Essays

The Muse Sang in his Ear:
Lessons From the Life and Work of C. Eric Lincoln

by
Lynn Huntley
President, Southern Education Foundation (SEF)

Dr. C. Eric Lincoln was a great human being who lived a good life. I was privileged to come to know him through my father, Dr. Lawrence N. Jones, his friend and contemporary at Union Theological Seminary. Over the years, happily, my life intersected with Dr. Lincoln's in several ways.

When I was in college majoring in sociology, I decided to write a paper surveying interventions to reduce recidivism among Black men who had been imprisoned. I had read Dr. Lincoln's book about the Black Muslims in America and wanted to visit the Harlem Mosque and talk with some of the Muslims involved in this work or whose lives had been reclaimed. Through Dr. Lincoln's good reputation and intervention, I was able to spend a day at the mosque, asking questions and considering how the ideology and support mechanisms provided by the Nation of Islam address needs of Black men inside of and after release from prison.

Later, when I worked at the Ford Foundation, I had the pleasure of recommending support for two major pieces of work by Dr. Lincoln—his compendium study of African American churches[i] undertaken in collaboration with Dr. Lawrence Mamiya—and an event by the Boston Philharmonic at which Dr. Lincoln's great work—This Road Since Freedom[ii]—was presented. Once, during the course of the donor-donee relationship, my colleague from the Lilly Endowment and I were honored at a breakfast given for us by some of the Black church grantees that our respective institutions were supporting. Dr. Lincoln stood up and made kind remarks about the help we had extended, ending with the following words:

Hallelujah, thine the glory
Hallelujah, amen
Hallelujah, thine the glory
Please fund me again!

Among other gifts, Dr. Lincoln had a great sense of humor and irony.

Finally, as I began work in 1995 on an international human rights effort[iii] to examine race and inequality in Brazil, South Africa and the United States under the auspices of the Southern Education Foundation, I called on Dr. Lincoln to write a paper about the ways in which the Black church in America has contributed to our freedom struggle. That stellar paper called, "Racism and Protest in the United States," is one of his last published pieces.[iv]

In sum, my connection with Dr. Lincoln is personal, varied and longstanding; my admiration for him is deep; and the sense of honor that I feel to have been selected to speak on this special occasion is strong. I thank Dr. Henry Whelchel and Clark Atlanta University community for this opportunity and for furnishing the impetus for me, in preparation for this event, to go back and reread some of Dr. Lincoln's work and to once again be enriched by his fine insights and character.

C. Eric Lincoln was a renaissance man in the finest sense of the word. He was a scholar, a teacher, a poet, a civil rights activist, a devoted father and family man, and a person with deep and heartfelt beliefs and values. His interests were wide, his intellect was agile, his curiosity was strong, and his hopefulness contagious. In spite of the poverty of his birth in the race stratified and brutalizing circumstances of the deep South, his many brushes with ignorant people who would have denied his humanity solely because of his skin color, and his struggles to find a place in which to optimize his contributions to human welfare, C. Eric Lincoln remained clear eyed and engaged. He knew that, to quote William Butler Yeats, "from our birthday until we die is but the winking of an eye." He sought to fill that brief space of life with as much substance, service and experience as he could.

"Lincoln was a renaissance man in the finest sense of the word. He was a scholar, a teacher, a poet, a civil rights activist, a devoted father and family man, and a person with deep and heartfelt beliefs and values. His interests were wide, his intellect was agile, his curiosity was strong, and his hopefulness contagious."

In preparing these remarks, I tried to think of a format that would allow me to both share some thoughts borne of my own experience and some of the eloquent writing of Dr. Lincoln. I decided to craft a fictional letter that Dr. Lincoln might have written to us and through this device make a presentation that will, I hope, be in keeping with my interests and views and those of Dr. Lincoln.[v]

Date: Timeless

Letter from C. Eric Lincoln

Dear Friends:

Now that I have gone on to my reward, I look down on the world and the busy lives that you live with detached longing. When the blood flows warm in your veins and the challenges around you are so consuming, it is hard to take the time to reflect on the question of one's life's meaning or the legacy one might wish to leave behind. I tried to do some of this through my writings and engagements. But now I have more time to reflect on what it all meant.

Children deride stories that begin "when I was a boy" and tell of hardships suffered and sacrifices made. But it is important, I think, to witness the lives of others and how they surmounted the sorrows put in their way because sometimes you can learn best from example or see problems in the lives of others to which one has become inured in one's own life.

