

**On Being Redundant: Freedom Is Not Once**  
***Baccalaureate Address***  
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The first and only time I had the honor to stand here was in 1983. I was 34, scared to death, and a little overcome by the magnificent appearance of the students who sat before me. They were clean and dressed in clothes totally unlike the ones I had seen for four years. Like today, I believed that the faculty were not the only people who had come in costume.

I was a youngster, really, an assistant professor, untenured, and had been at Earlham for five years: only one year more than the students who were graduating. And I was enthusiastic.

Now I stand here eight years and four days later than in 1983. I am a full professor, tenured, and easily the age of many of the parents in this grove. I have gone from being quirky (as my mother would say) to emulating my colleagues and becoming absolutely eccentric. And in 1991 I am no longer a youngster. In fact, since I am approximately the same age as some of your parents, I feel under the weight of a sort of parental task. I intend to give you good advice that you probably won't listen to.

When I stood here in 1983 I focused on a lesson I learned as a child from my parents. And as I stand here again this morning, I turn once more to childhood lessons and the guidance they can offer. Since together we must surely represent three generations- new graduates, parents in their middle age, and grandparents approximately the same age as my parents and the alumni class of 1941- this seems appropriate.

As I talk with you this morning I make no pretense to an absence of partiality. I am speaking in the voice of a nearly 42-year old woman who has had specific experience in her life. And being allowed to do this special thing a second time has encouraged me to think about things that are repeated. I think about things that are repeated in my life, in literature, in the academy where I work and in the world where I live. I am musing about whether I, and the world I live in, are inevitably and depressingly redundant. And if so, in what way will I continue?

Of course as an English teacher you would expect me to have recent familiarity with the term "redundant." Certainly I have written it enough times in the margins of some of your papers. There, it means you have said this before, and since this is a written piece and anyone could turn back to that portion of the argument, you need not repeat it. But there is another kind of redundancy, one which I learned about at home in Connecticut.

When I was a little girl I lived in the Connecticut wilderness on a street that turned into a dirt road just a few hundred feet past our house. We lived in what was called the "west woods" and there was a lot of territory that needed more clearing than mowing. We had a long, a really long driveway that sloped upward from the garage to the street. And when it snowed I was supposed to get out there with my shovel and my parents and "get to work."

Now it snows a lot in Connecticut, and I was not much shorter than I am now. That driveway looked like a glacial cliff. I'd do anything to get out of shoveling it. I'd hem and haw and make excuses. I'd need to go into the house so many times that my parents thought I had kidney trouble. I would even suggest that to shovel the snow from the driveway was to somehow defile its perfect, pristine aspect. But it didn't work. The snow would fall. We would shovel. And my parents' response to my whiny "again?" would be an endlessly redundant "yes, again." On the worst

days we would be shoveling as the snow fell, and so when we reached the end of the driveway we would have to start at the beginning, again.

My parents and I went through this same ritual every winter. I saw shoveling as a distraction from much more interesting things I would have liked to do. They saw shoveling as character building and essential to getting the car out of the driveway and us out of the wilderness. Shoveling was essential to getting food. Essential to finding medical care. It was essential for life. "If it snows," they said, "we shovel"; winter to winter, year to year, we shoveled.

Although this memory has been curiously with me these weeks, when I usually think about snow I identify it as a pretty and wonderful thing. I imagine winter evenings before a fire, romance, and chestnuts. I see little white boys dragging home green Christmas trees through the snow-covered field of a Currier and Ives print. But this is not all there is to know about snow. When I worked in northern Maine we would notice the first late-September snow because it stuck out after the warmth of summer and the vividness of a short fall. By the middle of the winter, however, we hardly noticed the snow at all. In the northern climes snow is such a daily occurrence that it wasn't until the first-floor windows were completely covered that we became aware the light had gradually been blocked. In fact, the snow distorted the shape and size of everything so much that when it finally melted in the late spring, people would walk around disoriented for a week. You could see where you had been blind before. You could walk on paths that had been snowed over for months. But, in October, November, December, January, February, March, and April, the snow usually fell so quietly that we hardly noticed it.

