Education: The Moral Imperative
Dr. Adelaide Sanford

Editor's note: The following is an edited transcript of the keynote address given by Dr. Adelaide Sanford at the 5th Annual Patrick Francis Daly Memorial Awards for Excellence in Educational Leadership on July 17, 1997 at the Hartford Club in Harford, Connecticut. At the time Dr. Sanford was Member-At-Large of the Board of Regents of the State of New York. The majority of those in attendance were principals participating in the 1997 School Development Program Principals' Academy.

My beloved ones, may you feel the power and spirit of my love for you. I choose to call you my beloved, and I long to know you, to look deep into the reservoirs of the liquid pools of your eyes, to know of your dreams and hopes and disappointments. I long to know the intimacies of your struggles and your triumphs, my beloved ones. I choose to call you my beloved because I need to love, and I choose to call you my beloved because you need to be loved and embraced and held closely and warmly. I choose to call you my beloved at the risk of not loving all of the things that you do, but I call you my beloved as the God in you speaks to the God in me. I choose to call you my beloved because I exercise the right, in spite of the pain and the passion and the utter frustration that our lives bring into confrontation each day, to choose joy. I select the right to be joyful and optimistic and hopeful, and it is in that spirit of the choice of joy that I choose to call you my beloved.

I am humbled by this opportunity to speak to this salty group, to this group of yeasty people, to the mustard seeds, for there are those among us who believe that it takes everybody to do something, and I would like to remind you, my beloved ones, that I believe in the power of the yeast, small in proportion to the quantity of flour that it can cause to rise. So that there is in this room with the salty people who have not lost their savor, the mustard seed believers, and the yeasty people who can move volumes of people and energy and thoughts and kindness and prayers far out of proportion to their size, my beloved ones.

So, I'd like to share with you humbly these few moments to ask you these questions: Who are you? Who do you teach and what are you teaching? For I fear with great trepidation that we need to be reminded with the sacredness of story how confused we can become around the objectives and the roles and the goals for which we yearn. This story is a part of the repertoire of my grandmother who was an enslaved person in this country by the laws of this country, a noble woman that I knew and loved in my lifetime. She said that there was in the history of the Ibo people the story of a woman of moderate means who had one treasured jewel. It had great familial importance to her, and she lost it. She was frantic and agonized about the loss of this treasure and searched for it every place she went.

Any of you who have lost something know that you look where you know it isn't, and you look where you don't know where it is. That's the nature of loss. This woman
over time continued to look everywhere she went for this lost jewel. My grandmother said that one day she was walking down a country road and thought about the lost jewel and began to look for it there, perhaps among the leaves and dust and broken twigs. If she was in Red Hook, or Bedford Stuyvesant or parts of Hartford, maybe broken pieces of life and glass and waste would guide her search for that lost jewel. People began to see her in this agonized activity and inquired about the nature of her efforts, and she said, 'I had a treasured jewel and I've lost it.' They began to search with her for this jewel, falling over each other. A griot, the wise man, came by and asked the pivotal question: 'What are you doing?' The response was, 'Well, this woman had a treasured jewel and she has lost it and we're looking for it with her.' The griot asked, 'Is this where the jewel was lost?' The response was, 'No, but this is where the light is.'

I submit to you that in our search for solutions we allow ourselves to look where the light is, the light that the media focuses, the light that the connoisseurs of the system focus, the light that those who are powerful and influential focus, thinking that we're going to find what we lost there because that's where they have placed the light. Fortunately we have a Dr. James Comer, who has asked the important question, 'Is that where the jewel was lost?' and has come up with an answer, a program that helps us to look not where the light is but actually where the jewel of the childhood of children was lost and the future of America is eroding.

For example, we are told that we must be excited and motivated and able to inspire children by telling them they are being prepared for the world of work in the year 2000. Now, at one time all of my people were fully employed. They were not paid, but they were employed. Currently, those people who own the designer drug factories are employed. The people who have chosen to build the yachts and the airplanes that deliver these weapons of destruction are fully employed. They may have a work ethic but they don't work with ethics. The light is on employment, but the loss of virtue and character and scruples, the loss of integrity is not where the light is, but that must be where we search.

There is also great concern about the role of education and the world is led to believe that an uneducated person is the most dangerous. But I would like to submit to you that those who were involved in the savings and loans corruption were great mathematicians. Those people who develop theories and proposals that denigrate groups of people and say that they are not capable of a humane performance in a civilized society, those people that wrote the history books and said there had been no contribution ever made by people of African ancestry, have great linguistic skills. They were well educated in the formal sense of education. And, my beloved ones, those skilled engineers with the mastery of forging steel and pouring concrete, who in their arrogance decided to build the Los Angeles freeway on a geological fault, were very well educated. They thought that they could hold back the forces of nature, that their mastery of material things could dispel the rationality of nature and the movement of the Earth when it decided to turn over. Those architectural geniuses who decided to build the hotels and casinos and majestic houses in the riverbed and the flood plain, were well-schooled. They could develop landfills and these houses and structures
would stand for 25, 35, 45, 50 years but in the mind of the eternal Creator, it is but a batting of an eye. When the mighty river decided to return to its natural bed, we ran with our sandbags and prayers to hold back the force of the mighty river. Educated people.

The light of reflective analysis is not here. Rather, the light is centered on the mastery of technology. Technology and its mastery and civilization are not synonymous. The Egyptian people lived on the banks of the Nile River for thousands of years. They benefitted from the seasonal overflow onto its banks. The rich, fertile, potent soil was used for the planting of crops. When the Nile receded and its bed was temporarily dry, the Nubians never decide to fill in the beds and build permanent structures there.

