

PORTRAITURES

Oliver Hill, Jr. (1949 – 2020): Confronting the Duality of the Black Experience in STEM

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How can one man – the son of a segregation-era civil rights lawyer – develop his personal character, pursue his career interests, and improve STEM education for the entire state of Virginia? Confronting the Duality of the Black Experience in STEM answers this question through a portrait of the inspirational life and career of Dr. Oliver Hill, Jr. The impact this prolific HBCU STEM leader had on his students and the entire Psychology discipline was directly influenced by the perspective afforded to him through his relationship with mindfulness meditation. Even in the present day, where alternative spiritualities are commonplace, it is rare to witness mindfulness at work alongside STEM leadership. However, Dr. Hill's devotion to a meditation-based spiritual practice guided his entire career in the cognitive sciences and became a foundational influence on his other roles as mentor, community leader, and higher education administrator. Through mindfulness, the late researcher-professor-spiritual teacher-administrator tackled racial injustice and forever changed how we think about our approaches to educating Black students in STEM. Dr. Oliver's views and actions speak to a contemporary approach to STEM education that current and upcoming STEM faculty and leaders can reference for decades to come.

Author's Note

When I first met Oliver Hill, Jr., something about him signaled that he would not be just any new acquaintance. We met at the Knowledge XCHANGE, a National Science Foundation-funded project that engaged participants in critical thinking about STEM reform. Oliver and I, along with perhaps a dozen other participants were assigned to the same discussion group. The event organizer, Dr. Kelly Mack of the American Association of Colleges and Universities, had previously encouraged me to get to know Oliver, as he was “one of her favorite people”. I took this accolade to heart. Soon, with no further prompting, I had my own bountiful evidence that Oliver was indeed someone very special.

Self-presentation says a great deal about self-identity, temperament, and values. As such, it is an excellent criterion for sizing up new acquaintances since it is based on actual behavior. Although a STEMist, in presenting himself to others, Oliver decisively foregrounded his humanity, gentle spirit, and strong ethical core. I had the opportunity to observe his brilliance in matters related to STEM reform later when the small group turned to its

principal discussion tasks. As Oliver spoke throughout the session our group members listened intently drawn to his message. Oliver was soft-spoken, but clear-thinking. And, despite his impressive knowledge, he immediately put others at ease, leading us to feel that to him we were comrades, amigos, colleagues, and compadres. The collaborative space of the small breakout group is a great place to size up an individual... (and know also that they are observing you). In the case of my first exposure to Oliver Hill, Jr. the ease with which he made others feel noticed, heard, and unjudged, contributed to our having a very fortunate and enjoyable small group discussion.

Like so many others, I will cherish having had the opportunity to meet and know Oliver, or Duke as his family and friends called him. He was, as he was known for saying, “always right where he was supposed to be”. Zewelangi N. Serpell, who knew him well explained that “he had a knack for always being profoundly present,” and Reginald Hopkins, another longtime colleague of Hill’s, described him as “transcendent, calm, knowledgeable, and intelligent”. These were in fact the qualities, I too came to know as characteristics of this highly intelligent, thoughtful, committed, gentleman.

My introduction to Oliver left me wanting more opportunity to get to know him, but I would have to wait until this portraiture assignment, due to his untimely death in early July 2020. For example, it was not until I began the process of researching Oliver’s life and legacy that I identified courage as a foundational element of Oliver’s character. It takes courage to chart an independent and personal-values-driven movement through one’s life while also setting the example for others to follow. Whether ethnicity and race-based, gender-based, or class-based, many life decisions are made without consciousness of the action, simply because that direction was the path taken by the multitude. Leading counter to the expectations of the pack is where courage is revealed; and Oliver had this brand of courage in abundance. He presented a countenance of strength, conviction to values, and generosity of spirit.

I now know that throughout his exemplary career, Oliver changed countless lives for the better. The heartfelt consensus during each of the memorial services and interview testimonials I reviewed, was that Oliver Hill Jr. was indeed worthy of adoration and praise, while also being the last person who needed or asked for that kind of attention (Hopkins, 2021).¹ His lived life comprised a tapestry of dignity, sense of humor, and sense of self, all of which were consistently intact. Myriad family, collegial, and community friends will lament his future absence, for in life he lived in a way that gave others strength. Sections of the portraiture rely heavily upon information from Swami Ishwarananda, who graciously granted a rare and exclusive interview for this project. For this contribution to our understanding of Oliver’s quest, I am eternally grateful.

¹ Hopkins, Reginald. (VSU faculty colleague of Oliver Hill) in discussion with Author September 29, 2021.

Historical Context - Segregation and Desegregation

An important factor in the life of Oliver Hill, Jr. was the legacy of racial and social segregation, and the powerful way it controlled the lived experiences for all races and social classes across the land. In 1949, Oliver's birth occurred in the "Black" hospital due to the state of Virginia's rigidly segregated health care system at that time.² Despite his father's prominent position as a civil rights attorney, Hill's parents took him home from the Black hospital to a community also segregated by race.³ In the early 1950's, Virginia segregation was translated into separate and unequal lived experiences of all, both Black and White.

W.E.B DuBois (1903) famously wrote about the effects of this separation along racial lines, invoking the imagery of a veil separating Black and White communities.⁴ With power concentrated in White communities, Black citizens had to know how to function on both sides of the veil, while Whites primarily dealt with the social stratification of only their community. In the Black community, the dual reality reflects the naked truth of differences in lived experiences, but on the other side of the veil, the White community preference was for truth clothed and adorned in ways that affirmed their basic superiority. Indeed, the segregated society structured living arrangements so that White citizenry rarely, if ever, ventured across the proverbial tracks to understand routine living experiences behind the veil. The lack of exposure to life in Black communities, allowed White citizen misperceptions of the Black community to live uncorrected through countless generations. Thus, the victimization of one community was part of the exaltation of the other, and the doctrine of separate but equal translated into vast real differences in the lived experiences accruing to each side of the veil.

