

Lisa Braxton Reid's Address to the Messiah Baptist Church  
Scholarship Awards Luncheon  
Saturday, June 28, 2014  
Bridgeport, Connecticut

I'D LIKE TO THANK THE EDUCATION SCHOLARSHIP MINISTRY FOR ASKING ME TO SPEAK HERE TODAY. I ALWAYS RECEIVE A BLESSING WHEN I COME BACK TO MESSIAH, MY HOME CHURCH. MY CAREER HAS TAKEN ME TO DIFFERENT PARTS OF THE COUNTRY, SO OVER THE YEARS I HAVEN'T GOTTEN BACK HERE AS OFTEN AS I WOULD HAVE LIKED. SO BEING HERE IS ALWAYS SPECIAL.

I'D LIKE TO THANK MY FAMILY AND FRIENDS FOR BEING HERE TODAY, ESPECIALLY MY PARENTS, WHO FIRST BROUGHT ME TO MESSIAH WHEN I WAS STILL IN DIAPERS.

THERE ARE SO MANY PEOPLE I'D LIKE TO MENTION, BUT I DON'T WANT TO LEAVE ANYONE OUT. I WILL MENTION ONE PERSON, THOUGH. MY HIGH SCHOOL FRENCH TEACHER IS HERE—GWENDOLYN JOHNSON. MRS. JOHNSON WAS THE DRIVING FORCE BEHIND ME TRAVELING TO FRANCE AS A FRENCH EXCHANGE STUDENT. I CAN'T

EVEN DESCRIBE WHAT A REWARDING EXPERIENCE THAT WAS FOR ME. IT HELPED TO MAKE ME THE PERSON I AM TODAY. THE TIME I SPENT IN PARIS AND NORMANDIE, AS A 16-YEAR-OLD, GETTING TO KNOW THE CULTURE, THE PEOPLE, THE LANGUAGE, COMES INTO MY CONVERSATION ALL THE TIME. IT WAS A DEFINING MOMENT IN MY LIFE. SO THANK YOU FOR BEING HERE.

I'D LIKE TO CONGRATULATE THE SCHOLARSHIP WINNERS FOR WHAT YOU'VE ACCOMPLISHED. YOU ARE AT A VERY IMPORTANT PHASE IN YOUR LIVES.

- YOU'VE FINISHED HIGH SCHOOL.
- YOU'RE ENTERING YOUR ADULT YEARS.
- YOU'RE ABOUT TO BEGIN COLLEGE.

THE WAY I SEE IT, YOU HAVE A BLANK CANVAS IN FRONT OF YOU. YOU ARE NOW IN A POSITION TO GRADUALLY FILL IN THAT CANVAS WITH AN ARRAY OF RICH AND MEANINGFUL EXPERIENCES THAT WILL HELP YOU MATURE, FEEL GOOD ABOUT YOURSELVES, AND CONTRIBUTE TO SOCIETY AND THOSE WHO ARE CLOSEST TO YOU.

WHEN I WAS COMING ALONG, WHEN I WAS THE AGE YOU ARE RIGHT NOW, MY PARENTS TOLD ME THAT I COULD BECOME ANYTHING I WANTED. AND THEY WERE RIGHT. I WANTED TO BE A JOURNALIST. I WANTED TO TRAVEL, TO INTERVIEW NEWSMAKERS, TO PROVIDE THE PUBLIC WITH IMPORTANT INFORMATION, TO WRITE FOR THE NEWSPAPERS, TO WORK IN TELEVISION. AND I DID THOSE THINGS. I ALSO WANTED TO BE A FICTION WRITER AND ESSAYIST. I WANTED TO WRITE STORIES THAT WOULD MAKE PEOPLE LAUGH, CRY, THINK, FORGET ABOUT THEIR TROUBLES. I'VE BEEN ABLE TO DO THAT TOO. AND I HAVE SOME EXAMPLES WITH ME HERE TODAY.

THE SCHOLARSHIP I RECEIVED FROM MESSIAH HELPED TO PAVE THE WAY FOR ALL OF THAT. WHEN I WAS A STUDENT AT HAMPTON UNIVERSITY, I MADE THE MOST OF MY EXPERIENCE. AND I HOPE YOU— SCHOLARSHIP WINNERS WILL MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR EXPERIENCES AS WELL. BESIDES GETTING A GREAT FOUNDATION IN MY STUDIES, I BECAME EDITOR OF THE UNIVERSITY NEWSPAPER, A STUDENT LEADER,

AND ANNOUNCER FOR THE SCHOOL RADIO STATION, WHICH HELPED TO GIVE ME CONFIDENCE WHEN I GRADUATED AND WENT LOOKING FOR A JOB.

