

A Choice to Change the World
Opening Convocation Speech by President Beverly Daniel Tatum
August 30, 2007

Good morning! Thank you, Kimberly, for your lovely introduction. I look forward to working with you and all of the SGA leaders in this academic year. Let's take a moment to thank our musicians this morning – Dr. Joyce Johnson, college organist and professor emerita of music -- and our wonderful Glee Club, under the direction of Dr. Kevin Johnson. I would also like to take this opportunity to publicly congratulate our Dean of the Chapel. This summer Reverend Lisa Diane Rhodes became Reverend DOCTOR Lisa Diane Rhodes, completing her doctor of ministry degree at Union Theological Seminary.

Please join with me in congratulating her!

It is wonderful to see all of you here – I am excited about the coming year and I hope you are too. I want to extend a special welcome to our newest students – our exchange students, new transfer students, new Pauline Drake Scholars, and members of the class of 2011. Welcome to your first opening convocation! And to members of the class of 2008, welcome to your *last* opening convocation as students at Spelman! And of course, we welcome our sophomores and juniors as well.

I also want to thank our faculty and staff who have joined us this morning. We also have a few special guests – visiting alumnae, family members and friends. We welcome you too! I suspect that some of our special guests are here to help us honor the faculty members we will honor this morning. You will hear more about them later, but let me say now how pleased I am that we will have the opportunity to recognize five fabulous members of our faculty as part of this morning's program – a very important part of what we will do together here, and we thank their friends and family members for joining us to help celebrate their achievements.

As some of you know, last week I was in Bellagio, Italy to attend a gathering of women's college presidents, sponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation. It was a wonderful meeting – a gathering of twenty leaders of women's colleges and universities from around the world. The countries represented included Bangladesh, Italy, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Kenya, Japan, India, Pakistan, Bahrain, the Philippines, Australia, *and* the United States. We gathered to talk about the unfinished and important agenda of educating women for leadership around the world. We know that so many of the world's problems impact women disproportionately - for example, health disparities, environmental challenges that prevent access to clean water and air; political and armed conflicts leaving women and children homeless, and HIV/AIDS (the number one killer of young Black women). So many issues impact women and call for the solutions generated by educated women.

At the Bellagio meeting we began to share best practices across regions, and talked about the common and unique challenges we face in our mission to educate women in the liberal arts tradition, a tradition which is explicit in its intention to foster critical thinking and provide students with the tools of problem-solving and analysis – the tools of liberation - the tools most needed in the rapidly changing “flat world” we now live in.

Some of the institutions represented were quite new, springing up in parts of the world where women have historically had less access to education. For example, Effat College in Saudi Arabia is only 8 years old, a liberal arts college for women created by the late Queen Effat in a context where women are veiled, not allowed to drive themselves and must have the permission of a male relative to travel. Yet once they have moved beyond the rote learning of traditional women’s education to the critical thinking that is part of the liberal arts tradition, *who knows* what changes will begin to take place?

Then there was Kiriri Women’s University for Science and Technology in Kenya – only five years old, offering degrees in computer science and mathematics, creating economic opportunity for women in a nation sorely in need of their talents – where they are celebrating their first 23 graduates. And there was the Asian University for Women, scheduled to open in Bangladesh with their first students arriving next year, the first pan-Asian university for women, bringing South Asian women together across national lines of difference and across histories of conflict to begin building the bridge to peace in South Asia through the education of women. It was truly inspiring to hear their stories of beginning. It was what one might imagine it would be like to talk to Miss Packard and Miss Giles as they described the start of Spelman 126 years ago.

Among the oldest institutions represented at the meeting were the three representing the United States – Mount Holyoke College, founded in 1837, Smith College founded in 1871, and Spelman College founded in 1881. And there were others like Kobe College in Japan and Lady Shri Ram College in India. We called the new ones “emerging” institutions and the older ones “established.” And while each institution grew out of a particular social and historical context – each represented one core principle – a principle that so aptly describes Spelman.

Each represented “a choice to change the world.” And that is the title of my talk this morning, **“A Choice to Change the World.”**

The act of **creating**, or **leading**, or **teaching** at or **working** at or **attending** a woman’s college is an **act of intention**. It is a *choice*. You don’t accidentally come here. You certainly don’t accidentally stay. It is a *choice*, a *choice* intended to liberate. In Saudi Arabia Queen Effat knew what she was doing when she decided to create her college. That choice was *not* about maintaining the status quo. It *was* about empowerment. When Miss Packard and Miss Giles came to Atlanta, it too was about empowerment, it *was* about transformation – transformation of newly freed women’s lives through the empowerment that comes with education that not only gives you tools of a trade but education that encourages you *to think*.