Virginia was both a state with rigidly segregated communities, and a frequent site for civil rights cases. During the 1940's, 50's, and 60's more civil rights cases were brought in Virginia courts than in any other southern state. The climate in Virginia was spurred by a critical mass of legal talent willing to go the extra mile. Virginia was never as violent or totalitarian as Mississippi. Those who have studied the state note that Virginia did not have the entrenched and malicious racial climate of Mississippi, Alabama, and

² Renee A. Hill, Ph. D (Wife of Oliver Hill) in discussion with Author April 6, 2021

³ Oliver W. Hill, Jr., oral history interview conducted by David P. Cline Recorded in Petersburg, Virginia, on August 17, 2013. Civil Rights History Project Collection (AFC 2010/039), Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. https://www.loc.gov/resource/afc2010039text.afc2010039_crbp0102_Hill_transcript/?st=gallery

⁴ DuBois, W.E.B., (1903). *Souls of Black Folks*.

Tennessee.⁵ As a result, Virginia's history of race strife is well represented, mainly among sites where litigation was aimed at striking down Jim Crow segregation policies commenced.

Oliver's father, a graduate of Howard University Law School in Washington, D.C. was a prominent leader in bringing legal action to dismantle segregation's grip on the state and nation.⁶ And he was an example of Virginia's segregated policies. Like many other Black attorneys who practiced law in Virginia, he earned his degree outside of the state. At the time, Virginia's only law school, the University of Virginia Law School, did not admit Blacks. To avoid integrating its law school, the State of Virginia paid the cost for Black Virginians to attend any out-of-state law school where they gained admission.⁷

Segregated housing was another important racial benchmark that influenced Oliver's early years. Neighborhoods were homogeneous along racial lines, and this was strictly enforced, which meant that all classes of Black citizens lived near each other because that community (area) was where everyone had to live. But these same racially homogenous Black neighborhoods were heterogeneous in all other ways.⁸ In segregated Black communities, doctors, lawyers, educators, entrepreneurs, clerks, and laborers, as well as their children and extended families lived in proximity, drawing upon each other's strengths and role modeling daily. Despite these communities being rich interpersonally, they had significant resource and governmental service challenges – making them separate and not equal under the law.

It is important to note that desegregation did not produce integration, either immediately or comprehensively over time.⁹ Nor did it uniformly improve conditions for Blacks. Desegregation allowed affluent Blacks to leave the Black community and legally live among White residents. However, there were still barriers for them and their families due to social class distinctions.¹⁰ In addition, the exodus of well-educated Black professionals left Black communities suddenly without the leadership they had benefitted from

5 Building Identity – Interview with the Virginia Humanities Council taped in 2018 for the program With Good Reason. <https://www.withgoodreasonradio.org/episode/real-love-2/>. Oliver W. Hill, Jr., oral history interview conducted by David P. Cline Recorded in Petersburg, Virginia, on August 17, 2013. Civil Rights History Project Collection (AFC 2010/039), Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. https://www.loc.gov/resource/afc2010039text.afc2010039_crbp0102_Hill_transcript?st=gallery

6 Hill, Jr., Oliver. *Building Identity*. Interview with the Virginia Humanities Council taped in 2018 for the program With Good Reason. <https://www.withgoodreasonradio.org/episode/real-love-2/>; Hill, Jr., Oliver. oral history interview conducted by David P. Cline Recorded in Petersburg, Virginia, on August 17, 2013. Civil Rights History Project Collection (AFC 2010/039), Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. https://www.loc.gov/resource/afc2010039text.afc2010039_crbp0102_Hill_transcript?st=gallery

7 Ibid

8 Ibid; Oliver Hill, interview by Claudia Rankins, June 13, 2019, Unpublished Transcript Remembering Dr. Oliver Hill Jr. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cO-oi_kfsWg

9 Hill, Jr., Oliver. oral history interview conducted by David P. Cline Recorded in Petersburg, Virginia, on August 17, 2013. Civil Rights History Project Collection (AFC 2010/039), Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. https://www.loc.gov/resource/afc2010039text.afc2010039_crbp0102_Hill_transcript?st=gallery

10 Ibid

during segregation.¹¹ On the other hand, new career options were opened for those professionals of color, who had once been confined to positions in education or public works. Black professionals were now allowed to take their talents and skills into other areas of employment.¹²

Somewhat ironically, the federal, state, and local governments also had a direct hand in eroding Black communities. During segregation, government programs placed limits on affordable housing, rendering many Blacks to certain neighborhoods and communities. As government entities began to alter income regulations related to subsidized housing qualifications,¹³ the more affluent Blacks in these communities became ineligible. As a result, affluent Black citizens were forced to leave segregated Black neighborhoods. Nationally, this short-sighted policy turned affordable housing into the ghettos that still scar the landscape of America's largest cities.

Oliver “Duke” Hill Jr.

