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Keynote Address—The Civic Engagement Imperative: Higher Education and the Public Good

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Keynote Address—The Civic Engagement Imperative: Higher Education and the Public Good

Ambassador James A. Joseph

Dean Francko

I'd like to welcome to the podium Felecia Jones, director of the Black Belt Community Foundation, who will introduce our keynote speaker.

Ms. Felecia Jones

Good afternoon. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said that not everybody can be famous but everybody can be great because greatness is determined by service. If you would, journey with me through the life of Ambassador James A. Joseph. The ambassador is emeritus professor of the practice of public policy and leader in residence for the Hart Leadership Program at the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University. He is also founder of the United States Southern Africa Center for Leadership and Public Values at Duke and the University of Cape Town. He joined the Duke faculty in 2000 after a distinguished career in government, business, education, and organized philanthropy. He was appointed to senior executive or advisory positions by four U.S. presidents, including Under Secretary of the Interior by President Jimmy Carter and U.S. Ambassador to South Africa by President William Clinton.

In 1999 the Republic of South Africa awarded Ambassador Joseph the Order of Good Hope, the highest honor bestowed on a citizen of another country. In 2008 he was honored as a Louisiana Legend and inducted into the Louisiana Political Hall of Fame. The founding chair of the Commission on National and Community Service that established AmeriCorps, he was honored by the U.S. Peace Corps in 2010 for his lifetime contributions to voluntarism and civil society. From 1982–1995, Dr. Joseph was president and chief executive officer of the Council on Foundations, an international organization of almost 2,000 foundations and corporate giving programs.

After graduating from Yale Divinity School in 1963, Ambassador Joseph began his career at Stillman College in Tuscaloosa, where he was founding co-chair of the local civil rights movement. A frequent speaker to academic,

civic, and religious audiences, he is the author of three books. He is the recipient of 19 honorary degrees and his undergraduate alma mater, Southern University, has named an endowed chair in his honor. He has also served as chair of the Children's Defense Fund and as a member of the board of directors of the Brookings Institution, the National Endowment for Democracy, the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, and City Year South Africa, a youth voluntary service and leadership development program. One thing that was not included in what he sent me and was shared during our time together, which I've been most fortunate to have with him, is that he was chair of the Faculty Board for the Duke University Center for Civic Engagement.

I cannot leave out the fact that the Ambassador is married to the former Mary Braxton, who is an Emmy Award winning television journalist, and he has two children and two grandchildren. I hope that after hearing him speak today you will agree with me that he's great, because he definitely has served. Join me in welcoming Ambassador James A. Joseph.

AMBASSADOR JOSEPH

Let me say at the outset what a delight it is to return to Tuscaloosa. I have not been back since 1964, a year after three local ministers and I launched the Tuscaloosa Citizens Action Committee. Those were difficult and those were dangerous times, but the movement we organized not only desegregated this community, but also opened the door for many of the advances that followed. And I say that because we could not have done it without the students at Stillman. So when I think about civic engagement, higher education, and the public good almost fifty years later, I think of those students; and when I think of those times, and today's theme, I am reminded of the ancient historian Tacitus, who defined patriotism as praiseworthy competition with one's ancestors.

I recall that definition of civic virtue today because it reminds us that each generation has an opportunity, indeed an obligation, to contribute something as significant and even as extraordinary as the generations that preceded them. And so

the questions I would like to examine today are these: One, what role should higher educational institutions play in developing, nurturing, and sustaining the civic values that lead to civic engagement? Secondly, what do these institutions need to know and teach about the modern idea of civil society, especially the civic habits and traditions of the many population groups who are changing our civic culture? And three, what can these institutions do to help define and develop civic engagement as a strategic form of social change rather than simply a form of charitable relief?

What I am suggesting is that there should be three components to what we teach, what we research, and how we promote or facilitate civic engagement. The first has to do with civic values, the second has to do with civic knowledge, and the third has to do with civic habits. This encapsulates civic engagement into three powerful metaphors: being, knowing, and doing.

Civic Values

Let me begin with the being, or values, component and offer the observation that an institution is what it rewards. I have been in business. I've been in government. I've run a lot of organizations. And one of the things I learned is that an institution is not so much what it says in its value statement or what it says in its press releases. It is what it rewards its people for being. If civic engagement is an important university priority, there needs to be both guidelines and incentives that reflect what the university considers to be its values, what it claims as its values. It is not enough to simply provide incentives for students through service-learning; there must be incentives to unleash the research capacity of the university as well. I was here and heard what the presidents panel said, and I am so pleased that they represent institutions that "get it." But as I travel around the country, I find an institutional culture that seems to regard practical investigation into practical community needs, as Dr. Wilson said, as the "dumbing down" of research. Too many of our faculty colleagues tend to regard those who teach about civil society and those who call for civic engagement, in Robert Louis Stevenson's phrase, as "practitioners of an obscure art."

