Humanizing

A Legend

Food for Thought Speech
given by June Foster on November 16, 1998

The following is excerpted from a Food for Thought program presented in November 1998 by June Foster, professor emerita at Limestone College and longtime friend of Dr. Montague McMillan. Although scores of teachers have had tremendous influence on their students, Dr. McMillan had a unique and special relationship with those with whom she came in contact, and Professor Foster illustrates this in her speech which she titled "Humanizing a Legend":

There's not much that I'm going to say that is startling or new or different. I'm just happy that most of you are too young to have heard the first speech I gave about her. I often said to my students in my classes, "I don't see how you people think you are going to be successful in life when you only know four adjectives — cute, great, swell and nice." That just about covered it, but during the last decade, I've added "awesome" to the list. That seems to be a popular one now.

After having said that, I'll choose one of them to describe Dr. McMillan. She was simply a great educator, a great

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friend, a great writer, a great historian, a great speaker and a
great example for literally thousands of students here. She was
an “awesome personality” and I loved her. She was the person,
aside from my mother, who has had and continues to have
the greatest influence on my life. Down through the
years, people have come to me and said, “What do you
have about Dr. McMillan, June? Could you pull out
something? We would like for you to contribute this to
an article.” And I’ve always been amazed that there has
been so little written about a person who lived for more
than a century and who really did influence so many
people. I think she deserves a biographer; this is hind-
sight, of course, but I probably should have been it.
When I came back to Limestone to teach, I didn’t know
that I was going to stay forever. I trailed around after Dr.
McMillan because our relationship, although we were
colleagues, stayed chiefly that of student and teacher. I
think once you have that relationship, it’s very difficult to
break it, and although I did not become her Boswell, I
hope someday somebody will write a biography of her.

Two sources I’m going to use are excerpts from speeches
I’ve made about Dr. McMillan in the past. The first time I was
asked to speak about her, back in April 1967, I had only been at
Limestone one semester as a teacher. Limestone had already
changed a good bit in the ten years I had been away. I began that
day with this:

It is a singular honor to be given the opportunity to
pay public tribute to one who for so many years has
received my private homage, and if the attempt falls
short of its goal, the fault lies in my ability, not in my
intent. A dedicated teacher, wise counselor, prudent
mentor and devoted friend — all these Dr. McMillan
has been to me. And although I diligently wrote in my
notebook that first week in our class, “Literature helps
us know our own hearts better, and gives us better
hearts to know,” and although I subsequently chose the
study and teaching of grammar and literature for my
life’s work, I am convinced that my knowledge of my
own heart and whatever is best and purest within it
can be in large measure attributed to her influence, to
her integrity, to her calm serenity, to her gentility, to
her staunch regard for the truth, and to the inspiration

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Remembering Dr. Mac

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she has ever instilled in Limestone students — the inspiration born of her own example to lead richer, more meaningful lives.

After that first semester, being in her classes became more than a school requirement to me; it was a necessity that I be near her, that I develop new and greater insights from her teaching, that I model my ideas of what is truly beautiful and worthwhile on her innate good taste and sound judgment. So it has been to a greater or lesser degree with students here for half a century. I think it would be an impossibility to attend Limestone and not be touched by Dr. McMillan’s presence and spirit, for the dignity and worth of her life have permeated this institution.

How great the work must have been for these 50 years — study, lectures, committees, civic affairs, speeches, church duties; yet how great the reward — to become a legend in one’s own time; to become almost synonymous with a goal of helping to create generations of more devoted wives, more unselfish mothers, more gracious hostesses, more responsible citizens, and more ethical professional women.

This fall, Dr. McMillan remarked to me that it must have been Divine Providence that brought such capable young leaders to our College after the crisis of Dr. Eastwood’s death. With this opinion, all of us at Limestone heartily concur, but I think it also providential that five decades ago a young teacher made a decision to devote her life and energy to the growth of this school. During these years, she has shown what a life of love could accomplish, for her life has been a fusion, a blending, a perfect synthesis of four loves: a love of God and the work of His church, a love of our country and the principles of freedom on which it is founded, a love of this college and its vision of broader horizons for American women, and finally a love of us, the students, and our ability to choose what is best for our lives if we be well guided.

