**Ceremony Speaker**

The University of Toledo

Spring Commencement 2016   
Saturday, May 7, 2015 | 2:00 p.m. | Savage Arena

Dr. Johnnetta B. Cole

Dr. Johnnetta Betsch Cole was appointed the Director of the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art (NMAfA) in March, 2009. Founded as a small museum on Capitol Hill in 1964, NMAfA became a part of the Smithsonian Institution in 1979, and in 1987 it moved to its current location on the National Mall. The museum’s collection of over 12,000 objects represents nearly every area of the continent of Africa and contains a variety of media and art forms. The National Museum of African Art also has an extensive education program. Since the mid-1980’s, Dr. Cole has worked with a number of Smithsonian programs. She currently serves on the Scholarly Advisory Board for the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture, the construction of which will be completed on the National Mall by 2016.

Before assuming her current position, Johnnetta Cole had a long and distinguished career as an educator and humanitarian. Through her work as a college president, university professor and through her published works, speeches, community service and consultations with corporations and not-for-profit organizations she consistently addresses racial, gender, and all other forms of inequality.

Dr. Cole served as president of Spelman College and Bennett College for Women. She is the only person to have served as president of these two historically Black colleges for women in the United States. She is also Professor Emerita of Emory University from which she retired as Presidential Distinguished Professor of Anthropology, Women’s Studies and African American Studies.

After one year in an early entrance program at Fisk University and completing her undergraduate studies at Oberlin College, Johnnetta Cole earned a master’s degree and a Ph.D. in anthropology from Northwestern University with a focus on African Studies. Dr. Cole made history in 1987 when she became the first African American woman to serve as president of Spelman College. During her presidency, Spelman was named the number one liberal arts college of the South. During her presidency at Bennett College for Women, an art gallery was opened and programs were initiated in women’s studies and global studies.

Dr. Cole has conducted research in Africa, the Caribbean and the United States, and she has authored and edited several books and scores of scholarly articles. She is the President of the board of the Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD). She is a fellow of the American Anthropological Association and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. She serves on the board of Gregory University, in Uturu, Nigeria. Dr. Cole is also a member of the Toni Morrison Society.

Johnnetta Cole has been awarded 68 honorary degrees and she is the recipient of numerous awards, including the TransAfrica Forum Global Public Service Awards; the Radcliffe Medal; the Eleanor Roosevelt Val-Kill Medal; the Alexis de Tocqueville Award for Community Service from United Way of America; the Joseph Prize for Human Rights presented by the Anti-Defamation League; the Uncommon Height Award from the National Council of Negro Women; the Straight for Equality award from Parents, Families and Friends of Gays and Lesbians (PFLAG); the John W. Gardner leadership Award from Independent Sector; the Lenore and George W. Romney Citizen Volunteer Award from the Points of Light Foundation; the George Washington Carver award; the Benjamin Franklin Creativity Laureate Award; and the Alston-Jones International Civil and Human Rights Award. In 2010, Ebony Magazine listed her among the 100 most influential African Americans, in 2011 Washingtonian Magazine listed her among Washington, DC’s most powerful women and in 2015 BET (Black Entertainment Television) awarded her the BET Honors award for education.

On December 8, 2012, in Uturu, Nigeria, an Igbo Chieftaincy title of ADAOHA (Daughter of All) was conferred on Dr. Cole by His Royal Highness Eze Cyril Ibe, EzeOgbonnaya Uwadiegwu and Eze Chimezie.

From 2004 to 2006, Dr. Cole was the Chair of the Board of United Way of America, the first African American to serve in that position. She has served on the corporate boards of Home Depot, Merck and Nation’s Bank South. She was the first woman to serve on the board of Coca-Cola Enterprises.

Dr. Cole is on the Advisory Committee of America’s Promise and Points of Light Foundation. She is a member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., The Links, Inc., and the National Council of Negro Women.

Dr. Cole is married to James D. Staton Jr. She is the mother of three sons and one step–son, and she has three grand children. Dr. Cole is also a mentor to many young women and men.

