

WILSON COLLEGE

On the Occasion of the
Bestowing of an Honorary Degree

Acceptance Remarks
by
Ruth Bamela Engo-Tjega

May 17, 1992

I would like to thank the President and Trustees of Wilson College and the entire college community for bestowing an honorary degree on my behalf. I certainly appreciate this honor and I accept it with all due humility.

I would also like to thank all of my friends who are here to share with me the many emotions this honor evokes. Lastly, I would be remiss in not recalling and blessing the memory of my late parents, Suzanne and Joseph Tjega who encouraged me at an early age to always be a participating member of my community.

As a woman who has spent all of her educational life in co-educational environments, I'm especially pleased and honored to be receiving my first honorary degree from a distinguished women's college. Let me first say that I have no agenda against men. As a concept, I love them dearly. And there are certainly advantages to coeducational schooling. Firstly, you learn to recognize men's strengths and weaknesses and in so doing, you become less vulnerable to the myth of their almighty intelligence, wisdom and strength. Secondly, there is the possibility that one may learn to integrate some of the positive aspects of the male character into one's predominantly female side .

However, these advantages while very real, did not remove in me the perception that the education system was designed and implemented with men as the principal players. I felt that this did not allow me, as a female student and later on as an African woman to have the same opportunities and encouragement to be the best or to share membership in the educational elite.

My experience was that wherever I went, women were the minority and were never expected to reach the end of any endeavor. They were always steered toward the famous "second choice" of leaving school, getting married, having children and being taking care of. Nobody was especially concerned when female students did poorly, but when they happened to excel, there were always special words to describe them, usually as being exceptionally different from their own gender.

I therefore developed a distaste for formal education as I knew it.

And when my country became independent in 1960 and school children were asked to write about it, I wrote my first poem, a rather angry diatribe entitled, "Il Faut Emprisonner L'Ecole", which means The School System Should be Jailed! Everybody thought that, as usual, I was "hors du sujet", off the subject, if not an outright revolutionary. But in my young mind, I thought our Independence should call for the jailing of a school system that constantly shamed the female students, making them feel like second class citizens.

Hence, from that time onward, I developed a keen interest in extra-curricular activities where I was more fairly involved in projects and their creation. I of course discovered later in life that as far as women were concerned, the school system was not the only institution deserving of jail. I have been tempted to write poems about the rest of so-called organized society, including the workplace, marriage, and even religion.

Today, as a mother of two, a girl and a boy, my perceptions remain relatively unchanged. Circumstances dictate that I send my children to far away boarding schools. Although I knew that being together in the same school would help them adjust more easily to separation from their home, I ultimately decided that my daughter would go to a separate girls school, where the reputation and the performance of the school is dependent on what women can accomplish in Math, Physics, tennis, piano, horse riding or their integrity.

I wanted to give my daughter the opportunity to be part of the process where women will be expected to be at the beginning, as well as at the end, of each programme, project or activity.

I am not by any means preparing this daughter of mine to be anti-male, but just a full human being, exposed to all the choices, challenges and responsibilities that life has to offer.

I therefore feel particularly privileged to be part of this day at this distinguished women's college. Indeed, by honoring me, you have helped me to address publicly the very obstacles that resulted in my being marginalized for much of my life.

Let me briefly give a few remarks on my position on gender issues. And please note that my real struggle and resentment have been directed against any system or institution that has as its basis, the domination and deprecation of other groups based on race, sex, religion, etc. I believe that we are all, with our various talents and individualities, needed to make life worth living. But I realize that even with the determination to be inclusive, it is difficult to talk about gender differences in a way that neither demeans either gender nor makes one or the other feel defensive. Even when such considerations are not intended to be judgmental, they are often taken as such.

Yet the last thing we need - now or ever - is antagonism between the sexes. And yet the differences which ought to be complementary, sometimes provoke discomfort and hostility when expressed.

I do believe that there are significant differences in the ways men and women think and express themselves, and my work in development field confirms it for me everyday.

The American psychoanalyst Erik Erikson, in Childhood and Society wrote about his observations on how small girls and boys play differently. Boys, he noted, when given blocks, tend to build tall towers, space ships, castles, etc. Girls, given the same blocks, tend to build low, enclosed structures. Anatomical analogies aside, Erikson suggests that these differences are suggestive of the ways that men and women behave and think differently. This is over-simplifying the issue, of course, since we each have some elements of the other inside (what Carl Jung called the animus and anima).

I would therefore argue that both qualities are needed in differing quantities and at different points in history.

During much of history, when humankind was in the process of exploring and expanding, it was natural that the aggressive, outwardly male tendencies dominated. I believe that at that time and until today, these tendencies are rightly celebrated because they are the foundations of many of the discoveries that make our lives easier today.

However, because of the reality of our world today, one must accept that there are limits to the concept of growth, that the concept of development as we are trying to redefine it is less based on quantity and more on balancing the needs of human beings, then I suggest that we emphasize more qualities that are essentially feminine, inwardly oriented, quality oriented, care oriented, consensus oriented.

This will mean more inclusion of women of quality in thinking and planning for the future of our planet, and will entail more men learning to integrate the language and thinking of the female side of themselves into that of their predominant male side.

This would also mean that women's colleges and think tanks all over the world would have a new type of challenge: creating new generations of women who will not limit their energy in the struggle for equality within the system we know today; women who will spend their energy on new visions, formulating trends and being part of the leading group in charge of planning and designing more humane lifestyles for the third millennium.

In closing, I would like to note that I have had the privilege to

be exposed to three alumnae of Wilson College. Nan Clarkson, who is the leader of a wonderful center of thoughts and spirituality: Adelynhood, in Massachusetts; Judy Brown, who is the leader of musiclife for the whole of Westchester county, New York and the talented Minister of Music in Larchmont Avenue Church, and my sister and long-time friend, Charlotte Weaver-Gelzer, a writer who still respects the feelings and the cultures of those she chooses to write on. Charlotte also understands that I come from an oral tradition which communicates with the spoken word rather than the written one. She writes tons of letters that I enjoy reading each year without ever answering. So let this be my oral thank you note to her.

These are three women of high integrity, leaders in their communities, working in three different sectors of activities, dramatically demonstrating that Wilson College is already on the way to establishing these new visions. May God continue to bless your efforts. Thank you.