Each of these social trends impacted the work of Oliver Hill, Sr. whose focus in law was challenging the separate-but-equal premise of *Plessy v. Ferguson*. Oliver Sr. was notably a member of the legal team that won the landmark 1954 US Supreme Court decision in the *Brown versus Board of Education* case.¹⁴ Additionally, Oliver Sr. was highly regarded in more local legal circles, where significant backlash from the White community unhappy with the changes brought about by these legal advances was prevalent. The result altered Oliver Jr.'s life considerably. The family home was threatened, including a cross burning on the front lawn.¹⁵ Additionally, Duke, Oliver Hill Jr., was not allowed to answer the phone in his family home because of the frequency and vileness of the threatening calls aimed at the family.¹⁵

Oliver Hill, Sr. was defiant and self-assertive in the face of the cross burning, hate mail, and threatening telephone calls. He kept a file of the most interesting hate mail. It amused him... Oliver Sr. also would not allow the family to use any of the “colored-only” entrances, water fountains, or rest room facilities.¹⁶ “[He] did so many mind-boggling things...When he was being followed on a country road by a car, he pulled his car over and went back to the other car to ask them to explain themselves...He could have been

11 Oliver Hill, interview by Claudia Rankins, June 13, 2019, Unpublished Transcript Remembering Dr. Oliver Hill Jr. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cO-oi_kfsWg

12 Ibid

13 Ibid

14 Hill, Jr, Oliver. *Building Identity*. Interview with the Virginia Humanities Council taped in 2018 for the program With Good Reason. <https://www.withgoodreasonradio.org/episode/real-love-2/>; Hill, Jr., Oliver. oral history interview conducted by David P. Cline Recorded in Petersburg, Virginia, on August 17, 2013. Civil Rights History Project Collection (AFC 2010/039), Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. https://www.loc.gov/resource/afc2010039text.afc2010039_crbp0102_Hill_transcript?st=gallery;

15 Hill, Renee. (Wife and Collaborator of Oliver Hill) in discussion with Author April 6, 2021.

16 Ibid

shot and his body never found!"¹⁸ He once also talked a judge into coming down from his bench and taking the witness seat and being cross examined to see if he was biased... He was.¹⁷

The courage shown by his father seemed to literally rub off on Oliver. Throughout his own career, Oliver Jr. was ever mindful of his origin in the Black community. From birth in the Black hospital, to his initial schooling in the segregated Black schools, Oliver remained centered in his Blackness, even while unsettled with his identity and place.¹⁸ Oliver's wife, Renee, spoke of her husband's courage, lack of second guessing, and letting go of grudges. She felt those traits were attributable to his father. Duke had the same adherence to core values, the same ability to speak truth to power, and the same inner strength as his father. But where his father carried a flaming sword, Oliver Jr. offered the balm of a compassionate space."¹⁹

In addition to lessons of courage from his father, Oliver's parents consciously built his self-esteem and understanding of racism. Like most Black youth, however, Oliver was also greatly influenced by the all-White world displayed through the television programming of the day. For many Black youth this dichotomy was unhealthy and confusing, leading them to internalize popular culture as normative behavior. In the formative years of life, this tension between lived reality within segregated, largely Black neighborhoods, and the abstract reality of television, which bombards Black children with images quite foreign to their lived experiences, creates a palpable tension that somehow must be resolved by very young minds.²⁰

It helped Oliver immensely that as an only child he was often privy to adult conversations in the home, giving him a broader sample of Black role models than available to most Black youth. Prominent visitors to his childhood home included Thurgood Marshall (a former classmate of Oliver Sr.), who stayed at Oliver's home when they were in town.²¹ All the lawyers that hoped that a Supreme Court decision on desegregation would be the solution to the problem of separate but not equal. As history has shown, it was not. The same disappointment came from the way desegregation was accomplished, as the Black community seemingly lost as much as it gained, if not more.

Schooling was a great example of how desegregation was implemented to the detriment of Black communities. When forced to desegregate, all too often the Black schools were shattered, and many staff, administrators,

¹⁷ Hill, Renee. (Wife and Collaborator of Oliver Hill) in discussion with Author April 6, 2021.

¹⁸ Hill, Jr., Oliver. oral history interview conducted by David P. Cline Recorded in Petersburg, Virginia, on August 17, 2013. Civil Rights History Project Collection (AFC 2010/039), Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. https://www.loc.gov/resource/afc2010039text.afc2010039_crlp0102_Hill_transcript/?st=gallery;

¹⁹ Hill, Renee. (Wife and Collaborator of Oliver Hill) in discussion with Author April 6, 2021.

²⁰ Hill, Jr., Oliver. oral history interview conducted by David P. Cline Recorded in Petersburg, Virginia, on August 17, 2013. Civil Rights History Project Collection (AFC 2010/039), Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. https://www.loc.gov/resource/afc2010039text.afc2010039_crlp0102_Hill_transcript/?st=gallery;

²¹ Ibid

and teachers lost their jobs.²² And, where there had been student leadership opportunities in both the Black and White serving schools, there were far fewer desegregated schools. In fact, often when schools were merged, many specialty staff and leadership were terminated. Another example of loss through desegregation, was the quality of instruction. When Oliver attended segregated schools, he realized that the quality of teachers, primarily women, was excellent. But this changed with desegregation as Black teachers gained more choices in employment and thus began to leave the profession.²³ Many saw their positions as a personal mission to help educate Black students and prepare them for the harsh realities of life in a desegregated society.²⁴

On numerous occasions, throughout his adult life, Oliver described the effect of growing up Black in the segregated south. His seventh-grade class was the first to integrate Richmond, Virginia schools.²⁵ Among the many artifacts of this experience, Oliver described self-reflection as an interrogation of his self-identity. He wondered why his “being” and that of others like him, was such a threat to Whites in the south. Growing up in this environment was an extended trauma of pressures, negative treatment, and the confusion of seeing only Blacks in his neighborhood, and only Whites on television. In this social dichotomy, determining what should be normative behavior can be quite confusing. What surrounded Oliver at school and on television was a social world completely out of touch with his lived experiences. All throughout his experience with desegregation and bussing, Oliver maintained his connection to the Black kids who continued to attend the Black high school after he went off to the desegregated White school. This was a critical declaration of loyalty and alliance with other Black students like himself, and it would play a role in Oliver’s life choices for the rest of his life. Upon graduation from high school, Oliver felt a strong need to attend an Historically Black College and University (HBCU). For many students, the selection of a college is the first real opportunity to vote their consciousness and self-identity, especially when choosing to apply to institutions that are consistent with their own identities.