I tried to imagine a daily maxim that Dr. McMillan might have chosen for a life of love such as hers. I think it might well have been the one beginning, “I shall not pass this way again.” This one would have been most appropriate, for having passed this way one time, she has enriched this College and its students for all time. With her oft repeated, “My dears, be very careful what you set your hearts on, for in almost every instance, that is exactly what you will get,” she taught us that “Life has loveliness to sell, All beautiful and splendid things,” and that if our realities did not match the expectations of our dreams, the fault lay within our own bargaining.

Thoreau once wrote,”If the day and the night are such that you greet them with joy, and life emits a fragrance like flowers and sweet-scented herbs, is more elastic, more sturdy, more immortal — that is your success.” And Victor Hugo,”The supreme happiness of life is the conviction that we are loved.” If these definitions be true, then today we pay tribute to one whose life has been surely marked by eminent success and happiness. Of her own joy in living there can be little doubt, and my purpose is to bring the conviction that she is loved — loved because she taught us with her own life what Keats meant when he said, “A thing of beauty is a joy forever. Its loveliness increases; it will never pass into nothingness.”

As the years passed after my graduation from Limestone, I found that the intervals between visits to my Alma Mater were often quite long ones, but I could never break the bond between myself and the one there who had been dearest to me. Whenever there was sorrow in my life, then came her words of gentle comfort; whenever fortune smiled, then came the quiet praise and constant encouragement. One closing of one such letter has remained especially dear to me, and because I wanted to close with some words of her own, these are the ones I selfishly chose, giving them priority over her much loved and familiar, “Two prisoners looked from behind the bars.” These, her own words, are the ones that I return to her — I speaking for the hundreds of Limestone girls she has taught in the past, for those present today and those now enrolled in our College, and for the generations of Limestone daughters yet unborn. All of us say to you simply, but sincerely, “The affection is certain; the devotion is sure.”

Several years after this, I was asked by the Cherokee County Historical Society to talk about Dr. McMillan at one of their meetings. It was a difficult assignment. The group had told me, “We don’t want you to talk just about Dr. McMillan; we want you to talk about Dr. McMillan as the spirit of Limestone College.” I struggled with this assignment. How does one talk about the spirit of a

1954 Calculid — Chi Delta Phi.
person? I decided to use some of the things I had already said about her, but I added, “When you speak of her achievements in terms of tangibles, there seems to be no reason why others would find her so difficult to emulate. Other Limestone alumni have returned to their Alma Mater as teachers. The College has had more than one faculty member to serve here for half a century. Many of our graduates have distinguished themselves as teachers, as writers, as civic leaders, as public speakers. I believe even those of us who know her best must eventually recognize the fact that she is an enigma, that this elusive quality referred to as her spirit is simply a phenomenon, a case in which the whole is somehow greater than its parts.” I concluded my remarks at that time with this: “After the publication of Dr. McMillan’s history of the College, a work prized by those who were fortunate enough to purchase one and much sought after by those who weren’t, a Charlotte Observer article stated that Dr. McMillan’s wings were poised for flight. She was quoted as saying, “I am excited over my retirement; in fact, it has been delayed beyond my personal wishes, and I am eager to be on my way. I need time to prepare for my finals.” Now if you knew Dr. McMillan really well, you would know she exaggerated. Her wings stayed poised for flight for something like two decades after that.

