

Reflections on Leadership for the 21st Century

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This morning, as you begin your academic career at Spelman I want to say a few words about leadership. How many of you expect to be leaders at some point in your professional careers? Almost all of you have raised your hand. You have come to the right school, because leadership is fundamental to a Spelman education. Our mission states that we educate women of African descent to become global leaders.

We use the word leadership all the time. But what does that word leadership mean? What do leaders do? How do we measure the success of a leader?

I've been a student of leadership my whole life and I am always looking for models of inspired leadership. Recently, I have been reading about the work of Bryan Stevenson. How many of you have heard of him? When you leave here today, listen to his TED Talk. Even better read his book "Just Mercy."

Stevenson is the founder and executive director of the Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery, Alabama. The mission of the Equal Justice Initiative is to save men and women from wrongful executions and to reform a criminal justice and law enforcement system that placed so many of them on death row in the first place.

He is a beautiful storyteller and he tells us how he got involved in this project, when, as a law student and an intern, he sat face to face with someone on death row. He realized that the work he did, even as an intern could potentially help save a life. He knew then what he wanted his life's work to be.

As moving as his story is, Stevenson is meticulous assembling data and facts to make a case for the urgency of his work. Here are some of his sobering statistics.

- The incarceration rate in the U.S. is the highest per capita in the world; it grew from 300,000 in the 1970s to its current 2.3 million
- In the past 40 years, the number of women incarcerated grew by 640 percent
- Over 40 percent of the population is Black, the majority serving time for non-violent offenses
- Stevenson's book describes the impact of incarceration at this scale on families, homes, neighborhoods
- Imagine the impact on us as a country. Forty years ago we spent \$6.9 billion a year on prisons as a country; now we spend \$80 billion a year for prisons

- We wonder why there never seems to be enough funding for higher education and grants for deserving students?
- Forty years ago, most states, public schools and higher education were at the top of the spending priority list. Now it's reversed—schools are on the bottom and prisons are on the top.

Stevenson calls this state of affairs, the new Jim Crow. We had a civil rights movement that got rid of the overt signs of segregation and indenture. But, he argues, mass incarceration put a new Jim Crow in its place.

He decided that his life's work was to battle this new Jim Crow.

No one elected him. No one gave him permission to do what he does. No one made him do what he does. He makes a subsistence living so he's not trying to get rich.

But he is a leader, someone whose tenacity and focus is determined to destroy the mass incarceration movement that has been so disabling and destructive to our community.

In thinking about what makes him a leader, three principles stand out.

The first principle: A Leader knows the change she wants to see and she speaks it clearly.

We heard Pearl Cleage, Mary-Pat Hector and Imani Dixon speak about the change they want to see.

Pearl has written a blog that blazes with the fire of her determination.

"I have only one mission between now and Election Day and that is to make sure everybody I know is ready to vote."

When she called me, she was clear. I want us to register 1,000 new voters in one day, today.

By the way, if we don't think that registering Black people to vote is important, we should read Tuesday's Wall Street Journal. The paper reported that a catalyst poll indicates that Asian, Hispanic and white voters have experienced an increase in the percentage of newly registered voters. By contrast, the percentage of new Black voters has declined, by 11%.

Bryan Stevenson was clear about the change he wanted to see—saving men and women from wrongful executions.

Spelman College is clear about the change it wants for every single one of you.

We want each of you to graduate.

We want the campus to be model of Title IX compliance.

We want our West End community to become a vibrant college town.

Know the change you want to see and find the courage to speak it clearly.

The second principle of leadership is your call to action. What is your call to action? What is the hard work? And how to we inspire others to undertake the hard work with us?

For someone like Stevenson, the hard work was reading stacks of case files, writing motions and briefs, tracking down witnesses, comforting despairing families and convincing other attorneys to work for next to nothing alongside of him.

For Mary-Pat Hector and Pearl Cleage the hard work has been organizing the event today for our AUC brothers and sisters to register and then getting them out to vote.

For leaders at Spelman our work, our call to action is finding students like you, faculty like the ones we are celebrating today and making the case for this country to change the priority of education from last to first.

And what is the third principle of leadership? After speaking the change you want to see, after the call to action, eventually, every leader must ask, what am I leaving behind?

What Stevenson left behind was not only the lives he saved but the unraveling of a destructive movement.

Tomorrow, when Mary-Pat, and Imani and Pearl and our SGA leaders look back they will hear the 1,000 voices they registered louder and stronger and braver in this country.

In 2020, when we look over our shoulder, we will see that you had a challenging and sometimes tough but fulfilling liberal arts education on a campus that supported you and in a community where you thrived.

Liberal Arts Education

Welcome to Spelman College where all of you are leaders, in training, to become better leaders, great leaders.

And no matter who wins this election, given the challenges that face our communities, the world will desperately need your leadership.

No matter who is elected, you will be the physicians who will eradicate health disparities.

No matter who is elected you will be the math majors, who, not unlike the now 98-year-old Katherine Johnson, a Black mathematician who plotted the trajectory of the first manned trip to the moon, will plot our course to yet unnamed planets.

Some of you will be environmental scientists and you will claim as your territory the battleground of compromised environments.

Some of you will be English majors and write the poems that awaken us to a truth we refuse to otherwise see.

Some of you who will be philosophy majors and like Stevenson, you will go to law school and from your moral and ethical center, repair what is broken in our criminal justice system.

Women of Spelman, think of yourself as being full of a Rio de Janeiro Olympian Black Girl Magic. Think of your education at Spelman as your intense, never give up hard work training like the training of a Michelle Carter, or a Simone Biles or a Simone Manuel or Ashleigh Johnson, or Gabby Douglas—all leaders in the fields each of them has chosen.

Women of Spelman, this is a great time to be Black and a woman.

As the new academic year begins, remember that, our job is to inspire and push you to become the best version of yourself.

Your job is to defy our expectations and reach heights we cannot even begin to imagine.