

1999 GEORGIA HUMANITIES Lecture

## **Moral Literacy: The Knowledge of Truth, Justice, Goodness, And Beauty**

By Robert Michael Franklin

Georgia Humanities Council Atlanta, Georgia

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Greetings to Governor Barnes, First Lady Barnes, members of the Georgia Legislature, elected officials, and representatives of the humanities, education, business, and religious communities. We are all grateful for your individual and collective support of the humanities. I pay tribute to my fellow board members on the Georgia Humanities Council and to our president Jamil Zainaldin and his talented staff. Let me also acknowledge the senior members of the administrative staff of the Interdenominational Theological Center, The ITC, who are actively engaged in bringing faith-based solutions to America's social crisis. We hope you will all get to know us better as we seek to bring hope and humanity to our nation's most distressed neighborhoods.

My subject is moral literacy. My one big idea is that there is a body of moral knowledge with which everyone should be acquainted, if we are to live meaningfully and to participate in authentic community- often referred to as civil society. Further, each of us has a role to play in disseminating this grammar of moral existence that is so essential to the future of our democracy. Our focus, then, is upon knowledge and the dissemination of that knowledge.

My approach to this large and intimidating subject is informed by a debate that raged a few years ago, perhaps one of the early shots fired in the culture war. E.D. Hirsch, Harold Bloom, and Mortimer Adler argued for "cultural literacy" as an acquaintance with a discrete body of cultural knowledge. They went further to suggest that there is a canon of such ideas and texts, and that educators would be well served by inculcating the contents of this list or canon of great cultural facts.

Other educators responded that the point of education is not to teach people *what* to think, but *how* to think, and that the "facts" that comprise education are of secondary importance. Still others argued that the assertion of a single canon was an act of cultural imperialism that showed evidence of racism, sexism, class bias, and other forms of exclusion that are routinely practiced by privileged white Anglo-Saxon Protestant males. I opt for the notion of an open, dynamic canon that is constantly being revised. Inclusion is judged by the capacity of the text or cultural fact to convey, in an exceptional manner, the truths we hold to be most dear.

An historian has observed that it is the intellectual habit of every generation to declare that its current level of moral depravity and intellectual chaos is as bad as it has ever been. I am inclined to argue, "But this time, it really is true." However, historians of the Roman Empire would probably laugh us out of the room. So, without asserting the comparative superiority of our culture's turpitude, let me suggest that public standards of acceptable behavior have changed dramatically since the 1950s and continue in flux to the present day. Some might argue that the presence of an impeached, but not convicted, president is a compelling symbol of our moral and intellectual chaos.

Many people attribute the rising acceptance of deviance to the culturally disruptive and dynamic period of the 1960s. It is not my purpose to examine that history here. It has been brilliantly interpreted already by observers such as Christopher Lasch, Robert N. Bellah, Cornel West, Steven Tipton, and Jean Bethke Ehlstain. I am more concerned about the cultural and moral consequences that radiate from that explosive era. I would like to characterize the period since the sixties as a time of eroding moral literacy. The importance of certain moral visions, virtues, and values was radically challenged. As the earlier moral codes were seemingly abandoned, baby boomers experimented with alternative codes and cultures of behavior. Many critiqued the notion of morality altogether. Whose morality was this, after all? Soon, popular approaches to parenting and early childhood education sought to be nonjudgmental and, often, non-directive. This movement had parallels in the therapeutic community where counseling and psychotherapy reflected an emerging set of cultural values that were morally relativistic, situational, existential, and utilitarian.

Obviously, this is a sketchy and rather simplified overview of a complex period through which most of us lived. But, may it suffice to support the claim that the cultural seeds that were planted then have now born fruit, and most of us are disturbed about this produce.

The erosion or decline of moral literacy is responsible, in part, for many bad behaviors in public and private life. This decline is pervasive in our culture. Wherever you look, you see evidence of this crisis of literacy and commitment, whether in boardrooms or boxing rings, in the White House or the streets in the "hood," in suburban subdivisions or elite business schools where a majority of students polled indicate a willingness to lie or cheat to increase profits. A 1994 *Newsweek* magazine poll asked: "Do you think the United States is in a moral and spiritual decline?" Seventy-six percent said yes, 20 percent said no.

