

## *Introduction*

I wish I knew how it would feel to be Black,  
Black without having to prove Black

Sky don't act blue, Grass don't have to kick 'ass'  
to prove it's green, Oranges do not have to define  
the behavioral characteristics of oranges.

White know white, there's light white, pure  
white, no conscientious, make-up, let's pretend,  
but just is, because they say so.

They have cleanliness and godliness behind them  
but just is—Because they say so.

I wish I knew how it would feel to be Black, so that  
I could stand undressed, bald and silent and be Black  
just because I am—So Black, I wouldn't have to be  
beautiful—So Black, I could hide my pride, So Black,  
I could be anti or pro, whatever I feel, so Black I could  
know I was Black for real—REAL BLACK

So I could know, and know I knew, how it feels,  
really feels, to be ME!!!

—UNKNOWN

On December 1, 1955, Rosa Louise Parks was heading home from work when she boarded a Montgomery, Alabama, bus and sat in the first row of seats designated for blacks; a few minutes later, she refused to move further to the back of the bus after the driver ordered her to yield her seat to a white male passenger. Her brave defiance on that day, which led to her arrest and a subsequent nearly year-long bus boycott that ended racial segregation on public transportation, has been commonly regarded as the beginning of the civil rights movement in the United States. Parks's courageous stance has rightly been characterized as a model for the activism that was to follow. Interestingly, she reflected later after moving to Detroit, that there were those who seemingly characterized her as something of an accidental activist, because they believed that her refusal to move was not intentionally and politically motivated but that "the reason I did not move from my feet was that my feet were tired."<sup>1</sup> Parks countered, however, that "My feet were not tired, but I was tired, tired of unfair treatment."<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, Parks, who went on to receive the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1996 and the Congressional Gold Medal in 1999, downplayed the view of herself as the singular radical activist who started the boycott and fueled a movement that had a major historical impact. Her quiet, courageous demeanor on that fateful day was a culmination of

## INTRODUCTION

years of being witness to oppression and injustice along with being guided by the strength and conviction of her family and others before her who had suffered similar or worse injustices. She was well aware that although hard-fought change was gradual but very slow, she and many, many others would have to unite to continue to fight for civil rights. Recognizing that as a black woman she was regarded through a distorted lens about her race, constructed by biases, prejudices, and privilege, Parks rejected the prescribed limitations and definitions of her as a human being, which robbed her completely of the freedom to be herself and enjoy her full rights as a citizen. In short, by refusing to surrender her seat, she decided to “do what I had asked of others,” that is, reject fear and inertia for empowerment and self-determination. The quiet strength that sustained her that day was at the core of her commitment and contributions to the civil rights movement through her involvement with the NAACP and founding of the Rosa and Raymond Parks Institute for Self-Development.<sup>3</sup>

In looking directly at the bus driver and refusing to move, Parks claimed a site and stance of resistance or “oppositional gaze” that challenged the conventional patterns of domination and power relations. Writing about film criticism and black female spectatorship, bell hooks theorizes about the “oppositional gaze” in a discourse on resistance to the dominant ways of looking at and understanding representations of black women that can transform our vision of existing images and the creation of new ones. Hooks explains:

The “gaze” has always been political in my life. Imagine the terror felt by the child who has come to understand through repeated punishments that one’s gaze can be dangerous.

## TRUTH WITHOUT TEARS

The child has learned so well to look the other way when necessary. Yet, when punished, the child is told by parents, “Look at me when I talk to you.” Only, the child is afraid to look. Afraid to look but fascinated by the gaze. There is power in looking.<sup>4</sup>

Insisting on the importance of “hard, intense, direct looks . . . as gestures of resistance, challenges to authority,” hooks concludes that “Looking and looking back, black women involve ourselves in a process whereby we see our history as counter-memory, using it as a way to know the present and invent the future.”<sup>5</sup> The poem preceding our introduction speaks to the frustration of having others define you or having them expect you to justify your very presence rather than accept you as another human being without the need to represent or explain an entire race of people. The poem also suggests, however, that to maintain this balance is not without cost. One’s self-definition of competence, assurance, and adherence to a code of ethics is threatened by those who may not know it exists or, even if they are aware it exists, might dismiss or ignore it, and their response effaces that for which one stands as well as the potency of self-empowerment. The gesture of resistance through looking and looking back enacts self-efficacy and locates power within the self.

From that perspective, the story of Rosa Parks offers unexpected lessons in leadership from what at first sight is a seemingly powerless position. We call this phenomenon “leading from behind,” that is, using one’s understanding of the power structures in one’s context and applying that knowledge to circumvent those structures by developing strategies honed by both training and lived experiences of being black and female.

