

JUMPING AT THE SUN

Throughout her extraordinary life, Dr. Johnnetta B. Cole has not only reached for the sun but has shone that light on others

BY JACKIE KRENTZMAN



“Life’s most persistent and urgent question is, ‘what are you doing for others?’”

— Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Dr. Johnnetta B. Cole, the director of the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, grew up in a prosperous African American family in Jacksonville, Florida. Her great-grandfather was the state’s first black millionaire. Her father was a successful insurance executive and her mother an English professor at a nearby black college.

When Cole was young, every so often one of the big department stores in downtown Jacksonville would call Cole’s mother and tell her to bring Johnnetta and her sister to the store because a new shipment of dresses had arrived. There was a catch—they had to come after the store had closed.

“Because of who my family was, we were given this privilege that we were allowed to even try on the dresses,” says Cole, who turned 80 this past fall. “But even we couldn’t do it in the light of day.”

When Cole was in middle school, she rebelled and told her mother, “I don’t want a new dress. If I can’t try it on in the light of day, I want to stop having to try it on in the darkness of night.”

Cole has spent her long and illustrious career proudly living and working in the light of day. As a teacher, a professor, the president of the only two historically black colleges for women (Spelman and Bennett), and now as the director of the National Museum of

African Art, she has dedicated her life to bringing others—especially those from marginalized communities—out of the shadows.

Her family may have been affluent, but that provided little buffer living in the Deep South in the Jim Crow era. “I didn’t have to go to the back of the bus,” she says. “I was always driven around in a private car. But when I got out of that car, or even while in it, I ran into the horrific expressions of racial discrimination around me.”

Her family, she says, distilled in her a set of bedrock values. One of those values, although it didn’t have a name at the time, was gender equity, which played out in ways large and small. Her mother was a college professor—and her father was a better cook than her mother. It was her father, not her mother or her sister, who would braid her hair. “He was gentler,” explains Cole.

Cole considers her parents and her great-grandfather Abraham Lincoln Lewis her role models. From her great-grandfather she learned that with privilege and access came great responsibility. “What you give ought to be in direct relationship to what you’ve received,” she says. “If you have been blessed with a great deal, then you have a lot of giving to do.”

Another role model was Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune, the founder of the historically black Bethune-Cookman University in Daytona Beach, Florida. The 15th child of former slaves, she was a renowned educator and fighter for civil rights and advisor to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt on civil and human rights issues.

The African American aristocracy in Florida formed a tight-knit community, Cole’s family and the McLeods were close, and Cole had an ongoing relationship with Bethune until her death in 1955.

Cole left home to attend Fisk University in Nashville at the age of 15. She transferred to Oberlin College in Ohio, one of the first white universities to enroll black students, a practice dating back to its founding in 1833. She studied under another mentor,



Left to right: Dr. Cole and actress Cicely Tyson; Dr. Cole at the Diversity Women’s Business Leadership Conference; Dr. Cole with Caroline Wang, Target’s vice president of diversity & inclusion.



Professor George Eaton Simpson, who introduced her to the field of cultural anthropology. Cole went on to earn her PhD in anthropology at Northwestern University in 1967.

It was at Oberlin that her passions for history, culture, and lifelong learning coalesced into a calling—teaching. Simpson’s influence made her realize that as a teacher she could have the broadest impact.

“To this day I consider myself a teacher first,” she says. “The great African American writer James Baldwin once said, ‘You cannot teach children that you do not love.’ I felt that I had the respect, the admiration, and, yes, even the love of my teachers. I wanted to inspire like I had been inspired.”

For the next 20 years Cole taught anthropology at many universities, including UCLA, Washington State University, University of Massachusetts Amherst (where she launched its department of anthropology), and Hunter College. Along the way, she was instrumental in developing black study departments. Later, she also taught at Emory University in Atlanta, where to this day she serves as presidential distinguished professor emerita.

“One hand cannot clap.”

—African proverb

In 1987 Cole got the opportunity to inspire not just a classroom—but an entire college community. She was appointed the president of Spelman College, the historically black women’s college in Atlanta. Remarkably, she was its first African American female president in its 128-year history.

