

THE UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON CONVOCATION 2007

THE ACADEMIC CHALLENGE TO THE CLASS OF 2011 by Julius A. Amin, Professor & Chair, Department of History, University of Dayton

FIND YOUR VOICE IN THE GLOBAL VILLAGE

Good Morning. To our in-coming first year, and transfer students on campus, I welcome you to the University of Dayton. You stand at the threshold of a critical time in your life.

This morning, my remarks will be brief, but will demand your focused attention. I will ask you to use the next four years to establish a foundation for the rest of your life. It is today a truism, whether or not it pleases us that we live in a global village. Technology, communication, and the movement of people and ideas have blurred national and continental boundaries. My most significant challenge to you is straightforward, and it is captured in the title of my talk: “Find Your Voice in the Global Village.” During the next four years, I ask you to find and then use your voice in the context of this global village.

Let me start by telling you a few things about myself. I was born and raised in Cameroon, West Africa. It is a small country, comparable in size to the State of California. It is diverse; Cameroon’s 18 million inhabitants belong to over two hundred ethnic groups speaking over two hundred languages. In Cameroon, my village is known as Lewoh. The village is the bedrock of most Sub-Saharan African societies. From the village, residents receive their identity, sense of purpose, and direction. To date, the village remains an integral part of African civilization. In his book, *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe provides vivid descriptions of a typical village community. Initially written as a response to observers who dismissed African civilization as irrelevant, Achebe’s book offers an amazing glimpse into African

culture. The setting of the book is pre-colonial Igboland in Nigeria. The Igbos are a dignified people, and have a complex culture. The political system is stable and forward-looking, and the social values stress equality and protection for all. Hard work is rewarded. There is a system in place to ensure morality, and social responsibility. It is an all-inclusive community. There is tolerance. Visitors and new settlers are welcomed, and protected. Everyone, the Igbos believe, belong to the same human family. The village is a strong and vibrant community. My village culture is similar to Achebe's Igbo civilization. Throughout my journey from West Africa to Dayton, Ohio, I have been told by well-meaning folks that I have done well. I always thank them for the compliment, but also correct them by stating, my family has done well, and my village has done well. For I know that no matter how far I journey in the life, I will always be part of a group, a family, a community.

My college years were spent in Cameroon at the University of Cameroon, Yaounde, and I did my graduate work at West Texas State University and Texas Tech University. At both Texas institutions, I gained a deeper understanding of American culture. There, my involvement in the community enriched my knowledge about American civilization. It was a lesson in diversity, tolerance, and human understanding. In fact, my education on both sides of the Atlantic has had an enduring impact on my personal, professional and social development. It is a result of my education, and village values that I stand before you as someone with a multiple consciousness: village, black, college educated, and international.

During my eighteen years at the University of Dayton Community, I have observed closely the intellectual development of many students. Our education program here has introduced them to many of the critical challenges faced by today's generation: war and peace, freedom and responsibility, tolerance and intolerance, and wealth and poverty. As a result, UD students who truly

embrace the opportunities and challenges offered them graduate better equipped to participate effectively as citizens and leaders in the global community.

To focus on the present, it is not too much to assert that this is a defining moment here on our campus. It is a time of innovation, ingenuity, and creativity. In addition to its Catholic Marianist Tradition, the University is involved in a series of bold experiments: Marianist education, Vision of Excellence, diversity, internationalization, and human rights. Benchmarks have been put in place to assess and ensure the success of these developments. These initiatives are consistent with the University's Mission. You might already have heard that the University's Mission aims at educating the whole person, "Spirit, mind, and body." Its many programs including Learn, Lead, and Serve, Rivers Institute, Humanities Base, International educational opportunities, General Education, Marianist Education, and much more are designed to achieve that.

The University's Vision of Excellence demands the best from everyone. It challenges people to become both thinkers and doers in a rapidly changing global environment. It believes that everyone can make a difference if they apply themselves.

"At the University of Dayton," one critical document states, "excellence means thinking, speaking, and writing clearly; acting judiciously and responsibly; investing our work with reason, faith, and imagination; and dedicating ourselves to a lifelong pursuit of learning." In short, a University of Dayton education challenges students to search for their voice, their passion, and also to work hard to excel in what they have chosen to do. The University of Dayton is an intellectually and morally rich community. The Vision of Excellence challenges everyone to give their maximum. I have found it both a privilege and an honor to be part of this community.