## INTRODUCTION

Parks's legacy, emanating from a quiet but persistent dignity and insistence on enacting her authentic self, provides a lens that reflects the ways in which we, as black female deans, employed the strategy of "leading from behind" to achieve effective outcomes in the systemically racist contexts of the predominately white institutions in which we served.

The idea of leading from behind is not a new one but resonates emphatically in the historical legacies and affirmations of three extraordinary leaders, that is, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Nelson Mandela, all of whom had a profound positive impact on millions struggling to move from abject constraint to autonomy and self-determination. Linda A. Hill, the Wallace Brett Donham Professor of Business Administration at the Harvard Business School and chair of the Leadership Initiative, in fact, used Mandela's notion from his autobiography of the shepherd who oversees and gently nudges the flock to its destination as the framework for her theory on successful leadership that inspires and sustains corporate innovation.<sup>6</sup> Promoting the idea of leading from behind, servant leadership, and effective use of collaboration to stimulate innovation, she envisages a new direction in leadership that will positively impact climate and organizational structure of business. This type of leadership requires, she maintains

someone who understands how to create a context or culture in which other people are willing and able to lead. This image of the shepherd behind his flock is an acknowledgment that leadership is a collective activity in which different people at different times—depending on their strengths, or "nimbleness"—come forward to move the group in the direction it needs to go. The [shepherd-flock]

## TRUTH WITHOUT TEARS

metaphor also hints at the agility of a group that doesn't have to wait for and then respond to a command from the front. That kind of agility is more likely to be developed by a group when a leader conceives of her role as creating the opportunity for collective leadership, as opposed to merely setting direction.<sup>7</sup>

While our work embraces the idea of leading from behind by encouraging collaboration from all organizational levels, particularly within higher education administration, and modeling the principle of servant leadership, we argue that, for us, it also means engaging in conduct that resembles the very deliberate and carefully constructed actions of our enslaved ancestors to combat cultural dynamics and long-standing institutional paradigms that stand as threats. Furthermore, what we learned has implications not only for future leaders of color but also for all those regardless of color who, as servant leaders, will mentor and guide them. We want to emphasize this application to all potential leaders and mentors of leaders that privilege does not remove the challenges instituting change and shifting the dynamics of power within conventional organizational leadership practices. Thus, while we speak from the perspective of experience in higher education, we feel confident in its application to other organizational settings in the public sector, including corporate settings and nonprofit agencies.

While we had both been through full-fledged searches, were vetted campuswide by a broad variety of constituents, and embraced the positions with a wealth of administrative experience and eagerness to make a difference, that did not remove the sometimes disconcerting feeling of being “strangers in a strange land,” pilgrims, if you will, charged

## INTRODUCTION

with enhancing contexts where we moved back and forth from margin to center, that is, standing outside on the inside at the center of organizations in a place whose conventional patterns of power and domination challenged us and were, at the same time, challenged by our presence. Thus, we found ourselves enacting the prescribed responsibilities associated with our roles while adjusting to lower appraisals of our performance, even when they clearly exceeded expectations or the performance of our peers. Moreover, our offers of advice or assistance sometimes were met with silence or a lukewarm politeness that conveyed clear dismissal.

At a spring 2016 literature conference, a professor of poetry and African Diaspora Studies, and creative writing, revered for his brilliant and prolific publications and contributions to teaching and mentoring, spoke about his creative production through the lens of Asperger's with a touching observation about the environment in which he thrived. Reflecting on the years of his enormous success in his academic job, he noted that he nevertheless often encountered reactions which clearly indicated that people could not imagine that he existed, as if what he had accomplished was by way of "an accidental sleight of hand." But he countered that view with his own oppositional gaze, rejecting their reflection of him and insisting that one must move beyond the limited vision with the observation that "If you only look at a reflection of yourself you can't see anything else," and that "focusing on one image or distorted mirror blocks your ability to see anything else."<sup>8</sup>

We, too, realized that as deans of color who were pioneers in our roles at our institutions, we would have to use the margins or limiting spaces to anchor and enrich the center. We would have to look back to use our space in the margin

as a site of resistance. In her essay titled “Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness,” bell hooks, discussing the politics of location, explains that the gift of marginality is that it “offers to one the possibility of radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds.”<sup>9</sup> This radical perspective, then, becomes the gaze or looking back that propels Rosa Parks and many who follow to reclaim power and agency.

