

### **Crafting A Caring Culture by Rev. Starsky D. Wilson**

Commencement Address for College of Education, College of Fine Arts & Communication, School of Social Work, & master's in public policy administration of the University of Missouri-St. Louis  
*Delivered Saturday, December 14, 2013*

To Chancellor George, Members of the Board of Curators, Deans of the Colleges of Education and Fine Arts and Communication, Directors of the School of Social Work and the Graduate School, to the Faculty, Administrators, Family, Friends and finally to this distinguished graduating class, let me begin by expressing my humility and deep gratitude for the honor of addressing such a critical group of leaders for our community, region and nation as these graduates. Perhaps, I am even more in awe of the influence of the graduates upon this committed community of caring and supportive family members and friends who have braved the elements just to say, "I love you" and "Well Done."

#### **Foundation Vision, Mission, Heritage**

I bring you greetings on behalf of the staff, trustees and partners of Deaconess Foundation. For those for whom Deaconess is more a memory of where you may have been born, delivered a child or where a family member went to nursing school many moons ago. If you are wondering, "Is that the same Deaconess?" Let me assure you, we are of the same flavor and label.

The current, grant making foundation was established from the proceeds of the sale of the health system in 1997. In the spirit of our faith heritage, the mission of Deaconess Foundation is the improved health of the St. Louis metropolitan community and its people. That mission has remained the same for nearly 125 years. So, as we honor the 250<sup>th</sup> birthday of the city of St. Louis in 2014, we will also honor the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Deaconess mission in St. Louis.

Today, Deaconess Foundation envisions and works to advance a community that values the health and well-being of all children and gives priority attention to the most vulnerable. I think you may agree with me that this vision [of a community that values the health and well-being of all children] does not yet appear. (Pause)

Standing here, in the footprint of the Normandy School district, and thusly, at the epicenter of the most important discussion of public policy, social welfare and education for this generation of our state's citizens, we can affirm that this vision does not yet appear. In the Providence or coincidence that this commencement is held on the anniversary of the school shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary in Connecticut and one day after a school shooting at Arapahoe High School in Colorado, we must admit that this vision of a caring culture does not yet appear. But, this is our vision.

It must be advanced. Shaped. Nurtured. Crafted. This is our work...to Craft a Caring Culture. And we come by it honest.

Now, when, I say "our work," I am – indeed - speaking of Deaconess Foundation. But, I do so in solidarity with these graduates, faculty and staff of the University of Missouri – St. Louis.

#### **Deaconess Heritage: A Sisterhood of Sages**

We, at Deaconess, come by this work [of crafting a caring culture] honestly, because we serve in the line of the Deaconess Sisters. This order of women who studied theology and nursing in order to live lives consecrated to caring, healing and teaching people at the margins of St. Louis' society were crafting a caring culture. From the first sister set apart in 1889, until the last one passed on in 2010, we've been entrusted with the legacy of a sisterhood of sages.

Writing about the social roles of women in the ancient Near East, scholar, Carole Fontaine adopts a full definition of the role of the Sage, that I think is useful. For her, sages are “any practitioners or tradents of the wisdom tradition, in addition to those who composed wisdom books.” They are “persons who routinely perform one or more...tasks associated with the wisdom tradition [including] authorship, scribal duties (like copying, collecting or editing), counselling, management of economic resources, conflict resolution, teaching and healing.” It seems to me, by virtue of the fact that we at Deaconess perpetuate the legacy of this sisterhood of sages, we have responsibility for crafting caring culture.

### **Sages Craft Caring Culture**

But, I hear something else in that definition. Let me repeat that because somebody else missed it. Sages are those “persons who routinely perform one or more...tasks associated with the wisdom tradition [including] authorship, scribal duties (like copying, collecting or editing), counselling, management of economic resources, conflict resolution, teaching and healing.” (Now, that sounds strikingly...like a university faculty to me!) You come by this responsibility of crafting culture honestly, by virtue of your job description.

