

Naimah Jaonee' Bahar

Chapel Speech

4-20-07

Ever since we wrote our faith papers in 8th grade religion class, I have wanted to speak in Chapel. Of Course you knew that I, Naimah Bahar, am no stranger to speaking in chapel. Everyone here should be familiar with my speeches about Ramadan when that month in the Islamic calendar approaches. However, today I am choosing to speak on other aspects of my identity. I will not focus on how I don't feel accepted or recount an experience that has made me feel the full sting of discrimination. I can count on one hand the number of times I have felt uncomfortable at Episcopal, outside of the standard awkwardness that accompanies middle school and freshmen year. I have the privilege to go to an amazing school with an amazing class full of people who have never made me feel anything but welcome and well liked. Whether I am walking through the halls on the way to class, attending a club meeting or defeating Matt Sheehan in a rap battle, I feel welcome. Oh and Matt I'm up for that rematch whenever you are. However, this speech does focus around a simple theme, the fact that same and equal are not identical. I believe that it is possible for all people to be equal without all people being the same (and I think that we should feel encouraged by that).

My background is most likely very different from many of my classmates, though we share many common threads. I was raised in a single parent household. My father was the victim of a violent crime and his life on this earth was ended prematurely; however, even before then, he and my mother were separated. By the time my senior year in high school approached, I had lost all of my grandparents. These experiences were all hurtful. However, they have helped shape me into the person I am today. I will not lie and say that if given the opportunity I would not like these people to be here with me, simply because what child if given the opportunity would choose to grow up without a father. Yet, these are the facts of my life as they stand. My differences in these ways do not decrease my worth any nor do they make inequalities between my classmates and me, they are nothing more.

Furthermore, I am a member of the lower socio economic tax bracket. I am neither afraid nor ashamed to admit it. When others go and vacation in the south of France or any island, I go and spend time with my family in Germantown. This doesn't mean that in many ways I am not equal to my friends just a little different. I do not begrudge them their opportunities. Hopefully, if I work hard enough in the future I can take my family jet setting to an island. I have family members that live in what could be called as the ghetto. And though the circumstances may be different, if you go to their home they would treat you with all the hospitality you would receive anywhere on the mainline, within the limits of their abilities. You will not find a more loving and devoted group of people anywhere. They are not worse or better than anyone I know here, just different.

I am African American. I have grown up in an environment when I have been taught that all people are created equal. Equal, but not the same. I have grown up in a different culture than many of my class mates. I attended an African centered school and participated in groups that taught me to value my heritage. I enjoy soul food and I don't think I could live without hip hop music. This is my culture. This is who I am, for all the good and the bad. The same way the class of '07 is who I am whether we are being collectively rewarded or punished. I love my background. Yet, I have never felt attacked when I see the St. Patrick's Day parade on television. I don't secretly plot to have my people given their own parade. Therefore I don't understand questions such as, why do we get a month to learn about the achievements of African Americans?

The other 11 months out of the year all I learn is white history. This is because for the majority of the United States history as a nation African American culture has been a sub culture, whispered about in tiny churches and passed down not in notable history books, but through peoples own experiences. Only recently with the advent

of MTV and Hip Hop has African American culture been mainstreamed and packaged for sale. The founding fathers did not include anyone who looked like me or any of my minority friends for that matter. No one can help that the majority of the country is white and thus the majority of the history of the country is regarding whites. I am not suggesting that we dwell on them too much, I understand why it is.

However, just because we can not help these differences doesn't mean we should ignore it; pretend it's not the truth; pretend they don't exist. Just because we as people cannot help our differences doesn't mean we should ignore them or pretend they do not exist. I for one would be very bored indeed if everyone was the same. Variety is the spice of life for a reason. So I suggest instead of trying to assimilate into this pre packaged mold of what everyone should be we embrace our differences. My hair is not the same texture as many of the people in this audience. Instead of trying to assimilate and chemically alter my hair to make it fit, I choose to wear it naptural, in all its glory.

However, everyday I am astounded by how much I have in common with people whom I would never have thought I had a connection, whether it is a random interest in the Family Guy or a fine appreciation for hip hop music. Moreover, something we all have in common is this school. We are all members of this community, whether we are enduring black outs and no heat or school on days when it probably should have been canceled. These are experiences that will connect us forever. Yet, they also make us different from others.

I believe that often there is an over abundance of political correctness within our culture. I have a very diverse group of friends and I can honestly say that when we are together we are most likely the least politically correct group of people ever. However, we all know that these are simply jokes. I believe it is possible to have an environment that is built on mutual respect in which individuals do not have to bite their tongues, where our differences are celebrated and where we can joke about stereotypes because we know that everyone sees the falsehood they are based on. However, this cannot happen when our differences are viewed in a negative light. Though we are all different, we are equal. Our differences do not divide us, but rather serve to further enrich our friendships, through learning and embracing.

However, it seems that in this country to point out our differences is to make a problem to segregate ourselves. In the immortal words of Lauryn Hill, "why for you to increase I must decrease". Why must the affirmation of my own identity as a strong African American woman take anything away from any of us? I do not believe that anyone should feel sorry or ashamed about who they are. Hatred of others in itself is poisonous to the soul; however, self hatred is worse. If I could give one thing to everyone it would be pride and a love of themselves. So I say that we do indeed recognize that we are all one. However, we should celebrate the things that make us unique at every level. No one is the same. Our differences extend down to the very fundamental level of our DNA, ninety-nine percent the same; one percent different; But the differences are what make life worth living.