BUT THE ROAD THAT I'VE TRAVELED, FROM HIGH SCHOOL SCHOLARSHIP WINNER, LIKE YOU, TO WHERE I AM NOW, HAS NOT ALWAYS BEEN AN EASY ONE. IT'S BEEN BUMPY AT TIMES. AT TIMES I WANTED TO TAKE MY CANVAS, THE BLANK CANVAS I BEGAN DESIGNING WHEN I BECAME AN ADULT, AND CHANGE IT, MAKE THE PICTURES I WAS CREATING SIMPLER, LESS COMPLICATED, DEVOID OF CONFLICT, DISAPPOINTMENT, AND PROBLEMS. BUT THAT WASN'T POSSIBLE, BECAUSE LIFE DOESN'T WORK THAT WAY.

SO I HUNG IN THERE. I PERSEVERED. I PUSHED THROUGH THE DIFFICULT TIMES WITH THE SUPPORT OF MY FAMILY, FRIENDS, AND "SOMETHING ELSE" I'LL EXPLAIN AS I GO ALONG.

**(PAUSE)**

CHAMPAIGN, ILLINOIS IS A FARMING AREA, THE HEARTLAND OF AMERICA, THE LAND OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN. THEY GROW CORN THERE AND SOYBEANS. THE LAND IS FLAT, YOU CAN GO FOR MILES AND SEE NOTHING BUT A BUNCH OF SILOS AND COWS. DEPENDING ON WHERE YOU ARE, YOU'LL SMELL THE STENCH OF THE LOCAL HOG FARM. THAT'S WHERE I WAS AT MY FIRST JOB AS A TELEVISION NEWS REPORTER--THE C-B-S STATION IN CHAMPAIGN. I COVERED ALL THE BIG STORIES: THE ABRAHAM LINCOLN IMPERSONATORS CONVENTION, THE BROOM CORN FESTIVAL, THE SWEET CORN FESTIVAL. THE BLUE RIBBON FESTIVAL, WHERE THE CONTESTANT WITH THE BEST COW WON THE PRIZE AT THE COUNTY FAIR. THE TRACTOR PULL. I ONCE DID A STORY ABOUT A MAN WHO THOUGHT HE WAS GOING TO MAKE A MILLION DOLLARS MAKING LADIES HANDBAGS FROM THE FEATHERS OF THE EMU'S HE HAD ON HIS FARM. MAYBE HE DID. I DON'T KNOW. IT COULD BE VERY STRANGE IN ILLINOIS. I FELT LIKE AN ALIEN. BUT ONE PLACE I FELT RIGHT AT HOME WAS MY WOMEN'S BIBLE STUDY CLASS AND CHURCH SERVICE AT CANAAN BAPTIST CHURCH IN URBANA

CHAMPAIGN. THE WOMEN IN MY CLASS WERE MY PERSONAL CHEERING SECTION, ALWAYS COMPLIMENTING ME ON THE STORIES I HAD DONE THAT WEEK, ALWAYS ENCOURAGING ME. CANAAN BAPTIST WAS A HUMBLE PLACE—AN OLD CHURCH BUILDING IN NEED OF REPAIRS. THE PASTOR AND HIS WIFE WERE VERY SUPPORTIVE OF ME. THEY LET ME INTERVIEW THEM A NUMBER OF TIMES FOR IMPORTANT STORIES ON POLITICS, CIVIL RIGHTS, HEALTH. THEY ASKED ME MORE THAN ONCE IF THE TV STATION MANAGERS WERE TREATING ME RIGHT. THEY LOOKED OUT FOR ME. UNTIL I WENT TO ILLINOIS, I DIDN'T KNOW HOW MUCH I WOULD MISS THE EAST COAST. IT WAS HARD FOR ME LIVING IN A STATE THAT WASN'T NEAR THE ATLANTIC OCEAN. BUT ONE BRIGHT SPOT WAS THAT CHURCH, THE CONGREGATION, THE PASTOR AND HIS WIFE.

TIME PASSED AND I LEFT ILLINOIS FOR A REPORTER JOB AT THE NBC STATION IN WILKES-BARRE, PENNSYLVIA. WILKES-BARRE IS AN INTERESTING PLACE, AN OLD COAL MINING AREA. THE PEOPLE ARE

RATHER ISOLATED. IT WAS THE LATE 1990S WHEN I WAS THERE, BUT PEOPLE DRESSED AS IF IT WAS THE 1950S. THEY ACTED THAT WAY TOO. THEY WEREN'T USED TO HAVING AN AFRICAN AMERICAN PERSON ON THE LOCAL STATION AND THEY LET ME KNOW THAT. I GOT SOME DISTURBING MESSAGES ON VOICEMAIL AT WORK, DISPARAGING REFERENCES TO MY OUTWARD APPEARANCE AND STRONG SUGGESTIONS THAT I GO BACK WHERE I CAME FROM.

