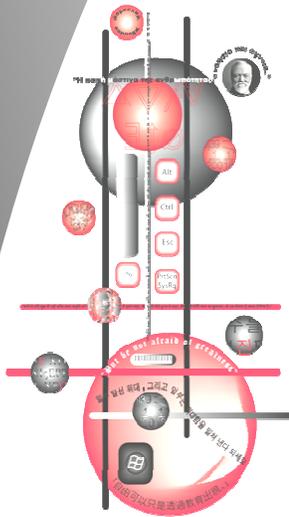


I Am A Teacher

Keynote Address at the York
College Fall Convocation 2013
September 12, 2013



Dr. Charles Coleman
Associate Professor
Department of English

Thank you President Keizs, Provosts Meleties and Griffith, Assistant Provost Henke, last year's convocation speaker Professor Sonia Rivera-Valdés and members of the committee for privileging me with being the faculty speaker for today's convocation. I will return shortly to thanking some other people.

My talk is titled "I am a teacher." I would like to begin with two quotes, one from one of my favorite books, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, and the other from an Amy Goodman *Democracy Now* interview with South American economist Manfred Max-Neef.

"I am an invisible man.
No, I am not a spook like

those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids – and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination – indeed, everything and anything except me.

Nor is my invisibility exactly a matter of biochemical accident to my epidermis. That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their inner eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality. I am not complaining, nor am I protesting either. It is sometimes advantageous to be unseen, although it is most often rather wearing on the nerves. (Ralph Ellison, Prologue, *Invisible Man*, Vintage 1995)

The first part of the Ellison

quote is applicable to the Trávon Martin situations of our nation. We have evolved a racialized cultural consciousness that frames how people are seen and evaluated based on skin color (Black, Brown, Red, Yellow, White), or based on ethnicity, or based on that false concept we have constructed called race. But I am equally taken by the part of Ellison's quote that reads, "It is sometimes advantageous to be unseen." A kind of anonymity that has resulted from my invisibility has provided me a space, a distance from which to observe, to contemplate and even to appreciate.

Manfred Max Neef, a South American economist, said the following in an interview with Amy Goodman, "We have evolved to the point now where we know a lot but we understand very little."

This short but powerful sentence took residence in my mind. I am awed by astronomers, evolutionary biologists, mathematicians, anthropologists, or historians who can construct, reconstruct, deconstruct information and knowledge about life, about the cosmos and about human behavior. Yet I am aware that as a species we find it extremely difficult, individually or collectively, to engage in consistent intelligent behavior, if a measure of intelligent behavior is respecting each other and the planet.

More than forty years ago I made an intelligent decision. I decided to become a teacher. Becoming a teacher added an occupational dimension to my invisibility; teachers are often disrespected and ignored. But it has also allowed me the space and distance to appreciate that teachers are people who fall in love with learning and who want to share that love with other learners in the classroom and beyond. And being in love with learning also means that no matter how much I think I know, one of

my ongoing quests will always be for understanding.

So my talk tonight is about my 40+-year sojourn as a teacher. And here I must thank some more people. I thank the students represented by an elderly Korean man who took a remedial reading class with me many years ago. I asked him to come to the board and write a short sentence in Korean and then to explain it to the class. He was so proud to be in a college class and to have been called on to share some of what he knew.

I thank the students represented by the mother from the 40s Projects behind York College; she took one class with me. Her young sons were applying to a gifted elementary school affiliated with Queens College. She knew to tell her sons that if they were put in a waiting room with games, toys and books, they should get a book and read while they waited.

I am grateful to the current and former York students represented by those who have stopped by my office and said, "I am returning to college after having stopped out for several years. I came to see you because I remember you said I was a good writer." Some of these students work in our Writing Center or other offices in the College.

I am grateful to my colleagues here at York. We don't always agree politically or philosophically as demonstrated by our reactions to the Pathways initiative. But York College students are multicultural; many are the first generation in their families to attend college, and the majority of our students are women. I appreciate that I work with colleagues who are sensitive, caring and whose love of learning permeates the classroom and in many cases extends beyond the classroom for our students.

