

MEMORIAL SPEECH FOR DR. ENDESHA IDA MAE HOLLAND

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One thing which the University of Southern California can be most proud of, is the quality of our faculty. One of the most notable professors here over the past decade has been Dr. Endesha Ida Mae Holland as Professor of Theater and Gender Studies. She was already famous for her Pulitzer-nominated play "From the Mississippi Delta," that she later published under the same name as a book about her life. Besides her prominence as an African American playwright, her role as an activist in the 1960s civil rights movement was well known. I am grateful to have had Dr. Holland as a colleague in our USC Gender Studies Program, but in addition to that, I am even more grateful to have had Endesha as a personal friend.

When she first came here in 1993, Endesha and I hit it off right away. One commonality was our self-awareness that in our youth we were sexual outlaws. She, because of her experience as a sex worker in Mississippi, which she did not at all try to hide, but I think was actually rather proud of, and me because as a gay person growing up in Georgia, the state sodomy law criminalized people like me, mandating a twenty year prison sentence, for the "crime" of making love.

As a result of my own criminality, of my own experiences with discrimination, and of my own sense of the unjustness of the laws, I gravitated to those black people who were challenging the established order. Endesha and I felt a commonality because we recognized that, in the South of our youth, both black people and gay people were seen as being irrevocably beyond the limits of respectability.

But beyond our sexual histories, it was Endesha's and my shared history of activism in human rights that really brought us together. One of the great accomplishments of Endesha's life, that we are honoring today, is that she put herself out there on the front lines in Mississippi. Due to my own participation in civil rights demonstrations in Georgia in the 1960s, back when I was a teenager, I was physically attacked, I had segregationists spit on me, people told me I was a traitor to my race, and purported friends warned me that I was threatening my future if I continued to engage in these illegal and disreputable actions.

Yet, as I look back on my life, the very things that people most warned me against were the things that now I am most proud of. I only wish I had done more. But, though I put myself in danger, it was nothing compared to what Endesha endured. For those of you too young to know this, Mississippi was the most physically and emotionally dangerous place in the South for civil rights activists. A large number were killed in the effort, including Endesha's dear mother.

Though Endesha never got over her mother's death, we can count ourselves lucky that Endesha herself survived, and thus was able to make the contributions that she made in her life. The tragedy, however, is that she could have made many more contributions if she herself had not been disabled in her 50s by ataxia, and died at age 61 from this inherited neurological condition.

Because Endesha was such an important person for our students, I was resentful when she had to take early retirement. And so was she. Endesha definitely did not go happily into the night of physical disability.

After she lost the ability to walk, I remember when she came into a Gender Studies faculty meeting for the first time in her motorized chair, a number of faculty tried to act like nothing was changed. We have this peculiar custom in our culture that seems to think if you ignore the elephant in the room, it will go away. But I looked deeply into Endesha's eyes, those eyes of hers that expressed so much, that could be so friendly and welcoming, but that could also hold you almost in a trance. I saw in her eyes that she did NOT want this to be business as usual. I interrupted the meeting agenda and asked Endesha to talk about what this immobility meant for her. She responded by bursting into tears.

Everything else was dropped, and the rest of that faculty meeting was, in my opinion, the most heartfelt and constructive meeting we ever had.

So many people try to ignore disability. But that is manifestly not the way that Endesha approached it. She fought. Hard. She wanted so much to continue teaching. That's how committed she was.

After she was no longer able to teach, I kept in touch with Endesha and called her periodically. In what turned out to be my last phone conversation with her, she complained bitterly that her nerve degeneration caused her voice to slur and some people thought she was drunk when she called them. I am so glad that I used that phone call to tell her how much we appreciated her contributions to our Program. She was very grateful to hear those words, because she had really put her heart and her soul into USC. And she was so proud of being a professor at "The University of Southern California" she said so grandly. "Oh, if only my mama had lived to see that day," she told me.

Looking back, my great regret is that I wish I had done these phone calls to her more often. Well, life is full of regrets, and we cannot change the past, but we can change our behavior in the future. Can I ask that you take a determination away from this gathering? In memory of Endesha, just make a phone call to a former colleague who is now retired. Let them know you're thinking about them, and remember so well their many contributions to USC. This little act of kindness would be something that each of us could do, at no cost to ourselves, and it would mean so much to so many. USC's President Steven Sample is always talking about the inclusiveness of "The Trojan Family." Let's not forget that our elders, and those who are too disabled to work, are also members of The Trojan Family.

Though I want to acknowledge my sadness at the disability and early death of my colleague and friend, I mainly am here to emphasize her many accomplishments and the life she led. How are we to assess the life of Dr. Endesha Ida Mae Holland? In a book by the Japanese Buddhist philosopher Daisaku Ikeda, titled "Faith Into Action," he advises young people about what to do with their life:

"Rather than a life of blank pages, live a life crammed full of memories—of battles well fought and wonderfully diverse experiences. Not to leave behind any history, just to grow old and die, is a sad way to live."