BUT I FOUND SOLACE IN THE FRIENDS I MADE THERE, THE YMCA ON MY BLOCK WHERE I WORKED OUT TO BLOW OFF STEAM, AND ALSO THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH THAT WAS DIRECTLY ACROSS THE STREET FROM MY APARTMENT. THE SERVICES WERE VERY CEREMONIAL, MAJESTIC. THE SERMONS GENTLE AND THOUGHT-PROVOKING. THAT AND THE ARCHITECTURE—THE VAULTED CEILINGS, SCULPTURES, FREIZES, AND POWERFUL PIPE ORGAN HELPED ME TO FIND CALMNESS AND SERENITY NO MATTER WHAT I FACED AT THE TV STATION.

LATER, AFTER I WAS HIRED AT NEWS 12 CONNECTICUT, I BECAME A SUNDAY SCHOOL TEACHER RIGHT HERE AT MESSIAH. I WAS ASSIGNED TO TEACH THE FIRST AND SECOND GRADERS. THOSE STUDENTS ARE NOW IN COLLEGE—SO THAT TELLS YOU HOW LONG AGO THAT WAS. WE HAD SO MUCH FUN. WE HAD FUN BUT I ALSO MADE SURE THAT THE STUDENTS LEFT CLASS EACH SUNDAY WITH THE IMPORTANT MESSAGE THAT GOD IS WITH THEM. NO MATTER WHAT HAPPENS, THEY CAN ALWAYS TALK TO GOD. EVERY SO OFTEN ONE OF MY STUDENTS WOULD GIVE ME A PIECE OF CANDY, OR A GIFT, OR A CARD AS A WAY OF SAYING THANK YOU. BUT MY STUDENTS HAD NO IDEA HOW MUCH THEY GAVE TO ME. BEING A SUNDAY SCHOOL TEACHER HERE AT MESSIAH HAS BEEN ONE OF THE MOST REWARDING EXPERIENCES OF MY LIFE.

(PAUSE)

A FEW YEARS AGO I WAS HIRED AT THE AT THE NATIONAL FIRE PROTECTION ASSOCIATION NEAR BOSTON, A FIREFIGHTER IN SOUTH



AFRICA GOT IN CONTACT WITH US. HE WAS CONCERNED BECAUSE SO MANY PEOPLE IN THE SHANTYTOWNS WERE DYING IN FIRES. IN THESE SHANTYTOWNS--THESE INFORMAL NEIGHBORHOODS---HOMES ARE SHACKS, MADE OF SCRAP, PLYWOOD, CORRUGATED METAL, AND CARDBOARD. THE SHACKS ARE INCHES APART. THERE IS NO SANITATION, NO PLUMBING, NO WATER SUPPLY. IF ONE SHACK CAUGHT FIRE, AN ENTIRE NEIGHBORHOOD WOULD GO UP IN FLAMES. THE FIREFIGHTER WAS CONCERNED BECAUSE PEOPLE WERE DYING IN THESE FIRES AND MANY OTHERS SUFFERED DEVASTATING BURN INJURIES, INCLUDING CHILDREN AND SOMETIMES BABIES.

I WAS SENT TO JOHANNESBURG AND CAPE TOWN TO WORK WITH THE FIRE SERVICE AND BURN SAFETY EXPERTS TO DESIGN A FIRE SAFETY PROGRAM FOR CHILDREN; THE IDEA BEING THAT THEY WOULD TAKE THE IMPORTANT FIRE SAFETY MESSAGES HOME TO THEIR PARENTS.

WHILE THERE, I GOT TO SEE SO MANY THINGS: NELSON MANDELA'S PRISON CELL; THE APARTHEID MUSEUM, WHICH BROUGHT TO LIFE THE

ACTROCITIES AND INJUSTICES SO MANY BLACK SOUTH AFRICANS  
SUFFERED UNDER.

I ALSO WENT TO A SHANTYTOWN. IT WAS STUNNING. THOUSANDS OF  
SHACKS AND DIRT ROADS. THE SHACKS WERE THE SIZE OF ONE-CAR  
GARAGES IN THIS COUNTRY. SOME WERE SMALLER. SOME ROOFS  
WERE NOT AS TALL AS ME. I KNOW BECAUSE I TOOK PICTURES NEXT TO  
THEM.

