

Gerald "Jay" Williams: It is so good to be back home in this place. But I must confess that a 10 to 12 minute message poses quite a challenge for me. Maybe it's because as a black preacher from the black church tradition, one typically takes 10 to 12 minutes to warm up. Or perhaps it's simply because I'm just a tad bit long-winded. Whatever the case, here we are. And amidst these time constraints and given the need, as they say, to be brief, be brilliant and be seated. I was tempted to skip over my opening pleasantries and get right into my message, but if I did that, I would be rather impolite and I would be in fact snubbing my mother's teaching to always give thanks, no matter what.

Gerald "Jay" Williams: So first let me express thanksgiving for my love and life partner, Robert Lewis Kelsey the Third who was here with me today. And second, I look out and see, Oh, one of the elders of the tradition, Dr. Preston Williams, who was one of my teachers here in college and I am grateful for his scholarship and leadership and the rigor. I took the religious and ethical vision of MLK with professor Williams and as I look back over my transcript in my mind, I didn't get many B's in Harvard, but I think I did get a B+ with professor Williams because of the rigor of his work.

Gerald "Jay" Williams: And third. Although words will surely fall short of the gratitude and praise that is due her, I must say thank you to the Reverend Professor Stephanie Paulsell, the Interim Minister of this fine Memorial Church. Her brilliance of mind and gentleness of heart and passion of spirit is simply an utterly intoxicating. These past few weeks, as I have been preparing for this message, I've been reflecting on the ways that Dr. Paulsell has made a way for me, twice her teaching fellow in the Divinity Schools, Introduction to Ministry Studies course Reverend Dr. Paulsell offered me, as a doctoral student, the first time to give a formal academic lecture. And during that time as her teaching fellow, she invited me to take part in the semester long Have Mercy Workshop that explored the religious dimensions of the writings of Dr. Toni Morrison.

Gerald "Jay" Williams: Little did I know, when I said yes at that time, it would afford me the opportunity to sit on a panel with Dr. Morrison. On the day of her 2012 Ingersoll Lecture here at Harvard, which has now of course, you know, just been released in a text goodness and the literary imagination, which I have a small essay. So in addition to offering me my first lecturing gig, professor Paulsell has now gifted me with the opportunity for my first academic publication. And one attached to such a significant storyteller. Yes, my mother taught me right to give thanks no matter what. So Stephanie, thank you.

Gerald "Jay" Williams: Okay, now my time starts. Although my mother also taught me not to cuss in church, today I must ignore that instruction because this message is about shit. Now, before anyone considers these words blasphemous, let me hasten to say that these words do come from Holy Scripture. This morning, I take as my sermon texts, two readings from the song of Solomon, the first being Morrison's 1977 novel of the same name, where there she writes of Guitar's

advice Milkman. "Want to fly? You got to give up the shit that weighs you down."

Gerald "Jay" Williams: And the second lesson comes from the other song of Solomon, the biblical song of songs that canticle of canticle in chapter one, verse five. You've heard it, read already, but it is worth repeating. "Do not look down on me because I am dark. I am black and beautiful." So today for us, these two scriptures converge. Solomon song of song and Morrison Song of Solomon, that novel about flight and roots and loving oneself with a love as strong as death. A passion, the songwriter said, as fierce as the grave.

Gerald "Jay" Williams: You see, Morrison, she who was loved, pens Holy Writ and authors sacred texts, that write against the texts that have written violence upon black flesh. Her project is to expose, and yes, I say is because she is still with us. Her project is to expose the evils that have corrupted the beauty of the divinity that dwells within black bodies. But to be sure her work is not just for black people. She, who was loved, helped us to see how such evil diminishes the humanity of all of us. She, who was love, writes of love and home and paradise and jazz, that music that is birthed in a particular moment in a particular place by a particular people and yet still transcends time and space.

Gerald "Jay" Williams: Yes, it is for all of us, and hear me when I say this, we have all been deceived. Perhaps it is just a white lie, but more than likely it is a black mark and a black smudge, a black scar, whatever the case, it conceals the truth of the matter that we've all been lied to. We've all been bamboozled. We've all been hoodwinked. Yes, we've all been deceived. Perhaps the greatest of life's deceptions is the fact that learning is enough. Yes, we have been seduced to believe that the more we learn, the better off we'll be. That learning is some linear activity that propels us forward along life's grand path of progress. That learning will make us smarter and because we are smarter, we will make sounder decisions and so on and so forth.

