

Stephanie E. Onuoha

Communication Sciences and Disorders '12

Martin Luther King Jr. Celebration Essay Contest

January 11, 2010

A 21st Century Thermostat: Raising the Degree of Human Responsibility

Several years ago, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., in his “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” proposed civil disobedience to the African-American community as a new alternative to violence and aggression. Encouraging civil disobedience and evoking a sense of responsibility in the clergymen was King’s attempt to eliminate the indifferent and irrational mindsets of individuals. Dr. King differentiated what it meant to be a “thermometer,” practically a conformist in my opinion, versus a “thermostat,” which is a cultivator of change. I recognize his plight in that it is tragically difficult to change the minds and hearts of people. Likewise, encouraging new perspectives on child rearing would probably elicit the same reactions from people today as those in King’s time, at least if time, energy, selflessness, and compromise are required. From several years ago till today, the remains of King’s plight are the resemblances of my own: I am set on setting the temperature for how adults today should be more responsive to the needs of younger children from troubling backgrounds by showing concern for their welfare and role modeling, responsibly for them.

For the most part, the individualistic culture of the United States is destroying the harmony and cohesiveness in several communities and is spoiling the quality of life for many young children. Adults are no longer concerned about the welfare of children that are not their own. As adults, we can be careless about the messages we send children, by, for instance, enjoying music that contains foul language and degrades women. At the same time, we can be

very careless about the clothes we choose to wear, whether to work or to the neighborhood drugstore; when inappropriate, kids are receptive to these messages. The damage that these types of issues can do to future generations has been avoided enough. I respect the parents that wake up each morning to a floor length to-do list filled with demands and determined to satisfy all, but only at the expense of placing their kids last. Considering the shortcomings of American society, I introduce two effective methods of positively influencing the lives of younger people: mentorship and increased involvement in the lives of children among school teachers on elementary and secondary levels. As a thermostat by design, my more advanced task remains to connect with damaged communities, educate individuals about the effectiveness of these methods, and empower adult individuals to participate and make a lifetime commitment to this effort.

With this in mind, my unique role as a thermostat consists of being a mouthpiece for a passive peer group and an activist for mentorship as an essential part of child rearing. Throughout my career as a motivational speaker, I do plenty of mentoring and coordinating with young children and mentorship programs. Living responsibly is what I strive to do and promote amongst older individuals because negative influence is like a carbon monoxide when it invisibly surfaces and its destruction, manifested in the misbehavior and mental corruption of a young child.

When speaking on issues concerning child-rearing, I usually share the story of my past which is the best evidence in my possession that proves adult involvement and mentorship to be effective. Despite trying circumstances, growing up Nigerian and in a single-parent home remarkably influenced the dynamics of my leadership. Upon the death of my mother, I became a mother at age six. At that age, I assumed the responsibilities of cleaning and cooking for my one

year old and nine year old brothers while my working-class father was away at work. I mention “Nigerian” solely to highlight the cultural influence on my gender role as the only female in the household and the effect that the culture had on my father’s approach to parenting. For instance, the ability to provide food and shelter for one’s family and finance the children academically are core values specific to the Nigerian culture. For my father, living up to these expectations meant working long hours and sacrificing the opportunity to establish substantial relationships with his children. For the most of my adolescence, I grew up feeling that he did not care about me. I found heart to forgive and love my father when I became aware of the emotional detachment between him and his father. This opened my eyes to see how one person’s carelessness can alter the attitudes of generations to come.

Given my father’s circumstance, he was forced to place us last on his list. He worked hard to the point where he became invisible. I would go weeks without seeing my father who was a taxi driver. By the time he would come home, I would be fast asleep; and by the time I would wake up to get ready for school, he had already left for another long, hard day of work. There was no supervision at home and this affected my productivity because I had no motive to do homework or study for exams. When I did see my father, no real interaction was ever made. The damage came when he would hear about my school progress from the school officials themselves—it was always negative feedback. I was too talkative, inattentive; I did not complete homework assignments and scored poorly on exams, and I was constantly receiving detention for inappropriate conduct. In the midst of everything, I was a victim of poor parenting and neglect. I became that child that other parents did not want their kids around. When I look back on this, what strikes me is that nobody during the time took the initiative to find out what or who could have been responsible for my inappropriate behavior. I was automatically labeled as

troublesome, punished without excuse. No teacher felt the need to advise an individualized learning plan or a testing of Attention Deficit Disorder, which I discovered I have late in my freshman year at college. No one felt the need to see what was happening at home. Granted, increasing emotional involvement and responsiveness among teachers may facilitate elementary and secondary school success for many troubled students.

At age twelve, my father had remarried and I had grown unguided and more rebellious. My environment had raised me: I learned from what I saw on TV, what I read in books, and what I had observed from other children. I spent much of my time home alone and in silence; I was not allowed to socialize with neighborhood kids and I had terrible relationships with those in my household. In house was a battlefield. I did not approve of how my older brother was not setting a good example for my younger brother. It pained me to watch him beat my younger brother unreasonably and mercilessly. My moral conscience annoyed him to the point where he would threaten to beat my younger brother if he refused to tell me to “shut up!” Bad company totaled my older brother as he started smoking pot, playing with guns, and burglarizing homes and robbing his classmates for fun. He eventually was expelled from high school, coincidentally on the same day that I received my first suspension ever from fighting in elementary school. My father eventually sent my older brother to a boarding school in Nigeria as a part of his plan to correct his behavior; my younger brother and I remained in America. Looking back, the decision that my father made actually spared the life of my brother. In the long run, witnessing, first-hand, the mistakes made by the people that I love the most and recognizing the pain that it brought me motivates and empowers me to bring awareness to the devastation that adults may be causing to younger children today.