I have been privileged to teach and to hone my craft at different levels: junior high school, high school, college and in a Masters-

level teacher education program. In my more than 26 years at York, I have enjoyed sharing my love of learning with students in classes on African American Literature; African American Studies; African American and Jewish American fiction; Class, Race and Gender in Popular Literature; History of the English Language; Intro and Advanced Grammar; Sociolinguistics and Senior Seminars, such as the one I taught on the history of writing. But freshman-level courses are at the heart of what I appreciate about my York College teaching experience – English 125, Introduction to College Writing, English 200, Introduction to Literature, and a course that I am proud to have helped develop, Cultural Diversity 101, Introduction to Cultural Studies.

So I would like to share some things written by students, and I will end with something I wrote. One of the kinds of middle-stakes writing we do in Cultural Diversity 101 and in other classes is called response logs. The following is taken from a young man's Cultural Diversity 101 response log to a Jane Elliot documentary titled, *A Class Divided: The Brown Eyed/Blue Eyed Experiment* (Note: Language and spelling errors have not been edited, except where comprehension might be affected):

"I was surprised when I saw the video. The idea that Jane Elliot used was very interesting. The white children in her classroom were able to see what it was like to be segregated and treated differently because of a physical feature. One day she treated the blue-eyed children better than the brown-eyed children and then the next day she treated the brown-eyed children better than the blue eyed children. Her experiment seemed to be successful, because the children learned from it. When the

children were all grown up, she had a reunion with them. After asking them questions about their experience as children through the experiment, I find that they learned from it. They were not prejudice against black people or anyone.

Jane Elliot used the experiment with adults of different races, and the results were the same. One comment that a woman made was that it is easy to feel segregated once, but [unless] you are a person who feels it every day then you don't really know how it feels to be segregated against.

How many times has Jane Elliot used her experiment, and were they all successful?"

The following is a response log by an English 125 student to Martin Luther King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail".

"Civil rights leader of Atlanta, Georgia, Martin Luther King Jr. wrote a letter to the state clergymen(while he was in jail for eight days for participating in a nonviolent protest against segregated businesses in Birmingham) responding to the statements they made on Mr. King's ideas and concerns about the racial injustice in the United states particularly in Birmingham. Mr. King told the clergymen that he could not afford to not be concerned about the racial injustice that the black race faced. There were also too many laws that suppressed the Negro population and made them feel inferior to the white population- the superior. These laws were unjust- discrimination against voting, black married women denied the title as Mrs., blacks not being allowed to drink from whites' water fountains and many more. Mr. King stated that any law that up lifted

men was just and any that put men down, was considered unjust- like the ones that oppressed the Negro population. This was the reason why Mr. King [saw] it right to have a nonviolent campaign to fight for equal rights for all men regardless of race. at the end of the letter, Mr. King told the clergymen that he hoped that they would be able to see and understand what he was trying to prove.

Mr. Kings was a very bold man and would fight for what was right no matter what it cost him so that, all men would be equal. Not so many like him would stand up for what is right and fight for justice. It is impressing to know that a man like him did something that cost his life just to have justice for all.

'...law and order exist for the purpose of establishing justice and that when they fail in this purpose they become the dangerously structured dams that block the flow of social progress.'

Mr. King told the clergymen that the citizens of the country must follow the law and order of their nation but, when the law is not just, there arises conflict and that those affected by the unjust law must have the right to protest in a non-violent manor."

Next is a response log from a student in Sociolinguistics:

"When I saw Sociolinguistics listed in the college bulletin, I knew right away that it was something I had to take. As an English major, I do plenty of reading and writing, but I know I probably don't pay as much attention to language as I should. By that I mean, I've never really went out of my way to find out how I learned to speak, read or write. I am

concerned about how I speak in public and how that reflects on me and I believe that taking this course will have effects I have not even thought about.

In Pinker's chapter, 'Chatterboxes,' it was very interesting to know that 'no mute tribe has ever been discovered' (26). It's so interesting to me because it just shows that everyone has some way to communicate. As he said in his first chapter, communication is key. His story about the tribe of people who encountered the Europeans and saw them defecating was something, both funny and true. The Europeans may have looked, acted, and spoke differently, but they were just the same, as they said 'their [feces] smells bad like ours' (26).