What Oliver has expressed in interviews about straddling the two worlds of White and Black, I too experienced. Like Oliver, this created within me a yearning to put the pieces together in a way that ended the feeling of living in two worlds, having daytime friends at school that you would never be likely to see outside of school hours; and having evening and weekend friends that

²² Ibid

²³ Oliver Hill, interview by Claudia Rankins, June 13, 2019, Unpublished Transcript Remembering Dr. Oliver Hill Jr. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cO-oi_kfsWg

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Hill, Jr, Oliver. *Building Identity*. Interview with the Virginia Humanities Council taped in 2018 for the program With Good Reason. <https://www.withgoodreasonradio.org/episode/real-love-2/> ; Hill, Jr., Oliver. oral history interview conducted by David P. Cline Recorded in Petersburg, Virginia, on August 17, 2013. Civil Rights History Project Collection (AFC 2010/039), Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. https://www.loc.gov/resource/afc2010039text.afc2010039_crbp0102_Hill_transcript/?st=gallery

felt more like kin, but were not with you all day during school. This search for an end to the disjointed feeling of life straddling two worlds is one that is very familiar and ubiquitous during the era of bussing and desegregation efforts. For Oliver, and many others like him and me, there was both an assumption and a hope that by attending an HBCU, all the personal pieces that were strewn about during our integration of previously White middle and high schools, could become aligned and repacked into a consistent whole. Oliver wanted, and felt he needed, the immersive experience of attending an HBCU. He picked Howard University.

Howard University

Oliver began Howard University as a Pre-Law major, later switching to history.²⁶ While attending Howard University, during the late 1960's, Oliver encountered a campus community awash with Black political thought. The prevailing political thought was deeply Afrocentric and hence for those in the University community, links to Africa and the African Diaspora was a central piece of self-identity, both political and personal.²⁷ Oliver had never encountered this level of deference to Africa before. Howard was at the center of the Black Power awakening and frequently hosted speakers who were central to the movement. Although at an early age Oliver's parents had instilled in him the idea of the struggle for social justice...in his own words, he "was not radicalized" until his exposure to the Black Power Movement while at Howard University. Part of that radicalization dictated lifestyle choices that he would later describe as precluding him from participating in what had been typical activities for a Howard undergraduate, such as pledging a fraternity (even though his father was a proud member of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity). The rhetoric and aspirations of the late 1960's Black Power Movement was so prevalent; it was not to be ignored or melded in with traditional personal or social activities.

As Oliver settled into life at Howard, rather than follow his father's path, he sought to carve his own. The exploration of Black Liberation political thought brought new identity elements to the forefront of Oliver's worldview. Ultimately, although Oliver embraced the militancy and issues upon which it was predicated, he began to see the dictates of the Black Power Movement as just another "suit of clothes," or another façade that did not satisfy his yearning for something more. He felt that he had traded one

²⁶ Hill, Jr., Oliver. oral history interview conducted by David P. Cline Recorded in Petersburg, Virginia, on August 17, 2013. Civil Rights History Project Collection (AFC 2010/039), Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. https://www.loc.gov/resource/afc2010039text.afc2010039_crlp0102_Hill_transcript/?st=gallery

²⁷ Hill, Jr., Oliver. oral history interview conducted by David P. Cline Recorded in Petersburg, Virginia, on August 17, 2013. Civil Rights History Project Collection (AFC 2010/039), Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. https://www.loc.gov/resource/afc2010039text.afc2010039_crlp0102_Hill_transcript/?st=gallery

ill-fitting identity (from his upbringing in Richmond), for another identity grounded in political struggle that just did not fit him in all the places and ways he felt were important. Oliver wished to feel whole.²⁸

As Oliver began to see that his new radical identity was as limiting as his earlier persona, it created for him a crisis of some urgency. As the Black Power identity was losing its luster, and while still at Howard, Oliver had a transpersonal experience. Under this strain he discovered meditation.²⁹ Oliver describes what he called a transpersonal experience as an out-of-body experience, which occurred during a time he was in Rock Creek Park, an urban nature preserve that runs through a good portion of Washington, D.C.³⁰

I was walking around the park when suddenly my awareness seemed to expand, and I lost all sense of ego boundaries. It was the proverbial experience of being one with the universe. There was no sense of me just this ocean of bliss and absolute peace, and an awareness of the interconnections of everything and everyone. It lasted for what seemed like an eternity but then I could begin to feel old constrictions beginning to reappear in my awareness. It was as if limiting thoughts were gathering together and reconstructing my old sense of separate self. Soon, it was over, and I was back to my sense of me. I was both ecstatic from the experience but also devastated that it had not lasted. I immediately set out on a journey to understand what had happened to me. And most importantly to replicate it. This investigation soon led me to the path of meditation. Meditation was originally developed, not as a treatment modality for stress, but as a means to experience the depths of consciousness beyond the thinking level of the mind. It is not a tool for suppressing emotion, but a method for becoming anchored in a deeper level of being so we are not buffeted about by our emotions. This gives us the ability to do the work that must be done from a place of love and compassion rather than a place of anger and othering.³¹

