
FRIENDS OF THE OBERLIN COLLEGE LIBRARY

JOHNETTA B. COLE

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LESSONS LEARNED AND NOT LEARNED AT OBERLIN

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An Address

by

JOHNNETTA B. COLE

at the

Annual Dinner

of the

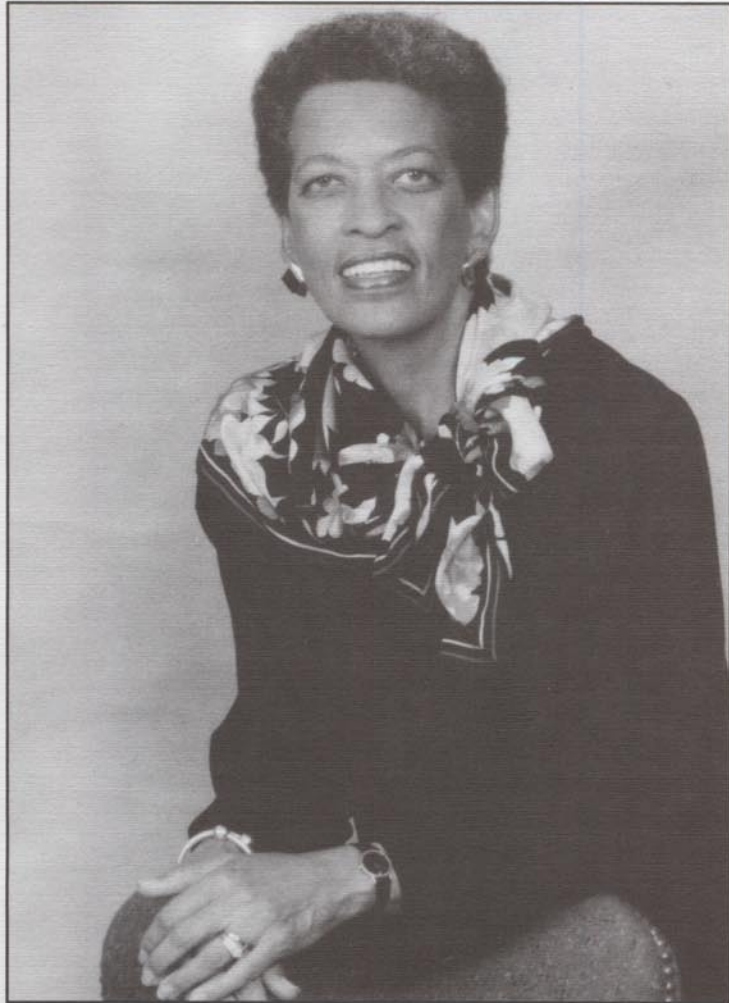
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Johnnetta B. Cole '57

Introduction

by

Nancy Schrom Dye

I'm so pleased to be here this evening with the Friends of the Library, and especially pleased to be able to introduce to you a very special friend of Oberlin College, Dr. Johnnetta Cole.

At the age of sixteen, after starting her college career at Fisk University, Johnnetta Betch entered Oberlin where her older sister Marvene was a music major. This bright young woman from Jacksonville, Florida, wanted to be a pediatrician. But she was lucky enough to take classes with a number of our most eminent professors, including George Simpson and Milt Yinger. They introduced her to the exciting field of modern social science, particularly anthropology, the science of finding the links between and the distinctiveness of people of all cultures. These courses sparked an immediate, passionate response in Johnnetta, and she changed her mind about her career. She would be an anthropologist, much to the dismay of her family. She took every course offered in the field at Oberlin, and after graduation she went on to study with Melville Herskovitz, one of the leading scholars of modern anthropology, at Northwestern University. She did her field work in Liberia and the Caribbean, and earned her Masters and her Ph.D. at Northwestern University to become one of the first African American women with a Ph.D. in anthropology. Dr. Cole went on to a highly successful career in college teaching, first at Washington State University, where she was named outstanding faculty member of the year; then to the University of Massachusetts as Professor of Afro-American Studies and Anthropology, and later Associate Provost; and at Hunter College of the City University of New York where she was Professor of Anthropology and Director of the Latin American and Caribbean Studies Program.