After reading both chapters of Pinker's book, it is so true that we must leave our assumptions at the door before entering the classroom. We cannot judge people by the way they speak. During this course I would like to learn more about different English vernaculars and changing language registers. As it was stated in class, no form of English is unintelligent; we must just know when to use certain forms."

I conclude with something I started during warm-up writing time in an English 125 class. Warm-up writing is low-stakes writing in which students are not held accountable for grammar or spelling. The intent is to foster freedom of expression in writing.

Sometimes I imagine earth is alive; she's a female who was made pregnant over four and a half billion years ago by a visiting meteorite, or by a star or by another planet. Since then she has continuously spawned

children. So every time a species goes extinct, she has lost another child. Her first children, however, were not the animals or even proto-animals and insects that populate the earth today. Her first born were oceans, mountains, lakes, rivers, ponds, and land masses with ice caps, forests, deserts, and plains.

Like all mothers she grieves terribly when she loses one of her children, whether it's a dinosaur, a dried up river bed, or a leaf. And she grieves her own curse/blessing. Blessed that it seems she will always be here spawning, nurturing, but cursed because she has to watch her offspring perish. Fairly recently she brought forth a new offspring, designed to think, feel and even do something she had no need to do – talk. Her new offspring had a very long gestation period and required nurturing through childhood much longer than some of their cousins. She saw this as a good thing because their slow development would help them understand their connectedness to and mutual reliance on their brothers, sisters and cousins and because they could use their ability to think, feel and talk to help their mother, the planet, and to help and nurture one another. However, after what seemed like a very long

infancy and childhood, this new offspring developed into adolescence faster than perhaps even she had anticipated. They became adolescents with more power and access to stuff than they were mature enough to handle, stultifying their movement toward adulthood. They began to engage in follies such as believing they could control and manipulate something as immutable and beyond understanding as time. They even began to think that just because they could talk that they actually had something to say. And mother earth is sensing something that may be new even to her. She has had some kind of physical response to the actions of her newest offspring. She keeps sneezing; her stomach growls; her hair falls out; her nails thin; she has diarrhea; and is there is blood in her stool? But her children, the new offspring, don't seem to notice. In their pursuit to collect something they refer to as money and to maintain something else they refer to as power, they mistake her phlegm, snot, bowels as something they call natural resources to be fought over and controlled. Likewise, they declare the filings from her thinning fingernails and remnants of her thinning hair to be rare, priceless minerals*. Even her sneezes and stomach

growls become what they refer to as natural disasters. And these disasters become part of some winners/losers game they are fond of playing. They not only seem to believe that there is some significant difference in origin and purpose between what they call each other – Japanese, Haitian, Chilean, Mexican, Luo, Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Black, White – but they also seem unaware that they have other brothers, sisters and cousins at all.

(*See Nikki Giovanni's "Ego Tripping.")

This year I transition from teaching as a career to a thing referred to as retirement. But I am not retiring from what motivated me to become a teacher. My love of learning; my need to share learning with others; and my quest for understanding are organic parts of who I am.

Let me close by thanking a few more people. Thank you Charlene, my wife of 40 years, who transitioned to the ancestors five years ago. On a few occasions, Charlene taught children in her second grade class whose parents were in one of my college classes. Thank you Torie and Keisa, our son and daughter, and the beautiful grandchildren that I now have the privilege of spoiling. And finally, I am thankful for being blessed with the love and friendship of some special people in today's audience.

Dr. Charles Coleman, an Applied Linguist, is an Associate Professor of English at York College, the City University of New York where he teaches freshman composition, introduction to literature, introductory and advanced grammar, history of the English language, sociolinguistics and special topics in linguistics.



He is also one of the faculty founders and an instructor in York College's Cultural Diversity Program. He has published in the journals *College Composition and Communication* and *Pragmatics*, and he has presented at national and international conferences in the areas Cultural Diversity, Language Pragmatics and Language and Literacy practices of speakers of African American Vernacular English. He is currently co-editing a book titled *Racialized Identity in the United States*.