Tribute to Black Teachers

There was once a time when the teacher was venerated. From ancient times the teacher was regarded as a semi-god, a community leader, a moral example, a foundation of knowledge, the symbol of wisdom, the walking truth of life, and an encyclopedia of culture. This revered personality was expected to live without blame or censure, but everything in our society is undergoing change. Social change is so rapid and radical that we are left breathless. Change is the name of the game. The twentieth century is an age of revolution, a transition from one age to another. These revolutions and wars have piled upon one another with such velocity and accumulated in such incremental rhythm that they are like a ball of tumbleweed in a windstorm or a snowball in a blizzard.

We have come through revolutions; we are in revolution; tomorrow we will make more revolutions. The concept of the instructor has suffered in this atmosphere and like everything else is caught in a revolution and state of change. Like all role-playing—roles are out of style—the role-playing or popular perception of the teacher has changed and not for the better. They stand for authority, law and order, servile respect for our elders, and blind obedience. Revolution and rebellion has not only threatened this image but changed the image of the teacher into a false god. The teacher has toppled from the pedestal of veneration, an ordinary human being, not a semi-god. However, the image of the teacher should be a positive, strong, influential image as our humanity demands and deserves.

We have a great history of the teacher, a great tradition from Iknaton in Egypt; Moses, the lawgiver; the eighth-century Hebrew prophets—Confucius, Jesus, Krishna, Mohammed, Buddha, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Erasmus of Rotterdam—and finally the great Einstein, Edison, Mary McLeod Bethune, George Washington Carver, and our beloved leader W. E. B. DuBois. These were all great teachers of civilization. They imbued our lives with great ideas, ideas of spirit, love, freedom, peace, human dignity, truth, and justice. Steeped in this tradition are also the ideals of the bicentennial from such patriots as Thomas Paine, Benjamin Franklin; and finally black Absalom Jones and Richard Allen, African American religious leaders.
Consider the ideals of God and the fellowship of humanity. Consider also the ability of individuals to think and, therefore, govern themselves. America is based on the belief that all people are created equal before the sight of God, that they are entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, domestic tranquility and the five freedoms: freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, religious freedom, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. These are the universal ideas of human value and satisfying people's needs. These are the teachings of the greatest teachers.

This is what the teacher must understand is part of the new image we must give to a suffering world; crying for food, fuel and energy, money, land, and most of all for leadership. I am the example of a family of three generations of teachers. My Great Uncle Jim Ware and my maternal grandfather, the Reverend Edward Lane Dozier, taught school one hundred years ago in Greenville, Mississippi. My mother and father taught more than fifty years ago in Meridian, Mississippi. My sister, Mercedes, gave Dr. Joyce Johnson Bolden, head of the music department at Alcorn College, her first music lessons in Prentiss, Mississippi; and I came as a teacher of English to Jackson State University over thirty years ago. My family has been involved with education in Mississippi for at least one hundred years. Another sister, Gwendolyn, taught in the public schools of New Orleans and a brother, S. C. Walker, Jr., taught in that same system. Mercedes, who went on to become a concert artist and fulfill the requirements for a doctorate in music, is now retired from teaching in New York. We are all teachers and each one, from my grandfather, who spoke the King's English without the benefit of formal education, has made a reputation as a great, creative, and natural-born teacher.

After more than thirty years of teaching, I have found it a most rewarding profession. You will never make a lot of money teaching, for no one becomes financially rich teaching. In terms of the service rendered, the teacher is often the poorest paid member of society. Until recently, the black teacher, and particularly the black woman teacher, worked for a pittance, hardly making enough to buy bread and keep body and soul together—regardless of how expensively she appeared to be dressed. She was in debt for those clothes that she bought mostly
on credit. Not only have I had the opportunity to mold minds and character, but I receive letters almost every two or three weeks from former students who have achieved and gone on to greater tasks. They thank me for the lessons and the days they sat in my classroom. This is the greatest reward of teaching.

The black teacher, particularly the southern black woman teacher, has been the first positive image some poor African American children have known. Instilling a good self-concept of worth in the black child is the most important task their teacher can accomplish. The black college, like the private black high school and the church-related grade school, gave African American children an education long before the state school existed.