Teaching women to think critically changes things. It changed things in 1881 – it still changes things. It changed things in 1960 when Roslyn Pope, Spelman SGA President co-authored “An Appeal for Human Rights,” the manifesto that appeared as a full-page advertisement in the major Atlanta newspapers calling for civil and human rights previously denied. It changed things in 2004 when Spelman students like Asha Jennings, Moya Bailey, and Angela Boudreaux wrote letters and organized friends to protest the misogynistic images and language in so many hip hop music videos. It was *thinking* Spelman women *thinking critically* and *acting strategically* that led to the cancellation of BET Uncut – one of the most flagrant purveyors of televised images of Black women as simply gyrating body parts. ***Teaching women to think critically changes things.***

Coming to Spelman College is an act of intention – a choice for which we must take *full* ownership. Students, you may be here because your parents wanted you to, your teachers thought you should, your sister did, or because your friends were coming. Whatever the reasons that influenced you, it's *your* choice now. Nobody is sitting in that seat but you. And you need to choose it every day. We all do – faculty, staff, and students. By that I mean, we need to *show up ready* – *ready* to take in every thing that Spelman has to offer and *ready* to give it all *we* have to offer – *ready* to engage with new ideas, *ready* to ask new questions, *ready* to have tough questions asked of you, *ready* to go places you have never been, *ready* to do things you have never done, *ready* to give your best, *ready* to expect the best from others, *ready* to ***change*** Spelman and ***ready to be changed by*** Spelman

Spelman *is* a choice to change the world. But before we can change the world, we have to change ourselves. Toni Cade Bambara once said, “Revolution must begin from within.” And she was right. *All important change begins from within.* As Ghandi said, we must be the change we hope to see in the world, and the same is true at Spelman. ***We must be constantly changing, constantly growing – because we want Spelman to constantly grow.*** Like trees planted by the water, we must be constantly refreshed and renewed lest we dry up and shrivel like raisins in the sun. *Spelman* is a college that must be bursting with life – bursting with creative energy and ideas – a community ALIVE and vibrant. In order to stay that way, we have to be constantly evolving, constantly changing.

And we *have* changed. Of course, you can just walk across the campus and see our physical changes. We truly are building a better Spelman for you! Our Spelman ALIVE progress report chronicles just some of the things that have changed at Spelman in the last five years. If you have not seen a copy, please contact our Public Relations office and they will make sure you get a copy. You will see just some of the evidence that Spelman has been changing across all dimensions of the institution.

One of the most important changes is our alumnae participation rate. Those of you were here last year know how important alumnae support is in our effort to increase resources for the college - I am delighted to tell you that we started last year with an alumnae participation rate of about 17% - and ended the year at

28% - a remarkable increase in just one year. Let's congratulate the annual fund team that worked so hard to make that happen. We want to recognize their efforts, but I know they didn't do it alone. Many faculty and staff assisted in encouraging the alumnae you know to make their annual gift, and I thank you all for your support. The "Every Woman, Every Year" message is gaining traction, and I am excited to see what this year holds in our effort – not only for alumnae, but for faculty, staff, and students as well. Truly it will take "Every Person, Every Year" to propel our progress even faster.

There is much that we hope to accomplish together at Spelman. Yet at the *core* of what we do – at the core of the acronym ALIVE - is the "A, academic excellence. At the core of what we do is our academic program. It must continually evolve as well.

It is for this reason that I am so delighted about one particular change this year -- the introduction of faculty institutes. Our Provost, Dr. Butler, has done a wonderful job of planning what is intended to become a tradition for the faculty. That is, semi-annual day and a half meetings for faculty development around issues central to the curriculum, pedagogy, and other aspects of Academic Affairs, held at the beginning of each semester. While our new students were having orientation, our faculty was re-imagining core aspects of our curriculum.