Gerald "Jay" Williams: But today, I wonder if Dostoevsky is correct that truth harbors a lie, or maybe it's that the lie harbors a truth. I'm not entirely sure. And this fundamental message mustn't be lost upon we, who sit in the sacred space founded for the cultivation of learned Puritan clergy. But today this clergy is not so much interested in learning as I am in unlearning. Unlearning the shit that has weighed us down and the stuff that haunts us.

Gerald "Jay" Williams: Yes. The irony is that sometimes you have to let go of the very things that have made you, you in order to become the you that you are called to be. Because some of the stuff that we've learned is wrong at best and dangerous at worst. Yes, some of the stuff that we've been taught is destructive and detrimental and sometimes even downright diabolical. You see, the unspoken presumption is that when you learn you've learned the right thing. But what happens when you've learned wrong and been hardwired with false facts, as part of what

Emilie Townes describes as the cultural production of evil. Because we know that hate too is learned.

Gerald "Jay" Williams: The world too often tells us otherwise. I am. You are and yes, all of you. I'll come back to this. I am. You are. We are black and beautiful. This declaration of a female lover is a proclamation of what she has unlearned. "Don't gaze on me with scorn." She says, "Because my skin is as dark as the night." You can read between the lines and almost hear her say what's been said to her. Your hair is too coarse, your nose too broad. Your hips are too wide, your buttocks too large. Your body, your presence is not the norm. It is not white. But this passionate, full bodied lover rejects the rejection of her black body and reclaims it as dark and lovely.

Gerald "Jay" Williams: You see, when Solomon scripted his song, he could not have imagined how prophetic his wise words would be for our present age. To declare beauty in what is deemed time and again as grotesque. How could he have known how these words, "I am black and beautiful," haunts us who have been deemed spooks. So grotesquely and visible that we cannot be gazed upon, let alone be the aesthetic paradigm for a nation that time and again determines that our very presence is an abomination deserving of death.

Gerald "Jay" Williams: Because as Washington Post Columnist Eugene Robinson helps us to understand, whether you are walking while black Michael Brown, Ferguson, Missouri 2014. Or standing while black, Eric Gardner, Staten Island, 2014. Or running away while black, Walter Scott, South Carolina, 2015. Or driving while black, Philando Castile, Minnesota, 2016. Or shopping while black, Alton Sterling, Louisiana, 2016. Or holding an iPhone while black, Stephon Clark, Sacramento, California 2018. Or staying home while black, Botham Jean, Dallas, Texas 2018. Or staying home while black, Atatiana Jefferson, Fort Worth, Texas Saturday, October 12th, 2019.

Gerald "Jay" Williams: Just being black are all conditions for being killed in these United States of America. Beloved, we have arrived at the place in America where a black body is not even safe at home, let alone in the streets of a Southern sundown city or the streets of Southie.

Gerald "Jay" Williams: And when they kill you in your home with Morrison, we must cry mercy. And we must plumb the depths of the implicit bias and ask why do they kill us when they see us, if they see us at all? No, these individual acts of violence against black bodies are not just personal sins, but rather they are rooted in a systematic, institutional and social structure of sin. And because of that, we must wonder who will teach our cops and the courts to unlearn the implicit bias embedded in an architecture of white supremacy that claims the normativity of whiteness and the monstrosity of blackness. Who will teach so that we might unlearn?

Gerald "Jay" Williams: But I am black and beautiful. This is what 21 year old Deandre Somerville had to tell himself each day when last month he served 10 days in jail for oversleeping and missing jury duty. Because the judge wanted to teach him a lesson. Each day, Deandre, this young man with no criminal record, had to keep telling himself, "I am not a criminal. I am not a criminal. I am not a criminal." He said. You see, when the condemnation of blackness leads to the criminalization of black bodies, Solomon's words, "I am black and I am beautiful," are poetic words that give power to shore up one's personhood. When the police and the powers that be try to pluck out one's heart and quench one's spirit.

Gerald "Jay" Williams: I am black and I am beautiful. This is a love language to the self, to declare I am when they say you are dark and ugly, shadowy and terrifying, a horror, an eyesore, a monstrosity. I am black and I am beautiful then is a song of protest at the very heart of Morrison's Song of Solomon. And also at the heart of her Harvard Ingersoll Lecture on goodness. It is a song that sings. I will love me even when the world around me does not bother enough to get to know me well enough to love me. Still, I will love me.

