

Remarks of Robert H. Hurt

Founders Day, Mercer University

February 5, 2014

Victoria, President Underwood, distinguished faculty and administrators, friends of Mercer, and most importantly, Mercer students, thank you for your invitation and your welcome.

And a special thanks to the students who are here. I think that President Underwood and the faculty and staff sort of had to be here, but you did not. Thank you for coming.

As noted in Ms. Conley's introduction, I have spent most of my years since graduation from Mercer in Washington, D.C., a city best known today for its manifest dysfunction, gridlock, and partisan hot air.

So last year when President Underwood told me on the eve of the shutdown of the federal government, that the Student Government Association had invited me—a Washington lobbyist—to come down from the nation's capital to share my Washington wisdom—I thought, wow, the Student Government has a really good sense of humor.

That assurance gave me the courage to accept this gracious invitation. I turned it into an opportunity for me to take a journey, back in time and back to the main campus that I had not visited in many years.

I spent time in the Tarver Library. I reached out to a number of my classmates of 50 years ago, some of whom were also Mercer Cluster colleagues—Sam Oni, Don Baxter, Larry Maioriello, Colin Harris, Larry Couey, Kathy Holmes, Edward Simmons, and Ben and Ellen Jordan. Some of them are here today, along with my daughter Louisa, and my wonderful wife Virginia. President Underwood, if my wife or daughter ask to see all of my transcripts and grades, please tell her those are restricted by the federal privacy act.

Most fun for me on my campus visits, I had the opportunity to talk with a great many current Mercer students. Those included the impressive young men and women who are the elected officers of your Student Government Association, with the current editor of the Cluster, Emily Farlow, and her staff editors, and with some of your excellent Minority Mentors. Thanks to all for their patience and time.

Much of what I rediscovered about the past, and learned about the present, surprised me. Some of it shocked me. Some things about my time at Mercer in the 1960's made me proud, some things made me ashamed of myself and others.

But first, let me put things in the context of life on this campus 50 years ago.

In 1962, the United States and the old Soviet Union came to the brink of nuclear war during the Cuban missile crisis. The military draft was in effect, and Mercer ROTC students graduated in uniform and were sworn in as Army officers as part of the ceremony.

Most of the time when a student was in this beautiful auditorium, it was because he or she had to be. Chapel attendance was mandatory, three days per week. Staff from the Registrar's Office stood in the balcony, taking a roll to see that your assigned seat was occupied— either by you or someone else,

In 1963, one of the big headlines in the Cluster announced that Mercer was raising tuition by \$25 per quarter. That brought the total fees for room, board and tuition to a whopping \$1,380 for the full academic year.

Freshmen, in retrospect, should have gotten a discount because they were supposed to wear a goofy orange and black beanie hat for the first couple of weeks of the school year.

Dorms were not air-conditioned, but that wasn't a big deal because most folks had no air-conditioning at home. Parking was not a problem because most students did not have a car. There was no I-75, but there were passenger trains.

Fifty years ago the Cluster ran a story about long lunch lines in the Connell center, so some things never change. There also was an article about whether the Administration Building was haunted. That's silly. Of course it's haunted. Like today, we had a great basketball team. But we had a small library, no swimming pool, and a campus quad that could not hold an aesthetic candle to that of today.

But in talking about 1963, here's the hardest job: trying to explain to a Mercer student today the bizarre terrain of race relations in the South and the nation 50 years ago.

My daughters, ages 17 and 20, have listened politely to my stories of white only schools, white only drinking fountains and rest rooms, and white only restaurants and hotels. But when I have tried to explain how a system of such stark racial discrimination was somehow an accepted norm by most white people - I get the universal teenager put-down-- a big eye roll to heaven, and the comment, "Really."

I believe my kids think that we all must have been crazy.

And maybe an insanity plea would be the best line of defense. Early evidence of that would be the incident in 1954, featured in Dr. Andrew Silver's documentary play, "Combustible/Burn," about the early civil rights movement in Macon and Mercer.

That's the story of Richard Scott, an African American graduate of Talladega College in Alabama, and Clifford York, a white Mercer ministerial student. They were arrested on charges of "suspicion of a misdemeanor." Basically, when the neighbors saw a young black man having dinner at a white person's home in Macon, they called the cops.

Upon their release, an NAACP spokesman said, and I quote, "The deputies honestly thought the two young men were breaking a law by dining together." Sherriff Wood said his deputies made the arrest out of fear of violence that might occur in the neighborhood if the biracial dining experience had become widely known.

And I suppose they would have been right about one thing—trouble was brewing. By the time I came to Mercer in 1961, the South was catching fire from the searing injustice of racial prejudice.

