

Good morning. I'd like to offer the following as a prayer. It comes from the poet Elizabeth Alexander's 2009 poem "Praise Song for the Day":

We encounter each other in words, words  
spiny or smooth, whispered or declaimed,  
words to consider, reconsider.

We cross dirt roads and highways that mark  
the will of some one and then others, who said  
I need to see what's on the other side.

I know there's something better down the road.  
We need to find a place where we are safe.  
We walk into that which we cannot yet see.

Amen.

I hope everyone had a restful and enjoyable Spring Break. In addition to all the great senior speeches, we've had some outstanding chapels this year from faculty and most recently from senior Frank Mercer, who spoke about his love of Alexander Pushkin, and who framed his remarks with a charge to all of us not to limit our study of Black history to the month of February and not to focus exclusively on the oppression of Black people, but to expand our study of artists, thinkers, and historical figures far beyond the traditionally biased American educational norm of white and Eurocentric studies. I want to take a few minutes this morning to do just that through a favorite lens of mine, the literary one, and examine how literature can help us become better people.

There's a scene in Zadie Smith's 2000 novel *White Teeth* that is anthologized in *The Penguin Book of Migration Literature*. We were just reading it and talking about it in class the other day and I want to share it with all of you. A fifteen year-old girl named Irie Jones, who is Black and of Jamaican descent, is a Londoner who is often ignored and excluded for not fitting the English beauty standard for body type. In her class on British literature, her white teacher is leading the discussion on Shakespeare's Sonnet 127, one of the "dark lady sonnets" about a woman who had darker features than the pale Elizabethan ideal, and Irie raises her hand and asks the teacher if the woman in the poem might be Black. The teacher dismisses the notion by saying that that there were no Caribbean immigrants in England at the time, that it would not have been possible for Shakespeare to be writing to a slave, and that the woman in the poem likely had a complexion similar to Mrs. Roody herself- which, to Irie, looks like the color of "strawberry mousse."

Irie is embarrassed for having asked the question and, to add insult to injury, is handed an anonymous note from a classmate, written in a kind of mock-Black vernacular, ridiculing the notion of a *real* poet praising the beauty of a Black woman. The chapter reveals how a person can be made to feel inferior at a young, impressionable age; it exposes how society tells us exactly what beauty looks like (and what it doesn't look like) and how a classroom can become a nightmare when a teacher is insensitive, a student commits a racist act, and others - the note-passers - turn a blind eye to bigotry.

In our era of heightened racial awareness, new stories are emerging all the time about young people of color who have faced similar forms of racism in their own lives and educational experiences. I refer you to Kwame Alexander's story about his senior year AP English essay, a story which he shared a few weeks ago during the All-School Seminar. You'll recall that Mr. Alexander's teacher gave him an F for a great paper, claiming he could not have written it, doubting his intelligence because of his skin color. Mr. Alexander noted that his father became his advocate at that time and Mr. Alexander asked us to think about all the students who don't have someone like his father to swoop in at that moment.

When people raise their voices to protest racism, when they organize to peacefully make known the injustices of our time, when they go on strike, when they call out time and again for reforms - in education, in policing, in criminal justice, in healthcare, in housing, in employment practices and workers' rights, in voting rights, in access to clean drinking water and grocery stores, in representation in the entertainment industry - they do it out of *necessity*. These movements emerge out of real experience and *a desire to make America the land of opportunity, the realization of its ideals*. We understand that the Civil Rights Movement and its leaders are American heroes who met with terrible segregationist violence, from vigilantes and mobs, *and* from politicians and local authorities. Opposition to peaceful protests today has taken the form of a divisive ideology that characterizes Black people as riotous mobs, looters, thugs--this is an old stereotype, one of several that we see chronicled in Marlon Riggs' documentary *Ethnic Notions*, shown in Sophomore English, and in the more recent documentary *Reconstruction* by Henry Louis Gates Jr., which I highly recommend. These grotesque caricatures were used to shape white public opinion in this country, and we still see their harmful legacy today.