I have always had wonderful teachers. They believed in me, inspiring me to achieve and believe in myself. My teachers were first my parents; then a Meridian native named Mrs. Harris and beautiful black women in Birmingham and New Orleans. When I went to Northwestern University, I was seventeen and a junior in college. My test scores on entrance examinations were in the upper third of that junior class. I am a product of southern black teachers, mostly women, and as a result of those good teachers, my image of the teacher is reflected in what I am today.

Today we have had an electronic revolution in teaching, mostly reflected in the machines for visual and audio aids, yet we are still facing an intellectual revolution in education and ideas. This is necessary in order to update our educational systems from the twentieth and nineteenth centuries to the ideology of the twentieth century and to implement the principles of the Einsteinian revolution. In our pluralistic or multicultural society, we need education that is also more relevant, modern enough for the twenty-first century, and more humanistic. The Einsteinian revolution that brought nuclear power from atomic energy has changed our lives and concert of the universe in which we live.

The teacher must be cognizant of these facts. The teacher should be aware of the cognitive and affective aspects of learning in young children as well as in adolescents. She must fight racism in all its subtle and blatant forms. Every teacher must help to develop a worth and
positive self-concept in every child or pupil in order for them to grow to respect every human being without racial, class, or religious prejudice. Every teacher must not only guide and inspire, but teach each child to think, and how to think. Teachers must avoid selective teaching and learning. Not only must Johnny read better, write better, spell better, run races better, but Johnny must learn to think better or she cannot survive. No person should ever accept a job teaching unless she or he loves people. The child who is taught without love is not well taught, and that child will neither like school, nor learning. Each teacher should have an abiding love for humanity, believing that human personality is potentially divine and every living soul has a spark of God, and the breath of God within her or him.

Yet, the teacher should also love learning and seek knowledge for its own and reward. To be prepared is an obligation. Moreover, the teacher must have respect for herself before she can have respect for others. The smallest child and the oldest person must be respected first as a human being. I have always told my students that they must always remember every one is a human being, no one is any less, or any more. When the teacher understands these facts, loves people and knowledge, and respects one's own person, only then can the teacher aid in enhancing the self-concept of each child.

The teacher must, therefore, be solidly grounded in the methods of their educational field. They must be thoroughly prepared in the principles, precepts, and concepts of their profession. Grades are not always indicative of ability, for general intelligence and consideration for human beings are beyond grades. Some years ago, a county superintendent of schools from the Mississippi Delta visited me while I was in the hospital and complimented Jackson State University on its fine teacher education program. He said, “We get very fine teachers from Jackson State.”

Although the State of Mississippi has supported Jackson State’s teaching program for a mere thirty-five years, the program has grown and developed to such an extent that it has won national awards for excellence. Moreover, we can point with pride not merely to our many successful graduates who are teaching all over the state, nation and the world, but most
importantly, to the vast improvement in the quality of students produced in the public and county schools of Mississippi over the last twenty-five years. Accreditation of high schools, equalization of teachers' salaries as well as pay raises, better buildings, educational equipment, facilities, more and better libraries across the state; all these are evidence of growth in educational opportunities and achievement in Mississippi during the last twenty-five years.

The image of the teacher must live up to its history. Teachers must all make that image greater today than it was yesterday, and in the future hope to bring to pass the fulfillment of humanity's destiny which is spiritual. We are asked, more than we are challenged, by a changing world order to present each child with a new, positive, and strong healthy image of the teacher in order that they may grow into the intellectual giants we must have as our leaders of tomorrow.

When I was beginning my teaching career and was leaving for my first teaching position, feeling woefully inadequate and unprepared, my mother said to me, "Remember, make it with your students. Be prepared with your subject matter every day and make sure they respect you for your ability, character, and personality. Attend strictly to your own business and keep your nose out of everybody else's personal business. Behave yourself, and you can stay on any job you have as long as you like." I have never forgotten her words, and I have never been fired from any job.

During my first commencement at Jackson State, and every ceremony thereafter as long as President Reddix was president, he gave a charge to the graduating class and asked them to repeat after him a paraphrase of the oath of Hippocrates. It was called the Hippocratic Oath of Teachers. I close with this oath, verbatim:

I now take upon myself the sacred responsibility of the ministry of teaching. Into whatever community I shall go, and if any man shall entrust his children to me for the teaching of letters, I shall not refuse to receive and teach such children. Moreover, I shall teach them from pure affection, even as my own brethren, remembering that it is written, "The wise shall shine as the splendor of the firmament," and "They that instruct many in
righteousness shall shine as the stars in the heavens forever and forever.”