Snow falls so quietly that a person hardly notices it until the door is covered and the smokestack iced over and plugged. It can do this while people sleep. During every Maine winter snow would trap people and asphyxiate them quietly.

The English teacher in me finds it remarkable to notice that even the colloquial and idiomatic use of the word snow in English illustrates its less attractive side. We say a person can be snowed in, snowed under, or snowbound. A person can be fooled by a snow job, or can be snow-blind. Living life with snow can be dangerous. An all-week snowfall can obliterate any landmark one usually uses to find her way home.

Now, you won't be surprised to find out that I think the redundant, pretty, silent, falling of snow, and the redundant, cold and fatiguing need to shovel for one's survival, are rather much like the relentless and often unacknowledged character of oppression and a person's only available ethical response under the circumstances. Together, the snow falling and the snow shoveling represent a lesson my parents taught me. It is this: In order to remove something that is redundant, you must also behave redundantly.

## Part 2

Like snow in the middle of a Maine winter, oppressive structures function by being so normal that they are nearly unseen. We are not talking here about the direct and clear and immediate fear of a tornado, or about outright racist behavior or the supreme misogynist moment when a man rapes a woman. We are talking about the work of oppression that is a daily redundancy. Slowly it covers the landscape, hiding the black-faced, plaster-cast jockey by the house door. Slowly it blankets the country club golf course that "restricted." This sort of snow accumulates on top of the history of many peoples, obscuring truth until only a vaguely discernible shadow line indicates where something has been covered. Gradually it rises to knee-high with explanations like: "We couldn't find anyone" or "He just wasn't right for the job" or with intentional and offensive comments like, "We'll hire one but only if she/he is qualified." Sometimes it's accompanied by accusations that the person who is trying to shovel out "has no sense of humor" or "takes everything too seriously." Eventually, it drifts from one aspect of life to another. It weighs down all possibility of movement. And then, finally it blocks the door and fills the stack. And in the night, the unnoticed weight of oppression kills. Like snow in winter months in the north of this country, the daily redundancy of oppression kills.

And what are these oppressive redundancies—things so accepted as part of our world that they go nearly unseen? They are, among others, redundancies based on race and sex, and they include anti-Semitism and homophobia. There are, of course, other oppressions that pass unseen in our lives particularly ones associated with class. But this grouping will do for now. In each case the phenomenon is the same. The oppression is so much of a presence in our lives, that even if we are in a position to experience it directly, we may hardly even notice it's there. This is, Joan Nestle writes, a "restricted country," and the irony is that we hardly notice it.[1]

Well, I am not going to try and prove to you that we live in a country where opportunities, and rights, and lives, are

restricted by race, sex and gender. That, it seems to me, would not be time well spent. Marilyn Frye, a feminist philosopher, has said that "teaching philosophy [taught her] that people cannot be persuaded of things they are not ready to be persuaded of." [2] And for the most part I agree. I cannot in this small time provide you with an experience that will convince you that the culture we share is sexist, racist, anti-Semitic and homophobic. Instead, I am going to assume that your time at Earlham and in the world has taught you that these conditions exist. The real tasks are to discover how to see them in their unseen redundancy and to determine how to respond to them.

Although the people who have lived all aspects of their daily lives within the whiteness of snow are less likely to wonder at it than those who have lived at least part of their lives in the tropics, it is not impossible for a person who does not share the same life experience to notice oppression. My father once gave me this advice: "If you stare at something long enough (and he meant a lawn mower or a chain saw), you can figure out how it works." I think it's good advice. If you stare at oppression long enough, you can figure out how it works. There is really nothing too mystifying about how oppression functions and about how structures that support oppression are maintained. With Elizabeth Minnich, I believe that "built into...institutions and political and economic systems- are conclusions, generalizations, beliefs, values and judgments. [I believe] that these conditions have long excluded [and oppressed] particular kinds of people, times and cultures. ...These conditions are so entrenched that it has been easy not even to see, let alone critique, them." [3] That entrenchment, I believe, is attributable to the power of redundancy.