From the time she left Gaffney until her last two or three birthdays, I would go with my mother or a school friend down to Knapdale, her family home near Marion, to visit her in that cozy dining/sitting room. “I must hasten to assure you,” I told this group, “that if she is preparing for her finals, she is doing it with the same flurry of activity, the same diversity that has marked every year of her life — page after page of daily correspondence with friends and former students, speaking engagements and happy visits with those who drop in as I did to charge their spiritual batteries.” Limestone continues to graduate fine young men and women, and somehow the aura of Montague McMillan can still be sensed. Although to today’s students she is the symbol of a bygone era, her spirit and efforts to define it still elude, and those of us who face that futility must simply be content in the knowledge that at least once we were fortunate, that our lives at one time, whether for hours, days, weeks or years, were touched by something rare, gracious, and beautiful — the spirit of Dr. McMillan.”

Now back to the present. She really did teach us, in addition to a love of literature, practical lessons about life. She was successful because she really thought this whole business of living was about love, was about God’s divine love. I don’t think she ever taught a student she didn’t love. With love and the right sort of coaxing, she knew how to make students “feel good” about themselves before that phrase became politically correct in education. Over and over, she would advise us about our future lives: “develop your talents, even if the only one you have is making a bed better than anyone else; make a will, even if you own only one lace handkerchief; keep your spiritual batteries charged through love of God and love of nature which is God’s world; take a moment to appreciate the beauty of a violet or the grandeur of a sunset.”

Dr. McMillan possessed admirable personal qualities, but the one I admired most was her self-discipline, which I feel accounts in large part for her longevity. She thought attention to personal health was important, and as long as I knew her, she ate three sensile meals a day, took a nap every day after lunch, and engaged in some form of daily physical exercise, usually walking.

It’s very difficult for me to talk about Dr. Mac and not present her to you, especially to you who were not fortunate enough to know her, as a saint. She did indeed have some very human qualities; she was not a demi-goddess. However, those human frailties seem very petty to me now.

I will close with something Dr. Mac wrote to Limestone’s faculty and staff in November 1969, almost 30 years before her death. After stating that her wings were “poised for flight,” she added, “I want all of you to come see me; morning, noon or night, you will be welcome. Anyone who brings the magic name of Limestone to my door will be given the best that I have … I have had a grand time at the Limestone party, but I am genuinely glad the hour is drawing near for me to thank my kind hosts and to say good night.”

Editor’s Note: Afterward, Professor Foster asked members of the audience to share their memories of Dr. McMillan, and many of her former students responded with personal recollections and experiences drawn from Limestone days, correspondence and visits to Marion.
Special Memories Of Dr. Mac

Editor's note: Former students and friends of Dr. Montague McMillan sent to the College their special memories of this unique lady. Unfortunately, we could only publish a select few here, but all of them will be printed in a booklet to be distributed as part of a special memorial service during Alumni Weekend 1999.

"It's Thursday, September 3. Anne and I have spent hours walking through THE OLD HOUSE at Knapdale. Dr. Montague is everywhere we look! We turn on every light in THE OLD HOUSE, lock the doors and depart.

"Halfway down the oak-lined lane we stand for several minutes gazing at the tired and weather-beaten house, glowing proudly in the fog-drizzled night. The moss hanging heavily from the old oaks curtails our view.

"Anne says, 'That’s probably the first time all the lights have been on at once.' She remembers Dr. Montague’s Scottish heritage. I remind her that this is the last time the lights of Knapdale will greet us.

"The dealer who has purchased the contents of Knapdale will come tomorrow. It will take three U-Hauls, a truck and a van to move the accumulation of 105 years.

"The lights of Knapdale will dim Saturday for the last time. The light that is our Dr. Montague will shine forever! The memories of her, her kindness, her intellect and her sweet and gentle spirit will remain to live and shine at least as long as we, our children and grandchildren live!"

- Hershel Baker, Dr. Mac’s advisor and close friend

"What a challenge to attempt to put into words the greatness of Dr. Montague McMillan. She was an inspiration because she expected the best from her students and challenged each of us to strive to reach his or her goal.

"When quiz time rolled around, we knew to study and to search for the ‘hidden detail’ that would answer that impossible question which appeared on each test.

"My husband, Jim Spears, was a student of Dr. McMillan during a summer school session while he was a student at the Citadel (this was before we met). She loved Limestone and wanted everyone who passed those halls to be the epitome of honesty and integrity, with a desire for knowledge which would make this world a better place.

