

Composing a Life:

The Art of Inventing Yourself and Why that Matters Now

Spelman College President Mary Schmidt Campbell, Ph.D.

Opening Convocation

August 22, 2019

**I am pleased to report that every Spelman student will receive a copy of the August 18th issue of the New York Times Magazine, featuring the 1619 Project, courtesy of The Show Me Campaign, John Legend's non-profit organization. The 1619 Project observes the 400th anniversary of the beginning of American slavery and explores slavery's impact on the genesis of democracy in the United States. Take a look at Part 2 of this opening convocation speech for thoughts on this important national anniversary and what it reveals about our resilience and creative inventiveness.*

Part 1: Welcome Back

Good morning.

Class of 2022, welcome back. Class of 2021, it's good to see you. Class of 2020, our graduating seniors, congratulations. Class of 2023 welcome to your first Opening Convocation. This ceremony is usually a joyful celebration. Usually, on this occasion we mark the beginning of the academic year, give out awards to outstanding faculty and congratulate faculty who have worked so hard to win tenure and promotion. Typically, the president and provost offer brief remarks. We will do all of that this year, but the events of Tuesday night cast a shadow over the opening of our new year.

Yesterday, many of you came to Sisters Chapel to unburden some of that weight you are carrying. Yesterday, students, faculty and staff gathered in Sisters Chapel and spoke their feelings—fear, sadness, anger, vulnerability, disappointment. This is not what you expected your Spelman experience to be.

With the guidance of Reverend Guidry, you prayed. At the end of the hour, she had us move from our seats in the back and come forward to reach for each other and hold hands. She asked us to embrace each other. She gave us words that shined a light on the path we need to take. I want to take a moment to say thank you to Reverend Guidry for her spiritual guidance, and thank you to all of you who came together.

Yesterday, I prayed for the speedy healing of the wounds of all four of the women who were shot. Blessedly, we have learned that all four students; Maia-Williams-McLauren and Elyce Spencer from Spelman, and Kia Thomas and Erin Enniss from CAU are recovering. All are expected to recover fully. Let me take a moment, also, to praise the quick thinking and courage of Derrick Daniels, the CAU sophomore, who stepped up with quick action to assist. I prayed for the families of the wounded. And I prayed for our own healing. We are wounded too. And we will need time for healing

Last night, Dr. Holloman visited residence halls for listening sessions to understand what we got right and what we could do better. When the incident was reported, he immediately went to the hospital Tuesday night and members of his team came to campus immediately after Tuesday's shootings. Thank you, Dr. Holloman, and your team for being available in the Wellness Center, health center, counseling and the residence halls. Our thanks, also, to the faculty who took the time from class to pause and allow our students to reflect on what happened. The classroom is the center of the Spelman experience and we appreciate your understanding.

President's Awards for Teaching and Mentoring

One of the things that Reverend Guidry counseled was to find affirming moments and to live fully inside of those. So, this morning, I want to affirm the good of our faculty by acknowledging the winner of the President's Awards.

Later in the program, I will have the great pleasure of conferring the President's Awards on each of them. For now, let me acknowledge each of the five faculty awardees. Please stand, when I call your name and remain standing.

Presidential Award for Excellence in Teaching

Dr. Luis Gonzalez-Barrios

Assistant Professor, Department of World Languages & Literature

Presidential Award for Excellence in Scholarship

Dr. Yan Xu

Assistant Professor, Department of History

Presidential Award for Excellence in Service

Dr. Cynthia Neal Spence

Associate Professor, Department of Sociology and Anthropology

Presidential Award for Excellence in Mentoring

Dr. Kai McCormack

Associate Professor, Department of Psychology

Vulcan Materials Company Teaching Excellence Award

Dr. Shanina Sanders-Johnson

Assistant Professor, Department of Chemistry & Biochemistry

A word of congratulations to Dan Bascelli and the phenomenal students who were part of this year's first place winning team of the Honda All Stars HBCU academic competition. You made Spelman College very proud!

I would also like to take this opportunity, this morning, to acknowledge our Provost and Vice President of Academic Affairs Sharon Davies. Provost Davies is the guardian of academic excellence at Spelman and for the past two years has provided outstanding leadership to our faculty. Before coming to academia, she practiced law. All of you students who aspire to become lawyers, she was in the private sector and the public sector and was very good at both. Almost 25 years ago, she left the practice of law and entered academia as a law professor at The Ohio State University. Her academic career at The Ohio State was sterling. She occupied the Gregory Williams Chair in Civil Rights and Civil Liberties and was director of the Kerwin Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity. In addition to her role as a faculty member, she served in a number of administrative positions, including vice president of diversity and inclusion and chief diversity officer.

