

Friday Features: June 5, 2020

Dear Winthrop Faculty and Staff,

I write to you this week with heavy heart and spirit. For all of us who work in higher education—whose lives are structured by the desire to increase access to the knowledge and skills that transform lives, deepen civic engagement, and broaden horizons—the challenges we have encountered this semester on the local and national stages have seemed at times insurmountable. Despite many moments of despair and questioning, I cling to the belief that they are not. We have a unique opportunity as the institution that we are to respond by continuing to do the good work we do in so many areas—our cross-institutional Diversity Council, our tremendous Office of Diversity and Student Engagement, a general education core that attends to diversity and inclusion issues as a central feature of the Human Experience course, programs that attend to social justice issues, and strategic institutional goals to advance diversity and inclusion at Winthrop as a core, mission-based activity. As long as this list is, we can and must always identify ways to improve upon our efforts and commitments in each of these areas.

Just as we banded together to find new ways to do all of our varied job functions in response to the virus we call COVID-19, so too must we find new ways to work together as a community to respond to the ongoing impacts of institutionalized racism in our nation. It too is a virus. It too can kill. We are *vulnerable individually and collectively*. The ongoing and historical impacts of systemic racism—and its close relations to class privilege and white supremacy—threaten the individual bodies of black, indigenous, and all people of color, as we have seen played out across the nation in the past weeks with the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and so many others before them. Racism also threatens us collectively as a democracy. At Winthrop, we made it our goal to close achievement gaps between our black and white students. We achieved that goal. At Winthrop, we made it our goal to increase the employment of faculty and staff from underrepresented groups in all positions—including leadership. We achieved our initial stretch targets and continue this important work. But to close the gap at one point in time is not enough. To say we have met our stretch targets in a given window of time is not enough. Inclusion work is not a box that can be checked; it is an ongoing commitment. We are *accountable individually and collectively* as well, to being anti-racist in a racist society, and to advancing the cause of social justice for all.

I write to you today to say that I uphold that commitment. For the black faculty, staff, and administrators with whom I have the privilege to partner in this work, I write to say I see you. I honor the pain you have been and are experiencing. I commit to the hard and ongoing work of healing, because healing is needed for ourselves, our communities, our democracy. This is not a new struggle. What makes it so challenging is how long the struggle has been going on. Last night on a panel sponsored by the Levine Museum of the New South titled “What is it going to take?,” our own Assistant Professor of History Jennifer Dixon-McKnight pointed out that “people think we are crying about what happened to George Floyd, but we haven’t gotten over what happened to Emmett Till.” These words speak powerfully to the length of the struggle and the depth of the anguish. At Winthrop, we must provide answers to the question, “What is it going to take?” We must continue and extend educational efforts to expand civic engagement, not just as a learning outcome for our students, but as a commitment embodied by each faculty, staff, and administrator on campus. We must talk to each other

across what may seem profound differences, and we must build community where we see it crumbling around us. We must also reinvest in the new literacies that are required by the age of the algorithm, where so much of the information we encounter is curated for us by codes we cannot see.

I know many of you have reached out to each other, to your supervisors, to our diversity leadership asking what we can do as a community to respond constructively to the emotional toll of the police brutality, state responses to civil unrest, attacks against the media, and unending floes of painful information we are all navigating. Vice President for Student Affairs Shelia Burkhalter has already charged members of her team with planning an event to provide counseling, support, and an opportunity to share concerns for students and others in our community. Please know that even as we continue to put plans in place for a safe return in the Fall, we are also thinking about how to support our campus community right now. As we continue to consider next steps, please feel free to reach out with suggestions, ideas, and needs, to me and to each other.

For today, I want to share with you links to some of the powerful statements I've seen issued from educational and professional organizations as well as resources that you may find useful:

[A Statement from the American Society for Biochemistry and Molecular Biology Minority Affairs Committee](#)

[Higher Education's Role in Promoting Racial Healing and the Power of Wonder](#), Association of American Colleges and Universities

[On Racial Violence and Inequities](#), American Association of State Colleges and Universities

[Black Lives Matter Syllabus](#), Frank Leon Roberts, NYU

[Black Lives Matter at School 2020 Curriculum Resource Guide](#)

[#SayHerName](#) and [African American Policy Forum](#), Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw think tank

In closing, I share with you some words from the visionary poet Audre Lorde, whose work articulates the interconnections of fear and silence and the deeply human necessity to push through them into articulation. Though these works were published in the 1970s, they are no less salient today in how they push us to examine our own current fears, silences, and vehicles for moving thought to action.

In the essay "Poetry is Not a Luxury" (1977), Lorde writes: "As we learn to bear the intimacy of scrutiny and to flourish within it, as we learn to use the products of that scrutiny for power within our living, those fears which rule our lives and form our silences begin to lose their control over us." Poetry is a vehicle for this transformative scrutiny, thus she argues that "poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought."

Lorde gives name to the power of moving through fear to speech in her poem, "A Litany for Survival," which you can read in full [here](#):

And when the sun rises we are afraid
it might not remain
when the sun sets we are afraid

it might not rise in the morning
when our stomachs are full we are afraid
of indigestion
when our stomachs are empty we are afraid
we may never eat again
when we are loved we are afraid
love will vanish
when we are alone we are afraid
love will never return
and when we speak we are afraid
our words will not be heard
nor welcomed
but when we are silent
we are still afraid

So it is better to speak
remembering
we were never meant to survive.

Finally, a selection from the 1978 essay titled “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action”:

What are the words you do not yet have? What do you need to say? What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you will sicken and die of them, still in silence? Perhaps for some of you here today, I am the face of one of your fears. Because I am woman, because I am Black, because I am lesbian, because I am myself – a Black woman warrior poet doing my work – come to ask you, are you doing yours?

I borrow two words in closing today:

From the Sanskrit and Hindu traditions: **Namaste**. Translated in its simplest form, it means “I bow to you.” Used often in yoga practices and widely in Indian Hindu culture, the word is “a way to see and honor the reality of others.” Other definitions include “the light in me bows to the light in you, “we are the same, we are one,” and “I honor the place in you that is the same as it is in me” (chopra.com).

From the Yoruba, **Ashe**, which translates as “the power to make things happen and produce change,” as well as the spiritual force in all things and especially “the power of the Word” (yagbeonilu.com/ashe/).

Only when we have fully unpacked how our differences are structured by racism and inequality will we realize the power of that which is the same in each of us.

Adrienne