

Howard University School of Divinity

And

National Human Genome Center

Launch of

Soul Genomics™:

The (Re)Union of SCIENCE and SPIRITUALITY in Human Identity for Population Health

(From Faith to Faith and From Vision to Victory)

The Andrew Rankin Chapel

Howard University

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Prologue: From Personal to Institutional Transformation

Introduction

Dr. Georgia M. Dunston, Founding Director of the National Human Genome Center (NHGC) at Howard University, invited me to make this presentation as part of the University's Sesquicentennial Celebration.

I believe that since institutions consist of a collection of individuals, that for "Institutional Transformation" to occur there first must be "Personal Transformation" among the people involved.

A Brief Summary of My Personal Transformation Journey

I grew up in a close-knit, Christian family in the small town of Garner, North Carolina. My mother was the first family member to hear the news of my being awarded a fellowship to continue my education at Howard University in Washington, DC. She was thrilled at the opportunity but less excited about me going to Washington, DC. I had only lived in the small town of Garner, which is located only three miles southeast of the city limits of the capital city of Raleigh, and the thought of me living in Washington, DC caused her some anxiety.

She shared so much with me as we talked about my heading away to another university. While I had lived on campus the entire four years at Saint Augustine's College (now University) [SAU], moving away would be different. SAU was across town so to speak. Washington, DC, was not across town where I could return home any evening.

I had always enjoyed being in the presence of my family. I knew my mother was delighted that I was being rewarded for the hard work I had put forward over many years now. But being the ever forward-looking individual that she was, she quickly moved from thinking about where the opportunity was and thought more about what possibilities were ahead of me. As she stood over the kitchen range, she spoke of purpose and focus.

She talked of God charting a person's footsteps based on their heart while individuals planned mostly with their heads. She talked to me about learning to follow my heart. That day in the kitchen with just the two of us, my mom poured her entire self into me.

She talked of how God had ordained what was happening to me from the foundation of the world even before I was born. She told me that God had great plans for me and for me to remember that I was really a representative of God and not man. She said my brothers and sisters would be watching me and desiring to follow in my footsteps and how it would be important for me to do my very best. My mother said I was not to feel pressured about the advanced level of study that lay ahead of me or to worry about the expectations of others but to look at this opportunity as a continuation toward achieving my destiny. After all, I had earned the opportunity to study at a prestigious institution like Howard University, who was paying me to study and train rather than me paying them for the opportunity.

I did not have much to say that day. In fact, on this day I became my father – a man of few words. After my mom talked about what was happening from a spiritual stand point and the investment that was being made in me, she suddenly turned around from the kitchen range, looked directly at me, and said, "And you better go up there and not make anything but As and A++s. What an honor this is for you and for all those you represent in this family, the church, and the whole community." After a while, there was silence. Based on the conversation I had that day with my mother, I could feel a stirring within my soul that could be characterized as both fear and excitement.

I was packed and ready to go early Sunday morning, September 14, 1969. My family gathered in the living room in a circle holding hands to send me off with a word of prayer. I cannot remember who prayed, but it was not me. It must have been Mom. After I left, they would head to church. I made my rounds in the neighborhood beginning at my grandmother's house. I walked up to her house where again prayer was offered for me to have a safe trip and a blessed new experience. My grandmother asked why I was leaving on Sunday and not going to church? I told her the friend I would be staying with while I looked for my own place to stay told me to come on Sunday since he would not be at work. I promised her I would find a church when I got to Washington. She looked at me like she had when I sat on her porch dreaming or daydreaming when she said I was supposed to be working.

From there I went over to my aunts' and uncles' homes so they could add their sendoffs and well wishes. I knew at each stop there would be prayer because growing up it seemed like my folks did a lot of praying, and I had seen it before when my uncles and brother-

in-law were coming and going while they were in the military. In fact, there was always prayer, even if someone was going only a few feet from home. My grandmother did not believe it should be taken for granted that you would arrive safely where you were going. So she instilled in her children, who instilled in their children, that you pray and ask God to keep you safe as you go from place to place. Those who prayed always added somewhere in the prayer, “Lord willing.”