Let's recall the times. In 1961, a mob of about 100 students threw rocks, bottles and fireworks outside the dorm of black student Charlayne Hunter when she and Hamilton Holmes desegregated the University of Georgia.

In 1962, James Meredith could have been killed for his efforts to desegregate the University of Mississippi. A mob of a thousand gathered there and attacked a hastily assembled band of 300 federal marshals with rocks, bottles, rifle and shotgun fire. Two people were killed, and of the 300 marshals, 160 were injured—28 by gunfire. The next day, 23,000 soldiers were stationed around Oxford.

The ultimate horror came a year later, on the morning of Sunday, Sept. 15, 1963, the same month that Sam Oni, Bennie Stephens and Cecil Dewberry became my classmates at Mercer. Four members of the Ku Klux Klan planted a box of dynamite under the steps of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham. The explosion came as 26 children were walking into a Sunday school class. Four little girls—three were 14 years old and one was 11—were killed and 22 others injured.

Many blamed Alabama Governor George Wallace for the killings by inflaming the racial prejudice that spawned such violence in his state. A week before the bombing, he famously told *The New York Times* that to stop integration, Alabama needed “a few first-class funerals and political funerals.”

The use of such language was calculated—Wallace had been defeated for Governor in 1958 by a racist candidate who was endorsed by the Ku Klux Klan, and who attributed his victory to Wallace being soft on integration. Indeed, Wallace had been endorsed by the NAACP. In winning the Governor's office in 1962, Wallace had said, and I quote directly, “no other son-of-a-bitch will ever out-nigger me again.”

I repeat those despicable words just as he spoke them to try to give you a sense of the world of social, moral, and political turmoil that was smoldering just outside the boundaries of the Mercer campus.

For me as a reporter and editor with the Cluster, and especially as an intern and later regular reporter with The Atlanta Constitution, now The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, civil rights stories were big news.

But it would be wrong to think that this was a subject that dominated the attention of the all-white Mercer student body. We lived in the comfortable bubble of the university's world-within-a world. In the minds of most 18 to 21 year olds on campus, desegregation was not at the top of the priority list. I feel confident that if we had taken a campus vote in support of Sam Oni's admission to Mercer, it would have passed. But few of us had any peer relationship with blacks, so this was just not a front and center issue in the minds of the majority.

I contrast that with the African American students at Historically Black Colleges in Georgia and across the South. They were both the foot soldiers and the strategists for the demonstrations that ultimately broke the back of segregation. Education meant power and progress for African Americans, then as now. That's why 50 years ago, so-called separate but equal education had been kept as separate and unequal as possible.

And so it was a little more than 50 years ago that Mercer stood at an important crossroads on what to do with respect to one of the great issues of the 20th Century. The easiest course would have been to do nothing.

It was not foreordained that Sam Jerry Jerry Oni, a student from Ghana, would be admitted to Mercer. It was public universities, not private colleges and universities, which were the subject of landmark desegregation litigation and court orders. Mercer in 1963 was bound by charter, money, and tradition to the Georgia Baptist Convention, which itself was on record in opposing integration--albeit in the gauzy, polite language of the day.

The Convention reviewed part of Mercer's budget, and every year voted to set its own important financial contribution to the university-- a dollar number

that was always a headline in the Cluster. Powerful alumni bitterly opposed desegregation and made it clear that their financial support would dry up if the school embraced integration.

The easy choice would have been to go slow, which was the mantra of the day in the South. But there was something special in Mercer's character, then and now, that made a difference.

At the same time the Bibb County deputies were locking up Richard Scott and Clifford York for dining together in 1954, Mercer Professor of Religion Mac Bryan was among those challenging Mercer students to learn the art of critical thinking and Christian conscience on race and religion.

Dr. Bryan would school a generation of Baptist ministers, many of whom would go on to lead Georgia churches and play a key role in supporting Mercer integration. Harris Mobley, the Mercer-trained Baptist missionary who would recruit Sam to come to Mercer, famously said, "Dr. Bryan invented me."

Also in the 1950's, Joe Hendricks had arrived at Mercer as a student, and returned to campus in 1959 as Dean of Men after studying theology. Joe would become one of the seminal figures in Mercer history, and certainly in the history of racial justice.

So it was well before 1963 that the strategy was formed. Desegregation at Mercer would happen in the context of faith and shared human dignity. It was not just that Mercer would desegregate, but how Mercer would do it that became important.

The key actors in this effort by the time I was at Mercer were Joe and Jean Hendricks, Ray Brewster, Willis Glover, Tom Trimble, Bob Otto, Harold McManus, Bobby and Mary Wilder, and many others. They were the campus radicals who would seek to save Mercer's soul, and they were the administration and faculty of Mercer.

