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NAVIGATING IDENTITY, BELONGING, AND PURPOSE IN A SOCIETY IN FLUX

Chris Rabb*

I. INTRODUCTION

I am here and I am out of my comfort zone. I know that a prior speaker in this Dyson lecture series was Dr. Cornel West.¹ Who wants to speak after him?

I admit I feel a little out of sorts; I wonder how I will compare. I’m not a lawyer nor a scholar. I’ve been pulled out of my comfort zone and I don’t know if I belong here. You know what I mean?

I know that when someone reads my resumé, they will see all of these accomplishments. And these are facts. So, I guess I can fit in. But belonging and fitting in are not synonymous.

Fitting in means adjusting yourself, to get in there using whatever tools or opportunities you have; to assimilate in a particular moment, a particular space, a particular group of people. You can fit in and I can fit in. But belonging is a much deeper sensibility.

Belonging is really about connectedness. It’s about the people in the place that you inhabit in any given moment accepting you for who you are. It’s where you don’t have to adjust or hide. It’s when you’re embraced for just being you—resumé or no resumé, personal connections or no personal connections. Belonging is about acceptance.

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Fitting in and belonging are important in different ways, but they are not synonymous.

Belonging and community engagement are important, especially in these extraordinarily trying times. Throughout our lives, we ask ourselves, “What am I doing here? How do I feel? Do I feel seen?” We ask ourselves this in almost every situation. And these are very weighty questions.

And so here I am with you, in this moment. I am outside of my comfort zone. But that place has value.

My hope today is that I can find a way to connect with all of you whom I’ve never met before. I hope we can figure out some issues together, in this society of ours in flux. A lot of that flux has to do with identity.

II. BEGINNING A JOURNEY

Almost 30 years ago, I started an extraordinary journey to figure out who were “my people”—literally. I was privileged to know all four of my grandparents, and each of them knew all four of their grandparents. Why is that relevant in my family? My sixteen great-great-grandparents were all born in states where slavery was the state law. They lived as far south as Mississippi and as far north as New York. That’s right: I have enslaved ancestors from New York.

On the very first day of my formal genealogical research, I was twenty-three years old and working in Washington, D.C. for my then-U.S. Senator, Carol Moseley Braun of Illinois, the first Black woman to serve in that body. After work one day, I went to the National Archives, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed. When I wasn’t working for the Senator, I was doing genealogical work with people fifty years my senior. I had my little laptop, my genealogical software, and no internet. This was pre-internet, folks.

On my first day in the National Archives in 1994, I found my father’s father’s father’s father in the 1880 United States Census for the State of Mississippi: Jack Rabb, my grandfather’s grandfather. The census said that the birthplace of both of his parents was Africa. “Jackpot!” I thought. “I’m a genius. I’m the best genealogist ever,” I said to myself. On that first day of research, I was able to connect my family all the way back to Africa.
Nearly thirty years later and about 5,000 more people having been added to my family tree, I have gotten no closer to Africa than I was on that very first day.

Why was I looking into family history to begin with? I wanted to know who my people were. I want to know more because my grandfather, Maurice Rabb, Sr. had died when I was a boy and there weren’t many Rabbs around to tell me about that side of my family.

We are a small family. So, I asked my grandma, his wife, “Do know where the Rabbs come from? What’s their story?”

She told me, “The Rabbs are from Mississippi, but I don’t know much more. I’m a Miller. My people are from Kentucky.”

I thought to myself, “Okay, we can get to your people in a second.” But what I really wanted to know was about the surname Rabb. Where does it come from? What is the story of Jack Rabb? For years, I did the work trying to find answers.

Why did I do that work? Why did it matter to me then? Why does it still matter to me? Why do I care about some ancestor who lived 200 years ago? What does it have to do with me?

In that moment in my twenties – and still in this moment, many decades later – social identity is significant. How we process our identity and how society reveals and influences our identity are very important. Identity goes to the very core of our humanity.