"Dr. Mac loved us all and we loved her in return!"

— Dale Blakely Spears, Class of 1951

"Dr. Mac instilled in me such a great love of English literature that I knew I could never die happy without visiting England. I have been fortunate enough to travel there several times and always love every minute more than I imagined. I always think about ‘my’ beloved Dr. Mac when I am there. I’ll never forget all the pages and pages we had to memorize because they were ‘so beautiful.’"

— Jeanne Gore Fowler, Class of 1957

"Dr. Montague McMillan was my friend, teacher, and faculty advisor. I was her student for four years and her friend for 53 years.

"I have many special memories of Dr. Mac, but one of my favorites is when she invited her English students to accompany her to the British Isles and France in 1949. I was privileged to be among the four students who toured Europe and England with her.

"Through the years, we four former students and Dr. Mac had several reunions at various places in South Carolina. At these gatherings Dr. Mac was always at her finest when she spoke of our trip, as she looked at the pictures we brought back.

"I’m sure it meant a great deal to her to spend two months in England. She gave many programs about her trip for several years at her various clubs. We always teased her about how she managed to lecture on that subject over such a long period. She always smiled and said, ‘The trip was so wonderful I have to keep talking about it.’

"She taught so many students and was such a great influence on many of us; I wish every child could have a teacher like her.”

— Renita Foster, Class of 1950
"In 1933, when I graduated from Limestone, I fully expected to teach in high school. However, I had been invited to be a bridesmaid at a wedding of another Limestone graduate in the chapel there on campus.

"After the wedding, Dr. Granberry asked me to consider staying on at Limestone as an aide to Dr. Eastwood in the history department. I was more than pleased!

"At the first full faculty meeting I was a bit apprehensive. After all, I had just graduated three months earlier and was now among many of those who had taught me!

"Who reassured me? Who almost literally 'held my hand'? Who quietly encouraged me? Whose wisdom and caring helped? None other than Dr. McMillan!

"Whether she was called Monty, Dr. Mac, Miss McMillan or Dr. McMillan, she was for me an example and a dear friend.

"Having been my teacher and my coworker, she will always be for me a wise, giving and loving person. Dr. Mac remains, as Limestone College itself does, a very special interest and an abiding love."

— Frances Stembridge Drayton, Class of 1933

"I remember that Dr. Montague McMillan had a personal interest in her students. When my good friend and piano teacher died in my hometown, Melrose (Hawkins) Hicks and I were in our room crying. Dr. McMillan heard of our loss and came personally to our room to console us. When my daughter Eleanor (Cargill) Strickland first enrolled at Limestone and was a student in her English class, Dr. McMillan announced to the class that she had also taught Eleanor's mother at Limestone. We were both impressed by her personal remarks.

"I also have fond memories of visiting Dr. McMillan in her later years when she lived at her family home near Marion, S.C. Her memory for names and events was remarkable as we reminisced about Limestone days."

— Mabel Bridges Cargill, Class of 1928

"When I think of Dr. Mac, I have this vivid memory of her wearing one of her blue floral dresses and standing before my sophomore lit class reciting passages from that day's assignment as if she were saying something very sacred! It always made more sense when she said it than when I read it!

"In retrospect, I think Dr. Mac encouraged my sense of adventure when she would drop phrases in class such as, 'When you go to Paris, see it from a different perspective. CLIMB THE EIFFEL TOWER! or take the boat trip around Lake Geneva; go and see the Castle of Chillon that Lord Byron refers to in the Prisoner of Chillon.' I probably would not have done these things if she had not planted that seed!

"She encouraged young women in her classes to explore the world, even though the world was not quite ready for us!

"P.S. I still have my sophomore lit book!"

— Carlton M. Mullinax, Class of 1962

"What do I remember about Dr. Mac? I remember Dr. Mac sitting daily in the alcove between Curtis and the front desk. She reigned as the matriarch of Limestone, as she spoke to every young lady who passed through this space.