But, wait a minute. The tasks not only include authorship and scribal duties. They also include: counselling (or social work), management of economic resources (sounds like public policy administration), conflict resolution (that requires Communication), teaching (or education) and healing (better stated: reconciliation). Which I (and trained facilitators have found) is best facilitated with the employ of the creative and fine arts. (Now that sounds strikingly...like this graduating class to me!) You... come by this work of crafting caring culture honestly, by virtue of your course of study. And, You... will be entrusted with responsibility for such crafting in a few moments with acceptance of a piece of parchment whereupon your name has been affixed beneath the emblem of this institution.

### **Graduates, you are called to craft a caring culture.**

In *Preparing for Peace*, J.P. Lederach defines culture as “the shared knowledge and schemes created by a set of people for perceiving, interpreting, expressing, and responding to the social realities around them.” In short, culture is how we make meaning. The basic elements of culture include: Language, Norms, Values, Beliefs and Ideologies, Social Collectives, Statuses and Roles and (finally) the Integration thereof. All of these elements are embedded within the disciplines in which you have been trained and fall within the purview of the professions into which you are now launching.

And just in case you missed the imbedded, implicit agenda of the educational process that you just made it through, let me make it explicit. The grounds you walked from dormitory to classroom, or parking lot to classroom, or classroom to classroom...to classroom, were once consecrated for the hallowed functions of playing golf and racquetball and molding a private, exclusive membership through a country club. These places where open discussion of diverse topics by people who represent varied ethnicities and cultural backgrounds now take place were once the spaces where small cliques cultivated a club mentality. But, the soil has been turned over. --- Through the study of public policy, education, fine arts, communication and social work our community and state have invested in a process to change ‘clique-cultivation’ into ‘culture-crafting.’ And the success of this experiment hinges on what you will do with it.

### **Will this Work be Successful? – Ask A Sage**

Will the work of the University be successful? Will the work of your professors, the stewardship of dedicated administrators and the sacrifices of these caring family members manifest a caring culture in our community? I’ve learned: when I want the answer to a really hard one...to ask a Sage.

An adapted Indian folk tale tells the story of one such sage and perhaps it can answer my question.

*There was once a Sage woman who lived by herself near a small village. Rumor had it that she could always accurately predict when the rains would come, or help heal a sick child with herbs, or calm angry neighbors and help them to resolve their fights and arguments. People came from all over the land to meet with her and seek her advice on matters both small and great. Her reputation was such that was said she was never wrong — not ever.*

*Some of the children of the village didn't believe that it was possible to always be right. Surely she could not know everything! They decided to test her knowledge. First they asked her to answer questions about the planets, the animals, and the world. No matter how hard the questions, she always answered correctly.*

*The children were amazed at her knowledge and learning and most were ready to stop testing the wise woman. However, one boy was determined to prove that the old woman couldn't know everything. Hatching a devious scheme, he told all of his friends to meet him at the woman's home the following afternoon so he could prove she was a faker.*

*All through the next day he hunted for a bird. Finally he caught a small songbird in a net. Holding it behind his back so no one could see what was in his hands, he walked triumphantly to the wise woman's home.*

*"Old woman!" he called. "Come and show us how wise you are!"*

*The woman walked calmly to the door. "May I help you?" she simply asked.*

*"You say you know everything — prove it — what am I holding behind my back?" the young boy demanded.*

*The old woman thought for a moment. She could make out the faint sounds of a bird's wings rustling. "I do not say I know everything — for that would be impossible," she replied. "However, I do believe you are holding a bird in your hands."*

*The boy was furious. How could the woman have possibly known he had a bird? Thinking quickly he came up with a new scheme. He would ask the woman whether the bird was alive or dead. If the woman replied, "alive," he would crush it with his hands and prove her wrong. If she answered, "dead," on the other hand, he would pull the living bird from behind his back and allow it to fly away. Either way he would prove his point and the wise woman would be discredited.*

*"Very good," he called. "It is a bird. But tell me, is the bird I am holding alive or dead?"*

*The wise woman paused for a long moment while the boy waited with anticipation for his opportunity to prove her wrong. Again the woman spoke calmly, "The answer, my young friend, is in your hands. The answer is in your hands."*

The sage woman in the Indian folktale is right in her wisdom. The sage sisters of the Deaconess Heritage were right in their service. The sage faculty of the University of Missouri-St. Louis are right in their preparation. And now, graduates of the class of 2013, the **Crafting of a Caring Culture is in your Hands**. God's blessings. And God's Care... as you Craft.