Photo credit: Jessica Suworoff, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution

**Dr. Johnnetta B. Cole**  
**The University of Toledo Spring 2016 Commencement Speaker: Address**

**Spring Commencement 2016   
Saturday, May 7, 2016 | 2:00 p.m. | Savage Arena**

**YOU CAN HELP TO CHANGE THE WORLD**

**COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS**

**UNIVERSITY OF TOLEDO**

**MAY 7, 2016**

**GOOD AFTERNOON! AND WHAT A GREAT AFTERNOON IT IS AS WE GATHER TO CELBRATE THE GRADUATION OF THIS MIGHTY CLASS OF 2016! IT REALLY FEELS GOOD TO BE BACK AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TOLEDO, AND BY RECEIVING AN HONORY DEGREE, TO BECOME A MEMBER OF THE CLASS OF 2016.**

**I WANT TO ACKLOWLDEGE SISTER PRESIDENT SHARON GABER, THE FIRST WOMAN PRESIDENT TO LEAD THIS STELLAR UNIVERISTY! SISTER PRESIDENT, WHAT A PRIVILEDGE AND WHAT A JOY IT IS TO GIVE THIS ADDRESS AT THE FIRST COMMENCEMENT WHERE YOU ARE AT THE HELM OF UNIVERSITY OF TOLEDO. I ALSO WANT TO ACKNOWLEDGE THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES, ADMINISTRATORS, FACULTY, STAFF, ALUMNI, STUDENTS AND FRIENDS OF THIS VERY SPECIAL UNIVERSITY. TO MAKE SURE I HAVE ACKNOWLEDGED EVERYONE WHO IS HERE, I GREET YOU AS MY SISTERS AND BROTHERS ALL.**

**I WANT TO SALUTE ALL OF THE FAMILIES AND FRIENDS OF THE GRADUATES WHO ARE HERE, AND THOSE WHO COULD NOT BE HERE. YOU HAVE DONE SO MUCH TO MAKE THIS GRADUATION A REALITY FOR YOUR LOVED ONE. THESE ARE THE FOLKS WHO ALWAYS BELIEVED IN YOU GRADUATES, EVEN WHEN YOU SOMETIMES DIDN’T BELIEVE IN YOURSELVES. THESE ARE THE WONDERFUL FOLK WHO HAVE BEEN YOUR HUMAN ATM’S!**

**A COMMENCEMENT IS A STERLING TRIBUTE TO THE POWER OF EDUCATION AND THE ROLES IT CAN PLAY IN OUR LIVES. THE FIRST ROLE OF EDUCATION IS TO HELP US BETTER UNDERSTAND THE WORLD. THE SECOND ROLE IS TO POINT OUT THE ROLE THAT WE CAN PLAY IN HELPING TO MAKE THE WORLD BETTER. ONE OF MY SHEROS, MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN ONCE SAID:**

*“IF YOU DON'T LIKE THE WAY THE WORLD IS, YOU CHANGE IT. YOU HAVE AN OBLIGATION TO CHANGE IT. YOU JUST DO IT ONE STEP AT A TIME.”*

**SOME OF YOU MIGHT BE THINKING THAT YOU ARE JUST ONE PERSON, AND WHAT CAN YOU REALLY DO TO MAKE THE WORLD BETTER? WELL, LISTEN TO THIS AFRICAN PROVERB THAT ANSWERS THAT QUESTION.**

*“IF YOU THINK YOU’RE TOO SMALL TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE, TRY SLEEPING WITH A MOSQUITO.”*

**HISTORY AND HERSTORY HAVE SHOWN HOW DETERMINED INDIVIDUALS CAN INDEED CHANGE THE WORLD FOR THE BETTER ----INDIVIDUALS OF THE MODERN ERA SUCH AS MAHATMA GHANDI, NELSON MANDELA, ELEANOR ROOSEVELT, MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR, ROSA PARKS, CESAR CHAVEZ AND GLORIA STEINEM.**

**HISTORY AND HERSTORY HAVE ALSO SHOWN THAT REGULAR FOLKS CAN AND DO HAVE THE ABILITY TO EFFECT SOCIAL CHANGE. IN THE 1980’S, A YOUNG TEENAGER, RYAN WHITE, ADVOCATED FOR HIV/AIDS EDUCATION AND UNDERSTANDING. HE NOT ONLY BECAME ONE OF THE FACES OF THAT MOVEMENT, BUT HE ALSO HELPED TO CHANGE HOW OUR NATION LOOKS AT AND DEALS WITH HIV/AIDS.**

**I THINK OF MALALA, A YOUNG GIRL FROM PAKISTAN, WHO’S ADVACACY FOR GIRLS EDUCATION HAS CONTRIBUTED MIGHTILY TO YOUNG GIRLS AROUND THE WORLD BEING ABLE TO GO TO SCHOOL.**

**AND JUST RECENTLY, SOFIA, A THIRD GRADER WROTE TO PRESIDENT OBAMA QUESTIONING WHY THERE WERE NO U.S. BILLS AND COINS WITH WOMEN’S FACES ON THEM. SHE LAUNCHED A PROCESS THAT LED TO WOMEN, SUCH AS HARRIET HUBMAN, BEING PLACED ON U.S. BILLS FOR THE VERY FIRST TIME IN OUR COUNTRY.**

