

## James Joseph Lecture

ABFE

April 24, 2015

Good Evening!

I am grateful for the tremendous opportunity to have been chosen to stand before you as the 2015 James Joseph Lecturer. I congratulate the Poise Foundation as the institutional winner and Maisha Simmons as the Emerging Leader Award recipient. She has done amazing work with the Forward Promise Initiative of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. I am honored to be engaged with and in the presence of all of you in this room. I am especially thankful to Susan Taylor Batten, and the board and staff of ABFE for the vision and commitment to shaping the dialogue and action on responsive philanthropy in black communities and the network of support for us that the organization provides. I am thankful to those who came before us and set us on paths to leadership and success, including My Brother Ambassador James Joseph, Sister Harriet Michel, and all of the others who refused to accept the status quo and demand our places in the fabric of philanthropy. I am immensely blessed to work in one of the most privileged places for which one can get paid...philanthropy! I am indeed grateful!!

It is not accidental that I, as a Southerner, is in this time and space as the 50 year commemorations of historic events that began the huge task of deconstructing systems of inequality and injustice in this country have and are occurring. We know, all too well, that the business of justice for black people is yet unfinished so I would like to begin with the current realities of life today for black people and black communities. As some of you know I write something akin to poetry. They're just words, borne from my truth and strung together in a particular way. There is no iambic pentameter nor is there a particular rhyme scheme but is, hopefully, an adequate description of where we are. Thank you for indulging me.

## **The Time of Now**

We are living in critical times,

Times dictated by stubborn systems of oppression, inequality, injustice, and ineptitude

Where messages fly like birds through electronic air,

Where pictures in time are captured that show we can't breathe and they don't help.

We are living in critical times,

Where there is blame and shame in blackness,

Where orange has always been worn on black.

Where debt imprisons us and slavery is masked.

Where our men and women are missing from communities and our children are lost.

We are living in critical times,

Where opinion has become fact and facts are distorted in human webs of half-truths and half-lies

Where our perceptions are not our own and our stories are filtered

Where we die in American streets and justice is just a concept, not intended for black

Where just staying alive is a major accomplishment and being well is unattainable

We are living in critical times,

Where the same battles are being fought, on a new day, in a different century and in novel ways

Where Jim Crow has a new name, a new respectability and new power,

Where James E. Crow, Esquire controls the rule of law and the houses of policy,

Where inequality is codified in new terms and rights are rolled back.

Where the arc of history is still bending but justice remains elusive.

We are living in critical times,

Where new movements have emerged and generational change is occurring,

Where the leadership bench is deepening and the table is broader,

Where change can arise from urgent times.

Where black lives matter, where leadership matters, where money matters, where movement matters, where policy matters

Where there is still much to be done,

And so I ask, what will you do and what will we do in the time of now?

In attempting to answer these questions for myself, I was moved to speak briefly about us and our roles in philanthropy.

### **Leading from where we are in these critical times!!**

Leadership is often defined as the action of leading a group of people or an organization; a process of social influence to maximize the actions of others.

While these definitions work, I offer, this evening, a more personal way to think of leadership which I have learned from people in communities who challenge systems of oppression and inequality every day. I believe, and as they have taught

me, that leadership is a practice more than a position, it is more of a relationship than a role, who we are is as important as what we do. It is a personal and professional journey. The ability to lead comes from the inside and extends outward.

So if leadership begins on the inside, what do we need to remember as philanthropic leaders in a time when we are called upon to be our absolute best selves?

We need the confidence and self-assurance that we, individually and collectively, matter and can make a difference. **Personal truth and authenticity** are critical components to building that confidence and self-assurance. Personal truth is the simple combination of what we know with how strongly we know it. It is who we are and what we're capable of. Authenticity is the degree to which one is true to one's own personality, spirit and character. Personal truth and authenticity give us the fortitude to speak truth to power if they are influenced by a racial analysis that encompasses the understanding that race is a political construct. That political construction was created by people to give power to one set of people over another. We must have a systems analysis about how that power impacts every social, political and economic structure in this country. And we must have an analysis about how change happens.

These critical times require that we **lead from courage and be bold**. Audre Lorde once said that courage is not the absence of fear but the ability to act even when we are afraid. Courage gives us the mettle to stand up and speak out in ways that may involve personal and professional risk, like Ambassador Joseph and Ronald Gault. I would suggest that the consequences are greater if we don't stand up and speak out boldly, sometimes against the grain and sometimes when it may not be popular. Because we know that if we don't stand for something, we will fall for anything and now is not the time for the faint of heart. I have also come to learn that we have to stand up and speak out despite our pain. As African American people, we walk with pain that resides deeply in our collective psyche borne from injustice that manifests itself in feelings of powerlessness and anger as we experience American life on a daily basis. We must face it, name it, heal from it and be whole in spite of it. If we don't, courage will elude us and our people will lose their presence in the board and conference rooms of philanthropy. There will also be the

loss of access that the privilege of philanthropy provides...access to the tables where power resides.

These times require that we **lead from learning**. We are all very smart people and have matriculated through educational institutions that validated our journeys with degrees. We needed those to enter philanthropy. However, our degrees should not be where our education ends. It is our collective duty and responsibility to learn from the people in communities with whom we are engaged. To really learn, we must listen with our heads and our hearts. We need to learn what works and what doesn't work from the people who do the work every day. In philanthropy, we are contributors, supporters and sometimes partners. We need to learn how to structure practices and processes that help rather than hinder progress on democracy, racial equity, fairness and justice. We need to be courageous enough to be influenced by that learning and use it to influence creative philanthropic practice...practices that support new movements, new actors, new structures, and new ways to sustain tried and true strategies...practices that support both program and advocacy, including organizing and leadership development. In these times, our learning should be accelerated. It is absolutely urgent that we know more so that we can do more. Here's an example...the Whitman Institute recently released a report on what they call trust-based investments...giving practices that demonstrate equity. The report offers nine practices that build trust and authentic partnerships with grantees. The practices they offer includes unrestricted, multi-year funding, the foundation does the homework, partner in a spirit of service, offer open and responsive communication, solicit and act on feedback, encourage transparency, simplify and streamline paperwork, support beyond the check and host restorative retreats. Practices like these could help to change the face of philanthropy by reducing the power imbalance that exists between philanthropic institutions and their grantees.

In these critical times, we must remember that it is not an accident that we are in philanthropy. We were chosen because of who we are and what we bring. We must persevere because the journey towards equity and justice is a long-term one. We must hold the vision that positive changes will occur for the people and places we care about. That vision binds us and gives us hope. Whether we are CEOs or program assistants, we share that hope and power resides in that hope. As actors in the philanthropic matrix, we are assigned positions with titles that separate us.

Some of us have positional power and some of us believe that we don't. Don't believe the hype. It is my contention that no matter your title, your position, you can make a difference. The times require that all hands are on deck, present and willing to work for equity and justice...that we lead from where we are.