Carolyn Calloway Thomas, Candidate for President of the National Communication Association, 1986 and 1996

On the road to St. John Baptist Church, only six miles from southern Arkansas, is a clear creek where my parents dreamed of their future. I was born near this beautiful place, in the small town of Lillie, Louisiana, as the third of ten children of Alvin and Idell Calloway. My mother was a high school graduate and my father dropped out of school at an early age, and later worked in the paper mills of Bernice, Louisiana, one of the chief occupations of African American males in the tiny southern rural towns of the 1930s and 1940s. Thanks to my mother and father, I learned about the virtues of hard work, self reliance, dedication and service.

It is simply not possible to think of "influences" on my life without mentioning three powerfully enmeshed forces: family, school and church. Together, these extraordinary people and institutions provided a loving network for children growing up in the agrarian, segregated South of my youth. The people worked hard to keep us firmly anchored in bedrock values and traditions, and encouraged us never to live shabby lives. Some of the people who served as my mentors, though not well educated, gave me the gift of service and commitment to community. People in my hometown were very serious about the African concept that it takes a village to raise a child. It was not unusual, for example, for an older male or female or the teachers to put children on the "straight and narrow," as we termed the moral teachings and practices of the community.

To help us maintain sturdy values, our parents and teachers at every turn trotted out stories, proverbs, and poems that gave coherence and direction to our lives. The poem, "Invictus" by William Ernest Henley, comes to mind. Many black children who came of age in the 1960s and 70s can, at least, recite instructive lines from "Invictus": Out of the night that covers me . . . I thank whatever gods may be for my unconquerable soul. . . . " The poem lightened our load, imbued us with the courage necessary to turn ugliness into loveliness, endowed us with faith, and offered us more than enough wisdom to strive for worthy and necessary goals. The peculiar racial and historical circumstances notwithstanding, we were encouraged to become educated and to excel.

In terms of my communication path, no one was more influential than my eldest sister, Catherine, who passed away on January 17, 2001. She was my first compelling mentor, even at the young age of six years ! In fact, I date my interest in speech communication from the moment that I heard "Sis," as we called her, practicing a poem for recitation in Mrs. Earline Nute's first grade classroom. "Dark brown is the river, golden is the sand, it flows along forever with trees on either hand." The exquisite way that my sister, Catherine, recited her lines spoke to my young soul such that I got up the next morning and followed her to school, even though I was not quite ready for prime time. Upon first hearing the poem, I wanted to greet the people who had helped my sister shape such pretty words. When I arrived at school Mrs. Nute sent me home, and the next morning I got up, dressed myself, and followed my sister to school again. The pattern of getting up, going to school, and being sent home again, continued until my parents and the teacher relented. As a result of my tenacity, I entered first grade at Elliott High School in Bernice, Louisiana at the age of five. This was a lesson that I never forgot, the power of persistence!

Looking back, during those defining moments, I did not know that the lines were from Robert Louis Stevenson's sweet little poem, "Where go the Boats." But I knew for certain, however, that the words thrilled my heart, and I kept them safely within my bosom. Thus, at the age of five I

fell in love with words, the spoken word, the hushed word, and the preached word. Throughout elementary school, it was customary for students to dramatize their knowledge of the spoken word. For this reason, I recited poetry and dramatic readings, and acted in plays. "The Death of the Hired Man " by Robert Frost and "The Highwayman" by Alfred Noyes, are two poems that I had to memorize for dramatic performances at local and state competitions. Yearly, at our school, which included both elementary and secondary grades, we celebrated George Washington's birthday, learned about important black historical figures, and sang the black national anthem weekly, in school assemblies. We even sang "Dixie," which had no surplus connotations at the time. It was simply a lively little tune that we mouthed, without accompanying ideological explanations or sermons. And it is brave of me to admit this in so public a forum!

Although Stevenson's poem, "Where go the Boats," served as my official introduction to the genre of poetry, my love of reading did not end there, however. Indeed, I grew accustomed to reading everything, including novels, plays, the Bible, comic books, and Bartlett's Familiar Quotations. When other youths were romping around on Saturday afternoons, after having completed their chores, I found myself nestled under one of the many tall, majestic pine trees that adorned our yard, hugging books and reading and reciting poetry. Three of my friends, Doctors Deborah Atwater, Carol Jablonski, and Bishetta Merritt, all have noted that they can usually count on me for a story or a quotation to fit most occasions. Still, I am moved by their statements, and I trace such usage back to my youth.

