## "Be Ashamed To Die"... Until

## **Inaugural Address of**

Everette J. Freeman
As
Eighth President
of
Albany State University
May 6, 2006

"Now the Lord had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee." - Genesis 12:1

Chancellor Davis, esteemed platform dignitaries, distinguished members of the Albany State University faculty, members of the ASU administrative and support staff, devoted ASU retirees who have given their all to this institution, alumni both of recent years and those of decades ago, friends and supporters of ASU, family members of the graduating class, and, most important of all, members of the graduating class of 2006: I am delighted and honored to be presiding over my first Spring Commencement ceremony as ASU's president and humbled to be commencing my journey as president as you, the men and women about to receive your degrees, commence your lives beyond these hallowed walls. Thank you for sharing this occasion with me at the beginning of your lives as ASU alumni and as I begin, after a short seven months, my journey here as ASU president.

I decided not to read my Inauguration Address, as is the custom, but to include it in your Commencement Day program. I wanted to save time for the bigger event of the day, your walk across the stage to become ASU graduates. And so, I yield the stage to you and gladly reduce my acceptance remarks to pages that you might read now and again as the years go by. Take some leisurely note of my comments now, if you will, but put this Commencement Day program in a safe place for future reading. In fact, my hope is that you will resolve to re-read this address in exactly ten years. Place a marker in your electronic PDA or whatever device you will be using ten years hence that will remind you on May 6, 2016, to pause to reflect upon this short commentary.

Throughout my life, I have re-read a few top-notch books and essays that are dear to me and that have served as intellectual anchors when I needed a respite from life's challenges. They include James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*, Eric Fromm's *The Sane Society*, King's *Letter From a Birmingham Jail*, Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, and W.E.B. DuBois' *The Souls of Black Folks*. There is something about revisiting a good read that always captivates me, and I urge you to identify a few good works that you feel strongly speak to your head and heart. Clearly, I am not suggesting that my remarks are in any way illuminating, but I do

hope you come back to them in a decade to see if they carry the same meaning then as they do now. And it is to this matter of the future that I wish to make a few points.

If you are a traditional student, you will have entered your third decade of life by 2016. If you are older or a graduate student earning a degree today, then you know well how enchanting it will be as your younger colleagues near you taste the passage of time. Many of you will have completed your formal, graduate and professional degrees. Still more of you will have begun raising children of your own. Nearly all of you will have accumulated more bills and debts, more woes, more sleepless nights, more moments of unmatched joy, more instances of unspeakable sorrow, more of a perspective of what it means to encounter a truly creative mind at work and golden memories of your halcyon days as ASU students.

As you ease into your favorite chair and open the leaves of this somewhat aged but still cherished Commencement Day program, the salient question you might instantly ask yourself – perhaps consciously, perhaps not – is this: Has the ASU degree I hold increased in value over the past decade? It seems to me to be a really simple, straightforward question that stands on its own. Do I have in my possession a degree that the marketplaces of ideas, competition and commerce regard as one that provides sustained growth year after year in the form of academic distinctions and achievements by its faculty, students and alumni, or do I hold a degree that is little more than an academic junk bond?

Part of the answer to the question of your degree's worth rests with you, and you must ask yourself some hard questions. Did I do all in my power over the past ten years to make ASU proud? Have I contributed my time, talents, energy and financial resources to helping the next generation of aspiring scholars earn an ASU degree just as I have done? Do I continue to demonstrate my commitment to the past that I cherish and the future I promised my alma mater I would fulfill? Have I let my family, classmates, beloved former faculty members, community and myself down by failing to do more, achieve more, give more to others?

Looking back over the span of a decade, what will you see about ASU that demonstrates in clear and compelling ways that your degree is worth more? It is my dream, my hope, my pledge to you that ASU will be as different to you in ten years as ASU today surely would appear different to our founder, Dr. Joseph Winthrop Holley, were he to resume life. By 2016, ASU will have completed two five-year strategic plans. As you recall the decade just passed, you will remember that your alma mater's strategic plan, covering the academic years 2006/07 through 2011, was completed just after you graduated and set ASU on a course that continued emphasizing its outstanding academic and athletic programs. It also placed ever more emphasis and focus outward rather than inward. During those years ASU became an even more passionate and active partner in making the Dougherty County public schools the envy of Georgia and the country. It was during those years that ASU faculty, staff and students made good on the promise to transform the curriculum into one that truly emphasized deep learning embedded in the lessons of the surrounding community as well as the theoretical paradigms of the respective disciplines. It was during those years

that ASU students and faculty decided that students were fully responsible for subject mastery and that faculty members were fully responsible for giving everything they had intellectually to their students every moment of every day. During those years students and faculty struck learning contracts with each other that brimmed with commitments to collective inquiry, outcomes-based learning and intellectual challenge. In the years before the 2006/07-2011 strategic plan ended, ASU became a place percolating with faculty-student-industry-public school research projects in which ASU students, working alongside rather than "under" their faculty guides, fashioned new constructs, patented intellectual property, and crafted effective approaches to old problems as well as emerging careers. During those years, ASU became, in a word, irrevocably invested in the larger world around it.

