

This I Believe. . .

Clough Commons – Suite 205

Thursday, March 27, 2014

11:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.

First, I'd like to thank Kathryn Meehan for the invitation to participate in this series. I feel honored and privilege to do so. Acknowledging the honor and privilege, however, doesn't really mediate the challenge of determining which belief to share. Like all of us, I actually believe in many things and the challenge for this occasion has been to choose just one. I labored over this for a while, but what I chose was fairly basic to the way that I've lived my life.

All of my life, I've been fascinated by the human voice, and I am, in fact, a linguist by training. What I deeply and sincerely believe is that the greatest gift that the universe has ever given to human beings—beyond life itself—is the power and capacity to express our thoughts and feelings. As someone who has applied the knowledge that I've gained about the ways that language works to rhetorical studies, I am also fascinated by the many mechanisms that we have invented over time and space for expressing ourselves—with intention and purpose, including: language, music, art, and various other symbolic systems that now constitute our multi-media, multi-modal, multi-genre traditions. In essence, I believe that these multi-sensory expressions, in their having the capacity to take into account all of our six senses—sight, smell, taste, touch, hearing, and intuition—constitute our whole-body potential for eloquence and for actually making miracles possible, with perhaps the most ambitious miracle of all being the persistence with which we try to make the world a better place.

My work in rhetorical studies has been about paying attention to the power of words. Even though I recognize, quite painfully sometimes, that words are indeed an imperfect medium, I remain amazed by our capacity to use them to great effect to think, express feelings and insights, communicate, persuade, and engage actively with the worlds that surround us. What I appreciate most is that our uses of language, especially when we take the time to do so with care, social responsibility, and ethical responsibility, is that language well-used has the capacity to evoke and inspire. Words can speak to our heads, hearts, stomachs, and backbones, or any combination of all.

So, today, I thought that the best way for me to demonstrate this belief is to share with you some of the words that have been evocative for me, creating often lingering effects, and inspiring me to live my life consciously and deliberately, bringing all of my senses and sensibilities to bear in observing the worlds around me; interrogating my perceptions and experiences reflectively, reflexively, and robustly; and using what I've gleaned from such critical processes to understand the potential and possibilities for what I might do with myself. Over the years, building these practices as habits of mind and action have brought to me a sense of what my own passions are and helped me to understand that life is, not only worth living, but also worth living well.

I start, then, with the words of Anna Julia Haywood Cooper. She was an African American woman who was born a slave in Raleigh, North Carolina, on August 10, 1858. She lived to be 105 years old, dying on February 27, 1964—almost long enough to see the passing of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act in 1965. During her very long and amazingly productive life, she went from being enslaved to being one of the first African American women to earn a college degree in the United States—a B.A. from Oberlin College in 1884. She earned an M.A. in mathematics from Oberlin in

1887; in 1925, she became the 4th African American woman to earn a PhD—in French literature and history from the University of Paris-Sorbonne; in 1930 she became one of the first African American women to be named president of a college, Frelinghuysen University in Washington, DC; and across all of those years she was a leader and advocate for much needed social change. In 1892, she wrote a book entitled ***A Voice from the South***. The last chapter is entitled “A Gain from Belief.” She says:

It is these magic words, “I believe.” That is power. That is the stamping attribute in every impressive personality, that is the fire to the engine and the moter [sic] force in every battery. That is the live coal from the altar which at once unseals the lips of the dump—and that alone which makes a man a positive and not a negative quantity in the world’s arithmetic. With this potent talisman man no longer “abideth alone.” He cannot stand apart, a cold spectator of earth’s pulsing struggles. The flame must burst forth. . . .Who cheats me of this robs me of both shield and spear. Without them I have no inspiration to better myself, no inclination to help another.

(1988: 302)

Cooper reinforced for me the notion that beliefs fire the soul and make it possible for human beings to be steadfast in working with others, rather than being a “cold spectator.” Belief inspires passion and evokes action with the hope and expectation that both will make a positive difference, rather than a negative one, amid the “earth’s pulsing struggles.”

A second example is from Audre Lorde, renowned radical feminist writer and civil rights activist who made an indelible mark in the late 20th century before she died in 1992 at 58 years old from breast cancer. Lorde stated:

It's not that we haven't always been here, since there was a here. It is that the letters of our names have been scrambled when they were not totally erased, and our fingerprints upon the handles of history have been called the random brushings of birds. ("Foreword," ***Wild Women in the Whirlwind***, ed. By Joanne M. Braxton and Andrée Nicola McLaughlin, 1990: xi)

These words have lingered with me for many, many years and fed my desire to document the lives, conditions, and contributions of women of African descent in defiance of the reality that the contributions of African American women—historically—have been muted and ignored. These words helped to inspire the deep passion and commitment that I have to make sure, in any ways that I can, that “our fingerprints upon the handles of history” are not so comfortably called “the random brushings of birds.” I am an archival researcher, and I define my focus in English studies to be the history of the rhetorical practices of women of African descent as advocates and activists for social change, as leaders who consistently exhibit rhetorical expertise and eloquence, and as intellectuals who think well about problems, conditions and challenges, and who think equally well about compelling opportunities for making the world a better place.

A third example comes from Alice Walker, an award-winning writer of poetry, essays, and novels who is a long-standing socio-political activist. In ***Living by the Word***, she states:

War will stop when we no longer praise it, or give it any attention at all.
Peace will come where it is sincerely invited. Love will overflow every
sanctuary given it. Truth will grow where the fertilizer that nourishes it is
also truth. Faith will be its own reward. . . Only if we have reason to fear
what is in our own hearts need we fear for the planet. Teach yourself
peace. Pass it on. (1988: 193)

I embrace the notion that the making of a better, more peaceful world demands focus and vigilance, not simply in imagining such a world, which of course is an important and often necessary step, but also in working relentlessly to create it—in teaching ourselves to nurture truth, justice, courtesy, compassion, peace; in dedicating our energy to the exercise of these values and not just the saying of them; and in committing ourselves to pass these legacies of faith and action on.

I take my last example from an African American male this time, Howard Thurman. Dr. Thurman is recognized as one of the most eloquent and thoughtful theologians of the 20th century, a prolific author, an educator, a civil rights leader, and a mentor for a whole generation of civil rights leaders, including, Martin Luther King, Jr. In a speech in 1981 (Spelman Centennial Celebration), Dr. Thurman implored his audience to attune all of their senses to “listen for the sound of the genuine” in themselves. As a member of that audience, I took his advice, and I’ve tried to live by this

principle. I have pushed myself to think about what is right, true, and real in my heart, head, stomach, and backbone, and I've also pushed myself to act on the truths that I have found based on the notion, as Ida B. Wells has so eloquently proclaimed, that knowledge demands action. If you know that something is right, true, and real, you must, then, treat it so and act accordingly. This point brings me back to where I started today, to the words of Anna Julia Cooper. There is a "gain from belief."

So, this I believe: I believe in the power of language well used—with care, with social and ethical consciousness, with an eye toward using words, images, and other symbolic systems graciously and well in order to do whatever good that I can do. In its capacity to evoke and inspire passion and action, language has been for me an enabling touchstone that has helped me to feel that change is possible, that miracles are possible, that it really is possible to leave the spaces in the world that we are privileged to occupy better off than the way that we found them, that we all have the privilege of being a positive force for good in the "earth's pulsing struggles"—if indeed we choose to be. Over the years, I have experienced gains from this belief with one gain today being the pleasure that I have experienced in sharing these thoughts with you.

Thank you very much for listening.