28 Hill, Jr, Oliver. *Building Identity*. Interview with the Virginia Humanities Council taped in 2018 for the program With Good Reason. <https://www.withgoodreasonradio.org/episode/real-love-2/>. : Hill, Jr., Oliver. oral history interview conducted by David P. Cline Recorded in Petersburg, Virginia, on August 17, 2013. Civil Rights History Project Collection (AFC 2010/039), Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. https://www.loc.gov/resource/afc2010039text.afc2010039_crbp0102_Hill_transcript?st=gallery

29 Hill, Jr, Oliver. *Building Identity*. Interview with the Virginia Humanities Council taped in 2018 for the program With Good Reason. <https://www.withgoodreasonradio.org/episode/real-love-2/>.

30 Ibid

31 Taken from Meditation with Oliver Hill, a YouTube video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wtbFWPLqoPw>

Thus, it was during his years at Howard University that Oliver followed his transpersonal experience and became interested in Eastern Philosophy and Meditation. He could see this as a continuation of his experiences as a child of color growing up in the south (self-inquiry over treatment). Oliver tried to incorporate this new interest into his academic work by taking courses in perception, studying how the mind responds to various elements of context, and developing his understanding of mindfulness. It was too late to change his major by this time, but it was during this time that he put together the notion of nonviolence and mindfulness. Being nonreactive requires control of the mind, which comes from mindfulness.

University of Michigan

After college, Oliver became a meditation teacher. On the Spanish Island of Majorca, he studied with Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, who also taught musicians like the Beatles and the Beach Boys.³² For six months, he meditated 6 – 8 hours a day, emerging feeling like a changed individual, not at all the same as when he began. Later, he was a Transcendental Meditation teacher for a couple of years in Boston, then Detroit.³³ During that time, he was married and had a child. However, teaching meditation in the 1970's did not provide enough to support a family, so Oliver went back to school. He chose the University of Michigan's program in Cognitive Psychology as he continued seeking the right path...his path.

The selection of Cognitive Psychology was based upon Oliver's idea that his studies would focus on human consciousness, but that was not the case. Consciousness was essentially a taboo topic in the study of Psychology during the 1970's.³⁴ So again, Oliver needed to create his own path towards his goal of melding consciousness and cognitive performance. He worked this into his doctoral studies whenever he could. While at Michigan, Oliver found an ally in a faculty member and meditator, Richard Mann. Oliver was the teaching assistant for one of Professor Mann's large and popular classes – Psychology and Religion. This connection and role as a teaching assistant became one vehicle for continuing his work with consciousness and the mind. Oliver sought to bring consciousness into the curriculum, weaving them into considerations of the philosophy of thought and identity.

An ashram was located just down the street from the University so Oliver and the professor would take small groups of their students to the ashram and teach them how to meditate.³⁵ During these visits, Oliver met Swami

32 Hill, Jr., Oliver. oral history interview conducted by David P. Cline Recorded in Petersburg, Virginia, on August 17, 2013. Civil Rights History Project Collection (AFC 2010/039), Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

33 Ibid

34 Hill, Renee. (Wife and Collaborator of Oliver Hill) in discussion with Author April 6, 2021.; Hill, Jr, Oliver. *Building Identity*. Interview with the Virginia Humanities Council taped in 2018 for the program With Good Reason. <https://www.withgoodreasonradio.org/episode/real-love-2/> .

35 Hill, Jr, Oliver. *Building Identity*. Interview with the Virginia Humanities Council taped in 2018 for the program With Good Reason. <https://www.withgoodreasonradio.org/episode/real-love-2/> .

Ishwarananda, a teacher there. Oliver has said that there was just something about that environment...it was to him intoxicating, satisfying a need he did not know he had...a need for developing the emotional side of his nature. To this point, Oliver felt his journey in meditation had been more of a head trip, an understandable summary feeling since his studies focused on Cognitive Psychology. Meeting the Swami prompted a strong and very positive reaction that was heart-based. The heart, central to yoga practice, points one toward giving back to the environment. The heart element then became an integral part of Oliver's quest. Because there is a natural affinity between those with similar experiences. When he found Siddha Yoga, it became the path of his heart. Above all else, Oliver was a spiritual seeker.³⁶

At the University of Michigan, Oliver met and married Renee, his wife of 39 years.³⁷ In the early 1980's, Oliver and Renee went to South Fallsburg, New York, the location of the Siddha Yoga monastery, where they participated in the Siddha Yoga Shaktipat Intensive.³⁸ This is the initiation where Swami Muktananda awakened the spiritual energy within Oliver and Renee, as well as others. This transmission of divine energy takes place throughout the day as participants chant, meditate, and receive teachings in the sacred environment of the Intensive. Oliver took the Shaktipat Intensive, and really bonded with "the Path." Throughout the rest of their respective careers, Oliver and Renee visited the monastery at Fallsburg and became integrated into the practice, even providing instruction to others and sharing the art of teaching. With both Oliver and Renee bonded with the Siddha Yoga Path, the two of them began a rich journey of teaching and learning together. Oliver and Renee would later establish a Meditation Center in their home.

