

**A JOYOUS RACE JUST BEGUN**

***THE REX NETTLEFORD MEMORIAL LECTURE***

by

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The memory of Rex Nettleford conjures up many images, no one perhaps complete, so many-hued were the colours of his raiments. When I spoke in the Parliament of Jamaica's Commemorative Session I referred to him as an 'incandescent eagle'. Tonight, I think of Shelley's *Ode to a Skylark* and some lines resonate with special poignancy:

*Hail to thee, blithe spirit!  
Bird thou never wert –  
That from heaven or near it  
Pourest thy full heart  
In profuse strains of unpremeditated art.*

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*We look before and after,  
And pine for what is not:  
Our sincerest laughter  
With some pain is fraught;  
Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought.*

.....

*In the golden lightning  
Of the sunken sun,  
O'er which clouds are brightening,  
Thou dost float and run,  
Like an unbodied joy whose race is just begun.*

Those who knew Rex Nettleford well - and there are those here at Rhodes and at Oxford who are among them - know just how profuse were those '*strains of unpremeditated art*' that poured forth from him. It was as if those strains of art in all their many forms were so co-mingled in his being that they flowed fluently from him in all he said and did. That is why this foremost scholar of Caribbean culture could also effortlessly be the pioneer of industrial relations studies in the Region, and the high priest of dance in Jamaica.

That combination of gifts and roles is rare indeed, and it is to the great credit of the

Rhodes scholarship process to have identified it in Rex's early life, and helped so much to nurture it. No surprise then that when Rhodes celebrated its Centenary, this University awarded Rex Nettleford one of the four Honorary scholarships worldwide with which it marked the occasion.

Rex, Professor the Honourable Ralston Milton Nettleford, Member of the Order of Merit of Jamaica and of the Order of the Caribbean Community, Honorary Fellow of Oriel College, Oxford, Vice-Chancellor Emeritus of the University of the West Indies - Rex to all - has left a legacy of 'sweet songs' by which he marked the passing of a whole generation of his peers and in all of which he pierced the veils of ordinariness to the virtuousness within - thereby memorializing the qualities he most applauded and commended in his compatriots - and by which he himself had lived. In his eulogies of others he revealed the credo which was his own greatness. But his sweetest songs were in his works at the University of the West Indies and the Jamaica Dance Theater Company - and they are today evocative of his passing. And, so in turn, our saddest thoughts about his loss evoke remembrances of all his most sublime achievements.

In one of my last moments with Rex I remarked on how well he looked; to which he replied - "just the glow of the setting sun". Small wonder that I recall Shelley's *skylark* that 'in the golden lightning of the sunken sun ... dost float and run like an unbounded joy whose race is just begun'. And the wondrous quality of Rex Nettleford is that while he has left the earthly campus he dwells there still - dost float and run like an unbounded joy whose race is just begun'.

In these moments of memorial it is that spirit of beginning, not of ending, that infuses our remembrance and should guide the ways we preserve and multiply the many legacies of his life - legacies not only to his Universities - the University of the West Indies and Oxford; but also to communities beyond them - to Jamaica entire and to the wider Caribbean - and beyond our archipelago to a larger humanity.

The attainment of true excellence is rare in any society; but the excellence that Rex hallmarked in the varied domains of Caribbean civilisation that he graced - was of a special rarity, and his comingling of them a unique creation. We owe it not only to him but also to ourselves to honour and perpetuate his achievements in inspired ways; none more perfect than the pursuit of the vision he held close of a Caribbean identity that transcended narrow insularities not only on the map but in the mind.