This discussion occurs against the background of a larger societal concern with eroding literacy. For instance, according to Literacy Action, Inc., a thirty year old, Atlanta-based organization committed to teaching adults the "basic skills needed to reach their full potential as individuals and citizens:"

- The U.S. has the lowest literacy rate among industrialized nations;
- More than 20 percent of adults read at or below the fifth-grade level;
- The U.S. spends \$1.5 billion annually on corrections to house 600,000 illiterate inmates;

- Eighty-five percent of juvenile offenders are disabled readers;
- Children of adults who participate in literacy programs improve their grades and test scores and are less likely to drop out of school: and,
- Forty-three percent of adults with the lowest literacy skills live in poverty and 70 percent have no job or a part-time job.

Despite significant progress in our societal literacy rates as compared with the beginning of this century, these are sobering statistics to carry into a new millennium.

At most theological seminaries, we worry a great deal about what we regard as the growing phenomenon of a lack of biblical literacy that is evident among incoming students. Most of them possess little familiarity with sacred scripture. Consequently, graduate level courses on the Bible often resort to laying the foundation that in earlier times would have been accomplished in Sunday school. I cannot resist quoting H.L. Mencken's observation that "Sunday school is a prison in which children do penance for the evil conscience of their parents." In light of Mencken's observation, perhaps we should say that these non Sunday-schooled seminarians are byproducts of a period when moral knowledge was contested and moral commitment waned.

Literacy matters. Anyone concerned about the quality of life should be concerned with the state of our personal and collective literacy in all of its dimensions: mathematical, technological, cultural, scientific, and, I would add to this list, moral literacy.

### **Moral Knowledge and Commitment**

What is the body of knowledge that we should desire that all citizens possess as moral agents? What does it mean to be morally literate?

I would like to suggest that it includes familiarity with the stories, traditions, texts, practices, and people who define our cherished moral ideals. Despite the wondrous diversity and cultural pluralism of our great nation, there are certain moral facts that all rational people can and should admire. We affirm the tradition of young people respecting their elders. I suspect that most of us think that everyone would be better off if they adhered to the Ten Commandments and the Golden Rule. We prefer that all people possess certain basic social graces or manners. And, we admire morally exemplary people such as Mother Teresa and Nelson Mandela. On occasion, we may even be inspired enough to imitate their behavior.

The subtitle of my lecture is "The knowledge of truth, justice, goodness, and beauty." As I shared this language with several friends and conversation partners, most of them chuckled at my audacity. As the lecture date approached, I called Jamil Zainaldin and gingerly asked if that subtitle had already been published. I explained with calm desperation that I had contrived that title on an unfortunate morning when I had consumed far too much caffeine. But now, I was sober and would like to suggest a more modest and manageable subject. Too late. I was stuck with the mother of all lecture subtitles.

In contemporary scholarly circles, producing prescriptive lists of character virtues is the intellectual equivalent of picking a fight. After all, what makes this list better than any other? Who determines which virtues are essential and desirable? I would argue that any list of virtues betrays an underlying, or better yet, an overarching vision of the good person. The essential virtues provide the outline of a portrait that is necessarily incomplete and requires elaboration through dialogue in particular communities located in particular contexts. Still, the essential desirable components of good character are constant.

Here I would like to cite the work of David Tracy, a theologian at the University of Chicago who reflects upon the nature of cultural classics, a subject that seems to preoccupy Chicago scholars. He suggests that a classic is a text, story, work of art, individual life, or event that emerges out of a particular time and culture but possesses an "excess and permanence of meaning" (invoking the philosopher Martin Heidegger) that renders it accessible to all rational people.

Hence, one need not be Russian to appreciate the genius of Dostoyevsky, or Irish to apprehend the power of James Joyce, or African American to be riveted by the insight of W.E.B. Du Bois. Rather, their works touch us, or to use Paul Tillich's wonderful metaphor, "They grasp us and do not let us go." In contrast to "period pieces" that depend upon a particular time and place for their resonance, the classic is timeless and it is, as Mortimer Adler helpfully adds, re-readable. It has no shelf life. Each subsequent revisit is a fresh visit. We can re-view the classic film, or re-read the poem, or reexamine an exemplary life, over and over. and each time we will discover a new insight. As the church historian Martin Marty would say, "You don't read the classic, it reads you."

The moral knowledge of the sort that I am suggesting is classic in nature-that which is required for a civil society. It is not limited to a closed or fixed canon. The canon is open, dynamic, mutable, and revisable.