Education without humility of spirit, without acknowledgment of a divine creative presence with divine forces is unsatisfactory. The indigenous Americans say, 'We must seek to understand and preserve the magnificence of the Earth for the seventh generation is yet unborn.' This is the education we want for our children. Who is doing the damage to this society? Men of power and intelligence and distinction who choose to build prisons and reject providing an opportunity to learn for every child are educated people. Officials who make policies that say, 'We must raise standards, we must extract a level of competency from children,' but feel uncomfortable about saying that we must first establish a level of competency for those who teach the children. Those who say, 'We must raise standards and everything will improve,' but do not say simultaneously, 'We must provide the material and the personal resources,' are very intelligent, powerful people.

When we reflect on who we are, who we teach, and what we are teaching, we must be very careful and ever mindful that we do not create arrogant, educated technicians. Rather, we must build a brave new world by first making sure that the builders grow. Those who make policy, those who hold the purse strings, and those who teach must also grow, and that growth begins with relationships. How we feel about ourselves and each other is paramount. Before you teach science, math or reading, you teach who you are. The children see you. They see your size, your shape, your color, your contours and how you accept and handle yourself. They don't care about what you know until they know that you care. Once they know that you care, then you may become their model.

A youngster came home after the first day in kindergarten and exclaimed to his mother, 'Oh, I have the most beautiful teacher. I love her.' The child's mother who hadn't shared this love of another female with her child was slightly jealous and a little concerned. 'Is this person going to displace me from the heart of my child?' Every day the child talked about the beauty of his teacher. Finally, the mother decided that she would have a manicure, have her hair set, put on her most flattering dress and go to meet her perceived competition. And so she did. When she got to the classroom, she met a rather plain, middle aged, and slightly heavy woman. This was her son's teacher. The mother was so relieved.
When her son came home that day, she was much more comfortable and receptive listening to the raves about his teacher, and she said to him, 'Tell me what is so beautiful about her.' The little boy said, 'Ma, couldn't you see? Every minute she expects something wonderful to happen.' The teacher’s beauty came from inside. Her face and voice didn't have a frown. She anticipated something wonderful happening. The child sensed this and expressed it as beauty. That’s why we must choose joy. That’s why we must choose to be each other’s beloved. We must look like we expect something wonderful to happen. That expectation becomes the reflection and predictor of the reality. You teach who you are first, then you teach the child, using a system of education that directs you to lead out of him or her. You do not impose. You extract from the child his wisdom, his intelligence, his genius, his excitement, his culture and capitalize on that.

What can you teach without character, values, ethics, morals, scruples? We will fall into what Ralph Ellison describes in his book The Invisible Man. Ellison says that the teenager prods us with these words: 'If you show me how I can move into your world, talk the way you want me to talk, have the aspirations that you want me to have, walk the way you want me to walk, dress the way you want me to dress. If you want me to do all these things, show me how I can enter your world and maintain my essential integrity and identity and I will help you make the desert bloom, but if you criticize, reject and model hypocrisy, I will make your garden a desert.'

Nightingale, in his book On the Edge, agrees with Ellison. He describes the inner-city Black adolescent as the greatest modeler of the American value system: materialistic, narcissistic and exploitative. Do we believe that America can survive with the majority of its wealth contained and controlled by the smallest number of people? Can America thrive in this time when it is no longer possible for the colonizer to go into underserved nations and take what it wants: the oil, the minerals, the diamonds, the human beings and beat them into submission? The good Lord put the minerals and the diamonds where he wanted them to be. Those who live where there are no minerals and diamonds, but depend upon them, must learn how to negotiate respectfully with the people who live where the minerals and diamonds are.

It is the adolescent who says that he could make our garden a desert. There will not be enough jails or chains drugs in the world to hold back the tide of righteous indignation felt by the exploited who are now isolated and marginalized. Reflected in his demeanor are the wretched scars he bears, faced with the additional yoke of blame for his condition.

So, my beloved ones, in closing, I would like to tell you who I really am. Dr. (Edward) Joyner was very gracious in reading all of what is written when you try to convince people that you have something to say. But who I am in my heart and what I teach are slightly different than the words of a resume. I do answer to the name Adelaide Luvenia Hines Sanford, but in reality, my beloved, I can never know my name. I can never know what my ancestors would have called me. I can never go home for I can never know where home is. I was born in New York and my parents and
maternal grandparents lived in Mississippi. But neither Mississippi nor New York is home. Home welcomes you, embraces you, enhances you, protects you and validates you. Neither of these places has done this for me or my people, therefore, as often as I possibly can, I go back to the warm, western shores of Africa, but I can never go to the specific town or village that is home. My grandmother said that when her vessel left the shores of West Africa, there were cousins, aunts, uncles, family members and villagers on that vessel. They didn't disembark with her in South Carolina. Some may have gone to Curacao or Haiti or Jamaica or Barbados or some other Caribbean region. She never saw them again. My family was not divided by their behavior. My family was divided and separated when they landed in the new world from the shores of West Africa. I can never send a letter home. I can never get a postcard from home. In this age of the celebration of diversity, if you ask me to stand here this evening garbed in the specific robes of my people, and if you said, ‘Regent Sanford, Dr. Sanford, Professor Sanford, Elder Sanford, greet us in the rich, melodic, cacophonous, alliterative language of your people and hold in your hand some symbol of their God worship, their spirituality, their images of the priests who were the teachers and who studied for forty years,’ this woman would have to stand before you this evening, my beloved, naked, mute and empty-handed. My beloved ones, I adore you.