

Marking Milestones

21-Keynote Speeches
about Successful Institutions and
Outstanding Leaders

Errol Miller



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Dedication

To my grandmother: Louise Dahl, née Aldred

To my mother: Joyce Miller, née Dahl

To my wife: Sharon Miller, née Rowe

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Foreword

Professor Errol Miller, transformational leader, distinguished scholar, inspiring teacher, insightful preacher, charismatic speaker, has once again provided us with an intellectual masterpiece.

The composition of such a fine selection from the myriad of speeches and presentations for which Professor Miller is renowned, could only have been guided by an inner recognition of his responsibility to persistently and consistently raise the sight of his audience whenever the opportunity was presented. The intellectual techniques he uses to connect with his audience are designed to stimulate a hunger within them to delve deeper in their quest to better understand the history of their circumstances, humanity and the particular events being celebrated.

Readers will be impressed by the clarity with which Professor Miller deals with complex concepts such as context and conscience, equality and excellence, individuality and community, reason, revelation and relevance. They will marvel at the ease with which he clarifies life's seeming contradictions that are part and parcel of our daily existence. Of particular significance, is his concept of "living at the intersections of irreconcilable but fundamental human constructs that are neither abstract nor academic."

One of the considerations which seem to undergird this collection is a call by Professor Miller to engage in deep reflections of our own areas of weaknesses that so often, we unconsciously attribute to others.

Professor Miller effortlessly ignites a fierce yearning to acquire the skills of a charismatic, intellectually stimulating and caring speaker. His advice is priceless:

Speeches are subject to moment and mood. It is unwise to proceed regardless of the moment at which you are to speak and the mood of the audience at that time. It is a tragedy to leave an audience unsatisfied.... A speaker has to engage with the audience in a sensitive manner which includes inputs, verbal and non-verbal from the audience.

The 21 speeches selected for this book, focus on key national institutions, monuments and outstanding leaders. They engender a deep understanding of the circumstances and persons who impacted the birth, growth and continued relevance of these institutions on our daily lives. This is convincingly illustrated in the titles of the chapters and equally significant, the explanation of their enduring relevance and place in our history. The central themes of the book can be gleaned from the author’s definition of the “spirit of the Mico” to which he attributes the transformation of the institution from a normal school to that of a University College. I can do no better than to quote Professor Miller. The spirit of the Mico is:

- The courage and the confidence to look beyond human frailty, flaws and faults and see the potentials and possibilities that reside in human personality and society.
- The commitment to build capacity among the vulnerable in society, especially the children of the disadvantaged and marginalised.
- The conviction that when individual enterprise, energy, enthusiasm and entrepreneurship are directed to serve the common good, not only the community benefits, but individuals find meaning and fulfilment in their endeavours.
- The spirit of the Mico is a pioneering spirit, a trailblazing spirit. It is the capability to perceive what is needed, to provide what is necessary and to risk failure in order to achieve the success that is demanded by the circumstances.

The book is a tribute to the ideas and leaders who have faithfully, creatively and collectively contributed to the building of the institutions that inform, influence and essentially determine the directions of our lives.

I highly recommend this publication to the people of Jamaica.

—Professor Sir Kenneth Hall, ON, GCMG, OJ, PhD



Preface

Outside and inside of Jamaica—on streets, in airports, in malls, at functions and elsewhere—people have come up to me and said that they still remembered elements from various speeches that I have made. Several remembered a joke that I gave and the implied exhortation. Others remembered the passion of the delivery. This has happened so regularly over the years that I committed myself to putting some of these speeches together, in a single volume, and the idea for writing this book was born.

My usual style is to speak extemporaneously because I found this to be more effective in communicating with audiences. This style required going over the speech in my mind dozens of times before the event. However, some events required written preparation even if I did not follow the text word for word in delivery. During the task of compiling my speeches, the written ones, or ones with copious notes, proved to be more easily assembled. These speeches were presented at various iconic events. I have selected 21 of these speeches for this volume.

My speaking career evolved at an early age. When I was about eleven years old, I learned from my class teacher at Half Way Tree Elementary School, the late Mrs. Lilly Brown, that I had a good speaking voice. She said that was the reason why she had selected me and would coach me to be one of the school's entries in the All Island Elocution Contest. She taught me to recite a poem titled: *Godfrey Gordon Gustavus Gore*—about a boy who never would shut the door. The only detail that I remember is that the finals were at the Ward Theatre, with its huge stage and high balcony. I won first place in my age group. In those days they did not give gold medals, only certificates. However, that experience taught me that although I was very nervous before going on stage, once I started to speak, nervousness went away.