She has written two textbooks that are widely used in college classrooms throughout the United States. I was happy to discover after a brief electronic search from my office yesterday that both of these books are in the Oberlin College Library's collection and even happier to discover that both are currently on loan to Oberlin College students. Her most recent book was published in 1993 by Doubleday. It is entitled *Conversations with America's Sister President*.

In 1987 Dr. Cole was appointed the seventh president of Spelman College—the first African American woman to lead this historically black women's college in Atlanta. From her presidency at Spelman she has gained a national reputation and voice in higher education. She has become one of America's leading educators. She has helped build Spelman into a major college center for research about and for women of color. And she has advanced the cause of historically black colleges as chair of the President's Assembly of the United Negro College Fund. She served as a leader of President Clinton's transition team for education, labor, arts and the humanities and now chairs the Department of Education's Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education. She has won numerous awards from such diverse groups as the YWCA, the Jewish National Fund, the Jeannette Rankin Foundation, the American Association of University Women, the National Coalition of One Hundred Black Women. She was included, as our Librarian Ray English noted earlier this evening, in the *IDream a World* exhibit and book of portraits of black women who have changed America. Her picture hangs in the halls of Oberlin High School as a role model for our own community's young people. Finally, my own introduction of Johnnetta Cole would be woefully incomplete if I did not pay personal tribute to her as an individual who has been enormously supportive and collegial in her relationship with me during my transition to being president of Oberlin College. I am deeply grateful to Johnnetta for her friendship and her collegiality.

Most important to us here, she remains true to the values we cherish at Oberlin. She believes in the fundamental equality of all people, regardless of race, gender, or class. She believes in striving for excellence, and she has always maintained a mighty outrage against injustice.

I am deeply honored to introduce to you my sister president, Dr. Johnnetta Betch Cole.

LESSONS LEARNED AND NOT LEARNED AT OBERLIN

Sister President, Nancy; my dearest Spelman sisters, Frieda and Pam; Sisters and Brothers of Oberlin; Sisters and Brothers all:

It's been quite an experience to once again defy Thomas Wolfe and come home—one more time—to my alma mater. But then Wolfe is right, because that to which one returns is never the same as it was the last time one passed that way.

What is so intensely different about this time is the sense of a new day for Oberlin, a hope that now she is really going to shine, this place of such old and glorious history. It's in the air, it's on the tongue of everyone I've seen and talked with: the notion that a kind of healing is in process and that the struggle for a whole and healthy community is a winnable battle. There is a feeling of excitement, the kind that is associated with the launching of a space ship, even the take-off in an airplane—if it is a journey you wish to go on. Yes, there is a feeling around this place that Oberlin is about to truly soar to the heights of her very own possibilities and in doing so, she will make sure that everyone is on the journey. By that act of inclusion, Oberlin would not only reach a marvelous future, she would fall back in love with her early mission to be a place for women folks, for black folks—yes, for all folks. And where is it all coming from, who in the world is behind it all? Sister President Nancy, surely you must know that it is you, you are so very much behind this fresh moment, this dream of a new day.

The atmosphere of expectation, these declarations of an exquisite vision of what Oberlin could be—it all comes from our collective need to do here what every institution must do periodically: to reinvent itself, to transform what is into what mighty and precious thing it can become.

This then is the Oberlin I have come to in these early days in November. This is the context into which I have walked, responding to the Brother Librarian's invitation to share some thoughts with you.

I think I should let you know that the talk you are about to hear is not the one that was prepared for you before this particular morning. The talk that arrived with me last evening, neatly word-processed and in that wonderful large speech print that these eyes of mine adore—that speech is going right back to Atlanta in the morning, safe and totally “undelivered.” But you should know that it is a great speech! It's just not the speech that awakened me this morning: rattling around in my head and pushing against my heart—to come on out and meet you, to meet each of you, this evening.

What I want to talk about tonight, what I feel compelled to talk about is both what this place taught me and what I didn't learn or experience here. So permit me to speak quite personally about the Oberlin I met, the Oberlin that touched who I was as a sixteen-year-old African American kid from the intensely Jim Crow South; the Oberlin that put a kind of "whammy" on me that still both haunts and delights me in very consistent and meaningful ways, yes even now as I carry out the complex and deeply joyful tasks of the presidency of Spelman.

And so here we go: lessons learned and not learned at Oberlin.