Gerald "Jay" Williams: And Morrison is correct. Right? And when she says that that goodness is the acquisition of self-knowledge, goodness is the acquisition of self-knowledge. And if she is correct that goodness is the acquisition of self-knowledge, then self-love or the knowing of myself as good, as lovable, is predicated upon the unknowing, the unlearning of the bad texts that have been written upon us. The bad texts that have written self-loathing and violence and destruction on our bodies.

Gerald "Jay" Williams: Yes, the acquisition of self-knowledge requires the unknownment of knowledges that others have circumscribed upon ourselves. Then this unknownment cause us to articulate a language of love of the self for the self, which is ultimately for the sake of us all. Because to be sure, as Professor James Hal Cone has taught us, blackness is not only a skin color or a phenotype, but rather blackness is a symbol also for the disinherited, for the oppressed, for the marginalized and we all, we all who know ourselves as bruised but not broken, persecuted but not forsaken as Paul says and pressed down but not destroyed.

Gerald "Jay" Williams: We all then might be black. Yes, I am black and beautiful. And this is a language of radical solidarity and a language of a transcendental identity that we all might share. And if the love of God, as the gospel lesson teaches us, is inextricably linked to the love of self, which is inextricably linked to the love of neighbor, then we need each other. Indeed, as the gospel writers said, we need each other to survive. As the love of neighbor and the love of God depends on loving self.

Gerald "Jay" Williams: So the unlearning of self-hate is a precondition for the learning of self-love, which is actually the axiom, the very starting point for world transformation. And our very capacity to change the world rests on a change of heart, a turning of the self to the self. Therefore, the proclamation, I am black and beautiful, is

playing in the dark, as Morrison said. It is an act of creative and Holy resilience. This act of inverting and reappropriating and twisting and querying and claiming our imperfections as the very site, the very point of departure for an of our belovedness.

Gerald "Jay" Williams: So it seems to me then that we are on a journey, a pilgrimage of sorts, towards self-love. The type of enfleshed, embodied, incarnate. All your heart, all your soul, all your mind, all your strength. Love that Jesus spoke of. This, he taught, was the first and greatest commandment. Yes. This love, this love as love is the very art of languaging ourselves in new ways, in our own language, a language that gets under our skin, language that we can wear, to claim my voice, to declare I am black and beautiful. I am dark and lovely. I am poor and blessed. I am fearfully and wonderfully made. I am undocumented and never alien. I am gender nonconforming and gifted by God. I am transgender and transformed by God's spirit. Yes, loving oneself is to reject the rejection, and to speak over oneself and claim I am good. I am beloved of God and I am good. You, beloved of God, are good.

Gerald "Jay" Williams: Yes, we are called to craft new languages and script new songs and write new stories and escape new sounds and create new art forms that speak life and that helps us to release, to release the shit that weighs us down and take flight, which is nothing short of an exorcism of the evils that have tried to claim our bodies and enslave our souls. Perhaps this is a bit of what Emerson meant in his 1838 Divinity School Address. When he set out to cultivate a learned clergy to a higher order of things. He preached that Jesus Christ belonged to the true race of prophets. "Jesus," Emerson said, "Saw with open eye the mystery of the soul that the human, her being, is without bound, that to the good she is born and through me, through you, through us, god acts. Through me, through you, through us, God speaks."

Gerald "Jay" Williams: So then in the end we must ask, what are the things that I must unlearn about myself in order to become myself, my best self? And what knowledges must we release in order to become the boundless vessels of the very divinity of God? What spirits must we surrender in order to be temples of the Holy Ghost? As we approach Halloween, and the celebration of the saints, may we be haunted. Yes. Haunted by ghosts of affirmation and the specter of Morrison, whose presence still is with us. May the spirits of self-love keep us up at night, rejoicing and singing that song of songs, that canticle of canticles, because self-love is delighting in yourself and celebrating yourself with a happiness that is pure contentment, rooted in the truth that you are loved. Whether you are black or white or brown or Asian, [inaudible 00:23:19] or indigenous, whether your skin is dark or light, your nose narrow or broad, your lips full or thick, you are black and beautiful. Let it be so. Amen.

Congregation: Amen.