I have since learned that reciting poetry versus making presentations from your own material are totally different. My experiences have many embarrassing moments that some of my close, lifelong friends will not allow

me to forget. Many of these experiences were at Bethel Baptist Church, in Half Way Tree. The Church had a programme called ‘Training Union’ which required that each member of an age group make a presentation to the group once per month on a set topic. Next, were the exigencies of a young church that had to invite preachers who sometimes did not show up. One of us young men had to fill in at the last moment. However, the church became more stabilized with the appointment of a pastor, The Reverend William Edwards. He included me on the preaching roster. Soon after, invitations to speak came from other churches. Several people said, and I came to accept, that I had a gift, for speaking persuasively.

After graduating from the University of the West Indies, and getting married, my first job as a teacher was at Excelsior High School. The Principal, Mr. A. Wesley Powell, was a master fundraiser. One project was monthly paid concerts in the newly constructed school auditorium. I cannot remember how I became the stand up comic for these concerts. I do remember, however, that Mr. Bradley, an Englishman who was very involved in dramatic productions, telling me that I had a great “line of pattern”, which he explained as good timing in delivery. I gave up the stand up comic routine when both teachers and students began to laugh when I said anything, even when it was not really funny. I wished to be taken seriously, at least some times. However, I have been unable to stop seeing the funny side of things, even serious things, and making jokes of them. This has often gotten me into trouble.

As a young married teacher, it was difficult to make two ends meet, especially when babies began to arrive. I saw an advertisement in the Gleaner from a well-known company for part-time salesmen. I saw this as a way to earn extra income. My application was accepted. I underwent the training. The starting arrangement was that the company would provide contact information of prospective clients and I would follow-up with a sales presentation. From these initial contacts, each salesman was expected to develop his own contact list. Commission was paid on monthly sales. At the end of the first month, several of my contacts bought appliances. However, I could not bring myself to go and collect the commission. I had severe misgivings:

Would these appliances stand up to long-term use by the clients?

Could they really afford them?

What had I used this gift of persuasion to do?

Was the money worth it?

I resigned because I could not answer these questions to myself in ways that brought peace to my soul. I made a commitment that I would only use this gift to speak about matters that I truly believed in and felt it necessary to persuade others to share those beliefs. Based on this epiphany, I have never charged a fee for speaking at any function. I have accepted gifts after speaking, a minority of which have been cash, but I have never accepted any speaking invitation, or spoken at an event, with prior agreement of material reward.

