

Equality: The Inaugural Address

**Delivered by Dr. Mary Schmidt Campbell, Ph.D.,
10th President of Spelman College
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Acknowledgments

Rosalind Brewer, Ronda Stryker, Mya Havard, Dr. Celeste Watkins Hayes, and all of the members of the Spelman College Board of Trustees: Last year this time, you elected me the 10th president of Spelman College. I accept this presidential medallion now as a symbol of the trust and authority you have vested in me.

Dr. Tatum, Dr. Cole, and Dr. Manley: I accept this medallion as a symbol of the nine past presidents. Your presidential leadership was as sterling and as full of grace as it was determined and purposeful. It is a privilege to follow in your footsteps.

My colleagues of the AUC: Serving with you, stewards of our future leaders, is an honor.

Dr. Kathleen Phillips-Lewis: The faculty of Spelman exhibit a love of excellence that is exceeded only by the joyfulness of their commitment to their students.

Ms. Demetria Holloway: Thank you for your kind words on behalf of the Spelman staff. The devotion and caring of Spelman College's outstanding staff is evident everywhere you turn on campus.

Dr. Daphne Smith: To travel the country meeting Spelman alumnae, in Harlem or Oakland, Detroit or Philadelphia, Los Angeles or Louisville, is to be swept up in the fierce Spelman spirit of sisterhood. Thank you for your leadership of our national alumnae association.

Zarinah Mustafa: Your leadership of the Student Government Association this year has brilliantly exemplified the wisdom, honesty and fearlessness of the Spelman women you lead.

My friends, colleagues and fellow foot soldiers — Thelma Golden, Spike Lee, Alfre Woodard, and Dr. Freeman Hrabowski: In the ongoing fight for equality, and in your life's work, you have carved out the necessary spaces that press our men and women to create and think boldly, excel and soar. You honor this occasion with your presence.

Delegates from colleges and universities across the country who join me in the common purpose of educating our country's next generation of leaders: Welcome.

Family and friends, I could not have arrived at this moment without your love and support. I am grateful.

My sons, you are my heroes. You have built lives full of devotion to your families, your country and your work with intelligence and integrity. I admire you and love you dearly.

My parents, Harvey and Elaine Schmidt are no longer on this earth, but they taught me about family and commitment to something bigger than myself; and I feel their presence as if they were sitting in the front row.

George, has been my best friend, presidential adviser, confidante, running buddy, the wisest man I have ever met, and love of my life for more than 50 years. Even as you have been my ballast and compass, you have never stopped challenging me to explore further, reach higher, or try a more challenging ski run and I love you for it.

Last fall, I had a transformative experience with members of my Spelman community. As many of you know by now, I invited Spelman students and a half dozen faculty and staff to come together for a shared reading experience. About 30 women from all classes and all disciplines joined the group. Our common text — Ronald Chernow's biography, *Alexander Hamilton* and if you attended the reading session and did the writing assignments, you got to go to New York to see the Broadway musical, "Hamilton."

On several evenings last fall, we gathered in Reynolds Cottage, the president's residence, to discuss the book and discuss the life of Hamilton. One of the founding fathers, Hamilton was an upstart immigrant from the Caribbean who made his way to the colonies, and on the eve of the American Revolution, changed the course of history.

On the evenings that we got together to discuss his biography, we'd enjoy the fellowship of dinner. After dinner, we'd debate. We'd debate the ideas of Hamilton's political rivals — Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and Aaron Burr; or

we'd marvel at his way with words or try to penetrate his sharp thinking on our Constitution, our banking system he invented, or his ideas about national debt and foreign policy. We'd chastise him for his behavior towards women.

As we sat in Reynolds and I listened to our Spelman women, I thought to myself — when the founding fathers birthed this country, and when they insisted on equality, never in their wildest dreams could they have imagined this room full of free-thinking Black women. Never could they have imagined a room full of our beautiful Black Spelman women having debates about *them*.

