

# FORUM

## A heavenly prescription for the blues



**Nigel Alston**  
Motivational Moments

"By walking, I found out where I was going."  
— Irving Layton

I found a "prescription for the blues" at a Friday night basement party at a most unlikely place, the Wake Forest University Divinity School. It was "A Celebration of Spiritual Renewal," an ecumenical attempt to broaden the style of and approach to worship in the Wake Forest University Divinity School community. The program was led by the preacher for the evening, Dr. Brad R. Braxton, the Jessie Ball duPont Assistant professor of homiletics and biblical studies at the divinity school. It was a spiritually moving service that provided food for thought, as did a question I was asked after the program by the preacher's wife, Lazetta.

I needed the uplift, after riding around lost on the campus of Wake Forest University looking for the service. I was in the general area but could not find the right place on the campus. No one I asked knew the correct location either, including the wedding party in the chapel that looked surprised as my wife and I walked in looking for a church choir and people singing and clapping their hands. Oops! Wrong place, sorry. After about 20 minutes of

touring the campus, looking for a familiar sign of a church service (a church van), my wife strongly advised me to forget about it: "You tried. Let's go home." I had to try one more time, though, so I got out of the car, started walking and this time, found out where I was going — to the basement.

To look at the outside of the building, you certainly would not expect there to be an old-fashioned church service inside on a Friday night — where I found myself clapping my hands, nodding my head in agreement with the sermon, singing along and feeling my soul refreshed. I am glad I started walking, so I could find out where I was going, a secret chamber underground where talk about the "blues" was the subject for the night. "A Prescription for the Blues" could be found at this party in the inner-most part of the divinity school building.

It was a small, intimate setting, and the spirit was alive and well. There were white, black, young and old in attendance, and students, professors and community people too. It could easily have been mistaken for a church homecoming, as macaroni and cheese, fried chicken and rolls were served along with tea and dessert.

The most interesting part of the evening, which caused me to reflect well after the program was over, was a question asked by Lazetta Braxton, a thoughtful person. "What refreshes your soul?" she asked as we stood talking and catching up since our last visit.

Her question really zeroed in on maintaining a personal balance — about giving of oneself while ensuring sufficient nourishment of the spirit and those relationships that keep you focused on the journey.

"Reading," I said immediately. "It fills me up, sustains me and keeps me going when I can't and don't want to go anymore. It provides a reserve power source to draw upon when needed to keep going."

It was such an interesting and revealing question that I thought about it some more as I realized my soul was refreshed after that basement-party-blues church service. I missed the obvious because I was thinking rather than being in tune with what I had just experienced. I would still include reading as part of the answer, but I also would add going to services like this "blues" party, an unexpected surprise and a blessing in many ways.

I remember, after hearing the testimony of a divinity student in his last year of school — who stood and talked about how he has made it over — how good God is. I listen and respond to good preaching that makes me shed tears of joy, like "A Prescription for the Blues," from Lamentations 3:21-24, preached this night. We've all had the blues at one time or another, Dr. Braxton pointed out. My soul was refreshed when I heard the preacher say, "Blues is not made for cathedrals but basements and cellars," and the treatment for it is "the steadfast love for God."

"Preach, preacher, we need the good news," I heard someone say.

The basement party was on with a song here, a testimony there and a good time for all. A student could identify with the word being preached, feeling it like a finger touching a sore, delicate to the touch, understanding how she and other divinity students — any of us for that matter — could be so anxious about their daily problems that they forget about the problem solver. The blues will make you do that, but the good news is there is a prescription for it.

I am refreshed when I hear a brother sing a simple song like: "If I can't say a word, I'd just wave my hand. Just like that everyone was swept up in the moment, in the twinkling of an eye."

"That's an old song," my wife said, as she broke out in singing it on Saturday morning while cleaning up. Her late sister used to sing that song down in the country at Mt. Tabor Baptist Church, in Gaffney, S.C.

I went to a basement party at the House of Blues, I mean the Wake Forest University Divinity School, where the blues broke out and the party was on. I found a good prescription for the blues too: If you can't say a word, just wave your hand. The treatment worked. We all left singing a new song and feeling refreshed.

Nigel Alston is a radio talk-show host, columnist and motivational speaker. Visit his Web site at [www.motivationalmoments.com](http://www.motivationalmoments.com).

