

“Transformation of Our Minds, Attitudes and Behaviours”

Independence Day Oration

By

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At

**Celebration in Observance of the
167th Independence Anniversary of the Republic of Liberia**

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**Centennial Pavilion, Monrovia
Montserrado County**

Your Excellency, Madam Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, President of the Republic of Liberia;

The Honourable Vice President of the Republic of Liberia Joseph N. Boakai and Mrs. Katumu Boakai;

The Honourable Speaker Alex Tyler, Mrs. Tyler, and the Honourable House of Representatives;

His Honour the Chief Justice and Associate Justices of the Supreme Court of the Republic of Liberia;

The President Pro-Tempore Findley and Mrs. Findley, and members of the Honourable House of Senate;

The Dean and Members of the Cabinet and other Government Officials;

His Excellency the Doyen and Members of the Diplomatic Corps;

The Special Representative of the Secretary General of the United Nations and Heads of International Organizations;

Members of the Consular Corps;

Members of the Clergy and Religious Community;

Traditional Chiefs and Elders;

Students;

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I would like to express my profound thanks and appreciation to Her Excellency, President Ellen Johnson and the 167th Independence Anniversary Celebration Committee for selecting me to bring a message to the nation. I consider my father the late O. Natty B. Davis the orator within the family so I do hope that I do justice to his memory. I am sure that he would be delighted to see one of his children addressing the nation on this important occasion.

My message to you will have some pieces of my personal experiences in order to provide a context for parts of my message. Those will provide the backdrop particularly when I talk about values and service; essential elements for “One People, One Nation, United for Peace and Sustainable Development.”

My life’s story began on Green Street in Harper City, Maryland County where three generations of Davis’s before me lived and worked to make their contributions to Maryland County and to Liberia. So, I am a fourth generation Marylander, and I would like at this time to thank my brother Natty B who seven years ago encouraged me to return home. I am grateful to Her Excellency President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf for giving me the opportunity to serve Maryland County and Liberia as President of William V.S. Tubman University, Liberia’s second public university.

My personal past is one of the many stories of Maryland County’s past. Please indulge me as I pay tribute to some of Maryland’s sons and daughters who are responsible for my being here today. My paternal grandfather, Alfred Pryde Davis was an outspoken private entrepreneur who was not involved in politics, but became a political prisoner for being critical of the government of his time. In his day, Liberians did not enjoy the freedom of expression that we so freely exercise today without fear of being relegated to a lifetime of imprisonment. As we enjoy these freedoms, we need to also demonstrate a sense of responsibility and not engage in malicious rumours that cause dissension or bring injury to individuals, families and institutions. The promulgation of half-truths, misinformation, and disinformation that cast aspersions on people and divides our communities is not demonstrating personal or social responsibility. If Liberia is to move forward in unity, these actions must stop.

In order to fully achieve the theme of this year’s anniversary, we must bring about transformation. What does transformation mean? **Alteration, change, conversion, renovation, revolution, makeover.** I am not here to talk about renovation of our infrastructure or other physical manifestations. I come as an educator and a psychologist to talk about an alteration of our minds, our cognitions, our perceptions, and our behaviours. We may have new roads, electricity, new buildings, etc. but if our attitudes and behaviours remain unchanged, we approach these with the same disregard as we did the old and soon they appear as the old.

Let me begin then with a few of what I consider in need of change; deep structural change. Our sense of identity and our values: those principles, standards, morals, ethics and ideals that should form the bedrock of our society. Among others are excellence, integrity, civility, ethics, civic virtue, dependability and trustworthiness.

Identity: who we are

Robert Reich, an American economist, professor, author and political commentator wrote in his March 24, 2014 Blog a piece entitled The New Tribalism. In that piece he writes, and I quote him:

“We are witnessing a reversion to tribalism around the world, away from nation states.” He goes on to give a brief history of the world as it was then. Again I quote him.

“Before the rise of the nation-state, between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries, the world was mostly tribal. Tribes were united by language, religion, blood, and belief. They feared other tribes and often warred against them. Kings and emperors imposed temporary truces, at most.

But in the past three hundred years the idea of nationhood took root in most of the world. Members of tribes started to become citizens, viewing themselves as a single people with patriotic sentiments and duties toward their homeland.