The purpose of Siddha Yoga is to look within and come to know your essential nature, beyond the body, emotions, and mind where there is a source of energy and awareness in you. It is that inner most light or principal of consciousness...the inner self...your true nature. When you see that which is within yourself, you know it is in everyone else. Oliver was a seeker, doing chants, meditating, repeating mantras, and selflessly serving. These practices allow a seeker like Oliver to go deeper and deeper in their search for knowledge of the truth and to become established in the awareness of the self. During meditation, one stills the mind to allow experiencing the subtler sources of knowledge within. The self is the abode of knowledge, once you open that place inside it, becomes a place for discovery and knowledge. Still the mind, open the heart, bring forth selflessness.

³⁶ Swami Ishwarananda (Teacher and guide to Oliver Hill) in discussion with Author April 5, 2021

³⁷ Hill, Renee. (Wife and Collaborator of Oliver Hill) in discussion with Author April 6, 2021

³⁸ Hill, Renee. (Wife and Collaborator of Oliver Hill) in discussion with Author April 6, 2021; Swami Ishwarananda (Teacher and guide to Oliver Hill) in discussion with Author April 5, 2021

The inner witness is what this is about...and it never changes, it gives you both separation and visualization from a clear unattached point. When you realize that you are not the thing, it frees you up to really be the thing. So, Oliver felt that this was a way the path could help young people develop a STEM identity despite others not having faith in them...with mindfulness they have detachment, which gives them the freedom and impunity to do their best at the task.

Oliver Spoke every year during his visit to the ashram, always with enthusiasm and love for the knowledge. He was also part of the speaker training conducted by and for the Center. At the time of his death, he was assisting the monastery in setting up distance learning. Oliver's last visit was in January 2020, roughly six months before he passed away.

Thinking About Application

During one of his media interviews, Oliver was asked to talk about contemporary applications of meditation and mindfulness. In his characteristically smooth way, he noted that one could complain about this practice of pulling out parts of a much bigger whole and using it instrumentally...detached from its origin and context. However, his elegant response avoided this criticism and focused instead on the possibility that the popularity of secular meditation and mindfulness could potentially bring others to consider the wholeness of the practices involved in pursuing a seeker's path. His comments alluded to the Western tradition of beginning an investigation by analyzing or breaking apart that which one sought to understand. He further explained that analysis is and should be secondary to the whole, breaking things into parts is the antithesis of focus on wholeness. So, while demonstrating how far afield we have gone by separating out mindfulness and consciousness from the whole spiritual practice of which they are components, Oliver wished that despite this analytical beginning those who started with mindfulness as part of a trend or fad, would be persuaded to look further for the answers that are available with adherence to the Siddha Yoga Path.³⁹

As a seeker, Oliver wrestled with the basic question of *Who am I?*: and with success, he gained deeper self-knowledge and freedom, which comes from that knowing yourself. This practice has tremendous potential for altering human relationships. Once an individual knows themselves; they will see that sowing divisiveness leads to fear of the other...seeing difference as a complement to the whole alters that likelihood by showing how we can seek

³⁹ Hill, Jr, Oliver. *Building Identity*. Interview with the Virginia Humanities Council taped in 2018 for the program With Good Reason. <https://www.withgoodreasonradio.org/episode/real-love-2/> .

to work with and foster change in others without demonizing them.⁴⁰ By being holistic we can use their stories to really see “the other,” which removes the tendency to see them as non-human or detrimental to others.⁴¹

At the center of the work is the study of the full range of human contemplative experiences to catalogue them, to understand their phenomenology, and to comprehend their scientific basis. Because the study of consciousness is the centerpiece of this kind of study, Oliver developed a teaching methodology that balances traditional “third-person” perspectives with “critical first-person” perspectives. With such a balanced approach, termed “Integrative Contemplative Pedagogy,” adherents provide the best approach to the study of the full range of human contemplative experience. This kind of integrative pedagogy is known throughout higher education in the Creative Arts, in laboratory science, and in public speaking, Oliver and colleagues extended it to the study of consciousness.

Virginia State University – Institution Builder

Oliver was an only child, with aging parents, so he and Renee felt the need to be closer to Richmond and returned there at the completion of Oliver’s doctoral studies. The couple’s plan was to only stay a few years, but like many academics they ultimately stayed in the area for their entire careers.

As Oliver and Renee returned to Virginia, they found that the remnants and unsettled issues of segregation were still present all around Virginia State University (VSU) and the Petersburg community where the campus was located. One of these remnants was the politics of state allocation of funds to higher education, which effectively created a three-tiered system among the Universities of the State.⁴² In this mix, the University of Virginia was the flagship institution, followed by Virginia Tech as the second tier, and all other institutions received the lowest levels of state support. Much like other decisions throughout his life, Oliver chose to become affiliated with VSU rather than seeking a position at one of the state’s top tier universities relative to funding, physical plant, and political clout.

In social arrangements, Oliver observed economic and class segregation that had become as prominent as separation based upon race. It seemed that the same or similar battles that had occupied Oliver’s father and his contemporaries were still being fought. The education system in Virginia, and more specifically Petersburg, reflected the legacy of the civil rights movement with a continuing struggle. A part of what troubled him most was Oliver’s level of acceptance of the status quo. Oliver felt that there should be outrage about racial disparities in student achievement just as there was concern shown when someone in a prominent position used a racial slur. Given

⁴⁰ Ibid

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴² Hill, Renee. (Wife and Collaborator of Oliver Hill) in discussion with Author April 6, 2021

his righteous indignation at the poor state of the education of students of color, it would not be long before Oliver sought to provide leadership to a community-wide effort that put concern about student achievement front and center.

