

“Things to Do Between Six Feet Tall and Six Feet Under”

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*As Prepared for Delivery*

I'd like to start off by thanking the selection committee for bestowing this honor upon me and especially Eric for that introduction! I cannot tell you how proud I am of him. In many ways he symbolizes why I have stayed here at Muhlenberg College for the past seven years. I'm not sure how many of you know this fact, but Eric and I share the same birthday which clearly marks Eric for greatness and we both share that birthday with Barack Obama so for those of you who voted for McCain/Palin and/or are really annoyed that I'm standing up here perhaps there is an astrological reason why first you got him as president and now you're getting me as your last lecturer...more on that in a moment...

So can you hear me? Are you listening? So this lecture has seriously stressed me out the past few weeks...what should I say? How should I say it? What should I wear? Burning questions...

As honored as I was and am that so many of you wanted to hear what I had to say one more time before leaving this place, and have told me how excited you are that I am your last lecturer...I have struggled to write this damned lecture or rather I have struggled to construct a last lecture that does not perpetuate the myth that I am some kind of rage-filled Black gay man who can not say anything positive...but over the hours I have sat down to write this I came to the realization that that will probably be a losing battle ...Hell- I was initially going to title this lecture: “You're damned if you do and you're damned if you don't” because I realized that for me to physically stand up here and speak to you with my face being projected on the roof of this tent and all the hoopla that has surrounded my nomination carries symbolical weight, social and political implications that are deeper than my delivering a nice speech on what I hope you will take away from your four years here...I stand here fully aware that it is not just about what I say tonight, but what it means that tonight I am standing here at all. I am aware that regardless of what I say or how I say it, there are some of you who will not get past the fact that you are not looking into a mirror or more specifically that you are looking into a mirror and you don't like what you see...And because of that you will most likely not hear a thing that I have to say... See I learned a long time ago, it's not what I say,

but what I do and then ultimately it's not what I do, but how my actions are perceived by the powers that be... So let me say this, I appreciate, I am deeply honored to be standing up here tonight, and I am going to do my best to do what it is I have tried to do since the first day I started to teaching, approach education as an act of transgression, a movement against and beyond boundaries...So I should warn you also that I am going to ramble on a little tonight about my own past, not as though it is my own past exactly, but a subject of fiction if you will. I'm doing this in a kind of halting attempt to relate the terms of my experience to yours; and to find out what specific principle, if any, unites us in spite of all the obvious disparities, some of which are superficial and some of which are profound, and most of which are entirely misunderstood...We'll come back to that, in any case, this misunderstanding, I mean in a minute, but I want to warn you that I'm not pretending to be unbiased.

Tonight, I am going to draw upon the writings of two social critics/commentators whose works have always deeply resonated with me and have greatly informed my teaching- James Baldwin and bell hooks. So let's pretend that I want to develop a script for a dance-theater work concerning the people or some of the people with whom I have encountered in my life- between six feet tall and six feet under. And let's assume, like any good artist/scholar I want to impose myself on these people as little as possible. That means that I do not want to tell them or you the audience what principle their lives illustrate or what principle is activating their lives, but by examining their lives I hope to be able to make them convey to me and to you all what their lives mean...Now I know that is not altogether possible. I mean that I know that my people, my characters are controlled by my point of view and that by the time I begin the dance theater piece I have some idea of what I want the piece to do, or to say, or to be. But just the same, whatever my point of view is and whatever my intentions, because I am an American artist my subject and my material inevitably has to be a handful of incoherent people in an incoherent country. And I don't mean incoherent in any light sense, and later on we'll talk about what I mean when I use that word.

