

The Fine Line: Building a Beloved Community

A presentation by
Dr. Sybil Jordan Hampton

Thank you, Bob Nash. You will never know just how important it is to have a member of the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation Board introduce me today. I want to extend heartfelt appreciation to Tim Russell, Chair, and to all the Board Members of the Association of Black Foundation Executives for selecting me for this honor, and to Kenneth W. Austin, ABFE Executive Director, and to all those who worked to make this celebration a reality. In attendance today are members of the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation Board and staff, including Board Chair J. Michael Jones. They are an important part of my beloved community. Would you please stand and be recognized? My mother, Lorraine Hilliard Jordan, is here with me to share this occasion, along with a host of relatives and friends. I am humbled and uplifted by your outpouring of support.

It is a supreme honor to present the 14th James A. Joseph Lecture. While working as Contributions Manager for Education and Culture at the GTE Corporate Foundation in 1986, I attended my first Council on Foundations Annual Conference and met Mr. Joseph for the first time. He is a man whose pioneering efforts make it possible for many of us to pursue careers in the field of philanthropy. I congratulate the Association of Black Foundation Executives for standing on James A. Joseph's shoulders and extending his legacy of leadership and excellence.

There are those in the audience this evening who will not be surprised to learn that my remarks on this occasion are of a very personal nature. The young, beautiful members of the Southeastern Network of African Americans in Philanthropy (SNAAP) who recognized Lynn Huntley and me last fall during the Grantmakers for Education Conference in Atlanta touched my heart with their generosity, commitment, and caring. Your gift inspired me to give something back to you today. Thank you, Atiba Mbiwan, Lesley Grady, Wanda Jenkins, and all your colleagues.

It is a privilege to serve as the third president of the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation. The late Governor Winthrop Rockefeller – brother of Nelson, grandson of John D. Sr., and father of the current Lt. Governor of Arkansas, Win Paul – became an Arkansan by choice in 1953. From then until his untimely death in 1973, he altered the state forever through his courage, integrity, and philanthropy. Although I did not meet or work with the late Governor Rockefeller, we are linked through his work, his spirit, and his legacy. Governor Rockefeller was a champion of civil rights and was the only governor to join in a public tribute to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. when he was slain.

Back in 1957, a series of events unfolded in Little Rock that changed my life and resulted in Winthrop Rockefeller being elected Governor in 1966. Little Rock's response to school integration made it an infamous place – a place where President Dwight D. Eisenhower sent troops from the 327th Infantry and the 101st Airborne Battle Groups to ensure that nine Black students, forever immortalized as "The Little Rock Nine," would enroll at Little Rock Central High School. After the 1957-58 school year, the Little Rock School Board voted to close all three high schools during the 1958-59 school year. In

their infinite wisdom, the men who served on the Little Rock School Board decided to send only five Black students to Little Rock Central when it reopened in August 1959.

I began a lifelong journey on August 12, 1959 – I was one of those five Black students, and I was the lone Black 10th grader who enrolled in Little Rock Central High School after it had been closed for the entire 1958-59 school year. After graduating from Central in 1962, I attended Earlham College and earned a Bachelor of Arts in English Literature in 1966. I spent the next 30 years living outside the state of Arkansas. When I was selected in September 1996 to lead one of Arkansas’s premiere independent foundations, I was afforded an opportunity to go home again to live, not just to visit.

Returning to Little Rock meant going back to a city where I had grown up with a loving circle of family and friends, a community, and church members. Just as important, Little Rock was the place where, as a vulnerable teenager, I had suffered the pain of unspeakable indignities – I was called “Nigger” constantly, and I was spat upon. During my three years at Little Rock Central High, I was shunned by all but the other Black students. By state law, none of us could participate in any extracurricular activities, including the National Honor Society, the Beta Club, the marching band, and any of the sports teams. Coming home to assume what some would say is one of the best jobs in the state of Arkansas after being humiliated and dehumanized at Little Rock Central High from 1959 to 1962 has been no small undertaking.

In order to seize this magnificent opportunity, I had to balance two states of mind – being joyful about returning to the Black community that nurtured me and built my skills and confidence, and at the same time being uneasy about the prospect of returning to a larger community that was an unknown at best, and that might be inaccessible or even hostile. There was little more to do than to step out on faith – as I had done in 1959 in becoming part of the continuing effort to integrate Central High. As the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation’s CEO, I am continually challenged to strike the balance between being a leader who works on behalf of all the citizens of the state of Arkansas, and being a leader who serves the Black community.

My husband suggested that my message is about walking a tightrope, but I believe the image of a fine line is more appropriate. The Encarta World English Dictionary gives 11 definitions for the adjective “fine.” Three of them are relevant to this presentation. “Fine” can be defined as:

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| Thin | very thin, sharp, or delicate |
| Delicately Formed | showing special skills, detail, or intricacy, especially in artistic work |
| Very Subtle | so particular or small that it may hardly be noticeable |

As a Black Foundation CEO, I walk a fine line and place a high value on delicately formed and very subtle paths or directions of movement. Everything I have learned about walking fine lines comes from the school of hard knocks. In my first university position, I recruited and provided academic support services to underrepresented student

groups that included primarily Blacks, with a smaller mix of Puerto Ricans and low-income Anglos. In less than twelve months on the job, a group of Black student leaders demanded that the President fire me for not being Black. **The students were unhappy because I asked them to account for program funds they were dispersing for tutorial support. I also stopped paying stipends to students who were not regularly attending class and turning in assignments.** To the students' great surprise, the President stood by his decision to hire me, because the students were becoming more successful academically and socially. Eventually, these student leaders and others accepted the fact that my support enabled them to earn undergraduate degrees and move on to careers after college. Yet, more than one of the Black students continued to tell me that I talked and acted "white" during my 14-year tenure at the college.

