

Dr. Donna J. Benson, Interim Chancellor

“The Search for Meaning in Life and Today's College Students”

University Convocation and Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Commemoration Speech

January 18, 1992

First of all let me say that it is a great honor and privilege to be here serving as the Interim Chancellor of North Carolina Central University. I am a North Carolina native and as a student growing up in this state, I was taught the history of this important institution. Friends, neighbors, and community leaders like the brilliant Civil Rights Attorney Julius L. Chambers served as formidable leaders and role models. I grew up respecting this University as a great center of learning that attracted serious students who excelled in graduate programs and who excelled as some of the best legal minds in this country. This University's heritage is strong and one part of our challenge during this interim period will be to sustain this momentum and contribute to this rich legacy. I have assured President C.D. Spangler, Jr. and members of the UNC Board of Governors, and the NCCU Board of Trustees that we will work together and use the strength of our collective wisdom to move the university forward.

Today, in honor of the life and leadership of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., I want to focus on the search for meaning in life and the implications for students at colleges and universities throughout this country and particularly for our own students here at NCCU. I want to do three things: first, use the writings of the esteemed theologian Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman and the poetry of artist and humanist Dr. Maya Angelou to establish our context. Secondly, I want to briefly discuss the life experiences of the people we call slaves and their search for meaning in life, and third, we will conclude by focusing on the relevance and implications for college students today.

In his monograph titled Deep is the Hunger, Howard Thurman challenges us to search for meaning in our lives. Thurman states:

When one considers that he lives only in the western half of that tiny speck of stardust, the space we occupy is well nigh a vanishing quantity. All of this means that in addition to my own intrinsic worth, I must find some movement or cause or purpose that is more significant than my own life.

Thurman is challenging us to find something to believe in, something in addition to ourselves to care about. He is reminding us that our lives, our talents, and gifts are precious and that each of us must decide what our compelling life's purpose will be.

In a poem titled "And Still I Rise," Maya Angelou reminds us that we exist on a continuum, an infinite line of connectedness and relatedness to all of the people who came before us. Angelou says:

You can write me down in history  
 With your bitter, twisted lies,  
 You can tread me in the very dirt,  
 But still, like dust, I'll rise . . .  
 Up from a past that's rooted in pain . . .  
 Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave.  
 I am the dream and the hope of the slave.  
 I rise, I rise, I rise.

Indeed, Howard Thurman, Maya Angelou, and Martin Luther King, Jr. remind us that the progress and freedom which we enjoy today are the results of the visions, hopes, dreams, and struggles of our own parents, grandparents, and earlier ancestors. Before focusing on the twentieth century, I want to take you back about one hundred years so that we can think briefly about the strength of those people we call slaves. Who were these people? How did they try to achieve meaning in life in spite of the obstacles and oppression that they faced? What can their life stories teach us? We are truly standing on the backs of giants.

In the 1930s, the Works Project Administration hired social scientists to travel throughout the South to interview men and women who had been slaves in the 1860s. Most of the survivors were in their eighties and nineties. About 2000 former slaves were found, 196 of these elders lived in North Carolina. As an American and African-American historian, I have studied and

researched the life stories in the WSP slave narratives and I want to share some of their thoughts with you because the insights of these former slaves are so deeply spiritual.

When social scientists interviewed Sarah Gudger who had lived near Asheville, North Carolina, she was well over 100 years old. She said: "Lord you don't know how mean darkies was treated." She talked of whipping, hard work, and not getting a real bed to sleep on until after she was fifty-six years old and a free woman. Interestingly, the thoughtful woman had one regret in her long productive life: she said that since slavery, every generation seemed to get "weaker and weaker." Gudger is talking about discipline, about character, about the ability to hold on to dreams even while being whipped. This former slaves was warning us that each generation since slavery seemed to be getting weaker and weaker.

When the WPA interviewers went to Aaron Siddles house to ask him about his life as a slave, Siddles instructed them: "By the law of Almighty God, I was born free, by the law of man, a slave." How was Siddles able to nurture such a decisive identify that juxtaposed the law of man and with the higher law of God? What can we learn from Sarah Gudger and Aaron Siddles about defining our own self-worth?

Slavery warred with black men, women and children. Struggle was inherent in slavery. Susan Rhodes explained: "People in my day, didn't know book learning, but dey studies how to protect each other and save them from such misery as they could." On plantations throughout the South, the enslaved sustained themselves with saying such as the following: "Got one mind for owner to see, 'nother for what I know is me; he don't know, he don't know my mind." You could enslave a body, but most slaves and slave owners knew that it was infinitely harder to enslave a mind. What can we learn from these people? Through years and years of struggle, prayer and slavery, black folks held onto the belief that one day they would all be free. One former slave said it was a mystery to him, but "the old-timey folks always felt they was to be free."