They were quite the band of brothers and sisters—great scholars, but also fun to be with in a classroom. I remember Dr. Glover, the History professor,

teasing Dr. Otto, who taught logic. He said, “Bob, history teaches us that logic is not important. Students don’t need to learn logic. They need to learn to use fallacies effectively.”

At the top of this faculty food chain was a man who does not always get his full due— Mercer President, Dr. Rufus C. Harris. He was a Mercer graduate, former Dean of the Mercer and Tulane University Law Schools, and President of Tulane University for more than 20 years. Most people thought that he came to Mercer in 1960 as a pleasant way to transition into retirement. He fooled us all, serving as President until 1980. With his patrician bearing and quick mind, he set the course that navigated Mercer desegregation with, through, and around trustees, Baptists, alumni, and the media.

And the media very much included the Mercer Cluster. In hindsight, whenever I interviewed Dr. Harris, I was like a simple minded border guard in a Star Wars movie talking to Obi-Wan Kenobi. I was no match for the Jedi master of interviews, and of course he was too smart to let me figure that out in real time. Basically, whatever Dr. Harris wanted me to write is what I ended up writing.

President Underwood, having seen you in action, I now know that you also are a Jedi master, so I presume that is a skill passed on in secret with each Presidential transition.

In the pre-Twitter world, the Cluster was the major conduit of information about all things Mercer. The earliest article on desegregation I have seen was February 2, 1950, when a student, Jim Young, wrote an almost full page column with a strategy to phase in desegregation. He said that “. . .the chief obstacle is not the sentiment of the college student bodies, nor that of the faculties or even that of the administrations. The chief obstacle is the sentiment of the financial masters of the administrations—the trustees and the general public.”

There was companion article on the same page by another student, Ms. Laurice Walker, and together these two pieces were a stunningly direct exposition on how to counter racism, and all founded on the teaching of Jesus. Ms. Walker said of desegregation that it would cause conflict, but that “New social conditions

are born like people—there's some misery attendant upon the birth," and she added that we should be mindful that Jesus said in Matthew, "I come to bring not peace, but a sword." Wow. Props to Laurice—strong words for any era, much less 1950.

I look back with mixed emotions on my own work on desegregation as editor. We covered the run-up to the desegregation decision aggressively, ran editorials and columns in support, and left no doubt where we stood. My predecessor as editor, Larry Maioriello, took a good bit of heat from his law school classmates for his early stand in support of desegregation. Some called the Cluster staff "Maioriello's Menagerie." Larry was and still is a tough guy and he just ignored it.

In hindsight, I give myself a decent grade for the journalism of the initial coverage of this issue on my watch, but I get a C minus for weak follow-up. I was shocked to learn in later years about the visit of the Tattnall Square church pastor to Sam's dorm room immediately after he arrived, delivering the message that he would not be welcome in the congregation.

I talked to Sam about that recently, and basically apologized for being a pretty sorry reporter for not having known or written about that incident. He said that at the time, he and his white roommate, Don Baxter, were so shocked, they said little about it. But a good reporter would have been in touch with Sam and following his life on campus. I think after Sam, and Benny and Cecil were on campus, we treated it as a story that was finished, which it was not.

For my own part, editorials in support of desegregation were in my comfort zone because I had grown up in a family where it was made clear early and often that racial bias was a sin. My father, John Hurt, was the editor of the state Baptist newspaper in Georgia, *The Christian Index*. The Index was one of the largest circulation weekly publications in the state, sent to more than 100,000 subscribers. Dad had a strong editorial voice, and he used it decisively in support of the Mercer desegregation.

He had push-back from some of his readers and some denominational leaders. But I never thought much about the courage it took for him to do that, as he was an employee of the Georgia Baptist Convention. It was only later that I learned from my older brother, also a Mercer graduate, that our mother was very concerned that Dad would lose his job over his editorials. I was probably focused on the fact that he had better sources than me— he broke the story of the application of Sam to Mercer and that sparked the follow up stories around the country and in The New York Times.

The media was just one part of the strategy that the faculty and Dr. Harris crafted to break the Mercer color barrier. Not by accident, the heart of the strategy was to leverage the powerful Southern Baptist tradition of sending missionaries overseas, and using that tradition to teach a lesson. When Georgia Baptists, or any good soul, looked into the mirror handed to them by the Mercer-trained missionary Harris Mobley, they would see the dazzling smile of Sam Jerry Oni. As Harris would say later with delight, “Our preaching caught up with us.”

But journalists or university Presidents were not the ground soldiers in this fight. The ground soldiers in the fight were Sam and his white roommate, Don Baxter, along with day students Benny Stephens and Cecil Dewberry. They were the Seal Team 6 for a hostage rescue of this university, and they did not escape without injury. Sam’s faith was shaken by the hypocrisy of churches that would not accept blacks. Don abandoned his plans to be a minister, also disgusted by religious hypocrisy.