The book, then, is a series of autobiographical essays on leadership, drawing on our roles as higher education administrators for nearly two decades. One author, who had served as a department head and college-level associate dean, went on to serve as vice provost and dean of the graduate school in a large, public, land-grant university designated as doctoral with highest research activity, while the other, who also had been a department head, served at the helm of the School of Education at a small, private Catholic university, classified as doctoral with higher research activity. Both universities are fully accredited by their respective regional accreditation bodies and hold ranking in *U.S. News and World Report*.

The leadership role of the dean in higher education remains largely ill-defined and ambiguous. Clearly, the functions associated with the role, along with the responsibilities and expectations, do not vary widely from institution to institution. What does vary is how those who take up the role enact it. Generally, although not exclusively, deans hold full professorial rank in some discipline; have distinguished themselves in teaching, scholarship, and service; and, in most cases, have held other administrative positions in the academy, for example, department head/chair, associate dean, and in some cases, executive positions in the private sector, such as in busi-

## INTRODUCTION

ness, industry, foundations, or government. While experience as a faculty member and as a college/university/private sector administrator represents the minimum qualifications for the role, those credentials are no guarantee of effectiveness or success. The unknown in the preparation equation is always the person assuming the role. The uniqueness of the human experience makes it difficult to prescribe with absolute certainty what it takes to become or be a dean. Furthermore, because the academy tends to be very homogeneous, it can generate a culture of isolation related to difference, so that if you do not fit, you are less likely to be invited in, or, if you do get in, less likely to advance or be invited to the table to enjoy the full benefits of the role and the right to be there.

Therefore, our particular perspectives on being pioneer deans of color in two predominately white institutions are designed to fill a gap that exists in the literature on the deanship in higher education relative to the experiences of deans of color and, more broadly, is intended to inform the preparation of future administrators of color in general and African American administrators in particular. Additionally, we believe that it will prove useful to existing higher education administrators (i.e., department chairs, deans, provosts, and presidents) who seek to diversify the leadership ranks in their institutions. Each chapter or lesson interweaves “reflections,” that is, examples of our particular experiences with the lessons those episodes have taught about becoming an effective leader, and unpacks the paradoxes inherent in the role of dean when the role is assumed by African American females. A concluding afterword by a systems expert offers summary perspectives and analysis of the several lessons that are offered.

## TRUTH WITHOUT TEARS

In the first chapter, “You Don’t Know What You Don’t Know,” we apply the framework of Michael Roberto, who identified seven sets of skills and capabilities that leaders must master if they want to be effective, as follows:

Through my research, I have identified seven sets of skills and capabilities that leaders must master if they want to become effective problem-finders. First, you must recognize that people around you filter information, often with good intentions; sometimes, though, they filter out the bad news. Problem-finders learn how to circumvent these filters. Second, you must learn to behave like an anthropologist who observes groups of people in natural settings. You cannot simply ask people questions; you must watch how they behave. After all, people often say one thing and do another. Third, the most effective problem-finders become adept at searching for and identifying patterns. They learn how to mine past experiences, both personal and organizational, so that they can recognize problems more quickly. Fourth, you must refine your ability to “connect the dots” among seemingly disparate pieces of information. Threats do not come to us in neat little packages. They often remain maddeningly diffuse. Only by putting together many small bits of information can we spot the problem facing the organization. Fifth, effective problem-finders learn how to encourage people to take risks and learn from their mistakes. They recognize that some failures can be quite useful because they provide opportunities for learning and improvement. You must distinguish between excusable and inexcusable mistakes, though, lest you erode accountability in the organization. Sixth, you must refine your own and your organization’s communication skills. You have to train people how to speak up more effectively and teach

## INTRODUCTION

leaders at all levels how to respond appropriately to someone who surfaces a concern, points out a problem, or challenges the conventional wisdom. Finally, the best problem-finders become like great coaches who watch films of past performances and glean important lessons about their team's problems as well as those of their principal rivals. You must become adept at reviewing and reflection, as well as how to practice new behaviors effectively.<sup>10</sup>

In particular, our discussion focuses on how use of key personal qualities, along with assistance from select trusted resources, and, at times, intuition can inform decision making and drive strategic planning and actions, when critical information is filtered, totally left out, or poorly communicated by those around you, for whatever reason.