So who are these people who fill my past and seem to clamor to be expressed: I grew up in a time and place where the prime directive given to children by adults, especially little black children was "Do as I say, not as I do." My mother was very fond of saying this to me and I assume she learned this from her father...But I always struggled with this because she would also tell me when I would do something careless or thoughtlessly drop something or bump into something or I would ask a question that she

assumed had an obvious answer, “you have eyes- use them.” Well these two directives seemed incongruous to me...if I am supposed to do what adults say and not pay attention to what they do, why do I need to see them at all? What should I be looking at, looking for? This kind of reasoning only prompted me to ask more questions of my parents, of my teachers, of my peers (with my eyes either literally or figuratively closed to what they might be doing) which in turn only prompted more punishment or chastisement regarding my lack of common sense...Most folks back then, hell, most folks I encounter now thought I was a little slow...most, but not all...like my great grandmother-Eva Tennessee, the first figure in this tale.

I titled this lecture “Things to Do Between Six Feet Tall and Six Feet Under” in honor of my great grandmother who passed away when I was seven years old. She was the first person in my life to pass away where I was old enough to understand what death meant...and hers was the first of only three funerals I have attended in my lifetime. I remember when I was five or six years, the first summer my parents left me down on my grandfather’s farm- yes that’s right I spent summers on a farm, well actually on the porch of my grandfather’s farm since my grandfather quickly discerned that I was utterly useless in the fields with him...Actually, I credit him with my decision to excel in school since the one and only time he took me out into the field and he sucked his teeth as he looked at me while I lay in the dirt crying like I was being beaten within an inch of my life and curtly said, “Boy you better get an education because you little ass will die if you have to do any real work...” and he was right...Anyway, I digress... So as I was saying, the title of this lecture is in honor of my great grandmother, Eva Tennessee with whom I used to sit on the porch and she would just let me ask questions until I ran out of questions to ask...(actually, I remember I never did run out of questions, she would just threaten to send me out to the field with my grandfather if I didn’t stop asking so many damned questions). But sometimes during my interrogation sessions (which consisted mostly of me asking her when were my mother and father coming to take me back to civilization) I would ask a question and she’d give me an answer I could not even begin to understand and I’d ask her- ‘whatdya mean?’ and she would casually chuckle and tell me, “Honey, if you can’t figure it out by the time you’re six feet tall, you’ll get an answer when you’re six feet under...” And so the tale began, so it now begins...

Okay, so obviously I am not six feet tall, and clearly at this point, only with the aid of some platform shoes will I ever physically be six feet tall...I let go of that goal around 10 years old when my family doctor finally told me, “Charles, no one in your family is six

feet tall, in fact no one in your family is even 5' 10", but the way you are going with those Twinkies and ho-ho's perhaps you can make it to six feet wide..."

No, I am not talking physical height, and I am not here to suggest that you should treat your lives as a checklist, the way some of you have treated your four years at a liberal arts college running from class to class just to say you've taken it, but not actually taking the time to learn something and then build upon that knowledge, connecting it to other bodies of knowledge or to your lived experiences outside the classroom...or rather I am not talking about how to acquire, attain or consume results (you don't need me for that-you're here about to graduate...you know how to achieve a result)...I'm talking about the process of growth, about the knowledge one acquires and the subsequent actions one takes in their pursuit of a goal with that knowledge in hand. I am talking about the motives behind the goals we set for ourselves...In other words this tale is about the JOURNEY between six feet tall and six feet under, not about any specific destination...

The feminist scholar and social activist, bell hooks once wrote that "Children make the best theorists, since they have not yet been educated into accepting our routine social practices as 'natural,' and so insist on posing to those practices the most embarrassingly general and fundamental questions, regarding them with a wondering estrangement which we adults have long forgotten. Since they do not yet grasp our social practices as inevitable, they do not see why we might not do things differently." (hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, p. 59) That was certainly the case with me. So a little more about chubby kid who hated outdoors...eventually he found himself at the gates of Academia in severe pain- the accumulation of perceived and received hurt was so intense he was not sure how to go on living. He came to the academy desperate, wanting to comprehend and to be surrounded by people on a similar quest- to grasp what was happening around and within him. Most importantly, he wanted to make the hurt go away. He saw in education, in the acquisition of scholarly knowledge, a location for healing. Imagine then if you will, this man carrying with him his childhood pain. Our protagonist obviously did not feel truly connected to these strange people, to these familial folks who could not only fail to grasp his worldview, but who just simply did not want to hear it- Children are better seen than heard... As a child he didn't know where he had come from. And when he was not desperately seeking to belong to this family unit or to the community in which they lived (that never seemed to accept or want him), he was desperately trying to discover the place of his belonging. He was desperately (and perhaps he still is desperately) trying to find his way home. So living in childhood

without a sense of home, he found a place a sanctuary in 'theorizing,' in making sense out of what was happening around him, through self-reflection.

