live a dream
But would I have touched the sky
Ever flown so high
No not I, if it wasn't for your love.⁹

Dare To Dream

Take one look at these small hands
They're endowed with power that can move mountains
There's much more in store that we could understand

I know we can do anything

Close your eyes and visualize
Nothing is impossible for those who try
Just dream to fly as eagles fly across the sky
I know we can...

See the rainbow around us all
Hear the angels when they call
Find a way to reach inside
Just dare to dream and walk with pride

Hold on when all hope is gone
The race may not be given to the swift or strong
It's given to the ones who can endure flaws
I know we can...

See the rainbow around us all
Hear the angels when they call
Find a way to reach inside
Just dare to dream

Oh and we'll rise up together we'll go higher
Find such to make it through the fire
Just dare to dream
I know we can do anything

See the rainbow around us all
Hear the angels when they call
Find a way to reach inside
Just dare to dream and walk with pride
Stand together side by side
And find a way to reach inside
Walk with pride ohh

See the rainbow around us all
Hear the angels when they call
Find a way to reach inside
Dare to dream and walk with pride
Stand together side by Side.¹⁰

And, then there is what could be the twenty-first century “anthem” for any graduating class, “Never Would Have Made It.”

Never Would Have Made It

Never would have made it, never could have made it, without you

I would have lost it all, but now I see how you were there for me
 And I can say
 Never would have made it,
 Never could have made it,
 Without you
 I would have lost it all,
 But now I see how you were there for me and I can say
 I'm stronger, I'm wiser, I'm better,
 much better,
 When I look back over all you brought me thru.
 I can see that you were the one that I held on to
 And I never
 Chorus: Never would have made it
 Oh I never could have made it
 Chorus: Never could have made it without you
 Oh I would have lost it all, oh but now I see how you were there for me.¹¹

Notes

1. Jackson, Cynthia L. African American Education: A Reference Handbook. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 2001. p. 51.
2. Appiah, Kwame Anthony, and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience. New York, NY: Basic Civitas Books, 1999. p. 1988
- g3. African American inspirational quotes can be found on the reference site Blackrefer. Online location: <http://www.blackrefer.com/quotes.html> accessed 4 April 2008
4. The HBCU Network. Online location: http://www.hbcunetwork.com/The_History_Of_HBCUs_Creation.cfm accessed 4 April 2008
5. Jackson, Cynthia L. African American Education: A Reference Handbook. p. 52.
6. For more information, see The United Negro College Fund Web site. Online location: <http://www.uncf.org/> accessed 4 April 2008
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. "If It Wasn't For Your Love." By Heather Hedley. elyrics.net Online location: http://www.elyrics.net/read/h/heather-headley-lyrics/if-it-wasn_t-for-your-love-lyrics.html accessed 4 April 2008
10. "Dare To Dream." By John Legend. Lyrics Mania. Online location: http://www.lyricsmania.com/lyrics/john_legend_lyrics_3360/other_lyrics_10459/dare_to_dream_lyrics_675405.html accessed 4 April 2008
11. "Never Would Have Made It." By Marvin Sapp. Online location: <http://www.onlylyrics.com/song.php?id=1008921> accessed 4 April 2008