For example: A woman turns on the television and sees that the movie of the week is showing a woman being raped. So, the woman turns off her television. Then she opens the newspaper to find the lead article talking about the murder of two local women. Later our hero answers the doorbell and finds her neighbor who has been beaten. This woman begins to get uneasy. The next day the woman gets a call from the bank saying that she has been denied credit privileges, and later that week she cashes her paycheck to discover that her wages are smaller than those of a man in a comparable position. The cumulative effect of these experiences is that the woman feels that she is inevitably a victim and worth very little. And this sort of scenario happens in one way or another, quietly, slowly, day after day, as it does in our world, until it simply seems normal. This is the experience of oppressive redundancy. It kills you quietly.

Marilyn Frye offers this insight about redundancy. "It is a general and obvious principle of information theory that when it is very, very, important that certain information must be conveyed, the suitable strategy is redundancy. If a message must get through, one sends it repeatedly and by as many means or media as one has at one's command." [4] If one sends these messages often enough, and they become redundant enough, they will also become as commonplace as snow in a Maine winter. The message will get through, but the delivery will not be noticed.

If we stare hard enough, as my father says, we do notice the redundant message, what do we do? This is where the lesson I learned shoveling snow comes in. You must be redundant back. There is no other way to survive. Finally, the only ethical response to a limiting redundancy is to respond with a freeing one. And this has been happening.

The forms these freeing redundancies have taken in recent years have been to define and give names to oppressive structures and people. And to propose countermeasures. People have marched to gain media attention, as have many of you; marched to respond to Nazis, as have many of you; marched to shout the KKK out of town, as have many of you.

Redundancy for survival has meant countering classes that only study the work of history or lives of white men with programs in Women's Studies or African-American Studies. On every committee, on every panel, in every faculty, town, state or national senate, someone has said the same thing again and again: "I am here. I am here. Pay attention to me. I am here."

There have been many responses to this redundant confrontation of redundant exclusion. In some cases and as a consequence of growing masses at the gate, new people have been invited into institutions of law, religion, and education. They have been given a place to sit. It has, in fact, become fashionable to have one or two "of each" at a table. We call this diversity. However, another thing that has happened is that the people who have owned the table, literally and figuratively, for all these years, are becoming unsettled. The real difference (rather than diversity) on campus and elsewhere is becoming more obvious. And for the first time white men, who for all this time have thought of themselves as "just people," are being categorized and particularized and described as white men. For example, we no longer talk about women academics and African-American academics as categories distinct from academics with a capital A, which used to be, almost always, white men. Now we talk about women academics and African-American academics and white male academics. It doesn't seem offensive to me. But this makes all the difference. The folks who for decades, perhaps centuries, have seen themselves as the universal measure, as "just people," must now, rightly, see themselves as what the media likes to call a "special interest group." And that's unsettling.

When these white men invited people of different genders, races and orientations to sit at their table, they never considered the possibility that the table's menu would change. And it's starting to. White men (and you understand I'm using this descriptively, not pejoratively, just descriptively) are discovering that diversity also, and much more problematically means difference. And so mostly, but not exclusively men, and mostly, but not exclusively white people, are retaliating. They have opposed the redundant refusal of diverse people and thinkers to be ignored. And they have employed another redundant tactic. They are employing marginalization and trivialization, distortion and lying to invalidate what others are saying. They are engaging in P.C. Bashing.[5]

A few minutes ago I made this list: I said "racism, sexism, anti-Semitism and homophobia." Did you tune out at that very moment? If you did, then you are a victim of the redundancy of Politically Correct Bashing. At the moment when I made that list, some of you, even those of you who would make the same list, probably said: "Here we go again, some more of that politically correct stuff." I think the reason for this is that a new redundancy has entered our lives. We are reading about it in *Newsweek*, hearing the President of the United States speaking it from podiums very much like this one. We are buying books from major publishers about it. We are turning it into the subject of small talk in corporate offices and at academic teas. Instead of considering global warming, decreasing enrollments and war, people are talking about political correctness. But do we know what it is? What is this thing people are talking about as the "New McCarthyism," as the "illiberalizing of the academy," as the "can't of the dispossessed"? Why is it being talked about now, and what are the consequences?