As a professional historian, I cannot resist the temptation of telling you how this link between education and community has expressed itself in the past.

Good education is tough, rigorous, and demanding, yet the fruits are worthwhile.

I will use a few examples to illustrate the role of education in shaping peoples lives.

Writing in his first autobiography, "*The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*," Douglass informed us that education was the "pathway to freedom." I referred to the first autobiography because Douglass wrote three of them. He obviously liked himself a lot. Douglass devoted his life to human causes: freedom, equality, and human rights. His struggles against the trip hammer of racism, sexism, and oppression led to an examination of the American conscience. Repeatedly, he warned that the institutions of slavery made a mockery of America's political, economic, and social institutions. Repeatedly, he informed the nation that education was a critical rite of passage towards the creation of a fair and just society. A committed protagonist for social reform, Douglass insisted that the American people must "reform the national heart, quicken the national conscience, root out wicked prejudices...and destroy the great moral evils." "The mission of the reformer," he continued, "is to discover the truth." A good and well-rounded education is critical to the attainment of the brand of social philosophy which he postulated. Education, he believed would produce the "liberation of the human spirit and the actualization of human potential." Without question, Douglass made his community and the world a better place. Sociologist Kelly Miller wrote this of Douglass: "The greatest things of this world are not made with hands, but reside with truth and righteousness and love. Douglass was [a] moral leader and spiritual prophet.... Unless all the signs of the times are misleading, the time approaches, and is even now at hand, which demands a moral renaissance." The

America Douglass left behind still faces monumental problems, but imbedded in his philosophy was the belief that education was vital to the search of universal freedom and happiness for all. Douglass's life is a testimony to the fact that one person can make a difference, if they try. It is only befitting that his words are engraved on the Jesse Philips Humanities Building, and his speeches have been used as required readings in Humanities Base courses here at the University of Dayton. Douglass summoned succeeding generations to think and act differently about the times they live in.

Ida B. Wells admired Douglass's work, yet she herself was a formidable force. Wells attended Shaw University (later Rust College) in Holly Springs, Mississippi. Founded during the reconstruction era, Shaw University provided education to African-Americans at a critical moment in the nation's history. There, students studied religion, and several other disciplines. For Wells, it was a time of mental development. Education at Shaw, Wells wrote, brought "the light of knowledge...strength...and Christian culture to those who would otherwise have been without." Shaw gave Wells the foundation of her life's work. She was a teacher, orator, journalist, feminist, and civil rights activist. She devoted her life to fighting a corrupt and vicious Jim Crow system which had become a national embarrassment. She wrote extensively in newspapers. In her articles, she exposed the gruesome pattern of lynching which for some southerners was a favorite past time. She was relentless, wrote the historian John Hope Franklin, in her struggle against "the evil side of human relations." In speeches across Europe, and the United States she challenged audiences to be angry enough to speak up against injustice. A co-founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Wells was truly a "crusader for justice." Her determination and courage paved the way for others. In deed, she was a champion.

W.E.B. Du Bois was a contemporary of Wells. Born in the immediate post-slavery era, Du Bois was educated at Fisk, Harvard, and the University of Berlin. The first black to earn a doctorate from Harvard University Du Bois emerged to become, literally, one of the leading intellectual heavyweights of his generation. He grew up in a segregated America, yet he remained a visionary all through his life. The years he spent in college, he wrote, were the “years of miracles.” In college Du Bois found his own voice, passion, and purpose in life. It was the transformative moment of his life. In his autobiography, he referred to the college years as “a microcosm of a world and a civilization in potentiality.” The possibilities were endless. Education, Du Bois wrote offered a “glimpse of the higher life, the broader possibilities of humanity,” to someone who “pauses four short years to learn what living means.” The “years of miracles” were the source of his life-long work. Du Bois was the spokesperson of the oppressed. His Harvard professor, William James wrote that: “The great use of life is to spend for something that will out last it.” Du Bois did that. As long as the contours of American history continue to include racism, sexism, and exclusion, Du Bois’s life and contributions will not be ignored.