In the South, where I was raised, the pervasive awareness of race was helped along by a series of "lessons" learned in the process of growing up. Those lessons were sometimes impromptu and often impersonal but they were never unintended. They were always there in the arsenal of race and place waiting for the most effective moment for inculcation. Their sources were varied, and as might be expected, some of the most traumatic derived from everyday personal relations with white people. But others were taught at home or in the informal councils of the elders as the fundamentals of black survival. I remember one time when I went to the basement of the county courthouse to be immunized against a childhood disease. I stepped forward unbidden to have my shot before all of the white children had received theirs. *The nurse grabbed my outstretched arm and flung me brutally back against the wall. "Boy!" she scowled threateningly. "Get back in line! Get all the way back there. All you niggers have to wait." …My first lesson was a difficult one, for it offered no explanation, no rationale. Just, "All niggers have to wait." Why? For what? I did not know that the why had already been answered, and that I was supposed to know the answer. It was presumed to be innate in my being. Ultimately, the answer was enured in the color of my skin. That was why, and I was supposed to know that. The question for what? was endless in application: for an education, for a job, for a place to live, for a ride on the bus, for a space on the elevator, for a place to go to school, for buying a loaf of bread, for ginning a load of cotton, for a chance to vote, for justice in the courts, and even for a chance to fight for the homeland. I was supposed to know that too. All niggers have to wait! And since I was obviously a nigger in the mind of the nurse, I was charged with knowing all that by the ripe old age of nine.*[vi]

I tell you this story to underscore a point. I suppose that I spent the rest of my life, one way or another trying to understand how it was that people could be so mean to others simply because of a difference in skin color. *I used to spend a lot of time thinking about race. It just didn't make sense to me. Too many contradictions. Too many nonsequiturs. Too illogical. Too mechanical. Too humanistically sterile.*[vii]

I escaped the deforming bitterness or rage that such treatment creates in no small measure by using my mind. What do I mean? Well, simply, too many of us let the ignorance of others, the perceptions of others, the valuation of others shape how we think of ourselves and the people of which we are a part because they don't "consider the source." They get damaged and don't have within themselves the analytic powers needed to recuperate and heal, to fend off blows to the heart by using their own minds.

I have always believed in thinking—even about things that hurt me. *Thinking is an intrinsic value—a value in and of itself. Human beings are meant to think, and when they fail to do so, not only do they expose themselves to the consequences of ignorance, they also deprive themselves of one of the most rewarding experiences available to the human spectrum of possibility—the organization and creative management of ideas in the ongoing search for reality.*

But thinking can be painful. It has its risks and its hazards. [Still]…[t]hinking is the precondition of learning and learning unsupported by thinking is mere rote conditioning, or learning in a state of paralysis….

Truth has a moral dimension that provides the integrative tension by means of which all of the fragments of human experience are held in proper juxtaposition, making possible a more perfect scenario of who we are, and why. Thinking effectively implies a worldview—a comprehensive perspective—informed by an ethic, by which some pattern of reason within the chaos with which we struggle is discernible.

We can think. We can reason. We can be better than we are.[viii]

In my life, I always tried to use the full array of my faculties to meet life's vexing complexities and to search for truth. There was an article some time ago called "Rumors of Inferiority" and it argued that many Black people today have internalized doubts about their fundamental equality to all other human beings. Hence they don't perform as well on tests or other such measures because of fear of failure. They carry the weight of the entire "race" on their backs.

Of course, internalized oppression is nothing new. But what I am most discouraged about is that so many of our young people or old people, for that matter, don't stretch themselves, don't extend themselves in order to explore the full measure of their capabilities. They think somehow that the "life of the mind" or intellectual pursuits are a "White thing."

Well let me tell you something. In this world in which we live, with all of its staggering complexity, all of us need to develop our minds as fully as possible, just to be able to survive, let alone to thrive. You don't have to have education in order to have wisdom—my elders had little formal education but were sages in the finest sense of the word—but you do have to have education, as much as you can get, these days, if you want to have choices, options in your life, and live life to its fullest.

I worry a lot about the hypocrisy in our nation's current debate over why it is that poor or Black students lag behind Whites or others with money in performance or levels of educational attainment. The implication seems to be that Black students aren't learning because of their own limitations, rather than those of the school systems of which they are a part. Now I am not denying that there are factors related to environment or lack of family support or poverty that contribute to underachievement in school. And, let's be real. A lot of us don't apply ourselves the way we should.