I WRAPPED ON DOORWAYS AND WENT IN AND TALKED TO PEOPLE.  
THEY WERE HAPPY. THEY WERE DOING THE BEST THEY COULD WITH  
WHAT THEY HAD, DIVIDING THE SHACK INTO SEPARATE ROOMS USING  
BEDSHEETS.

AS WE WERE LEAVING ONE SHACK, WE NOTICED THREE WOMEN IN  
THE ROAD, WITH A TABLETOP SPEAKER AND MICROPHONES. THEY  
BEGAN SWAYING TO THE MUSIC. THEY WERE SINGING HYMNS, THE  
SAME HYMNS WE SING HERE AT MESSIAH. THEY SANG WITH HEART  
AND PASSION. IT DIDN'T MATTER TO THEM THAT THEY HAD NO

HEAT—BECAUSE IT DOES GET COLD IN CAPE TOWN. IT DIDN'T MATTER THAT THEY WERE WEARING HAND-ME-DOWN CLOTHING OR THAT THEY HAD TO BUY COOKING OIL BY THE CUP BECAUSE THAT'S ALL THEY COULD AFFORD. THEY WERE PRAISING THE LORD AND IN THAT MOMENT IN THE STREET, I WAS IN THE CONGREGATION. I'VE NEVER FORGOTTEN THAT.

**(PAUSE)**

AS I MENTIONED BEFORE...EVER SINCE I WAS A CHILD I WANTED TO WRITE A BOOK. I HAVE DREAMED OF BEING A NOVELIST. A FEW YEARS AGO, I FINISHED A MANUSCRIPT AND I WANTED FEEDBACK. I SOUGHT THE RESOURCES OF MY CHURCH—MYRTLE BAPTIST CHURCH IN WEST NEWTON—NOT FAR FROM BOSTON, WHICH I JOINED ABOUT 10 YEARS AGO. A DEACON AT THE CHURCH, WHO WAS AN ENGLISH TEACHER AT THE TIME—NOW RETIRED--TOOK TIME OUT OF HER SCHEDULE TO MEET WITH ME ONE-ON-ONE TO GIVE ME FEEDBACK. AND IT DIDN'T STOP THERE. OUR CHURCH HAS A BOOK CLUB. WE MEET MONTHLY IN

EACH OTHER'S HOMES, HAVE POTLUCK DINNERS AND TALK ABOUT THE BOOK THAT MONTH. THE BOOK CLUB READ MY MANUSCRIPT LAST SEPTEMBER AND THEY ALL WEIGHED IN AND GAVE ME EXTENSIVE FEEDBACK. I HAVE SINCE REVISED THE MANUSCRIPT AND AM SENDING IT OUT, HOPING TO GET IT PUBLISHED.

WHEN I'VE HAD STORIES PUBLISHED IN JOURNALS OR ANTHOLOGIES, MEMBERS HAVE BOUGHT COPIES AND HAD ME AUTOGRAPH THEM. THEY'VE BEEN VERY SUPPORTIVE.

**(PAUSE)**

ONE DAY A FEW YEARS AGO, I WAS FEELING PRETTY SAD. IT WAS NEW YEAR'S DAY—2011. I WAS LOOKING BACK ON MY LIFE, LOOKING BACK AT WHAT I HAD ACCOMPLISHED AND FELT SAD BECAUSE I DIDN'T HAVE ANYONE SPECIAL TO ENJOY THE NEW YEAR WITH. I HAD BEEN WISHING FOR A LIFE PARTNER FOR QUITE SOME TIME.

ON THAT NEW YEAR'S DAY I WENT TO A FRIEND'S HOME FOR A PARTY. THE HOUSE WAS FILLED WITH PEOPLE—MOST OF THEM COUPLES. I

PULLED A FRIEND OF MINE ASIDE AND TOLD HER HOW SAD I WAS AND WHY. SHE PULLED THE HOSTESS ASIDE AND THE THREE OF US WENT INTO THE LIVING ROOM—AWAY FROM THE CELEBRATION-- AND WE PRAYED.