As I said before, all sixteen of my great-great-grandparents were born into states where slavery was the state law. Most of them were, in fact, enslaved. And some of them were enslaved by their own fathers. Deep down, I’m trying to get back to Africa, records-wise. On my first day, I get there. Then Africa is like, “See you later.” I keep digging and digging, but what I came up against are the white people who owned my people. I came to learn that many of those who owned my ancestors were, in fact, my ancestors as well.

In doing this research as a 23-year-old cisgender man, I’m uncovering rapist after rapist after rapist after rapist.
significant psychological impact of this journey of trying to find my people. These rapists, I came to realize, were no less my ancestors than the Black folk with whom I was (and am still) yearning to connect. I was not ready for that journey, but I persisted.

I knew I had to make a decision very early on. I decided that I would not let the misdeeds of others—in generations before I was even a thought—impact my own self-worth. I had to make the distinction between ancestry and heritage.

Ancestry is just what we are. It’s our pedigree: our parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, and so on. Ancestry is what genetically makes us ourselves. Heritage is very different.

If ancestry is what you are and who you come from, heritage is about who we choose to become. We have choice over that. To be sure, we all inherit certain things culturally, but we don’t have to accept them all. There are parts of our heritage that we lean into, that we love, that we feel good about. There are parts of our heritage that validate us. But there are also parts that may inspire shame. Or, one can simply say, “I do not want to bring that with me to the next generation.” There are other people’s traumas; maybe that we heard about happening in previous generations. Maybe we even have our own traumas as children. There are practices and mindsets that we don’t much care for and maybe ones that we experienced first-hand. And we each have the power say, “Not on my watch. I’m not going to take that cultural heirloom. I’m going to leave that over there on that dusty mantel place.”

I want to dig now into other matters that have formed my social identity and sense of self.

III. SOCIAL IDENTITY AND SENSE OF SELF

As I said, we have choices. We can look for Frederick Douglass or George Clooney or whomever we want to plop into our family tree. (Of course, that’s not going to happen unless it’s actually real!) But we can make choices about how we process the decisions, the life experiences, the values that have been transmitted inter-generationally.

There are a lot of people who do genealogical work for different reasons. They may be looking for a celebrity. They may be looking for money. They may be looking to find cousins. There are many reasons to document one’s family history, and they are all valid.

For me, my research started out as an attempt to put meat on the bone of the stories I had heard growing up about some of these people
in my family tree. I found a photograph of my great-grandfather, Allen Rabb, standing in front of Rabb’s Meat Market in Columbus, Mississippi.\(^2\) His father was Jack Rabb, the gentleman whose census listing I showed you.

Allen Rabb built up a very successful business that he had inherited from Jack Rabb, which is saying a lot. Because any random white person could have just bombed that very successful Black business, which was the norm all across the South and the West.\(^3\) After operating for decades, Rabb’s Meat Market—a thriving enterprise that my great-great-grandfather passed along to his eldest son, Allen—died as a result of the Great Depression.

The wealth created from that business centered on the Black people my family employed in the town. It also allowed for my great-grandfather to tell his six sons, “If you want to leave the state and get an education, I’ll pay for it wherever you want to go.” At the turn of the century, that was extraordinary.

One of the Rabb sons went off to serve in World War I. Another went to “northern Mississippi”—also known as Chicago—and worked for Al Capone, according to family lore. (Unfortunately, that son came home in a box quite young in life.) Another son became a professional violinist. Another became a photographer. My grandfather, Maurice Rabb, Sr., who was the third of the six sons, loved to learn. He was a nerd at the top of his class.

In Mississippi back then, “Negroes” weren’t allowed to attend school past the tenth grade. You see, “Negroes” didn’t have the mental capacity to understand complex thoughts and such, according to white folks. It didn’t matter that Maurice’s father and his grandfather were fairly wealthy. He was Black, and so he had to leave the state to pursue his love of learning. And he did.

I know that I descend from folks who had a real strong interest in education and service, and it has informed a lot of the decisions that I’ve made. Even before college.