"I remember Dr. Mac as the one who introduced me to Homer, Shakespeare, and thousands of characters I never had known but do now because of her.

"I remember Dr. Mac as the lady with the most beautiful smile, the glorious gray hair always up in a French twist, the manners known only to a Southerner and the wit of a true intellect.

"I remember Dr. Mac as a friend, a mentor, who always had time to talk, to answer questions and to give advice when asked, and as one who knew more history about my family than I did!

"She was, and always will be, the true Limestone Lady."

— Julie Williamson Lowry, Class of 1965

"I have many happy memories of Miss McMillan, as I'm sure all her students have. One experience comes to mind that meant so much to my future.

"Just before graduation in 1931 Dr. Granberry called me into his office and told me of an opening as public school music supervisor in Piedmont, S.C. He said 'Martha, you are to go over there and get that job; you will go in my car; and Miss McMillan will go with you.' So we drove over, and Miss McMillan lectured me all the way: 'Martha, wear your dresses a little longer, let your hair grow long and pin it up, stop using so much makeup!'

When we went into the superintendent's office, he took one look at me and quickly said, 'I'm sorry, Miss Boyd, but we want an experienced teacher.' I got ready to leave, but Miss McMillan said 'Martha, wait in the next room a minute.' I did, and I heard her very strong voice say, 'You'll be making a great mistake if you don't hire this young lady. She can do anything and do it well; etc. etc.' She then called me back into the room and the superintendent said, 'Well, Miss Boyd, we want you here.' A gracious, loving friend; a wonderful teacher; never to be forgotten — Montague McMillan.

— Martha Boyd Robbins, Class of 1931

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Special Memories

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“Dr. Mac was one of the finest persons I have ever known. She was a superb teacher and a dear friend to her students. Her moral and spiritual convictions were of the highest caliber. Her life was an inspiration to all of us.

“In the fall of 1957, I cut off two of my fingers in a lawn mower accident. I lost a number of days from school. It was imperative that I finish college in 1958 so I could go on to seminary to complete my training for the ministry. I was already 31 years old. I came to class one day feeling sorry for my dilemma. Dr. Mac lifted my spirit with her lecture that day. One of her statements was, ‘It’s bigger than anything that happens to you.’ That was just what I needed to hear. I picked up the pieces, dug in and completed my incompletes to graduate with my class. I owe a great debt of gratitude to our beloved Dr. Mac.

“I shall treasure her memory for the rest of my life. She was the best of the best.”

— Reverend Lee Roy Denton, Class of 1958

“When I hear the name Limestone College, I immediately think of Miss Montague McMillan, my friend. The years I spent at Limestone — 1928 to 1932 — were filled with troubles, financial woes, the Great Depression. Miss Montague McMillan, that gracious southern lady, was always there to help her girls through many crises.

“One day during my freshman year Miss McMillan sent a message that she would like for me to come to her apartment. When I arrived, she said, ‘Elizabeth, I have something I hope you can use.’ There on a chair was a beautiful coat. She said, ‘Try it on.’ I did and it fit perfectly. She had found out that I did not have a winter coat.

“At the beginning of my sophomore year she asked me to come by her office that morning after class. She asked me, ‘Elizabeth, how would you like to help me this year?’ I replied, ‘I will be happy to if I can.’ Then she said, ‘I need someone to grade papers for me this year, and I know you can do it.’ That work scholarship helped me through that whole year.

“Miss McMillan always saw the needs of her students and did something about it. She was truly a wonderful friend and an inspiration to all who knew her.”

— Elizabeth Crocker Taylor, Class of 1932

Friendly Argument On Radio Program Settled By Dr. Mac

“The late Raymond Parker, host of Carolina in the Morning, a two-hour talk show, was having a friendly argument with his then partner, Don Lovelace. The subject that brought several calls from listeners was cabbage or cabbages. They couldn’t agree on the correct word to use, so Raymond told Don, ‘Let’s call Dr. Montague McMillan, English Professor at Limestone College and let her settle this argument for us.’ Raymond called and was fortunate to put Dr. Mac on the air. He related the problem to her, and she didn’t hesitate to give him an answer. Her reply was, ‘Boys, I am going to be fair to both of you because either one is correct.’ That settled the big on-the-air argument, and both Raymond and Don felt quite satisfied.”

