A Fellowship in Learning: At Home in the World

Inauguration Remarks by Eileen Wilson-Oyelaran
March 11, 2006
Kalamazoo College

Platform guests, honorable delegates, trustees, alumni, the Kalamazoo College family, ladies and gentlemen. I am honored by your presence here today.

This day is not about Eileen Wilson-Oyelaran, it is about Kalamazoo College, an outstanding institution that accomplishes extraordinary things because of the dedication of the people who come together both to teach and to learn here.

And yet, I am humbled by the awesome responsibility and the sacred trust, which has been conferred upon me today. I recognize that I stand on the shoulders of men and women whose legacy of devotion, commitment and leadership has brought Kalamazoo College to where she is today: poised to sharpen her distinctiveness and advance boldly toward the future.

The central challenge of our time is the development of students who are truly at home in an increasingly complex, interdependent and often strife-torn world.

-- James and Lucinda Stone, who brought a spirit of progressivism and a commitment to the equal education of men and women;
-- Allan Hoben, who captured the essence of this community in his notion of a fellowship in learning;
-- Frances Diebold, professor of biology, who more than any other faculty member embodied the fellowship in learning throughout her 44-year career at the college;
-- Weimer Hicks, who birthed the "Kalamazoo Plan;"
-- Wen Chao Chen and Bernard Palchick, who have shepherded "K" in times of transition;
-- My most recent predecessor, Jimmy Jones, whose efforts on behalf of this College continue to bear fruit;
-- Mrs. Pauline Byrd Johnson, who in 1926 became the first African American woman graduate of Kalamazoo College. Hers is a legacy of courage and gracefulness I hope to emulate.

In addition to those who came before, "K" is enriched by those who currently care for her:

-- the Board of Trustees, who steward this wonderful institution with a passion for securing its eminence;
-- the Alumni Association Executive Board and countless alums, who through their leadership and support ensure that K is faithful to her mission;
-- the faculty and staff, who, through their daily interactions with students and with one another, give life to the notion that we are a fellowship in learning committed to ensuring that our students are at home in the world.

Before turning to the substance of my remarks, I would like to take a moment to thank the members of the planning committee, who have worked tirelessly to arrange these inaugural festivities. I am sure when they agreed to serve they had no idea what was in store. I most certainly did not. I am deeply grateful for their hard work and their attention to detail. I would
also like to extend a special thanks to the Kalamazoo College students who, on this weekend before exams, have come out to assist in very many ways. I promise that we will celebrate this inauguration with a community party on April 1, when the junior class has returned from study aboard and when the pressure of exams seems a distant memory.

To family and friends who have traveled across the country to share this special occasion, I am thrilled by your presence. The Yoruba say: ore ore aso ara (friends are my cover) and your willingness to journey and to share this event speaks volumes about your friendship and your love-both of which have and will continue to sustain me. And finally, to my family: to my father Welford, who graces us this day with his 92 years of wisdom, history and memory-you are the wellspring of our purpose; to my sister Carol, a special thanks for your support and friendship; and to my husband/best friend/counselor, Olasope -both Kalamazoo College and I are blessed to have you as my partner in this enterprise. To my children: Adedoyin, Oyindasola, Omosalewa and Oyeyinka: Omo Bate--I say, omo l'ade (when all is said and done, you are my crown).

An occasion such as this provides an opportunity for us to acknowledge our past while boldly envisioning our future. And thus, we have chosen as the theme for this weekend's festivities, A Fellowship in Learning: at home in the world. Those familiar with "K" will readily recognize the phrase, "A Fellowship in Learning," coined by President Allan Hoben in 1923 as a way of capturing the essence of the Kalamazoo College experience. Our choice of this theme allows us to claim Hoben's legacy while embracing the

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In the "Ritual of Recognition," the script of the first-year matriculation ceremony, written in 1927, and still used today, President Hoben states:

"Kalamazoo College is a Fellowship in Learning. It is not land or buildings. They are but the shell of a congenial group life that has persisted here for more than a century. Through the interplay of minds, both past and present, and in friendly contact with faculty members, the student evolves his/her best self and, therefore, his/her charter of service to mankind."

