Moral Leadership

Integrity ✧ Courage ✧ Imagination

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Preface

I wish I knew how
It would feel to be free
I wish I could break
All the chains holding me
I wish I could say
All the things that I should say
Say 'em loud say 'em clear
For the whole 'round world to hear

I wish I could share
All the love that's in my heart
Remove all the bars
That keep us apart
I wish you could know
What it means to be me
Then you'd see and agree
That every man should be free

I wish I could give
All I'm longin' to give
I wish I could live
Like I'm longin' to live
I wish I could do
All the things that I can do
And though I'm way over due
I'd be startin' anew

—Nina Simone
(lyrics by Billy Taylor)

I came of age on the South Side of Chicago during the 1960s. Part of the soundtrack of those years was provided by Nina Simone singing "I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel to Be Free." It was an exhilarating, volatile period. You may be aware of the stories about the great refugee migration of rural southern African Americans that often unfolded in two stages: first, from the rural south to the urban south, and in many cases, a second move from the urban south to the urban north. My family was part of what has been described as the largest migration in such a short concentration of years in American history. We migrated from Mississippi to West Memphis, Arkansas, then north to Chicago to escape the domestic terrorism of lynching and to pursue greater economic and personal development opportunities. But, there was a shadowy side to our life in the city. The street gangs of Chicago were already world famous.

One day, two groups of young men gathered on the street directly in front of my grandmother's house. We lived with my grandmother for many years until my parents could save a down payment to purchase a larger home where she moved in with us. The boys were arguing about something and preparing to fight. All of a sudden, out of nowhere, my grandmother ran from her kitchen through the house, onto the front porch, down the stairs, with apron flying in the wind, and right into the street to place her body between these muscle-bound young men. I was eight or nine years old and horrified that she was putting my reputation on the line this way. But I listened. She spoke to both groups of boys and said, "No one is fighting here today. I know what it's like for a mother to get a phone call that her son has been shot. My son was shot in Europe in World War II. I have fed many of your families from that little garden next door. I know your mothers. Your mothers don't want to get that call." It was an incredible scene.

I watched these tough homeboys look at her, look at each other, look at her, look at their friends, and begin to back away. No words spoken. She placed her body and authority between them, backing them off and disrupting the usual flow of street brawls. They disbanded, certain to fight another day. No other mothers or fathers intervened like that, although a few watched timidly from their porches. But because of this one woman and her moral courage and imagination, there would be no fight that day in that place. I am writing because I must bear witness to the life of Mother Martha Battle McCann from Battle, Mississippi.

Most books on moral leadership are written by scholars on the topic and do not see light beyond the edge of a university campus or a congregational parking lot. Unfortunately, many people are unaware that important conversations about moral leadership are happening inside the community's anchor institutions. More important, beyond the conversations, these enduring community institutions are doing the hard work of nurturing and producing moral leaders—sometimes as simple as grandmothers mentoring and modeling leadership for the kids around them; sometimes more formal and text centered.

Given the state of our polarized nation and world, the topic of moral leadership is open and awaiting participants. Years after my grandmother passed away, I reflected on her unusual gifts of hospitality, care, and discipline. Through them, I realized that she was extending an invitation, hoping that I, that we, would respond by loving the things that she loved, caring for the people for whom she cared. This preface is dedicated to her and to your grandmother and all of the other change agents and moral leaders who have given us a pretty good world. Now, it's up to us to improve it.

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My grandmother was not there when I graduated from Morehouse in 1975, nor was she there in 2007 when I became the tenth president of the college. But I thought about her the morning that I was to be introduced to a commencement audience during the final commencement of my predecessor and distinguished physicist Dr. Walter E. Massey. My story affirms the deep affection of the national community for Morehouse as an enduring institution that merits the confidence of some of the nation's most influential citizens. Indeed, many of them encourage their sons to attend with hopes that they will in the course of education become moral agents and leaders.

Just before the procession, platform guests gathered to don their robes and take photos, all except two people, the actor Denzel Washington and me. Apparently we were acting out of habit rather than following the memo. We went to the president's office instead of the student center. One of the college staff was on hand to lead us across campus just in time to robe and join the lines. As we walked and talked, he expressed pride in his son's recent graduation from Morehouse, a young man who went on to become a Golden Globes–nominated actor and artist. I felt the pride in the tradition and legacy of this village asset that occupies a unique place in the hearts of people.

We hurriedly walked outside on a gorgeous Sunday morning to the sight of thousands of people on the stunningly beautiful and stately college yard, the same yard where Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s funeral and memorial service occurred on April 9, 1968, as tens of thousands gathered and millions watched from afar. Sitting in our living room in Chicago, I was part of that TV audience, and I became entranced with this place, and with President Benjamin Mays, who delivered the amazing eulogy that day. As we began to walk through the parted Red Sea of an excited audience, I realized that processing in front of me were filmmaker Spike Lee and actor Wesley Snipes. Behind me were Denzel and a famous boxing promoter, Butch Lewis. As we processed, people were going crazy, with deafening noise and shouts, snapping photos, calling out to these national celebrities, and enjoying the moment. I felt like the potted plant in this company. But, I knew that in a few days, after the masses had dispersed with their graduates, I would be responsible for steering this great ship and setting the tone for our future. It felt like an object lesson on stewardship and leadership. I had an important role to play, I had authority and power, but I was at once the least interesting and most ignored person in the picture. I smiled. What a metaphor for how authentic leadership works.

That's when I heard my grandmother whisper: "Work hard, be sincere, change lives on a daily basis, and you may or may not be noticed. But, never forget that your work is undeniably important. The things that people take for granted and in which they have great pride are on your shoulders. Be faithful. March forward."