Here again we must take my father's advice and stare at this phenomenon long enough to understand what's going on.

Hardly a week goes by when the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, the newspaper of colleges and universities, doesn't feature some article or opinion addressing this thing they call "political correctness." And I know it's a discussion that is carried on at Earlham.

Some say that political correctness is a flimsy, unthinking, poorly articulated argument. However, if a person offers a view that is poorly articulated and flimsily argued and it's about, say, the importance of the classics to a liberal education, it is critiqued for its flimsiness but not dismissed for being politically correct.

Some say that "political correctness" is an ideological, prescriptive philosophy. However, consider the person who presents a series of arguments critiquing affirmative action and civil rights legislation. If that person ties those arguments to an advocacy of meritocracy, he is not named as an ideologue. He is not criticized for engaging in knee-jerk political correctness.

Some say that political correctness is about silencing people and winning arguments with accusations of racism or sexism. But in 13 years at Earlham I have seldom heard any person call another racist or sexist. I have heard ideas and actions described as contributing to racism or sexism. There is a difference. I have also heard women called by names I can't repeat here and referred to by various parts of their anatomy. I have heard this done in arguments, and it is silencing. But no one critiques this behavior and says it's politically correct.

All of this seems ironic to me, for surely the person who speaks for the classics and the person who extols a policy of meritocracy represent a dominant ethos in our country and in the academy. If political correctness implies tyranny, thought control, and a new McCarthyism, shouldn't those terms be applied to the people who have the most political power? Instead, politically correct "thought control" is attributed to women and persons of color. But at Harvard, where this issue is loudly fought, of 373 tenured professors in the arts and sciences, only two are African-American. In 1986 just 12 percent of full professors in the nation were women. [6]

It must be obvious that those dirty words "politically correct," like the word "liberal" in the most recent presidential election, have little to do with flimsy opinion, facile conclusions, prescriptive philosophies and name-calling. These are failings that belong to people of all political persuasions. And this is not about silencing. How can 12 percent silence 88 percent? Instead, political correctness is an epithet applied to a particular set of arguments: 1) those arguments which name and identify white men as an interest group, 2) those arguments which see the oppression of marginalized persons as systematic, 3) those arguments which focus more on discovery and inclusion than they do on preservation. Political correctness does not mean disrespect, though a challenge to an established way of thinking can feel that way.

"Politically correct" is often a term applied to people who see, and speak redundantly, about oppression. And this is

particularly true when the oppression is unseen and is maintained by silence. Politically correct people are critiqued because, as my parents would say, "you can't miss us." We stick out like fence posts in the white redundancy of a snowy countryside.

### Part 3

Well, all this talk about redundancy, like shoveling a long driveway, makes me tired. And I wish I could tell you that so much work will inevitably lead to success, but I can't. In fact, that old saw about "if at first you don't succeed try, try, again" was never a lesson I learned from my parents. I did hear, "Do the best you can." And there is a big difference.

The first maxim, "if at first you don't succeed..." proscribes a particular form of ethical thinking and behavior. It extols the belief in the power of individual effort to shape reality. It advises that, given mental and physical vigor, whatever a person wants can be achieved if he or she just tries hard enough.

Katie Cannon in *Black Womanist Ethics*, argues precisely against the notion of the power of the individual to change reality. She points out that this belief in the power of the individual is based in the assumption of freedom and the power to make choices. She says that "the cherished ethical ideas predicated upon the existence of freedom and a wide range of choices proved null and void in situations of oppression." And she explains that "Blacks and (some) Whites, women and men, are forced to live with very different ranges of freedom." [7]

So, for people living in "situations of oppression" or for people committed to fighting such oppression, saying "if at first you don't succeed try, try again," is to advise eternal frustration. Instead one must say, "Do the best you can." Sometimes the best you can do is to survive. At other times the best you can do is to put together a little freedom, for yourself, for your family and for others. But these possibilities require the same tenacious redundancy that is expected of a young child with a long driveway. And it's tiring.