Today, as he sees it, “The connections that matter most are again becoming more personal. Religious beliefs and affiliations, the nuances of one’s own language and culture, the daily realities of class, and the extensions of one’s family and its values – all are providing people with ever greater senses of identity.” While being bound by religious beliefs and affiliations, the nuances of one’s own language and culture can be positive, we can also use those to divide ourselves and foster insiders and outsiders. The not so distant past of Liberia attests to this. As we rebuild Liberia what takes precedent in our perception of ourselves? I contend that as Liberians we must think of ourselves as citizens, viewing ourselves as a single people with patriotic sentiments and duties toward their homeland, Liberia. The Preamble of the Constitution of the Republic of Liberia states, “.that all of our people, irrespective of history, tradition, creed, or ethnic background are of one common body politic.”

The Preamble goes on to state, “Exercising our natural, inherent and inalienable rights to establish a framework of government for the purpose of promoting unity (not disunity), liberty (not bondage), peace (not war), stability (not instability), equality (not inequality), justice (not injustice), and human rights (not abuse) under the rule of law (not mob rule) with opportunities for political, social, moral, spiritual and cultural advancement of our society, for ourselves and for our posterity.” In that same Preamble, there is a resolve to “live in harmony, to practice fraternal love, tolerance and understanding as a people” as well as setting forth the obligation “to promote African unity and international peace and cooperation.” Evident in these words is the need to shift from a warring mentality to a peaceful one where our behaviours are consistent with harmony, fraternal love, tolerance and understanding, promoting unity on our continent, and engaging in international peace and cooperation. Well, you might say that was meant for the government. I contend that as citizens each one has a responsibility to live those words; not just mouth them but to live them daily.

As we strive to become one people, one nation there are some beliefs and practices that we must change. Among these is what I have heard referred to as MALE RIGHTS. In a recent discussion I had with a group of men and women, one of the male discussants stated that women coming to Liberia should adapt to the way things are. He went on to say they should know how to address men showing proper respect because of male rights. I responded by asking him what about female rights and children rights, or human rights. I was disturbed by this line of conversation because it suggests that because of the difference of one chromosome which results in a different anatomical difference that males are entitled to rights denied to women. It signified that women are still regarded as less than men and should be treated not only as lesser creatures but as property to be used and abused. So I went in search of the evidence that gives males rights that are not accorded to women. I went back to the Constitution of Liberia, Chapter III, Fundamental Rights. And this is what I found in Article 11, (a) I quote. “All persons are born equally free and independent and have certain natural, inherent and inalienable rights, among which are the right of enjoying and defending life and liberty, of pursuing and maintaining security of the person, and of acquiring, possessing and protecting property, subject to such qualifications as provided for in this Constitution.”

Section b continues with defining these rights. “All persons, irrespective of ethnic background, race, sex, creed, place of origin or political opinion, are entitled to the fundamental rights and

freedoms of the individual, subject to such qualifications as provided for in this Constitution.” Nowhere does it state that males have rights that females do not have. Therefore we need to alter our thinking and behaviours about men and women. Females are equal to males and should not be treated as lesser creatures or as property to be used and abused. The law must enforce this in every aspect of life; in the home, classroom, work-place and in social settings.

Liberia can boast of some strong women. I am grateful to those strong women in my family who set for me such wonderful examples of service to humankind. It is my strongly held belief that words of praise to the Almighty without deeds to our fellow humans are nothing but hollow words. Two women who not only consistently praised God, but followed up with deeds of human kindness were my paternal grandmother and great-grandmother whose commitment to education and service took them to the remotest corners of Liberia. Let me share a story of a visitor from the United States, a Mr. William Kamma Reeves, a man in his seventies, who visited me in Harper and told me stories about my great-grandmother. He pointed out that my danneh, as we called my great-grandmother, and her daughter, Ma Caddy, my grandmother lived in their village of Gedebo and taught him his ABC’s, and that my grandmother and he grew up as siblings. He went on to say how harsh living conditions were in the village but that were it not for their presence among the villagers, he and others would not have begun their education. This encounter brought back some very fond memories. I remember as a young child as I travelled with them on their missions from one remote area of south-eastern Liberia to another. The condition of the roads in the fifties was challenging as it is today. These are the women who shaped my early development and that of several other Liberians. From their lives we glean the importance of education as the great equalizer even then. We also see the value placed on service to others. Why else would they leave the comfort of their homes to travel and live under very harsh conditions? It certainly was not for the salary.