Oliver began his VSU appointment doing his own research on cognition. His research focused on cognitive factors related to the education of Black students, documenting how the state of education at that time was simply the latest iteration of the issues segregation that existed fifty to sixty years prior.⁴³ Oliver decried the realities of education for Black students and engaged in research and study to advance his knowledge and understanding of the complexities underlying student achievement differentials. He described his initial faculty work at VSU as following along a rather traditional cognitive psychology research and teaching combination. There was no formal place for his interest in mindfulness, meditation, and self-regulation. However, through an Association of Contemplative Mind in Higher Education fellowship, Oliver, Renee, and a dance faculty member were supported in developing contemplative texts; and the trio collaborated on a summer course.

During his long career at VSU, Oliver has been described as coming out of retirement two and a half times. This is because he retired, came back to serve as department chair, retired a second time, but even before that retirement, he was brought back to serve as interim dean. During this long and distinguished career at VSU, Oliver served VSU in critical roles at equally critical times. Indeed, his career accomplishments were institution building.

A faculty colleague, Zewelangi Serpell, succinctly chronicled Oliver's many institution-building contributions to VSU:

Oliver embodied the calm and knowing posture of one who meditates and is involved in contemplative practice... His professional profile is professor, Psychology Department Chair, and herald of the first PhD program at Virginia State, or perhaps chief methodologist – having been the sole member of faculty in our department willing to take on all the advanced graduate statistics courses, and really serve as the stats consultant on possibly all the quantitative theses and dissertations coming out of our new program. Or maybe research scientist, cognitive science to be specific, having amassed thousands and thousands of dollars from the National Science Foundation to support STEM education research projects that were targeting African American students from middle school all the way through college. And if you connect to the Algebra Project, you can go even all the way back to early

⁴³ Haile, Dawit. (VSU Colleague of Oliver Hill) in discussion with Author September 2021.

childhood. Or maybe we'll remember [him] as Dean of VSU College of Natural and Health Sciences, his last position before retiring for a third time. But, for those of us who had the great privilege of meeting Dr. Oliver Hill Jr., and working with him, there is no disconnect.⁴⁴

As a VSU faculty member, Oliver was a key figure in providing leadership born both of his overt actions and his demeanor. As an institution builder, Oliver brought a much-needed array of tools and predisposition to all the roles he played throughout his tenure.

Mentoring Students and Colleagues

Oliver was a dedicated mentor to both students and other faculty. Beyond the campus his mentoring also included generously giving of his time to work with incarcerated men, teens who had been displaced from their homes with no place to go (Oliver and Renee housed and cared for these youths, sometimes for years). For those describing Oliver as a mentor, accessible was thought to be the best adjective. One former student described how Oliver always seemed to know just what to say, because he listened so well. Mentees felt great assurance and comfort in their relationship with Oliver because he projected love and acceptance that seemingly could not be pierced, he was up for anything, always remaining calm and able to help others see their own possibilities. It was common for those who worked with Oliver to note that along with his grappling with greater universal truths, Oliver completely helped others whether it was reshaping their life trajectory for the better, or more concretely using his own resources to ensure that students had what they needed to thrive. As an augmentation to his extensive mentoring portfolio, Oliver helped students and faculty with the mathematical components of their grant proposals, and research articles. His colleague, Serpell, had more to say about his mentoring style.

The reflection I want to give today is to honor what I consider his most important role. Mentor. So, in Buddhism, my spiritual practice, the mentor-disciple relationship is fundamental, and the relationship is very specific. The concept is talked about as the oneness of mentor and disciple. It entails a shared agenda to work together for the liberation of others. In Buddhism, the mentor's purpose is to empower others to recognize or see that our highest potential and happiness are realized through taking action for others. In this way, the mentor-disciple relationship is deeply personal, but it's also profoundly expansive... the mentee does not become a mini version of the mentor. Instead, they learn from the mentor's way of life... that approach to life to

⁴⁴ Serpell, Zewelanjji. (Friend and faculty colleague of Oliver Hill) in discussion with Author September 2, 2021

bear on [the mentee's] own particular circumstances expressed through the qualities of their own unique character. This is how it was with Oliver. This is how it was with Duke. For a great many people, his presence in their life produced action. And action always oriented towards others. To honor, Oliver is to honor a great mentor, a spiritual teacher, a guru. He led with grace. And by compelling example. The power of his action was in its simplicity. He was always present, living his life purpose, and quietly activating in each of us a great desire to do more for others, especially for young people and for whole communities. And, honestly, for the whole of humanity. I feel deeply honored to have had his presence in my life. And my life purpose is expanded because he inspired in me action.⁴⁵

The cogent illustrations of Oliver's skill at providing gentle leadership that was firm, but accommodating, was provided by several commentators during his memorial service. One particularly telling illustration was the way Oliver facilitated groups in handling the emotional challenges, or baggage, that often derails groups focused on solutions. Oliver was known for acknowledging the baggage but as he encouraged that discussion, he announced in advance that this backward-looking focus on past events or grievances would be given two minutes and then the group would move on.⁴⁶

Connecting Campus and Community

For the entirety of his professional career, Oliver sought to bring what he knew from his interest in cognitive development and apply it to address the needs of learners both on the campus and throughout the community. With VSU colleagues Oliver maintained an active research interest on the topic and published in academic journals. One example of this research and publication interest, illustrates the ongoing interest Oliver had in finding ways to support this student population.⁴⁷

Oliver's ideas frequently became the content of funded projects and published research. Serving the whole community of color meant softening the boundary between campus and surrounding community creating dynamic partnerships. One such campus and community collaboration was the Algebra Project in Petersburg, VA.