People who oppose the Black Lives Matter movement suggest that American institutions are no longer racist and that Black people are perceiving problems that simply don't exist. In response to that, I offer the following passage from Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel *Americanah*. Adichie is writing from the perspective of her protagonist, Ifemelu, a Nigerian immigrant, a scholar who has had success at elite American universities and is blogging about race in America. Adichie drew on her own experiences in creating this novel. Her character Ifemelu addresses this post to a white readership:

Dear American Non-Black, if an American black person is telling you about an experience about being black, please do not eagerly bring up examples from your own life. Don't say "It's just like when I..." You have suffered. Everyone in the world has suffered. But you have not suffered precisely because you are an American Black. Don't be quick to find alternative explanations for what happened. Don't say "Oh, it's not really race, it's class. Oh, it's not race, it's gender. Oh, it's not race, it's the cookie monster." You see, American Blacks actually don't WANT it to be race. They would rather not have racist [stuff] happen. So maybe when they say something is about race, it's maybe because it actually is? [...] Don't say "We're tired of talking about race" or "The only race is the human race." American Blacks, too, are tired of talking about race. They wish they didn't have to.

The protagonist Ifemelu continues a little further in her blog post:

Don't say "Oh, racism is over, slavery was so long ago." We are talking about problems from the 1960s, not the 1860s. If you meet an American Black man from Alabama, he probably remembers when he had to step off the curb because a white person was walking past.

Ifemelu goes on,

I bought a dress from a vintage shop on eBay the other day, made in 1960, in perfect shape, and I wear it a lot. When the original owner wore it, black Americans could not vote because they were black. (And maybe the original owner was one of those women, in the famous sepia photographs, standing by in hordes outside schools shouting "Ape!" at young black children because they did not want them to go to school with their young white children. Where are those women now? Do they sleep well? Do they think about shouting "Ape"?)

As Adichie's character explains so vividly, this is not ancient history. Fortunately, we have made progress as a society to the point where white segregationist mobs no longer swarm schools like Central High School in Little Rock Arkansas in 1957 when nine courageous Black students attempted to integrate the all-white school (this should sound very familiar; you read about it in 7th grade English in Melba Beals' *Warriors Don't Cry*). However, a mob carrying all kinds of white supremacist, neo-Nazi iconography invaded the United States Capitol two months ago, and we needn't look very far to see how segregated and unequally resourced many schools still are.

The greatest hurdle to real and lasting equality is fear. In 1987, the last year of his life, the great writer and public intellectual James Baldwin was posed a question in an interview. A journalist asks him, "Do you think we'll ever get rid of prejudices?" Baldwin answers, and I'm changing a few of the slurs he uses here as he presents others' hateful speech. He says,

It is not a matter of prejudices. It is a matter of cowardice. It is easy to blame the [Black] or the Arab or the Jew or the [lesbian] or the [gay]. Anyone who isn't you. No one can see that you could *be* that person, that in some ways you *are* that person.

The journalist goes on to ask Baldwin, "What is it that makes people frightened? To be a coward is to be frightened." He replies,

What you see in other people, whatever you see in other people, is what you see in your mirror. What you try to do is isolate whatever you see in that other person, which is *you*.

Baldwin is saying that people are afraid to recognize how similar we are as human beings, how closely connected we all are, despite efforts to the contrary. Circumstances beyond anyone's control - the mysterious forces that land a person in their life, with their family, their resources or lack thereof, their community, their country, the opportunities placed in front of them - these are not the result of the individual's hard work or character or intellect. It's something else, something external to the individual. Call it luck or chance. Call it fate. But what I could never accept is the notion of a God who favors some over others. In this country, we are free to be religious if we choose, but we should not use faith to justify our own good fortune and others' misfortune. Slave-owners in America would quote the Bible to support the notion that darker-skinned people bear the mark of Cain, or the curse of Canaan, and are inherently sinful and somehow deserving of their bondage. The poet Phyllis Wheatley, a slave herself, addressed religious hypocrites in her poem "On Being Brought from Africa to America," reminding them that all people - regardless of color - "May [...] join th'angelic train."