In 1860, after years of sectional conflict, this country was at war with itself in a bloody Civil War. In 1861, and in 1862, the South was winning. Abraham Lincoln desperately sought

for some way to turn the tide. In September 1862, Lincoln wrote a preliminary proclamation which warned southern plantation owners that if that did end the bloody conflict, he would emancipate all of their slaves. In November and December, the South still had the advantage, the prospect of losing millions and millions of dollars of enslaved laborers seemed to make some southerners fight harder. On January 1, 1863, Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation which freed all the slaves in Confederate territory and enabled black men to be enlisted as Union soldiers. From 1863 until the spring of 1865, the war continued. Black men and women fought for the Union but more importantly, they fought for the freedom of themselves and their children. When the Confederates finally surrendered in April 1865, men and women who had been held in bondage as chattel slaves were finally free. After 200 years, slavery in this country was over. Can you imagine how freedom felt to these men, women, and children?

On plantations throughout the South, black people rose to thank God for delivering them out of slavery, they sang, they prayed, and they rejoiced. They sang, "Stomp It Down, Stomp Down Freedom Day, Stomp It Down, Stomp Down Freedom Day." To their former owners sang: "Shoo Fly, Don't Bother Me; Shoo Fly, Don't Bother Me." In 1865, African American soldiers marched down the streets of Wilmington, North Carolina dressed in the uniforms of the United States Army singing the "Battle Hymn of the Republic:"

In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea,  
With a Glory in his bosom that transfigures you and me,  
As he died to make men holy, let us die to make men free,  
His truth is marching on.

And in plantation communities and rural towns throughout the South, free black men and women sang the one song that and guided and strengthened them throughout the long struggle for freedom. They sang: "Before I Be a Slave, I'll be buried in my grave and go home to my lord and be free." An enslaved body but a free mind: Who were these people? What can we learn from them? We are truly standing on the backs of giants. Dr. Charles Gilchrist and the legendary NCCU choir will capture this momentum for us today with a spiritual rendition of the

Battle Hymn of the Republic. We must teach students how to interpret this hymn and how to understand the empowering Negro Spirituals.

Even in the midst of jubilation, free black men and women well understood that they had an incredible amount of work to do. They needed civil rights, they needed the right to vote, they needed land so that they could be independent farmers who worked for themselves. And more importantly, they had to find husbands, wives, and children who had been sold during slavery.

In 1865, 95% of the African-American community was illiterate - not ignorant - but illiterate. In freedom, black men and women started one of the most successful phases of the black struggle for freedom: a massive movement for education. Often with the help of white friends and allies they raised money, organized, and built Sunday schools, night schools, normal schools and colleges. Men and women, boys and girls were seen throughout the South with slips of paper containing the alphabet or words. Books and education became universal badges of freedom.

To be sure, the struggle for education was not easy. Few families could afford to send their children to school full-time. Very often one child would go while the other children worked in the fields. Black students who went to school learned in what was called "double-time": those who had the opportunity to learn, had the responsibility to teach. Black students had to understand their lessons well enough to be able to teach their brothers and their sisters and sometimes their parents at night. We have overwhelming evidence of the success of this movement: just think about the number of colleges and universities which were started in the early days of freedom:

Shaw University, 1865

Fisk University, 1866

Howard University, 1867

Johnson C. Smith University, 1867

St. Augustine's College, 1867

Fayetteville State University, 1867

Barber Scotia College, 1867

Hampton Institute, 1868.

The struggle of black people to become free politically and socially was productive. Blacks and their allies made considerable progress during the postwar period of history know as

Reconstruction. The Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments were added to the U.S. Constitution guaranteeing the civil rights of all Americans. Two black men were elected to the Senate of the United States, 20 served as Congressmen in the House of Representatives. Blacks were judges, magistrates, and served as members of city councils and civic organizations. The years between 1865 and 1877 were encouraging. The United States had never been so integrated; there had never been such a democratic moment in American History.

Unfortunately, this highpoint of integrated political activity in the United States was followed by a nadir in the country's history. From the end of Reconstruction until World War I and afterwards, vigilantes rode through neighborhoods, driving families off their farms, burning schools, burning churches, taking weapons from black veterans and intimidating black men who dared to vote. In the late 1800s, fewer and fewer blacks voted and got elected to office. The case that sealed the legal fate of black civil rights was the 1896 Supreme Court ruling in Plessy v. Ferguson. This decision and subsequent misguided cases legalized segregation in the United States. The emerging democracy of the Reconstruction seemed to be forgotten. The United States entered the new century, the twentieth century, as a society that was racially divided and the protests movements continued throughout the 1900s. Legendary leaders such as Paul Laurence Dunbar, Booker T. Washington, Dr. W.E. B. Dubois, Ida Wells Barnett, and Marcus Garvey provided innovative, creative, and constructive responses that culminated in the Harlem Renaissance which was designed to move African-Americans forward.

