

LIFE IS A SONG WORTH SINGING SO SING IT

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This is the text of an April 1, 1974 speech that James Solomon gave at Morris College. The speech was delivered at a general assembly meeting organized by the Morris College Math Club. Solomon had resigned from his position at Morris College a year earlier and was working as staff at the South Carolina Higher Education Commission (a state agency specializing in higher education).

A program accompanying the text shows that the speech was preceded by a prayer, a scripture reading, and singing by a gospel choir. After Solomon's speech, the event concluded with more singing by the gospel choir, a series of announcements, and a benediction.

I am very pleased to have this opportunity to visit my alma mater and share in this assembly program at the invitation of the Morris College Mathematics Club. I don't suppose that there is any significance to the fact that I was extended an invitation to visit you on April Fool's Day. Well in any case I am delighted and privileged to be here.

It is always challenging to face up to the responsibility of preparing a message for young people. This is true because youth demand that such a message be informative and inspirational. Developing an informative message is not too difficult. It is true that it requires research and meticulous preparation but these are elements not too difficult to come by. On the other hand, developing an inspirational message is a relatively demanding chore. However if one is regular in his attendance to Baptist churches and attentive to what is being said, one can find all sorts of little inspirational tidbits, around which a talk might be developed. Putting the two, information and inspiration, together, however, is much more difficult, and I am the first to admit that I am not very adept at doing this.

With this in mind I deliberated long and hard with respect to what I might say today. As a matter of fact I discussed this matter with Mrs. Knuckles¹. I asked her if I should attempt to develop a talk geared to the particular interests of mathematics and science majors or if I should gear it to the broader interests of the general student population. She said that I should do whatever I felt best and she hastened to add that she was certain that whatever I came up with would be appropriate. Well, while I appreciated

¹Sara C. Knuckles was a mathematics instructor at Morris College.

her apparent confidence in my abilities, her response did little to resolve my dilemma.

Well, to make a long story short, I worried about the matter for weeks but could not come to a decision. Then on last Sunday as I, along with my family, prepared for church Dr. Norman Vincent Peale² appeared on the television screen, and while I was not able to concentrate on what he was saying, I do recall hearing him say that if one would only do that which he is capable of doing he would astound himself with the results that he would obtain. This thought stayed with me all through the church services, so much so that upon returning home I sat down and wrote this talk. I have entitled it “Life is a song worth singing, so sing it.” Of course this title is not original with me, in fact it came to my attention as the title of a song by Johnnie Mathis³. This song projects some of the notions which I hope to project here. I hope that you will find some food for thought in both the title and the talk.

Oft-times it appears that the self-evident truths — “that all men are created equal and are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights” — were self-evident only to the founding fathers who drafted the Bill of Rights. The poor immigrants who came to this country both by force as slaves and who migrated on their own initiative certainly did not, upon their arrival, find these truths to be self-evident. Further, the original American, the American Indian, most probably saw a good deal more evidence of these self-evident truths before the Bill of Rights was written, than they do almost 200 years after the emergence of this country as a sovereign nation. Today the poor in general as well as many Blacks, poor and not so poor, certainly do not seem to be so endowed. However, I would be remiss if I did not say that these groups both collectively and individually are partially responsible for their plight. In fact this is the basic theme of my assertion. I contend that the problem may not be so much, that of being endowed with those so called inalienable rights, as it is one of not being aware of one’s endowment, and, as a result, not thinking and acting the role which one has simply because he is a child of God, created in his image, and with some of his power. As Dr. Peale puts it, one really does not know what he is capable of doing until he has tested his capabilities and he followed that statement with the statement “one can do most of the things that he must do if he thinks he can and seeks God’s help.” In other words, life is a song worth singing. All one has to do is sing it.

Most of us are ordinary people, and being ordinary people we have the tendency to think that we are capable of accomplishing only that which is very ordinary and common. But the truth of the matter is that if we set goals

²Peale was an American minister perhaps best known for his book *The Power of Positive Thinking*.

³John Royce Mathis is singer-songwriter of popular music. The song “Life Is a Song Worth Singing” was written for his 1973 album *I’m Coming Home* by Thom Bell and Linda Creed.

for ourselves which are realities but high and noble, and then give our all towards accomplishing these goals we become extra-ordinary and astounding things begin to happen. Please permit me to cite a few examples to illustrate what I mean.

Last Sunday Black women throughout American gathered themselves together to honor a great Black woman, Mary McLeod Bethune. As I understand it, in the very near future a monument is going to be erected in honor of Mrs. Bethune in Washington, D.C., the first such monument for a Black woman in the history of this country⁴. Now I dare say that there is not one among us who would not agree that Mary McLeod Bethune was a great person.