Universities That "Get It"

I am pleased, as I said, that there are universities that "get it." They are the ones that understand that one of the missions of universities is to put

knowledge at the service of society. But one of the things I've learned over the years is that the best universities are also those that put the community at the service of knowledge. There are an increasing number of universities that have actually tied academic incentives to community outreach. They are the ones who understand that in order to unleash the full potential of the university, the institution will have to re-think what it rewards.

The second point I want to make about civic values is that we need to be very clear about what values we need to cultivate. I taught ethics at a number of universities and for too long those who teach ethics have focused on the private virtues that build character to the exclusion of the public values that build community. It may be that what we need most at this unique and almost apocalyptic global moment is to help both our students and our society understand how best to think about, and how best to apply, values to public life without getting caught up in the politics of virtue or the parochialism of dogma.

I have been living in South Africa full or part time for the last sixteen years and there is much we can learn from a concept of community the South Africans call ubuntu. It is best expressed by the Xhosi proverb, "People are people through other people." It is this powerful sense of the shared interdependence of people that lies behind the spirit of forgiveness and reconciliation reflected in the work of Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu. It is the ability to say that your pain is my pain that has allowed them to say that if your humanity is assaulted, my humanity is assaulted; if your dignity is denied, my dignity is denied. It is not "I think, therefore, I am." It is "I am human because I belong. I participate; I share because I am made for community." At the heart of this spirit of ubuntu is the willingness to take risks and to act justly and with compassion to one another.

So what does it mean to speak of values that build community in a world that is integrating and fragmenting at the same time? The more interdependent we become the more people are turning inward to smaller communities of meaning and memory. While some find reasons for despair, it may be that remembering and regrouping are part of the first stage of the search for common ground. As I travel around the world, I hear more and more people saying that until there is respect for their primary community of identity they will find it difficult to embrace the larger community in which they function. We will thus find it difficult to form a more perfect union in the United States

as long as we emphasize the myth of individualism to the exclusion of the tradition of community that saw people come together to build each other's barns and to ensure that there was a public safety net for those in some way disadvantaged.

The second principle in which our idea of community needs to be grounded is one I often quote from the African-American mystic, poet, and theologian Howard Thurman, who was a mentor to Martin Luther King at Boston University. Dr. Thurman was fond of saying, "I want to be me without making it difficult for you to be you." Can you imagine how different our world would be if more Americans were able to say "I want to be an American without making it difficult for Arabs to be Arabs, Asians to be Asians, and Africans to be Africans?" Can you imagine how different our communities would be if more Christians were able to say, "I want to be a Christian without making it difficult for a Jew to be a Jew, a Muslim to be a Muslim, or a Buddhist to be a Buddhist?"

So how do we build community? It is has been my experience that when neighbors help neighbors, and even when strangers help strangers, both those who help and those who are helped are transformed. They experience a new sense of connectedness. Getting involved in the needs of the neighbor provides a new perspective, a new way of seeing ourselves, a new understanding of the purpose of the human journey. When that which was "their" problem becomes "our" problem, the transaction transforms a mere association into a relationship that has the potential for new communities of meaning and belonging.

In other words, getting people to do something for someone else—what John Winthrop called making the condition of others our own—is the most powerful force I know in building community. When you experience the problems of the poor or troubled, when you help someone find meaning in a museum or creative expression in a painting, when you help to dispel prejudices or fight bigotry directed at a neighbor, you are far more likely to find common ground, and you are far likely to find that in serving others you discover the genesis of community. So the moral imperative of civic engagement is to help transform the *laissez-faire* notion of live and let live into the principle of live and help live.

Civic Knowledge

This brings us, then, to the second question we need to ask. It is about civic knowledge: What should we know and what should we teach about

the modern idea of civil society? Resurrected in the 1970s by the Polish Workers Movement and later in debates about perestroika in the former Soviet Union, the idea of civil society is rooted in three very different visions of public life.

The first was the idea of civil society as government. Civility, for Aristotle, described the requirements of citizenship rather than private sensibilities or good manners. It was organized around the face-to-face relationships of friends whose leisurely aristocratic benevolence enabled them to discover, articulate, and promote the public good. The second was the idea of civil society transforming government, often in opposition to government. I was standing on the edge of a crowd in the former Soviet Union when an upstart named Boris Yeltsen made his first speech calling for major social reform. I was standing in a crowd outside of Parliament in Cape Town when Prime Minister de Klerk announced that Nelson Mandela would be released from prison and the African National Congress unbanned. On each occasion, people spoke of the rebellion of civil society against the state. They did not so much want to replace the state as they wanted to transform it. The third idea of civil society has been the notion of civil society transcending government. Unlike the private sector driven by the market and the public sector driven by the ballot, the so-called third sector is driven by something deeper and more noble, a spirit of compassion and commitment to the common good. It is in many ways the conscience of the other two sectors. It is even possible to argue that since civil society preceded government, it may be more appropriate to think of it as the first sector.