The inaugural Faculty Institute was held August 16 and 17 and almost all of the tenured, tenure-track, and full-time faculty participated in very productive discussions focused on transforming the General Education Core Requirements to meet the needs of the 21 st century women of Spelman. Building on the work done by Dean Desiree Pedescleaux and the General Education Working group, a group convened by the Provost last January, the faculty had the opportunity to respond to a draft proposal for the goals and outcomes of Spelman's General Education Core Requirements. The in-depth discussions, introduced by the Provost and facilitated by faculty, have clearly been energizing and have laid the groundwork for work that the faculty will continue throughout the year. Our faculty identified three areas for greater discussion that shape the Spelman students' experience: the identity of the College as a *women's* college *and* as a place for women of African ancestry; the role of spirituality at Spelman; and the meaning of inclusivity and difference at Spelman.

These and other key themes that inform the identity of Spelman College will be the topic of exploration and definition this academic year, with the goal of producing a general education experience that begins in the first year and is woven in increasingly complex ways throughout the four years at Spelman. As Dr. Butler has so well articulated, the key to this evolution of our curriculum is interdisciplinarity – helping students see the connections between and among ways of knowing and disciplinary knowledge and methodology. This work will require *all of us* – not just our students – to think more critically -- *and will change our world*. It is *very* exciting and I look forward to these future conversations.

The work described above as well as that of the Task Force on Student Development and other campus committees will all converge as part of this

year's strategic planning process. Last May I appointed faculty and staff to our campus strategic planning committee which Provost Butler and Dr. Sylvia Bozeman (professor of mathematics) are co-chairing. Now that our students are back, student members will be joining the committee as well. We intend to have a highly interactive process with which faculty, staff, students, alumnae, and trustees will all be engaged. All of you will have the opportunity, *if you choose*, to come to a focus group or workshop sometime this fall to talk about the future of the College. What do we do best that we want to strengthen? What do we need to *add* to our repertoire of strength? What environmental hazards or opportunities do we need to plan for? What are the *next* steps on our journey to greatness? These are the questions we must answer together.

The work of the strategic planning committee will continue throughout the year. Our goal is to have a draft of the next strategic plan ready for review by our Board of Trustees in April 2008, with the opportunity for revision over the summer, and a final draft ready for Board approval at the October 2008 meeting.

As you can hear, this will be a very busy year throughout the campus. There is no doubt that change requires hard work. And, when you are good at what you do, when you have been as successful as Spelman has been, you might ask, why mess with success? *We are good* – you might even say that we are *real* good. *But we can be so much better.* So we have to maintain our humility and stay focused on continual improvement. Jim Collins, author of the book *Good to Great* and its follow-up, *Good to Great and the SocialSectors*, reminds us that “Greatness is an inherently dynamic process, not an end point. The moment you think of yourself as great, your slide toward mediocrity has begun.” Let me repeat that: “The moment you think of yourself as great, your slide toward mediocrity has begun.” That’s not just true for organizations, it is also true for individuals. And *none of us* wants to do *that* kind of slide.

And so we must keep our focus – on showing up ready - every day - to take on new challenges. We must make that choice – each one of us. *We are* the College! If we are to achieve great things, each one of us must be on our *own* journey to greatness. Jim Collins describes in very compelling terms what it takes to go from really good to truly great based on his study of hundreds of organizations, and this is what he says:

In building a great institution, there is no single defining action, no grand program, no one killer innovation, no solitary lucky break, no miracle moment. Rather our research showed that it feels like turning a giant, heavy flywheel. Pushing with great effort – days, weeks, and months of work, with almost imperceptible progress – you finally get the flywheel to inch forward. But you don’t stop. You keep pushing, and with persistent effort, you eventually get the flywheel to complete one entire turn. You don’t stop. You keep pushing, and you get two turns...then four...then eight...the flywheel builds momentum...sixteen...you keep pushing...thirty-

two...it builds more momentum...a hundred...moving faster with each turn...a thousand...ten thousand...a hundred thousand. Then at some point—breakthrough! Each turn builds upon previous work, compounding your investment of effort. The flywheel flies forward with almost unstoppable momentum. This is how you build greatness.

I feel that flywheel turning at Spelman and I hope you do too. Our momentum is definitely building.

Collins, Jim. (2005) *Good to Great in the Social Sectors*, (Boulder, Co: Jim Collins), p. 23.

Students, the same way you build a great institution is the same way you get a great education. *What makes that flywheel turn and build its momentum is consistency of effort, consistency over time, and clarity* --- clarity about your personal mission and your values, clarity about the meaning of this opportunity and the importance of using it wisely, clarity about consistently doing your own work with integrity, clarity about finding and claiming your purpose here at Spelman. *We know you are good now* -- that is why you have been admitted. But we also know you *can be better* and that is the choice you made when you came to Spelman – a choice to be empowered to be the best women you can be.