Chapter 2, "You Cannot Hack Your Way to a Vision," addresses the enigma that often arises in conjunction with the dean's charge to be a change agent. So often, deans of color in predominately white institutions are hired into systems where they are told there is a genuine desire and potential for significant change. Thus, they are expected to bring the new perspective and vision required to move the organization in a forward direction. While this expectation is not exclusively reserved for deans of color, what may be ignored are the underlying impediments they face in an environment unused to the nontraditional presence and leadership styles they may bring. Thus, in this chapter we present our personal narratives of building a vision while paying particular attention to our concern to address short- and long-term outcomes as well as the unexpected resistance we encountered as we set about charting the very different courses for our respective units that we had been told were desired.

One of the most difficult lessons new administrators must learn is that their efforts will rarely, if ever, receive the positive acknowledgment or even attention these leaders believe they deserve. The lesson of chapter 3, “Enlightened Self-Interest Trumps Everything: Don’t Expect to Be Appreciated,” unveils how we learned fairly rapidly that our efforts would not yield many accolades. In fact, it soon became clear that the more we intentionally linked our change initiatives to self-interests of those we supervised, the less likely they would be challenged. We explore this reality, but not as an indictment of our faculty colleagues and staff. Rather, we suggest that collaboration and collegiality are skills that few faculty members have the opportunity to learn or practice in their preparation for the academy. While faculty and administrators can provide eloquent and even cogent definitions of the terms and the behaviors that demonstrate productive collaboration skills and collegial behavior, there are few clearly defined models of either in higher education from which to learn. Instead, as in other organizations, faculty and staff jockey for position, sometimes intentionally, sometimes unintentionally, using administrators to get what they want, that is, to fulfill their own agendas and interests.

In higher education, every dean faces the dilemma of ensuring the right mix of senior and junior faculty. Too many from either group can jeopardize the organization’s ability to be sustainable and competitive. The lesson of chapter 4, “No Divas, No Devils: Hiring the ‘Right Stuff,’” addresses that dilemma, which demands an intentional balancing act between the enlightened self-interests of faculty, individual academic units, and, not inconsequentially, upper administration and the dean’s own vision for the organization’s future. As deans

## INTRODUCTION

of color, we became acutely aware of this issue, as we sought to attract and retain stellar scholars, teachers, and administrative staff to our organizations, while simultaneously assuring the diversity within their ranks that our respective universities sought to foster. Our particular approaches to hiring “the right stuff” form the substance of this chapter, wherein we explore the different strategies we utilized as we encountered difficult challenges and surprising institutional ambivalence to our efforts.

Learning how to lead is also about learning how to balance the need for action with deliberative and deliberate approaches. It is quite correct to expect administrators, particularly in higher education, to demonstrate decisiveness in their decision-making behaviors. However, in far too many instances, in their haste to make things happen quickly, new deans mistake the ability to make swift decisions with effective leadership. In chapter 5, “Walking Around a Problem: Avoiding Quick Decisions and Quick Fixes,” we illustrate how our experiences taught us that nothing could be further from the truth. We learned instead the value of “walking around a problem” in order to see and comprehend it from many different angles. This strategy served us particularly well as black female deans whose decisions were subject to a great deal more scrutiny than was the case certainly with our white male colleagues and, to some extent, our white female peers as well. In this chapter, we describe how we employed and deployed the lesson of “walking around a problem” in both short- and long-range decision-making circumstances. We also discuss how it served to legitimate our style of decision making with some skeptical upper administrators who early in our leadership tenures subjected even the most routine decisions to additional scrutiny.

Near the end of our tenures as deans, we learned of a sentiment expressed by a Republican congressman from Virginia, Scott Rigell, on his decision to support President Obama's budget at a time when others in his party had chosen to block it, and it is the stance he took at that time which frames the outlook of chapter 6, "Serve Without Fear, Leave Without Regret." His words of conviction to stand behind what he felt was the right decision in light of the needs of the people he represented aptly captured our own determination to "do the right thing," even if it might cost us our positions. In our final chapter, we use this frame to outline some of the additional lessons that we learned, including but not limited to framing arguments for cynics rather than for supporters; understanding the role of genuine praise, rather than flattery in changing an organizational culture; building for the organizational future that we will never see and how it affected us personally. We view these additional lessons as opportunities for future leaders to develop approaches to enhance the sustainability and competitiveness of their institutions, regardless of the organizational context, whether in higher education, business and industry, corporate, or nonprofit settings.