As I grew up, I added the phrase, “Lord willing, I will do this or that.” Every prayer prayed for me on Sunday morning, September 14, 1969, ended with, “Lord, if it’s Your will, take Robert Louis to Washington, DC, without any hurt, harm, or danger coming to him.” Now that I was all prayed over, it was time to go. Since there was only one church service that started at 11:00 a.m., I was convinced that praying for me would continue at Wake Baptist Grove Church in a couple of hours.

I walked back home, said my good-byes, got in my car, drove up the driveway away from the house I had helped my father build, passed my grandmother’s home and the front porch upon which I had sat so many times as a boy, passed my uncle’s home, and finally passed my two aunts’ homes. I was soon out of sight of the family community where I had spent my childhood. Many tears were shed in the household I was leaving. I was finally heading to Washington, DC to enter Howard University.

I entered Howard University in September 1969 to pursue the Doctor of Philosophy degree in the field of chemistry. At twenty-one years old, married, and armed with a Bachelor of Science degree from Saint Augustine’s College (now University) in Raleigh, North Carolina, I had some anxiety about what was before me. My uneasiness resulted from a lack of knowledge about graduate school and the uncertainty of whether I had what it took to successfully make it through such a demanding program. With the same hard work, courage, perseverance, prayer, and steadfast faith that I was accustomed to in my youth, I used it to make it through Howard University leaving with two advanced degrees, i.e., the Master of Science degree (1971) and Doctor of Philosophy degree.

Saturday, May 12, 1973, was the celebration day. What a proud moment that day was for my family and me. I always knew how special the moment was for not just my family but my extended family in Garner who had invested themselves in me. My high school chemistry teacher said it was a proud moment for him as well.

The time had arrived for those receiving PhDs to rise and go to the platform to have their degrees conferred upon them. As I rose to my feet, a sense of unspeakable fulfillment and joy flooded my mind. My last name beginning with “S” placed me toward the end of the line. As I inched my way toward the platform, I knew the trek to this point had been a step-by-step, transforming journey that I could not take full credit for charting.

Soon, I was finally standing and shaking the right hand of Howard University President James Cheek and listening to the incredible words he spoke to me and every other PhD graduate: *“Having fulfilled the requirements and having been recommended by the faculty for the degree, it gives me great pleasure to confer upon you today the Doctor of Philosophy degree with all the rights, privileges, and honors pertaining thereto. With this degree, you are not only entitled to teach others but to also teach yourself. Congratulations.”*

With these powerful words echoing in my mind and deep in my soul, I realized that my destiny was being fulfilled even if I could not

fully understand where the transformation would take me. I left the stage and returned to my seat having officially received my PhD. Excitement filled the air even more because the day before this celebration one of the companies recruiting me called to say they would pay for my wife to join me at a conference in California. At this moment, all I could do was look out on the day and whisper to God a prayer of gratitude from the bottom of my heart and deep in my soul.

I was indeed ready to move to the next level of my upward growth path along the journey I was taking step-by-step. This next level was traveling to California to present my PhD research results before a body of international scientists. An added bonus was that my wife and thesis advisor were travelling with me.

I left home at age twenty-one and a scientist who studied chemistry but who also had a solid belief and faith in God. I was now leaving Howard University at twenty-five years old with a PhD in physical organic chemistry, my mind open and unshackled, and still holding on to God. This structure in my life came about as a result of an early exposure to and consistent upbringing based on Christian doctrines deeply instilled in me by my family, community, and culture. It wouldn't be long however, before a potentially life-threatening storm would cross my path when I found myself in a telephone booth not able to depend on my degrees, my lineage, my family, my network, nor any other resource of human origin with the power to turn the situation around. I would need to develop a deeper relationship with the God that I was introduced to in my youth.

From Despair to Victory

The next year our lives changed as my wife faced a potentially life-threatening situation. At the young age of twenty-six, my wife discovered a lump in one of her breast. As a young couple our world was shaken. Even without information from medical experts, uncertainty became our thought process on a daily basis. We decided to consult with medical experts but to not trouble our families with the situation. We both came from large families with small siblings still at home and they had enough to deal with in their own lives in North Carolina.