I

First, and with the honest disclaimer that Ray English did not set me up to say this: at Oberlin I learned one more time how symbolic libraries had been and would be in my life.

Remember with me that I grew up in the Jim Crow South. I was born into an upper-middle-class household in Jacksonville, Florida in 1936. And so, in my first attempts to sound out letters that make words that signaled concepts, I had to learn *White* and *Colored*; for I would see those words often: printed over water fountains and no less clearly they were there even when there was no word that marked the exact seats on a bus for my kind of folks. Just begin in the back and stop before any white man, woman or child wanted a seat and you would be all right.

Well, there was no sign that said "colored" over the colored branch of the YMCA, or a certain public school or the library, all of which bore the name of Abraham Lincoln Lewis, my maternal great-grandfather, who was Jacksonville's leading black businessman. With a small group of other African American men, he had founded in 1901 the first insurance company in the state of Florida.

Each and every time that I went to the A. L. Lewis public library in Jacksonville, Florida, it was with pride that I saw my great-grandfather's name there; it was with excitement that I waited to see what book Olga Bradham, the librarian, would put into my hands—like the icing on the cake of my own discoveries. But no less present was the gnawing sensation that I was in the colored library—the one with fewer books than the white folks had; the one where a good percentage of our books were their hand-me-downs.

Surely it was that experience and all those repeated throughout my early education that made the library at Fisk University such an important symbol when I went there as an early entrance student. There I was, fifteen years old and at a university—about as bright and naive as a fifteen-year-old could be.

It was into that library at Fisk with its hard stone walls that I often went for warmth and comfort. I felt safe there—at least until some young man came around to where I was, head in a book—to test if I really knew how to act like a college student!

Presiding over that magnificent edifice as the librarian was Arna Bontemps—a giant in African American letters. He was my first genuine, regulation, alive intellectual hero.

But, you see, I also remember that far too often, what I needed or wanted wasn't there. It was over at Vanderbilt Library or in some other library that once again belonged to the white folks. Even then I knew that it wasn't about being efficient and using interlibrary loan to maximize resources, it was about that same ol' stuff again—it was about white and colored libraries, it was about racism.

I've spoken all of those words to set this stage, to have you understand, my sisters and brothers, that this place called a library was of enormous symbolic meaning for me.

I had no idea how many volumes were actually here—but what mattered to me was that this was my library building and there wasn't some other building up the street and across the tracks where the newer books were kept. Whether an illusion or not, I felt that my library, Oberlin's library, had all the books anyone could want or need as a college student.

What I didn't know back there in 1953 through 1957 was just how much more Oberlin's library could do to become a welcoming place for each group of folks who add their squares and colors and patterns to the Oberlin quilt.

That would have to come as the very scholarship which is housed in this place became more receptive to other ways of constructing knowledge, indeed other ways of knowing about other ideas and peoples and experiences.

It is my sense—and it's a quick rather than a studied analysis—it is my sense that in Ray English and his staff we have folks who understand how and why buildings with countless books, articles, recordings, prints, films are not ipso facto by and of and for all of the people. And so I thank you Ray for all that you and your colleagues are doing to make certain that her story is housed here no less than his story; that the tale of the hunt is found in the words of the lion and the lioness, no less than the rendition of the hunter.

These days, when machines replace what I used to do at the trays of the card catalogue, thank you for making sure that for all who come here the warmth of human engagement with a librarian—a person—is not only possible but welcomed.

In all sincerity, I want to also thank you who are friends of this place that was so important in my life at Oberlin, a place that must

remain a symbol of the power of ideas and the necessity for all people to have access to that power.

II

It was here at Oberlin that I fully encountered the magic of a liberal arts curriculum. It was here that I came to understand the difference between balance and neutrality; the importance of focus on an issue as opposed to tunnel vision. It was here at Oberlin that I developed sharp powers of reasoning and analysis; and I was taught how to reach conclusions without closing my mind to other information and different possibilities.

I know that I brought to this place an ability to speak and to write. But Oberlin taught me how to do those things more clearly and effectively—in short how to communicate with precision, cogency, force and passion. Prof. Boase, you will never know how much I learned here and use every day because of you and our debate team. I came to talk that kind of talk here, and also to walk with extraordinary skill, the line that separates attention to the smallest detail and the largest picture. Along that thin line, I could reach out and touch either method—and most of all envision synthesis between the two.