In his eulogy at UWI's Thanksgiving Service at Rex's passing, were two lyrical passages of the Public Orator I specially recall tonight:

- *His life was many, simultaneous, mutually energising careers. The achievement in each separately, would have been enough to earn him a place in history. He was scholar, educator, author, dancer, choreographer, administrator, institution builder. Which other University's Vice Chancellor has also been a dancer, choreographer, founder and artistic director off a dance theater company? And which other dancer-choreographer has also been head of a Trade Union Education Institute? Then there were the myriad works of voluntary public service, local regional and international service ...*
- *It is a further mark of distinction that all of this work was driven by one great purpose: to promote self-knowledge and a creative sense of self-worth in the Caribbean person, a self-confident sense of identity in community.*

In this first Rex Nettleford Memorial Lecture it is of that Caribbean, that identity, so precious to Rex, that I speak. For today, the several tiny pieces of our archipelago so preoccupy themselves with island home that together they are losing their vision and abandoning their project of a Caribbean homeland. Perhaps Rex's memory can help to recall us to our destiny.

For all of us there are bits of writing capturing essential truths that remain half-remembered in our minds until recalled by some evocative moment. For me, tonight, one such are words written over forty years ago by Jean Paul Sartre in his Introduction to Frantz Fanon's clarion book *The Wretched of the Earth*. Sartre wrote:

*And when one day our human kind becomes full grown, it will not define itself as the sum total of the whole world's inhabitants, but as the infinite unity of their mutual needs.*

How incisively and with what conviction those words assert the oneness of our human condition? How directly they invite the question: Has our human kind yet become full grown? What is the state of 'vision' of 'leadership', of 'governance'?

within global society? And for me tonight, especially, within our Caribbean region?

Thirty years after Franz Fanon's book (in 1995) global civil society in the form of the World Federalist Movement and the International Association of United Nations Associations - a more internationalist pairing you could not want - came together in San Francisco to celebrate the signing of the United Nations Charter there in 1945. For that 'Charter Ceremony', Maya Angelou composed a memorable poem that re-captured Sarte's insight of human unity and asked the same question of our maturity.

Maya Angelou wrote, as only she could, of a wonder that she likened to the great wonders of the world, the wonder of our capacity to acknowledge the eternal unity of humanity's needs and what she felt was our generation's potential to respond to those needs. She longed for the day when we would reach that point of fulfilment; that moment, as she wrote, 'when we come to it'. Maya Angelou was musing about humanity's misused potential; she was musing about 'vision' and 'leadership' and 'governance' (among other things) at the global level: and so for me, at the level of a globalised Caribbean.

It is in this context that I view 'Leadership'; and its demands are inexorable. Norman Manley, Michael's father, was a towering political figure in the Caribbean of the forties and fifties. He was Rex's role model - and for that matter, mine. He might so easily have become the father of the West Indian nation. As it was, when the moment came to lead the nation, political realities at home constrained this great man to stay at home, to decline the mantle of regional leadership and, ultimately, to take Jamaica to a separate independence.

The referendum which Manley called to confirm Jamaica's commitment to Federation, and through it to West Indian nationhood, was a wrenching experience for himself, as it was to be for all West Indians - including Rex. What a failure of leadership; and not only by Manley who called the referendum; but of other West Indian leaders, like Adams of Barbados whose stewardship of the Federation contributed to the 'no' vote; and of all beyond, like Williams of Trinidad and Tobago, who could not rise above the sham arithmetic that '1 from 10 leaves 0'.

Next year, 2012. Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago will be celebrating 50 years of Independence; and in successive years so will the rest of what we call the 12

independent Caribbean States. I suspect that few will recall ( a whole generation will actually be too young to recall) that that supreme moment of island nationalism came not out of a gallant struggle for freedom but out of the dismal failure of regional unity – the shattering of the dream of ‘one Caribbean’ which Rex among others had craved – and went on for his whole life to nurture; the dream built on the Caribbean identity which all will espouse but for which few will make political sacrifice..

But for that failure, next year, the Caribbean nation (with the name “ The West Indies”) would have been celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Independence of the Federation. I wonder what would have happened had Jamaica's referendum gone the other way? What would have happened had the decision taken at the 1961 Lancaster House Conference which settled outstanding details of the federal system, and fixed the date for the independence of the Federation, not been frustrated by the 'No' vote in that referendum?