Hoben's fellowship was characterized as a community of younger and older scholars joyfully learning together, in a place where the role of faculty was to share: not merely their disciplines but also themselves. The Fellowship was dependent on a superior faculty who lived in close proximity to students and who were willing to let students become an integral part of their home life as well as their campus life. The educational process involved seminar-style classes where faculty and students learned together as they confronted both the intellectual and the social challenges of the day. The emphasis was on rigorous scholarly inquiry in an environment where every learner (both student and faculty) was expected to help one another to do and to be his/her best. Learning was conceived as "play, as in playing with ideas"-a play rooted in imagination, in creativity, enthusiasm and spontaneity. A democratic ethos prevailed, and individuality of expression was encouraged.

The fellowship was designed to cultivate in learners the ability to think clearly, to appreciate every beautiful thing, and to revere the truth. Equally important, a graduate of the fellowship was expected to live nobly: that is, to make the world somewhat better because of the significant
advantages that his/her college education made possible. (4) Kalamazoo College graduates were expected "to go out into the world possessing the scholars' spirit dedicated to human welfare."

For all the nobility of spirit embodied in the fellowship in learning, the vision speaks to a former time:

-- A time when the College was largely mono-cultural. The campus was uniformly Christian and with the exception of Pauline Byrd (who encountered considerable social isolation) was uniformly white.
-- A time when technology had not given rise to the capacity for instant communication—there was no cable network, no e-mail and no cell phones. It took weeks to learn what was happening in other parts of the world.
-- A time when one was not expected to encounter, or to live, among people whose life experience was different from one's own.

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Today, as we embrace the notion of a fellowship in learning we look, again, at its purpose—to enable the student to go out into the world possessing the scholar's spirit dedicated to improving human welfare—and we recognize that such a goal is not possible unless we engender in our students a sense of being at home in the world. A sense that wherever they find themselves they can be at home and make a home because they respect difference, can view the world from multiple perspectives, can adapt to new situations, and have the ability to put themselves at the margins.

Let us think about this world, the world that our students will be challenged, in Dr. Hoben's words, "to make somewhat better." According to Erik Peterson of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the world in 2025, when our current students enter their fourth decade, will face a variety of challenges. I would like to highlight a few:

-- The world will have a population of about 8 billion, the vast majority of whom will live in China, India, the United States and Nigeria.

-- The so-called developed world will experience slow growth, an aging population and a decline in the workforce. Immigration will become critical if the manpower needs of these countries are to be met. The so-called developing world will witness a faster rate of population growth, giving rise to more youthful citizenry.

-- The demographic composition of the United States will become much more diverse. Individuals of Hispanic background, regardless of race, will be the largest minority group in our country. Inevitably the concepts of "minority" and "majority" will come to have no meaning—because, in fact, we will be rapidly moving to a time when the so-called minority, aka "people of color," will outnumber the "majority," i.e., people who are devoid of color.

-- Food consumption will double by 2025 and we will be called upon to manage much more carefully and justly our resources, particularly fresh water, food and energy.
-- By 2025 the speed and efficiency of business operations worldwide will, in a sense, flatten the world and eliminate the notion that greater geographic distance results in increased costs. We will enter an era of unparalleled global economic competition. And yet, in spite of the increased opportunities for economic growth, the income gaps within nations will increase.

-- New technologies, particularly nanotechnology and genomics, will change the face of medicine, increasing the life expectancy rate and providing opportunities for the manipulation of one's hereditary make-up. The ethical dimensions of these opportunities are not yet fully fathomable.