The next person is Nelson Mandela. He has great admiration for Du Bois. Mandela’s name and work is obviously a familiar story to some in this room. Mandela’s life is a profile in courage. A crusader for justice, Mandela served as the first President of Post-Apartheid South Africa. Today, he is among the top three global statesmen. In his autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, he discusses his transformative years at the University College of Fort Hare and the University of Witwatersrand. Fort Hare, Mandela wrote, was “characterized by a level of sophistication, both intellectual and social, that was new and foreign to me.” At the University of Witwatersrand, Mandela was introduced to a “new world...a world of ideas and political beliefs and debates, a world where people were passionate about politics.” The college years

helped him to find his own voice, and discover his passion. Mandela learned to engage in bold initiatives and experiments. Like Douglass, Wells, and Du Bois, Mandela's passion will be to work for social change. Today at eighty-nine, Mandela is one of the most respectable individuals in the global village.

Rarely do historians assign the title "great" to anyone, but that label is befitting of these individuals. Whether or not one agrees with this label, the four people listed above share several key commonalities. Their life is a testament to the transformative power of education. On critical human causes, they acted rather than waited. They were engine rooms for justice and social reform. They were internationalists, and true pioneers of what we call the global village. They worked for global understanding, and the enrichment of humanity. Education enabled them to realize that they had immense potentials, and unlimited capabilities. All of them were never contemporaries of each other, but each of their story is particularly relevant for our mission here at the University of Dayton.

During the summer you encountered David Bornstein's *The Price of a Dream: The Story of the Grameen Bank*. Based on extensive interviews, and other primary sources, Bornstein's study is a fine work on the origins and development of the renowned micro-lending institution, the Grameen Bank. The book in part, is also a biography of the bank's founder, Muhammad Yunus. The setting of the book is in Bangladesh, a poor nation. Over fifty percent of the nation's population goes without many of the basic needs of life. Among several developing nations, Bangladesh is ranked highly on the misery index: low per-capita income, high infant mortality, and chronic poverty. Compounding the problems is that this nation is frequently hit by natural disasters.

However, a tiny percentage of Bangladesh population is relatively wealthy. Yunus came from a wealthy background. As a young man growing up things came easily to him: cost of education, food,

descent housing, and other basic needs. He attended reputable in-country schools, and then did graduate work at Vanderbilt University in the United States where he obtained a PHD in economics. In graduate school, he was introduced to ideas which convinced him that education must be used to improve the life of the community. Therefore the by-products of education should and must include social responsibility and reform. Those valuable lessons will inform Yunus's thinking and actions for the rest of his life.

Following his PHD, Yunus returned to Bangladesh, and became professor and head of the Economics Department at Chittagong University located in the southeastern part of the country. This was a poor region. Affected by the 1974 famine, many in the region looked malnourished, and barely clinging on. It was here that Yunus gained a new understanding of poverty. Yunus set out to understand the region's poverty. He put his students to work. The village of Jobra became the testing ground of his ideas. Working with his students, they interviewed residents, and compiled enough data to help them to understand the sources of the region's poverty. They tried out various solutions. Early on, Yunus and his team came to the conclusion that the poor were trapped in an economic system which denied them credit because of their status. In Jobra, Yunus's team focused on the poorest of the poor, the rural women. They were at the bottom of the economic ladder. Generally referred to as "banking untouchables," they were landless, had no assets, and were victims of a culture of domestic violence. To eliminate poverty one must be prepared to engage in persistent experimentation. The bank of ideas is never bankrupt.

For a start, Yunus extended his personal money as loans to farmers; and later he took additional loans from banks and gave to farmers. He encouraged the formation of farmer's cooperatives, and also promoted irrigation so that crops could be cultivated year round. He repeated the routine with positive results. Micro-credit,

Yunus believed, was the solution to village poverty. After several experiments, with farmers repaying their loans regularly, Yunus concluded that the tide was turning. It was here that the Grameen Bank began. “Gram,” means “village” and “Grameen” means “rural”.

In establishing the Grameen Bank, Yunus outdid himself. He mobilized people to work towards a common cause. His education had established a foundation for his life’s work. Though the tactics were unorthodox, and at times a little crazy and impractical, his objectives never wavered. Combating poverty was now his passion, and his voice was heard all over.