And yet, let me share with you what you must surely already know. That despite the countless ways in which my liberal arts education at Oberlin was an exquisite set of certain intellectual experiences—it was a liberal arts education that too often failed to expose me, to teach me, to challenge me with the totality of human conditions.

In short, it was some of the best education available for that time in the American academy—but how much better it would have been if the faculty had then known what increasing numbers of Oberlin faculty know today: that in order to produce truly well-educated women and men, students must be exposed to a fully inclusive set of realities.

In my days here, the curriculum was far more Eurocentric and male-centered than it is today. It was a time when the history, arts, economics of all the peoples of the world were often presented as fundamentally secondary to those of Europeans and white Americans.

It was a time when the experiences of women folks were trapped in a course here or there on “the family.” It was a time when at the base of what was taught and learned was the assumption that everybody in the world was a heterosexual and God only made the world for those who in a physical sense are fully abled.

In short, it was a time before the enormous contribution of Black Studies and other interdisciplinary approaches that call for an understanding of the way of life of different peoples of color. It was a time before Women's Studies, and therefore a time when a college like Oberlin was hardly less guilty than all other schools and colleges of praising heroes and ignoring heroes.

Where were the professors whose own experiences and intellectual interests would bring to me and my classmates the range of perspectives, the diversity of views that would have helped me to better see and confront myself—as a young African American woman, and to do so, of course within the context of the world?

My professors were mighty intellectual giants who taught me so much. But can you blame me for wishing that I could have also learned from more folks who looked like me and who shared more of where I had been and needed to go?

My music appreciation class was so spectacular that I rarely hear classical music without messaging it with lessons I learned at Oberlin. But why is it that I met Bach and Mozart here but not the works of Coltrane, and Billie Holiday?

How fortunate you are, my sisters and brothers who are here at Oberlin now—today you are exposed to the oral and written literature of Native Americans, Asian, Hispanic and African Americans. And among your faculty, far more than in my day, are teachers from and of those very communities.

Where I have the privilege of working, at Spelman College, I see the mighty effects of a long tradition of having a faculty that is two-thirds women and heavily African American; the effects of a long-standing commitment to a liberal arts curriculum; and now the extraordinary leap in quality which comes from more conscious attention to the lessons of Black Studies and Women's Studies.

I suspect I see all of that in part because of my experiences at Oberlin.

III

It was certainly here at Oberlin that I came to feel and to know the power of interracial and interfaith relationships.

Remember that I came from the South, where in 1953 the world was made up of only two kinds of folks: black ones and white ones; and as far as I was concerned, diversity in the arena of religion revolved around whether you were a Baptist or a Methodist—for more diversity try confronting which kind of Baptist or Methodist. What an absolutely mind-boggling and heart-rending experience it was for me to be with students, faculty, and staff who came in far more

versions of humanity than I thought existed. And in the language and behavior of the '50s, so many tried to make me feel welcome, to feel at home.

But I learned here at Oberlin the critical need for there to be enough of one's own folks before it is possible to be at ease with all other folks. That is why I found my way to Mt. Zion, a small black church in Oberlin; that is why I traveled 40 miles to a chapter of a black sorority—Delta Sigma Theta—in Cleveland; and that is why I never strayed away from the circle of Oberlin black students who didn't need an explanation for how I did my hair, and who never asked me to speak for the whole race.

I hope that there is little need for me to say more on this point about why it is so deeply important to have a house, an organization, a club where students of a particular ethnic, racial, or religious group that has known the bitter sting of bigotry can find the comfort of the familiar, the known, the deeply loved.

In words similar to those of Howard Thurman, a great black theologian, let me say: a person has got to feel at home somewhere before he or she can feel at home everywhere. But hear me, my sisters and brothers of color—I trust that it is also clear that at the same time that each group of color, or religious denomination, or sexual orientation at Oberlin may need to stop at a particular brand-name filling station—everybody here has got to move along the same road. I am grateful to Sister President Diana Chapman Walsh of Wellesley for that marvelous metaphor.

