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“Connections, Windows of Opportunity, and Leadership”

by Dr. Shirley Ann Jackson, Chairman
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On Her Induction Into
The National Women’s Hall of Fame
Seneca Falls, New York
July 11, 1998

In my mind’s eye, I have a picture--a vivid picture that has been recurring ever since I received word that I was to be inducted, here at Seneca Falls, into the National Women’s Hall of Fame. This mental picture is of a monument--not an imposing tower of marble and granite, but a living, breathing testimonial built up stone by stone, scene by scene, from the lives of the 136 women who already have been ensconced here. Within that picture, I see Elizabeth Cady Stanton at her table, crossing out word after word on the early drafts of the Declaration of Sentiments, trying to get the language right. I have a vision--of Ms. Stanton and her cohorts coming together--and connecting. Their connections led them to create and to pry open “windows of opportunity,” and to provide leadership for other women, and for the world in pushing for women’s rights in a time long before the term became part of our national and global vocabulary.

This historical vision, is, in my mind, the true Hall of Fame, the compelling centuries-old tribute that enlivens and binds together its young walls of mortar and brick. I cannot but believe that each of these women lived not only with a sense of what she was trying to accomplish, but also with a sense of what that accomplishment could mean to others, the women and men alike, who would come afterward. In other words, I believe that they, like thousands of others who will never be enshrined, lived with the sense that they were builders of this less tangible monument, their collective legacy.

I am reminded of a passage of Scripture, from the Book of Hebrews, which reads: “Wherefore, seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us run with patience the race that is set before us ...” Today our “cloud of witnesses”--both the living and the dead--is applauding, applauding not only those of us being recognized here, but all women, everywhere, who continue day after day to build this invisible Hall of Fame. It is our task to run a race worthy of their cheers. So, as I reflect upon being a part of this particular ceremony, what is particularly pleasing is the connections that I share, directly or indirectly, with several of the other inductees today. That leads me to share with you a few thoughts about those “connections,” about “windows of opportunity,” and about leadership.

First, I am especially gratified to be inducted as part of a group that includes, posthumously, the experimental physicist Dr. C. S. Wu--not only because of her pivotal work in disproving parity conservation in weak nuclear interactions, but because she was a physicist, in a field that traditionally has included so few women. Like Dr. Wu, I am a particle physicist (a theorist), by training and by research experience.

Second, while we have not gotten to know each other personally, Secretary Madeleine Albright and I were both appointed by President Bill Clinton, to work as high-level government officials in roles not traditionally held by women.

And third, I have a connection to Katherine Dexter McCormick, because I lived in her "house." Ms. McCormick was responsible for endowing the first and--still today--the only dormitory for women at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), in which I lived as an undergraduate, and, for two years, as a graduate student and physics tutor.

For Dr. Wu, the window of opportunity opened as she left her native China to pursue graduate studies in physics at the University of California, which in turn opened up a lifetime of accomplishment in experimental particle physics. Dr. Wu also recognized her responsibility for training and mentoring others--including yet another woman physicist who was a colleague of mine at Bell Labs, and who is now a professor and department chair at one of the University of California campuses.

In the case of Madeleine Albright, her appointment as the first female Secretary of State is a mark of leadership by President Bill Clinton, in opening yet another window of opportunity for a woman in a field traditionally dominated by men--just as he created a window of opportunity for me in appointing me as the first female (and first African-American) Chairman of the U. S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission--again in a field traditionally dominated by men.

As for Katherine McCormick, while she perhaps is best known--and deservedly so--for her role in co-founding the League of Women Voters, I am particularly grateful for the leadership she displayed in creating a dormitory for women at MIT. While that action may seem minor in relation to some of her other accomplishments, I can tell you that in 1964, when I was entering as a freshman and women made up less than 5% of the entire MIT student population, the refuge of an all-women's dormitory was anything but minor. The opening of McCormick Hall greatly improved the quality of life for women at MIT, contributing to their increase in the MIT student body.

Anais Nin once said that "life shrinks or expands in proportion to one's courage." Greatness, I believe, begins with courage and perseverance--the will to seek out and to take advantage of opportunities--as well as to create opportunities where none exist, for oneself and for others. Sometimes that courage and perseverance results in success and recognition, and sometimes it does not. When recognition does come, as it has for me today, it is only a reminder of responsibility--the responsibility as leader to set an example of vision, hard work, creative thinking, and scrupulous adherence to ethical standards, as well the responsibility to cultivate and to nurture the next generation of "Hall-of-Famers." So I am deeply honored, but I also am profoundly humbled by the responsibility and duty that accompany this honor.

I would not be here without the support of my loving and patient husband, Dr. Morris Washington, as well as our son, Alan. I would like to thank my real role model--my mother--Mrs. Beatrice Jackson, my sisters, Mrs. Barbara Avery and Mrs. Gloria Joseph, and my father,

Mr. George Jackson, who recently passed on, but who would have been fiercely proud, as always.

I thank my brother-in-law, Mr. James Avery and his mother, Florence, my nephews Kevin and his son Kevin Waters, and Jamar Joseph, my dear friend Janie Poole, and my colleagues from the NRC, all who have come to support me today.

Finally, I thank the 1998 National Honors Committee, including those responsible for nominating and selecting me for this extraordinary honor. And I especially thank the other inductees today--I am honored to be honored with you. Thank you.