

THE REFUSAL TO BE SILENCED

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As one of the few nations with a cultural tapestry into which countless ethnic narratives are proudly woven, Canada owes its diverse heritage to those courageous men and women who stood up for their roots and demanded to be heard. Throughout the centuries, this world has been one in which the voices of entire peoples have repeatedly been silenced; the perseverance of countless individuals in speaking up for these minority groups has been crucial in inspiring humanity to embrace diversity to ever greater degrees. One group of people which have overcome adversity to carve out a vital place for themselves in the foreground of Canadian national identity is the black community. Among them, a visionary who deserves particular recognition is Mayann Elizabeth Francis.

One of seven children, Francis was born in Sydney, Nova Scotia to parents who were newcomers to Canada. Growing up with issues of inequality and racism propelled Francis to take action for positive change. After earning a Bachelor of Arts degree from St. Mary's University, Francis channeled her enthusiasm for social justice through working with the Nova Scotia Human Rights Commission before subsequently completing a Master of Arts degree in Public Administration from New York University. At one point, Francis found herself working on Wall Street as a corporate paralegal, a position which had initially been withheld from her because of her race. It was only after the original candidate quit that she was hired to fill the need for immediate help, soon after which Francis quickly proved herself – the firm's senior partner apologized for what he called his initial "foolish thinking." Despite the discrimination that Francis had to continually battle, her determination eventually paid off.

After living in the United States for 16 years, Francis returned to Canada to work as the chief executive officer of the Nova Scotia Human Rights Commission and was the first woman to hold the position of provincial ombudsman. In 2006, Francis was appointed Nova Scotia's 31st lieutenant-governor, being the first Black Nova Scotian and second Black Canadian to hold this office. During her installment speech, Francis expressed her desire for people to view her appointment as a "beacon of hope for all those who have felt the pains of oppression" and for "everyone, especially young people, to understand they can achieve great heights." In recognition of her tireless work in defense of human rights and equality, Francis has been acknowledged with the Golden Jubilee Medal, the Harry Jerome Award, and the Multicultural Education Council of Nova Scotia Award.

Francis' vision is inspirational and empowering. Urging all individuals to be an "active participant in the life of [their] communities," Francis encourages a proactive stance to life that stands up to discrimination of all shades. In a speech to graduating students at York University, she advised youth to view life's challenges not as futilities but as opportunities, to be humble and compassionate, to be strong and to stand tall against the forces which threaten to silence a people. As a lifelong champion of celebrating and embracing differences, Francis has been essential in not only voicing the hopes and dreams of the black community but also in defending all minorities which struggle to make their stories matter.

As a young woman of a visible minority, I'm deeply cognizant of the significance of Francis' message. In a world where the heritages of thousands of cultures are not represented in mainstream media, where "all citizens are equal" but some are more equal than others, and where the opportunities available in life can be inextricably hinged upon one's ethnic and economic backgrounds, it is absolutely critical that all people stand up for the rights of diverse communities. Without them, Canada would not be the strident mosaic of a nation it is today. Mayann Elizabeth Francis continues to inspire me with her undefeatable spirit and determination, driving me to raise my voice in support of the fundamental rights of every human being to be free from discrimination and to be treated with dignity.

From the distant past to the present day, civilization has progressed in baby steps towards increasing appreciation of communities and worldviews different from those of the majority. Canada embodies such ideals of tolerance and equality on the whole, but our task as citizens remains unfinished. In the same spirit of Francis, so influential a Black individual and principled a Canadian, it is the responsibility and privilege of the rest of us to carry forth this beacon of equality.

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