

Jamie Walker's Speech for Camille Howard's Memorial
San Francisco State University
October 30, 2003
5:30pm

Camille Howard is the epitome of the word Diva. If one were to open Webster's dictionary and scroll down to peruse the true meaning of the word Diva, Camille's picture would be sitting, gracefully, beside it. During my four years under her apprenticeship in the Theater Arts Department from 1994-1998, one could find Camille sitting (in jet black sunglasses) in the studio theater, with bright red lipstick on, which was manufactured by MAC. Not everyone knew it, but the name of the lipstick that Camille wore was also called "Diva." In fact, it was called Diva-Red. I wore that same color lipstick, too.

I had often wondered how a woman could be so heavenly and graceful, in her flowing black skirts or dresses, that appeared to trail behind her in the breeze, as she strode throughout the halls of the Theater Arts Department, determined to either move her car, run errands, head to her office for advising hours, or prepare for her long drive home in rush-hour traffic.

"Can she really see behind those jet black sunglasses?" I'd often ask myself, playfully. "Camille sure has grace and class! And I want to be just like her."

I hadn't known it, at first, but sometimes, behind those dark sunglasses were also tears, which made Camille all the more beautiful and deeply human. Camille was dramatic (in every positive sense of the word) and full of life, but she was also graceful, deeply spiritual, tender-hearted, and Divine.

I learned of Camille's passing at 2am East Coast time on Friday October 17, 2003. Earlier that evening, I had been asked by Camille O. Cosby and journalist, Renee Poussaint, to give a speech (about honoring our mentors and elders) at The Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., for Ruby Dee, Ossie Davis, Geoffrey Holder, the dancer, Carmen Devallade, and many others. That night (as she had been all year), Camille had been on my mind. As I sat in the audience that evening, watching actors perform, jazz musicians play, Desmond Richardson dance to "All In Love Is Fair", or listen to Tracy Chapman and Stephanie Mills sing, (all in honor of their mentors), I couldn't help but to think of Camille, and the monumental role she played in my life (as mentor, second-mother, and cherished sister-friend). Tears filled my eyes watching the Gala celebration that evening, for I was grateful for Camille's guidance and love throughout the years. It was she who loved me, unconditionally, and believed in me when, at times, I did not even believe in myself. It was she who mothered me when my own mother was not there. Camille taught me how to wrestle with my own sadness (informing me that 'Jamie, I struggled and have wrestled, too'). She was there for me as I learned to heal from all of the years of childhood sexual abuse I had been subjected to as a child. She guided me, loved me, taught me discipline, introduced me to meditation, spirituality, Buddhism, and prayer. She lifted as she

climbed, lighting my footsteps, as I journeyed down my own road to self-discovery, enlightenment, and unconditional love.

Inspired, thus, at The Kennedy Center about honoring our mentors and elders, I logged onto my email account that evening after I got home to do a "google.com" search on Camille. I wanted to see how she was doing, and recalled sending her a copy of my first book, 101 Ways Black Women Can Learn to Love Themselves (which I dedicated to her) and a card earlier that summer. Within seconds of typing her full name into google.com, I noticed a new email suddenly appear on my computer screen, with the subject heading "Regarding: Camille Howard."

I smiled, thinking it was Divine Order, for Camille's spirit had been tugging and pulling me all summer. And I hadn't known why I was suddenly depressed. I hadn't known that it was actually Spirit trying to inform that she was making her transition.

I thought the email was Divine Order and so I smiled. However, when I opened it, I discovered a different kind of spiritual sign I was receiving the Universe. The heart-wrenching email (from Virstyne Henry, a forward from Roy Conboy) not only informed me that Camille had passed, but that the Memorial services for her at Saint Mary Magdalen had already come and gone.

Shocked and horrified, I put my head down at the computer and wept until 8am the next morning. I hadn't even known Camille was sick. If I did, I would have been there, for I knew how much Camille loved and cared about me, and treasured the correspondence we kept over the years. Indeed, I am still grieving, but as we are informed in the Bible, 'weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.' And with that joy comes a flood of precious memories that we can all continue to laugh at and look on fondly.

The poet, Rainer Maria Rilke, once said, "For one human being to love another is perhaps the most difficult task of all, the epitome, the ultimate test. It is that striving for which all other striving is merely preparation."

Camille taught us how to love with all of our hearts. She taught us how to love our voices, how to love ourselves, how to love each other, how to cherish our instruments, our body temples, and even our own choices--whether big or small. She taught us how to love this business, how to love the craft, and each divine, precious gift that we have to offer, bring, and share on the stage. Above all, she taught us how to not only recognize and see love in all areas of our lives (in our immediate and external world), but she also proved that love was already residing deep within our center, waiting to be unconditionally loved, actualized, and reborn.

Indeed, Camille was like an angel to me. She still is and frequently visits me. Camille is an angel to all of us. And she now looks down upon us, lovingly and gracefully, as an ancestor spirit from Heaven.

And I'd just like to leave you with a small quote that Camille once sent to me in the mail during the course of her sabbatical.

It's from the dancer, Martha Graham:

There is a vitality, a life force,
a quickening
that is translated through you into action,
and because there is only one you
in all time,
this expression is unique.

If you block it,
it will never exist through any other medium
and be lost.
The world will not have it.
It is not your business
to determine how good it is,
not how valuable it is
nor how it compares to other expressions.
It is your business to keep it yours,
clearly and directly
to the keep the channel open.

You do not even have to believe in yourself or your work.
You have to keep open and aware directly
to the urges that motivate you.

Keep the channel open.
No artist is pleased.
There is no satisfaction whatever at any time.
There is only a queer, divine dissatisfaction;
A blessed unrest
that keeps us alive
and makes us more alive than others.