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IV. CONNECTEDNESS AND PRIVILEGE

This sense of connectedness that I have is also related to privilege. In fact, I know a ton of white people; I'm not bragging, but I've met several hundred over the years! Yet I don't know a lot of white folk who have college-educated ancestors going that far back. These white people certainly exist, and maybe some of you are one of those folks who have a long line of ancestors with formal education. But it's pretty rare for a family to be so educated for so many generations. And it is extremely rare for a Black family to have six generations of college education, like mine does.

Looking at my line, I’m a sixth-generated college-educated person. I have a 20-year-old who’s in college now, and he’s the seventh generation. If you count the enslaving white ancestors in my family tree, the college education extends back ten generations. (And I'll get to that.) Even though I’m not independently (or dependently) wealthy, I’m doing okay. I have occupational prestige. I’m cisgender. I chose to be a heterosexual in fifth grade when the straights came to me with their pamphlets. I said to them, “Oh, ok, that looks about right now.” (Isn’t that how these things happen? I have a bad memory.) Factually speaking, I have “stuff” that some people call unearned privilege. It’s worked very well for me, in fact. But the Black part? Not so much. But this other “stuff” represents extraordinary offsets.

What does a person do with privilege? How does privilege fold into our identity and sense of purpose? We all have different types of privilege. All of us. What do we do with it? That’s a loaded question, I know.

I have a small montage here of photos from different stages of my life that I pulled off my phone and I would like to share with you.
Figure 2. Photos courtesy of the Rabb family

In Figure 2, the photo at the bottom left is my granddad, Maurice Rabb, Sr. talking to Dr. King. My grandfather had to leave Mississippi to pursue formal education, as I said. He was a bad ass. He caused a lot of good trouble. In the picture at the top, it’s hard to see, but this is a picture of the first Black mayor of Chicago (where I was born and raised), Harold Washington. He was iconic both in Chicago and nationally, as one of the first Black mayors of a major U.S. city in the

1980s. My big brother is on the far left, standing next to my mom who worked for Mayor Washington. That gave me super bragging rights as a kid. To the right of Mayor Washington is my maternal grandmother, Madeline Wheeler Murphy; and then my dad, Maurice Rabb, Jr. They were doing amazing work in different fields. I’m on the far right in the photo of Mayor Washington. In the picture on the bottom right, that’s me with my mother. She is holding a campaign poster from my maternal grandmother’s run for Baltimore City Council.

My maternal grandmother was the one who set me on my journey around genealogy. She hired me to do the work of documenting a connection between our Black family and a very influential white family of which some of you may have heard. More on that in a minute.

You’re not necessarily supposed to understand anything from this photo montage; it is just a visualization of who my people are, in terms of my pedigree. In genealogical terms, your ancestry doesn’t include your siblings, cousins, nieces, nephews, aunts, uncles. “Ancestors” are just the progenitors before you. Think of an upside-down triangle. Paternal side—left. Maternal side—right. My ancestry is what makes me, me, biologically.

Remember I talked before about the distinction between ancestry and heritage? One can superimpose other things onto a family tree and ask, “What are some trends that have occurred over generations?” For me, I have an ethnicity based on my African ancestors; this is information from the DNA tests I’ve been taking over the past twenty years. I may be one of the most genetically well-documented people you’ve ever met! Do with that what you will, of course. One can superimpose onto any chart rich data that go beyond biology or ethnicity. One might talk about formal education, religious affiliation, occupation, geography, and any number of other things.

Separate from ancestry, you may also have a resumé. That's a piece of paper that can act to validate you in certain circumstances. There is value in that. Notably, society often seeks to validate any one of us based on something other than the bodies we inhabit, the languages we speak, our immigration status, or any number of factors. Society does that and our government does that.

Here's an example of how government viewed Black people. In the National Archives and Records Administration, I found a list of "Slave Inhabitants" in the city of Columbus, Mississippi in 1860, shown in Figure 3. On that list was the name of another enslaver ancestor of mine, George Harris. He was a man who had a lot of "assets." Those assets were human beings. They are circled in red on the next figure.