Who do we know who exemplified this ideal better than Dr. Holland? She certainly crammed her life full, she fought her battles well, she experienced many diverse things. She interacted with people who came from different backgrounds. She didn't stay limited and isolated to her own group. She learned the lesson that the extent to which we avoid or are prejudiced against a particular group of people is the extent to which we lose the opportunity to learn something of value from them. She was open to everybody.

Endesha said to me one time, about gay people, "all I know is that the sissies were always nice and helpful to me." See, rather than base her opinions on some ideological statement that she got from the Bible, or from somebody else's opinion, she preferred to make up her own mind, based on her own direct experience. She realized, more than most people, that every person has their gift, that every person has their contribution to make.

She found that gift in people, and she sucked it up.

She was a sponge as she went through life. She absorbed as much as she could. During her college years, and later in graduate school, she took the time to explore, to experiment, to grow. She was very conscious that she could not afford to blow this opportunity that was laid before her, and that if she did allow this opportunity to pass by, she would not expect to be so lucky again.

She was very proud of what she had accomplished. Endesha and I shared that kind of pride that pioneers always have when subsequent years have shown that the actions we took, the choices we made, to challenge the establishment and rebel against the law, and against the established order, that these illegal acts ended up being the very things that put us on the right side of history.

The public figure who most inspired both of us to a committed life, and who most shaped our views, of course, was Martin Luther King. Endesha was so grateful that her involvement in civil rights activism led to her meeting King. I heard Dr. King speak on three occasions, and I have seldom heard such eloquence. My most favorite King speech was his sermon extolling "The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life." What he said applies directly to Dr. Holland. King said that there are three dimensions necessary to construct a fulfilled life. The first dimension, he said, is self-acceptance. If we do not accept and love our self, we cannot accept and love others. With this self-acceptance and self-love we can reach out and develop our self, to do our life work so well, that no one

else could possibly do it better.

The second dimension of a fulfilled life, Dr. King said, is service to humanity. A life is not complete if we are so selfishly focused on our own self that we ignore the larger goal of helping others. Though Rev. King was a Christian minister, he expressed so well the Buddhist ideal of compassion when he said "there is nothing greater than to do something for others."

And the third dimension of a complete life, he said, is what he called "the quest for the divine." Whether you conceive of the divine as a higher power outside yourself, or as developing a higher spiritual power within yourself, the idea is to commit oneself to a broader goal in life than just a mundane daily existence.

Judged by this standard, I would conclude that Dr. Holland truly exemplifies a "complete life." First, she gained self-acceptance. She overcame incredible limitations. She went through a period of self-hatred that almost ended her life.

Yet, she pulled herself out of despair, and against all odds, was able to grow, and accomplish.

She was very proud of her accomplishments, in the way that only a person who comes from a severely disadvantaged background can feel pride. Because she was not only feeling pride for herself, but also for her mother and all her other ancestors going back to the days of slavery, those ancestors who because of the racist structure of the South had never had the opportunity to reach their full potential, like she did. She had that good kind of pride, and she relished it.

She was proud that her theater productions and her publications have been in service to humanity. She reached countless numbers of people. Besides those of us who work in the medical field, where the very purpose of the work is saving lives, how many USC professors can say that their work has literally saved lives? I know when I get a letter from a reader of one of my books saying that reading my book literally saved their life, I consider that to be the highest compliment possible. Yet, Endesha had countless such testimonies.

When we hired Endesha, I already knew about her inspiring role as a playwright. But what I did not know until after she had taught here for awhile was how inspiring she was as a teacher. After a few semesters students in my classes kept bringing up how much they had learned from her, how moved they were by her example, how better they had become as a human being as a result of being in her class.

She taught many of our students who came to USC from a very limited background, in their isolated wealthy suburban enclave. She taught them about the reality of the world. She taught them the way the world really is, not the sanitized version many of them had been handed in their high schools. Her life was a living example not of how we might want the world to be, or how we think it ought to be, but how it really is. And she

showed students, as well as those who saw her plays, the reality of how life really is.

She showed that life is diverse. The question that she put to students, by her very presence as a professor on this campus, was this: Are we going to deny that reality, or are we going to value and appreciate diversity? Are we going to be threatened by diversity, or are we going to grasp hold of it, and gain every ounce of benefit that we can from the reality that we all gain benefit precisely because people are so different. If everyone were the same, Dr. Holland showed her students, how impoverished our lives would be. So, what Dr. Holland's life teaches us is not to just tolerate diversity, but to value and cherish it.

Dr. Holland contributed to our campus in so many ways, particularly as a good role model for disabled people, and for African American women. But what struck me was how she so effectively reached out to ALL students, of whatever background. She was particularly kind to lesbian and gay students.

I greatly appreciated her support for our long campaign to hire a faculty member in Lesbian Studies. Year after year I argued that not having even one specialist, in any department, in the field of Lesbian Studies, was a major lacking at USC. Year after year I kept pushing, that this should be the top hiring priority for faculty recruitment in the Gender Studies Program. Department chairs came and went. Deans came and went. And year after year nothing happened.