As Baldwin explains, it's cowardice that prevents us from acknowledging how close we all are to our fellow Americans, whether they be Black or brown, Asian American, white, LGBT, migrant workers, Native people, veterans with PTSD, people dealing with addiction, the homeless, those in abject poverty (in rural shacks and in urban slums), those dying of COVID-19, those in prisons serving unjust sentences or those serving just sentences for crimes they committed when life offered them no other alternatives. It takes courage to take a hard look at yourself, for me to take a hard look at myself. Not the same type of courage that the late Congressman John Lewis and the Freedom Riders summoned in 1961 when they peacefully protested segregation knowing that they would be met with violence.

It takes just a modicum of courage - *which needs summoning nonetheless* - to listen to the experiences of fellow human beings of whatever race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or income level, to really listen, to reflect, and realize, "I've been given advantages and privileges in this life that others are wrongfully denied, and I've got to do more to help change these inequalities."

As I approach the end, I'll offer a few lines from Georgia Douglas Johnson, from her poem "Brotherhood" (she uses the French word "chanson" here, which means "song"):

Shall we not wend  
The blind-way of our prison-world  
By sympathy entwined?  
Shall we not make  
The bleak way for each other's sake  
Less rugged and unkind?  
O let each throbbing heart repeat  
The faint note of another's beat  
To lift a chanson for the feet  
That stumble down life's checkered street.

Georgia Douglas Johnson. I wish you all a nice transition back to school with these two virtual days, and I wish all of us an uplifting Spring--it will be even more so if we share together in the lifting up and strive to make everyone's path forward wider, smoother, and kinder than ever before. Thank you.

## **Praise Song for the Day**

BY [ELIZABETH ALEXANDER](#) (1962- )

A Poem for Barack Obama's Presidential Inauguration

Each day we go about our business,  
walking past each other, catching each other's  
eyes or not, about to speak or speaking.

All about us is noise. All about us is  
noise and bramble, thorn and din, each  
one of our ancestors on our tongues.

Someone is stitching up a hem, darning  
a hole in a uniform, patching a tire,  
repairing the things in need of repair.

Someone is trying to make music somewhere,  
with a pair of wooden spoons on an oil drum,  
with cello, boom box, harmonica, voice.

A woman and her son wait for the bus.  
A farmer considers the changing sky.  
A teacher says, Take out your pencils. Begin.

**We encounter each other in words, words  
spiny or smooth, whispered or declaimed,  
words to consider, reconsider.**

**We cross dirt roads and highways that mark  
the will of some one and then others, who said  
I need to see what's on the other side.**

**I know there's something better down the road.  
We need to find a place where we are safe.  
We walk into that which we cannot yet see.**

Say it plain: that many have died for this day.  
Sing the names of the dead who brought us here,  
who laid the train tracks, raised the bridges,

picked the cotton and the lettuce, built  
 brick by brick the glittering edifices  
 they would then keep clean and work inside of.

Praise song for struggle, praise song for the day.  
 Praise song for every hand-lettered sign,  
 the figuring-it-out at kitchen tables.

Some live by love thy neighbor as thyself,  
 others by first do no harm or take no more  
 than you need. What if the mightiest word is love?

Love beyond marital, filial, national,  
 love that casts a widening pool of light,  
 love with no need to pre-empt grievance.

In today's sharp sparkle, this winter air,  
 any thing can be made, any sentence begun.  
 On the brink, on the brim, on the cusp,

praise song for walking forward in that light.

### **Brotherhood**

[Georgia Douglas Johnson](#) - 1880-1966

Come, brothers all!  
 Shall we not wend  
 The blind-way of our prison-world  
 By sympathy entwined?  
 Shall we not make  
 The bleak way for each other's sake  
 Less rugged and unkind?  
 O let each throbbing heart repeat  
 The faint note of another's beat  
 To lift a chanson for the feet  
 That stumble down life's checkered street.

**To America** (Note: I did not end up quoting from this poem, but it informed my thinking.)

[James Weldon Johnson](#) - 1871-1938

How would you have us, as we are?  
Or sinking 'neath the load we bear?  
Our eyes fixed forward on a star?  
Or gazing empty at despair?

Rising or falling? Men or things?  
With dragging pace or footsteps fleet?  
Strong, willing sinews in your wings?  
Or tightening chains about your feet?