### Part 4

I'll tell you what. It may be just that it's the last day of the last week of school, but I get really tired of being redundant. I get tired of working against redundant oppressions that have outposts everywhere, even in my own mind. [8] I get tired of feeling like I must stand in faculty meeting or in classes, again, to say the same things, again. I am beginning to feel like my life is spent, as Audre Lorde would say, "reinventing the pencil." [9] I want to stop, go in the house and put my feet up. But I know the snow is falling.

I know that some of you get tired. You get tired of being redundant voices in your classes and houses and work places. Sometimes you think your words make no difference or that they and you get named and dismissed for being politically correct. It's cold out there, I know, and you, too, probably want to stop.

But is there, I wonder, any ethical alternative to this redundant responding? Is there any other ethical alternative to this engagement of the heart in the cause of freedom and survival for yourselves and for others? I don't think so. Instead, I think we must listen very carefully to the words of Adrienne Rich when she says this to us:

*Freedom. It isn't once, to walk out  
under the Milky Way, feeling the rivers  
of light, the fields of dark-  
freedom is daily, prose-bound, routine  
remembering. Putting together, inch by inch  
the starry worlds. From all the lost collections* [10].

I think what Rich means here, is that the exhilaration we feel when we do something that confers honor upon us: when we freely strike out on our own, when we give a baccalaureate address, or when we graduate from college—this exhilaration is like walking, once, beneath the Milky Way in the rivers of light and fields of dark. It feels wonderful, but it will not hold. Freedom is not a once-in-a-lifetime epiphany or achievement. It is daily redundant work. It is routine, and it is prose-bound. And all of this work provides no guarantee of anything but exhaustion. It does not even guarantee survival.

I think it's no surprise that a reading of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* offers essentially the same information. My favorite

part of the novel is when Denver, a young African-American woman who has spent the bulk of her life ostracized by the ex-slave community, and bound to her mother and their home, is trying to decide whether or not to go forward into the world. Morrison writes:

*...she stood on the porch of 124 ready to be swallowed up  
by the world beyond the edge of the porch...  
...Grandma Baby said there was no defense...  
She said [that] this ain't a battle it's a rout...  
Remembering those conversations...  
Denver stood on the porch in the sun and couldn't leave it.  
[Then she hears, in the mind, her grandmother laugh.]  
"But you said there was no defense" [Denver says.]  
"There ain't."  
"Then what do I do?"  
"Know it and go on out the yard. Go on." [11]*

Like Rich, Morrison knows that freedom is not once. And she knows that the world offers no guarantees. But there is no other ethical choice available but to get down off the porch, to take all you can, to live your life with a redundant commitment to working for survival and freedom.

But how do you do this? Where does a person find the energy to be redundant? I don't think I know the answer to this question. But it seems to me there are many sources for such strength. John Woolman, for example, a 17th-century Quaker, spent the better part of his life redundantly arguing with fellow Quakers about their holding slaves. His energy, he told us, came from his faith in God. For Harvey Milk, superintendent in the city of San Francisco until his assassination in 1978, the strength to be redundant about social justice for lesbians and gay men came from the community that loved and supported him. Audre Lorde talks about the energy she gets from tapping into an erotic center that she describes as "an assertion of the life force of women; of that creative energy empowered." [12] One of my colleagues, while disagreeing with a member of her community, was asked if she didn't think it was a good thing that the United States Constitution made it possible for her to speak her mind. She said, "I get my authority from the shed blood of Jesus Christ because I am a woman of faith, and that's where my primary allegiance is."

