

You Are Important

Taken from "Mr. Washington"
by Les Brown

One day in 11th grade, I went into a classroom to wait for a friend of mine. When I went into the room, the teacher, Mr. Washington, suddenly appeared and asked me to go to the board to write something, to work something out. I told him that I couldn't do it. And he said, "Why not?"

I said, "Because I'm not one of your students."

He said, "It doesn't matter. Go to the board anyhow."

I said, "I can't do that."

He said, "Why not?"

And I paused because I was somewhat embarrassed. I said, "Because I'm Educable Mentally Retarded."

He came from behind his desk and he looked at me and he said, "Don't ever say that again. Someone's opinion of you does not have to become your reality."

It was a very liberating moment for me. On one hand, I was humiliated because the other students laughed at me. They knew that I was in Special Education. But on the other hand, I was liberated because he began to bring to my attention that I did not have to live within the context of what another person's view of me was.

And so Mr. Washington became my mentor. Prior to

this experience, I had failed twice in school. I was identified as Educable Mentally Retarded in the fifth grade, was put back from the fifth grade into the fourth grade, and failed again when I was in the eighth grade. So this person, Mr. Washington, made a dramatic difference in my life.

I always say that he operates in the consciousness of Goethe, who said, "Look at a man the way that he is, and he only becomes worse. But look at him as if he were what he *could* be, and then he becomes what he should be."

Mr. Washington believed that "Nobody rises to low expectations." This man always gave students the feeling that he had high expectations for them and we strove—all of the students strove—to live up to what those expectations were.

One day, when I was still a junior, I heard him giving a speech to some graduating seniors. He said to them, "You have greatness within you. You have something special. If just one of you can get a glimpse of a larger vision of yourself, of who you really are, of what it is you bring to the planet, of your specialness, then in a historical context, the world will never be the same again. You can make your parents proud. You can make your school proud. You can make your community proud. You can touch millions

of people's lives." He was talking to the seniors, but it seemed like that speech was for me.

I remember when they gave him a standing ovation. Afterwards, I caught up to him in the parking lot and I said, "Mr. Washington, do you remember me? I was in the auditorium when you were talking to the seniors."

He said, "What were you doing there? You are a junior."

I said, "I know. But that speech you were giving, I heard your voice coming through the auditorium doors. That speech was for me, sir. You said they had greatness within them. I was in that auditorium. Is there greatness within me, sir?"

He said, "Yes, Mr. Brown."

"But what about the fact that I failed English and math and history, and I'm going to have to go to summer school? What about that, sir? I'm slower than most kids. I'm not as smart as my brother or my sister who's going to the University of Miami."

"It doesn't matter. It just means that you have to work harder. Your grades don't determine who you are or what you can produce in your life."

"I want to buy my

mother a home."

"It's possible, Mr. Brown. You can do that." And he turned to walk away again.

"Mr. Washington?"

"What do you want now?"

"Uh, I'm the one, sir. You remember me—remember my name. One day you're gonna hear it. I'm gonna make you proud. I'm the one, sir."

School was a real struggle for me. I was passed from one grade to another because I was not a bad kid. I was a nice kid; I was a fun kid. I made people laugh. I was polite. I was respectful. So teachers would pass me on, which was not helpful to me. But Mr. Washington made demands on me. He made me accountable. But he enabled me to believe that I could handle it, that I could do it.

He became my instructor my senior year, even though I was Special Education. Normally, Special Ed students don't take Speech and Drama, but they made special provisions for me to be with him. The principal realized the kind of bonding that had taken place and the impact that he'd made on me, because I had begun to do well academically. For the first time in my life I made the honor roll. I wanted to

travel on a trip with the drama department and you had to be on the honor roll in order to make the trip out of town. That was a miracle for me!

Mr. Washington restructured my own picture of

who I am. He gave me a larger vision of myself, beyond my mental conditioning and my circumstances.

Years later, I produced five specials that appeared on public television. I had some friends call him when

my program, “You Deserve,” was on the educational television channel in Miami. I was sitting by the phone waiting when he called me in Detroit. He said, “May I speak to Mr. Brown, please?”

“Who’s calling?”
“You know who’s calling.”

“Oh, Mr. Washington, it’s you.”

“You were the one, weren’t you?”

“Yes, sir, I was.”

Keep away from people who try to belittle your ambitions. Small people always do that, but the really great make you feel that you, too, can become great.

—Mark Twain (American author, 1835–1910)

Who still wants it?

A motivational speaker started off his seminar by holding up a \$20 bill. In the room of 200, he asked, “Who would like this \$20 bill?” Hands started going up.

He said, “I am going to give this \$20 to one of you, but first, let me do this.” He proceeded to crumple the bill.

He then asked, “Who still wants it?” Still the hands were up in the air.

“Well,” he replied, “what if I do this?” And he dropped it on the ground and started to grind it into the floor with his shoe. He picked it up, now crumpled and dirty. “Now who still wants it?” Still the hands went into the air.

“My friends, you have all learned a very valuable lesson. No matter what I did to the money, you still wanted it because it did not decrease in value. It was still worth \$20.

“Many times in our lives, we are crumpled, dropped, and ground into the dirt by the decisions we make and the circumstances that come our way. We feel as though we are worthless. But no matter what has happened or what will happen, you will never lose your value in God’s eyes. To Him, dirty or clean, crumpled or finely creased, you are still priceless.”

You are of infinite worth to Me. There has never been a person like you, nor will there ever be another just like you, for you are unique, created for the specific purpose I had in mind. The main thing I made you for is to love Me, so that I can love you in return. So come to Me and let Me show you how great My love for you is and how special I know you to be.

Love, Jesus