

Women in Leadership Seminar



Sept. 22, 2006

Guest speaker / discussion leader: Dr. Jane Smith, Exec. Dir. Of the Spelman College Center for Leadership and Civic Engagement.

Seminar Notes:

Dr. Smith opened by saying: "I hope what I have to say today has some meaning for you, and that we will have a substantive discussion about transformational leadership (which has now replaced the concept of engaged leadership.)"

"Before I begin my remarks, let me tell you the most substantive question I've been asked. I was preparing to give a speech having been graciously introduced much like I was here. Immediately, before I could begin my remarks, a hand shot up in the audience. A young girl looked straight at me and asked, "Dr. Smith, aren't you *tired*?"

Her response was that she may be tired, after all, she's been at this for nearly 40 years. But she's as passionate about Spelman and the new mission of the college as she's ever been.

History of Spelman: 125 years old. Founded at Friendship Baptist Church. John D. Rockefeller heard about the plans to start a college for young women – women newly freed from slavery and eager to learn and for higher education. He was confident his wife - whose maiden name was SPELMAN – would be very interested in this cause. She was and that's how Spelman got its name – from a white, rich, Yankee woman!

Spelman's educational goals: 1) Academic excellence 2) Leadership development 3) Service learning

What is leadership? 1) Responsibility – each student at Spelman needs to understand that being a leader means people are counting on her and that she has a responsibility to be an example others can learn from; 2) Who you are - - each student at Spelman needs to understand that there's a balance between being an African American woman and being part of a larger majority of women; 3) Vision – each student at Spelman needs to also understand that a leader must look beyond the present and set the course for the future

Black woman's story (an explanation of where the black woman's rage and sense of arrogance comes from): Dr. Smith recounted a story of a young girl whose roots in Africa were suddenly and harshly severed. Separated from family, thrown on a ship bound for a foreign country, beaten and stripped, raped and sold like a piece of beef.

This background may help to explain why some have come to believe "the sisters' are bad."

But Dr. Smith went on to say: "Despite the history of black women which is certainly real – and the history of discrimination in this country which is also real - I myself have changed the way I think. I am a different woman than I was in 1954. I stand as a different woman among all women with global influence. That's who we are today."

New President at Spelman: When Dr. Beverly Tatum arrived, a new day at Spelman began. She recognized that we had not yet harnessed the power of our leadership. She created the Center for Leadership and Civic Engagement and now together, we are moving in a new direction. We want to help women of color (not only the traditionally black women who have attended Spelman – but women of all colors, white, brown, yellow and red) to see herself in a larger context.

White is a color too: Eleanor Roosevelt's granddaughter is on the Spelman Board and Spelman welcomes Caucasian students as well as women of all colors. We want more to attend, Dr. Smith said.

First Conference of Women of Color: Dr. Tatum and Dr. Smith were anxious to make this a meaningful experience and hoped that something would happen to make a lasting impact...but they didn't know exactly what that something would be. On the dais were a rainbow of impressive women leaders: African American, Caucasian, Asian, Latino, and Native American. All had spoken – with messages about what each had suffered and what legacy they now brought to the leadership table. The final speaker was a Cherokee Chief. She said: "While I appreciate everything each of you has shared about your history and your contributions, I must remind you of this. Everything all of you have achieved has been achieved on stolen Cherokee land!"

Key message: As women, we must all realize that we are all on each other's backs!

New leadership model: After Dr. Tatum arrived at Spelman, the new model of leadership emerged. Transformational leadership – preparing women to transform the country and indeed the world. Dr. Tatum and Dr. Smith believe that leadership has to be based on an ASSET model, not a deficit model. A deficit or "crybaby" model wears people down – focuses on we're this or that, and what we don't have or why we haven't been able to get where we want to be. But, the asset model of leadership is based on a UNIFIED FRONT – it's a truly transformational model.

Spelman's commitment: To send women out with 3 assets: 1) excellence 2) leadership 3) service. And it's not just about leadership of women, or women of color, but leadership for all people, all causes, etc.

Next Women of Color Conference: May 7, 2007