— Bright Gresham Parker, Class of 1937
"I had the opportunity to visit with Margaret Hall Boyston at her home in Allendale, S.C., and she told me this story about Dr. Mac and asked me to 'write it up' and send it in for her."

— Carlton M. Mullinax

When I came to Limestone, it was quite an adventure for me. I was an only child from a small town, and it was prearranged that I would room with two other girls whose families were friends of ours. We lived in Eunice Ford.

"Miss McMillan had previous knowledge of us and being the kind, sweet person she was, asked us to ride over to Spartanburg with her. I was so excited! I wanted to write a check so I would have some money. Since I had never written a check before, I had to call home to talk to Daddy to ask permission to write the check! (Over the years, I have overcome that fear of writing checks!)

"The afternoon came for us to go, and we all were very excited as this was a BIG TRIP for us! When we got to Spartanburg, Miss McMillan committed a traffic violation of some sort. I don't remember what it was, but I remember the big city policeman pulling us over and yelling at her, 'Lady, can't you READ?'

"She just looked up at him with those blue eyes and said, 'No sir, I can't READ!'

"We went on our merry way, and the incident was never mentioned again!"

— Margaret Hall Boyston, Class of 1939

"Dr. McMillan enriched not only my life, but also through me, the lives of my family, my friends, and my students. Throughout the years, her philosophy has influenced my thinking and my behavior; her love of literature enhanced my own appreciation and pleasure; and her keen sense of beauty helped me to find 'tongues in trees, books in running brooks, sermons in stones, and good in everything.'

"Her books were her cherished friends. When someone carelessly used a rare volume of Dickens to prop open a window in the classroom, her heart was broken as well as the spine of the beautiful leather bound book."

— Lucille S. Godwin, Class of 1958, former Professor at Limestone College

"I remember thinking, at the age of 16, that Dr. Mac must be the first real teacher I had ever had. What a lady! What a treasure! I'll always remember that sweet, clear crisp voice in a class as well as on stage reading A Christmas Carol. Thank you, dear Lady, for being there for us during those dark days of WWII."

— Nancy K. Skelton, Class of 1945

"Mr. McMillan was the epitome of a gracious lady who gave of herself to inspire and challenge the young students at Limestone. She had the uncanny ability to see the potential in each Limestone daughter. Fortunately, I was one of those daughters in the class of 1947.

Dr. Monty motivated us to strive for high academic standards. More importantly, she taught us to be ladies with high ideals. Through all her teachings ran the thread, 'Don't be mediocre.' These words and her influence have shaped my thinking throughout my life. As she moved about the campus, she was and is the spirit of Limestone.

— Jean Brian Coggins, Class of 1947

$40,000 Prize Offered In Alumni Challenge IV

The South Carolina Independent Colleges and Universities are sponsoring an Alumni Challenge competition between the 19 private colleges and universities in the state. Limestone College has the chance to win $40,000 for first place in the competition by showing the greatest increase of alumni giving over last year. An award of $25,000 is available for second place and $15,000 for third place in the competition. Alumni Challenge IV will also reward $20,000 to the private college that attains the highest alumni giving rate in 1998-99.

In order to win in either category, the percentage of Limestone alumni giving a minimum of $25 must increase significantly over last year. In urging alumni contributions, Kelly Fogler, Director of Alumni Affairs, suggests that you imagine what $40,000 could do for your alma mater! She said, "We're sure Limestone already ranks number one in your heart. Help make Limestone number one among the 19 competing colleges in Alumni Challenge IV!"

Contributions should be mailed to the Limestone College Development Office, 1115 College Drive, Gaffney, S.C. 29340.