Spelman flourished under her leadership. In her 10 years at the helm, she built up a \$113 million endowment, increased enrollment significantly, and raised the school’s academic standards and national ranking. She launched several centers and programs, including the Spelman College Mentorship Program, the International Affairs Center, and the Office of Community Service. In 1992 Spelman was named the number one liberal arts college in the South by *U.S. News & World Report*.

While president, she continued to teach. She thought teaching was essential to her role as president. Teaching was not merely a matter of imparting information—it was also a way of learning. “She who teaches must learn, and she who learns must teach,” she says, quoting an African proverb.

In 1997 Cole retired and began teaching anthropology and women’s studies at Emory University. Five years later, she was persuaded to take the reins as president of Bennett College in Greensboro, North Carolina, the only other historically black college for women in the United States.

At Bennett, she pulled the college out of a financial crisis, led a successful \$30 million capital campaign, and launched the Johnnetta B. Cole Global Diversity and Inclusion Institute. An art lover, she also founded an art gallery on campus.

While Cole says teaching is her calling, others would say she has another—leading. “Dr. Cole has been such a success because she is a natural leader,” says Asif M. Shaikh, the chair of the Museum of African Art advisory board. “First, she has a huge, huge heart and a generosity of spirit. And that gives her the gift of not only inspiring, but also showing people how to aspire—she helps people develop the confidence and framework to think about what they can achieve and be. Her life embodies the notion that if you aim high, you will get higher than you otherwise might have.”



Dr. Cole and Candi Castleberry Singleton, founder and CEO of The Power of &; Dr. Cole and Stephanie Rawlings-Blake, former mayor of Baltimore, Maryland; Dr. Cole and Dr. Sheila Robinson, founder and publisher of *Diversity Woman* magazine.

WORDSTOFOLLOW

Dr. Johnnetta B. Cole loves proverbs and quotes. She has a store of them—some her own, some the words of others—for the appropriate occasion. And most of them involve, in some form or another, inclusion. Here are few of her noteworthy proverbs.

“It always seems impossible until it is done.”

— Nelson Mandela

“If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.”

— African proverb

“If you want change, you’ve got to educate, you’ve got to legislate, and when necessary, you’ve got to advocate.”

— Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

“If your dreams do not scare you, they are not big enough.”

— Ellen Johnson Sirleaf

While it is true that without a vision the people perish, it is doubly true that without action the people and their vision perish as well.”

— Dr. Johnnetta B. Cole

Imparting that message of “dream it, be it” is particularly important for young women at historically black colleges, Cole says.

“I dream of the day when special-mission schools—Brigham Young, Brandeis, Notre Dame, or Howard or Spelman—are no longer necessary,” Cole says. “But they are. Today, when there are still so many deep and hurtful expressions of racism, historically black colleges and universities provide an environment in which students do not have to spend inordinate amounts of their time pushing back against racism.

“Furthermore, we live in a country, in a world, where gender inequality is still so prominent. For some students, it is an extraordinarily important experience to go to a place like Spelman, or Bennett, or Wellesley, or Smith, or Mount Holyoke, and never have someone look at them and say, ‘Honey, are you sure you can do physics?’ Until we move beyond where we are today, in terms of deeply seeded notions of inequality and practices of these systems of inequality, these special-mission institutions are deeply important.”

Her role as president at the only two historically black colleges for women in the United States sends a powerful message, says Bennett College Interim President Dr. Phyllis Worthy Dawkins. “Dr. Cole has inspired millions of African American girls and demonstrated that not only can they succeed but that they too could become college presidents or serve in powerful leadership roles.”

“We were taught to jump at the sun. We may not land on the sun, but at least we would get off the ground.”

— Zora Neale Hurston

In 2007 Cole retired yet again. She moved back to Atlanta and resumed teaching at Emory University. She was in her 70s, but as is her wont, she was restless and looking for a new challenge. She thought perhaps she would take a volunteer docent training course at the High Museum of Art. Or perhaps, even more ambitiously, go back to school and earn a PhD in art history.

Then, one day, she got a phone call that yet again put retirement on hold (“I have failed at retirement three times,” she says). The caller was Richard Kurin, acting provost at the Smithsonian. He asked if she might have any recommendations for the open directorship position at the National Museum of African Art.