Imagine, if you will, that everything Dr. Holley saw upon returning to campus in 2011 was new and bewildering to him. All he had to rely upon to know he was at the place he founded in 1903 was a mission statement that reads: "ASU's mission is to inform and transform its teaching research, and service through unbridled engagement in the educational, civic, religious and commercial life of Albany." Would Dr. Holley know this place? Absolutely! He would know it as surely as he knew in 1903 that locating the original campus on what was then prosperous and elegant Slappey Road would have done the poor Negroes and bemused whites of southwest Georgia no good. So Holley situated his new school on the east side of the Flint River in the notorious, murder-ridden village of East Dougherty because that was where he believed the Albany Bible and Manual Training Institute he was creating that would become ASU was most needed.

By 2012, when the next strategic plan took hold, ASU had as many non-traditional and graduate students enrolled as traditional undergraduates. Its campus now straddled both sides of the Flint River. Its academic programs reflected a profusion of integrated online, just-in-time, self-paced and class-by-need sessions depending upon the consensus of learning groups. Its classes were organized around key intellectual domains in the sciences, arts and humanities, and established and emerging professions. Alumni fully operated the Student Success Center as well as the mentor program and regularly hosted online chat sessions with students and lectured in class-by-need sessions. ASU faculty, as was true in Dr. Holley's day, discovered effective uses of their knowledge and expertise to solve southwest Georgia's problems, ranging from water utilization to creating and analyzing data that helped the U.S. Marines extend a vehicle's solar cell lifespan. By 2016, an ASU graduate or two from our Army and Marine ROTC programs will have been tracked for general officer. Our women's golf team – a rainbow of ethnic and racial diversity – will have won its fifth straight NCAA golf championship. Our graduates will not only have entered ASU with the required U.S. passport or one from their home country, but will have been hired by the best school systems in Georgia and the best employers world-wide on account of our renowned geolanguage labs that will teach a multitude of foreign languages through the study of far-flung lands.

By 2016, I plan to still be here instigating interdepartmental rivalries among staffers over which office has the most undergraduate and graduate degree candidates, and plotting with faculty to secure more funding for intercontinental lectures, hard copy as well as electronic books, laboratory equipment, forensic analysis, office furniture and release time. I aim to remain excited and eager to visit our alumni chapters – both new and old – to meet with you and your classmates and the 20<sup>th</sup>-century alums in your chapter to review the electronic academic accomplishment portfolios and cybercasts of entering ASU freshmen destined to become the graduating Class of 2020.

Today, for the first time, Albany State University is hosting a two-pronged celebration, a joint commencement and presidential inauguration. Why, you may wonder, would we choose to combine two distinctly different events? Why not celebrate both individually? The simple answer is limited resources.

Today, when funding for institutions of higher learning is limited and our intrepid ASU Foundation continues to work miracles in finding money to strike an inaugural medallion and fund scholarships, it is unseemly to ask or expect a customary inaugural celebration. I promise the ninth president of ASU that we will provide resources for a grand investiture. But for now, this moment is quite enough. I am in the company of my precious family members: my dear wife, son-in-law, two daughters, three grandsons, three of my five siblings, sister-in-law, two favorite cousins, one favorite muse from days gone by, one flame from my youth, and the gang of three from Tennessee are here. Along with you, my beloved ASU extended family, who could ask for more?

This is the first time such a joint ceremony has been conducted here. It is not, however, the first time that this institution has had to overcome obstacles. Nor is it the first time this institution has transformed obstacles into opportunities. Dr. Holley saw only abundance where others saw scarcity. Many of us have learned to do the same.

Today, I am invested as the president of a university, which is probably the last place my old high school principal would have predicted he'd find me. Joining me on the podium is the University System of Georgia's chancellor, a self-made man whose intellect, business acumen and commitment to public service transcend racial and socio-economic boundaries. Some of you in the audience are, like we were, the first in your family to graduate from college. Your accomplishment deserves recognition. Yet you have not come to the end of the road, nor is the road ahead smooth and straight. On life's highway, you may expect bumps, twists, turns and potholes, but you will not need a Green Book anymore. You may get speeding tickets. You may have flat tires, you may run out of gas at \$8.00 a gallon and you may run into other vehicles whose drivers don't have insurance. The road goes on. Life goes on. And so as you sit in your favorite chair, smarter than you were ten years ago in 2006, and a bit less starry-eyed about the wonders life holds, be prepared to do something more to increase the value of the ASU degree you hold. Horace Mann, the father of the first system of public education in Massachusetts and the nation, and the man who eventually became the founding president of my alma mater, Antioch College, placed the challenge

before each succeeding generation in the clearest words I know. He said: "Be ashamed to die until you have won some victory for humanity."

Like any other investment, I want to make sure in ten years the value of an ASU degree is higher than it was in 2006. Work together on this campus, and beyond it. Invest in this university and in this community. Become involved in activities here at Albany State, and in activities across the state, across the nation and across the world. And as I have said time and again, return to this place in two years, five years, but certainly in ten years. Come back with bold stories of selfless service to others. Come back determined to leave once more to find more to do. Love your family with all your heart. Try not to be a big shot. Always err on the side of plain, decent folks. Get a good night's sleep as often as you can. Pray to your God as you know Him. Eat fiber. Laugh as much as you can. Look always outward toward others and help them. Never stop learning.

And, finally, give back to this place that gave so much to you at the start of your journey to a great life ten years ago on that magical May 6, 2006 Commencement Day when a moment of grace was yours to savor.

Everette J. Freeman Eighth ASU President