The Grameen Bank began modestly but quickly attracted the attention of all around the world. The bank’s policies and objectives are stated in the Sixteen Decisions. The first of the Decisions is: “We shall follow and advance the four principles of the Grameen Bank – discipline, unity, courage and hard work - in all works of our lives”.

Grameen Bank borrowers do not need any collateral for loans. As of today borrowers own 90 % of the bank, and the primary clientele are the poorest women. The bank has over one thousand branches, services over 40,000 villages, and employs more than 11,000 people.

Yunus’s path to success was no picnic but he was committed. Along the way he challenged traditional banking and development institutions to re- examine their approach towards eliminating poverty. He paid particular attention to policies implemented by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Traditional policies, Yunus argued, have created more misery for the poor. Yunus raised the stakes by demanding that credit become a human right. Whether or not commentators agree with him, he has challenged all to rethink the methods used to resolve the critical social question of poverty.

To many, the Grameen Bank is a triumph. It is rightly a case study of the use of education to improve the human condition. Indeed, one person can make a difference. Yunus's work has earned him numerous international awards: The King Baudouin International Development Prize, CARE Humanitarian Award, World Food Prize Award, and the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize. His story has been covered in major newspapers including the *New York Times*, *Economist*, *Wall Street Journal*, and the *Washington Post*. Micro-lending has become contagious, and his methods have been copied in different parts of the world. Word travels fast in the global village.

Yet, the concept of the Grameen Bank is not new. Farmer's cooperatives and other types of cooperatives have existed for generations. While Bornstein's book raises awareness of the commitment of an individual to an ideal, the mission of the University of Dayton, our commitment to community, and my own multiple consciousness (village, black, college-educated and international) demand that we raise a broader set of questions and perspectives.

It is surprising that at a time when the University of Dayton has declared its commitment to diversity and internationalization, incoming first year students, were assigned a book which reinforces previous notions. Part of Bornstein's thesis is simple. Bangladesh is poor and backward; and micro-lending will change that. The implication is clear. Western capitalist practice can eliminate poverty in the developing or non-western world. While this may be so in some cases, there exist also numerous examples of the devastation caused by capitalist practices.

As a first year reading, this book fails to adequately educate and challenge our students to think about non-western society and the complexities of the global village. The story of the Grameen Bank is not contextualized within Bangladesh culture and history. Both

are dismissed in this story as irrelevant. One learns little about the role of various groups in society, traditions, religion, and so on.

Perhaps, a more disturbing aspect of the book is that it contains almost nothing positive about Bangladesh society. Does the culture contain anything of value? Does the story of *The Price of a Dream* imply that the global village must become modern and western? In the book, nothing seemed to work until the western capitalist principles (or “socially conscious capitalist system” as is referred in the book) are introduced. Academicians, long ago, had decoded the mislabeling of westernization as development.

Still, others have convincingly pointed out problems with the current objectives of the Grameen Bank. It is great to focus on women but what about the elderly, handicap, weak, and other groups. It is hoped that the bank will soon incorporate these groups in its reform agenda. Grameen bank has since endorsed many other companies including Grameen Phone Ltd, Grameen Telecom, Grameen Communications, Grameen Software Ltd, and so on. Grameen Bank is now a gigantic corporation.

Whatever the limitations of this book, the overriding message is unmistakable. Yunus used his education to make a difference in his community.

First year students, so far I have asked you to use your college years to find your voice, discover your passion, and use them to make a difference in the global village. This is your moment. Your time here will be filled with joy, challenges and opportunities. As we saw with Douglass, Wells, Du Bois, and Mandela, you should strive to make a difference in your community, and broadly, within the global community. Over the next four years, I challenge each of you to develop an awareness of the importance of context of a village or community, a culture, and a history that led to the present. I challenge you to find your voice, discover your passion, and then excel in it.

The foundation of your future work begins now. In Alan Lightman's, *Einstein's Dreams*, he writes, "This is a world of changed plans, of sudden opportunities, of unexpected visions. For in this world, time flows not evenly but fitfully and, as consequence, people receive fitful glimpses of the future." Incoming students, this is your opportunity to begin to chart, and perhaps, change that future.