I am suggesting that there are four grand virtues that mark the good life: truth, justice, goodness, and beauty. Again, it is my incomplete outline and vision of the good person. Of course, the categories of the good person and the just society date back to the earliest evidence of human reflection about the well-lived life. Historians of religion will affirm that the ancient Sumerians, Egyptians, Chinese, and others seemed to be engaged persistently in meaning-making in order to live and to live well. Even the etchings on ancient cave walls that depict women and men nurturing children, tending animals, and building community are eloquent portraits of moral existence.

Recognizing the importance of public schools as participants in the process of nurturing virtuous people, the Georgia Department of Education has generated a list of twenty-seven character traits that should focus school discussions of character education. Aristotle suggested that there are four basic virtues (temperance, prudence, fortitude, and courage); the Apostle Paul argued for the privileged position of three virtues (faith, hope, and love); Jesus asserted one supreme virtue... love of God, others, and self. What's going on here? Is it that the smarter you are, the shorter your list?

All of these great moral philosophers are working on the same project, the transformation and elevation of human existence through, in part, the elaboration of virtue. For religious philosophers, this is more than an educational project, it may also

involve inner conversion and re-orienting one's deepest motivations in life. Suffice it to say that virtue is an essential category for organizing our thoughts about the good life, and that conversation does not require a religious or theological analysis in order to produce significant clarity and progress on the subject.

"Virtue is a quality of character by which individuals habitually recognize and do the right thing." Those who work from an orientation known as the "ethics of virtue" argue that "some personal choices and categories are morally superior to others."

Truth is better than falsehood. Justice is superior to unfairness. Goodness is queen over meanness and selfishness. And, beauty, whether intrinsic or in the eye of the beholder, is preferable to its opposite.

Truth is the currency that makes all communication trustworthy and worth the effort. According to the German social thinker Jurgen Habermas, truthful communication helps to undergird democracy, as it is the bond of trust and faith between people of equal dignity. Totalitarian societies are built upon lies, or one big lie, that only a few privileged people should participate in the public conversation and all other people are simply a means to the end of gratifying the few. Lies destabilize the social order, especially those that are detected and unpunished.

But, Martin Luther King, Jr. was fond of declaring that "truth crushed to the ground will rise again." Truth conspires toward our freedom. For if the truth does set us free, then any lie or social arrangement built upon falsehood will forever feel the earth tremble as truth, like a repressed force of nature, seeks to find the crack through which its volcanic energy may burst.

Justice is the discernment of the proper ordering of relationships. It consists of the capacity to treat like cases in a similar manner. It is even-handedness and the Solomonic apprehension of the means by which life's inevitable disorder can find mitigation and relief. Under normal circumstances, it operates in accord with formal, procedural principles and rules of distribution. But, under unusual circumstances, it recognizes when compassion and casuistry may achieve the just ends toward which formal procedures aim, but may not be adequately and precisely calibrated.

Well-ordered individuals require well-ordered communities and states to support a good life. Hence, the virtue of justice in an individual is not sufficient for a good life. There must be social justice as well. And, the just woman or man must work to establish a just social order. That is why we cannot be indifferent to the state of our courts of law, legislatures, tax codes, or criminal justice system. All of them play a role in establishing the boundaries within which just people may flourish.

Here again, Dr. King's wisdom and voice echo: "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice." Societies, not simply individuals, reap what they sow. King offered not merely an historical claim or a transcendent hope, but a theological and philosophical statement about the very structure of reality, an ontological claim. The universe is so constructed as to abhor injustice and disorder. Its corrections may be slow, but they are inevitable and even destined.

Goodness is a way of naming an ensemble of virtues that pertain to a loving regard for others, including a willingness to place oneself in the shoes of the other. Goodness includes a generosity of spirit that includes others, that is impatient with circles and rules that exclude. It is manifest in a magnanimity that aspires to the noble, high-

minded resolution of conflict. It refuses to drift downward into an ethic of revenge and self-centeredness.

Beauty is, perhaps, the most controversial virtue because it seems so subjective and culture-dependent. In fact, it is not a moral virtue like the others. It is a nonmoral good. We can probably get along well enough without a preoccupation with beauty. But, there is something profoundly satisfying about the contemplation of the beautiful. Whether in music, poetry, a setting in nature, the inner qualities of a person, or the physical attributes of another, we are capable of being transformed, transported to a higher plane of consciousness in the presence of this mysterious quality. The contemplation of beauty can also spur us to savor and appreciate the goodness in life in ways that prompt us to live better. Thereby, a nonmoral good facilitates the moral life.