**Figure 3. Slave Inhabitants in the City of Columbus, Mississippi, U.S. Census (1860)—Image on file with the author**

That big ellipse represents all the human beings that he owned. It records their gender, complexion, and age. Society did not embrace those Black people's full humanity. Somewhere, potentially on that
list, is one of my ancestors that I’ve yet to formally connect to their father and enslaver, George Harris. But I do know that the enslaved people didn’t have enough value to be treated as human beings, because slavery was the state law. And that’s just not how it worked. Yet they were valuable enough to be documented in the service of wealth accumulation. You understand the distinction? They were important enough to be documented because they were assets of very rich people. And as you all probably are learning in law school, there’s a lot of documentation in the world. The wealthier a person is, the more complex tax and other issues may be involved. But the enslaved individuals were not deemed important enough to be considered whole, to have value in and of themselves. They didn’t belong, but they were forced to fit in, in the service of wealth creation for the people that owned them.

So far, I have referenced some of my ancestors who inspired me, whose values have been transmitted over time and generations. These are the people who have imbued in me a sense of urgency from a very young age. Sometimes people do the work of genealogy because they want to be connected to fabulosity. (That’s a real word. I made it up years ago.)

I asked: who are my people? Some people assume that I want to be connected to someone who has high status, right? Because that, they assume, might make me feel better about myself, perhaps. Otherwise, the story goes, it is possible I’m just a nobody.

V. Ancestry, Heritage, Family and Power

Throughout this work of genealogy and life, I find myself asking, “Who am I? What value do I bring?” Maybe if I can be connected to someone of great status, I will know the answers. Actually, I’ve got that high-status connection, too. Figure 4 is a picture of a very high status white person.
Figure 4. Philip Livingston II, Signer of the Declaration of Independence

This is Philip Livingston. He was a New Yorker and one of the fifty-six signers of the Declaration of Independence. In his family, he was known as Philip “The Signer” Livingston. The reason he was known as “The Signer” is because in this family, everyone was named Philip!

Finding this Philip was a challenge for me as a genealogist, because there were something like eighteen other Philips, all in the same

11. See id.
county. But I found him; and Philip “The Signer” Livingston was a great man because he signed the Declaration of Independence.

What you may not know about this famous New Yorker is that he was a part of a multi-generational lineage of mass human traffickers—I mean, massive. This family owned thousands of people. But not in New York, where they owned just a few. One of those people enslaved by the Livingstons was my ancestor, Christiana. Her mother, Barbara Williams, had been plucked away as a little girl from Port Maria, Jamaica, where the Livingstons owned five plantations. Christiana’s mother was brought to Manhattan in the late 1700s. Philip “The Signer” Livingston’s grandson, Philip Henry Livingston, raped Barbara Williams. That’s my connection through the Livingstons.

Now, some of you may say, well, how could you definitively know that Barbara Williams was raped? Well, according to Christiana’s death certificate in 1909, Christiana was born when Barbara was likely still a child, so there’s the whole no-consent thing. Furthermore, she was legally treated as property. So, again, there is no way that Barbara Williams could have given consent. Furthermore, there’s no documentation to suggest that Philip Livingston’s grandson considered his descendants birthed by Barbara to be of any value at all, beyond the services they rendered in support of the white Livingston family’s lifestyle. That was not (and is not) an easy thing to swallow. Yet Philip “The Signer” Livingston, the man of high status, is no less my ancestor than any one of my African ancestors in that same generation.


13. See, e.g., Madeline Wheeler Murphy, Slavery A Family Divided History: The Relationship Between Two People Long Dead Reaches Down Through Time to Shape the Lives of Their Descendants, Black and White, BALTIMORE SUN (June 29, 1997), https://www.baltimoresun.com/1997/06/29/slavery-a-family-divided-history-the-relationship-between-two-people-long-dead-reaches-down-through-time-to-shape-the-lives-of-their-descendants-black-and-white/ (my maternal grandmother’s recounting of the received oral history in her family that she was related to a signer of the Declaration of Independence and her great-great-grandmother’s birth after the rape of Barbara Williams by Philip Henry Livingston).
That being said, the Livingstons are not my family per se. Philip “The Signer” Livingston is a relative. Can you see where I’m going with this?

