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“STILL HERE”

Good afternoon! This occasion – and my honor as recipient of the 2013 Lionel Barrow Award -- reminds me of the story about the American tourist who visited Spain and attended his first bullfight. As he and his wife left the arena they spotted a restaurant where they decided to have dinner.

The menu was in Spanish and neither the man nor his wife was able to decipher the offerings. However, he saw a meal being served at a nearby table that appeared to consist of two very large meatballs in a bowl of soup. The waiter confirmed that it was a delicacy and – indeed -- the specialty of the house. Moreover, it was only available on days when bullfights were held because it featured the gonads of the losing contestant.

In his desire to sample this exotic cuisine, our tourist eagerly placed his order. And, a few minutes later the waiter returned with his

order. But, much to his dismay the tourist found his bowl contained two small marble-sized entities submerged in his soup. So, he summoned the waiter and asked why his serving didn't measure up to what he had seen at the other table.

“Well, señor” the waiter said, “sometimes the bull wins.”

I hope you won't think I'm serving any bull during my remarks today but, instead, will find something useful as you pursue your careers as scholars and teachers.

I'm told the trend in speech-making these days is for the speaker to tell his or her “story” in hope of forming a bond with the audience. In doing so, I'm recalling the days of my youth when I would occasionally be introduced to older adults and they would invariably ask, “Who are your **people**, son?”

Well, allow me to take a few moments to tell you about my “people” and acknowledge a few persons who have been major influences in my life -- and made possible whatever accomplishments I've attained.

First, I must credit my family beginning with my great-grandfather Green Wilson -- born a slave in Texas -- and who is the earliest Wilson of African descent we've been able to trace through genealogical records. Obviously, I would not be standing before you today were it not for Green Wilson, who transitioned from slavery to sharecropping.

My paternal grandfather, Leck Wilson, was also a sharecropper who worked cotton fields in support of his wife and 16 children. One of those children was my father, Clint Sr., who became an award-winning political cartoonist despite his father's warning that a Black artist growing up in segregated America would have little chance for success.

It was my father who instilled in me an interest in news media; newspapers in particular. As an editorial cartoonist for the Black press he closely followed current events and -- as his only child -- I spent time reading the various publications to which he subscribed. Through my Dad's life and work I learned the importance of advocates on behalf of marginalized and subjugated people.

My wife, Dr. Mary Wilson, is of course one of my “people”. She has endured – patiently, I think -- the many hours and days I spent in the isolation that comes with a career in researching, writing and teaching.

Outside of my immediate family there are others who may also rightfully be called “my people”:

The late A.S. “Doc” Young was a prolific writer and editor for African American publications including the Los Angeles *Sentinel*, California *Eagle* and *Ebony* magazine among others. He gave me the opportunity to practice the journalistic crafts of news gathering, writing, reporting and editing. He also had the courage to hire me as a section editor and columnist at the age of 19 -- much to the consternation of several older newsroom staffers.

I must also acknowledge two professors under whom I studied at the University of Southern California where they nurtured my academic and scholarly passions: Dr. J. Samuel Bois, a father of the modern discipline of semantics, and Dr. Earle Pullias, an education theorist and

philosopher, who had a deeply spiritual commitment to truth and scholarship that transcended racial and cultural differences.

Of special importance among my “people” is my nearly life-long friend, colleague and collaborator Dr. Felix Gutierrez. I am immensely pleased that the honor of the Barrow Award was bestowed on him two years ago.

Felix has been a source of insight and inspiration -- personally and professionally -- since our undergraduate days at California State University in Los Angeles. Through the years we have not only collaborated on a few books and articles, but our families have shared many of life’s milestones including weddings, births, family illnesses and funerals.

Our partnership has shown that people of different cultures can work together toward enlightenment of those in society who sorely need to learn lessons on the brotherhood of humankind.

We come now to consideration of the one among “my people” whose life and work largely makes this occasion possible: Dr. Lionel C.

