

BEREA COLLEGE COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS
SOCIAL JUSTICE IN A CHANGING WORLD
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MAY 5, 2013

I am privileged to come here today as a co-worker in the struggle for justice to pay my respects and offer my gratitude to an institution which has been a true **Profile in Courage**, a Leader, Advocate and Practitioner of **Social Justice** for more than 150 years. Beginning in 1855 with the adoption and implementation of its mission of racial equality and the education of women, and subsequently with its programs of assistance to the people of Appalachia, Berea College has provided an environment in which **Social Justice** flourishes and the Christian tradition of acceptance and tolerance is imparted to its students. Thank you President Roelofs, Trustees, Faculty and Bob Shaffer for giving me this special honor.

I was asked to speak to you today about the meaning of **Social Justice** in our lives and in our nation. At its core, **Social Justice** is a simple concept which requires each of us to treat others as we would want to be treated, with respect and fairness, regardless of race, religion, gender, age, sexual orientation or physical condition. **Social Justice** is living a life of service to others, in which you promote and support policies and laws which provide for an equitable distribution and sharing of resources, both natural and manmade, including government assistance, to insure a dignified life for all.

Social Justice also requires a belief in equal access to opportunity for all, especially the poor and disadvantaged. I believe that an important goal of **Social Justice** is to eliminate poverty through the provision of quality, integrated education and the development of affordable housing on a regional scale rather than warehousing the poor in urban ghettos, which is today the more politically palatable policy.

In summary, **Social Justice** requires us to live a life guided by the belief that “**God has made of one blood all peoples of the earth**” and that we are all **Brothers** and **Sisters** and should be treated as such.

Social Justice begins in the home. How we are going to live our lives and treat others starts with the values we are taught by our parents. My brother and I are the product of a single parent household. My father deserted my mother, my brother and me when we were 2 and 3

years old. My mother never remarried. She devoted her life to making sure that we had the opportunity to succeed. Yes, she lived her life for others.

My mother taught elementary school in Newark and Orange, New Jersey for over 30 years, always worked her entire summer vacations because we needed the money, and her joy was seeing us do well. She taught us, through her example, that determination and hard work were the keys to success. She repeatedly told us, "I will never let you down" and "No matter what the obstacles are, you can do it". I remember her constantly saying: "There are just the two of you, so never let each other down".

My mother, despite her work schedule, never missed one of our school or sports events. She always helped us with our homework even as she struggled to earn her Master's degree in Education **at night** at Seton Hall University. She instilled in us compassion and respect for our neighbors, classmates and their families, regardless of whether they were rich or poor, black or white.

Finally, and perhaps most important, my mother always taught us to forgive those who may have done us wrong. Forgiveness is an integral part of **Social Justice**. When we discovered that my father, at the age of 85 was alone and dying of cancer in a hospital in Louisville, my mother told me to forget the past and go take care of your father.

My brother and I could forgive my father for deserting us but it was much harder to forgive the pain and suffering he caused my mother. I went to Louisville, visited with him for only five minutes before he went into a coma for three days and died. My brother and I arranged a funeral Mass and buried him in Brooklyn, New York. Believe me, that was a real **Social Justice** challenge for both my brother and me. Sometimes you just have to do **tough things**.

The life experiences and values imparted by my mother formed the basis of my commitment to live a life totally devoted to **Social Justice**. I am sure that there are graduates here today who are from single parent households who may have shared similar experiences. Along with my brother Jim, who graduated from Villanova University, was President of Ford of Canada, Mexico and the United States, I commend you for not using your situation as an excuse, as a reason to fail. I applaud your graduation today and have confidence that you will accomplish your goals regardless of any roadblocks placed in your way.

Graduates, you may feel that you are facing difficult times as the result of globalization, outsourcing, limited job opportunities and flat wages. You may also be worried about terrorism, the future of the middle class and whether the American dream is still possible. These concerns are real, but the nation has faced **tougher times before** and **we have always**

met the challenges and prevailed. At Berea, you have learned the fundamental values which will sustain you as you go forward to live your lives and help solve our nation's problems.