Of course, the real villain, the primary cause of Black underachievement in school, especially in the formative years of public elementary and secondary school, is that the children who need help the most are receiving the least. These are the children in the inadequately staffed or equipped schools, who don't have access to advanced placement or college preparatory courses, or who are taught critical subjects such as science or mathematics by "out of field teachers."

Each time test scores are printed in the paper or I see a headline that says, "Blacks lag behind Whites" in one area or another, I cringe. I know that many Whites and not an inconsequential number of Blacks see only the failure of the *students* rather than the failure of the *schools and the system* that are supposed to help them to learn.

I worry a bit about our historically Black colleges and universities, too. I love these schools because they are the avenue to advancement for so many of our people and still graduate a disproportionately high percentage of the African Americans with four-year degrees. But these schools are under-resourced and under stress. We need to create a more fulsome culture of giving in our community, if these schools are to prosper and remain independent repositories of Black learning, history, culture and experience. All universities exist as "*…midwives for the delivery of ideas. The university is the ultimate stage for the pursuit of truth, and truth unadorned is the goal of all serious thinking. The true university initiates and endows the great conversation, the exchange of ideas to be tried and tested in the crucible of contrariety. …In the true university, the optimum possibilities of the intellectual enterprise are promoted when earnest scholars at varying levels of maturation attend each other in the interest of the total society they exist to serve. Some may be called professors, others may be called students, but their common task is to exchange ideas, to test the quality of ideas, and to examine and refine processes through which improved ideas may come into being, be communicated, and find their proper expression in the enhancement of the human condition. In short, the university exists for the celebration and the instrumentation of learning, and learning is the principal means through which a society sustains itself, renews itself, and validates its continued existence.*"[ix]

Where is the moral leadership, the intellectual leadership of the great universities on the issue of overcoming racism in America? Why aren't our universities more engaged and functioning as laboratories for solving community problems and meeting community needs? I never saw academe as something separate from society. I always sought to use what I learned in the classroom or library to solve actual problems in the real world.

I am discouraged that more and more, universities are trying to be bastions of learning for elite students who score well on standardized tests or have enjoyed excellent elementary and secondary education. Such students are said to "merit" support. *Come now Richard Hernstein and Charles Murray with the latest "bell curve" for*

the Jencksian tradition but what it seems to measure most accurately is the pervasive yearning for a scientific justification of an entrenched social practice that is neither scientific nor just.

How high does your IQ have to be to steal a million dollars from charity? To kill 168 people in a public building? To feed placebos to dying patients who think that they are being treated? Whatever it is that the intelligence quotient claims to measure or predict, sooner or later its true believers must grapple with the question of sufficiency; that is, what is the minimum IQ required to retain the right to be a person in this society?[x]

I keep thinking about students like me, who came from more humble beginnings, but with mentorship, support and a chance can go on to live good lives and contribute to the democratic common good at home and around the world. They merit a hand up more than the economically advantaged student whose feet are already firmly planted on the road to success.

Another reason why our great universities must become more involved in the life of our community is simply this: today roughly one third of African Americans are middle class, one third are working poor, and the bottom third are desperately poor, marginalized and falling further and further behind. The great surge of energy within our community to demand fair treatment for poor people, to press for a sturdy social welfare system, to transform the unequal status quo seems to me to be declining.

During the civil rights era through which I lived, mass marches and the obviousness of the racial barriers related to segregation and legal discrimination that we were trying to surmount gave *all* Black people a target for protest, a shared set of needs and interests, and a sense of our interdependence as a group. We needed each other to swell the marches, to go to jail in great numbers singing freedom songs, to sit-in or pray-in.

Today, as the legal barriers to Black advancement have begun to drop and some of us have begun to move up, we have ceased to see either our link to our low-income brothers and sisters or our continuing responsibility to give a hand up. The divide of class in our community is profound. Like Whites whom we used to criticize, more and more of "us" think that they are "self-made" women or men and if others are poor, that's their problem. This is a tragedy of great dimension—this internalization of negative attitudes.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once wrote that he had no doubt that Blacks would overcome the barriers of racism, but, he said, he worried that we were "integrating into a burning house." I think what he was saying is that we were becoming part of a system, a mindset, an array of institutional arrangements and structures built on principles of "social Darwinism" rather than deep regard for the actualization of human rights values. Is this our destination—to be part of America or to help transform America?

