

Equity Conference 2017 Opening Remarks

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I'll be brief, because I want so much to turn the stage over to Joycelin for her performance. I wanted to introduce you all first to my daughter, Devon. She turned seven weeks old on Wednesday. I am actually on maternity leave right now but being here with you and organizing this weekend, I realized, is actually also about Devon, and the world we are all a part of.

So, we began the year by asking questions of each other - our origin stories, names, and spirit animals. I want to share a story about Devi, and some questions that have surfaced for me in these opening weeks of her life. I hope they spark some questions for you too.

When Devon was two weeks old we had a routine newborn checkup. I jotted down questions for the nurse as Mr. McAuliffe and I waited in the very room I had labored in before being transferred to the hospital. The nurse walked in and remarked on how beautiful Devon is. "She is beautiful, just beautiful," the nurse said, "She's perfect." Every mother thinks her child is beautiful and perfect and I am no exception. Devon is the most beautiful and perfect and the smartest baby to ever grace the planet, naturally. It was this next comment though that gave me pause and has stuck with me every day since. "She has the best of both of you," the nurse said, "your face and his coloring." "Thanks", I replied nodding, "thanks."

As she took Devon across the room, the meaning of her words began to sink in. I started to feel a tightening in my chest. *What did she just say?*, I thought. *Did I hear her correctly? Did she just say that my child was beautiful because of her color? Did she just say that the best of me was the shape of my face? That the best of McAuliffe was the color of his skin?* I quieted my inner thoughts with a "No, she couldn't have meant that." I looked at Mr. McAuliffe and he didn't seem concerned or to have heard her. He watched intently as the nurse cooed at Devon and took her temperature. I turned my attention back to Devi and the checking of her vital signs. She was healthy and not crying in that moment (which was amazing itself)- so all was well in the world.

I've thought about the nurse's words at length since that visit. I have told myself that she was making small talk. *She probably tells all new parents that their child is beautiful and perfect*, I thought again and again to myself. But in her small talk some of my own fears (fears I did not even know I had until that moment) were uncovered. *Is the lightness of Devon's skin what the world will say makes her beautiful? Is this what the world sees when they see my brand new baby girl? If she looks white, will people not believe that I am her mother? How will she navigate being multiracial?* Students in the multiracial affinity group well know the challenge of that last question.

At that point Devi was only two weeks old - and of all of the questions and challenges I was and continue to grapple with about motherhood, that Devon's beauty would be attributed to her light skin color was not a matter I was prepared to engage so early in her life. In her small talk, the nurse revealed her own unconscious bias (I know that rationally) - a deep, implicit, and likely unknown preference for the beauty of skin color that approximates whiteness. That the media have held up whiteness and thinness (among other things) as a normative standard of beauty for women has been well documented. If you Google "beauty" in an image search, as I did at 4am this morning, it literally shows only white women. There is an occasional picture of Beyonce, but that is a topic for another time.

Recently I started to think about the pictures of all the families and babies born at the place where I labored with Devon. The nurse had taken our picture that day too for the "Baby Wall of Fame". The families in the photos are mostly white, with some families of color sprinkled in. McAuliffe and I, however, are the only interracial couple featured. Maybe there are others somewhere, but visibly, we are the only multiracial family on the wall. In talking about this experience with Mr. McAuliffe, he suggested that the nurse may never have actually encountered a multiracial child before. "Is that even possible?" I countered. "It's possible," he said. Maybe she had never been proximate to that kind of racial difference. That she unintentionally triggered such dismay in me, does not lessen the impact of her words or the fear which they elicited. She didn't even know; she was just saying my baby was beautiful.

In January, Bryan Stevenson asked us to get close to those people and causes that are different from us, those people or causes that make us uncomfortable. He compelled us to do so in order to change ourselves for the better and to make the world around us more equitable, more just. In the last seven weeks since Devi was

born, I have come to think of proximity as a critical aspect of both motherhood and leadership. I need to get close to this confusing, unpredictable, amazing, beautiful little being in order to begin to understand her and meet her needs. We all need to get close to something - an idea, a cause, a worldview - or a person who is different from you in order to be a more compassionate and empathetic member of this world.

This year's Equity Conference theme is about "proximate leadership". Okay, so what does that even mean? John Kotter of the Harvard Business Review writes that, "The function of leadership is to produce change," and that, "setting the direction of that change is fundamental to leadership". To me, leadership is more than the production of change alone. An effective leader practices humility, sensitivity, openness, and persistence. Leadership is about closeness. It is about putting yourself in an uncomfortable position, and setting that new direction. *What direction will you set?* Whether than means attending an affinity group meeting for the first time or confronting your own unconscious bias, it is incumbent upon all of us to approach what makes us uncomfortable. I, along with the student organizers of this year's conference, want to ask you, *How close are you willing to get to your own biases? What causes and people are you willing to get close to? What kind of leader will that proximity allow you to become?*

And now - Joycelin.