Of all issues which confronted black people in a segregated society, the one issue which united the African-American community more than any other was education for their children. Mothers and fathers would make great sacrifices to improve the chance for their children to have a better life in the world. Mary McCloud Bethune accepted dimes and quarters as she raised funds to build a college that was needed to help train black teachers and professionals. George Washington Carver, truly a genius in agricultural chemistry, inspired black students to conduct their own research. From 1865 to 1930, the literacy rate for black Americans climbed from 5% to 70%, a tremendous accomplishment in the history of this world. All these people and more

paved the way for the Civil Rights Movement and the opportunities that we have today. In 1954, the efforts black parents, eager students, and the formidable NAACP legal defense team culminated in Brown versus the Board of Education of Topeka. In this landmark decision, United State Supreme Court ruled that separate schools were inherently unequal. And thus began a new phase of the seemingly continuous black struggle for freedom. As a people, African American parents have always been passionate about education for their children.

In synthesis and summary, we must ask ourselves: Are we the hope and dreams of the people that we call slaves? Are we the manifestation of the hope and dreams of our great grandparents, our grandparents, our parents and the good people who tried to keep on keeping on while fighting for civil rights and human rights? Would Mother Angelou understand our poetry, prose, theater, songs and dances? Are we the sons and daughters that Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King dreamed about?

As Howard Thurman suggested, I see today's college students struggling to define their own self worth. For example, African American students assert their connectedness with their past with their hair styles, their clothing, and with the rhythms of some dances and positive rap music. I think the former slave Aaron Siddles who defined his own identity would be comfortable with the lyrics of affirmation of *the positive* music groups of today. The incredible technology of the face-changing scenes in the first part of Michael Jackson's video "Black or White" seem to indicate that today's students will also be comfortable with cultural diversity and respectful of ethnic differences. The rock guitarist Slash improvises with the King of Pop to create a memorable, upbeat tune.

I am, however, somewhat concerned about the proliferation of hats and shirts that have X's written the apparel. Some youths who wear such clothing appear to know very little about the man who came to be known as Malcolm X. I think that we can use this as a learning experience and I recommend that NCCU students read The Autobiography of Malcolm X. This very interesting book chronicles the life experiences of a man who moves from crime, drugs, and prison to self-education and angry black nationalism. In the circle of his life, he then he matures

intellectually and spiritually to become an advocate of multicultural religious humanism and international Islam. Students, you must read the book in its entirety, otherwise you will be terribly misinformed particularly if you do not understand that Malcolm matured beyond nationalism. While it is fairly easy to perceive the differences between Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., astute NCCU faculty members can explain the similarities between these two intense leaders who often disagreed with each other but also respected each other. I will ask the faculty to provide forums for you to discuss this classic autobiography and Spike Lee's new movie starring the quintessential Denzel Washington.

Like generations before you, serious NCCU students are trying to complete rigorous courses of study while struggling against racism, sexism, and other types of oppression that are destructive and cruel. I know that you are aware of oppressive systems like apartheid in South Africa and the persistent struggles of people like the brilliant attorney Nelson Mandela and the inspiring Bishop Desmond Tutu who spoke in Duke Chapel a few years ago. Faculty members also understand that African American students are waging a relentless struggle against drugs like marijuana, cocaine, and the highly concentrated derivative of cocaine called crack. Movies like "New Jack City" and "Boys N the Hood" depict the painful realities and harsh truths of black-on-black crime and the terrible toil this drug war is taking on the lives of our youth, and especially young black men. Students, we know that you understand that drugs can enslave people. As students who are trying to get an education, you will have to help each other, faculty members and NCCU staff will have to help you, and we will all have to help the young people in high school, middle school, and elementary school to remain drug-free.

I read about the beautiful mural that NCCU students prepared for Magic Johnson. We will have to help you become better informed about the HIV/AIDS disease and its spread through sexual contact and intravenous drug use. Again, you will have to help each other, NCCU faculty and staff will have to help you, and you will have to help explain the need for a new morality to teenagers who are looking to you for peer counseling and leadership. Like the former slave Susan Rhodes stated, we must actually learn how to support and protect each other.