At Spelman, she has devoted herself to determining how best to support our faculty. How do we make sure they continue to grow, do their research, write the publications, engage in the creative work that makes them better teachers and mentors and coaches for, you, their students?

By now, you have heard your new president Nia Page speak on several occasions. I hope you have noticed how completely and totally present she was at each of the events. As the leader of student government, Nia represents you. One of the first emails I received after Tuesday night's incident was from Nia. She is determined to work with students and the administration to effect changes that can offer a safer, more secure environment. I know that I

speak for every member of the leadership team, when I say that we are delighted for the opportunity to work with Nia and all of the SGA members this year.

Part 2: The Art of Inventing Yourself and Why that Matters

This year marks the 400th anniversary of the introduction of slavery to what Europeans mistakenly called the “New World.” As Spelman students, you will do something that is rare on college campuses. You will study African Diaspora in the World, ADW, a study of 400 years of the uprooting and displacement of millions of Africans — the largest mass migration in recorded history before World War II. You will study how this mass re-location has seeded, shaped, bent and molded what we now call the modern world. What this legacy has bequeathed to us, its heirs, is an infinite capacity to re-invent ourselves.

Last Sunday, The New York Times devoted its entire Sunday New York Times Magazine to the 1619 Project, that explores the impact of slavery on the genesis of democracy in this country. As Nikole Hannah-Jones noted in the introductory essay, on the waters of the Atlantic Ocean, we gave birth to ourselves. From that time forward, every generation of Black people has had to “give birth to itself.”

After Emancipation, during the era of Reconstruction, our “Negro Colleges,” like Spelman, Morehouse and Atlanta University and Clark Atlanta gave birth to the educated Black citizen. They were the crucibles within which former slaves re-invented themselves to become our first activists, scholars, teachers and missionaries.

After Reconstruction, Jim Crow laws legislated a strict apartheid that not only separated Black from white but attempted to re-enslave the Black population. Resisting, millions upon millions of Black people left the south to escape Jim Crow. Their mass migration from the South to the North, the Midwest, and the West was the largest in this country's history.

In migrating, we reinvented ourselves to become New Negroes. In cities like New York and Philadelphia, Pittsburgh and Baltimore, Cleveland and Kansas City, New Orleans and Los Angeles, we produced generations of artists, writers and musicians. We produced teachers, lawyers, physicians and scientists, who would deeply etch into the American consciousness the contours of what is now American culture and innovations in law, science and medicine, innovations that continue to benefit us to this day.

Fighting in two World Wars, we took our inventiveness to worlds outside of this country, and we discovered that outside of this country, others considered us international artists and thought leaders.

After World War II, one of our most important inventions was born right here on the campuses of Spelman and Morehouse. We gave birth here to the Civil Rights Movement of the 20th century. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a Morehouse man, and he called the women of Spelman some of the “most magnificent and courageous women” he had encountered in the fight for civil rights. A Spelman alumna, Doris Ruby Smith Robinson, was a founder of the Student Non-Violence Coordinating Committee or SNCC.

Women’s rights and gay rights followed the lead of civil rights in this country as those movements took hold. Worldwide, freedom fighters on the continent of Africa looked to the Civil Rights Movement as one of their models.

In the 1980s, on the streets of the South Bronx, we started the plug-ins and street jams, that turned into Hip Hop. Hip Hop would grow from a local street jam into a global movement that impacted music, film, clothes and an urban ethos that spread worldwide. We invented all of that.

So, the world turns and the world births new generations, new eras. You, class of 2023, are living to the pulse of a new beat. In this time and place, you get to invent your version of the

future. Take advantage of your years at Spelman to undertake that invention with energy and imagination. I offer you a few words of advice:

Take risks.

Make mistakes.

Forge new relationships.

Violate your assumptions.

Question us, question yourself.

Try something new.

We are here not only to teach you, but to learn with you. You are on a voyage of discovery and we are in the same boat, learning side-by-side, working hard, side-by-side, giving strength to each other, side-by-side.

As you set out on your voyage, remember that we come from a long line of voyagers who have become experts at giving birth to themselves and inventing a way out of no way. As you begin, never forget that we are on this voyage with you, we are here for you, we believe in you.