I was also very much influenced by Louisa Mae Alcott's book, Little Women. "Christmas won't be Christmas without any presents," grumbled Jo, lying on the rug. "It's so dreadful to be poor!" sighed Meg, looking down at her old dress." The words were enlivening. They nourished my soul and made me smell economic and educational opportunity. My love of reading also extended to several small blue covered books that I discovered in the Westside High School library. The books detailed beautifully the lives of great men and women, including Booker T. Washington, Madame Curie, Clara Barton, and George Washington Carver. I coveted those books. Books were my constant companions, and I treated them with special care. Even today, as part of my family lore, I am still teased about my precious "school books," as I called them, especially when visiting my grandparents, Will and Clara Malone. My grandparents owned a large farm in northeast, Louisiana, about six miles from the southern Arkansas border. Some of my proudest moments were summers that I spent on their bountiful farm, shucking peanuts, picking peas, snapping beans, and harvesting pears, tomatoes, luscious concord grapes, and all the delectable things that came from the rich, fertile soil. One summer, when a fierce thunderstorm arose, accompanied by large, menacing sheets of rain, I suddenly remembered that one of my beloved books had been left outside, fully exposed to the cruel elements. And I pleaded with my grandfather to risk his life and to go in search of my cherished book, so strong was my love of books.

These stories are testament to my concern for the spoken and the written word. Although I received much reinforcement from others, including my parents, siblings, teachers, preachers, and other members of the community, my internal compass also clearly pointed in the direction of achievement. As a young adult, I attended youth meetings every Wednesday evening, taught Sunday School, and went to church twice on Sundays, in the morning and in the evening. My church and high school both provided me with so many opportunities for leadership and for speaking. Yearly, at Christmas time, for example, I recited Saint Luke 2:1 52 (one of the most telling narratives in the New Testament Gospels about the miraculous birth of the Christ child), and every homecoming the third Sunday in August until I went away to college, I recounted the history of the New Hopewell Baptist Church. Homecomings and family reunions were occasions

that few people in my community missed. Indeed, many individuals who had left the South in the 1950s and 1960s during the second great black migration, returned home again to have their souls revived, and to visit with family and friends.

At an early age, I was blessed with many positive, strong and influential women and men. Mrs. Velma Rodgers, the school librarian, and Mrs. Elnora Hildreth, my third grade teacher, who absolutely forbade slovenly speech in her classroom, also shaped my life. Mrs. Hildreth insisted that students form complete sentences and clearly articulate their words. She made "ing," "th," and " d" sounds ring like music in our ears! Many elementary school students and adults were charmed by Mrs. Hildreth's methodical, but inspiring promotion of the spoken word.

The teachings of Mrs. Hildreth and other forthright women, including my mother, were never concealed, even in high school. During high school, I participated in speech contests and student government, acted in plays, served as president of several of my classes, played basketball, and attended Bayou Girls State, a political leadership oriented state organization that was sponsored by the American Legion.

I took the faith and precepts of my community with me when I went away to college. Upon my arrival at Grambling College it was both natural and expectable that I would utilize my high school speech and drama experiences, although I clearly did not wake up one morning and announce to the world, "I want to be a speech teacher." It is a curious fact that throughout my career, I have rarely plotted precisely where I wanted to be at a given point in time. In my community, we were taught to strive for the best, and somehow, implicitly, we believed that the future would take care of itself.

Undoubtedly, some of these beliefs emanated from religious teachings. Inherent in such messages, however, was a strong faith that ultimately we could trust people to be good to us, despite segregation and discrimination.

At Grambling, students learned not only how to speak well, but also some of the theories that explain how and why audiences are moved in different ways. We admired Plato, Aristotle, and Quintilian, along with African American playwrights such as Douglas Ward Turner. The leadership and speaking skills acquired in high school and church served me well as a member of the Grambling College debate team, as president of the Thespian Club, and as an officer and member of other organizations. In keeping with educational tradition, at Grambling, college students were treated to vespers on Sunday afternoons, where they reflected on the meaning of life and witnessed several splendid Shakespearean productions that were performed by the Dallas Repertory Company, including Hamlet.

Everyone was required to leave his/her halls of residence dormitory rooms at six o'clock in the evening and walk to the grand auditorium for vespers, and since there were few recreational options available in the town of Grambling and other adjacent places, such as Ruston and Dubach, virtually all students attended vespers. As a tribute to their parents, however, most students supported Grambling's mission and tried unceasingly to fulfill their civic and educational duties. At least, that is the panoramic view that I currently hold of my college days!

About one month before graduating from Grambling College, Dr. Allen Williams, one of my undergraduate professors, suggested that I should go to graduate school, which, frankly, was not something that I had thought about! After teaching for one year at Mer Rouge High School in northeast Louisiana, I headed for the University of Wisconsin at Madison, and later for Indiana University. My experiences both at Wisconsin and at Indiana University were delightful! Doctors

Lloyd F. Bitzer, Winston Brembeck, Lawrence Rosenfield, James Andrews, J. Jeffrey Auer, Paul Batty, Lynda Beltz, Robert G. Gunderson, Dennis Gouran, Michael Leff, and Raymond G. Smith, all instilled in me a vision of what could be. The presence of only one female heroine in the above list of names signifies the status of communication departments during the 1970s, when virtually all of my university teachers were men, however excellent and kind.