This year we have been favored by many visitors who have drawn on the energy of their spiritual and living community, like Henri Nouwen; on the strength of feeling a calling, like James Cone, and, like Bernice Johnson Regan, on the strength of the memory of the dead, and the hold they have on us. She speaks of this in her song "They Are Falling All Around Us" where she sings about Fanny Lou Hamer and Ella Baker—redundant women in their own right. Regan sings:

*It is your path I walk.  
It is your song I sing.  
It is your air I breathe.  
It is the record you set that makes me go on.  
It's your strength that makes me stand.  
You're not really going to leave me.*

When I was a little girl my father said: "Daughter, think and think again, and then think again, and if you still think you're right, I'm behind you 100 percent." Such support and trust in some sort of human goodness is energizing and either turns you into an ego maniac or helps you resist addiction to external approval.

And where will *you* find the energy to be redundant? I don't know. But I am sure the time you have spent at Earlham has offered possibilities and has provided tools for the task. We have, I hope, offered you skills in analysis and discernment. In the time you have spent here, I hope you have observed the integrity with which my colleagues have pursued their commitments, and that you will try to emulate such integrity in your lives.

And I hope we have offered you as much food for your heart as we have for your mind, because the sort of life that lies ahead of you will, I think, require a lot of heart. When you leave today the world you will meet will not accept late papers, or incompletes. The world you enter will be diverse, intolerant and not nearly as nice as we have been. You will find yourself surrounded by people you don't like, and more problematically liking people whose ideas you hate. I hope we have offered you enough experience with real difference, not diversity, to help you cope and to encourage you to seek out difference as a positive value in your life. My mother always told me, and I say to you, "You don't have to be like someone to be friends with them."

Part 5

So, I promised at the beginning of this talk that I would give you parental advice, and I think I have. I have told you to be redundant in the face of redundancy- that is, be sure to shovel when it snows. Stare at something until you figure out how it works. Do the best you can. Make friends with people who are different than you are. Find someone or something that trusts in you and goodness enough to be behind you 100 percent, and offer the same to someone else.

This comes straight from my parents, through me, to you.

In fact, at this very moment my father is probably saying "daughter, that's enough." And it probably is. Still, before I stop, I want to be an English teacher again and tell you about something I discovered while thinking about this talk. In the 17th century the word redundant was used to mean "plentiful, copious and exuberant," and it frequently referred to "swelling, wave-like, overflowing" phenomena. So, I want to wish you this redundancy too. May you have lives redundant in joy and redundant in courage. I really don't know what the world out there is going to offer you, but I hope it will be the opportunity to put "together, inch by inch / the starry worlds. From all the lost collections."

Thank you.

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[1] Joan Nestle, *A Restricted Country* (New York: Firebrand, 1987), p. 29.

[2] Marilyn Frye, "Sexism," *The Politics of Reality* (California: The Crossing Press, 1983), p. 17.

[3] Elizabeth Minnich, "Discussing Diversity," *Liberal Education* (January/February, 1991), p. 5.

[4] Frye, p. 26

[5] Among these folks are D'Souza, author of *Illiberal Education*, and Charles Sykes, author of *The Hollow Men*. Catharine Stimpson refutes the latter (*The Chronicle of Education*, May 29, 1991, p. A40) and accurately calls into question the "facts" Roger Kimball presents in *Tenured Radicals* and cites other opponents of "P.C." for "selective use of evidence" and "the manipulation of fear."

[6] Leon Howell, "Who's Politically Correct?" *Christianity and Crisis* (Vol. 51, No. 9, June 10, 1991), p. 187.

[7] Katie Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics* (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholar's Press, 1988), p. 3.

[8] With gratitude to Phyllis Boanes, Susan Callan, Mary Garman (originator of this particular phrase), Jan Slagter and Belle and Frank Caruso for their generosity with time and words and ideas that have found their way into this piece.

[9] From a conversation between the author and Audre Lorde, Earlham College, Winter, 1982.

[10] Adrienne Rich, "For Memory," *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1981) p. 9

[11] Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Plume Books, 1987), p. 244.

[12] Audre Lorde, "The Erotic As Power," *Sister Outsider* (California: The Crossing Press,

1984), p. 55.