I will always remember that, as her final participation in our Program, in her final faculty meeting, Endesha chose to emphasize her wish that the next professor hired to replace her should be a specialist in Lesbian Studies. Though her speech was slurred by the effects of ataxia, her words were most eloquent. She was that committed to diversity--in our Gender Studies Program, and at USC -- that instead of automatically calling for someone who simply replicated her, she had a larger agenda in mind. She knew that there were other specialists in African American Studies at USC, but she knew that there were none in Lesbian Studies. I hope she will be remembered for her commitment to true diversity at our university. Many mouth the words, but her final effort in our Program was to promote greater diversity. Thankfully, in subsequent years the University remedied this deficiency, and today there are several professors doing research and teaching in the area of Lesbian Studies. Once again, Endesha Ida Mae Holland proved to be on the right side of history.

Dr. Holland is exhibit "A" in the need for us to make sure that USC remains firmly committed to diversity and affirmative action. Not just because we want to be just and magnanimous to help minorities, which is not a bad goal in and of itself, but even more importantly, because we recognize that having a diverse faculty is a great gift to our students.

The people I most respect on this campus are those who get the kind of response from students that Endesha regularly got. We cannot forget that those students are our reason for being here, and they are why we are doing what we are doing. Endesha understood

this, and was strongly committed to her role as a teacher. She clearly devoted herself to what Dr. King called "service to humanity."

Dr. King's third quality of a complete life was what he called the "quest for the divine," and a commitment to a larger purpose in life. In this regard also, Endesha's commitment to a larger goal was evident, not only by her involvement in the civil rights movement, but also by her enlightening and inspiring plays. She wrote plays that did much more than provide a passing entertainment to audiences. What I think was Endesha's most enduring "quest for the divine," was her strong commitment to passing on her wisdom, to the audiences watching her plays, to her students, and to the readers of her publications. Her autobiography, that she struggled to complete while she still had the ability, remains a ringing testimony to her life.

Everybody knows about Martin Luther King's "I Have A Dream" speech. But it was only upon examining his other speeches that it became clear to me that his dream was actually much larger than a dream for ending segregation. His dream was ultimately about love, generosity, and morality. Not morality in the sense that some fundamentalist zealots of various religions seem so obsessed about other peoples' sexual behavior, but morality in a deeper sense.

In one of his speeches, "The Drum Major Instinct" King said:
"There is, deep down within all of us, an instinct. It's a kind of drum major instinct—a desire to be first.... We all want to be important, to achieve distinction, to lead the parade.... Don't give that up. Keep feeling the need for being first. But I want you to be first in love. I want you to be first in moral excellence. I want you to be first in generosity. That's what I want you to do."

Speaking for himself, and recognizing that the numerous death threats he received might be carried out, King concluded:

"I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity...
Say that I was a drum major for justice;
say that I was a drum major for peace....
I just want to leave behind a committed life."

Certainly we can say that Dr. Holland exemplified this life of commitment and service to humanity. She could not walk, but she was one of the most energetic drum majors at this University.

Martin Luther King died when he was 39, and Endesha's potential contributions were cut short in her 50s. Though I am resentful that both of these great Americans did not live longer, I also realize the most important thing for me is to express my gratitude that they were here on this earth, and that I was fortunate enough to have come into contact with them. I have come here today to celebrate the life and the accomplishments of Dr. Endesha Ida Mae Holland. Those who knew her knew that no matter how many challenges she faced, no matter how many setbacks she endured, she did not give up, and she did persevere.

I think I knew Endesha well enough to say that nothing would be more pleasing to her than for you to take from this gathering today a renewed dedication to the expansion of human rights, a dedication to make sure that at the end of your life on this planet, you can look back and say, "I 'm proud that I was on the right side of history." Will you look back and be able to be thankful that your actions contributed to the betterment of humanity and the earth? Or, will you look back and say, "Gee, all these things happened while I was alive, but I didn't really get involved. I don't really see anything that I did to increase the happiness of humans or other species. I did not do anything to make the world a better place."

Once again I would like to quote Daisaku Ikeda, who in his book "Faith Into Action" implores young people to get involved. He says:

"We must stand up for our beliefs and take action. Human rights will never be won unless we speak out, unless we fight to secure them.. Do not say you will do it 'someday;' now is the time. Do not say 'someone' will do it; you are the one. Now is the time for you to take full responsibility and courageously pave the way...."

Dr. Endesha Ida Mae Holland did exactly this with her life. From her civil rights days, through her writing, and to her teaching, what we see is a model of a committed and fulfilled life. She consistently stood up for her beliefs, she spoke out, and she took action to make the world a better place. We celebrate her life because it provides an amazing story of human resilience, and an inspiring example showing the fulfillment of human potential. She constructed a life that was, indeed, on the right side of history.