Fifty years ago on my graduation day, June 12, 1963, from The College of the Holy Cross, Medgar Evers, Secretary of the Mississippi NAACP, was gunned down in front of his home by the Klu Klux Klan. I will always remember that tragedy because the next day the front page of the *Worcester Telegram* carried two major stories: One was our graduation and the other was the assassination of Medgar Evers. The Civil Rights Movement was under way and the nation was beginning the build-up for the Vietnam War. **These also were difficult times.**

My generation faced these challenges by participating in the Movement to start the nation on the path to racial equality and by serving in the war which, initially, we were told was a necessary war. Many brave lives from my generation were lost in both struggles. In the Vietnam War, many of my classmates were among the 58,000 soldiers who died. Their names are listed on the memorial wall in Washington. My college roommate, a Marine, was wounded. He is paralyzed from the waist down and has spent his life after Vietnam unable to walk. Another of my college classmates was exposed in Vietnam to Agent Orange and as a result has suffered from Parkinson's disease for the last 22 years. Yes, we all have to face difficult times in our lives.

Witnessing the special needs of our college classmates, we formed the first Class Foundation at Holy Cross 25 years ago. I was one of the founders and remain President of the Foundation. We have provided financial support and comfort to a number of classmates: a classmate with MS (who needed a handicapped equipped van); the wife and children of a classmate who committed suicide and left his family completely broke; and, a classmate who suffered a mental breakdown, lost everything and needed shelter and financial help. How are you going to respond to similar situations. Are you going to help a classmate in need? Remember, life is an opportunity to help others.

After Holy Cross, I went to Georgetown University Law School, worked three jobs and attended day school full-time. After graduation, I passed the New Jersey Bar and received a **Rotary** International Fellowship to Argentina. I visited some of the poorest villages in South America and was constantly asked why urban riots were taking place in the "affluent" United States, which was viewed as an oasis by the people of South America. During that Fellowship, my **Social Justice** future began to take shape.

Seeing the extreme poverty in South America **was a defining moment in my life.** I believed then and still believe that the United States has a **moral obligation** to help remedy conditions in the developing countries, conditions which I witnessed in South America and which exist

around the today world. However, the public support at home to address these foreign conditions will never exist until we have solved **Our Own** race, poverty, education and affordable housing issues. As a result, I returned to New Jersey and became a Legal Services lawyer, dedicating my life to trying to solve these national problems.

In 1968, I went to work in the City of Camden, New Jersey, which soon became engulfed in riots for the same reasons violence had broken out on the streets of Detroit, Newark and Los Angeles: Blacks were segregated in racial ghettos, police and the community were at odds, unemployment was high and jobs were low-paying, the urban public school systems were a failure and there was a lack of affordable housing in the cities and none in the surrounding suburbs, which were being developed as the result of “white flight” from the cities.

Recognizing that these urban conditions in Camden, and in other cities across the nation, **were intolerable**, and **could not be solved within** the boundaries of the cities, I worked with two other Legal Service lawyers to develop a **regional litigation and development strategy** which is now known nationally as the “Mount Laurel Doctrine”.

We represented Ethel Lawrence, a black woman who became known as the Rosa Parks of affordable housing, and the local NAACPs in an exclusionary zoning lawsuit against Mount Laurel Township, a developing suburb, located 15 minutes outside of the City of Camden. Ethel was a fifth generation resident of Mount Laurel, whose descendents had come to Mount Laurel as part of the Underground Railroad. Being here today at Berea College has a special meaning and connection for me because in the Mount Laurel case I have represented the descendents of the slaves who escaped, and Berea College was founded based on its opposition to slavery.

Mount Laurel Township was evolving from a farming community to a middle class suburb. The elected officials pledged to promote the Township as a **middle class suburban enclave** which, in their minds, created the necessity to adopt exclusionary zoning to keep out the poor from the surrounding region. Through aggressive code enforcement, they also sought to remove the poor Black residents who had lived in the Township for generations.

In response, Ethel Lawrence and a group of community workers formed a nonprofit corporation and submitted plans to the Township for the development of 36 affordable housing units. Ethel realized that the upscale development under way in the Township **would not include** any housing for her children or grandchildren. The plans were rejected by the Township. The Mayor met with Ethel Lawrence’s group at their local church and told them “**If you people can’t afford to live in our town, then you’ll just have to leave**”. Quite an irony, the new suburban officials were referring to Mount Laurel as “their town” and telling Ethel Lawrence and the black families, who had lived in the town for generations, that they had to leave.