It is desirable to encourage people to aspire to recognize, appreciate, and emulate beauty. Ironically, we learn what to regard as beautiful by studying a vast variety of examples. We have to encounter all forms of art to know what we can dismiss and what we do not like. Taste must be educated and refined. And, as we all know, tastes can be acquired.

The knowledge of truth, justice, goodness, and beauty should be accompanied by a commitment to practicing and embracing these virtues on a daily basis. It is not enough to know the good or to will the good. We must do good, or at least be found trying. I hope this doesn't sound too much like the bumper sticker that reads, "Jesus is coming soon; look busy. " It is noble to be found trying to do the right thing. G.K. Chesterton would probably agree with this since he once observed that "the Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and left untried."

The pursuit of the good life is, as many Greek philosophers regarded it, an *agon- a* struggle, a contest, a race to be run. It is not automatic, not easy, and always involves sacrifice and strife. According to Wayne Meeks of Yale University, "The choice between the easy life of vice and the difficult life of virtue is an exceedingly lonely one." And, the proper choice requires a particular kind of education, or *paideia*. In ancient schools of philosophy, it was widely believed that "philosophical conversion and the virtuous life to which it leads are attainable only by an elite." Meeks also notes that some Greeks believed that what commonly passed for a good education was not truly so, but only a "pseudopaideia."

W.E.B. Du Bois argued a similar line as he challenged those to whom he referred as the "talented tenth" of the "Negro" race to take note of the trials and tribulations of virtuosity. In a commencement address at Howard University in 1939, he observed that:

To increase abiding satisfaction for the mass of our people and for all people, someone must sacrifice something of his own happiness. This is a duty only to those who recognize it as a duty. It is silly to tell intelligent human beings: Be good and you will be happy. The truth is today, be good, be decent, be honorable and self-sacrificing, and you will not always be happy. You will often be desperately unhappy. You may even be crucified, dead, and buried. And the third day you will be just as dead as the first. But, with the death of your happiness may easily come increased happiness and satisfaction and fulfillment for other people-

strangers, unborn babes, uncreated worlds. If this is not sufficient incentive, never try it- remain hogs.

Education matters. Literacy depends upon it. But how do we come by the knowledge of truth, justice, goodness, beauty, and the other virtues that you have, no doubt, mentally added to this list?

We learn these essential and precious lessons most profoundly by hearing stories and provocative words and by seeing those words enflashed. That is, we learn moral knowledge and we commit ourselves to it by being grasped by, and entangled in, a web of narratives and exemplary lives that make morality come alive. It is not a passive process. It is a relational, interactive process. The classic reads us. It stakes its claim upon our minds and souls. Thereby, moral literacy becomes a way of life.

At the end of *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, Robert Bellah, Steven Tipton, and fellow authors cite Helen Vendler's 1980 presidential address to the Modern Language Association. She used as her text a passage from the end of Wordsworth's *The Prelude*: "What we have loved, I Others will love, and we will teach them how." She says,

It is not within our power to reform the primary and secondary schools, even if we have a sense of how that reform might begin. We do have it within our power, I believe, to reform ourselves, to make it our own first task to give, especially to our beginning students, that rich web of associations, lodged in the tales of majority and minority cultures alike, by which they could begin to understand themselves as individuals and as social beings...All freshman English courses, to my mind, should devote at least half their time to the reading of myth, legend and parable; and beginning language courses should do the same...We owe it to ourselves to show our students, when they *first* meet us, what we are: we owe their dormant appetites, thwarted for so long in their previous schooling, that deep sustenance that will make them realize that they too, having been taught, love what we love.

Expanding on Vendler's challenge to teachers, I would argue that each of us has an opportunity and an obligation to teach others to love what we have loved, to cherish what we have cherished, to know the best that we have known.

Each of us must become active in disseminating and reinforcing the moral grammar that constitutes literacy and contributes to a virtuous life. In the workplace we can model *behavior* and attitudes that reflect the stories that have touched us deeply. In our leisure time, we can retell those stories to children who are willing to listen. And, some of us will need to go the extra mile in learning to present those stories to the least advantaged members of our society, such as juvenile offenders waiting to be sentenced, the youths who are already incarcerated but not corrupted altogether, and those who are addicted but still able to cry for a way out. Someone must reach them with the fundamentals of moral literacy.

