

**WHITNEY YOUNG, JR. MEMORIAL LECTURE**  
**Gallaudet University**  
**Washington, DC**  
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We are challenged to see that the barriers built by prejudice, fear and indifference which are now crumbling – are not replaced by new barriers of apathy, of underdeveloped skills, of lack of training. If this happens, our gains will be but temporary, our victories hollow.

*Whitney Young (1963). "Social Revolution: Challenge of The Nation", before the N.Y.C. Urban League Conference*

Good afternoon. I am very pleased to join you this afternoon as the 2003 Whitney Young Lecturer. My delight in joining you grows out of my challenging new position as President of the University of the District of Columbia; and of my privilege to be able to speak to you on this occasion as we come together to honor the memory of Whitney Young, a great American, a great African American, a great Social Worker.

I feel especially honored today because I understand the cause that brings us together. It is because you gather here to raise funds to support social work students that I approach this occasion with some apprehension as I seek to honor the man for whom this event is named and those of you who invite me here today.

More than two centuries ago, Charles Dickens wrote, "these are the best of times and these are the worst of times." As we gather here today, I am sure that if Dickens were alive, he would still say, "these are the best of times and these are the worst of times".

We are now well into the third year of the century. Throughout the nation we anxiously wait on word as to whether or not we have gone to war with Iraq. For some of us it is a matter of knowing whether or not the price of oil will continue to rise. For others we wait to hear whether our sons, our daughters, our husbands or wives will head

off to war. For others among us, we face the knowledge that our life savings have been jeopardized by greed and the unethical behavior of people who put personal success and wealth above the common good. The men and women of Enron and Arthur Anderson have helped to create a national economic crisis. These are the best and the worst of times.

Today, American citizens still enjoy one of the highest standards of living in the world. Those of us of African descent can eat, sleep and play virtually anywhere we can afford to be.. Those of us of African descent, thanks to people like Whitney Young, can now work on Wall Street or run Time Warner as well as American Express. But on the other hand, we find an ever-widening gap between those who have and those who do not have in the United States. It does appear that these are the best of times and these are the worst of times.

Yesterday men and women of African descent were restricted by laws and practices, which artificially limited their opportunities for education, employment and political activity. Thanks to men and women like Whitney Young we have men and women of diverse backgrounds who run state and local governments around the country. In fact our neighbor to the North, Maryland, just swore in a Lieutenant Governor of African descent. My new home, Washington, D.C. has a mayor of African descent and a City Council that is predominantly black. On the other hand our city enjoys an illiteracy rate, which is, reflected in a population, 37% of which cannot read above the 4<sup>th</sup> grade level. My fellow social workers, these are the best of times and these are the worst of times.

Last week a local man in the District was calmly killed in a local service station. This man was killed as an onlooker continued to pump his gas, pay for the gas and leave. The man was left dying where he lay. All of this was recorded on a surveillance camera on top of the gasoline pump. The District has both a mayor and a police chief of African American descent. I say to you today, that these are indeed the best of times and they are the worst of times.

Several weeks ago in the neighboring city of Baltimore, another tragedy struck our community. A mother and her children were killed in an arson related fire. This mother, and her family, were apparently burned to death because she dared to resist the drug culture that was invading her neighborhood. While we no longer must fear the Klu Klux Klan or White citizen councils, we must be apprehensive of drug pushers who may look like us. They have replaced the hooded figures with the trappings of the urban drug culture. I submit to you that these are the best of times and they are the worst of times.

Here in the District of Columbia, the nation's Capital, we have a superintendent of Schools who is of African American descent. Our chief academic officer for the public schools is a man of Hispanic background. Our schools in the district are challenged by student failures and corruption in the teacher's union. To complicate matters even more, in the aftermath of nine-eleven, we find local government here, and throughout the nation struggling to support education and human services. I say to you

again, these are the best and the worst of times. It is no wonder that Whitney Young cautioned us in 1963 when he suggested that gains could be threatened by “apathy \*\*\* underdeveloped skills \*\*\* and lack of training.”

We cannot gather here today and reflect on the life and legacy of Whitney Young without first paying some attention to the man and his life. Perhaps it can be done by others, but I cannot give a Whitney Young talk without first recalling the man and what he stood for in the tapestry of American history.