Equality, over 200 years ago, was a private club. The Founding Fathers were among the exclusive members, and their rooms were closed. There were a few, like Hamilton, who could see beyond those closed rooms. A few could look out over the oceans of time and see the possibility of full equality --- a tiny speck in the distance, an unknown destination. Most could not have imagined a Spelman College, an entire school full of free-thinking Black women.

It would take almost 100 years after the country's founding, a civil war and emancipation before a school like Spelman was even a possibility. Like the founding of the country itself, there was no precedent for Spelman --- no models, no blueprints. Spelman was an act of the imagination, a realization of an ideal of equality; and the belief that women, Black women, could receive an outstanding education.

Unlike the country's founders, Spelman's founders were women --- teachers, two white Baptist missionaries who believed unequivocally in the power of education. We just celebrated Founders Day and we retold the story of Sophia B. Packard and Harriet E. Giles, who hailed from Salem, Massachusetts and traveled to Atlanta in March of 1881, determined to start a school for recently freed Black women.

Our Founders Day narrative includes Father Quarles, a legend in 19th century Black Atlanta. Father Quarles had founded Friendship Baptist Church and in its basement, he founded what would become Morehouse College for Black men. When Packard and Giles showed up on his doorstep, he offered the basement of Friendship Baptist once again as an incubator for a new school -- this time for Black women.

One hundred and thirty-five years ago, the promise of this school, with its exacting standards and high expectations, was powerful. Local women would send \$2 or \$5 donations for this incredible beacon of hope. One Sunday, at a church service in Cleveland, where Packard was speaking fervently about the school in her effort to raise money, the wealthy industrialist, John D. Rockefeller was in the congregation; and on the spot, he made a gift. Eventually, in honor

of his many subsequent gifts, the school was named after the family of his wife Laura Spelman Rockefeller.

Never in their wildest dreams would our founding fathers have imagined a coalition like the one that built Spelman College: women as well as men; the very poor and the very rich; Black people joined with white people; north joined with south. They were a coalition of the faithful, a coalition that came together in postbellum America at a time when the country had been cleaved explosively.

This coalition of the faithful pushed and pulled against their differences, against burgeoning Jim Crow law and separatism, to birth a new school, to educate a new woman, to build new citizens and new communities, and to make a new world.

Who was this new woman? Most Black women in Atlanta in the late 19th century were laundresses, maids, hotel and domestic workers. They endured long hours, low wages and inhumane working conditions. But, in the summer of 1881, a few months after the school opened, those laundresses in Atlanta and in other cities of the south, rose up and organized and went on strike in Atlanta. Freedom was not sufficient. They demanded equality. Freedom was their ticket; equality was their destination and they insisted on a voice for themselves in mapping their way to that destination. Their voices are part of the founding narrative of Spelman as well.

It's not surprising that, offered the opportunity of a first-rate education, many of these same Black women flocked to this new school, the Atlanta Female Baptist Seminary. As word of this new school swept through Atlanta and beyond, the school's population grew by leaps and bounds. By the turn of the 20th century, and by the time Spike Lee's grandmother graduated, the school had become Spelman College and Spelman graduates had become the cornerstone of their communities. Spelman graduates were the teachers, the nurses and the missionaries who were building schools in Liberia and the Congo

Those early graduates set the standards high. They laid claim to the ideals of freedom, justice and equality. They embodied those ideals, lived by them, and made them their own in their life's work. It's not surprising that when the Civil Rights Movement surged throughout the south, pushing the entire country to move closer to realizing its values, and demanding open membership in the equality club, Spelman students were at the forefront. Students from Historically Black Colleges and Universities in general were in the vanguard. Students from HBCU's launched the lunch counter sit-ins in the 1960s that grew to 70,000 students in cities all over the south.

Students, women and men from Spelman, Morehouse, Clark and Atlanta Universities led the way to the desegregation of the city of Atlanta. A full-page ad, "An Appeal for Human Rights," endorsed by all the AUC student government presidents and written by Spelman student, Roslyn Pope, was published by courageous editors in three Atlanta newspapers on March 9, 1960.