Barrow, Jr., founding father of the Minorities and Communication Division of AEJMC. It is in his honor that I have titled my remarks today, “Still Here”.

I first met Lee -- as he was known to many of us -- in 1978 when the MAC division was in its formative years. He was Dean of the Howard University School of Communications and I was an untenured professor at Cal State, Los Angeles. Our relationship was enhanced when casual conversation revealed that we both belonged to the same college fraternity.

He told me how the work of his Morehouse College classmate -- and our fraternity brother -- Martin Luther King, Jr., inspired him to become an activist for just causes. Lee Barrow realized there was much to be done in bringing Civil Rights -- the biggest domestic news story of the era -- to mass media professions and their higher education feeder institutions.

The MAC Division was founded in 1970 under Lee Barrow's leadership. At that time the stimulus for diversity in America's mass

communication industries – the Kerner Commission Report – had only been on the nation’s consciousness for two years. The commission reported that journalists of color held fewer than two percent of editorial jobs in the United States. It also found that news media produced content [quote] “through White eyes” and from a position devoid of diverse cultural perspectives.

Two of the panel’s major recommendations were (1) that media industries dramatically increase their hiring of people of color and (2) that colleges and universities recruit and prepare a diverse student body for jobs that hopefully would be made available to them.

For a while, the embarrassment of the commission’s findings led to a flurry of diversity activity. The American Society of Newspaper Editors began an annual census of industry employment of women and people of color and the percentage of non-White professionals crept slowly upward. Scholarships, internships and other summer training programs for previously excluded groups sprang forth throughout the nation.

It was not long, however, before hiring efforts in the industry stalled. And a decade after the Kerner Report, a study by Albert Scroggins at the University of South Carolina found 98 per cent of the nation's journalism and mass communication faculty were White -- and almost all of them were male.

It was clear to Lee Barrow that despite the Kerner Commission's wakeup call -- and his own efforts within journalism education -- neither the profession nor the higher education establishment had moved the needle toward cultural and gender inclusion to any significant degree. Whatever momentum had been gathered was noticeably curtailed, if not lost.

It was around this time when Barrow launched a newsletter from his base at Howard University. He aptly named it "*Still Here*".

Still Here carried articles about the progress and setbacks toward a multicultural workforce in media industries and the journalism/mass communication academy. More important, it offered a place where both

“positions wanted” and “job openings” were published – thus offering a modicum of encouragement for those committed to the cause.

The meaning and objectives of *Still Here* spoke to the apathy that had so quickly overtaken movements toward diversity and rendered them merely a lip service operation less than a decade after the Kerner Report.

Perhaps Lee Barrow was inspired by a Bible story that his friend -- now the Rev. Martin Luther King -- may well have told. The story is found in Chapter 6 of the Old Testament book of Isaiah. There was a need for someone to exercise leadership of God’s people and the Lord was moved to ask of them, “Whom shall I send?” And the people likewise wondered aloud, “Who will go for us?” Isaiah’s reply was “Here am I, send me.” So God told Isaiah to go forth and exercise communication leadership by spreading His message to the people.

Today, as we face challenges to cultural and gender inclusion, I believe Lee Barrow’s declaration that under-served groups are “still

here” remains inspirational. In the manner of the prophet Isaiah, Barrow used a three-part formula to address the issue.

First, he recognized the need was THERE. Second, he knew persons who faced obstacles of inequity and apathy were STILL HERE. Third -- and most important -- he knew that if matters were to improve, the efforts had to begin with his leadership. Thus, his actions echoed those of Isaiah: Here am I, SEND ME.

Although Lee Barrow died in January of 2009, his legacy remains. It reminds us of challenges we face in this new media age -- an age that requires us to re-assert with resolve that we are “still here.”