The litigation against Mount Laurel Township was filed in 1971. Death threats against Ethel Lawrence followed and I was physically confronted at each public proceeding. It took four years to ultimately win a unanimous decision in the New Jersey Supreme Court, known as Mount Laurel I in (1975). This is the **first and only time in the United States**, that a State Supreme Court has interpreted a State Constitution to require each **developing** municipality in the state to plan, zone and take affirmative measures to provide “realistic affordable housing” for their fair share of the regional housing needs of the poor. We had won!

But, Mount Laurel refused to comply with court orders and 8 years later the New Jersey Supreme Court, again in a unanimous decision, known as Mount Laurel II (1983) reinforced the doctrine and applied it to **all 566 municipalities in New Jersey**. In 1985, under pressure from the Court, the New Jersey Legislature enacted the Fair Housing Act, which coupled with Mount Laurel I and II, have become known nationally as the **Mount Laurel Doctrine**. Today, the Mount Laurel decisions are studied as part of land use courses in all of our nation’s law schools. The NY Times reported that the Mount Laurel decisions are the most significant social justice rulings since Brown v. Board of Education in the mid-1950s.

In retrospect, the legal victories were easy compared with our effort to actually develop affordable housing in Mount Laurel Township. It took me 30 years to build Ethel R. Lawrence Homes and Ethel Lawrence, who died of cancer in 1994, never even got to see the opening of her namesake development. She would have been proud to see this townhouse complex of 140 units which is located on **62 beautifully landscaped acres**. The children in our development tell me all the time that they love living there because they get to play outside on our green, open lawns and be kids. They don’t have to worry about being yet another innocent victim of the drug violence and murders in the City of Camden.

To see our development, you would be surprised to know that I encountered community opposition every step of the way. At each Planning Board hearing more than **600 Mount Laurel residents** would attend and denounce our plans, insisting that the project would raise their property taxes, destroy their neighborhood, ruin their schools and increase crime. Ten years later, we engaged Princeton University to study the impact of Ethel R. Lawrence Homes on our residents, the neighbors, the Township and the school system. The 2 year study completed in 2012 found that **not one** of the negative allegations had ever materialized.

More importantly, this study revealed that moving to Mount Laurel has proved to be a major benefit to our residents. Everybody knows opportunities and resources depend on location. Some municipalities, some neighborhoods are more advantaged than others. Allowing low-income families to live in more advantaged communities and to benefit from such **“opportunity housing”**— with access to jobs, better schools, safe neighborhoods and healthy environments— reduces stress, improves health and life outcomes.

As a result, our residents have been able to dramatically improve their lives. The study found that the adults are much more employable and better employees. Dependency on welfare has been dramatically reduced as the result of increased income from work. The study also concluded that the children are doing well in school as a result of the elimination of stress and because of the the socioeconomic mix in the classroom. They are scoring far better on standardized tests than their peers in Camden and their test results are on par with Mount Laurel students and state averages.

The Princeton University study will be published in book form this July by Princeton University Press and is entitled, "**Climbing Mount Laurel**". I intend to personally deliver a copy of this book to New Jersey Governor Chris Christie, who, over the last four years, has tried to dismantle the Mount Laurel Doctrine. The Governor's efforts are despite the fact that the Doctrine has resulted in success stories, like Ethel R. Lawrence Homes, and the construction of 60,000 affordable housing units that would never have been built if not for this landmark Doctrine. Currently, 30,000 more affordable units are in the development pipeline.

My mother, brother and I celebrated the dedication of Ethel R. Lawrence Homes in 2002 with Julian Bond, who gave the dedication address. As you can see, the struggle for **Social Justice** in America is not easy. It is one that takes determination, hard work and perseverance. **Social Justice reform efforts are not 100 yard dashes, but are marathons.** To sustain a life dedicated to helping others, one needs strong fundamental values which you have learned from your parents and Berea College. It is now your generation's time to act. Time to help solve the nation's social problems. Remember, have faith in God, live your life for others, and you will always have joy in your heart. Congratulations, thank you and God bless you.

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