

“Somebody Should Say, ‘No’”
An Address to the Fourth Annual Upstate Diversity Awards Dinner
[As Delivered]
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It’s good to be back in the Upstate and to share in this new tradition of recognizing the strength that comes from difference. Appropriately, as we gather here this evening, voters in North Carolina and Indiana are participating in an election in which diversity plays a central role. No matter who wins the general election in November, America’s next president will break new ground. John McCain would be the oldest person to take the oath of office for the first time, as well as the first Viet Nam veteran—and a former POW at that—to serve as Commander-in-Chief. Hilary Clinton would be the first woman to be elected President and would add to her already historic career trajectory as the only First Lady to hold elective office. And, of course, Barack Obama would be the first African-American to occupy the Oval Office.

These are all reasons to be proud of our country and the differences that strengthen us collectively and make us a beacon of hope for the rest of the world. Yet much remains to be done. Occasions like this evening always feel a bit like graduation to me. We’re celebrating the result of countless hours of hard work, mostly out of the public eye. The recognition is necessary and well-deserved. But in every commencement ceremony there is the sense that a challenge lies ahead. This is best summed up in what I believe to be the shortest graduation speech ever: “Congratulations. Get to work.” Resting on our laurels and glorifying our past achievements is the surest way to lose the very gains that we celebrate

today. Much work remains to be done. For example, what does it say about how we view race in our country when we describe Barack Obama as an African-American candidate? He could equally be called just another white guy running for President. For he is both. Accepting that reality is part of what lies ahead.

In exploring this idea further, I'd like to frame my remarks this evening around two quotes from one of America's up-and-coming philosophers: Jonah William Paris Simpkins. The academics in the audience may not have heard of him yet because he hasn't published any articles. But I can assure you that he's just about mastered the alphabet, so spelling cannot be far off. Once he gets past the excitement of his upcoming third birthday, I'm confident he'll settle down into more scholarly pursuits.

One evening as we were preparing dinner, Jonah walked into the kitchen and asked my wife, Carolyn, "Where are my people?" Not "Who are my people?" or "Where are my toys?" but "Where are my people?" He asked it with the same sense of urgency as an officer looking for his troops. Indeed, this two-year-old's query hearkens back to Gandhi's quote: "There go my people. I must follow them for I am their leader." Whether leaders or followers, we all need to find our people.

But exactly what do we mean by "our people"? Herein lies the kernel of the division that keeps us from truly knowing each other and, I would argue, truly knowing ourselves. When we start looking for "our people" we all too easily get caught up in the politics of "us" and "them."

In America, we're all about picking sides. Think about it. Either you like Pepsi or Coke. Republicans or Democrats. CNN or FoxNews. Even politicians crow, "Either you're with us or you're against us." Here in South Carolina, the politics of "us" and "them" reaches down to the most essential parts of personhood. Either you like Carolina or Clemson. Either you like the beach or the mountains. Either you're a Yankee or you're a Southerner. Us and them. As Director of Diversity Initiatives at the Charleston School of Law, I spend a lot of my time dealing with "us" and "them" and usually there isn't much difference between the two.

But that doesn't stop people from trying to draw distinctions. I'll never forget a conversation I had with a consultant while I was living in Washington, DC. He talked about how much he loved working in the South. A non-Southerner himself, he described with great excitement the feeling of landing in any Southern city and getting to work. "As soon as my plane touches the ground," he said, "I know I'm the smartest person in the state." Smarter than any of "them."

After I moved to Greenville, I often thought about that comment. Suppose that guy flew into Greenville-Spartanburg Airport, drove to downtown Greenville, and walked down Main Street? Who might he see? On any given day, he could run into successful entrepreneurs with national companies, lawyers who have clerked on the Supreme Court, and public servants of international stature. It wouldn't take a rocket scientist to determine that there's talent in the Upstate. But...just in case it did, we could call upon Anderson native and Greenville attorney Cort Flint, who worked on the Apollo project. Smartest guy in the state?

This guy wouldn't have been the smartest guy on Main Street in Greenville. And he wonders why he doesn't get more consulting work in the South. This guy could never get past the notion that slow talking must mean slow thinking and that all Southerners do is sit on the front porch, wave at passersby and occasionally take a notion to visit with the neighbors before having supper and turning in for the night. There is talent here in South Carolina. Some of it is native. Some of it is "from off."

Though we might like to believe otherwise, it's not just "people from off" who are caught up in the politics of us and them. In fact, one of my first trips to the Upstate made it clear that we still have work to do. While my wife interviewed for a job with the Greenville Hospital System, I decided to take a ride through a nearby neighborhood to investigate housing options.

As I turned the corner in the leafy suburb, an officer I had passed earlier came up behind my car and turned on his blue lights.

"Is there something I can help you with, sir?" he asked.

"No, not really," I replied. "I'm just looking at some of the houses for sale," a fact that was clear from all the listings I had on the front passenger's seat.

"Well, is there a particular house I can help you with?" asked the officer.