Like your peers at the 3,000 colleges and universities around this country, I am sure that serious NCCU students realize that our greatest adversary is the current economic recession. IBM, American Airlines, and other multi-national corporations here in Research Triangle Park have announced that they will have to release employees. It is a difficult time to enter the job market for well-prepared students. This is a business issue and NCCU graduates must to continue to prepare for graduate school and multiple career pathways. An economic recession means that NCCU faculty members must help you to become as competitive and resourceful as possible as life-long learners.

Today, we are at a pivotal point in our history. Since 1980, the number of African-American high school students has continued to increase but the number of African-American college students has declined from 9.4% to 8.8%. The number of black students in post graduate and profession schools has also declined to critically low percentages. Only 4% of this country's dental students are black, 5% of all law students are black, 6% of all medical and 4% of all M.B.A. students are black. In the future, our society will feature: a global economy, increased competition from Japan and the industrialized world, advances in telecommunications, superconducting electricity, and super computers. As minorities make up more and more of the population - this community, this state, and this country - will need energized NCCU graduates who will be trained and ready to take positions as managers, decision-makers, scholars, policy makers, judges, artists and entrepreneurs. Students, you must continue to do well and more importantly you must inspire other young people to do well also.

I know that some of you are concerned about the future of historically black colleges and universities. The most pressing problem that HBCU's face, is trying to find and attract new faculty who are dedicated to teaching the next generation of NCCU teachers, nurses, attorneys, entrepreneurs, scientists, social scientists, humanists, researchers, and leaders. If you are concerned about the future of historically black colleges and universities, some of you must follow erudite NCCU alumni and continue your studies until you are awarded Doctor of Philosophy degrees. This country and this world need the well-trained minds of NCCU

graduates who will accept the challenge of teaching young people who are energetic and talented. I know that some of you will accept this Ph.D. challenge and prepare yourselves to join this esteemed faculty. Although there may be some people who are opposed to HBCU's there are even more people who are truly praying for your success. Your parents, your teachers, and alumni who live and work throughout this state and country are cheering for you. The people in the state of North Carolina invest millions annually to make sure that this impressive study body - 5,400 strong - has access to a vibrant college education.

As students who will become the leaders of the 21st Century, it will not be difficult for you to find a cause or purpose greater than yourselves to work for; it will not be difficult for you to find people who truly need your skills and abilities. As you make the transition from being students who are primarily learning, to scholars and professionals, always remember the efforts of the well known and the not so well known people of the past who gave so much of themselves so that you could reap the benefits of universities like NCCU. Be inspired by the legacy which you have inherited. Continue to develop your capacities for critical and creative thinking. As you progress through North Carolina Central University - with its rich legacy, its strong liberal arts programs and its competitive professional programs - I hope that you will find your own voice, your own way to make a significant contribution in your chosen profession.

The search for meaning in your life; the search for something greater than yourself to believe in can free you to realize self-actualization and unselfish service to others in your chosen field of endeavor. We affirm that we stand on the backs of giants because we continue to be inspired by the insights that are imbedded in the instructive songs that we aptly call Negro Spirituals. Understanding that we are the descendants of slaves whose spirituality enabled them to define their own self-worth, we also understand that we are creatively capable of dreaming new dreams. Each generation is charged with the responsibility of preparing the next generation of leaders. I know that NCCU Eagles truly understands this responsibility to discipline, educate, and prepare the next generation of Eagles.

Howard Thurman challenged us to find something greater than our own lives to believe in. Maya Angelou challenged us to be the hope and the dream of the slave. And former slaves like Sarah Gudger and Aaron Siddles challenged us not to enslave our own minds. We encourage you to continue to affirm your own self worth in ways that are good and positive. We encourage you to use your imagination as you search for meaning in your own life. Propel yourself into academic excellence. Motivate yourself into learning how to be scholars and leaders. Resonate by dreaming big dreams. Give your selves permission to love your University and all of the wonderful opportunities that this great University offers. As the sons and daughters that Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., we understand that we must work hard to prepare the next generation of leaders. Indeed, we stand on the most sacred grounds of this mighty institution that we proudly call North Carolina Central University and we close this commemorative celebration of the birth of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King with the proverbial passage from Isaiah 40:31:

But, they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength;  
They shall mount up with wings as eagles;  
They shall run, and not be weary;  
And they shall walk, and not faint.

As faculty, staff, alumni, students, and friends of NCCU, we stand here today and reaffirm that the pursuit of preeminence will continue to guide and direct our teaching, research, and service:

Eagle Pride is alive and well.  
Eagle Pride is alive and well.  
Eagle Pride is alive and well!