I also have fond memories of my father, Olie Davis, as many Marylanders called him, standing and addressing Marylanders at the 26th Independence Day celebration, or other occasions. Dad was also known as the poor man’s advocate because, as a lawyer, he often took cases not because of people’s ability to pay, but in his search for justice for people who could not access justice for themselves. And so we often got cassava, bananas, and other fruit and vegetables from grateful people for whom he had fought in the courtroom. But we also got something even more powerful. When people found out who our father was, we were offered kindness and care. Today, too many Liberians seemed to have lost that sense of caring for one another and kindness to one another. We seem too busy getting what we can get for ourselves, sometimes even stealing, to be attentive to the plight of the less fortunate. We need to change our attitudes and behaviours and become more caring of fellow humans, especially those who are the most vulnerable among us. If you have ever ridden with Her Excellency, you know how long it takes to arrive at the designated destination because she makes numerous stops to inquire about the people, demonstrating how genuinely she cares about the citizens, especially the children.

As we work to rebuild Liberia and achieve one people, one nation, united for peace and sustainable development, what kind of leadership is needed at all levels and in all spheres? We currently see too much emphasis on self-aggrandizement. There is what I call the beating of the chest followed by the question, “Do you know who I am?” with the expectation that we should pay homage. Instead the approach should be I am your public servant here to serve you. What can I do for you? What I am proposing a change in the attitudes and behaviours of all of us who serve the public. We are elected, appointed, to serve and we should do so willingly; we should be servant leaders. Greenleaf (1970) in responding to who is the servant-leader, wrote “It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice

brings one to aspire to lead. The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant – first to make sure that other people’s highest priority needs are being served. The best test is: Do those served grow as persons; do they, while being served become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?” (Greenleaf, 1970 “*The Servant as Leader*”.)

As we read this quote from Greenleaf and think about Liberia, the question is, as leaders, do we place our constituents’ highest priority needs at the forefront of how we structure their educational or work experiences, or do we do what is convenient for us? Do we structure their experiences to ensure that they grow as persons? As a result of our leadership and the manner in which we structure their experiences, do our students/constituents become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous? Are they more likely to become servant leaders given their experiences with us? At TU we have articulated a mission that states that we provide quality educational experiences that transform lives for worthy service. We expect our students when they leave us to go out and serve in whatever their disciplines are.

What are the changes that we must make in order to become servant leaders? There are 10 characteristics of the servant leader as described by Greenleaf and others. The first is **listening**. Spears in Greenleaf’s *The Servant Leader*, points out that as a servant-leader, the focus is on listening intently to others, trying to identify what the will of the group is and trying to clarify that will. During her recent visit to Harper Her Excellency said to the audience “I am here to listen to you”. As a psychologist, I closely observed her (she didn’t know that she was being scrutinized by a psychologist), and can say that she engaged in what we call “mindful listening.” She stayed in the moment with the speaker even though some of it was critical, and did not respond defensively. In my profession of psychology we talk about the importance of also listening to what is not being said. So does the servant-leader. As Spears indicates, s/he “also keenly listens to her/his own voice and engages in reflection”.

As we look at the second characteristic, **empathy**, we know that Carl Rogers, a psychologist made a tremendous impact to not only psychology, but to several other fields when he emphasized this concept and that of unconditional positive regard. The servant-leader is one committed to understanding and accepting others even when he or she does not accept their behaviors or performance. We have leaders who state that they will not sit down in the same room as others with whom they disagree. That is the opposite of servant leadership. The distinction between the behaviors/performance and the individual as someone with intrinsic worth is essential to being a servant-leader. As one people, one nation, we must learn to accept one another even if we disagree with their politics and behaviors.

This third characteristic of **healing** refers to the “potential one has for healing one’s self and one’s relationship to others”; the desire to make whole. Greenleaf in “*The Servant as Leader*” states “There is something subtle communicated to one who is being served and led if, implicit in the compact between servant-leader and led, is the understanding that the search for wholeness is something they share.” Liberia needs leaders who can change their attitudes and behaviors to promote healing rather sowing dissension and discontent.

General and self-awareness means one is sharply attuned to self, others and the environment. Oftentimes this means that one is jarred by that awareness. However, that awareness is used in the service of others and to correct one’s behavior.

Persuasion, As Spears and others who speak of servant leader describe persuasion, it is the ability to convince others rather than to rely on positional authority to coerce compliance that separates the servant leader from others who use power to dominate others. Too often I see examples of leaders who rely on positional authority to coerce compliance. If we want our people to follow our vision, persuasion is what we need to use.

Conceptualization: As a leader one must think beyond the day-to-day occurrences, “putting out fires”, and dream big dreams. This ability for Conceptualization enables the servant leader to be a visionary.

Foresight: Foresight enables the servant leader to “understand the lessons from the past, the realities of the present, and the likely consequences of a decision for the future.”

Stewardship: As leaders demonstrating stewardship, we hold our institutions/agencies/ministries, etc. in trust for the greater good of society.