IV

Let me tell you about something else that I learned at Oberlin that has stayed with me over all of these years. I learned that coming to understand the world is the first role of the scholar. But it is not the only role. A scholar, a well-educated person, also has a responsibility to help change the world—for the better. The people who taught me this were more often my classmates and schoolmates than my professors. It was from the women and men of the Oberlin student body that I received instruction in social activism. It was a marvelous period when we saw ourselves as agents of change.

Into the wee hours of the night we would debate Marxism versus Pan-Africanism. Could there be a world without anti-semitism and racism, we asked? How would we bring an end to war? Was poverty inevitable in this world of ours?

To this very day, I am profoundly grateful to Oberlin for the political education I received here. Clearly my progressive politics

were born in late night bull sessions in Tank Hall and in gatherings on Tappan Square.

But let me tell you what didn't happen at Oberlin when I was here: somehow we never made a definitive connection between what we were learning in the classroom and what we could have been doing in terms of service in the very communities that are in and near Oberlin.

Before this criticism seems too harsh, let me quickly say that in those days, very few colleges or universities had put it together—the need to bring theory and practice into such close communion that one could accurately speak of service learning.

At Spelman, how proud I am of the fact that fifty percent of our students are engaged in community service—serving food in homeless shelters, comforting women in rape crisis centers, working in hospices for the victims of AIDS. But far too little connection is made between those efforts and courses in sociology, economics, biology and women's studies.

Today, in our America, when there are so many broken lives that cry out to be fixed; when violence and inhumanity toward each other characterizes so many of our human encounters; when eleven- and twelve-year-old kids plan their funerals because the only thing they have plenty of is hopelessness, can't we please find a way to put all of this knowledge we have to the service of a different kind of world?

V

Finally, let me tell you about one more very precious gift that I received at Oberlin. It was, quite simply, the answer to the question of what I would be when I grew up.

I came to Oberlin by way of Fisk University, convinced that I would be a pre-med major and one day I would go riding into the sunset as a pediatrician. But, as I've written in my book *Conversations*, all of that got turned around the day I sat in George Eaton Simpson's class and heard and felt Jamaican Revivalist cult music—an example, Professor Simpson said, of African retentions in the New World—a case in point of what cultural anthropologists study.

Umph: I didn't really know how to spell anthropology, but there I was, in the right class, because it met at the right time, ready to be turned on to what would become a life-long profession.

From Simpson and Yinger and their big red book, *Racial and Cultural Minorities*, I had learned to better phrase the questions that haunted me about my community and my nation. Now Simpson would watch over me intellectually, as I formulated questions when

I encountered Hopi myths, Kung ecological patterns, Eskimo kinship patterns, and always—because of who my guide was—the ways of various African American (including Caribbean) peoples.

Let me say, without any intention to be melodramatic: that class and all of the anthropology that I learned in the rest of my days at Oberlin fundamentally changed my life because it changed the way I came to look at the world.

Nothing could have been more exciting, more intriguing, more revolutionary to me at that time than the discovery of the many ways in which we human beings are both different and similar; the reality that African American peoples, like all other folks, are the carriers of their ancestors' culture; and that racism and sexism—like the overwhelming majority of all that we do and say and believe—is learned! (A lesson the authors of *The Bell Curve* have yet to learn.)

Because I had the privilege to be George Eaton Simpson's student I turned around to see that in understanding the ways of others, I would better come to understand my own. Yes, as the saying goes in anthropology, it's scarcely the fish who discovers water.

I can tell you that not a day goes by that I do not, in some way or other, use the fundamental skills and concepts that I learned from those early adventures with anthropology right here at Oberlin. As the President of Spelman, I try:

—to listen carefully to hear all of the voices in the community

—to ground my understanding of the culture of Spelman in participant observation (I still teach)

—and I continue to base my actions on the knowledge that, despite the tenacity with which people hold on to old ways, they can and do learn new ones.

I guess I should tell you that what I didn't learn from my days at Oberlin was just how long it would be before most folks in this world of ours would come to appreciate why there are such lines that divide us and all the potential for human good if we would tighten the ties that can bind us. But we folks of the world will just have to keep trying to learn all of that.

You've been awfully patient to listen as I tried to express my deep gratitude to Oberlin and my hope that she will now come ever closer to fulfilling her promise.

It's been so good for me to come back here again—and to learn from doing so. Let me leave you with lines from T. S. Eliot's poem, *Little Gidding*:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.