I'd imagined that it must have seemed to his kith and kin that some monster had appeared in their midst in the shape and body of a child- a demonic little person who threatened to subvert and undermine all that they were seeking to build. No wonder then that their response was to repress, contain, punish. No wonder then that the mother would say to the little boy, now and then, exasperated, frustrated, mortified "I don't know where I got you from, but I sure wish I could give you back."

He believed in childhood he had found a place where he could explore possible futures, a place where life could be lived differently- his imagination, the place of 'what if...'. This 'lived' experience of critical thinking, of reflection and analysis, became a place where he worked at explaining the hurt and making it go away. It was through his imagination that he 'discovered' the transgressive power of education and eventually the academy...and to think it was his illiterate grandfather who actually set him on this path... Fundamentally, he learned from this experience that theory could be a healing place. But don't get it twisted- education/the academy/theory is not inherently healing, liberatory, or revolutionary in and of themselves. It fulfills this function only when we ask that it do so and then direct our imaginations towards this end. The French poet, Henri Michaux warns that "before being a product, thought is a process" and that the pursuit of knowledge often requires that we "pass through difficult, undignified places."

Often individuals who employ terms like theory, education, activism- are not necessarily practitioners whose habits of being and living best embody the action, the practice of theorizing or engaging in the struggle for social justice. The privileged act of naming often affords those in power access to modes of communication and enables them to project an interpretation, a definition, a label...a description of their work and actions, that may not be accurate, that may obscure what is really taking place...As I have discovered as an adult, as an academic this is all too often the case...we all have come to education to liberate ourselves, to gain access to freedom be it economic, social, political, religious or intellectual. But academic production of liberatory social theories often fall prey to the very hierarchical settings they try to resist more often than not. Now so far in this hypothetical sketch of an unwritten and probably unwritable script, so good. As much as I hope that what I say and how I am saying it isn't boring, I know can't afford the luxury of being simplistic or glib this evening...You see, as much as I am so deeply honored to stand here before you today to deliver this lecture, I would feel

dishonest if I did not admit to you that past few weeks since the announcement was made have brought to a head the interesting collection of experiences that constitute the internal battle I have waged within myself almost daily (that I have often discussed in my classes) . What battle am I speaking of you ask? The one born out of being 'a stranger in the village' so to speak- of being the only member of this faculty of approximately two hundred who is African American...(and yes- I hear the loud psychic sigh that some of you are making to have it confirmed that 'Oh God, he IS going to talk about the black thing- AGAIN.) Well get over it...it's only twenty minutes of your life...and then you can go right back to ignoring that race and racism still matters...that is after all your privilege, but more on that in a second...

So for this part of our protagonist's story I am going to draw on James Baldwin's essay *A Stranger in the Village* as the literary frame:

Every year despite obvious evidence to the contrary, this young man comes back to the Academy with the sense that no black man had ever set foot on this tiny campus before him. I do not mean this literally, but figuratively. Wherever he passed, the first year he was here, a wind passed with him-of astonishment, curiosity, amusement and outrage. After that first year, after the second year, and the third all the way up to today he never intended to return. But he did return in the next year, to work (the academy offered him sanctuary remember?). Now after seven years, most people on this campus know his name; scarcely do they hesitate to use it- Hi Charles! (Some not even realizing that that's Professor Anderson to them...they need to earn the right to be familiar with him), they know that he happens to also be able to teach other things besides just cool dance moves, and that, yes, he comes from America, that he is American, as American as they are (though, this, apparently, they will never really believe: black people come from the country of Africa after all). But he remains as much a stranger to some of them today as he was the first day he arrived.