Commitment to the growth of people: Spears tells us that servant leaders “believe that people have an intrinsic value beyond their tangible contributions as workers.” Therefore servant leaders are “deeply committed to the growth of each and everyone in his or her institution/agency/ministry/office. This means that if we are servant leaders we have a “tremendous responsibility to do everything within our power to nurture the personal, professional, and spiritual growth of” the employees of the institutions, etc.

Building Community: Given the rise of urbanization, technology, and all of the other factors that tend to isolate us contributing to our tendency to focus only on ourselves, the servant leader strives to build a sense of community within the institution, fostering caring communities that replace the bureaucracies and silos which we have erected in this society.

These ten characteristics are by no means exhaustive. I see them as compatible with the goals of a rebuilt Liberia. As a psychologist these are the essence of what we see as healthy growth and leadership.

How do we bring about this transformation?

There are three levels at which this transformation of attitudes and behaviours must occur. It is imperative that each level reinforces the other.

- 1. Family:** The family is the unit that gives us our very early sense of who we are. It provides us with the foundation of values that prepares us for the broader society. It provides us comfort, security and a sense of worth. It is also the holder and transmitter of society’s norms. Yet for two generations of many of our young people there was no family. They raised themselves and for many their moral compasses are non-existent. And so they mistake brute force for acceptable means of achieving what they want. It is not too late for many of these young people. The schools, colleges and universities must become in loco parentis. That is, they must become surrogate parents on site. They must engage in values clarification, provide structure, and correct misbehaviours by serving as models of what is appropriate.
- 2. Education:** Each school must strive to become a centre for quality and excellence. No more should we hear that our students cannot read or write. We must not just have students who take classes, but we must provide them with quality educational experiences so that when they leave us they are transformed for worthy service. That means that each student at every level should be able to demonstrate new knowledge, skills and attitudes in readiness to serve humankind.

They must demonstrate proficiency in oral and written communication. In this day and age, rote memorization is no longer the most desirable tool for teaching. Our students must be taught critical thinking, reasoning, the ability to critically search for and use information. They must demonstrate skills in quantitative reasoning and given today's world they must have the ability to use technology as an effective tool.

Reviewing a course proposed by faculty at TU in entrepreneur education, I was pleased to see emphasis on topics such as “the meaning of the dignity of labour”; “benefits and value of doing work”; and “ethics in life and business”. Those should be standard in any curriculum in Liberia.

3. **Society:** This third level must support the family and education by setting and adhering to norms that are based on excellence, integrity, civility, ethics, civic virtue, dependability and trustworthiness among others. Society must also reinforce the fact that there are consequences through rewards and punishment. Every member of this society, small or big has to know that s/he must have personal responsibility for her/his actions.

4. In the words of the national anthem we sing the words of valour unpretending. If we search our Thesaurus, we know that other words for valour are courage, bravery, spirit, nerve, heroism, fearlessness, boldness, gallantry. Liberians must use courage, bravery, spirit, nerve, heroism, fearlessness, boldness, gallantry to change their perceptions of themselves, and their attitudes about what we can do for ourselves. We must battle mediocrity and set excellence as the standard in our schools, workplace and in society generally.

We must eschew dishonesty and corruption and imbue integrity in all of our actions, no matter how small. Public servants/ civil servants should not ask for money or favours under the table to do the people's work.

Our interactions with one another should be characterized by civility. We may disagree, but we do not have to be disagreeable. Ethical behaviour should be the norm rather than the exception.

Love of nation should supersede ethnicity and other affiliations that are used to divide; each child must learn what it means to be a citizen; with all of the rights, privileges, obligations, and responsibilities. They should not mouth the national anthem and other national symbols without fully understanding what they mean. We must all truly understand that in order for Liberia to succeed each one must do his/her duty regardless of what it is, because others depend upon us. We cannot afford to have bench warmers, that is people who sit in offices or under trees and do nothing but collect a pay check. We also cannot afford to have minimalists, those who perform the least of what is expected and nothing more. We must examine our labour laws that permit those minimalists to work the system by working only 15 days a month knowing that they will get a pay check for the whole month. We need workers who demonstrate the value and passion for work. Therefore dependability and trustworthiness must be the new order of the day and every day. We must practice personal responsibility instead of trying to pass blame for not doing what we were supposed to do. Change will not come easy, but we must remain steadfast and hold ourselves and others accountable. If we do not change, Liberia will become obsolete as the dinosaurs while others speed by. Let us remember the words of the national songs which proclaim a new day. We can truly become “one people, one nation, united for peace and sustainable development”

Thank you. God Bless Liberia!