Meanwhile, quality time with my father was still irrelevant to me during late adolescence. At an early age, I accepted the fact that I will never have a normal and stable home life. The animosity between my step-mother and I, in addition to being socially ostracized in middle school pushed me further into a severe depression. I was disrespectful to myself and to my elders, cynical, suicidal, and I acted very irresponsibly as a young adult. The way that I conducted myself was not at all exemplary for younger children that looked up to me. This is why my lifetime goal is to limit the spread of bad influences deriving from adverse home conditions on innocent young children.

In the grand scheme, my breakthrough came when I found a way to avenge those that ostracized and tormented me: academic success. I was once very eager about how to make honor roll. After receiving advice, I tried a number of times, failed, and finally succeeded until academic success became habitual. In middle school, scoring at the top of my class, in every one of my classes, was a way to tell those that ostracized me, both students and some teachers. “I win! I am the rejected stone that now holds the pillar!” I can say that my life took its turn when I received mentorship from a dear aunt of mine and from the youth ministry director at my church. These individuals withstood my rebellion and disrespect, dug into me, and sowed seeds of progress and encouragement. They and some of my secondary school teachers discovered my talent of singing and speech-giving and immediately found and created events where I could showcase my talents. I was truly motivated by simple statements such as, “one day the world will hear what you have to say,” particularly because behind the statements were true substances of faith. Every day when I spell my name on a paper, I am reassured of what I have been pre-ordained to be and do, what has already been inscribed in my name, “Stephanie Ezinne Onuoha”:

the Ibo—a tribal language—translation of “Ezinne” is “The real good mother” and “Onuoha” means “The voice of the people.”

Today, the energy that I have for children is undying. By the time I arrived at senior year in high school, I used my power and every opportunity as president of the honor society to establish events that shed light on how younger children need better living examples and to be shown more concern by adults. My high school was a low socioeconomic status, underachieving school. That translates to mean that the majority of the students were much like my old self: not concerned about setting positive examples for the young or even aware of the impact that my lifestyle had on them. Among the many opportunities that I had to impact the student body, the biggest ordeal was being the first student keynote speaker at Largo High School’s annual Black History Month program; my aim was to deliver a speech that would motivate my peers to help destroy generational curses and inspire the community to be more conscience of the examples and messages they are giving children. The speech I gave hit home, and it revealed the strength of my talent to me. The buzz travelled within hallways, into class rooms, and managed to spill into the local community newspaper; the statement, “a visual statistic of a failing youth is provided when for instance a single-mother raises her child properly, with mannerism intact, and by the junior high school age, her child is corrupted upon interacting with a child that curses, engages in premarital sex, and steals; this is a child that was poorly raised, *another parent’s irresponsibility*,” resonated and penetrated. The support I received for initiating mentorship programs in my school soared from many sponsoring non-profit organizations hereafter.

Given my past and the involvement and care that it took to inspire and energize me, I am committed to the advocacy of child mentorship because I am living proof of its effectiveness. Many of my peers and older adults are consumed in day-to-day worries and material things such

as GPAs, hair, money, cars, the opposite sex, or a promotion at work; many highly revered celebrities are not helping role model either. I consider this to be representative of what Dr. King described as “thermometer” behavior. In this instance, thermometers are the many individuals that are apathetic to societal issues, whose complacency prevents them from fighting for causes that are not presently affecting them, and those who simply conform to their surroundings—perhaps because it is more convenient and rewarding. For this reason, I identify myself as a thermostat because I recognize the need to take responsibility and focus everyone’s attention—to be a voice for my peers and for the vulnerable young. I believe that a “thermostat” is an individual that is receptive to possible societal dangers and takes immediate action against them. To a thermostat, a chance to express talent is an opportunity to educate, empower, and impact. Thermostats use these moments that were created to further themselves as moments to shed light on pending issues. I have a duty to inform my peers and adults of the danger that we are doing to future generations by not living exemplary lives and involving ourselves in the lives of young ones. Thermostats like me are all over, fighting the premonition of corrupted generations to come and are setting the temperature of this movement by creating awareness about this issue, introducing ideas to counter it, and by living trendy, exemplary lifestyles. I have no choice but to make every effort to live on a pedal stool because the cause that I am fighting for is greater than I. I do not want my irresponsibility to be the cause of another child’s corruption. Hence, the power of mentorship is like no other—to save another child from the effects of poor parenting, poverty, neglect, abuse, and depression is priceless. While anyone can mentor, proper mentorship takes commitment, a change in character, elevated concern, and a vow to act responsibly in front of young children—from every average individual to celebrity—which will certainly catapult the younger generation into a new positive direction.

