Nine days ago, our country experienced a tragedy the likes of which most of us could not have imagined nine years, nine months, or even nine weeks ago. But the unimaginable has happened. And today, we find ourselves operating from a new paradigm, facing a new reality dominated by a terrorist attack of unspeakable proportions, the true gravity of which we do not yet know.

Indeed, while we are still grieving, still in shock, and still unable to completely comprehend the images of devastation broadcast from our televisions hour by hour, we must brace ourselves for the nation’s response to this attack. Talk of war hangs heavy in the air and we wait, literally, for the other shoe to drop. Only one thing seems certain: There is neither a short-term nor easy solution to this crisis.

We have lost much since last Tuesday and, unfortunately, are likely to lose much more before it is all over. Yet, in the midst of this tragedy, I am struck by the fact that we have gained something, too: a new level of caring and civility; a new depth of courage and commitment; a new sense of camaraderie and community. I see it everywhere, in the way strangers greet me, in the way people ask, and really seem to want to know, how my family, friends, and I are doing. I certainly see it here at Morehouse, in the way all of you — students, faculty, staff, alumni, friends and trustees of the College — have responded to each other during this time.

As I said during Crown Forum last Thursday, I am extremely proud, and grateful, for the way you have conducted yourselves, for the many random, and not-so-random, acts of kindness I have witnessed among you on this campus. Sometimes, it takes tragedy to compel us to our best. As the Greek essayist Plutarch once said: “Good fortune will elevate even petty minds, and give them the appearance of a certain greatness and stateliness, as from their high place they look down upon the world; but the truly noble and resolved spirit raises itself, and becomes more conspicuous in times of disaster and ill fortune.”

As our nation’s disaster unfolds, I hope that your noble and resolved spirits will continue to raise themselves, and that you will continue to embody and express the virtues of brotherhood and sisterhood you have demonstrated so far. I hope you will view this time – as I do – as an opportunity for us to build on the best of that which has defined Morehouse as a community in order that, together, we may build an even better community.
Building a better community is something we have been talking about since I returned to Morehouse as president in 1995. I began by sharing with you my vision for the College. I called for our recommitment to a “culture of excellence” and identified as our institutional priorities recruiting and retaining intellectually gifted students; recruiting and developing a first-rate faculty; enhancing and expanding our academic and extracurricular programs; and creating an academic village – a campus environment that reflects the spirit and intelligence of those who study, live and work here.

I talked about these priorities in the context of some of the challenges we face as an institution of higher education: the cultural challenge to identify and embrace global opportunities, even as we maintain our unique traditions; the moral and ethical education challenge to cultivate in all the members of this community character built on a moral and spiritual awareness and appreciation of others; the intellectual challenge to prepare our students for cutting-edge disciplines and careers; and the leadership challenge to produce graduates who will become leaders for the global metropolis of the 21st century.

I talked some, and I listened. I heard your dreams and embraced your hopes for the College. And from our discussions, I articulated what has become our shared vision for Morehouse – that “it will be among the very finest private, undergraduate liberal arts colleges in the world.” The vision goes on to say that, “the universe of institutions against which we measure our progress and standards must encompass all of the finest colleges and universities, not just those with origins similar to our own.”

Over the past six years, we have not just talked and listened. We have also acted. We have measured ourselves against the best and worked diligently to bring our vision for Morehouse into clear and tangible reality. We already have become recognized as the number-one college in the nation for educating African American men.

All over campus, you can see evidence of the many projects we have undertaken to support our idea of excellence: new academic programs; upgraded classroom facilities; a renovated dining hall and student activities center; a new executive center and a technology tower under construction. And yes, within the next several weeks, you will even see the ground broken and construction begun on a new, 600-space parking deck! By February, we hope to break ground for our 70,000-square-foot, state-of-the-art Leadership Center and, in 2003, to begin construction on a residential living and learning facility.

I point out these accomplishments and plans not so that we may boast, for we certainly have much left to accomplish. But I do mention them as a way to remind all of us that even in the midst of destruction in our nation, there is evidence of construction all around us, signs that we are moving forward together to achieve our goals. And we must continue to do that, as a nation and a college community, to move forward, to plan, to hope, and to dream. Because in light of all that has happened, it is more important than ever that we look to the future.
Even as we put in place the programmatic and physical infrastructure to support our vision, we must strive to build a better community by developing our human infrastructure, as well. In the end, this will be our most important accomplishment. In the end, the challenges we face, the cultural, moral and ethical, intellectual and leadership challenges I mentioned earlier, these challenges that are made all the more compelling by our nation’s current crisis can only be addressed by humans – by men and women equipped, educationally and morally, to handle them.

Toward that end, I am pleased to announce that today we are launching a new, College-wide initiative: the Institutional Values Project. The purpose of this initiative is to provide a way for us to continue and expand the discussions we already have begun, and to engage on a deeper level in a dialogue about the shared personal and institutional values we believe are necessary for us to achieve our shared vision for Morehouse.

We are calling the first phase of the Institutional Values Project “A Year of Dialogue.” This is significant because the word dialogue comes from the Greek roots “dia,” which means through, and “logos,” which means meaning. So, to engage in dialogue means to “go through meaning.” Over the next academic year, we will “go through” what it means to be a part of the Morehouse community. We will learn to really talk with one another, and to really listen. We will seek to understand, as well as to be understood. We will experience the benefits of suspending attachments to our own points of view in order that we might be enriched by the points of view of others. In the end, we hope to emerge with a common understanding, and a common agreement, about the values we will adopt to guide our interactions as a community.

How will this be achieved? Some of us will be asked to participate on project teams that will wrestle with broad issues and concerns about the values that should undergird our community. Some of us will work with an academic integrity task force that will look at the specific challenges of incorporating values into the teaching-learning environment. All of us will have an opportunity to be a part of chat room discussions, leadership lectures, and brown-bag lunches. Formally and informally, in classrooms and dorm rooms, in private offices and common spaces, this dialogue about values will be our primary, College-wide focus.

From my perspective as president, the Institutional Values Project and, in particular, this “Year of Dialogue” is one of the most important efforts we will undertake as a community because dialogue is the process by which we define and redefine our culture and ourselves. It is the way we decide who we are and who we want to be. Importantly, it is the path to our becoming one of the finest liberal arts colleges in the world. We engage in this “Year of Dialogue” in order that we may become just that.

And so, I ask, I encourage each of you to make a personal commitment to be a part of the Institutional Values Project, to add your voices and your views to our dialogue. In the words of the prophet Isaiah, “Come, now, let us reason together.” Let us talk together and work together, so that Morehouse may continue its historic mission. And so that
Morehouse men may continue to be the men of character and courage the world needs – now more than ever.