Students, women and men from Spelman, Morehouse, Clark and Atlanta University, organized and staged a sit-in at the then, segregated Rich's department store in downtown Atlanta. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. joined them. And when they all got arrested, even Dr. King was surprised by the audacity and steeliness of the Spelman women. From his jail cell, he penned a handwritten note to the Spelman women that read, in part: "It is inspiring enough to see the fellows willingly accepting jail instead of bail, but when young ladies are willing to accept this type of self-suffering for the cause of freedom, it is both majestic and sublime" (MLK archives).

Here we are in the 21st century, looking back over shoulders to see what Spelman College, over the past 135 years, has brought us. As we look backward, we can see the work of the nurses and teachers and missionaries. We can see, too, a world-renowned opera star, a Fortune 500 CEO, the editor of seven major newspapers, the mayor of an American city, a leading cancer researcher, a Pulitzer Prize-winning artist, a former surgeon general, an aviator, an award-winning Broadway producer, successful business women, lawyers, physicians, educators, community activists, mothers, grandmothers, aunts, nieces, daughters and spouses. During one of my one-on-one sessions with students, one of our Spelman women -- a senior -- told me recently that she plans to become the first woman president of Nigeria. I don't doubt it for a minute.

After 135 years, we glow with pride for Spelman College. And why shouldn't we? At Spelman, the six-year graduation rate is 76%, that is over 35 percentage points higher than the national graduation rate for African Americans. At a time when we lament the scarcity of women and underrepresented minorities in science, technology, engineering and mathematics, Spelman produces more Black women who go on to complete Ph.D.'s in STEM fields than any other college or university in the country.

As technology companies lament the dearth of women and underrepresented minorities in their work force, Spelman was cited this year as one of the top 10 colleges that produces Black women who founded successful tech start-ups — we tied for 10th place with Stanford University. By any measure, our outcomes are spectacular.

When you consider that the families of half of our student body are Pell-eligible -- that is they have incomes of \$40k or less -- the success rates mark a new frontier in Spelman's ongoing surge towards that place called full equality.

But there is a paradox. The paradox is that, as good as we have become, and as successful as our women may be, it is not enough. The paradox is that, despite the success of any number of individuals, that destination of equality is fading for many others. The paradox is that as successful as Spelman College may be, the problems that face this country now may be as daunting as the problems that faced the country when the first 11 women showed up as students in the basement of Friendship Baptist Church on April 11, 1881.

- We know now that Flint Michigan is probably just the tip of the urban environmental iceberg
- We know that urban education is failing our young people. Drop-out rates for Black males in some urban high schools is over 50 percent
- We know young Black women are disproportionately targeted for harsh discipline in our public school systems
- We know that a shocking percentage of our academically highest performing high school students, who are also low income, don't even apply to a four-year college
- We know that here in the West End of Atlanta, we still work to do

As good as Spelman has become, we have to do more, we have to be more.

- We are rightly proud of our graduation rate, but we cannot rest until we have a school in which every woman who comes to Spelman leaves with a degree
- We are rightly proud of being a leading liberal arts college that teaches our students to master critical thinking skills, tackle complexity and contradictions; and that instructs them to write and think and speak with clarity and with the courage of their convictions
- But the 21st century demands more. The 21st century demands that our women speak the language of technology fluently and creatively
- If we expect our women to confront the problems of environmental and criminal justice, rebuild our nation's public schools, work at the frontiers of science, develop new sources of energy, and take on projects to empower women worldwide, then they will need tools of technology to amplify and expand their work
- They will need to analyze big data, build networks that allow them to work globally, manage digital archives, invent apps, and incubate new ideas, new devices, and new businesses to make and market those new ideas.

