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**Higher-Level Thinking for  
AIM High Teachers  
Murchison Middle School  
November 10, 1990**

Good Morning. I am so very happy to have been invited to address you today. I need to say a special thanks to Mrs. Marilyn Fowler for my being here. She and I spent time discussing the AIM High Program several weeks ago, and I have a good feel for what this outstanding program is all about. When I finally got around to writing this speech, it became clear to me that there were several different things that I want to say to you.

You comprise the group of people whom I most admire in this world. I hope you believe me when I say that there is no job I know of that is more important than being a teacher in Grades K-12. I do understand that teachers are not paid anywhere near what they should be paid. But I am sure you agree with me, that the amount of money paid to people doing certain occupations says nothing at all about the importances of their occupations. Indeed, if money and importance went hand-in-hand, then Mike Tyson, the prize fighter, or

Michael Jackson, the rock singer, are the most important people in the whole wide world!

My life exemplifies of how a person can profit from the words and deeds of other people, especially public school teachers. I am a native of Lexington, Kentucky. In the formative years of my life, during the late 1950s and early 1960s, there were many restrictions on what people like me could do or even aspire to. "Jim Crow" practices were rampant: local custom prohibited blacks from the free use of downtown accommodations; we attended segregated schools, and were buried in separate cemeteries. I can vividly recall going to Joyland Amusement Park on "Negro Day," which was one day every three months. I remember wondering, what do white people do in public bathrooms that we don't do, since we could not use them?" In May 1964--the historian in me remembers the exact Month--I went into Walgreen's with a friend and attempted to be served because I had heard that black people could now sit and eat in any restaurant they desired. The waitress said to me, "I am sorry, we do not serve

Negroes," to which I replied, "No problem, I don't eat Negroes, I want a hamberger!" I do not say these things out of a sense of bitterness but to point out the reality of American society of that day and that the color of your skin could greatly determine the options available to you.

Yet, when I turned 18, the world was changing: the death of Martin Luther King, Jr., actually made it possible for my future wife and I to receive money to go to College. The University of Kentucky gave me a grant that was renewable each semester as long as I made good grades. I was not smart--after all, I had graduated from high school in the bottom one-third of my class--but I was smart enough to figure out a good deal when I heard one. After completing my B.A. degree, I was awarded a fellowship for my Master's Degree at UK; then I had a fellowship for my Ph.D., to Duke University, which was worth a considerable sum of money. The graduate advisor at Duke explained that the fellowship was for three years only, and after that I would be on my own financially. All that meant to me was that I had no choice but to do all of the course work, and the research and the writing of my dissertation within the three years. My wife and I (we

had gotten married after our sophomore year in college) moved to Durham, North Carolina, on July 3, 1974; we moved back to Lexington for me to start teaching on July 11, 1977, and I had the Ph.D. degree in hand. Please do not view this as bragging on my part, but I must admit that I am proud of the fact that (1) I was the first black to receive the Ph.D. degree in History at Duke even though at least nine other Afro-Americans had been admitted to the program before me, and (2) regardless of race, I completed the Ph.D. program in History at Duke quicker than any other student had. So at the age of 27, I was awarded the Ph.D. from Duke--an elite college--and had Universities all over the nation offering me jobs.

Nothing I say should give you the impression that I have "made it" on my own, without the help of other people. Indeed, as I look back on my life, at every crucial point, I have met someone who has given me encouragement, or sound advice, or whatever else I seemed to need at that time to get over the next hurdle. This first started at the all-black schools I attended from Grades K-8. As a young boy, I was always in trouble at school and adults were constantly calling my

mother telling her about the latest thing I had done at the park or in our neighborhood.

I eventually noticed that some of my teachers seemed to be especially hard on me, that they often allowed other students to get away with misbehavior or poor work that I was called to task over. At a very low moment in the eight grade I asked one of my teachers, Mrs. Mary Roach, why do all of my teachers dislike me so? She said that they realized I had potential, that on the few occasions when I was not being disruptive but actually taking part in class activities, I exhibited real ability, and that I could make something of my life. The only thing stopping me from being something, she emphatically said, was me. Mrs. Roach explained that beginning the very next school year, I would be attending an all-white school and I needed to be prepared for what I would encounter, namely that some of my teachers might not demand the very best from me. As fate would have it, when I was in the 11th grade I told my American History teacher that I wanted to be a History teacher just like him. I will never forget his reply. I lacked the intelligence to graduate from college and become a teacher he

said. I should join the Army or get a job on the assembly line at IBM. Please do not misunderstand me, enlisting in the Army or working at IBM can, in fact, lead to very meaningful <sup>lives,</sup> ~~lines.~~ But, I knew his comments were designed as a "put-down," to remind me that I had a place in life from which I really could not expect to grow. Though I was angry, I refused to buy into his negative assessment of me. Why? because the words of Mrs. Roach were still in my mind and thoughts: that I could be anything I wanted to be. She and the other black teachers at the "supposedly inferior black schools," most definitely planted some seeds that I have sowed.