## **Commitment and Grace**

We have spoken of the body of knowledge, the classics, which constitute moral literacy. And, we have noted that becoming literate and virtuous is often a lonely struggle. Hence, the need for deep commitment. But, there is another dimension of the struggle for virtue that lurks in what may be called the recent unpleasantries in Washington, D.C.

As the scandal unfolded, I had a simple idea that I wanted to convey to the President. I wrote to him at the White House (unanswered to date), shared my simple idea in an address to the Congressional Black Caucus where he spoke a few hours later on the same day, and then submitted an article that was published by the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (October 1998). In the article, I suggested that the President would benefit from a brief moral and spiritual retreat that should involve prayer, study, counseling, reading the political and spiritual classics, and writing an essay on his own journey from error to redemption. I characterized this as a gesture of self-censure that he should initiate if he were not willing to resign. Self-censure could be a gesture of decent leadership that might signify his respect for the connection between behavior and consequences.

I urged the President to write an essay that could become the basis or starting point for a culture-wide discussion of certain basic moral issues such as the nature of good and bad, right and wrong, and how the nation adjudicates public and private misbehavior. Well, I'm sure that this is not the last good advice I give that will go widely ignored. However, I think that we still need the essay, an essay that jumpstarts this vital conversation in the culture. Even in his apologies to the nation, the President invoked biblical texts (especially Psalm 51 : "Create in me a clean heart" language) and, thereby, stirred a controversy among religious scholars about the political misuse of faith. Many prominent scholars signed a statement protesting his manipulation of religion and religious leaders (which I'm afraid would include me since I was present for the White House Prayer Breakfast on October II, 1998). This was an instructive controversy that would have been enriched by his response to those who signed the statement.

If the President had engaged the debate with theologians and scholars of sacred scripture, someone might have urged him to read and exegete the strange and haunting passage from Paul's letter to the Romans. In one of the most controversial texts of the entire testament, Chapter 7: 14-25 conveys Paul's existential struggle with his own conflicting motivations. That which he hates is the thing he seems compelled to do, and the life to which he aspires is ever elusive. An excerpt of the text reads as follows:

Vs.15: I don't understand myself at all, for I really want to do what is right, but I don't do it. Instead, I do the very thing I hate: I know perfectly well that what I am doing is wrong, and that my bad conscience shows that I agree that the law is good. But I can't help myself, because it is sin inside me that makes me do these evil things. I know I am rotten through and through so far as my old sinful nature is concerned. No matter which way I turn, I can't make myself do right. I want to, but I can't. When I want to do good, I don't. And when I try not to do wrong, I do it anyway. Vs.24: Oh, what a miserable person I am! Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin?

Paul is a man marked by profound inner conflict who struggles to reconcile the tension between his spiritual ideals and his physical appetites. This may be the biblical

passage with which the President should begin his introspective journey. But, a report on the journey would be valuable to all of us. Like other classics of spiritual autobiography such as Augustine's *Confessions*, such reporting would encourage all of us to be more honest about our own uneasy struggles. We might even have to admit that there is a bit of the President in all of US, a bit of that strange mix of idealism and potential for self-destructive indulgence-an unparalleled capacity for doing good that lives alongside unparalleled recklessness.

Earlier, I spoke of the struggle, sacrifice, and loneliness of the virtuous life, but it is here that we encounter the soul-wrenching anguish of a good person who finds it easy to do bad things. Perhaps, you can appreciate Oscar Wilde's flippant confession, "I can resist anything except temptation."

For Paul, the state of inner turmoil is not resolved through reason, nor can it be ignored or suppressed. Rather, he makes a theological move as he invites the intervention of an "holy Other." He declares that God's grace abounds in such a way as to embrace his wretched soul. When we strive to live the virtuous life only to find that circumstances external and internal frustrate us, we may be tempted to abandon the effort. But, our knowledge of the humanities can remind us that there are resources in the great faith traditions, particularly those with which we are familiar in the West, that can offer some hope at the end of a hard day's night. In Judaism, Yahweh takes the initiative in choosing the people of Israel, not because they were numerous and mighty, but because, as Deuteronomy 7:7 says, because they were small and rejected. In Christianity, God declares that God's grace is sufficient to rescue and sustain those who feel trapped by the principalities and powers. In Islam, Allah takes the initiative in revealing Allah's will for fallen and weak humanity. Indeed, these traditions point toward a source of truth, justice, goodness, and beauty in the universe that draws us into relationship and offers us mercy when we get things wrong. And, although not all of us participate in these particular traditions or any others, we should be familiar with them as we develop our own responses to the challenge of human finitude.