Following our meeting with the doctor a biopsy was performed to determine if the lump was benign or malignant. The laboratory results showed that the lump was malignant and would require surgery. Fear set in and questions began to flow. The announcement that the results showed cancer shook me the most and brought on great fear as I began wondering about the future of my wife, our children's well-being, and other internal feelings words were not adequate to express.

Practical reasons dictated that I could no longer carry the weight of the situation alone. As I sat in the hospital waiting room while my wife was in surgery trying to figure all this out, I finally got up, went outside to a telephone booth, and called both our parents to inform them for the first time of the gravity of the situation we were facing. Both my mother and mother-in-law responded that they did not know when they could get to us but that they would come as soon as they could.

As I sat in the telephone booth replaying what my mother and mother-in-law had just said and wondering when either of them would be able to come to my aid, another event took place in that telephone booth on that sunny day in August 1976. The moment the responses

from my mother and mother-in-law rung in my ears, I heard what appeared to be an audible voice saying after each of their responses, “*I will never leave you nor forsake you.*” This same message was repeated twice. The voice was so audible that I turned around to acknowledge it both times to see if someone was close enough outside the telephone booth to overhear my conversation. At this moment, my relationship with God changed.

While I had been raised in the church and believed myself to be a good person, at this time I did not have a personal relationship with God; did not know what it meant to have such a relationship; was not in the house of God as I should have been; and had not given Him credit for working in my life to the degree that I should. I was in tune with the training I received as a child to know to call on God in prayer and fall back on my faith, especially when trouble showed up. I had heard these words as a youth, but in my present situation I realized I knew nothing about what to do. I thought of how often I spoke about God, but it was clear now that I had been doing so because everything had always turned out good. Sitting there helpless, I recognized for the first time that my life was more a “head” relationship with God than a “heart” one. As fear continued to brew, I called on God that very moment in prayer while still sitting in the telephone booth, which was the only thing I knew to do. For the first time, this prayer was from a completely broken and frightened individual who had no fix for the problem.

I had thought I had a strong relationship with God prior to my wife’s experience, but this occurrence revealed I really did not, and this manifestation put me on a course that would change my relationship with God forever. I began to recognize the difference between thinking of myself as good and being a person who actually walked with God.

Over the next several years, I became a strong student of God’s word. I studied the Holy Bible deeply almost daily with many references and other resources, not able to get enough of what His word taught me. In the early years of my studying, I quickly began to see how much of my journey was God’s plan for my life. My studying led me to choose “not to be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of my mind” (Romans 12:2) and working to conform my mind to the mind of Christ (Philippians 2:5). Since the word of God said that “If any lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that give to all men liberally,..(James 1:5a), I sought Him for wisdom, instruction, guidance (Psalm 32:8), and direction (Psalm 119:105).

The transformation in my life resulting from faith in the One who knew my substance (DNA) before I was formed in my mother’s womb (Psalm 139:13-16) had truly set me free in mind, body, and spirit (John 8:32,36). My studying cleared the way for me to be able to “Trust in the LORD with all my heart; and lean not unto my own understanding. In all my ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct my paths (Proverbs 3:5-6). I believed that a renewing of the mind and liberation of the SOUL with the TRUTH was the path to true *fulfillment of one’s destiny*, which is the revelation of Christ in us, our Hope of Glory. This understanding made clear my need for Him in ALL aspects of my life, and I desired to share with everybody inside and outside my network who wanted to improve his or her life and recognize his or her need for Him as well, including both scientists and non-scientists alike.

Engagement for Institutional Transformation

For “Institutional Transformation” to occur there first must be “Personal Transformation” among the people involved.

After many years of personal study, in 1986 I became a Sunday school teacher for senior high school students in grades nine through eleven. It became evident that God was working with me and giving me the vision and wisdom to pass His word on to many generations of young people for over a quarter of a century. After my first full year of teaching Sunday school, I was asked to co-teach a men's Bible study that met every second, fourth, and fifth Saturday morning of each month. It is a class I now have been teaching for 30 years. The pastoral leadership of my church also asked me to co-teach with the ministerial staff of a church-wide Bible study class that I now have been teaching for 27 years. Teaching God's word became a joy and passion of mine. It is truly one of my gifts and one I love.