**SOME OF YOU, DEAR GRADUATES, WILL GO FROM HERE TO ENGAGE IN FURTHER STUDY. SOME OF YOU WILL LEAVE THE UNIVERSITY OF TOLEDO AND ENTER THE WORK FORCE. AND YES, BECAUSE OF THE STATE OF THE U.S. ECONOMY, SOME OF YOU ARE STILL LOOKING FOR A JOB. WHAT EVER YOUR SITUATION IS, HERE IS WHAT I ASK OF YOU: BECOME A CHAMPION FOR POSSITIVE SOCIAL CHANGE.**

**THERE ARE SO MANY ISSUES THAT NEED ADDRESSING; CLIMATE CHANGE, HUNGER, POVERTY, WAR AND VIOLENCE TO NAME BUT A FEW. SO, MY DEAR CLASSMATES, CHOOSE AN ISSUE THAT YOU FEEL PASSIONATELY ABOUT AND WORK ON IT, EVEN IF YOU THINK THAT YOUR CONTRIBITION WILL ONLY BE A SMALL ONE. MOTHER TERESA ONCE SAID:**

*“IF YOU CAN’T FEED 100 PEOPPLE, THEN FEED JUST 1.”*

**HOWEVER, IF THERE IS NOT AN ISSUE THAT TUGS AT YOUR HEART, THAT CRIES OUT FOR YOUR ENGAGEMENT, THAT KEEPS GNAWING AT YOU, HERE IS ONE THAT I FEEL PASSIONATE ABOUT AND THAT I INVITE YOU TO JOIN ME IN CONFRONTING.**

**THE ISSUE IS CENTERED IN A REALITY OF THE WORLD THAT YOU AND I LIVE IN. OUR NATION, AND INDEED THE WORLD, HAS NEVER BEEN AS DIVERSE AND INTERCONNECTED AS IT IS TODAY. THINK ABOUT IT. RIGHT HERE IN THIS ARENA, WE REFLECT EXTRADINARY DIVERSITY IN TERMS OF RACE, GENDER, GENDER IDENTITY, CLASS, SEXUAL ORIENTATION, NATIONALITY, RELIGION, AGE, ABILITY AND DISABILITY. ANOTHER ONE OF MY SHEROS, AUDRE LORDE, THE WELL KNOWN AFRICAN AMERICAN, LESBIAN POET, LEFT US WITH THESE PROFOUND WORDS:**

*“IT IS NOT OUR DIFFERENCES THAT DIVIDE US. IT IS OUR INABILITY TO RECOGNIZE, ACCEPT, AND CELEBRATE THOSE DIFFERENCES.”*

**IN SO MANY PLACES, HERE IN OUR NATION AND AROUND THE WOLD NOT ONLY ARE OUR DIFFERENCES NOT CELEBRATED, THEY ARE USED AS THE BASIS OF BIGOTRTY AND DISCRIMINATION. MY CLASSMATES, I STORNGLY BELIEVE THAT YOU AND I, HAVE THE RESPONSIBILTY TO CHALLENGE ANY AND ALL SYSTEMS OF INEQUALITY.**

**WHEN YOU ENCOUNTER INTOLLERANCE, BIGOTRY AND DISCRIMINATION, YOU MUST SPEAK UP AND SPEAK OUT. I URGE YOU TO ASK WHOEVER IS USING SUCH HATEFUL LANGUAGE TO THINK ABOUT WHAT THEY ARE SAYING AND WHY THEY ARE SAYING IT. AND DO YOUR BEST TO MAKE THE POINT THAT BIGOTRY IS NOT ONLY HURTFUL AND HARMFUL TO WHOM IT IS DIRECTED; IT ALSO CHALLENGES THE DIGNITY AND HUMANITY OF THE PERSON WHO IS EXPRESSING IT.**

**TO MY CLASSMATES WHO WILL LEAVE HERE TO BEGIN WORKING IN ANY NUMBER OF PROFESSIONS, I OFFER THIS CHALLENGE: BE A VOICE FOR FAIRNESS AND INCLUSION IN YOUR WORKPLACE. WHEN THERE ARE JOB OPENINGS WHERE YOU WORK, MAKE SURE THE SEARCH INCLUDES A POOL OF DIVERSE APPLICANTS. AND EQUALY IMPORTANT, IF NOT MORE SO, DO WHAT YOU CAN TO MAKE SURE THAT THE CULTURE AT YOUR WORKPLACE IS A WELCOMING ONE, INDEED THAT THERE IS THE KIND OF INCLUSIVENESS THAT ENCOURAGES ALL EMPLOYEES TO BRING THEIR WHOLE SELVES TO WORK.**