Cole gave him some names. Then she added, jokingly, “If you move the museum to Atlanta, I’ll do it.”

Kurin was delighted. “So you figured out that the real reason I was calling was to ask you to put your name in the hat?”

Kurin and others applied a full-court press. In 2009 Dr. Cole, with no formal education or training in art history let alone African art, became the director. Perhaps becoming a volunteer art museum docent would have to wait.

Despite her initial passion for the job and belief that one must reach for the stars, she panicked right before she was officially appointed.

“I felt that I didn’t know enough, and that I was being asked to do a job for which I did not have the training,” she says. “I actually tried to withdraw from the process. But Richard Kurin and Wayne Clough [at the time the secretary of the Smithsonian] talked me into leaving my name in the hat. I am so glad they did.”

She reached into her deep store of aphorisms and plucked out the perfect quote to illuminate how she overcame her fear: “As Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the president of Liberia, said, ‘If your dreams do not scare you, they are not big enough.’”

Cole says the fact that she does not have an academic background in art history has not been an impediment. Running a museum in many respects is as much an educational mission as it is an art and cultural mission. A museum’s mission of reaching out, educating, bringing people together—this she knows.

Asif Shaikh says Cole’s outsider status is an advantage. “She is not an African art connoisseur—she simply fell in love with it. African art is spiritual. It is all about the religious framework and the social order, and as an anthropologist she understands that art is an expression of culture. As an educator, she understands how to reach people. And precisely because she is coming from a broader perspective and not just a narrow curatorial place, she can speak more directly to a broader audience. Not being an African art specialist is a tremendous advantage for her and the museum. She has turned out to be the ideal person for furthering our mission of building cultural connections through art.”

Another reason Cole is the perfect fit for the position, says Shaikh, is that she is a uniter—which dovetails with the original mission of the museum.

The National Museum of African Art was founded in 1964 by Warren Robbins, a white man (it joined the Smithsonian family of museums in 1979). From the museum’s inception, its mission has been about much more than showcasing African art. It has positioned itself as a vehicle for cross-cultural communication.

Cole fervently believes Robbins’s conviction that while all forms of art can inspire and are capable of bringing people together, African art is particularly suited to the task.

“There’s so much divisiveness today in our public discourse, and so much attention is paid to what divides us, that our museum,

because it is centered in the beauty and the power of the creativity of African art, reminds us of our one extraordinary binding force—that is, all the world’s people are descendants of the continent of Africa,” she says.

Bringing together a uniting force, African art, with a natural uniter, has been a boon for the museum. She has initiated a discussion series in which she sits down with a person outside the world of African Art for a lively talk covering a wide range of topics that amplifies our interconnectivity. She has also worked closely with the Ford Foundation on an initiative for increasing diversity and inclusion in the arts.

“Dr. Cole has been the ideal leader for our museum,” says Shaikh. “Uniting people has been her passion and gift throughout her life. Everyone feels comfortable in her presence. She listens. She makes everyone feel good. She treats everyone in the organization, from top to bottom, the same. She does not have an ounce of prejudice for any culture or any person.”

**“It is a privilege to be first.
It is a responsibility to make
sure you’re not the last to
hold that position.”**

— Dr. Johnnetta B. Cole

Cole is asked all the time, “What is the one piece of advice you give recent college graduates?” That question is not her favorite. How can there be just one pithy nugget to send young, idealistic students out in the world? Such thinking is too simplistic, and so does a disservice to young women, she says.

Still, when *Diversity Woman* joined the chorus, she was game.

“I struggle to find just the right way to put this, but the message that I want to give to my young sisters is to say, ‘You don’t have to be against others in order to be for yourself.’ By that I mean any young woman has not only the right but the responsibility to be for herself. But in order to do that, she doesn’t need to be antagonistic to folks who are different from her. In fact, by opening up to folks whose identities are somewhat different from hers, she not only will have the joy of understanding the realities of someone who is different, but will, I think, begin to have an interesting new way of looking at herself and her own multiple identities.

“And then, after saying that, if my young sister hasn’t looked at me and said, ‘Okay, enough. Enough preaching,’ I will say one more thing: what good counsel do you have for me?” **DW**