The attractiveness of the concept of civil society lies in its conjoining of private and public good. But in what should be its finest hour, the idea of civil society is in danger of being distorted and hijacked by those who emphasize its potential in order to bolster arguments for a more limited social role by government. Some of the strongest advocates of civic engagement are people with an uncivil state of mind.

While it is clear that it was people power that led to the collapse of communism, the dismantling of apartheid, and even the fall of the Berlin Wall, there are now those who exaggerate the potential of civil society in order to bolster their claims about the role of government. Those of us, and I spent fourteen years as a spokesperson for Benevolent Wealth, who understandingly and necessarily emphasize the potential of civil society have a responsibility to also point to its limits. It

is also important to remember that civil society includes more than simply the non-governmental organizations that serve a public good. As Thomas Carothers reminded us in a *Foreign Policy* magazine article, civil society everywhere is a bewildering array of the good, the bad, and the bizarre. The hate groups that have used the Internet to become transnational and the criminals who operate across national borders are only a few of the groups that use the civic space between the state and the market for less than noble purposes. In short, civil society carries the potential to re-shape and unite a divided world, but we must guard against overselling its strength or over-romanticizing its intentions.

Another of my concerns about civic knowledge, what we know and what we teach and what we research about civil society and civic values, has to do with the many ways in which American civic culture is changing. Alexis de Tocqueville, Robert Bellows, and many others have painted wonderful pictures of what they described as the habits of the heart of the American people. Unfortunately, neither de Tocqueville nor Bellows included in their reporting and analysis the extent to which voluntary activity and civil society in racial minority communities served as a vehicle of self-help, social cohesion, and positive group identity. As president of the Council on Foundations, 2,000 foundations from around the world, I cringed every time I heard some new guru on civil society speak of American voluntarism or American generosity as if it were somehow unique to those citizens who traced their ancestry to Europe. Very disappointed in what I kept hearing, I began the research on the civic traditions of America's racial minorities for *The Charitable Impulse*, which I published in 1995. What I found were remarkable manifestations of civic feeling that in many instances pre-dated, but was consistent with, the civic habits practiced and the civic values affirmed by the larger society.

Emulate the Iroquois

As early as 1598, and long before Cesar Chavez started organizing farm workers, Latinos in the Southwest formed "mutualistas" and lay brotherhoods to assist members with their basic needs. Long before de Tocqueville, Benjamin Franklin became so enamored of the political and civic culture of the Native Americans he met in Pennsylvania that he advised delegates to the Albany Congress in 1754 to emulate the civic habits of the Iroquois.

Long before Martin Luther King wrote his

"Letter from a Birmingham Jail" or gave his "I Have a Dream" speech, African-Americans in the 19th century formed so many voluntary groups and mutual aid societies that some Southern states enacted laws banning black voluntary or charitable activity. Long before Robert Putnam published his first article on social capital, Neo-Confucians in the Chinese community were teaching their children that a community without benevolence invites its own destruction. The point I am making is that it is no longer possible to speak of American civic culture without reference to and respect for the varied traditions that are now shaping our civic life.

We have also seen the globalization of civic engagement. People around the world are coming to realize that a good society depends as much on the goodness of individuals as it does on the soundness of government and the fairness of laws. They are reclaiming responsibility for their lives through neighborhood associations in squatter settlements, farming cooperatives in rural areas, micro-enterprises in urban areas, housing associations, mutual aid associations, and various other forms of self-help groups to improve local conditions.

The events of the last decade have caused us to think often and deeply about whether transnational community is really possible. I am convinced that it is, but it will require us to think and act differently. Our students who are engaged in community outreach locally and those who work abroad must be taught to respect local traditions, local cultures, and even local concepts of community. While not as well organized and not as well supported abroad as in the United States, the idea of helping neighbors in need, the idea of service to others as an essential part of the pursuit of happiness, can be found in many countries and communities. The absence of a service movement does not necessarily mean the absence of a service ethic. What we can bring is experience in how to mobilize and even how to motivate, how to communicate an existing ethic, and how to coordinate existing energy. But there is much we can learn about the service ethic that comes out of the notion of ubuntu, for example.

