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2019 Inamori Ethics Prize Speech: The Power of Storytelling

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The Power of Storytelling

LeVar Burton

2019 Inamori Ethics Prize Recipient

Thank you, [Dr. French] and all of the people at the Inamori Foundation, at the Inamori Center. Thank you, Mr. Provost. Thank you, [Case Western Reserve University]. Thank you Stephanie, my ride or die, my road-dog for life. Thank you.

I am an itinerant storyteller. Storytelling isn't just what I do; it's who I am. I am lucky, blessed, and fortunate in that I was born to the woman that I was. I believe that on a certain level, as souls, we spend some time before we incarnate evaluating what it is we want to accomplish as a soul in a lifetime. And among those decisions that we make are the circumstances into which we will be born. So on a certain level, I feel like I chose my mother, and that was the best decision I ever made as a soul.

I say, about my mother, that I am the man that I am because she was the woman that she was. My mother was 4'10" and a half. Weighed about a buck ten, a buck fifteen tops. Until the day she died, I was afraid of that woman. You laugh, but I am serious. Erma Jean—and every opportunity I have to mention my mother's name in public I do—Erma Jean Christian. That was my mother's name. She started her life as Erma Jean Ward, then met my father. No, before my father she married a man named Reynolds. She was Erma Jean Reynolds, then she was Erma Jean Burton and she finished out her life as Erma Jean Christian. My mother loved men, [she] loved getting married, I guess.

[My mother] was my first teacher. She was a high school English teacher when she met my father. She was the first person in her family to graduate from college, which she did at the age of 17. She graduated from Philander Smith, an Historically Black College in Little Rock, Arkansas. My father is from Paragould, Arkansas. That's the country, if you don't know. It doesn't get much more country than Paragould, Arkansas. My name is Levar; it's as black as you can get. My mom was also a reader, she was a voracious reader. And my mother read not simply to me when I was a child. My mother also had at least two, sometimes three, books going for her own personal pleasure, her enjoyment.

So I grew up in a household where reading was akin to breathing. And people ask me all the time, so how do I get my child to read more? I ask them a couple of questions: “Do your children see you read?” We are sponges, especially as children and that all-important example that modeling makes a difference. It certainly made a difference in my life—seeing my mother read for pleasure made an impact. It communicated to me that reading for pleasure, not just for knowledge but for enjoyment, was one of the benefits of being human. I also ask parents, “Do you know what your children are passionate about?” Because it is our passions that tend to drive our reading appetites. If your child loves superheroes, then damn it, buy your kid comic books. I do not care what the gateway drug [to reading] is. I simply want kids to learn how to love to read. Because in my view, if you are a reader in at least one language, you are free, literally free. No one can imprison your mind. And no one can put shackles on your imagination.

So my first idea of what and how I should spend my life, because my mother was first a teacher and then a social worker, was to have a life that was of service. My mother instilled in my sisters and in me that service to a community, service to our fellow man, was expected like reading. I say about reading in my mother’s house that you either read a book or got hit in the head with one. And almost every day of our lives, Erma Jean encouraged us to be a good person. Just be a good person. Those values I carry in my heart, each and every day of my life. I strive to make my mother proud. Well, first it started out trying to not embarrass the family, or black people for that matter, because black people will tell you we feel responsible for everything that happens in the race. And as such, that mantle is shared by all African Americans in this country. We never want to give anyone reason to be embarrassed about who we are and what we do.

My mother was not only the first person in her family to graduate college, but she got her second degree in social work, an MSW, a master’s in social work. She got it in night school while being a social worker full time during the day and raising three children by herself and putting us all through parochial school education. When I started my freshman year at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles, I had won a full scholarship, but it didn’t cover books and fees, and so in addition to her day job as a social worker, my mother waited tables at a nightclub called Small’s Paradise in Sacramento so that I could pursue my dream of becoming an actor. You see why I love this woman so much?

That is the value of an investment. The investiture in another human being is the greatest gift that we can give. The belief that we hold for one another cannot be underestimated. I am the man that I am because of that woman's love. My mother was also my first storytelling mentor. I was asked for the first time in my life, today, how long has it been since I have considered myself a storyteller, and I have to admit that it hasn't been that long. The last five years or so. Very recently, I have had the courage in my life to claim that title. To own the title storyteller. And I would like to share with you a little bit about my other storytelling mentors.