In the beginning he was far too shocked to have any real reaction. In so far as he reacted at all, he reacted by trying to be pleasant-it being a great part of the African American's education (long before he goes to school) that he must make people like him. This smile-and-the-world-smiles-with-you routine worked about as well in this situation as it had in the situation for which it was designed, which is to say it did not work at all. No one, after all, can be liked when his or her human weight and human complexity cannot be, or at least has not been, admitted. Eventually he became convinced that his smile was simply another unheard of phenomenon, which allowed them to see his teeth-

they did not, really, see his smile, and he began to think that, should he take to snarling, no one would notice any difference. In all of this, in which it must be conceded there was the charm of genuine wonder and in which the young man could tell there were certainly no element of intentional unkindness, there was yet no suggestion that he was human: he was simply a living wonder.

Now he knew that they did not mean to be unkind, and he knows it now; it is necessary, nevertheless, for him to repeat this to myself each time that he walks along academic row. Those people who shout his name in some way that reveals the hint of a stereotype of a black man or gay man or a dancer that they would never consciously admit informs their perception of what he says and what he does have no way of knowing the echoes this sound raises in me. Most of these people are brimming with good humor and the man can see how some of them swell with pride when he stops to speak with them...and he is always humbled and bolstered by these moments.

Just the same, there are days when he cannot pause and smile, when he has no heart to talk with the people of the Academy; when, indeed, he mutters sourly to himself, exactly as he muttered on the streets of Richmond, VA, and on the farm of his grandfather when he was a little boy trying to figure out why it was so wrong to ask why.

Sometimes he walks around this campus, and tries to tune out the not so subtle second glances or the thinly veiled racist or homophobic banter that passes for joking. Or he tries to not think too deeply about what is going through the mind or perhaps not going through the minds of the young African Americans on this campus who go out of their way to blend in like flies in buttermilk, who avoid any gathering that might identify them as anything but 'normal', who avoid making eye contact with him and the few other African American adults on this campus but alas he can not help but get swept up in that old familiar feeling...

And this is so despite everything he may do to feel differently, despite his friendly conversations with the student workers at Java Joe's, despite his many friendships with those of you who have worked with him on dance pieces, despite the *hey's and whassups* which he exchanges with people as he walks, despite the fact that he knows that no individual can be taken to task for what history is doing, or has done. He just thinks to himself, 'James Joyce is right about history being a nightmare-but it may be the nightmare from which no one *can* awaken.' People are trapped in history and history is trapped in them.

Now we've brought this hypothetical protagonist to this place, this supposed

site of freedom- as the Academy and American education claims to be- now what are we to do with him, what does it all mean, what can we make it mean? Does it matter? It should...because if he didn't show up every day, year after year who would speak for those who cannot get through these elite gates? How would you be prepared to engage a world that is far more diverse than you could possibly imagine (especially if you actually buy the idea that Muhlenberg is as diverse as any place you want to live). So I suspect for those of us who listened and especially for those of us still talking amongst yourselves only half listening, but fully judging, and of course for those of us deeply embroiled in texting, this little hypothetical script seems completely incoherent...