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## Ryder trial presents double standards



**Earl Ofari Hutchinson**  
Guest Columnist

A few months after her arrest for shoplifting, a doe-eyed Winona Ryder sported a "Free Winona" T-shirt on the cover of W Magazine. The two-time Academy Award-nominated actress followed up her cover photo-op with a shoplifting skit on "Saturday Night Live." NBC billed the show, "She'll Steal Your Heart and More." In the months since Ryder was pinched for stealing a grab bag of fashion goodies from Saks Fifth Avenue, entertainment writers, and seemingly at times, even Ryder, have treated her bout with the law as a sideshow diversion that gives the public yet another voyeuristic glimpse into the screwed-up lives of some of Hollywood's glitterati.

This implies that there is and should be a different legal standard for rich and famous law-breakers than there is for everyone else. This is the kind of thinking that deepens the public belief that justice in America can be bought and sold by anyone who resonates celebrity glow. This dangerous double standard makes a sham and a mockery of the judicial system.

Ryder is the near textbook example. She's charged with stealing more than \$5,000 worth of merchandise in broad daylight from a major department store. This is hardly an example of no harm, no foul light frivolity. It's grand theft. America's prisons and jails are filled with men and women who are serving long stretches for stealing items valued at much less than the items Ryder is accused of stealing. Three



File Photo

Footage from this video has played a major part in the prosecutions case against actress Winona Ryder.

months after Ryder's arrest last December, a federal appeals court tossed the convictions of two inmates slapped with sentences of 25 years to life under California's draconian three strikes law. One stole three golf clubs from a golf shop. The other snatched videocassettes from two Kmart stores. The Supreme Court will rule on the three strikes law this term.

The same double standard applies to other celebrities accused of breaking laws. Roman Polanski was charged with having sex with a minor. Zsa Zsa Gabor was charged with assaulting a police officer. Sean Combs was charged with bribery and illegal weapons possession. These are serious charges that have also landed countless others in the slammer for long prison terms.

Then there's the all-time poster boy for the celebrity double standard, ill-fated actor Robert Downey Jr. Despite Downey's highly publicized busts on drug and weapons possession charges, his stock in the entertainment business soared. He was released

on several occasions from Los Angeles jails to complete movie shoots, and after yet another major drug bust in Palm Springs, he went on to bag a Golden Globe Award for best supporting actor on "Ally McBeal."

There was nothing wrong with Downey's entertainment industry friends, and a star-struck public, pleading for empathy for him and urging the courts to spare him a long prison sentence and give him the help that he desperately needs. There was also nothing wrong with the courts taking his mess of a life into consideration in determining the appropriate punishment for him. But thousands of drug offenders need the same compassion and help as Downey. The big difference is that these drug abusers aren't high-profile, bankable screen commodities. They are mostly poor, blacks and Latinos.

It's not just the ability of Ryder, Downey, Combs, and, lest we forget, the other notorious celebrity bad boy, O.J. Simpson, to cast their hypnotic spell over a

fawning public, that gives them a colossal edge over the average working stiff when they are hauled into court. It's also their deep pockets.

They can afford to hire the top legal guns, crack private investigators and publicists. This more than levels the legal playing field for them and enables them to go toe-to-toe with prosecutors. Prosecutors know that every legal move they make against celebs will be intensely scrutinized and, more often than not, criticized and second-guessed by the media and the public.

Then there are jurors. They go to the movies. They watch entertainment shows. They read the gossip rags and entertainment magazines. To many of them, film stars are demigods whom they identify with and swoon over. Yet, in the jury box, they are suddenly expected to become instant amnesia and forget that these are their idols and judge them as they would anyone else who winds up on a court docket. This is fantasy thinking. More likely they will see them as victims of a vengeful and jealous legal system bent not on prosecuting their heroes for alleged crimes committed but on persecuting them because of who they are.

The fate of the republic hardly rests on whether Ryder is convicted. But the fact that she was arrested and tried offers some hope that our laws will be equally and fairly enforced against anyone and everyone no matter whether the person can or can't afford to shop at Saks Fifth Avenue.

Earl Ofari Hutchinson is an author and columnist. Visit his news and opinion Web site at [www.thehutchinsonreport.com](http://www.thehutchinsonreport.com). He is the author of "The Crisis in Black and Black" (Middle Passage Press).

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