When I spoke to the first year students during orientation, I spoke about three characteristics that mark women of Spelman across the generations – those three things are self-respect, integrity, and a strong sense of purpose. As president I travel continually advocating on behalf of Spelman to donors, employers, opinion shapers of all kinds – and they often tell me that there is something about Spelman graduates that stands out - a sense of self-confidence, yes, a polished self-presentation, yes, but not just that. More than anything it is clarity about who she is and where she's going and the responsibility she has to represent herself, her people, and Spelman. That responsibility begins the moment you pass through these gates and continues the rest of your life – that is part of the choice you have made. Your choice is not to be average – or to do what everyone else is doing. Your choice is to be a leader – to set the standard – the standard for ethical behavior, the standard for respect for one's body, the standard for respect for one's sister – and brother.

One of my favorite songs that the Glee Club sings is “We Are” written by Spelman graduate Bernice Johnson Reagon. One of the lines says, “We are our grandmother's prayers, we are our grandfather's dreamings, we are the breath of our ancestors.” We owe it to them, to ourselves, and to future generations to be the best we can be everyday. When you get dressed in the morning, ask yourself – is this how I want to represent myself and Spelman? Is this how I want to represent my ancestors who sacrificed all they had to make it possible for me to be here? When you enter class ask yourself – have I done all I can to be prepared for class today? Am I at my best right now? If the answer is no, then ask yourself, what needs to change?

In my study at Reynolds Cottage, I have a card on a bulletin board above my desk that says: "Take a minute. Look at your goals. Look at your performance. See if your behavior matches your goals." If the answer is "no," I know that I need to change something.

Spelman College is a choice to change the world. It is a choice to be here, a choice that requires changing oneself. It also requires engaging with the world, which brings me back to where I started – Bellagio Italy and women's colleges from around the world.

A choice to change the world means engaging with the world beyond our gates. Community service has always been part of the Spelman mission and vision – but how we define community is broadening. We are part of a global village, and we need to know our neighbors. I am *excited* about the steadily increasing opportunities for our students to engage with the world. Whether through traditional methods like study abroad or shorter term experiences like an alternative spring break service trip to Senegal (as some students did last year) or participating in a model UN competition in Egypt, China, or Switzerland (as some of our students have done), or going to a leadership conference in Dubai (which I hope some of our students will do this year) or interacting with international visitors who come here to Atlanta, a Spelman education should be a global education. You can't *change* the world without information *about* the world and in this case, there is no substitute for experience. Get your passports ready! Women of Spelman are going places. And the world is coming here! This new worldwide network of women's colleges born at Bellagio offers great opportunities for exchange for our students and our faculty as well, and I look forward to telling you more about those opportunities as they unfold.

A choice to change the world also means taking responsibility for the ways each of us is *always* changing the world - and not always for the better – through our excessive consumption of the world's resources. *Understanding our own environmental impact and seeking to reduce it is a choice that all of us can make every day.* This time last year I announced that we were constructing a green building, and that we were working on recycling. I am pleased to report that we have made some progress, thanks to the efforts of our Director of Facilities Management Services, Art Frazier.

For example, we have begun a pilot program using environmentally friendly cleaning products; we are replacing incandescent light fixtures in the residence halls, with more efficient, cooler fluorescent bulbs; we have a grant from the Associated Colleges of the South to support two student "recycling interns" to assist with instituting campus-wide recycling; and we will launch this fall a Spelman Sustainability Task Force comprised of students, staff, and faculty to develop a sustainability strategy for Spelman College. I am delighted too that we have with us Ms. Jewell Harper on loan from the Environmental Protection Agency for two years to assist us in our sustainability efforts and to help us become a model of sustainability and to help increase awareness for other Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

These are just some of the highlights of our efforts thus far - clearly there is more for *all of us* to do. It makes a difference not just for us but for those who come after us. We want Spelman College to be here for many years to come *but it won't matter* if the world we live in has become uninhabitable. Let us be consistent in our actions, consistent in our values, consistent in our effort to preserve the environment. *Together we can make a difference.*

I know my time is short and my speech has been long. Let me conclude with this: Each of us has made our choice to be here at Spelman. We are committed to the hard work of change. We are ready to engage the world. Spelman *is* a choice to change the world. I feel the flywheel turning - it's going to be a great year! Thank you for being here this morning!