He was man of action and diplomacy. He was a social worker and educator. Whitney Young was a product of the South who understood patience and planning. He was a man who commanded respect and was respectful. He was a man who understood the world in which he lived and he could use the world as he knew it to master the process of change. Whitney Young was a man of intellect and a man of protest. While he understood protest as a weapon, Whitney Young also understood when to use it and how. In To Be Equal, (1964) Young quoted:

It is not enough to man the machinery, of protest. Equally important today and twice as important tomorrow is participation in the responsibilities and opportunities of full citizenship in our democracy. This means moving, not only onto the picket line, but also the PTA meeting, moving into the libraries, community facilities and committee rooms, moving onto commissions and boards to exercise our rights and insure a fair share. *My Soul Looks Back*, Riley p. 330.

Whitney Young’s life and his legacy are associated with several forces in my life. Each of these forces is derived from events that I believe are critical to understanding what Whitney Young means to American history in general and to the social work profession in particular. Young’s career began after he attended Kentucky State College, a segregated school in the South. It was there that he, like many other African American youth, honed his skills in diplomacy and the ways of the South.

We both attended segregated schools in the South. Each of us obtained graduate social work degrees. Young, unlike me, probably had to leave the state of Kentucky to get a graduate degree because it was probably taboo for him to study in a white University in Kentucky. While I did not share that particular experience, I did have other humiliating experiences as a survivor of segregation. Like Young, I learned to tolerate the racism of discrimination and second class citizenship. Each of us were victims of the strange career of Jim Crow and each of us learned to survive in spite of it!

Young joined the Army following the entry of the United States into World War II. It was there that he had hoped to leverage participation in the Army Specialist Program into his goal of later becoming a physician. That was not to be because few medical schools were open to African Americans. Instead, Whitney Young was to become a mediator who became a voice in addressing the wrongs suffered by African

American soldiers. It appears as through this military experience led Young to pursue an education in preparation for social work practice after his service in the Army.

By 1954 at age 33, Whitney Young had become dean of the Atlanta University School of Social Work and later he became the national director of the Urban League. It was in this capacity that Young became the national figure we fondly remember and honor with this lecture today. In his role as the executive director of the National Urban League, Whitney Young became the social work activist who parlayed his skills and relationships into alliances that truly sought equality of opportunities for African Americans. His leadership there at the Urban League propelled him into national prominence as he complemented the civil rights activism of Martin Luther King and others who appealed to the conscious of the world by way of non-violent protest demonstrations.

Young's life story can be better told by others. In my time here today, I prefer to focus on Young's achievements and what those deeds may teach us today. In a manner that is easy for me I would like to reflect on Young's life for what it has come to mean to me. As I have done on many other occasions, I would like to share a short story told by Booker T. Washington in his autobiography.

In his autobiography, Up From Slavery (1903), Booker T. Washington tells us a story of love and sacrifice. Washington tells us of a woman who came to see him when he was raising money to pay for a farm, a place that was to become Tuskegee University. She hobbled into the room where he was. She was leaning on a cane and she was clad in rags; but they were clean. She said: "Mr. Washin'ton, God knows that I spend de bes days of my life in slavery. God knows I's ignorant an' poor, but, " she added, "I knows what you an' Miss Davidson is tryin' to do." This woman expressed understanding of Washington's effort to make better men and better women for the coulored race." "I ain't got no money," she said," but I wants you to take these six eggs, what I's been savin' up, and I wants you to put these six eggs into de eddication of dese boys an' gals." "Since the work at Tuskegee started" wrote Washington, it has been my privilege to receive many gifts for the benefit of the institution, but never any I think that touch me so deeply as this one."

As I have done on similar occasions, I would like to give you six eggs. These six eggs represent what I believe can be harvested from the life and legacy of Whitney Young. I believe that what I have to offer are responses to my reflections on Young's life. I would like to give you what I believe are the essential lessons to facilitate our move into the next millennium.

The first egg that I will offer as a remembrance of the life and legacy of Whitney Young, is the egg of Courage. As social workers we should have more than a passing understanding of this thing called courage. You who understand the world in which Young was born and lived must know the courage it took to create a new paradox for the manner in which America was to regard the black man. The world, which Whitney Young mastered, was a world that witnessed the tragic death by lynching of Emmett Till

in 1953, just one year before Young became dean of the Atlanta University School of Social Work

Whitney Young became director of the National Urban League in 1961, just two years before the civil rights workers were killed in Mississippi, for daring to try and register black voters. Whitney Young had the audacity to think and act on the idea that African American men and women had a right to work. He believed that they had a right to the opportunity to be educated and trained anywhere that any other American was educated and trained. Young sought to achieve for persons of color the right to enjoy the dream of all Americans. This was out of the box thinking for an African American as we entered the 1960's.