So when I spoke about incoherence I said I'd try to tell you what I meant by the word. It's the kind of incoherence that occurs, let's say, when I am frightened, I am absolutely frightened to death, and there's something which is happening or about to happen that I don't want to face...and yes I know not everything that is faced can be changed, but I firmly believe that nothing can change if it is not faced...So for instance allow me to use an example...I have a friend who has just murdered his life coach and put her in the closet and I know it, but we're just not going to talk about it. Now this means very shortly since, after all, I know the corpse is in the closet, and she knows I know the corpse in the closet, we're sitting around having a few drinks and trying to be buddy-buddy together, that very shortly, we can't talk about anything because we can't talk about that. No matter what I say I may inadvertently stumble upon this corpse. And this incoherence which seems to afflict this campus and by extension this country is analogous to that. I mean in order to have a conversation with someone you have to reveal yourself. In order to have a real relationship with somebody you have got to take the risk of being thought, God forbid, an oddball, of having someone wonder where did you come from...You have to take a chance, which in some peculiar way most of us don't seem willing to take. It would require on the journey between six feet tall and six feet under that you stop...just for a second...and take a look- at where you've been, where you're headed, where you stand right now...It would require taking a moment to appreciate the sacrifices others have made during their own journeys towards six feet tall and the price they paid as they reached six feet under...It would require realizing that with your privilege, comes responsibility...

Most people are not naturally reflective any more than they are naturally malicious, and on occasions like today most of us would prefer to keep politics and such concepts as race and racism at a certain human remove because it is easier for us thus

to preserve the sanctity of the occasion- the celebration of your hard work to attain this level of education, of acquiring a certain amount of knowledge, without really having to consider your privilege and having to take responsibility for your what you will do with that privilege and the knowledge given to you. You are inescapably aware, nevertheless, that you are in a better position in the world than many people are, as this occasion reveals you are accumulating more cultural cache to embark on the next leg of your journey...Yet some of you can't quite put to death the suspicion that you are therefore in a position to possibly be hated by those who have inherited the disaccumulation that is inextricably linked to your continued accumulation of privilege. I don't think anyone wishes to be hated, neither do most of us wish to change places with those less fortunate, less privileged than yourselves. But alas, people who shut their eyes to reality simply invite their own destruction, and anyone who insists on remaining in a state of innocence long after that innocence is dead turns himself into a monster...

So I'd like to end this lecture by thanking you all once again for bestowing this honor upon me of being the last lecture from Muhlenberg's faculty that you shall receive here. And like Betty White on a recent Saturday Night Live, I must thank Facebook for helping me to find the words to say what I want to say to you by being the repository of my thoughts through my numerous facebook statuses so that I can. So for those of you who have taken classes with me, you should have noticed that I have barely resorted to my favorite methods of teaching this evening- a barrage of proverbs and metaphor...Well fear not- to summarize I am going to pull out some of my facebook gems:

I suspect y'all asked me to speak tonight because as some say "the blacker the berry the sweeter the fruit." Well I say the darker the skin the deeper the root. And I have no doubt that there are many who are jealous of my boogie, you may say that you're not, but I always catch you looking. Well, I'll be the first to admit that I can be selfish, impatient and a little insecure. I make mistakes, I am out of control and at times hard to handle. But if you can't handle me at my worst, then you sure as hell don't deserve me at my best. But regardless of what you might think of me, I hope that you will at least remember that your time is limited, so don't waste it living someone else's life. Don't be trapped by dogma - which is living with the results of other people's thinking. Don't let the noise of other's opinions drown out your own inner voice. And most important, have the courage to follow your heart and intuition. They somehow already know what you truly want to become. Everything else is secondary. And lastly know that

why I stand up here this evening despite the nervousness, anxiety and self-consciousness it evokes in me is for one reason, something that I rarely say to anyone but I try to convey to everyone through what I do- I love you...I love you as students, fellow human beings, fellow Americans, I love you as allies and yes-even as enemies...I am willing to be the object of your derision if it means that potentially you will recognize that your point of view is not absolute and that if you truly want to be a part of this world you have to develop the ability to identify with others spiritually, emotionally, intellectually, not simply tolerate or acknowledge them... I don't think any of us hear that enough or at least appreciate what it means no only to say it, but to live a life that reveals it in your actions...Well, as I stand here and put up with the blatant disrespect some of you have shown me this evening I will say again- I love for who you already are, and from this position of love I implore you to remember that things are not as they were, but things are not as they could be...

And if none of this makes any sense to you remember: if you can't figure it out by the time you're six feet tall, the answers will be revealed when you are six feet under...Good luck and Godspeed.