Desegregation was to be a shock wave in congregations all over the South. At Mercer, the Rev. Tom Holmes, teacher and administrator, staked his professional career in 1965 on his ability to bring Tattnell Square Baptist Church through the tumult by accepting that all were welcome in God’s house. For preaching truth, he was called “lower down than a dog” and fired. His wonderful book, “Ashes for Breakfast,” tells the story.

He was not alone. Many preachers all over the South who lost their pulpits in the same way. They became pastoral refugees. My first pastor in Washington,

D.C., Bob Troutman, at Riverside Baptist had been run out of his church in Memphis.

But the die was cast in Macon. Mercer would not only desegregate, it would establish an on-campus tutoring program for black students who wanted to attend but who had been denied the same standard of a high school education as their white classmates. Today, Mercer's minority enrollment of more than 20 percent is by far higher than virtually all of its peer institutions in the South.

We speak today of Dr. Harris and the faculty of that time as the seminal figures in desegregation here, and they were. But fundamentally they were teachers. Race relations were just one of the lessons in the syllabus, and their lives and lessons transformed a generation.

Ellen Jordan, my classmate in 1963, sent me an email when she learned about the topic of my remarks today. She wrote, and I quote, "here's a snapshot from the perspective of a naïve little Baptist girl who had no independent thought until I got to the Mercer quad. . . Happy with the status quo, an over-achiever, high school nerd, product of segregated neighborhoods and schools, afraid to leave the box, feeling always that religion would carry me along; I came to Mercer with no expectations. Just another comfort zone.

"And then I went to Ray Brewster's class. He turned the world upside down in the most quiet and shocking way. Sitting on the edge of the desk, feet propped on a trash can, tattered book in his hand, he gave me 'a whole new life.' To this day."

Ellen closed by saying that Ray, his colleagues and Dr. Harris "symbolizes the Mercer experience," and that "they chose the right side of history at that moment in time. I am touched that nearly a half century later, here we stand . . . Mercerians—from different backgrounds somewhat, with similar experiences mostly—and the circle is unbroken. Maybe Mercer is still doing that today."

Ellen, I think, knows that she can rest easy. Mercer is continuing that tradition.

I know that students, faculty, and President Underwood have made it clear that the observance of the 50th anniversary is not a time for self-celebration and resting on laurels. And indeed, no white man or woman today should expect a pat on the back for helping end a practice of discrimination that defies modern understanding.

But the simple truth is that the campus radicals of my era—mainly the faculty and administration with the support of students—plowed up the weeds of systemic discrimination at this university, and did so in a way that new things could grow from that work.

It is a very good thing that most students in 2014 find the racial terrain of 50 years ago to be ancient history. It is a good thing that the name of Governor George Wallace draws blank stares from most teenagers today. But it also should be a good for them to know that George Wallace, late in life, became a born-again Christian, renounced racism, ran for Governor yet again, was endorsed by the NAACP, and won the majority of the black votes in Alabama on his way to victory.

Don Baxter, who had turned away from the ministry to medicine, said in this room that his experience at Mercer with Sam changed his life forever. And for the good. Sam said in this room that he found renewal in his faith and in this university when he returned years later to see the changes that had taken place.

Charles Richardson, an African American who is Editor of the Editorial Page of Macon Telegraph, told me that Mercer today is a life force in Macon—it radiates a vibrant and progressive power in this city and state. This community depends on Mercer for progress.

My classmate Colin Harris, who himself retired recently from the Mercer faculty, reminded me that on Founders Day we should be mindful that “founding” is a process more than an event. Founders are present in the life of a community in every generation.

To students today, of all races and national origins, you have the opportunity to know each other as friends and partners in life in a way that just

was not possible in my time. Right now, at Mercer, you have the opportunity to live and study and socialize together in what for many of you is probably the most unselfconsciously integrated environment you have ever encountered. It is an opportunity for you to develop the friendships of a life time.

So the end of the story of the 50th anniversary is not really an ending—it's a beginning. Mercer students, you attend a much better, much stronger, more compassionate and impactful school than the one I attended. You have access to programs that reach around the world. You have a student body strengthened by diversity to deal with a world of diversity, and you have a faculty of great accomplishment.

Now it's your turn to write the story line of a Founders Day that will unfold some years from now. I do not know what the social, economic, cultural or public policy challenges will be that you choose to take on. But I am confident that in your task, you will be able to draw on the strength to do so from a university that was changed for the good by the campus radicals who saved Mercer's soul.

Thank you.