

**MORNING INSPIRATION  
BENNETT COLLEGE FOR WOMEN  
AUGUST 17, 2008**

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PRESIDENT**

**THEME: A NEW PLACE AND SPACE**

Greetings. Good morning. Good morning. This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it. Good morning.

What an honor and a privilege it is to be with you this morning, to be in this space at this moment with the phenomenal fresh women, the class of 2012.

Welcome entering students, and warm greetings to you. Welcome, warm greetings to your parents, guardians, and friends. Welcome to our oasis, where we educate and celebrate women and develop them into twenty-first center global citizens and leaders. I would like students to see where they are going, to see those who have graduated. If there are alumnae in the house would they stand?

I would like students to see our leaders. If there are trustees present, would they stand? I'd like to acknowledge our Bennett faculty and staff present by asking them to stand. I am especially grateful to the Office of Student Affairs for the work they have done and that they will do to welcome freshmen to Bennett. Dr. Stanley Viltz, who joined us as Associate Provost for Student Affairs is back in Los Angeles this weekend, but her team is here. Would they stand?

There are other senior staff members present, and I'd ask them to stand as I call them by name.

I would also like the student leaders present to stand and be recognized.

And I am grateful to our brothers and sister from the Shalom Church. They worship here on Sundays at our invitation, and have joined us on this Sunday as part of the welcome team. Would Rev. Eric Cole and the First Lady of Shalom, Sister Dionne Cole, please stand and get a handclap of thanks.

My task today is to offer words of inspiration, and it is a task that I do not take lightly. It is a great responsibility to be asked to inspire. When I am personally seeking inspiration, I go to the ancestors, to folk like WEB DuBois or Ida B. Wells, to the African proverbs that never fail to strengthen. Or I go to the Bible, to the Proverbs or the Psalms, where inspiration flows. I look at living people, like Dr. Dorothy Height, when I realize that if my 97 year old sister can persist, then so can I, indeed, how dare I not. And sometimes I just look to nature, to the proverbial sparrow, to remind myself that if God would protect a sparrow, a lily in the field, or an ant, then surely Fathermother God is protecting and

inspiring me. Oh, there is inspiration in the wind, if one must be inspired. But this morning I went to a few books.

First I went to Bennett's history. We have a profound, exciting, foundational history. It goes all the way back to our founding in 1873, in the unpaved basement of St. Matthews United Methodist Church. It fast forwards to 1926 year, when we became a single-sex institution. The legendary presidency of Dr. Willa Player, during the tumultuous civil rights years, is the slice of history that I want to settle on for this morning's inspiration. There is plenty about the Player years that might lift us. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke in this very chapel, as did the noted theologian, Howard Thurman, and then-Morehouse President Benjamin Mayes.

But for uplift and inspiration this morning, I choose a chapter from a book titled *Gender, Ethnicity and Religion*, by Rosemary Radford Ruether. In a chapter of the book on the lunch counter struggle, written by Barbara Isaacs, two of our own, Roslyn Smith '61 and Betty Davis McCain '63 are quoted. On the fourth day of the sit-in the Greensboro police arrested and detained nearly one dozen Bennett women. Says Betty McCain "The only thing the jailers said to us was, we thought you girls had – yes they call us girls – a lot of culture, but you don't because you don't know your place."

What is our place? Who gets to define it? What does it mean to know one's place? What does it mean to transcend it?

For freshmen, just a few months ago, your place was a senior in high school. Now, you are a freshman at Bennett College. When you were in high school you behaved as in high school, now in college, we challenge you to behave as a young adult, as if you are in college. We challenge you to define your space, not to allow the notion of "knowing your place", of living within boundaries, define you. Indeed, I dare you to transcend the boundaries of any limitation, to color outside the lines if you will, to give yourself full permission to explore this campus, our scholarship, activities, and opportunities. I challenge you to define yourself outside and beyond the boundaries of this nation, to set your sight on global experience. I challenge you, too, to go beyond the boundaries of expectations. You say you want to major in English. Why not take a Spanish class, just to check it out. You say you are a scientist. Try a little art appreciation or music. You say you love the spoken word. Try embracing the written

word. Step outside the reality that you have constructed for yourself into a new reality.