God promised never to leave me or forsake me, and I can say without wavering that in both the ups and downs of my life, He has been true to His word.

It was at the defining moment in my life at age twenty-seven that I yielded my life completely to Jesus Christ inside a telephone booth. Since that time my focus has been to walk, to the best of my human ability, by essential biblical standards. These standards represent an unchanging reference point for my life. I consider the biblical doctrine for Christian living my North Star, believing without any doubt that these standards will eventually guide me to my eternal destiny.

When I replay the period of despair in my life, I come to the same conclusion 42 years later: God was ordering my destiny one footstep at a time. I did not know it at the time, but my life would never be the same once I exited that telephone booth.

I rejoiced during a biblical study when I found the expression in Hebrews 13:5 of the Bible, "*I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.*" This settled in my mind forever that my telephone booth experience was real and so is the God that I serve.



~ SPECIAL CALL TO WORSHIP ~

THE TIME IS ALWAYS NOW
HOWARD UNIVERSITY
SESQUICENTENNIAL
1867 - 2017

THE HOWARD UNIVERSITY SACRED GENOME STORY FROM FAITH TO FAITH & FROM VISION TO VICTORY

PROGRAM

Opening Song.....Lift Every Voice and Sing.....Congregation
Director, Chapel Choir *Ned L. Lewis, Musician*

Invocation.....Reverend Dr. Bernard Richardson
Dean, Andrew Rankin Memorial Chapel

Welcome.....Professor Gay L. Byron
Associate Dean for Academic Affairs, Howard University School of Divinity¹

Special Selection.....Great Is Thy Faithfulness.....Soloist, Siera Toney
Graduate Assisant, Rankin Chapel, HUSD

The Call

Where we began.....Professor Frederick Ware
HUSD and PI, AAAS² Grant

Who do you say I am?.....Professor Clive O. Callender
*Howard University College of Medicine³ Transplant Center
Director & Founder National MOTTEP*

Can these dry bones live again?.....Professor Fatimah L.C. Jackson
*Director, W. Montague Cobb Research Lab
New York African Burial Ground Collection*

Special Selection....."Your Evolution Will Not Be Televised".....CeLillianne Green, JD
"Perfectly Black" *Lawyer, Poet, Teacher, Speaker
Howard University School of Law Alumnae*

The Challenge

Where we are now.....Professor Frederick Ware
*Se Kim, PhD and Curtis Baxter, DoSER⁴
Center of Science, Policy, and Society Programs, AAAS*



HOWARD UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF DIVINITY

AND

NATIONAL HUMAN GENOME CENTER

LAUNCH OF

Soul GENOMICS™

The (Re)Union of SCIENCE and SPIRITUALITY in
Human Identity for Population Health



Soul Genomics as Ancient Wisdom for the Modern Scientist.....Philip Kurian, PhD
Physicist, NHGC & HUCM; HU Physics Alumnus

THE COMMISSION

Where we are going.....Professor Gay L. Byron
HUSD Center for the Union of Genomic Science and Spirituality

PROLOGUE

The Global Genome Generation (G3).....Professor Georgia M. Dunston
Founding Director, National Human Genome Center at Howard University

Special Selection.....For Your Glory.....Soloist, Siera Toney

Fulfilling our destiny as a federally chartered research university.....Professor Gary L. Harris
Associate Provost for Research & Graduate Studies

From personal to institutional transformation.....Robert L. Shepard, PhD
Howard University Alumnus Author, Scientist & Motivator

EPILOGUE

For such a time as this in the history of HU & western science.....Alton B. Pollard, III
Dean and Professor of Religion and Culture, HUSD

Closing Song.....Howard University-Alma Mater.....Congregation

Reception and Book Signing
Basement of Rankin Chapel

The **EPI**GENOME Story of LIFE'S Journey
through Time in Humankind.

¹HUSD

²American Association for the Advancement of Science

³HUCM

⁴Dialogue on Science, Ethics and Religion Program