We will not rest until we know that every Spelman women who graduates, will leave as a master of technology

- Spelman is a recognized STEM powerhouse. Our women study here on campus and abroad and in leading laboratories all over the world. We will continue to build on those strengths, but we will build on those strengths and build the arts with them at the core of the liberal arts
- I have been on this campus for almost a year now, and I can see that the arts are the beating heart of Spelman College. I have watched the way the arts call us out of our silos, out of our comfort zone, and call us to collaborate across disciplines and class rank. I have watched how they invite us to take risks, make mistakes, fail, and create the unimaginable. They are conscience, memory -- the truths we need to tell. They are a source and shaper of our collective purpose and will. We will not rest until a new fine arts building honors the creative and essential role of the arts on a liberal arts campus
- We still have work to do on our own campus to keep all of our women safe and supported
- We will not rest until Spelman College is a model of Title IX compliance
- We will not rest until the entire AUC is a model of mutual respect and love among all of our students
- We will not rest until we forge the necessary community partnerships to rebuild the West End into the neighborhood its residents deserve

For the past 135 years, Spelman has been more than a school. Spelman College has been a movement (my apologies to Dr. Ruth Simmons, who has used this phrase with another school).

Black Lives Matter. Black lives always matter here; and because they matter, we have -- for 135 years -- sustained a fervent coalition of faith and purpose and will.

Admission is granted to our circle of faith to all true believers — white and Black, and brown and yellow; men and women, straight, gay and transgender; rich and poor; Christian, Jewish, Muslim -- all faiths; north and south, east and west, spanning the seven continents.

To reach the destination of equality, our country needs Spelman College. It needs our circle of faith. We need the circles of faith that are the AUC and

University of Maryland Baltimore County, and cultural institutions like the Studio Museum in Harlem and men and women at the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities, and bold artists willing to speak truth artfully and persuasively to power.

I worked in higher education for many years before I retired in 2014. Some of my NYU colleagues are here today. In the 23 years that I served as dean at the Tisch School of the Arts, I came to believe that while there is certainly a part of education that is about the acquisition of skills and competencies and expertise in a subject area, there is also a part of education that is about love.

There is a part of education that cares about each and every student. There is that part of education that even as it makes demands, it deeply desires that the student sitting in front of you succeeds. I see the love on this campus every day -- a deep abiding love on the part of Spelman faculty, and staff; students, administrators, trustees, alumnae, friends and supporters. I see a love that is radiantly alive.

This afternoon, I want to leave you with a symbol of that radiant aliveness. When you came into the hall today, you received a lapel pin. These pins were designed, prototyped and the process documented by first-year Spelman student Rahni Bell, along with art and art history faculty members Joe Bigley, Robert Hamilton; Angela Taylor, and our computer science faculty member, Jerry Volcy, who holds the Brown, Simmons Chair in Computer Science and is director of our new Innovation Lab.

A group of Spelman women worked diligently to assemble 1,000 of these lapel pins. Let me pause here to thank the following women for the hours of work they contributed: Kiyah Bryant, Shakira Wilds, Jhanae Askew, Naida Hill, Breanna Rice, Rahni Bel, Eiloenai E. Rufen-Blanchette, Trisha Barton, Elizabeth Sengoba, Raegan J. Brown, Kathryn Goodgame, Adesuwa Joseph, Brygette Bagley, and Ta'sha Charles. This, by the way, is an example of STEA; but more importantly, it is a symbol of the meaning of Spelman.

Now, may I ask that we have the lights dimmed? On your lapel pin is a yellow tab. At the count of three, I want you to pull that tab. One, two, three.

Look around you. You can see the light.

When I walk the campus of Spelman College, I see the light.

I see the light in the eyes of every woman I meet.

I see the light.

I see the light of her promise.

I see the light of our faith in her.

I see the light of our belief in her.

I see the light.

Spelman women you are our beacons.

I see the light in you and a fierce determination fills my heart today.

I see the light in you and I know that it will lead you, lead me, lead us.

I see the light and I know that we are already on our way undaunted to unimaginable new heights.

Thank you. God Bless you.