I want to add some scripture into this mix. It would be impossible to offer inspiration in our chapel without relying on the word. And the scripture I'd like to lift is the Prayer of Jabez. 1 Corinthians 4:10, "Oh, that you would bless me indeed, and enlarge my territory, that your hand would be with me, and that you would keep me from evil."

Now, the Prayer of Jabez has been popularized in a series of books and workshops by Bruce Wilkerson and his wife Darlene. And the series of books have been criticized by those who suggest that the constant invocation of the Prayer of Jabez is little more than a prayer for riches. I see the prayer, though, as a prayer for expansion. Lord, that you would bless me indeed, and enlarge my territory. What is Jabez asking of God? He is asking to break through the boundaries. He is asking for increase, he is asking for more. And he is asking for blessings and protection from evil.

To be sure, we can look at the prayer of Jabez as a prayer for wealth. In the New Century Version of this verse, Jabez is not asking for territory, just land. That's wealth. And in the New American Standard Version of this verse, Jabez is asking for increased borders. In the King James Version, Jabez is asking God to enlarge his coast. Jabez is asking to be taken from where he is to where he wants to be. He is asking for more. He is asking for an upgrade.

Can't we all stand an upgrade, to do more, to do better, to reach more hungrily and more prayerfully for the place that is our highest and best? Can't we all stand to stop for a moment and ask to get past the place those jailers to Roslyn Smith and Betty McCain they belonged in? How dare anyone impose a limitation on any of us? And how dare any of us be willing to take on the shackles of limitation.

Women, especially women of African descent, have too frequently had to accept limitations. We have been shackled by stereotypes that no longer serve us. To be sure, we have seen stereotypes shatter in our time. Willa player shattered stereotypes by being the first woman president of Bennett College, but also the first woman president of a four-year college in our nation's history. Hillary Clinton shattered stereotypes by earning almost enough electoral votes to be nominated president. She stood strong and firm against the commentators who regularly exhibited their ignorance by saying that she

reminded them of -- the kindergarten teacher, the nagging wife asking them to pick up their socks, the annoying ex-wife. Why place a presidential candidate in such gendered terms. It was an attempt to restrict her territory. But Sister Hillary Rodham Clinton got an expansion, an upgrade for the candidacy of any woman who preceded her. And we all deserve an upgrade from the stereotypes, from the limitations, from those who would put us, then keep us, in our place.

Where is your place, Bennett Belles, Class of 2012? Your place is everywhere. You belong in the White House and in the boardroom. You belong in the laboratory and in graduate school. You belong in China, in Ghana, in Tanzania, in South Africa, in Ethiopia, in Peru, in Pakistan, in Russia, in Estonia. You belong on the honor roll, in Student Government, in the writing lab, in the choir. You belong in one of our outstanding plays, you belong in an outstanding internship, and you belong outside on a bench with your nose in a book! You belong in a place where you are a blessed achiever, where you are joyfully thoughtful, excited and enlightened. And you'll get to the places where you belong when you give yourself full permission to go there, permission to explore every aspect of yourself, permission to excel.

Even as I ask each of you to stretch, I want you to know that this institution is stretching too. We are a team of leaders committed to moving Bennett from good to great, to improving our academic offerings and our physical plant. We have made much progress in the past academic year, and we will make more. We are looking forward to our reaffirmation visit and welcome the accreditation process. Two of our dedicated faculty members, Drs. Carla McLucas and Alan Goble, have been working on our Quality Enhancement Plan, which is part of our reaffirmation process. Our theme -- Enhancing Communications Skills Through the General Education Curriculum. We are encouraging students to do more writing. We are also seeking an academic upgrade by focusing on entrepreneurship, global studies, leadership, and communication, and have made progress in each of those areas. We will not accept society's verdict on HBCUs. Bennett College for Women is an absolutely essential institution in our nation's higher education landscape and we claim that enlarged territory.