I was gone from the world when September 11, 2001 occurred, but I watched the events before and after that date with interest and concern. Right before September 11, 2001, the United Nations had a World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Forms of Intolerance, in Durban, South Africa. Unlike other governments in many parts of the world, the United States government did not even try to have a "preparatory conference" or to develop a national plan or set of commitments for how it would combat racism in all of its forms at home or abroad. Instead, because our government worried about the slippery slope of reparations for victims and nations victimized by the Trans- Atlantic Slave Trade or whether the nations of the world might say something about the Palestinian and Israeli conflict, in the Plan of Action to be issued by the Conference that might not be what we wanted to hear. So our government decided to withdraw from the World Conference, to leave!

As I watched the events unfold and saw Americans, including a lot of African Americans, wandering around Durban wearing signs that said, "The U.S. Government isn't here, but the U.S. is here," I thought, what an opportunity was lost by the government's withdrawal? I was recalling our alleged national commitment to freedom of speech and the free exchange of information and ideas and wondering what happened to that. Is American exceptionalism so strong, is our commitment to unilateralism so powerful, that we can just thumb our noses at the rest of the world's nations and their suffering peoples with impunity?

One thing is clear: African Americans are being called these days to have a dual agenda. We must fight for civil rights at home, not just for ourselves, but also for others, but we must also engage more aggressively with the global struggle to reduce racism and its frequent companions, poverty and inequality. Why? Because our experience as an oppressed people should make us intolerant of oppression any and everywhere. Because our status as the world's most wealthy concentration of Black people imposes special responsibilities on us to look out for others. Because our place in the belly of the world's most powerful nation gives us the obligation and opportunity to try to affect what our government does around the world in our name as citizens of the United States. And because I happen to think that we have some experience in the United States in dismantling individual and institutional racism that others would benefit from knowing about. If we sit quietly during these turbulent times and fail to raise our voices in opposition to policies and practices that hurt rather than advance efforts to improve human welfare, shame on us.

Inequality is growing in the United States as a result of globalization. Every day, there are more and more winners and more and more losers at home and, in other countries; the contrast between have and have not is even starker. Globalization of economic systems and the revolution in technology are transforming the world. Of course, globalization isn't that new. The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, trafficking in human beings, is an old sin. But what is new is the degree of cultural transfer between and among different peoples and nations, the permeability of national borders, migration trends and changing demographics, and the ascendance of capitalism as the preeminent global form of economic activity. We African Americans have to act like citizens of the world, not just insular Americans concerned about preservation of our bubble of prosperity in a world full of misery.

I hope that our religious institutions, our churches, will rise to the occasion. You know, I did a major, one of a kind study of African American churches a few years ago called, "The Black Church in the African American Experience." I collected the largest dataset about our churches in existence and mined that data

to learn what I could about the history, present commitments and future prospects of these institutions. Of the Black church, I have written:

> *The new responsibilities of the Black church would seem to be obvious and there are encouraging signs that significant and imaginative efforts are being made to meet the evolving needs of a people who have yet to experience their full quantum of the blessing of liberty. This is not a new role for the Black church. Rather it is a more comprehensive resumption of responsibilities the church identified itself from its inception—looking after its own when every Black American had no place else to look for sympathies or succor.*[xi]

Since most of Black people's philanthropic activity is devoted to the Black church, in a real sense the Church is our indigenous philanthropy. I wish that organized philanthropy saw it and treated it as such. If it did, the opportunities for capacity building, for creative partnerships to meet community needs, for erosion of race-based barriers, for better decision-making by White donors would all be enhanced.

By the way, the so-called "faith based" initiative of the current federal administration is really nothing new. Governmental agencies have for years supported non-profit activities either of churches or the institutions that the churches have spawned to deliver services and meet human needs. Black churches have not been beneficiary of as much public support as they deserve for several reasons. First, many don't know how to develop fundable proposals or to whom to send them. Second, the culture of each one going its own way is still prevalent, so often we don't propose efforts of scale rooted in collaboration and sharing. Third, mega churches to one side, my research shows that most of our churches are small and their pastors lacking in formal training. In other words, most of our churches partake of the relative levels of economic, social, political and economic deprivation from which our community suffers. I want to say something about "church as entertainment" and the absence in many pulpits of substantive leadership, but that's a different letter.

Anyway, I suppose I should be drawing this missive to a close. You have been wondering about "lessons from my life and work" and asking me to say what I think is important. What shall I say?

First, I would say that I have learned that you can be born in poverty but the poverty does not have to live in you. You can be hurt by racism but the hurt doesn't have to be disabling. We are smarter and stronger than that as a people.