In terms of the question related to human perception, my clinical psychologist husband, Jack Thomas, reminds me that people do not always see themselves as others do. Despite this somewhat softly veiled caveat, there are, however, several self descriptors that come to mind when I am forced to scrutinize my traits. Among them are the words intelligent, caring, kind, self assured, confident, lively, problem solver, assertive, leader, and communal.

Instinctively, and because of my ancestral history, I identify with sources and objects of community. At Indiana University I have had a wide range of administrative experiences, including serving as associate dean of the faculties, acting associate dean of the graduate school, director of graduate studies, director of the minority faculty fellowship program, director of the student support services program, and director of the interracial communications project. Recognizing the critical role that sisterhood and intellectual community played in my life, as soon as I had achieved faculty status at Indiana University, I joined the women's Faculty Club, where I served as president. In that role, I was introduced to the life of the university and came to understand even more compellingly that humans are indeed like coral, interconnected. Even though I was not taught to make large cultural distinctions between female and male roles while growing up in Louisiana, at Indiana University I observed more keenly that there are gender differences, with serious implications for who controls what, when, how and with what effect. And this disturbed me. So I became a member of the North Central Region of Women's Studies and served on several task forces at Indiana University, which worked to help improve the status of women.

I also became active in the Speech Communication Association. But I am getting ahead of the story. My history in the association began in New Orleans in 1970, my first conference. The conference was memorable because Larry Rosenfield, one of my professors at University of Wisconsin, introduced me to many individuals, including the "giants" in the field, so that I could lay eyes on them. Although I attended many paper presentations, receptions and departmental parties, temporarily, I buried them in my sub conscious, because I was so struck by the absence of black Americans. I wondered aloud whether there had indeed been an enactment of Douglas Turner Ward's play, Day of Absence, in which he imagines what the world would be like if African Americans went on strike. At the New Orleans convention, I also wondered whether African American professors and graduate students nationwide had joined such a strike and had forgotten to inform Doctors Molelfi Asante, Lyndrey Niles, and myself of the activities!

Two years following the New Orleans conference, I was a member of the Legislative Council. Through the association, some of us took with us an abiding belief that individual talents should be used to benefit others. We fought with all our might to open up the association and to expand black participation in the Speech Communication Association. And some individuals, including Doctors Melbourne Cummings, Jack Daniel, Dorothy Pennington, Lyndrey Niles, and Molefi Asante, created the Speech Communication Association Black Caucus. Our founding of the Black Caucus followed closely on the heels of the Civil Rights Movement and the sacrifices of blacks and whites at Selma, Alabama, and Memphis, Tennessee. Gradually, after much pushing and activism, opportunities for blacks in the association opened up. Whether it was chairing the SCA Finance Board in 1991, producing ideas about the nature of SCA substructures, helping to evaluate SCA programs, running for second vice president, and losing,

serving as president of Central States Communication Association, or increasing diversity, the desire to benefit others was ever the prime motive for my activities.

The separate, larger question of who were my mentors, excluding the individuals that I have already mentioned, is a fascinating one! In her book, Lanterns (1999), Marian Wright Edelman, director of the Children's Defense Fund, in paying tribute to her mentors writes, "O God, I thank You for the lanterns in my life who illuminated dark and uncertain paths." Edelman' s apt use of the word lanterns as a metaphor is applicable to my life as well. In a real sense, anyone who provides light rather than shadows, offers a way out, enlivens my life, and gives me beautiful perspective, has bestowed upon himself or herself, the word mentor! Many of my mentors are historical figures, whose words and deeds have been culled from dusty tomes. The following story is one such example. A few years ago, while conducting research on nineteenth century women at the Library of Congress, I found buried in the many correspondences between black and white abolitionists a quotation from Maria Weston Chapman. According to the narrative, in 1859, Sarah Remond, an abolitionist, was whining about the fact that the venerable Frederick Douglass and other men at an abolitionist meeting had snubbed her, meaning, of course, that she believed that her voice had been silenced, according to the masculine tenets of nineteenth century America. And Remond shared her special anguish with Chapman, who, in turn, sent Remond a wise and captivating letter, which was specifically crafted to rally Ms. Remond's sagging spirit. "The important thing always is not what happens to us, but how we take it." wrote Chapman. To this very day, the words bring meaningful and joyous perspective, and help to keep my life turned in the right direction. In a genuinely dynamic sense, Weston is also a mentor, not only because her words have an ambrosial quality to them, but also because she gave me something to believe in and something to hold onto. There are countless mentors "out there," including Sojourner Truth, Mary McCleod Bethune, Eleanor Roosevelt, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Teresa, Mahatma Gandhi, and other equally remarkable women and men that I remember from my journey. And all have served as lanterns.