Civic Habits

We come now to my final concern, what I have called civic habits, the idea that we tend to promote a rather limited approach to civic engagement. We are told with frequency that the world would be better off if more of us worked in

soup kitchens, delivered meals to the elderly poor, or tutored kids who are at risk. Those are very important contributions, but they are ameliorating consequences when the university could also help eliminate causes.

The most often cited example of charitable relief is the story of the Good Samaritan. We are told that a traveler finds someone badly beaten along the side of the road and stops to help. Suppose that same man traveled the same road every day for a week and each day he found someone badly beaten at the same spot on the road. Compassion requires that he give aid, but eventually compassion requires that he ask, “Who has responsibility for policing this road?” What started out as an individual act of charitable aid leads to a concern with public policy. The first response was to ameliorate consequences, but the second response must necessarily be aimed at eliminating causes. One is charity, the other is strategic civic engagement. Civil society has often been most effective when it has dared to go beyond charity, when it has helped provide both understanding and meaning to the social problems that trouble us.

My second point about civic habits is that the university can help to inform and enrich the public policy process. I know that many of your institutions are advised by its donors and legal counsel that it is unwise, illegal, or too risky to get involved in public policy, but I’ve served over the years on the boards of many universities, so I know about which I speak. But I also served on the U.S. Treasury Department’s Task Force that struggled with how to distinguish between permissible advocacy and impermissible lobbying and I can tell you that there is much that can be done by a university to objectively inform and objectively influence policy.

And finally, a third point about civic habits is that civic engagement should mean investing in the empowerment of those who are economically and socially marginalized. The university can help educate its publics, both locally and nationally, on the policies and practices needed to make our society work for all of its citizens, but it is not enough to be simply advocates who speak in behalf of the marginalized groups in our communities. We must help empower them to speak for themselves. If racism was the original American sin, the persistence of paternalism is its most enduring counterpart. One of the most striking and fundamental lessons coming from around the world is that when we empower the

historically excluded to be active participants in the programs designed for their advancement, we are likely to have not only new ideas and wider ownership of strategies, but increased effectiveness as well. Moreover, it is much better to empower communities than to simply provide service or engage in advocacy in their behalf.

We have all too often asked the wrong question in dealing with those in our communities whom we seek to help. We have been asking what can we do about their predicament, or what can we do for them, when we should have been asking what can we do together. Self-help is a principle all groups admire and often desire, but too many people assume it means that those disadvantaged by condition or color should be able to lift themselves by their own bootstraps, even when they have no boots. I like the concept of assisted self-reliance or participatory empowerment, where the affected groups provide leadership but they are supported by outside resources.

Let me, thus, conclude by making the point that if you are to involve your students and your faculty meaningfully in your communities, they must understand that how they are engaged is as important as in what they are engaged. There is a story told about the exit of the British from one of its former colonies. On the day in which colonial officials were preparing to depart, the Governor General was overheard to say, “When we came here these people had few roads, few hospitals, and few schools. We built new roads, we built new hospitals, and we built new schools, but now they ask us to go. Why?” A peasant, on overhearing the conversation, interrupted to say, “It is easy to understand, your honor. Every time you look at us you have the wrong look in your eyes.” Civic engagement aimed at eliminating poverty or advancing equity must begin first with a look at the policies and practices of our own institutions. Unless you have the right look in your eyes, your efforts will not only be in vain, if left unattended could damage the institution’s image, diminish its influence, and defer the dreams of those who gave birth to the vision you seek to advance.

And so we need to step back and ask what assumptions, what social analysis lies behind civic engagement, what theory of change informs our practices and priorities, how often is the promotion of equity a consideration in what we conclude is successful, and finally do we have an organized and disciplined way of learning what truly works in closing social gaps. When we provide answers to those questions, we may find that civic

engagement itself may need to change. We cannot allow ourselves to become advocates of an obscure art, preoccupied with the potential of civil society and not its limits. Someone has to ask the difficult questions that too easily go unasked, and if asked unanswered. I hope that you will be the one to return to your institutions and ask those difficult questions. Someone has to probe beyond the conventional wisdom that avoids controversy by closing rather than opening minds. You are part of a moment in history where an increasing number of universities have chosen to put knowledge at the service of society.

I hope, therefore, that you will be able to elevate the idea of civic engagement to both a craft and a calling, both a discipline of study and a field of practice.

Archimedes is reported to have said, “Give me a lever long enough and I can move the world.” Those of you in this room have been given the lever. I hope you will use it not only to move your institutions and your communities, but also to move the world. You are engaged in a very noble enterprise. For when you provide help, you also provide hope. And the gift of hope is as big a gift as the gift of life itself.

Thank you very much.



Ambassador James A. Joseph presenting the Keynote Address at NOSC 2012 at The University of Alabama.