⁴⁵ Serpell, Zewelanjji Transcript of VCU MLK Day Tribute to Oliver Hill, Jr. Martin Luther King Day 2020

⁴⁶ Serpell, Zewelanjji Transcript of VCU MLK Day Tribute to Oliver Hill, Jr. Martin Luther King Day 2020; Hill, Renee. (Wife and Collaborator of Oliver Hill) in discussion with Author April 6, 2021

⁴⁷ Oliver W. Hill, Zewelanjji Serpell & M. Omar Faison (2016) The Efficacy of the LearningRx Cognitive Training Program: Modality and Transfer Effects, *The Journal of Experimental Education*, 84:3, 600-620, DOI: 10.1080/00220973.2015.1065218

The Algebra Project was a noteworthy example of how Oliver brought together the leadership of VSU, citizens of the local Petersburg Community which surrounded the campus, and external funding agencies.⁴⁸ It further reflects how students took advantage of that support to open a door of opportunity and show those in power that they were capable of high achievement.

This project began in 2005 when Oliver's wife Renee and Dr. Dirk Philipsen – both co-directors of the Institute for the Study of Race Relations at VSU – invited Algebra Project Director Robert Moses to make a presentation at a conference at VSU. Subsequently, the Institute invited the Algebra Project⁴⁹ to participate in a workshop at VSU to introduce the Algebra Project concepts to teachers of mathematics, and instructional leaders from several school districts in the area surrounding the university. Robert Moses and his son, Omowale Moses, responded to that invitation affirmatively. Omowale was director of the Young Peoples Project, Inc. (YPP), an independently incorporated youth component of the Algebra Project.⁵⁰ Oliver was also involved at this time, since he was the chair of the Psychology Department, and totally committed to responding to the needs of youth in the community.

The formal project began by involving Algebra Project staff members, VSU department heads and faculty members, community leaders, Petersburg City Public Schools (PCPS) administrators and faculty members, city officials, and business representatives. Handy Lindsey, director of the Cameron Foundation was also present for the meetings.⁵¹ Like the others in attendance, Dr. Cameron felt that the strategies employed by the Algebra Project could offer solutions to local education problems. Oliver was involved in the planning grants, execution, and analysis. Dave Dennis was invited to join. Dave began first with the Algebra Project, then later with the Southern Initiative Algebra Project (SIAP) which works more with HBCUs.⁵²

What began as an exchange of ideas among a handful of people from VSU, developed into a planning group called the Design Team. This Design Team became the foundation of the movement that evolved into a regional initiative involving five additional school districts. As a result, the culture of learning in Petersburg Schools was changed by this coalition of VSU and the community, which was supported by a strong youth mentoring program that was provided by YPP and VSU students, in partnership with SIAP. The

48 Hill, Renee. (Wife and Collaborator of Oliver Hill) in discussion with Author April 6, 2021; Dennis, Sr., David. (Colleague Algebra Project & SIAP Partner of Oliver Hill) in discussion with Author September 30, 2021.

49 The Algebra Project is a national project that uses mathematics literacy as an organizing tool to guarantee quality public-school education for all children in the United States of America. The project was founded by Robert Parria Moses.

50 Ibid

51 Hill, Renee. (Wife and Collaborator of Oliver Hill) in discussion with Author April 6, 2021; Cheryl Talley, Ph.D. (Psychology Department Colleague of Oliver Hill) in discussion with Author May 10, 2021; Haile, Dawit. (VSU Colleague of Oliver Hill) in discussion with Author September 2021.

52 Hill, Renee. (Wife and Collaborator of Oliver Hill) in discussion with Author April 6, 2021

success of this university/community partnership demonstrates what it takes to bring together a community to make this happen. The development of these partnerships provided a means of leveraging funding to supplement financial support.⁵³

At the conclusion of the AP/SIAP implementation, math pass rates had increased across the board and all PCPS schools were accredited except one. Overall, 50% of the 2007-2008 mathematics teachers now instruct college students at least part-time, and the mathematics dual enrollment program that was instituted over a 2-year period earned 30 participating students 7-14 college credits in mathematics.

VSU and SIAP have received a second DRK-12 grant from the NSF Division of Research on Learning (DRL). This latest funding focuses on the K12 level intervention with the Algebra Project in Petersburg and New Orleans, Louisiana, serving as a model for building the capacity of Math Education faculty at HBCUs. The engagement of Math Education faculty at HBCUs and the school personnel from surrounding districts has allowed the project to expand into training teachers. Based on Oliver's idea, districts need to begin to "grow their own teachers" to serve students of color. This expanded scope of the project leading to a name change of the project – the K16 model. This more comprehensive intervention engages students early by first introducing them to the idea that they're going to go to college, and that there's a way they can have that paid for if they major in Math or another STEM discipline and provided, they agree to return to their school district for four years as a teacher.

Oliver Hill Jr. lived a complete and distinguished life. A life that began in segregated Virginia and ultimately contributed mightily to the positive lived experiences of faculty, students, and staff of HBCUs and Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). His story is a powerful lesson in the outsized contributions of mission driven HBCU faculty, scholars and activists who collectively have fostered the development of "STEMists" of color in the U.S. From their stories comes a recognition of what other institutions must consider if they desire to improve their track record in broadening the participation of students of color in STEM.

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⁵³ Dennis, Dave. Preface to "The Petersburg Story: A case Study of Urban School Reform (Unpublished report to the Cameron Foundation) by Doris Terry Williams.

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