I know that many of you may have a cousin with whom you are really close, regardless of whether they are your first cousin, your second cousin or whatever. That cousin may have a sibling that you rarely talk to, even though they are equally related to you. Those two cousins, who are siblings of each other, have the same genetic connection to you. But you consider one cousin to be family. We have the same blood and we grew up together. We are connected beyond blood. But the other cousin? They are just a relative. One might connect with one cousin in a way that one doesn’t connect with the other. These distinctions matter.

Ancestry.  
Heritage.  
Family.  
Relatives.

They are all connected. They inform how we navigate in the world, especially in a time of great flux. Particularly when we want to know what we do with the gifts we’ve been given, we ask ourselves: How are we supposed to show up? How do we define community when we desperately need it? We don’t want to feel alone. We don’t want to feel estranged. We want some direction. So, we ask ourselves, “Who are our people?” We ask, “Who are our people beyond blood, beyond nationality? To whom are we connected in meaningful ways as we define meaning for ourselves, not according to someone else’s definition?”

Others may define value in a very narrow way, such as status or power. But power works in a lot of different ways. Power can be used as a cudgel. It also can be used to create. The choice is ours.

Certain members of this august Livingston clan spared no expense to capture children and others who for some reason wanted to run away from the Livingstons’ warm embrace as enslavers. They

14. See, e.g., Philip Livingston, Run Away from Philip Livingston [Unnamed African Man], Rutgers Univ. Scarlet & Black Res. Ctr., https://scarletandblack.rutgers.edu/archive/items/show/2 (last visited Feb. 14, 2024) (reprinting newspaper advertisement in which enslaver and “slave trader Philip Livingston offers a reward of three dollars for the capture of an African man who escaped from Livingston in New York City. The man does not speak any Dutch or English, suggesting that he was only recently brought to New York from Africa”).
spent a lot of effort to collect their human assets.¹⁵ I've seen a newspaper advertisement from 1752 seeking the return of a “run away” enslaved person.¹⁶ Now, I don't know if this was an ancestor of mine whom the Livingstons were trying to catch, but they were very interested in the concentration of power and wealth.

Speaking of the Livingstons, are there any folks of Irish descent in the audience? How about any people of German descent? Yeah, the Livingstons didn’t much care for any of your kind either. They conscripted people from both Ireland and the Palatinate (“palatines” from modern-day Germany).¹⁷ The Livingstons treated these folks awfully. And incidentally, the Irish and Germans weren’t even considered white back in the 1700s or 1800s.¹⁸ So the Livingstons weren’t really friendly people except if you were a cousin. That’s not surprising, because most of the Livingston lineage intermarried. They often preferred to marry off cousins. I have a distant relative named Livingston Livingston, just to give you a sense of how intermarried that family was.¹⁹

Let us ask about this family: “In service of what?” They had great status and wealth. These Livingstons in New York State owned a million acres of land at one point. Their holdings were larger than the footprint of Rhode Island.²⁰ That wealth created opportunities for generations of Livingstons to do all kinds of things, some of which were actually pretty decent. There are white abolitionist descendants of these awful people. Consider, for example, John Jay, the first Chief

¹⁵ See id.
¹⁶ See id.
¹⁸ See, e.g., Noel Ignatiev, How the Irish Became White 41 (1995) (“In the early years Irish were frequently referred to as ‘niggers turned inside out...’”); Jeffrey Strickland, How the Germans Became White Southerners: German Immigrants and African Americans in Charleston, South Carolina, 1860–1880, 28 J. AM. ETHNIC HIST. 52, 60 (2008) (“Consistent with their middleman status, the Germans faced ‘host hostility,’ or nativism, in Charleston, strongest in the 1850s but persisting well into the 1870s.”).
¹⁹ See, e.g., Susan Fox Rodgers, My Reach: A Hudson River Memoir 99 (2011) (explaining that “[f]rom the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, the Livingstons were one of America’s great aristocratic families[,]” with an estate that “ran from the [Hudson] river to the Massachusetts border and covered a million acres—an expanse of land the size of the state of Rhode Island[,]” and also remarking the trend in the Livingston family to use the same names in successive generations; “The lack of imagination in naming is dazzling: there is a Livingston Livingston tucked in there, lest the young man forget his origins.”).
²⁰ See id.
Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States and a former Governor of New York.\(^\text{21}\)  Jay married into the Livingston family.\(^\text{22}\)  A lot of wealthy, influential people were connected to the Livingstons.