Later today, during the Parting Ceremony, we will distribute a booklet, the Wisdom of Words, to incoming freshwomen. We asked thirty people about the five most

critical books for freshmen to read, and they replied with choices both predictable and unpredictable. In distributing this booklet, we are encouraging freshmen, and others, to expand their territory and to read outside the classroom. Reading is revolutionary. In 1830 the North Carolina legislature passed a law preventing people to teach slaves to read because reading “excites dissatisfaction” among the oppressed. Reading takes some of us beyond our boundaries, expands our territory. Let’s excite some dissatisfaction in our nation and our world. Freshwomen, please make sure you get your copy of *The Wisdom of Words!*

We live in a society that gives us signals to accept the limitations, the boundaries, and the restricted territory that is sometimes defined as the place that is black and female. Consider the horrible media treatment of Michele Obama, who is portrayed as the typical angry black woman. Anger is a sign of something gone wrong, so it would almost be unconscionable for African American women not to carry some anger about our treatment, our depiction, and our conditions. But to reduce a polished, gorgeous Harvard law graduate, wife, mother of two, administrator, and soon-to-be first lady to an angry person because she is firm, poised, and unbowed is character assassination. To dig up her Princeton thesis about race to try to put words in her mouth is character assassination. And in the words of Dr. Maya Angelou, our trustee, and still she rises. My point, there are a set of stereotypes that we must transcend. We can’t take on the signals that others send about who we are.

And we can’t reinforce the stereotypes. I cringe when I turn on a television and watch music videos; with the half clad sisters gyrating across the screen. These are images that are being broadcast all over the world, influencing others to think of us stuck inside the territory of video girl. But as India Airie says, “I’m not the girl in the video”.

Sometimes we put jackets on ourselves. In every family, each child has a label. There’s the pretty one, the smart one, the loud one, the troublemaker. And maybe the labels were true. But they don’t have to be. As you expand your territory, as you give yourself an upgrade, don’t stick with the label you earned in your childhood, because, sister, you’re not a child anymore. So if you’re the pretty one, don’t lean on that. You can be the smart one, too. If you’re theoretically the nerd, or the smart one, remember that smart girls can have fun too. If you are the troublemaker, ask why you make so

much trouble. And ask yourself if there are other aspects of your personality that you'd like to explore.

When we expand our territory, we also open ourselves up to the possibility that we can have positive, nurturing, sister relationships with other women. Too often, when women work together, there are others who like to enforce envy, jealousy, and negative competition. Think about the term "cat fight", which is often used when women disagree. Why not simply principled disagreement? You give yourself an upgrade when you want to do your best, and have your sister do her best too. As Proverbs 27:17 says, "as iron sharpens iron, so one (wo)man sharpens another." We are strengthened as a community when everyone is committed to excellence, to doing her best. You have to embrace the lovely differences in each of us, differences in intellectual leanings, differences in religion, looks, dress, and upbringing; we have to make our differences strengths. We have to get past the gossip and the pettiness. Small people talk about people. Big people, those with expanded territory, talk about ideas. We get an upgrade when we learn from each other, instead of falling into those gendered stereotypes – "who does she think she is". She is a sister, in her place, in her space, growing, learning, soaring, and basking in our oasis.

You don't know your place, some nameless jailer told Roslyn Smith and Betty McCain. Yes we do, the sisters responded. Roslyn wrote an incisive freshman essay about her hopes, dreams, and aspirations. On September 22, 1957, she submitted an essay that read, in part, "Intellectual independence is my first requisition in life, to learn to think and to meet all complex problems with faith. The goal of my achievement is to better educate myself and to prepare to find position in the society and world in which I live." Roslyn Smith was honestly and boldly asserting her goals and seeking her place. She was seeking greater territory. She would not be diminished or defined by a jailer who had the absolute wrong idea about what her place might be. She would find her own place with a successful career in New York, and she would define her place again, returning to Greensboro in her retirement as a volunteer for the Bennett Alumnae Association and St. Matthews United Methodist Church, as a mentor, friend, and Bennett Booster. "This is as I am", she wrote in her essay. Who are you, Class of 2012? Where

is your place and your space? Can you stand an upgrade? An increase in territory? A larger coast? A new sense of place and space?

Jabez cried out to the God of Israel, "Oh, that you would bless me and enlarge my territory! Let your hand be with me, and keep me from harm so that I will be free from pain." And God granted his request. And God grants our request for an upgrade past the limitations of stereotypes, of self-imposed labels, of a past that will not fully define our futures.

What is your place, Class of 2012? Your place is everywhere! Welcome to Bennett College for Women, to the opportunity to explore the fully manifestation of God-given talents and skills, an opportunity to define your own place.