Today more than ever there is the need for the courage of a Whitney Young. Today there is a great need for courage if we are to truly honor the life and legacy of Whitney Young. We found ourselves facing the prospects of war. Just weeks ago, millions of the citizens of the world turned out to express their displeasure with the American threat of war. It is not my position today to suggest that NASW should be opposed to or supportive of a war with Iraq. It is however my responsibility to say to you that if Whitney Young were here today, he would probably have been on record for opposing a war with Iraq.

I would not be completely honest if I did not remind us at this time that Whitney Young disagreed with Lyndon Johnson in 1969. I must remind us today that Young broke with Johnson over his foreign policy and that he joined the campaign against the Vietnam War. He argued that the war diverted precious funds away from domestic funds needed by the poor.

Today, I extend to you the egg of courage as a reminder of the role played by both Whitney Young and NASW in providing leadership for doing the right thing. Today we are threatened by the possibility of war with Iraq. This is being considered, while our economy is in shambles and our children cannot read. We talk of war with Iraq while some of our congressional leadership want to revisit the civil war. I offer the egg of courage as a means for revisiting the roots of social work and the life of Whitney Young. The egg of courage is being offered at this time because courage is needed as a means for doing that which is right and not popular. Those of us who teach have a responsibility to not only direct student learning as we believe it should be. We also must help students know when they must step out of the box as Young and others must have done.

When we examine the life of Whitney Young, we find it to be a life of leadership. His life is one that is characterized by example after example of someone who thought outside of the box. When I reflect on Whitney Young, I think of someone who considered the future and encouraged us to consider investing in ourselves. Whitney Young was a leader and for this reason I offer the egg of leadership.

I offer the egg of leadership as an example of Young's greatest contribution to NASW and the modern civil rights movement. Of course, it goes without saying that his contribution to the National Urban League is perhaps his most memorable contribution.

Herman Watts, in a Sermon entitled "What's Your Name.," wrote:

Each person has a name that no other  
Can bear. There is a beauty, a strength, and  
A glory that each person has of his own.  
The whole universe is thrown out of kilter  
When you shrink from your magnanimous responsibilities.

Whitney Young knew his responsibilities. Whitney Young understood leadership. I offer the egg of leadership because Young's life and work personify leadership.

Whitney Young was right on the War question in 1969. He was correct on the idea of a domestic war, a Marshall plan to combat poverty in the United States. As executive director of the Urban League, Whitney Young is credited with virtually single handedly convincing corporate America to support the civil rights for all by supporting self-help programs in employment, education and housing. I offer the egg of leadership as a plea for NASW to engage in the behavior that leads us to do the things that make a difference in the communities in which we live and the organizations we serve.

The leadership practiced by Whitney Young enabled a change to take place in the way services were rendered and defined in this nation since World War II. Today countless human service professionals, many of them social workers, facilitate dialogues between conflicting groups. Whitney Young was able to see the future of dialogue and used his leadership skills to make it work not only for the Urban League, but NASW as well. Today, as we advance well into the twenty-first Century, there is a need for leadership to step forward and advance idea and lead the nation and its communities in the battle against many of the nation's ills. I want to hear more from NASW as a leader in the war on poverty, AIDS, illiteracy and violence. As we pause to reflect on the life and legacy of Whitney Young, I wonder if we can say that we have followed his leadership. I wonder if we can say that social work today is the social work of the Young generation. I give you the egg of leadership.

The third egg that I offer today is the egg of equality. The life and legacy of Whitney Young cannot be separated from his attempts to achieve equality. His first book, To Be Equal (1964) stressed the importance of opportunity for African Americans. He clearly understood that once the work of civil rights on the streets was done, there was further work to do. Whitney Young understood that equality could not be achieved if government, big business and unions did not facilitate training, and educating more African Americans. There is further work to do today. Equality is still an illusive concept for many Americans.

A barrier to equality was recognized by the University of Michigan and a means devised for insuring that its students obtain a first class education with as diverse a student population as possible. Similarly, the life and legacy of Whitney Young is a reflection of efforts to promote equality and affirmative action. Our nation has had a split personality, though, when it comes to these issues. Affirmative action seems to be okay when it benefits those who have. It seems to be okay for the children of men and women who finish certain schools, It seems to be okay if you already have an advantage. Affirmative action seems to be okay if your gifting potential is well above average. My friends, I give you the egg of equality because we still have a long way to go in America.