To be sure, not all of the family’s practices, behaviors, and accomplishments were sordid. It’s like any family. There is an array of fabulosity and yumminess, debauchery and evil. When you have 5,000 people in your family tree and you estimate conservatively that 1% are just aggressive jerks, that’s a lot of jerks. At least fifty people who were the worst, the dregs of society. So, I am claiming with certainty that at least 1% of my family tree is comprised of people from all backgrounds who were aggressively awful human beings. Well, maybe it’s just half a percent. In any case, that’s still a lot of people. And we are all connected through blood, through thousands and thousands of people.

VI. PRIVILEGE, ACCESS AND HIGHER EDUCATION

How does all of this relate to where we are in a society, especially when it comes to discussing issues of equity, privilege, access, and opportunity? What does my family story have to do with the Supreme Court’s decision in Students for Fair Admission that has all but dissolved affirmative action in higher education?\(^\text{23}\)

I acknowledge that my remarks might seem hypocritical. After all, I graduated from Yale College. That’s a fairly fancy institution. It is also egregiously wealthy in terms of its endowment.\(^\text{24}\)  True. But is Yale inherently better than any other institution of higher learning? If you took away that endowment and you put it at a school like this one,


or a similar school, that’s a game-changer. Yale-level financial wealth creates extraordinary opportunities for the people who have true access to it.

There’s something important to understand. There is opportunity and then there is access. Opportunity is more of a potential. It is a statement of values, like “We believe in opportunity.” That sort of statement is important; it helps constitute the narrative that we’ve created in our society about opportunity for all. But the quality and breadth of opportunity in this nation is deeply connected to privilege and social identity. So, to me, affirmative action—even at its best—was always and only a remedial approach to the symptoms of larger systemic issues.

Let’s be clear: affirmative action has value. I don’t know if I would have gotten into Yale without affirmative action. I’m very comfortable admitting that now. I was not as comfortable admitting it in 1988. The way it was processed by folks back then went something like this: “The only reason you’re here is because you’re Black.” I found that statement adorable.

Only after I graduated did I discover my connection to the Livingston family and the existence of the Livingston Archway in Branford College, one of Yale’s residential colleges. It is named after the father of Philip “The Signer” Livingston who endowed Yale’s first professorship and sent all of his sons there. Now, I’m sure they were all geniuses. It’s in the blood. That’s where genius comes from: hemoglobin. I’m glad I didn’t know the Livingston Archway existed until after I graduated, because I might have burned down the building! Instead, I settled for having my picture taken there years later (shown in Figure 5).

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26. See, e.g., The First Endowed Professorship, Yale, Slavery & Abolition, http://www.yaleslavery.org/Endowments/e1prof.html (last visited Feb. 14, 2024) (noting that “Philip Livingston, Second Lord of Livingston Manor, New York, donated 28 pounds sterling to Yale in 1745 ‘as a small acknowledgement of the sense I have had for the favour and Education my sons have had there’ and Livingston’s role as a slave trader).
Let’s acknowledge that, before there was race-based affirmative action in the United States beginning in the twentieth century (which was never real affirmative action), there was a type of affirmative action that benefitted members of the Livingston family. That affirmative action created the extraordinary structural inequality that we're now digging ourselves out of as best we can.

Affirmative action, as struck down by the Supreme Court, was always just a crumb. Most people don't go to college. Most people don't even apply to elite schools. So, the destruction of affirmative action in higher education, particularly as relates to elite institutions, is not as relevant to most Americans as people would think. That being said, it is still important. We need multiple tools.
Consider why we have elite institutions to begin with. What is it about the artificial creation of scarcity that allows these elite institutions to persist, when the real factor allowing these institutions to maintain that status is extraordinary financial wealth? Can you imagine all the wonderful things that financial wealth could accomplish in other contexts? I believe that Haub Law is number one for Environmental Law, right? (See, I used the Google before I got here. I’m just making sure.) That is great that you’re already number one in that field. But what if we just took Yale’s endowment and gave it to Pace? Do you think that would have an impact on the scholarship, the students, and the capacity to do so much more? Of course.