### **From Literacy to Fluency**

We have focused upon developing literacy as a worthwhile end for human existence. But, is this the highest level of moral functioning available to us? Moral development theorists suggest otherwise. They note three broad categories of moral reasoning: pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional. The pre-conventional level focuses upon what is good and right for the individual. This style of reasoning tends to be self-centered and focuses upon following the rules that help us to avoid punishment and garner rewards. The conventional style of moral reasoning focuses upon ethical principles that are more universal and a community that is more expansive than the self-centered individual and his or her immediate family or community. Post-conventional morality aims higher than moral rules of punishment and reward or ethical principles that are broadly applicable. It is a manifestation of a fully self-actualized person who is wise and is led by the spirit of love, the spirit of God. Post-conventional morality seeks to establish the beloved community, the kingdom or commonwealth of God.

Some people are capable of aspiring to this higher level of ethical motivation and accomplishment. Ethicists refer to this as supererogatory motivation which includes the

capacity for radical self- sacrifice and a profound respect and love for others and God. The moral law cannot compel us to sacrifice our lives in order to save another life or to make the world a better place. This is a higher call, a sacred vocation. But, the early steps in this direction could be regarded as expressions of the faculty of moral fluency.

Despite widespread cynicism about moral leadership in our society, we are still capable of being moved by the presence of authentic moral exemplars. Their presence in the world reminds us, no, invites us to strain a bit beyond our comfort levels as we pursue virtue. Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, jr., Mother Teresa, Jimmy Carter, Nelson Mandela, Cardinal Joseph Bernadin, Rosa Parks, and some of the local heroines and heroes in each of our life stories are there to challenge us not to play it safe. We can develop fluency by studying their lives, understanding how the words become flesh, and by retelling them to others by our words and our deeds until their stories become part of our story and identity.

Recently, the city of Atlanta announced its motto for year 2000 celebrations. We hope to be known from now on as the "Possibility City." In Atlanta, indeed, in Georgia, anything is possible. And, those of us who believe this are *possibilitarians*. Our claim to this lofty moniker is rooted in the large number of possibilitarians that were nurtured on Georgia soil, including the distinguished awardees that we will honor today.

The question that I wish to leave with you is, "Do we have the capacity to entertain a bold dream of who we can become if we all sacrifice a bit of our autonomy and pride for the sake of the common good?" Our history and our present ensemble of leaders and resources suggest that we can do anything if we really give it a try.

Can we write a story together comprising the many stories that are in this room and in this state? Can those who are affluent, women and men in full, imagine new ways of empowering those who are poor but desire to improve? Can white, black, Latino, Asian, and Native American peoples bring their rich resources of art and imagination to the drawing board as we imagine a better city, a better state?

I believe that we can, and that we must. We are literate enough, even fluent enough to spend our lives risking large and noble things. May we be compelled forward by the words of Rabbi Hillel: "The world is equally balanced between good and evil. Our next act will tip the scale."

Thank you.

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Dr Robert Michael Franklin is president of the Interdenominational Theological Center (The ITC), the nation's foremost center of historically African American religious training and graduate education A native of Chicago, Illinois. Dr. Franklin studied at Morehouse College, the University of Durham in England, Harvard Divinity School, and the University of Chicago.

As a scholar-preacher, he is an insightful educator and former seminary program administrator and foundation executive. He has taught at the University of Chicago and Harvard, Colgate, Rochester, and Emory universities. Prior to coming to The ITC, he served as program officer for the Ford Foundation in the Asset Building and Community Development Program where he had primary responsibility for grants to African American churches engaged in secular social service delivery.

Since his return to Atlanta, Dr. Franklin has been much in demand as a preacher and lecturer. He serves on the boards of the Children's Defense Fund, the Urban League of Atlanta, and the Georgia Humanities Council. He is married to Dr. Cheryl Goffney Franklin and is the parent of three children, Imani, Robert III, and Julian.

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