Second, I encourage those who are in the academy as students or faculty or leaders to pursue study, thinking, learning, sharing and engaging with all of your hearts and minds. Our people remain in deep trouble. We are hemorrhaging out of public schools, deepening a culture of anti-intellectualism, losing the

domestic civil rights battle, succumbing to despair, drugs and criminality, and failing to see that without an educated mind we will be dependent upon the largesse of others. History teaches us that the generosity of others is a risky reed to which to cling.

Third, I challenge us all to not just think about ourselves, but think about our interdependence with others. Did you know that there are over 29 million people living with HIV/AIDs in southern Africa or that there will be 20 million orphaned children in that region by the year 2010 unless something dramatic, miraculous is done? Did you know that there are over 70 million people of African origin, descendants of enslaved Africans just like us, living in Brazil, one of the world's most unequal societies measured by income or wealth disparities? You are living in a new era of human history, with new challenges and frontiers of learning and experience to cross. Lift your eyes up beyond your own circumstances and dedicate your lives, like our fathers and mothers, to helping others.

Fourth, don't ever lose hope. The problems of the world are huge and complex. It is easy to be overwhelmed and use the complexity as an excuse to be insular and unengaged. But please remember the struggles of those who have gone before us, doing so much with so little. It is our watch now.

You know, occasionally, I used to hear beautiful music in my ear. Maybe it was a muse singing to me, inspiring me. May these closing words inspire you:

> *To see life steadily and to see it whole; to know, and to make knowing an instrument of freedom and creativity; to understand the stars without reducing them to pollution; to appreciate love without being maudlin in its expression; to*
>
> *care about the nurturing green earth, and to nurture it in turn; and above all, to recognize that human contingency is but the counterpart of human interdependency—that is our challenge. We are all a part of the main.*[xii]
>
> *Now we must prepare for a new society which gives full honor to what we profess. We do not have much time, for the new order for which we must prepare is already here in prospect and expectation. We must not let the lingering haze of the smoldering fires of yesterday obscure the possibilities inherent in tomorrow. If we do not learn to trust each other we cannot truly trust ourselves. The stresses of contemporary civilization are multifarious and multiplying. But one variable claims attention above all the rest. It seems that all over the world, in the words of Omar Khyyám: men want dug up again, which is to say that faceless and long abused people are demanding and dying for recognition of their right to be human and to be so recognized—to have life with dignity, creativity and responsibility. That, it seems to me, is neither unreasonable nor impossible. We all belong in the forefront of human enfranchisement. That is the least we can do for our country; that is the most we can do for each other; that is the best we can do for ourselves and for our posterity. That is the ultimate meaning of survival and the only strategy that will work. I call it no-fault reconciliation—the*

recognition that we are all of a kind, with the same vulnerabilities, the same possibilities and the same needs for God and each other.[xiii]

To which I add, my prayer that our beloved Father in heaven, will look after you and strengthen you for the battles that lie ahead.

With love,

C. Eric Lincoln

[i] Lincoln, C. Eric and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African-American Experience* (Duke University Press, 1990)
[ii] Lincoln, C. Eric, *This Road Since Freedom* (Carolina Wren Press, 1990)
[iii] The Comparative Human Relations Initiative. Publications from this effort include
1) *Beyond Racism, Embracing an Interdependent Future: Overview Report, Three Nations at the Crossroads, In Their Own Voices,* and *Color Collage* (Southern Education Foundation, 2000),
2) Hamilton, Charles V., Lynn Huntley, Neville Alexander, Antonio Sérgio Alfredo Guimarães, Wilmot James, eds. *Beyond Racism, Race and Inequality in Brazil, South Africa, and the United States* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001), and
3) www.beyondracism.org
[iv] Lincoln, C. Eric, "Some Reflections on Racism and Protest in the United States," *Beyond Racism, Embracing an Interdependent Future: Color Collage* (Southern Education Foundation, 2000) 24-35.
[v] Dr. Lincoln's words are italicized.
[vi] Lincoln, C. Eric, *Coming Through the Fire, Surviving Race and Place in America* (Duke University Press, 1996) 17-18.
[vii] *Id.* at 41.
[viii] *Id.* at 43-47 *passim.*
[ix] *Id.* at 43.
[x] *Id.* at 72-73.
[xi] *Color Collage* at 34.
[xii] *Coming Through the Fire* at 47.
[xiii] *Id.* at 157.