Perhaps the forces working for fragmentation would ultimately have destroyed the Federation, even in a post-independence context. We cannot discount it altogether; but, somehow, I doubt that they would have succeeded had the vote in Jamaica been 'Yes' and the West Indies become independent as a federal nation on 31 May 1962. I believe with John Mordecai, who chronicled the Federal experience, that the tenuous Lancaster House patchwork would have held, that the Federation would have grown stronger and faith in it firmer; that, ultimately, Manley's early vision of a strong West Indian nation would have been fulfilled. Prospects for the Caribbean would now be very different. We have paid a large price for that leadership deficit – for that is what it was.

But the present comes out of the past; and, for the West Indies, it has had to come out of a rejection of federalism. The present had to be constructed instead on a fragile regionalism. Having let federalism slip from our grasp - regionalism became a necessity, and we have spent the last 40 plus years - not always with total conviction - trying to make a virtue of it. That effort has been on the whole a triumph of practicality over inclination - the compulsions of mutual interest in regional cooperation overcoming our natural archipelagic instinct for contrariness and fragmentation.

Recently, in Barbados, the Caribbean's youngest Prime Minister, the PM of Dominica, Roosevelt Skerrit, reflected on our record. He recalled that one of our

Caribbean Nobel laureates, the poet Derek Walcott, in his acceptance speech for the Prize, likened the Caribbean to a beautiful vase that had been shattered by its history into many pieces.

*What we are intent on doing (said the Prime Minister) is to play our part in fitting these broken pieces together and to recreate a unified society of states that is modern and contemporary, but is inspired by the unity of our first people (the Caribs) and the common heritage of those who followed them.*

But, alas, the Prime Minister's conclusions on our integration efforts through the Caribbean Community were not reassuring:

*To be quite frank, (he said) for the most part, the Community exists in the words of the Treaty only, rather than (as) a tangible entity that is seen by its people as a vital part of their lives. The force of historical necessity which might otherwise have driven the peoples together naturally are weak or non-*

*existent. The Community at this time needs both unifying cultural symbols and an inspiring rallying call that 'all ah we got to be one'*

He is virtually alone among our political leaders in speaking out so clearly of our shortcomings. Perhaps, it is no accident that he is the youngest among them.

Earlier this year, the respected regional commentator, Sir Ronald Sanders, had written candidly:

*There should be no doubt that the people of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) are well aware that failure of the regional integration project to contribute to solving the urgent problems which now beset their countries is really a failure of leadership.*

I believe this is true; and of wide application. And this leadership deficit in the Caribbean cannot be overcome by 'people' action – much as we might wish it so. Empowerment in the Caribbean does not justify so large a belief. An empowered civil society does not exist in a practical sense .

If leadership is faltering at the regional level and people are not empowered,

governance becomes a critical element of progress. What is the Caribbean balance sheet? One of the attributes of good governance is freedom to be critical of government; it needs to be acknowledged even as we indulge that freedom. The bigger picture in the Caribbean surely is that the region has sustained democracy and preserved the rule of law throughout the post-independence period – over almost 50 years. There have been anxious moments in parts of the region, it is true; but more sporadic than sustained, and always with a return to constitutional norms. Indeed, over the early years of nation-building, constitutionalism has held sway in the Caribbean: parliamentary democracy, free elections, changes of government, independent judiciaries, press freedom, the right of dissent are all part of the regional norm – interjectional blemishes notwithstanding.

But those blemishes cannot be ignored; we must hold ourselves to a higher standard in all these areas. It is not only the forms and structures of governance that must pass muster but the substance and quality as well. And there are far too many examples in too many parts of our region of endangered governance values. Of course, our realities of size and circumstance contribute. In the small states we all are in the Caribbean, Governments occupy inordinate space in the governance landscape; the checks and balances that are natural to larger societies are absent in our countries. For us, therefore, there is need for a special level of insistence on the practical realisation of the precepts of good governance, and intolerance of deviations from them.

Of course, the condition of liberty anywhere is eternal vigilance and there is never excuse for complacency – hence the necessity for robust and unfaltering accountability. Good governance in the Caribbean, as everywhere else, can never be assumed; it must ever be demanded and delivered as a national birthright.