However, upon a closer examination, we see that Mary Jane McLeod was born in Mayesville, South Carolina, not fifteen miles from where you now sit. She was the middle child in a family of 17, and the first of the children not born in a shanty. In her early life she was taught the importance of prayer and acquired a deep and abiding faith that was a source of strength to her all her life. She learned also that if you want something very much you have to work for it. In fact in her life she said, “nothing comes without faith and prayer and nothing in my life has ever come without sweat, too.”⁵

We see then that Mary McLeod Bethune founder-president of Bethune-Cookman College, and Director of the Division of Negro Affairs of the National Youth Administration in World War 2, was an ordinary woman who gave what it took to accomplish extra-ordinary deeds. She set her goals, they were realistic but noble, and she maximized her strengths and minimized her weaknesses. For it seems that life was a song worth singing and she sang it.

My second example is that of Malcolm Little. Malcolm Little was born in Omaha, Nebraska, on May 19, 1925. A drop out from school at 15, he was convicted of burglary and sent to prison in his twenty-first year. While in prison he was connected to the Nation of Islam (that is the Black Muslims). When he left prison in 1952, he dedicated himself to building the Black Muslims, and adopted the name Malcolm X. He withdrew from the movement in March of 1974 organizing the first Muslim Mosque, Inc., and later the non-religious Organization of Afro-American Unity. He made two trips to Africa and the Middle East during 1964. Three months after his return to the United States, he was assassinated in New York on February 21, 1965.

The story of Malcolm X is the story of one who rose from hoodlum, thief, dope peddler, and a pimp to become one of the most important and dynamic leaders of the so called “Black Revolution”, and was also one of the great orators of our time. He too, it seems, was an ordinary person who saw life as a song worth singing and sang it.

⁴The monument in question is the Mary McLeod Bethune Memorial in Lincoln Park. Built by artist Robert Berks, it was erected in July 10, 1974.

⁵Solomon cites *The Negro Heritage*, Page 199 for this quote.

My third and final example is that of a person that you all know personally for he is one of you. He is a 20-year-old history major here at Morris College, and is believed to be the youngest city councilman in South Carolina and the United States. His name is John R. Spann and he was elected recently to fill the unexpired term of a Pinewood, S.C. Councilman⁶. In one of the papers which I read recently it said that “Spann says that he feels that his election is an accomplishment for the young people because young people have something to offer and are willing all that they can to solve problems.” I am certain that those of you who know Spann well would say that he is an ordinary person, however, no one can discount the fact that he has accomplished an extra-ordinary feat. What John Spann has accomplished convinced me that for him also, life is a song worth singing because even now he is singing it.

What I have attempted to do here is cite a few examples to support my assertion that for the most part it is ordinary [people] like you and me who accomplish extra-ordinary things in life. Being ordinary is not a virtue nor a millstone. What makes the difference is how we feel about ourselves, how noble our goals are, and the degree of our commitment to accomplishing these goals.

As I stand before you today I am deeply aware of the fact that you are members of the first generation of technically free Black Americans in the history of this nation. I realize [this] sets you apart from each generation of blacks which has preceded you. You belong to the first generation of Blacks that, from a technical point of view at least, possess all the prerequisites necessary for achieving in mass the economic, social, and political freedom embodied in the American dream.

In fact it may be said that for your generation the ingredients detailed by Martin Luther King in his now famous “I have a dream” speech now exist. However, if it does come to pass that your generation is the one destined to bring to reality the dream that King had, then your generation must see life as a song worth singing and sing it.

You must astound the world by doing what you are capable of doing, that is, by accomplishing in all walks of life that which is extra-ordinary. You must maximize your strength and minimize your weaknesses. You must feel good about yourselves and know from whence you have come. You must realize that your heritage is not the slave ship and slavery but that the blood of kings and pharaohs flows through your veins. You must remember that your ancestors have made great contributions in art, music, science, politics, and religion. You must realize that your roots lie not in barbarism but in nobility and truth. For indeed one of your ancestors carried the cross for

⁶Pinewood is a small town that had roughly 700 residents at the time. Spann was elected to town council in a special election held after Councilman F. L. Barwick resigned for personal reasons. Spann was the first African American elected to Pinewood Council, and after his election, he publicly said, “Now is the time to forget about black or white and come together for the betterment of the town”. He was reelected the subsequent year.

Christ and thereby lightened his burden when others were crying crucify Him, and did so.

Indeed, life for you must be a song worth singing so my young friends my message to you is simple “sing it.”

Solomon’s inclusion of Malcolm X in his speech is intriguing. Solomon was a graduate student at Atlanta University (1959–1960), and the chair of the math department Lonnie Cross (later Abdulalim Shabazz) was actively involved with the Nation of Islam. He invited Malcolm X to speak in the Mathematics Club and converted to Islam in 1960. At the time of Solomon’s speech, Cross was Director of Education for the Nation of Islam. It is unclear from the historical record whether Solomon knew of this connection.

Acknowledgements. This text is based on an original document in the James L. Solomon holdings of the South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, S.C.