-- We will be exposed to new forms of warfare-most of which will not be associated with the nation-state. One person with the right strokes on the computer will have the capacity to bring the interconnected global economy to a halt. Access to weapons that have the capacity to do considerable harm will not be controlled necessarily by national governments. World-wide conflicts may be manipulated and expressed as conflicts over belief systems rather than economic systems.

-- Access to knowledge and information will no longer be restricted by national barriers or accident of birth. Virtual universities will result in the creation of new cyberspace communities of learning-borne out of interest and access to appropriate technology.

To be at home in the world one must recognize this interconnectedness and one must learn to cross boundaries with ease.

The intersection of these various changes will give rise to cross-national linkages and interconnections never witnessed in human history. Imagine a situation in which our access to goods and services-to food, health care, fresh water and the mechanisms of communication-depends more upon for whom we work than where we live in the world. Where what we can learn depends more upon the availability of a global communication network than on our ability to pay tuition. In the context of this emerging reality, the worlds of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., take on new meaning. "All life is interrelated. We are all caught up in a web of mutuality: tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."

To be at home in the world one must recognize this interconnectedness and one must learn to cross boundaries with ease.

-- Real boundaries of language, nationality, geographic region,
-- Pedagogical boundaries related to subject matter, theory vs. practice, teaching vs. learning,
-- Personal boundaries of faith tradition, sexual orientation, mental health and physical ability.

Kalamazoo College has a long tradition of assisting students to cross boundaries. Through exceptional study abroad programs, students explore new cultures, refine their language skills, and hone their capacity for intercultural communication. Through participation in community partnerships such as the one we have crafted, over a seven-year period, with Kalamazoo Public Schools, our students have the opportunity for mutual learning and for the development of a sense of respect and humility that emerges when two groups come together as equals in an effort to address an issue of mutual concern. We have learned over time that in-depth learning experiences in other countries often provide a context for students to better understand privilege...
and injustice in our own country. Thus, students who return to the campus from study abroad in Latin America bring with them a greater understanding of the immigrant experience and increased commitment to galvanize other members of this fellowship in learning in service of local immigrant communities.

However, if our graduates are to be truly at home in the 2025 world, Kalamazoo College must reassess the fellowship in learning. Is this fellowship in learning preparing students to cross boundaries in all their permutations? The answer is clear: there is more that we must do.

-- If our students are to be at home in the world, our campus-based fellowship must be inclusive: reflecting in a more representative fashion the geographic, racial/ethnic and economic diversity in our nation and the world. We must develop the resource base that will enable the college to welcome every student who qualifies academically regardless of her/his economic circumstance.

-- We must examine our curriculum and co-curricular life with the same precision and rigor we applied to our respective scholarly disciplines to determine if we are effectively preparing students to exercise ethical leadership and responsible citizenship in a world that is flat. In a world where the economic, political and military preeminence that has been a part of our most recent history can no longer be guaranteed.

In Ghana, there is an Adinkra symbol called Sankofa. It takes the form of a bird capable of looking backward without turning its body or breaking its forward motion; Sankofa, the bird capable of advancing with purpose while looking back to claim the best of its past. In the spirit of Sankofa, let us reaffirm the joy associated with the fellowship in learning and make it our own. Let us claim the sense of community and mutual support that characterized the early fellowship, even as we recognize that there are many forces in contemporary life that make the creation of community both challenging and complex.

Community is engendered by conversation, by story-telling within spaces that support coming together. For this reason we are working aggressively to renovate Hicks Center. I am pleased to announce that through the generosity of Bill and Nancy Richardson with the assistance of the Kellogg Foundation, we are $1.5 million closer to our goal: our goal of creating spaces that nurture the conversation and story-telling that give rise to joyful community so critical to our fellowship in learning, our goal of creating on this campus a heart and hearth. Bill and Nancy, thank you.

And so, my friends, today is about Kalamazoo College-about a fellowship in learning at home in the world-about all we can and will be-together. Like the Sankofa bird we will advance purposefully while selectively co-opting the best of our past. Thank you for letting me be a part of this wondrous journey.