Here’s the thing. We have so much financial wealth in the hands of so few. What would it mean if that wealth were more equitably distributed to allow more people, irrespective of their backgrounds, who don’t have the social identity and connectedness that has been the norm for upward mobility and advancement in this country until—well, even today? There are more people who got into Yale just because of who their daddy was than Black folk who got in.27 A lot more. That is something I didn’t know then, but I do now. Inequality persists despite all these other things we’re talking about around diversity, inclusion, and equity.

VII. FINDING A ROLE, USING OUR GIFTS

I want to end with this. I have thirty-seven more pictures that I don’t have time to show, but I would like to show you a photo of Christiana, the daughter of Barbara Williams and Philip Henry Livingston, the grandson of a signer of the Declaration of Independence. Christiana is my great-great-great-grandmother. Shown in Figure 6, she was born in 1812 and died in 1909, at the age of ninety-six. She grew up in New York.

27. See, e.g., Mark Zaretsky, Yale to Review Policies in Wake of Affirmative Action Ruling, But No Guarantee on Legacy Admissions, NEW HAVEN REG. (Jul. 9, 2023), https://www.nhregister.com/news/article/yale-legacy-admissions-affirmative-action-18189608.php (reporting that students with legacy affiliations represented 14% of a recent incoming class). Only 12% of the same class is comprised of students who self-identified as African American. See Yale College Class of 2025 First-Year Class Profile, YALE COLL. UNDERGRADUATE ADMISSIONS, https://admissions.yale.edu/sites/default/files/yale_classprofile2025web.pdf (last visited Feb. 14, 2024). These statistics do not reveal any differential in the acceptance rates for these two groups of applicants, however; furthermore, there may be some applicants who are members of both groups.
Figure 6. Christiana Williams Freeman, 1812–1909²⁸

Christiana Taylor Livingston Williams Freeman told her stories to her granddaughter, Mary Alice Wheeler McNeill (aka “Aunt Kitty”).²⁹ Aunt Kitty wrote letters to her nieces. One niece shared those letters with my grandma, who shared them with me in the 1990s.³⁰

²⁸ Half-Length Portrait of Christiana Williams Freeman, Seated, in Daguerreotype Collection, William Clarence and Mary Alice Wheeler McNeill Family Collection, Libr. of Cong. (1855), https://www.loc.gov/item/2014647403/.
³⁰ See Murphy, supra note 13 (containing the author’s grandmother’s description of a letter she received from her aunt in 1950).
I have been trying to trace the footprints of my ancestors for thirty years now. I am not trying to find Frederick Douglass or George Clooney or whomever. I want to find out who my people are. Christiana Freeman is one of them.

Christiana did not have wealth. She could read and write, but she had no known formal education. She was a seamstress to the one-percenters of New York at the time. If you see any pictures of haute couture outfits from that era in New York worn by the patrician class, her fingerprints might very well have been on those clothes. But barely anyone outside of my family knows her name. The stories transmitted by Christiana through the generations finally arrived in my metaphoric and literal hands. What a gift!

We all have gifts. The question is: What do we do with those gifts? What do we do with them? For each of us, that’s our own exploration, that’s our work. We have to answer that question for ourselves. We have to find out. We can’t just let the process of discovery unfold. We each have to make it happen.

Where I invite you to start is with this sometimes inconvenient truth: Everyone has a role. It’s worth repeating: Everyone has a role. My Grandma used to say that. She was aggressively intelligent, but I thought it was a particularly trite saying of hers. I often reflected to myself, “Huh? I don’t get it.” Years later, well after she died, I came to understand. What my grandmother was saying was that there will come a moment that will call you to act, and you are going to have to step up. You may be stepping into a role you did not anticipate. It may mean stepping into a role that scares the daylights out of you. It may be a role that is 180 degrees from what you thought you would be doing in that particular moment. Rise to the occasion. Because it’s the moment. Of course, the “moment” may be fleeting or extended. It could even last years. And your role will almost certainly change over time. But, in that moment, accept the role.