Keeping in mind that people of color in the aggregate now comprise nearly 40 per cent of the U.S. population and that women are more than half of the nation’s citizenry, here are a few of the challenges Dr. Barrow would confront were he alive today:

People of color only comprise about 12 per cent of daily newspaper employees.

They comprise only 21 per cent of TV newsroom employees and fewer than 12 per cent of radio journalists.

Women of all races own only 6 per cent of the nation's radio stations and 5 per cent of its TV stations.

In raw numbers, African Americans own just 10 of the nation's 1,350 TV stations and Latinos -- who own about 35 of those stations -- fare only slightly better.

What's worse, many of these data reflect a *decline* over the past few years.

The picture is similarly bleak in the realm of higher education -- the entity charged with preparing a diverse and equitable pipeline into media professions and the mass communication academy. In 2011 the annual enrollment survey -- conducted by Lee Becker and his colleagues at the University of Georgia -- found about 22 per cent of undergraduate students identified themselves as members of ethnic minority groups.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that minority faculty hiring in journalism and mass communication programs has increased slightly in

recent years. Nevertheless, a recent study by Federico Subervi found a need to improve the recruitment and retention of such faculty.

A new cadre of diverse faculty will find research topics rich with possibilities germane to their cultural and gender backgrounds. For example, this era of social media and new technology platforms has seen an alarming rise in uncivil discourse at every level. And, much of it has been directed toward people of color and women.

Those who are “still here” face the emergence of a myriad of additional challenges. Racist commercial advertising runs unabashedly on YouTube as are distasteful parodies about mental illness, the disabled and abused women. Sexually prurient commentary concerning the first lady of the United States has become commonplace.

Bruce Horowitz -- the *USA Today* media critic -- notes that advertising executives openly acknowledge such content lacks decency, but that the issue is trumped if the offensive material happens to “go viral” on the Internet and swells corporate profits.

So, what are the implications for those of us who are “still here”?

Not long ago my Howard University colleague, Dr. Carolyn Byerly, posed a profound yet simple question: “Do we want *all* of the textbooks in our field authored by White men?” Her point was not about denigration of White males because it’s true they have pioneered the theories and pedagogy of our disciplines. It is also true, however, that in recent years multicultural and gender sensitive scholarly perspectives have opened new avenues of thought. It is this variety of inquiry that has led to further enlightenment and better understanding of mass communication in all of its iterations.

This validates the notion that inclusion of diverse perspectives strengthens a free and multicultural society. For this reason my career has been approached from the philosophical view that research is not an end, but rather a means to an end. Not only must the scholar’s work reveal “the nature of things”, it must do so with an eye toward elevating standards and values in our pluralistic society.

Academicians should be among the first to advocate for such change. If not the scholar, then who?

The Bible story in the book of Isaiah also inspired a hymn written by M. W. Spencer titled “There Is Much To Do”. Its lyrics read in part:

There is much to do, there’s work on ev’ry hand.

Hark, the cry for help comes ringing thru the land

Jesus calls for reapers, I must active be,

What wilt Thou, O Master? Here am I, send me.

In accordance with Lionel Barrow’s legacy, our task is to inform the forces of racial, gender and cultural insensitivity that we are “still here.” But, advancements will only be achieved when scholars of all cultural backgrounds actively commit themselves to the notion, “Here I am, send me!”

We cannot let the Barrow legacy fade and fulfill the final passage in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s “The Great Gatsby” that sums its mournfully discouraging commentary on life as follows:

“So we beat on, boats *against* the current, borne back
ceaselessly into the past.”

No, I think not! While the passage of time may push the physical memory of Lionel Barrow ever backward, his legacy and example will remain. For we know as long as barriers to progress are **STILL THERE**, they must be confronted by those who are **STILL HERE**, because we have each said to ourselves “Here I am, **SEND ME.**”

So, let this be our mantra: “Still there . . . Still here . . . Send me.”

Thank you so much for your attention and the opportunity to share my thoughts with you today.