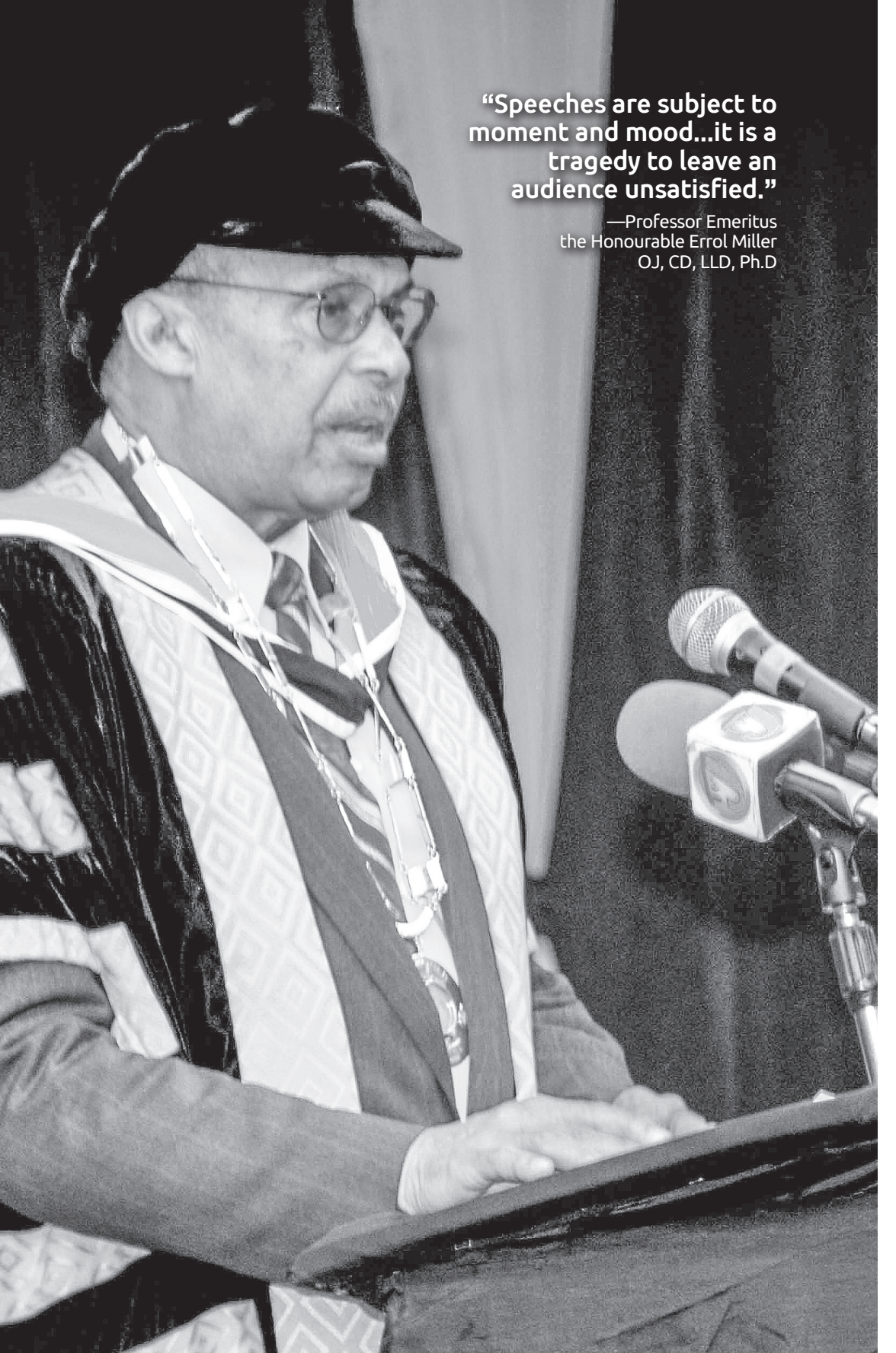
Accepting the invitation by Mrs. Fay Saunders to speak at the St. Andrew's High School Prize Giving was a milestone in my career in public speaking. It was the first time I spoke to such a large audience outside of a church setting. I was 28 years old at the time and absolutely petrified before speaking. I cannot remember what I said but it must have been well received because other invitations to speak at school events, and other functions, started to come with regularity.

The invitation most centrally related to this volume, *Marking Milestones*, came twelve years later in 1979, from The Reverend Sam Reid and the leadership of the Calvary Baptist Church to speak at the opening of the new building for their Christian Education Centre. It was the first time that I gave an address which went back into the history of the group that invited me.

The response of the audience to this address, and the resulting interactivity that was generated, is still unique in my experience. Upon conclusion of the address, conversations broke out between members of the audience. These lasted for between ten to twelve minutes before the Master of Ceremonies was able to restore order and proceed with the completion of the Programme. I later learned that parts of my presentation related to core issues that were being vigorously debated among members and well-wishers of the Church.

The impact on me was profound. I realised that addressing fundamental issues that are germane to the audience, reminding them of who they are and the road they have travelled was an approach that had real meaning for people. I adopted and adapted this approach for several subsequent special occasions.



A black and white photograph of Professor Emeritus the Honourable Errol Miller. He is shown from the chest up, wearing a dark academic cap and glasses. He is dressed in a dark academic gown with a light-colored, patterned stole. He is standing at a podium, looking slightly to his right, and appears to be speaking. In front of him are two microphones on stands. The background is dark and out of focus.

**“Speeches are subject to
moment and mood...it is a
tragedy to leave an
audience unsatisfied.”**

—Professor Emeritus
the Honourable Errol Miller
OJ, CD, LLD, Ph.D

Introduction

The book, *Marking Milestones*, is a collection of 21 speeches that I gave at special events celebrating great milestones in the history of the organisations that invited me; including three of such events that are personal milestones.

In order of longevity of the organisations these are:

- The 275th Anniversary of the Wolmer's Trust
- The 250th Anniversary of the Moravian Church in Jamaica
- The 175th Anniversary of the Ocho Rios Methodist Church
- The 175th Anniversary of the Savanna-la-mar Baptist Church
- The 125th Anniversary of Victoria Mutual Building Society
- The 116th Anniversary of Alpha Academy
- The 100th Anniversary of Calabar High School
- The 100th Anniversary of St. Hugh's High School
- The 85th Anniversary of the Shortwood Old Students' Association
- The 80th Anniversary of the First Missionary Church of the Missionary Alliance
- The 50th Anniversary of the Bethel Baptist Church
- The 50th Anniversary of the Jamaica Teachers' Association
- The Kingston and St. Andrew Corporation Event presenting the Keys to the City of Kingston to President Thabu Mbeki of South Africa
- The Launch of the United Theological College of the West Indies' Foundation
- The Inaugural Keva Bethel Memorial Lecture of the College of the Bahamas

- The Inaugural Conference of the Jamaica Teachers' Colleges
- My reply at the Albert Shanker Education Prize Award Ceremony for 2004 by Education International at its World Congress held in Port Alegre, Brazil
- My address as the First Chancellor of Mico University College at its graduation ceremony in 2008; and
- The graduation address given at the University of the West Indies, Mona in 2012 when I was awarded the Honorary Degree of Doctor of Laws.