Here is a point that I must absolutely leave with you teachers of the Aim High Program: on far too many occasions in the desegregated schools, white teachers do not push black children hard enough. For whatever reasons, some white teachers--in sharp contrast to the teachers in the all-black schools--often allow black children to get away with forms of behavior that ultimately will be counter productive to them in life: allow them to use English incorrectly, to wear whatever clothes they want, to avoid standards of

proper hair care, and on and on. These teachers--to be sure are in a minority--might adopt such a stance toward black children because they do not feel real comfortable around them or--even worse, feel blacks are inferior. But teachers it may surprise you as to which child or children will actually be motivated by you and move far beyond what seems to have been their station in life.

That I am a professor--a fancy name for what I actually am--a teacher--is a direct result of having been influenced by Mrs. Roach and several other teachers whom I encountered during the formative years of my life. I don't know about you, but I love going into the classroom and challenging students to become interested in my subject. I teach American History, a subject that initially many of my students say that they are not interested in. To that assertion, I always explain that if you find History boring then it means that it was not taught to you correctly. Surely, I argue, all of us are interested in learning about our past, of how we got to where we are today, of how we are part of a large "chain" that stretches back over the centuries.



Making my job a little more challenging is the fact that I teach History 315K, a course that students take to complete one-half of the State requirement in American History. I suspect that initially, some of my students resent that they are part of a captive audience. Then, to make it even worse, I teach this course on Tuesday and Thursday mornings at 8:00. <sup>Yet,</sup> Over the years, this course has made my teaching reputation here at UT: I have won teaching awards, and have been mentioned positively in the annual polls conducted by UTMOST Magazine. I have had many many students tell me that they like this class, and that it is the only class they would take at 8:00, and that they never once missed the class. I always respond by asking them "why?"

I remain surprised when many of my students say to me that I initially captivate them with my enthusiasm for my course. Surely, I want to believe, other people are excited that they have the opportunity to teach? Maybe they are excited, but they somehow fail to spread their sense of excitement and enjoyment to their students. I

do not know about you, but I honestly feel fortunate to be a teacher, and every day that I go into the classroom I hope I exhibit that feeling.

The students say that my class, even though it is in American History, a subject all of them know, at least on the surface, turns out to be a very learning and engaging experience. Here is something that I firmly believe you must do to be a successful teacher, be it at the college level, high school, junior high, or elementary school: you must have a "hook," something that will attract them to your subject and make them see "why" this is an important course. I start off by challenging them about what they know about American History. I ask them, "Who discovered Europe?" Since that proves to be too difficult, then, "Who discovered Germany, or England, or France, and when?" Next, "Who discovered America?" Explain how the concept of Columbus discovering America makes no sense.

Continuing on with the "hook," I ask my students, "Who was Ebenezer MacIntosh?" Also, I ask a very crucial question, "When was the Declaration of Independence signed?" The answer is not July 4 but August 2. All of these questions relates to the theme of my course.

From my perspective it is crucial to have a theme in a course that touches on everything. My theme is "History From the Bottom Up."

Please listen to the following poem.

Who built the seven towers of Thebes?  
The books are filled with names of kings.  
Was it kings who hauled the craggy blocks of stone? . . .  
In the evening when the Chinese wall was finished  
Where did the masons go? . . .

Young Alexander plundered India.  
He alone?  
Caesar beat the Gauls.  
Was there not even a cook in his army?  
Philip of Spain wept as his fleet  
Was sunk and destroyed. Were there no other tears?  
Frederick the Great triumphed during the Seven  
Years War. Who  
Triumphed with him? . . .

Every ten years a great man,  
Who paid the piper?

So many particulars.  
So many questions.

About a year ago, I was interviewed by Alcade, the Alumni magazine at the University of Texas. The writer explained during the interview that I was a teacher that students had said that they like in part because of the humor I use in my lectures. Let me be clear here: when I first started teaching, I did not act myself. But at some point, I realized that I find humor in most things in life. I never do it at the expense of sex, race, religion, and the like, but I do find enough other things to poke at for fun. It has helped me get through many of the tough issues that I have to lecture about. Use humor to make points about whites calling themselves "Native Americans," about the concept of the "self-made man," and how whites give 110%. Students especially find humor in my lecture on Thomas Jefferson and race, where he talks about blacks having natural rhythm •

## Conclusion

Being a teacher is much more than a job: it is a calling. You and I have been entrusted with a most important task: the molding of young minds. The first time a student came up to me and said that ~~they~~<sup>she</sup> had switched ~~their~~<sup>her</sup> major to teaching because of me, I did not know whether to be flattered or scared. How can I be a role model to someone when it is doubtful if I really have my own "act together?" Because we are, in fact, often viewed as role models, as the starting point for information on so many different subjects, I want to end by challenging you to do something that I too must do: I decided two years ago that the praise I have received as a teacher is not completely justified. Nevertheless, many of my students have high expectations of me. I must strive to live up to their expectations. In other words, every time I go into the classroom I must do my best.

Thank you for your time.