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**“Response to Professor Morain’s Founder’s Day Lecture”**

*January 27, 2004*  
*The University of Georgia Chapel*

On October 29, 2002, the Richmond City Council in my home state of Virginia voted unanimously to honor a slave who plotted a revolt. The resolution calling Gabriel Prosser an “American patriot and freedom fighter” commemorated the 202<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of his planned slave revolt in 1800. Because of two slaves who revealed the plot, the revolt never materialized, and Prosser, along with dozens of other conspirators, were hanged. One black councilman said that “the resolution seeks to correct an error in history whereby Gabriel has been seen by many as a criminal rather than a freedom fighter who gave his life for the liberation of his people.” But a good many white Richmonders saw it differently. One local white leader, president of the European American Unity and Rights Organization, said “when you honor Gabriel, your honor his planned intentions, which were mass murder and terror.” Now, I have a hard time viewing Gabriel Prosser, or Nat Turner, also from my home state, as murderers or terrorists. They are my heroes, though I can understand why they might not be yours.

As we approach the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the *Brown* decision which outlawed legalized segregation in public schools, we are, sadly, still very much a divided society. On issues ranging from electoral politics, affirmative action, the Confederate flag, the Rodney King incident, the O.J. Simpson murder trial, and even our cultural icons, blacks and whites often see the world very differently. If we accept that as a given, that does not mean that we give up in our efforts to bridge the cultural divide. This country has a long and painful history of mistreatment of its nonwhite citizens, be they African American, native American, Hispanic-American, or Asian American. We may never see eye to eye on every issue, but, at the very least, there must be acknowledgement of past injustice; only then can healing and reconciliation begin. We should not live in the past, but neither can we be oblivious to it, for it provides us with needful historical markers along the way.

Professor Morain spoke of cultural differences and the tendency sometimes to misunderstand or to misinterpret. The key here is to open our minds to new things, rather than adopt the defensive posture that we sometimes do. A few years ago a school district in Florida, in response to the sudden influx of Hispanics into the school

district, adopted what was called an “English-first” policy, which had the effect of forcing Hispanic children to communicate in English. That’s not necessarily a bad idea, as long as the English-first policy is accompanied by a Spanish-second policy, whereby non-Spanish speaking school children are required to learn Spanish. Athens, Ga, is a very different city from the one I arrived in seventeen years ago, and at least twice a week when I enter Wal-mart I wish that I could speak Spanish, which is why I’m trying to learn it right now—even at my advanced age—and am requiring my children to learn it. Whether we want to acknowledge it or not, ours is a changing society, and we no longer have the luxury of looking inwardly. We must cast off our provincialism, and begin to think, as they say, outside the box.

Professor Morain spoke about goodwill, and how that goodwill can sometimes be misinterpreted. Let me suggest, though, that not everybody is motivated by goodwill, and until those of us who ARE outnumber those who are not, we must continue in the struggle. Professor Morain has already said it more eloquently than I can: cultural differences enrich our lives, and human commonalities unite us. She has laid down the challenge, and it is up to us to heed it. Our children’s future, indeed their very survival, depends on it.