A few of the speeches were delivered almost as written. Among these are the Calabar 100th Anniversary Education Lecture, the oration when President Thabu Mbeki received the Keys of the City of Kingston, the Reply to the Albert Shanker Award; the first address as Chancellor of Mico University College and the UWI, Mona Graduation Address 2012.

The speech at the Wolmer's Trust 275th Anniversary is very close to the speech as written but not as delivered. It was about 11:45 pm when I got to speak. I promised to finish before midnight and did, inclusive of the planned joke. The standing ovation I received may well have been related to having kept that promise, than to the content delivered. In the case of the 250th Anniversary of the Moravian Church, I prepared a Lecture but the event was a banquet. I had misread the situation. Like the Wolmer's presentation, the speech delivered was excerpts of what had been prepared.

A few students at the UWI once asked me to give them a lecture on public speaking. I had to explain to them that I had not received any formal training but had learned the craft by numerous trials and many errors. What I learned is that public speaking shared similarities with love making. Speeches are subject to moment and mood. It is unwise to proceed regardless of the moment at which you are to speak and the mood of the audience at that time. Further, it is a tragedy to leave an audience unsatisfied. Speeches have to come to a conclusion that leave audiences satisfied.

In a nutshell, the speaker has to engage with the audience in a sensitive manner which includes inputs, verbal and non-verbal, from the audience. If public speaking is a performance, it is more a dance with a partner than a soliloquy. This means that at sometimes, audiences take speakers down paths that were unplanned but which enhances the speech. In the interactions,

insights are gained and spoken but were neither written nor planned. Planned thoughts were forgotten and not spoken but should have been spoken. In hindsight, after the speech, some insights become abundantly clear that should have been part of foresight and preparation. Also, people contribute feedback and information that are enriching.

In addition, in the preparation for this publication I included information that was not available at the time but which now enriches the essence and the substance of the speech. For example, the Anglican beginnings of the Victoria Mutual Building Society and the fact that The Reverend William Gardner of North Street Congregational Church was the founder of the First Building Society in Jamaica. I have had a copy of the second edition of Gardner's, *A History of Jamaica*, for several decades, but never read the foreword by his brother until I came across it online, after the speech.

The essence and substance of what was spoken at the event and the final product as written in this book are basically the same. However, in some cases, what is recorded in this volume is more complete and is richer in details because the written speeches are not constrained by time and circumstance of the actual event. The speeches also include feedback following the live speech and, in a few cases, contain details that were not available at the time. Nowhere was this more evident to me than with the speech given at the launch of the United Theological College of the West Indies' Foundation. In writing the speech, I worked from a transcript of the spoken speech. I realised that in the delivery of the speech, as a result of interaction with the audience, I kept leap frogging at several points, as spelling out the details was deemed unnecessary. The audience knew the subject, got the point and responded, many times with laughter, even before I completed the thought. However, it could not be assumed that the audience reading the speech would be the same audience who heard it. Hence, the speech as written here is far more formal and complete than the speech as spoken.

In the process of preparing and delivering these speeches, and in benefiting from feedback afterwards, I have come to a more holistic understanding of our people, a greater appreciation of our history, a better understanding of education, and deeper respect for sacrifices made by individuals that seemed foolish to onlookers at the time. I have been forced to have greater deference for those whom we succeed, including their perspectives and starting points. This has made me less judgmental, yet

firmer in conviction, about the values and the virtues that really count. It has also altered my understanding of time and change. Real change takes time. Transformation requires patience and persistence. Further, life is not linear nor are accomplishments of one generation guaranteed permanence. There are always persons who come along later who 'knew not Joseph'.

This volume is presented to honour the organisations and the occasions. The intention is to inform and inspire a wider audience than those who heard these speeches. I have tried, by the Grace of God, to comply with the injunction of St. Paul to the Philippians in Chapter 4 of his Epistle and Verse 8:

Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.

To God be the glory.