But there is another level of governance in the Caribbean where the record is palpably not good. It is governance at the regional level: the failures of which Prime Minister Skerrit was complaining. The Commonwealth Caribbean is a community of sovereign states; but instead of sovereignty being tuned to the needs of community it has been employed to frustrate it. This is contrary in itself; it is absurd when the sovereignty that is avowed is not reality - when reality is powerlessness, not power. In the end we have used the sovereignty we profess, essentially against each other. The measure of governance that is a precondition of community has been sacrificed on the alter of false gods.

So there is a governance deficit at both the national and – to a much greater extent – regional levels in the Caribbean. A look beyond CARICOM to our wider Caribbean society is just as challenging. Our history of colonialism has reinforced the separateness of a dividing sea, and Caribbean people have grown up largely as strangers looking more to their respective metropolises than to each other: neighbours, each looking beyond our Caribbean neighbourhood.

Twenty years ago, the West Indian Commission (on which both Rex and I served) posed the question ‘apart or together?’ not just for CARICOM but for the wider Caribbean: not what unity among the Commonwealth countries of the Caribbean, but why not a Caribbean Commonwealth - a Commonwealth from the Bahamas in the North to Suriname in the South, from Central America in the West to Barbados in the East; a Caribbean Commonwealth encompassing the states, the governments, the people of the entire Caribbean: of the islands of the sea and the coastal states whose shores are washed by that sea; not just the English speaking Caribbean, but the Dutch, the French the Spanish as well. In Rex’s cultural outreach, he was already making it a reality.

That Caribbean oneness is not really so far-fetched. I recall, nearly 40 years later, how its reality was impressed on my mind as I opened for CARICOM the negotiations with Europe that were to lead to the Lome Convention. What I said on that day in Brussels, speaking on behalf of the Caribbean, were to be the last words we spoke formally with Europe on a regional basis in those negotiations. At our urging, Africa, the Pacific and the Caribbean thereafter would speak only with one voice, often – then, a more united voice than Europe’s.

The unity of Europe has deepened and widened since then. The Community of 9 in 1973 is now a Community of 27 and it is still growing; and its unity has strengthened structurally and in quality. That first emanation of the Treaty of Rome with which we began a dialogue in advance of Lome 1 is now reaching to the fulfilment of the Treaty’s vision, and ambitiously beyond it, Where are we? And, even more to the point, to what are we reaching?

There is a point beyond which regional variety, unless harnessed to the achievement of common goals, becomes a tangled web. On the West Indian Commission twenty years ago, we heard many accents; but we heard, overwhelmingly, a voice that was authentically regional espousing not only a regional identity but a regional aspiration for doing things together in ways that

will better the condition of Caribbean people. And we heard the voice of the young that was impatient of change. Rex's response came back always to 'education'.

Most of today's Caribbean people have emerged from a generation that recognised out of harsh reality that education was the essential escape from social, economic and political handicap. This was not, of course, a new insight peculiar to West Indians. Epictetus in his 'discourses' some 2000 years ago, at the start of the 1st Millennium - had asserted that 'only the educated are free'. Our forebears had no need to read the Greek classics to know how right he was. It was for them the lesson of life.

Today as we look to the 21st Century we have to ask ourselves: has this passion for education abated in the Caribbean as education itself has contributed to welfare? Have the freedoms of this Century created an illusion that we no longer have need for a passionate, zealous, unwavering commitment to learning? If so, freedom has sold us short, or we have mistaken for freedom what is merely a transit stop on the way to it. I hope there is still among parents and young people alike in the Caribbean a compulsion for education: that it still comes first in their list of priorities - first among the goals for which they will make sacrifices.

An earlier generation of West Indians actually read by kerosene lamps and street lights on the way to learning. Electricity is now more widespread, but are we using it for learning or for distractions of one kind or another? In our increasing appetite for electronics, do we pause to reflect that the satellites perpetually spinning on the geosynchronous orbit over the Caribbean represent someone else's learning, someone else's technology? If we make ourselves mere spectators of these marvels, allow ourselves simply to be entertained, we are accepting that we shall remain dependent illiterates, we are opting for another kind of bondage.