The book concludes with an afterword, featuring the perspectives and analysis on black dean leadership, written by Dr. Earl Braxton, CEO, president, and founder, Edge Associates, who is a systems expert who consulted with one of the authors, Olga Welch, for the entire tenure of her deanship, providing coaching individually to every member of the dean's executive committee (two associate deans and the three department chairs), as well as collectively to the unit's executive committee whenever it met. In "The Impact of Providing Role and System Consultation: The Dean Story Viewed from

## INTRODUCTION

the Balcony to the Basement,” Dr. Braxton writes from his “outsider on the inside” position. Since employing a systems consultant is not a strategy normally employed by deans, the afterword furnishes both a “balcony and basement” analysis of the practices, challenges, and insights gained from enacting the role of consultant in a changing, institutional context. This analysis is intended to cast a third lens on the experience of being a dean of color in a higher education environment that is seen as a dysfunctional system.

The book offers new perspectives on black female administrators and faculty serving in predominately white institutions and augments the scholarship on the leadership experiences of black deans begun in 2005 by one of the authors, Olga Welch. In “Walking on a Trampoline: The Role of Complexity, Change, and Execution in Leading a School of Education,” written for *Women of Color in Leadership: Taking Their Rightful Place*, Welch reflects on the expectation in higher education institutions that the dean act as a change agent, using the metaphor of “walking on a trampoline.”<sup>11</sup> Specifically, the metaphor suggests a version of complexity theory where the journey is analogous to the trampoline’s uncertain topography. “‘What was up’ at the start may be somewhat ‘down’ further along the route and the ascent may become steeper as the destination draws near.”<sup>12</sup>

While there is certainly no shortage of how-to books on successful leadership, recent notable guides reflecting on ways to manage the ever-changing landscape where change seems the single constant are focused on self-awareness and self-control as key to moving forward on that “trampoline.” In *Lessons in Leadership*, an experienced leadership coach and syndicated columnist, Steve Adubato, offers advice meant

to serve leaders in all professions, emphasizing heavily the very personal nature of leadership and providing copious examples of famous world leaders whom he followed in work he has contributed as a political and media analyst.<sup>13</sup> A recent book by Jerome T. Murphy, *Dancing in the Rain: Leading with Compassion, Vitality, and Mindfulness in Education*, provides very useful insights specifically aimed at leaders in educational administration—current leaders seeking guidance for themselves as well as those aspiring to such positions—engaged in or considering the prospect of the uncertain topography that defines the realm of leadership.<sup>14</sup> He offers reflections on seven “dance steps” or guiding principles one can follow to develop habits of mindful responses that enhance daily leadership skills and inoculate self-inflicted negative reactions (resistance, rumination, self-rebuke) that fuel or drain the energy and capacity to respond to external demands and complex problems. His thoughtful and caring approach, supported by practical exercises, entreats us to engage regularly in mindfulness “check-ups” that provide nourishment for our capacity to flourish in the face of various pressures.

Driven by academic disciplines from below and constrained by budgetary concerns from above, “college deans straddle a jittery enterprise whose members at once cling to tradition and toy with the notion of breaking out of the mold. A desire for normalcy drives administrative expectation that these deans be change agents bent on improving the institution.”<sup>15</sup> College deans of color bring their own wide spectrum of personal and professional life experiences into their leadership role. The ways these leaders approach and implement change initiatives within their respective institutions provide

## INTRODUCTION

a perspective on the role of deans of color in leading change that is seldom examined in the extant literature.

It is those perspectives that Welch explored in the edited volume, *Turnaround Leadership: Deans of Color as Change Agents*, which examined deans as agents of change using the conceptual framework of “turnaround leadership in higher education” proposed by Fullan and Scott.<sup>16</sup> Drawing on this framework, case studies of six deans of color were presented, with the purpose of interrogating the framework through each dean’s “insider view.” It allowed the reader to examine how these particular leaders thought about and implemented a change initiative and whether the desired organizational outcomes were achieved. The study of deans of color who engaged in critical problem solving was particularly timely given the absence of their perspectives in the existing literature on change and change initiatives in higher education.

We have shared the lessons presented in this book, both formally in presentations and informally with colleagues in our institutions, as they sought our advice on particular initiatives or challenges they faced. Through our follow-up dialogues, we’ve learned the impact of these lessons far beyond the academy. The narrative style and the specificity of the focus for the chapters in *Truth Without Tears* make the book particularly useful for audiences in graduate courses across disciplines, in, for example, educational leadership, gender, race and ethnic studies; as well as for higher education administrators such as deans, provosts, department chairs, and division heads seeking to expand diversity and diversity of perspective among the faculty and in leadership positions at their institutions. However, the book’s utility is not limited to

## TRUTH WITHOUT TEARS

this audience, as the lessons that the coauthors discuss have already been applied by administrators in nonprofit agencies, those who serve in corporate settings, including large investment and hospital environments, and persons beginning new businesses, who are adapting our lessons learned to their own particular contexts.