November 25, 2015

To All Morehouse College Students and the Larger Morehouse Community:

As I reflect upon the dynamism of the last two weeks, this has begun to feel like a resurgent moment in our College’s long and illustrious history.

Vice President Joe Biden’s recent visit with us, as part of his “It’s on US” tour, was both a rebuke of sexual violence and a call for all of us to play a more active role in ending sexual assault in our college community. A day later, one of our developing new students posted a disparaging and grossly insensitive letter in social media space that reminded us how hurtful and harmful words can be. Yet hours after that ill-advised posting, there was a stern rebuke as men of Morehouse joined 300 other students of the Atlanta University Center (AUC) to demonstrate on the steps of our college’s most historically significant building, Graves Hall. And in so doing, our community admirably restated and re-confirmed our long-held commitment to principles of equality and justice.

Days later, the focus on change and growth sharpened with a silent protest on the steps of the Kilgore Campus Center, where we learned more about the experiences, concerns and needs of our LGBTQ community. Later that evening, students from across the AUC came together to further declare their stance against sexual misconduct, and to also stand in solidarity with students at the University of Missouri and their advocacy for genuine inclusion, an end to racial harassment and broader representation of minorities on campus.

Finally, a more robust and planned demonstration in support of the “Mizzou Movement” occurred on campus, thereby interconnecting our local struggle to the broader American struggle to get beyond a quantitative quest for diversity, and embrace a more qualitative quest for true pluralism in our higher education institutions.

The themes of the past several weeks are varied and broad including our need for a stronger push against sexual violence; the importance of standing up for principles of inclusion, equality and justice as part of the process of developing Morehouse men; the role of lifelong education and action in building inclusive and just communities; the imperative to ensure that the Morehouse male identity is “multi-ed” and fluid, yet always grounded in a consistent set of core and defining values, and; the importance of building transparency and trust into efficient administrative processes when handling situations that either reflect or contradict our values and principles. In the aggregate, these themes remind me that at Morehouse, we are proudly branded as a special community of conscientious learners and leaders with a history of pushing and pulling Americans to higher social, political and spiritual heights. And implicit in that mission is our obligation to practice what we preach and to model the values and principles that truly set us apart from those who are content to pay mere lip service to our most cherished ideals.

At Morehouse, we have always understood that our campus living-learning environment is a microcosm of the world we envision and the world we want to will into being. As a Morehouse student, I vividly recall reading Dr. King’s book, The Beloved Community. In it, he describes a new world where reconciliation, redemption and revitalization are the rule rather than the exception. Dr. King understood (better than most) that only by eliminating (racial) hatred, economic exploitation and violence could we fashion a new world out of this old world where such conditions persist to this day, as illuminated by the recent, shocking violence in Paris.

In our quest for the beloved community, we clearly have much work to do. And that work is best approached with a keen introspective thoughtfulness that makes us far more aware of our own strengths, and awakened to our own weaknesses, prejudices and biases toward others. Secondly, if we are to stand in the
Morehouse spirit and tradition, we have a dual obligation to continuously deepen our understanding of issues of inclusion, acceptance and social justice that are certainly worthy of our support and advocacy.

If we can do these things, I have every confidence that we will be better architects of the global beloved community, and will do so by first proving the concept of the local beloved community right here on our own campus.

It is incumbent upon Morehouse to lead the way in creating this new world. And the abiding ancestral expectation is that we lead by example and shun the posturing and hollow sophistries of the unreformed reformer.

Personally, part of what made my undergraduate development at Morehouse distinctive and successful was the degree of clarity I was provided about what was expected of me as a Man of Morehouse. Morehouse leaders were also clear about who and how we were expected to be as graduated Morehouse Men. And there was a clear embrace by the campus and by the alumni that has steadily motivated even the least sentient among us to strive to grow tall enough to wear that proverbial Morehouse crown. The attributes associated with that crown have been described in various ways, over time.

Thus, with those crown values in mind, we have insisted that today's Morehouse students become men of exemplary acuity, agency and integrity, each experiencing and benefitting from a unique brotherhood, while aspiring always to be consequential in the world! These expectations are today's expression of the traditional institutional values from which they are drawn.

More importantly, these expectations also serve as an important backdrop to my further reflections about recent activities here at Morehouse.

On Monday night I sat to dinner with approximately 20 invited student leaders from across the AUC. They represented various organizations, including: "Black Lives Matter", "AUC Shut It Down," "Safe Space," as well as engaged and committed individual students across our three colleges. Together, they defied their generation's stereotype of being disengaged and apathetic, and taught me a great deal about their challenges and needs, and how we might strengthen our commitment to affirming them, embracing them and enabling them to thrive. I now have a better understanding of how real and perceived forces converge to keep students from seeing themselves as "Men of Morehouse" and ultimately "Morehouse Men."

As we concluded our dinner, the student leaders asked that Morehouse respond to ATLBSU Coalition's request for a statement that affirms the college's commitment to ensuring safety, equality and justice for Black students. I made that commitment while reminding them of what I said during my 2014 inaugural address: "we were constructed to lift not just our people, but our country, and our world" and "being transcendent in the face of hatred and ignorance is the Morehouse way."

Therefore, on my watch, Morehouse will continue her commitment to ensuring the safety, equality and justice of Black students.

Our student leaders also requested that we clarify our support for a fully inclusive experience for our LGBTQIA community at Morehouse. I am convinced that we can and shall build and maintain a high-performing and nurturing beloved campus community. That includes embracing and affirming our LGBTQIA community in a new way, thereby enabling them to experience a more inclusive and enlightened Morehouse College.

As we think of how best to inspire, inform and encourage one another to effectively address the thorny and challenging developmental issues ahead, I am reminded of the function of brotherhood. Without a doubt,
unconditional brotherhood should undergird our drive to build and maintain a high-performing and nurturing beloved campus community. Our concept of unconditional brotherhood firmly establishes that everyone matters, and that we embrace, rather than judge, manipulate or rebuff our differences and diversity.

This means that in a dynamic community of men, in addition to standing against all forms of violence, we must always stretch, learn, accept and adjust to differences, even as we clarify and cherish our common ground as men of Morehouse and as Morehouse men. This further means that our language and actions ought to build community in and beyond our diverse population of “learned” men. And by consistently elevating our thoughts, language and actions, we will successfully cause our new beloved campus community to engender a new beloved world community.

That is our calling. That is our commitment. That is our work. And that is our destiny!

Sincerely,

John Silvanus Wilson, Jr.
President

cc: Laercia Cade, Esq.
    Dr. Garikai Campbell
    Dr. Alan Robertson
    Dr. Timothy Sams
    Mr. Bill Taggart