Alex Haley was an amazing storyteller. I learned so much from Alex. Alex Haley was the most authentic human being I have ever met in my life. [I] was with Alex so many times on so many occasions where people would just clamor to get close to him. And his ability to focus on whomever was in front of him was absolutely astounding, commensurate. Because Alex was laser locked on you. When you were engaged in a conversation with Alex Haley, he wasn't looking around to see if somebody more important or somebody more attractive walked in the room. He was present with you, and he allowed his presence to travel with him. He would leave those giant ballrooms, he would always go into the kitchen, he would always introduce himself to the kitchen staff, as they were invariably people of color. His example of what it is to be a compassionate, present human being shaped me almost as much as his storytelling has. I don't use the words in combination very often, but Alex Haley, in my view, was a great man. A great man. And the controversy surrounding some of the parts of *Roots* notwithstanding, the man changed, through the power of the pen, the way a nation frames one of the greatest tragedies in human history: chattel slavery here in America.

For those of you old enough to remember—. How many of you were old enough to remember when *Roots* aired originally in January of 1977? Thank God you're not all twenty-four! Then you remember how we were all glued. It was one of the few times I can recall, and I am sixty-two years old, that there was indeed one America. America is always at least bifurcated from my experience. Through my lens there are always at least two Americas in play. There's white and black; there's male and female; there's rich and poor. America is always fractured through the prism of race, however, because it is how this country came to be the world power that it is. America hasn't always done a very good job of telling its story to the world either. I look at manifest destiny as simply an excuse that was used

by British Europeans to come to this country and steal the land and kill all of the people on it, which they did because they resisted (which any of us would have done). Our relationship with slavery is still incomplete and its legacies of institutionalized racism.

It feels like we are at an inflection point here in this country where we have a very clear and present choice, which is to reconcile our slave-holding past and make appropriate amends to the descendants of those enslaved because it's the right thing to do. It is the ethical thing to do, and I'm not talking necessarily [about] reparations, I mean amends. I love this country, desperately, and I have had to—throughout the course of my life—find a way to deal with the fact that my country doesn't love me so much. It hurts, it really does, and I know I speak for many souls, not just my own. I see the heads nodding in this room. My country doesn't love me as much as I love it. And yet I persist. And yet I pursue the American dream. I pursue the democracy that was promised by the founding of this nation.

Alex Haley's contribution through the written word is immeasurable. There was one America in January of 1977. It happened to be one of the coldest winters in memory, so folks were inside already, but we only had three channels and PBS. But we were watching *Roots*, and as a nation we watched. The audience grew almost exponentially every night. The final episode of *Roots* is still in the top five of the most-watched episodes of television in the history of the medium. All of that was accomplished with one family's story. That is the power of storytelling.

I was a huge fan of the original television series, *Star Trek*. I loved *Star Trek*. I'm a science fiction literature fan, it's always been my go-to body of literature when I'm reading for pleasure or enjoyment, and it was rare for me to encounter heroes in the pages of those novels who looked like me. But [in] Gene Roddenberry's vision there was Nichelle Nichols, not just there, but in an important role, in a position of authority. Talk about a beacon of light to a young, black kid in Sacramento, California. Gene Roddenberry's vision as a storyteller told me there was a place for me when the future came. That I would be welcomed into a world that hopefully we, as the stewards of this world, would have resolved all of the issues of racism and sexism and classism. There would be no need for money; the problem of lack would have been solved. That was the kind of world I wanted to live in, and that's why I bought into Gene's vision. It included me and it seemed like that way of thinking, believing, and living was the right thing to do. It was ethical. You saw in the clip earlier, I talked about

all of the inventions that have been made possible by Gene's vision. The flip cell phone, right? The iPad. You think Steve Jobs wasn't a *Star Trek* fan? Really? Apple owes me money.