THEN THE HOSTESS SAID TO ME, “LISA, YOU NEED TO WRITE DOWN THE QUALITIES YOU’RE LOOKING FOR IN A MAN AND PRAY ABOUT IT. SHE GAVE ME A PIECE OF PAPER FROM A STENO PAD AND I WROTE DOWN WHAT I WAS LOOKING FOR, AND PRAYED. A FEW DAYS LATER— AT THE END OF SUNDAY SCHOOL, A MAN WHO HAD BEEN SITTING BEHIND ME IN CLASS FOR YEARS, WALKED UP TO ME AND INTRODUCED HIMSELF. I WAS SURPRISED BECAUSE WE HAD NEVER TALKED BEFORE, ALTHOUGH WE HAD BEEN IN CLASS TOGETHER FOR YEARS AND EXCHANGED A GLANCE EVERY SO OFTEN. I HAD SEEN HIM SITTING BACK THERE WITH HIS DAUGHTER. I DIDN’T KNOW HE WAS DIVORCED. WE BEGAN TALKING BY EMAIL AND DISCOVERED THAT WE HAD A LOT IN COMMON. WE WERE BOTH WRITERS, BOTH

JOURNALISTS, AND WE WERE BOTH WRITING BOOKS. OUR FAITH, OUR WORSHIP LIFE, WAS VERY IMPORTANT TO BOTH OF US.

**(PAUSE)**

LATER, I PULLED OUT THE LIST I HAD MADE. THE LIST I HAD PRAYED ABOUT. I WAS ABLE TO CHECK EVERYTHING OFF THE LIST.

**(PAUSE).**

I WAS TAUGHT GROWING UP THAT GOD LISTENS TO PRAYER, BUT I REALLY FELT IT IN THAT MOMENT.

MY HUSBAND, ALEX, AND I HAVE BEEN MARRIED NOW FOR EIGHT MONTHS.

BEFORE OUR WEDDING I WROTE AN ESSAY ABOUT HOW WE MET AND GOT IT PUBLISHED IN THE ANTHOLOGY SERIES, CHICKEN SOUP FOR THE SOUL, IT WAS MY FIRST TIME BEING PUBLISHED IN A BOOK WITH NOT ONLY A NATIONAL, BUT INTERNATIONAL AUDIENCE, THAT YOU CAN FIND ON AMAZON DOT COM, IN BARNES AND NOBLE, OTHER

BOOKSTORES, AND LIBRARIES. SINCE I WAS A CHILD I HAD DREAMED OF BEING IN A HIGH-PROFILE PUBLICATION, BUT NEVER DREAMED I'D BE INCLUDED IN THIS SERIES.

**(PAUSE)**

SO GRADUATES, WHEN I BEGAN TALKING, I SAID THAT I WAS ABLE TO PUSH THROUGH THE DIFFICULT TIMES WITH THE SUPPORT OF FAMILY, FRIENDS, AND SOMETHING ELSE. I'M SURE BY NOW YOU'VE FIGURED OUT WHAT I WAS TALKING ABOUT.

GOD HAS BEEN WITH ME ALONG THE WAY, REMINDING ME OF HIS PRESENCE, REMINDING ME OF HIS PROTECTION.

MY PRAYER LIFE, MY WORSHIP LIFE HAVE BEEN VERY IMPORTANT TO ME. MY CHURCH FAMILY HAS BEEN VERY IMPORTANT TO ME. THEY'VE CELEBRATED MY SUCCESSES, COMFORTED ME IN THE HARD TIMES, BEEN MY SECOND FAMILY WHEN I WAS FAR AWAY FROM HOME. SO GRADUATES, WHEN YOU BEGIN DESIGNING YOUR CANVAS ONCE YOU ENTER THE LARGER WORLD, REMEMBER WHAT A BLESSING IT IS TO

HAVE GOTTEN A GOOD, SOLID CHRISTIAN FOUNDATION HERE AT MESSIAH, AND THE SUPPORT OF THIS WONDERFUL CHURCH FAMILY.

AND DON'T FORGET MESSIAH. SOME OF MY BEST MOMENTS AS AN ADULT ARE WHEN I COME BACK HERE FOR A VISIT. IT FEELS LIKE A FAMILY REUNION, HERE AT MESSIAH. PEOPLE WANT TO CATCH UP WITH YOU. THEY ASK HOW YOU'RE DOING. THEY ARE TRULY INTERESTED IN YOUR WELL BEING.

YOUR WORSHIP LIFE, YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD, YOUR CHURCH FAMILY, HERE AT MESSIAH OR AT ANOTHER CHURCH YOU MAY JOIN IN THE FUTURE, DEPENDING ON WHERE YOU DECIDE TO LIVE, WILL BE THERE FOR YOU IN THE GOOD TIMES, THE BAD TIMES AND EVERYTHING IN BETWEEN. TREASURE THAT. HOLD ONTO THAT. DON'T FORGET THAT. AND KEEP THAT WITH YOU ON YOUR JOURNEY.