**OTHERS OF YOU WILL LEAVE HERE FOR POST BACCALAUREATE STUDY. IN YOUR GRADUATE, LAW OR MEDICAL SCHOOLS, SPEAK UP AND SPEAK OUT ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF A FACULTY, A CURRIUCLUM AND A STUDENT BODY THAT REFLECTS THE RANGE OF HUMAN DIVERSITIES THAT SURROUND US. IN DOING SO, YOU WILL HELP TO GUARANTEE A BETTER EDUCATIONAL PROCESS FOR YOURSELF, AND FOR ALL STUDENTS.**

**FOR THOSE OF YOU WHO CHOOSE TO BE PARENTS, AND FOR THOSE WHO CHOOSE NOT TO BE PARENTS, BUT WHO WILL BE IMPORTANT IN THE LIVES OF A NIECE, NEPHEW OR OTHER YOUNG FAMILY MEMBERS, OWN THE POWER YOU HAVE TO HELP A YOUNG PERSON TO BEGIN HIS OR HER LIFE WITHOUT THE SCORGE OF BIGOTRY. REMEMBER, BIGOTRY IS LEARNED. AND IF IT IS LEARNED, IT CAN BE UNLEARNED. AND BEST OF ALL, WE CAN STOP TEACHING IT.**

**DURING THIS AND EVERY ELECTION SEASON, YOU AND I, INDEED ALL AMERICANS, HAVE THE RESPONSIBILTIY TO INVISTIGATE HOW EACH AND EVERY CANDIDATE APPROACHES THE BASIC AMERICAN VALUE THAT SAYS, “ALL MEN, AND LET US ALWAYS ADD WOMEN TOO, ARE CREATED EQUAL.” AND IT IS MY VIEW THAT YOU AND I ALSO HAVE THE RESPONSIBILITY TO PUT INTO OFFICE CANDIDATES WHO ENDORSE THAT FUNDAMENTAL AMERICAN VALUE.**

**IT IS NOW TIME FOR ME TO BRING CLOSURE ON YOUR COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS. I WANT TO DO SO BY TELLING YOU MY VERSION OF THE WELL KNOW STORY, THE STAR THROWER. ONE MORNING, A YOUNG GIRL WAS WALKING ALONG A BEACH WHERE THERE WERE COUNTELSS STARFISH THAT HAD BEEN WASHED UP ON THE BEACH BY A STORM.**

**AS SHE CAME TO EACH STARFISH, THE YOUNG GIRL WOULD BEND DOWN, PICK UP THE STARFISH AND THROW IT BACK INTO THE OCEAN. AN OLD MAN WHO WAS WALKING ALONG THE BEACH NOTICED THE YOUNG GIRL AND AS HE APPROACHED HER HE SAID:**

*“GOOD MORNING, MY DAUGHTER! MAY I ASK WHAT IT IS THAT YOU ARE DOING?”*

**THE YOUNG GIRL LOOKED UP, AND REPLIED:**

*“GOOD MORNING SIR, I AM THROWING STARFISH INTO THE OCEAN. THE TIDE HAS WASHED THEM UP ONTO THE BEACH AND THEY CAN’T RETURN TO THE OCEAN BY THEMSELVES. WHEN THE SUN GETS HIGH, THEY WILL DIE UNLESS I THROW THEM BACK INTO THE OCEAN.”*

**THE OLD MAN SHOOK HIS HEAD AS HE REPLIED:**

*“BUT THEY’RE SO MANY STARFISH ON THIS BEACH. YOU CAN’T SAVE ALL OF THESE STARFISH. CAN’T YOU SEE THAT WHAT YOU ARE DOING WON’T MAKE A DIFFERENCE?”*

**THE YOUNG GIRL BENT DOWN, PICKED UP ANOTHER STARFISH AND THREW IT AS FAR AS SHE COULD INTO THE OCEAN. AND THEN SHE TURNED TO THE OLD MAN AND SAID:**

*“IT MADE A DIFFERENCE TO THAT ONE.”*

**I TRULY BELIEVE THAT EACH OF YOU CAN BE A FORCE FOR POSSITIVE CHANGE IN OUR WORLD.**

**TO EACH OF YOU MY CLASSMATES, I WANT TO SAY:**

**CONGRATULATIONS!**

**FELICIDADES!**

**MAZEL-TOV!**

**AND, BY GRADUATING I SAY, YOU DONE GOOD!**