



“Words of Encouragement, Words to Inspire a New Generation ... All of Us”

About a month ago, LaTonya Goldsby, one of the founders of BlackLivesMatter-Cleveland, asked me if I would consider providing “words of encouragement, words to inspire a new generation” as part of a Black History month program at her church.

I was honored – for LaTonya Goldsby *herself* is an inspiration. The tragic killing of her 12-year-old cousin Tamir Rice by Cleveland police officers in 2014 not only thrust Tamir Rice’s name and case into the local and national spotlight, but also unexpectedly propelled LaTonya, Samaria Rice (Tamir’s mother), and other family members into the public arena. They sought answers – and justice. They formed the Tamir Rice Justice Committee. They even collected some 60,000 signatures on a petition demanding that the officers be charged and held responsible. With supporters, they delivered that petition to the then Cuyahoga County Prosecutor Tim McGinty. No charges were ever filed, and no indictments ever returned.

I accepted LaTonya’s invitation. But, I kept asking myself: What words might I speak to “encourage” and “inspire,” particularly at this historical and political juncture? This juncture when hard-fought for – and indisputably still insufficient, incomplete, and unequal – rights, programs, and opportunities are under attack?

Here are three excerpts from what I said February 22, 2017 at Lively Hope Missionary Baptist Church’s “Black History/Black Future Month” program. Thank you, LaTonya, for inviting me.

“Words of encouragement and inspiration: We have to be able to Imagine and act – strategically, in an organized fashion, with goals and outcomes. We have to act as if we believe that something different is actually possible, and that we are the architects of our lives. And, that even in the face of defeats – for there surely have been and will continue to be defeats – we must continue to act ...”

Referencing my Tree of Life journal:

“In this journal, I jot down ... snippets of essays or writings of activists, intellectuals, and artists who I admire and who inspire me... Their creations are roadmaps to remind me that racism, sexism, poverty, heterosexism, political oppression, battles over civil rights and voting rights, etc. have deep roots. But you know what else is deep – the legacy of

protest and demands that unleash the spirit of conscientious objection to oppression, exclusion, and vilification!"

Indeed, it is critical for all of us to remember that we have a role to play. As I neared the end of my presentation, I quoted the poignant words of black writer, mother, lesbian, womanist activist Audre Lorde from "Learning from the '60s," in *Sister Outsider*:

"Change is the immediate responsibility of each of us, wherever and however we are standing, in whatever arena we choose... Each of us must find our work and do it. Militancy no longer means guns at high noon, if it ever did. It means actively working for change, sometimes in the absence of any surety that change is coming."

So, let us all find words of encouragement, words to inspire a new generation in order to sustain others – and ourselves – as we seek social justice and change. Onwards.

Dr. Rhonda Y. Williams
February 27, 2017