"Not unless you're a real estate agent," I thought but did not say.

He asked for my license and registration, then proceeded to call in my information. After 15 minutes, I was on my way. Place matters in the South. And apparently I was out of mine. The officer looked at me and thought, "He must be

one of them, there's no way he can be one of us." Us and them. Nine times out of ten, there isn't a dime's worth of difference.

And this brings me to the second quote from our great philosopher. Just a few weeks ago, my family went to Cape Town, South Africa, where my wife attended a seminar that included, among others, several graduates of the wonderful, visionary Liberty Fellowship, which Hayne Hipp has developed as a gift to South Carolina. Jonah and I had some time on our hands, so I decided to take him into the city while Carolyn was in her session. The highway in Cape Town from where we were staying runs past some of the poorest areas in the Western Cape. As we passed Khayalitsha township, Jonah looked at the shacks made of corrugated tin and asked what they were. "They're houses," I replied. He couldn't believe this and insisted that I had it all wrong. This, I understand, is behavior that will continue for the rest of my natural life. "Those houses are *broken*," he insisted. "Somebody should say 'no!'" What could I say? He was right. The unfiltered moral indignation of a child shames us all.

The only way we conquer the divide between us and them is to say "no." To say no to the manufactured differences which have no bearing upon who would make the best employee, colleague, friend, partner or leader. I say this with conviction because when I see people who've seen the lie that is "us" and "them"—those people who order their lives around others who possess basic human decency—I see how much richer their lives are for rejecting this false and divisive choice.

At no point was this more apparent to me than a few weeks ago when I had the distinct honor of attending the service at Furman for Tunky Riley. David Broder of the *Washington Post* called Dick Riley one of the “most decent and honorable people in public life.” But Mr. Broder only got it partially right. Dick *and* Tunky Riley are two of the most decent and honorable people, anywhere. Period. It makes all the sense in the world that an institute named for Dick Riley should be at the forefront of efforts to promote diversity in our state and in our region.

Watching the service in Daniel Chapel, one could not help but notice the many loves of this magnificent woman. Beautiful music, beautiful flowers, and beautiful words served as a fitting tribute to someone who, to paraphrase one of the speakers, had friends who were young, old, white, black, Jewish, Methodist, Episcopalian, gay, straight, Republican, Democrat, and just about any other label that we would choose to attach. Her life showed us the true joy of celebrating humanity.

As I watched people file out of the Chapel at the end of the service, I remembered that when Jonah, our then-newborn little philosopher, first came home from Greenville Memorial Hospital, the first person to visit us was Tunky. A woman who had dined with the Queen and was eulogized by a former President, made a personal visit to celebrate the birth of our first child. A child born to a father who was named for a housepainter with a high school education. Ironically, she probably had just left that same neighborhood where I was stopped by the police on my first trip down to Greenville.

When we indulge in the politics of us and them, we revert to something less than our best selves. When we look beyond those differences to the common passions and interests that connect us, we live a life worth living. Tunky's life of beauty, excellence, and humanity truly was a life worth living. It was a lifetime of recognizing what is broken in the way that humans relate to each other and daring to say no. The words of advice I recently heard a 90-year-old man offer to his granddaughter best capture Tunky's spirit: "live with courage."

There is much to be learned from a life well-lived. In seeking the shelter of a world of "us" and "them" we lose in significant ways. So often our state is portrayed as a backwater where someone could land and automatically be "the smartest guy in the state," but the truth is that there are wonderfully talented people from South Carolina. An additional truth, albeit an inconvenient truth, is that there are many more talented South Carolinians who have left the state with no plans to return. Not a month goes by when I don't hear from someone who either is leaving the state or has already left.

Just from my own generation, there are lawyers, doctors, television producers, a Harvard professor, a dot com success story, and senior executives with Fortune 500 Companies who once called South Carolina home. Each has tremendous talents to share but feels discouraged by the fact that SC ranks at the bottom of the nation in the number of women holding elective office, or that there is no woman or person of color heading a major SC college or university that is not an Historically Black or Female College. Or that there has been no

person of color elected to statewide office in South Carolina since the end of Reconstruction. Or that there is no person of color currently serving as President or CEO of any major company in the state. The legal, medical, entrepreneurial, and artistic talent from South Carolina's diverse communities far too often finds life easier and more rewarding—both financially and socially—beyond our state's borders. Somebody should say no.

We have done well, especially here in the Upstate. But we can do better. We in the South have traveled a great distance. And we have realized social progress only by walking that path together. Congratulations. Get to work. Challenges remain. Just consider the talent *not* in this room this evening. Men and women of all backgrounds who have determined that their futures in South Carolina are more limited than in other parts of our country and world. Our beloved Southland is still broken. Our state is broken. And when we deny to each other the basic dignity that is inherent in all human beings by refusing to recognize their worth and their talents, our spirits—and hearts—are broken. We are broken. Somebody should say “no.” We all should live our lives with the moral courage of a two-year-old.

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