I believe that we are equal when we are all equal. That is equal under the law. I believe that we are all equal when we all have an opportunity to acquire an education. I believe that we are all equal when we all have an opportunity to sleep with a roof over our heads. I believe that the life and legacy of Whitney Young is one that demands much of us. It is for this reason I offer you the egg of equality. I offer the egg of equality as a challenge to each of you to go back to your communities and address the question of whether or not there is opportunity for all you serve. Is there equality for the children of your communities who are not receiving the kind of education that would give them the ability to be admitted to your University or the one from which you received your graduate degree. Do we have equality if we have an adult population reading at less than a fourth grade education. Such is the case for us in the District of Columbia.

Whitney Young's legacy was about removing the barriers to equality. While he played a key role in the civil rights movement, he also played a major role in forcing both corporate America and the federal government to employ practices and policies which would reduce barriers to equality.

Today, I offer the egg of equality as an instrument for achieving an illusive goal for so many Americans. The lack of an education, language discrimination and all of the "ism's" still plays too great a role in the lives of American men, women and children. I give you the egg of equality because I wish to call our attention to the fact that our job is not yet done. Barriers to equality of opportunity still exist. We as a profession should be best equipped to see that these barriers are identified and removed. I give you the egg of equality.

The fourth egg that I offer this afternoon is the egg of involvement. The egg of involvement is offered out of an awareness of the importance of the true meaning of citizenship. There is a hole in the dream expressed by the leaders of the modern civil rights movement. While Martin Luther King, Jr. gave the speech that personifies the civil rights movement, it was the work of people like Whitney Young who made it a reality. I offer the egg of involvement as our reminder that things don't get done unless we take some kind of action. I also use the egg of involvement to remind us that our failure to act, our failure to get involved is also a failure of citizenship.

Now, more almost forty years after the March on Washington we find the life and legacy of Young's work being threatened by the increasing rate of poverty among the

children of our nation, and the growing birth rate among children who are giving birth to children. As we now stand in the dawn of the twenty-first century we do so with a deep sense of uncertainty as we wonder what will become of us as we face the enigmatic forces of our times; the violence, homelessness, and the constant conflict of values that seem to foster distrust and animosity among people who are different. As we look down the road into this new century we find ourselves confronting new challenges fostered by a nation still willing to find a scapegoat for its ills. It appears as though we are willing to repeat some of the inglorious lessons of our past as we begin a new process of labeling people because of the way they look, the color of their skin, or their national origin. If violating the rights of the Japanese by incarcerations during World War II was wrong, it is wrong today to round up persons simply because of their Middle Eastern origins. If it was wrong for Hitler and the Nazis to round up Jews in Europe in the 30's and 40's it is wrong for us to do it to others in this century. Today, the aftermath of 9/11 warrants each of us to give careful thought to our precious freedoms. I ask of us, do we really want to give back those freedoms for which so many have fought and died. I think not. So I give you the egg of involvement.

During the 1940's, a German minister was interned in the Nazi concentration camps. This man was one of the church leaders who opposed Hitler. This man was Martin Niemoller who left us these words;

FIRST THEY CAME FOR THE SOCIALISTS, AND I DID NOT SPEAK OUT BECAUSE I WAS NOT A SOCIALIST. THEN THEY CAME FOR THE TRADE UNIONISTS, AND I DID NOT SPEAK OUT BECAUSE I WAS NOT A TRADE UNIONIST. THEN THEY CAME FOR THE JEWS, AND I DID NOT SPEAK OUT BECAUSE I WAS NOT A JEW. THEN THEY CAME FOR ME, AND THERE WAS NO ONE LEFT TO SPEAK FOR ME.

My friends and fellow social workers, I give you the egg of involvement, before they come for us.

The fifth egg that I will give you this afternoon is the egg of inquisitiveness. Social Work is derived from a muck raking tradition. Whitney Young's life and work reflected an awareness of the world as some thing which was in a constant state of change and that the world could be changed or altered in some way by raising questions that raised the bar and created opportunities.

I give you the egg of inquisitiveness as a means for continuing to remind us, that all is not right with the world. I give you the egg of inquisitiveness as a means for reminding us that the life and legacy of Whitney Young was about improving the conditions of the world by carefully raising questions that led to change. Young's presence was a statement. His capacity to challenge the status quo was a question about what things could be.