After two and a half years at the GTE Corporate Foundation, I moved first to the University of Wisconsin–Madison for seven years and then to Southwestern University for three years, I had roles with responsibility for all students across the college or university campus. More often than I care to remember, Black students who felt I was not working to benefit them—and Anglo and other students who felt that because I did not look like them, I would not be open or fair—questioned my integrity or character. Walking a fine line has provided means of maintaining my sanity and building relationships of trust and respect. I have learned that not everybody will like the way you handle a situation on any given day, but by striving for excellence, working to achieve the institution's mission and goals, and remaining calm and low-key, **you can earn trust and respect.**

On a professional level, my responsibility as CEO is to manage and lead a philanthropic organization committed to improving the quality of life for all Arkansans. On a personal level, I am committed to what W.E.B. DuBois states so eloquently in *The Souls of Black Folk*: "...to make it possible...to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face."¹ My ongoing struggle is to reconcile my professional and my personal commitments. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s vision of the Beloved Community guides my work. Working at the systemic level to make the dream of the Beloved Community a reality is one important way to ensure that the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation's grants benefit all Arkansans – Anglo, Black, Latino, American Indian, and Asian-American. Supporting and jump-starting the creation of an infrastructure for just and fair public policies for all Arkansans are ways my professional life is compatible with and supports my personal values and goals.

I cannot, I must not, I will not forget about the continuing significance of race in America today and the endurance of negative racial stereotypes and attitudes. Legal and direct racism has transformed into more indirect and subtle forms, the latter being more difficult to address. The work is harder, while at the same time, our understandings of race and equality are being challenged by wide social changes like immigration.

An example of the type of grant that illustrates working to create the Beloved Community is the centering of Audubon Arkansas's work in a Black community, Granite Mountain, which has traditionally been isolated within Little Rock. One aspect of the plan is to build Audubon's headquarters there and to create an adjacent 400-acre nature park that

has the potential to draw people from all over the city and state to a family recreational site. Members of the Granite Mountain community are involved in all facets of the project's design and implementation. An important feature is the design of environmental education enrichment activities and curriculum in conjunction with several schools in Little Rock that have significant Black student populations.

A city neighborhood that people have come to think of as less important and dangerous, will now become a treasure. Just as important, the citizens of that community get to share their wealth. It is a social justice project, an economic development project, and an education project. All of our areas of program interest are combined and reinforce each other.

King wrote: "...that one seeks to defeat the unjust system, rather than the individuals who are caught in that system. And that one goes on believing that somehow this is the important thing, to get rid of the evil system and not the individual who happens to be misguided, who happens to be misled, who was taught wrong. The thing to do is to get rid of the system and thereby create a moral balance within society."ⁱⁱ

The Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation from its inception has played a leadership role in changing racial politics and dynamics of the state of Arkansas. This work is central to the Foundation's mission. When we achieve the foundation's mission, we are extending the legacy of the late Governor Winthrop Rockefeller. In the current environment, racial and ethnic boundaries are being transformed by immigration into the state of Arkansas – old systems do not capture what Arkansas and the country are today. The work of the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation reflects these changing boundaries – and the struggle is to align the Foundation's grantmaking with these changing boundaries. I am proud to lead this work as a life long boundary crosser.

My young colleagues, I believe that embracing and striving to make Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s Beloved Community a reality offers a way to minimize the negative impact of the double bind of trying to serve two masters: all the citizens of the state of Arkansas, and the Black community that expects me to remember where I came from.

The Beloved Community will not come into being overnight, and perhaps not even in my lifetime. Yet, it is, in my estimation, the desired end of the most enlightened philanthropy. Poverty, hunger, and homelessness will not be tolerated, and all forms of discrimination, bigotry, and prejudice will be eliminated. Love and trust will triumph over fear and hatred. Peace with justice will prevail over conflict and strife.ⁱⁱⁱ

For those who ask the question, can a Black, a Latino, a Pacific Islander, or an American Indian lead a philanthropic organization whose mission is to improve the lives of all the citizens in the area it serves without becoming a hydra-headed monster or being torn apart by "two warring ideals in one dark body"?^{iv} My answer is yes. Yes, if one can embrace Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s global vision of the Beloved Community, elusive though it may be; if one can stomach the fact that the just and equitable society is not impossible but will take a lot more time; perhaps longer than your lifetime!

ⁱ W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Bantam Classic, 1898): 3

ⁱⁱ Martin Luther King, Jr., “Love, Law, and Civil Disobedience” in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (San Francisco: First HarperCollins Paperback Edition, 1991): 47

ⁱⁱⁱ Coretta Scott King, “The Meaning of the Martin Luther King, Jr., Holiday” in *The Education Update Online*, January 2004

^{iv} *The Souls of Black Folk*, 3