That which we focus our imagination on is what we tend to produce in this room. That was one of the things that I learned from Gene. The power of the imagination. Not a single thing in creation has gotten here without someone's imagination. Every thing you can think of. Every device, every design, every manner of product, it has all sprung from the imagination of a human being. And it is that which we focus on in our imaginations that we tend to manifest. That is how human beings operate. We are manifesting machines. Consciously or unconsciously we are manifesting in our waking sleep as well as in our sleeping awakesness. We are manifesting machines. 24/7. Consciously or unconsciously. The more we can live in our imaginations and spend time there, the more prepared we will be for the challenges that face us. It's one of the reasons I love doing my podcast, *Levar Burton Reads*. It gives me an opportunity to reconnect with a whole generation of adults who are used to getting literature selection advice from me. And so I get to continue to introduce them to new authors, more diverse authors, authors they might not have encountered on their own. And I get to encourage them to spend a little time in their imaginations and to remember the joys of being read to and to lose oneself in story because my generation is leaving a world of problems for your generation to solve. I apologize, because it's a real shitshow right now, and you're going to need every faculty you possess in order to meet these challenges. Chief among them, I promise you, is your imaginations.

Gene also taught me that all of our heroes are human. He was a visionary, and he was a man. He was a man of his generation. Gene loved women, and he loved to see women in short skirts. In spite of the vision, all of the women in *Star Trek* (the original series) wore short skirts. Gene was a part of the generation who did the three-martini lunch, and still, he was a visionary. All of our heroes are human, and that was a really vital, critical lesson for me to learn.

When I think of how I got here, the amazing twists and turns in my life, circumstances that I never could have foreseen, outcomes that seem to have materialized miraculously from nowhere. Time and time again, when what felt like the hand of fate intervening at a critical moment that made such a huge and profound difference in the trajectory of my life, I can't help but be grateful to all of the people who have invested in me. We are,

none of us, alone in this life. And none of us get through life being a lone wolf or a solitary player. Life is a team sport. Participation is not optional. You can't change the world from your couch. It takes energy to change the world. So get up, get out, and do something with your life. There are very few things, to me, that are more precious than the written word.

My last storytelling mentor that I will mention—I'll tell a brief story about Fred. I'm talking about Fred Rogers—you might know him as Mr. Rogers. Fred was an amazing human being. When I first met Fred, I was really excited because I was eager to see what this man was really like. I mean, I thought that it can't be real, right? That's got to be like a character, that's an act, but it wasn't. Like Alex, Fred knew how to be present. It's a really [great] gift to give to someone, your attention, your undivided attention. It says I see you. It says you matter in this moment.

I was at a big confab at the White House once when Bill Clinton was in office. It was a gathering of all of the influencers and influential people in the business of show business. Everyone had gathered in this room in the White House and Bill Clinton and Hillary were there, Vice President Gore and his wife Tipper, and around this huge rectangular assembled table were all of the studios head and head of networks from Los Angeles. It was a high-powered type-A room. When it came time for Fred to speak, he did something extraordinary. He asked everyone to close their eyes and think of a teacher, or someone who had seen them at some point in their lives and encouraged them to become who they turned out to be. He asked people to close their eyes and focus their attention on that person for a minute. That was Fred's contribution, and don't you know [that] every single person in that room closed their eyes for a minute. I know because I peeked. I had to. So I'd like to do that with you now and I'd like for all of us to close our eyes, just for thirty seconds. As Fred did on that day, I will watch the time. Now, how did that feel? Not so bad. None of us, none of us did this thing called life alone. We all need and are lucky, not only to get help, but to be able to ask for help when needed, which is a real, learned skill that I have had to learn.

Music is one of my favorite modalities of storytelling, there is so much story available in song. One of my favorite artists is a jazz singer. Jazz is my favorite genre except when Van Morrison is singing. Van Morrison is the sinner-saint, he is the poet-bard, he is my favorite recording artist. He has been the soundtrack of my life, but music in general and jazz specifically (and so many other genres of music) have added so much richness to my

life. There's a song by Dianne Reeves that's called "Testify," which has become something of an anthem of mine. I will leave you with a few words of Dianne Reeves. She says in the song, "Sometimes you won't understand why life is the way it is, things don't always go the way you plan them. But I believe that God and time are synonymous and through time, God reveals all things. Be still," she says, "Stand in love and pay attention." I interpret the value of her suggestions to be still, stand in love, and pay attention to mean this (at least through my lens). Being still is valuable because unless we are still, we will never hear that inner voice that guides us. That small, still voice within which is so important. Stand in love, well that is easy because standing in love is the only response to being human. And "pay attention" is my favorite. As a person who believes everything happens for a reason, I want to pay attention because I don't want to miss an opportunity to hear a story that's going to change the world. Thank you.