The social work tradition is one that is derived from men and women who had issues with the status quo and they questioned those issues. Whitney Young had an issue with the Vietnam War. His issue had to do with the question of whether or not we had a right to divert valuable resources away from domestic matters to a war effort. I give you the egg of inquisitiveness for I wish to encourage NASW to raise several questions. Do we initiate war with Iraq if we think they have weapons of mass destruction? Where should such suppositions end. What if some of our allies decide that North Korea poses a threat? Should we go to war? Should we spend scarce federal dollars on a war with Iraq when we cannot rebuild our schools and neighborhoods? I do not have the answers to these questions. On the other hand, can I afford not to raise them.

My friends, Whitney Young, by his very nature, was an inquisitive man. His inquisitive nature called attention to an immoral war. His inquisitive nature opened doors of boardrooms and government with the end result being increased opportunities for persons of color. In the final analyses, our ability to face the future is based upon our capacity to reach new heights and cross enormous boundaries by asking and answering the questions of why and why not. Whitney Young asked the questions that helped us to open the doors of opportunity. I give you the egg of inquisitiveness so that you might also stretch the horizons of your generation.

The sixth and final egg that I want to give you is the egg of responsibility. Alice Walker wrote in one of her books, In Search of Our Mother's Garden, "We inherit a great responsibility \* \* \*for we must give voice to centuries of silent bitterness and hate but also to neighborly kindness and sustaining love." Nearly four hundred years of living in the United States has given witness to the many African American people who have assumed responsibility by the way they have given voice to bitterness, hate, kindness and sustaining love. I want to give to you the egg of responsibility for carrying on the legacy of Whitney Young. His life was one of service. It was a life of service that began when he was in the Army, mediating disputes between his black colleagues and white Army officers.

I give to you the egg of responsibility to provide leadership and opportunity for each of us and our children and their friends. I give you the responsibility to help lift up those who fall...to give heat to those who are cold and to provide food and drink to those who are hungry and thirsty. Men and women like Whitney Young are among a group of individuals who have never allowed "no" to be their final answer. Each of us has a responsibility to make a difference in the world because where we are today has been the result of so many who cared enough to make a difference.

I referred earlier to that the Reverend Herman Watts once said, "each person has a name no other can bear. There is strength and a glory that each person has of its own. The whole universe is thrown out of kilter when you shrink from your magnanimous responsibility. Whitney Young knew his name. He accepted the responsibility associated with being Whitney Young. Do you know your name? Do you know your responsibilities?"

We have a responsibility to be advocates for change. We have a responsibility to educate the ignorant. We have a responsibility to be caring and concerned for all people. But you and I, those of us blessed with a sound mind, a healthy body, and a firm grounding in professional knowledge and skills have an even greater responsibility to give back to our communities and our nation as Whitney Young has given to us.

I want to give you the egg of responsibility because people like Young in a variety of roles in churches, schools, and clubs and in our homes have shown us the way of neighborly kindness and sustaining love. Now as we move well into the twenty first century, let us rededicate ourselves to all those who stepped up and took their rightful place on the stage of human kind. Rosa Parks sat down on a bus and refused to give her seat to a white man. Ida Wells challenged lynch laws and Jane Porter Barrett established a social settlement. Each of these individuals took on the world and accepted the responsibility for confronting the conditions around them for the betterment of their families and their community. I give you the egg of responsibility, so that you two can take your place among the movers and shakers of the world.

I have offered six eggs which are believed to be derived from the life and legacy of Whitney Young. We are also approaching forty years since the signing of the modern civil rights legislation. I ask, what is the significance of civil rights legislation if most of our citizens do not bother to vote? So what is the significance of civil rights movement if 30% of this nations children are poor? So, what is the significance of the civil rights movement if more than 30% of the District's population cannot read above the fourth grade level? My friends and fellow social workers, we have jobs in the District of Columbia, we have trouble filling because people cannot read or are not prepared to assume responsibility to work. So I ask you what is the significance of forty years of civil rights and the legacy of Whitney Young?

The significance of forty years of civil rights is reflected in the lessons learned from the lives of people like Whitney Young. From him we learn the very valuable lessons of courage, leadership, equality, involvement, inquisitiveness and responsibility. These are simple concepts. But, for me their simplicity hides the important roles they play in framing the character and commitment required for positive social change.

Our nation is at a crossroad as we test the resolve of both friend and foe. We are at a crossroad as we consider where we go from here as a world power. I believe that our nation will do the right and just thing if we hold true to the fundamental values and principles reflected in the life of someone like Whitney Young. His character and his commitment, if adopted by us can and should answer the question, forty years of civil rights, so what?