And, beyond ourselves, is it not true that if developing countries generally are not to remain on the margin of prosperity and progress, ways have to be found of responding to higher education needs. If not a knowledge gap will surely open up as big or bigger than the income gap by which we have traditionally measured levels of development. And that is the most serious of all. For human resource development is, after all, the very foundation of economic development.

In the world of the Third Millennium, the maxim of Epictetus that only the educated are free will have the more contemporary meaning that only the educated are free to prosper. Rex Nettleford never wavered in his demand that learning be the Caribbean's credo.

In what was, perhaps, his last substantive Lecture, In Trinidad on the fringes of CHOGM 2009, talking at the Commonwealth People's Forum, Rex spoke inspiringly to this theme. I am grateful to that steadfast Commonwealth educationist, my friend Peter Williams, for bringing it to my notice; and I should like to share some words from it with you. Rex called his speech: *ENGAGEMENT OF DIVERSITY AND THE DILLEMA OF DIFFERENCE: EDUCATING THE NEXT GENERATION*. He explained that he had chosen the title "*as a major challenge not only for us in this chaotic, contrary, contradictory, debt-rich, oil-poor. even murderous but exciting region of the world but also of the third millennium Planet we all now tenant*".

It was full of 'Rexisms' – as when he described us all on '*Planet Earth (as) rich and poor, developed and developing, one-third Caucasian and the two-thirds non Caucasian, the Western Christian civilisation, and those not so blessed to meet St. Peter in the land of Milk and Honey*'; or '*I like to remind audiences ...that the only time that ... we had full employment in this region was under slavery – yet another paradox of paradoxes which are the bane of Caribbean life*'; or, talking to teachers. '*We must stop teaching disciplines and start teaching human beings*'.

But the passage from that speech I should like to leave with you is this:

*It has to be understood...that whatever the budgetary constraints faced by Commonwealth Member States in the region, whatever the seductive sounds coming from the free market camp, it remains the responsibility of public policy, of governments, to propose the direction to be followed and to enlist the greatest possible number of actors in order to succeed in a strategy that masters change.*

*Indeed, this kind of leadership by the State does not mean a monopoly of the functions employed to move education forward, least for the field to be hijacked by Ministries of Education served by unimaginative pedestrian technocrats who forget that there are a certain number of human values that*

*need to be activated in human-scale communities like ours. Values such as the dignity and responsibility of the individual; the freely chosen participation of individuals in communities; equality of opportunity and the search for a common good and cultural certitude; the power of knowledge through education and training – these can be realised through the sort of education that can trump violence and foster rational thought and peaceful reflection even in the face of temptation to violence. We are speaking here of lifelong learning beyond the classroom of course.*

In what were to be final reflections, Rex was speaking beyond the Caribbean – or even the Commonwealth. He was urging wise counsel.

From all I have said you will understand why moments that memorialise Rex’s life and work are imbued with a spirit of beginning, not of ending - of a joyous race just begun. The Rex Nettleford Foundation, formed by the University of the West Indies, the Jamaica National Dance Theatre Company and the Nettleford Estate, is the principal instrument by which we will seek to continue Rex’s Caribbean odyssey. Its mission is to –

*support scholars and programmes that promote the strengthening of West Indian society in the areas of social and cultural development through research, community service and intellectual excellence; to produce young leaders who grasp the importance of public service based on integrity, who have a desire to protect the weak, and who will use their energies and talents for the betterment of humankind.*

The Foundation is the way we can sustain the values and advance the purposes that inspired Rex’s work of “promoting a creative sense of self-worth in the Caribbean person and a self-confident sense of identity in community” As its first Chairman, I am proud to launch the Foundation in the United Kingdom , and grateful beyond measure to the Warden, Don Markwell, to do so here in this place which was so special to Rex.

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