We’re not all going to be signers of the Declaration of Independence. We’re not all going to be captains of industry. We’re not all going to be fancy seamstresses. But each of us has a role to play. And my hope for each of you is that you will find a community of conscience within which you can act in that role. That will give you so much wealth—the type of real wealth that matters. I’m talking about community wealth, the wealth that transcends finances and social status, the wealth that brings you joy, the wealth that gives you a sense of purpose.
So, I implore you to step up and acknowledge that role, especially if it is a role that you do not want.

I’m standing before you and I am a state representative in the Pennsylvania House of Representatives, the largest full-time state legislature in the country.\footnote{See, e.g., \textit{States With a Full-Time Legislature}, \textit{Ballotpedia}, https://bal lotpedia.org/States_with_a_full-time_legislature (last visited Feb. 14, 2024) (noting that ten states have a full-time legislature, defined as "a legislature that meets throughout the year"); Kyle Sammin, \textit{Pennsylvania’s Legislature is Big—and That’s Beautiful}, \textit{Phila. Inquirer} (Oct. 2, 2023), https://www.inquirer.com/opinion/pennsylvania-legislature-size-too-big-democracy-house-20231002.html (noting that "[w]ith 203 House members and 50 senators, Pennsylvania has the largest full-time state legislature in the country").} I am a Representative in a state that may exert an extraordinary influence over national electoral politics in 2024. Pennsylvania is one of six swing states that likely will determine who will become the next President of the United States.\footnote{See, e.g., Myra Adams, \textit{These 6 States Will Determine the 2024 Presidential Election}, \textit{The Hill} (Feb. 23, 2023, 8:00 AM), https://theh ill.com/opinion/campaign/3870203-these-6-states-will-determine-the-2024-presidential-election/ (naming Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Michigan, North Carolina, Arizona and Georgia as six key states to watch in the 2024 presidential election).}

But I am not here as a partisan or as an elected official. I am not even here to tell you to pursue public service. I was called to that service, even though I really didn’t want to do it initially. Supporters said to me, “Oh, you should really run for an open seat in the Pennsylvania House.” I responded, “You’re asking me to drive 104 miles to the state capitol to be surrounded by those whose views are radically different than mine?” I had two young sons then. That didn’t sound good to me, oddly enough.

But then I thought about all of the people who came before me, including some of the ones I have mentioned here today. I thought about the sacrifices they made not only for their families, but for the communities of struggle where they were rooted. I knew then that saying no was not an option. I had to do it. I had to run, even if I didn’t win.

To my great shock, I won the election.

I’ve been in the state legislature for four terms now. I love to serve. I hate politicians, but I love to serve.

We all have to find that within us: how we serve in any capacity. That is the role I speak of today. Any one of us may have a role that is small or transient, but that role matters. How do I know it matters? Because I’m talking about ancestors who were quasi-literate, lived more than 200 years ago, and none of you have heard of them before
today. But they’ve made a profound impact on my life. And I use my role now to help my children, the 65,000 bosses I call my constituents, and others—whomever I can touch because all of these people in my family tree have touched me in so many different ways.

Open yourselves up to the possibility of your role, whatever role it may be. I’m not asking you to pursue great wealth or high status or any of that stuff. Each of you has a role to play, especially now in this moment, and especially as law students. Your individual and collective impact can be awesome. And I’m here for it. Indeed, that may be the best explanation for why I’m allowing myself to be outside of my comfort zone today.

If I can have any impact on any of you, then I know it was worth it. I have seen it in my own life, and I’ve tried to give you a sense today of how people whom I never met, who are literally a part of my DNA have influenced me.

Thank you for allowing me to speak with you today. I feel that this is a moment. This is a moment when we can tap into our collective fabulosity.