

## **National Insight: A Look at Synnoetics in One African American Female's Journey to the Principalship**

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### **ABSTRACT**

**This article discusses the principle of synnoetics as defined by Dr. William A. Kritsonis in the *Ways of Knowing Through the Realms of Meaning* as it chronicles the teaching career of Rhodena Townsell. Rhodena, an African American female, began her teaching career as an uncertified special education teacher in a small East Texas town. Rhodena became the principal of an elementary school in 1998. She is the first African American principal in her rural school district since integration.**

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**C**urrent demographic and economic studies show that African Americans are beginning to migrate back to rural areas in the South. Statistics support that 4.1 million African Americans reside in small towns and rural areas (Jen, Kassel & Whitener, 2004).

### **Purpose of the Article**

The purpose of this article is to share my personal success story. I hope that my story will serve to inspire other African Americans who want to become educational leaders in rural districts. I will apply synnoetics, the fourth realm of meaning to my journey to becoming a principal with the assistance of my coauthor.

### **First African American Principal Since Fully Integrated**

In 1998 I became the first African American principal in my school district since the public schools in the East Texas area became fully integrated. There are 40 teachers on my pre kindergarten – second grade campus. Both campus administrators are black. One teacher is an African American. My school district employs 151 teachers. Four teachers and two of the eleven administrators are African American.

### **Desire for Country Living**

Many of the student teachers in my graduating class began their careers in large towns or big cities. I was one of the few African Americans in my student teaching group to begin a teaching career in a rural area. I grew up and attended school in a rural area. I still enjoy living in the country. The smaller salary and the lower job turn over rate has never diminished my desire for country living. I like knowing my neighbors, and I like the quiet, slower pace of life. Country living suits me.

I have held various job positions on my elementary campus, and I have enjoyed the work. I believe that my dedication to task and my genuine love for people has afforded me the opportunity to make progress. God placed me at the right place at the right time. Significant others were at each juncture to help me along the way. People that I value have always helped to make me comfortable with taking the next step.

Upon reflection it appears that my career path simply unfolded; however, that was not the case. I prayed to God for knowledge. Then I prayed for the wisdom to correctly apply the knowledge that I was gaining. God gave me the fortitude and the insight that I needed to succeed. He receives all of the praise and the glory.

Chapter 13 of *The Boy Scout Handbook* (1998) is entitled, “Making Your Own Luck.” This chapter of the book champions those individuals who are able to make lemons into lemon aid. I believe that my desire to serve others and my over all flexibility has given me a distinct edge.

Neither my race nor my gender has interfered with my desire to become educated. The desire to help other people has always been strong. I attribute this belief to the direct

influence of God and to that of my closest family members. Synnoetics were positive in my life.

### **Ways of Knowing Through the Realms of Meaning**

In his book, *Ways of Knowing Through the Realms of Meaning*, Dr. William Allan Kritsonis (2007) defines synnoetics as personal knowledge. Synnoetics is not a subject that can be directly taught. Synnoetics are lessons that are indirectly learned. They are insights that are gained from experiences. Synnoetics refer to the insight that a person has into his own being and the insight that that same person has into the lives of other people.

It is no secret that the use of personal knowledge, what one knows, can often afford an individual the opportunity to make advancements or mischief. The understanding of self and of other people can lead a person to make decisions which are either beneficial or detrimental.

Upon the examination of the principles of the synnoetics realm, I noted that all parts do not neatly fit any one particular individual. All principles should be mentioned in order to bring to the reader to a meaningful understanding of this realm.

In his article, *Towards an Aesthetics of Synnoetic Interactivity*, Gregory Little (2003) relates that the term synnoetics was coined in the late 1960's. Louis Fein coined the term to describe the following: "...The cooperative interaction of people, mechanisms, plant or animal organisms, and automata into a system the mental power of which is greater than that of its components" (Little, G., 2003).

Those called to teach love learning and want to positively influence and inspire the youth in their wake. From elementary school to the doctoral level educators recognize that learning is learning. Learning is a cooperative interaction between people. Teachers want to impact as many individuals as possible. Educational leadership programs contain a component in which learners are asked to examine the successful career paths of others. There is a need for information in such matters. I believe that my personal success story may possibly be of benefit to someone else.

Meaning in the synnoetics realm requires direct engagement on the part of the individual. Individuals are able to apply experiences and understandings to a plethora of situations. My personal phrase for this is, "Use what you know to get where you want to go."

### **Personal Insight Gained by Understanding Those Considered Significant**

I grew up knowing that I would attend college. My paternal grandfather, a self made man, told me at a very early age that I would attend college. Grandpa's love, acceptance and expectations of me, along with those of my parents, helped me to develop

a self-accepting confidence. Their love and concern also produced a desire in me to help other people reach the same point.

Personal knowledge is insight that can be gained by understanding how others, those whom one considers to be significant, relate the perceptions that they have of that individual back to him. If the people that one considers important shun that person, then that individual is likely not to become self-accepting. He may deem himself as being unimportant (Kritsonis, 2007).

### **Choosing a Career**

When I was very young I decided that I wanted to become a librarian because I loved reading. I read much of the time. The thought of being with the books that I loved, all day, every day, was really appealing to me.

As a Junior High student I could be found reading in the library each day after lunch. I sat there with other students, mostly males, who were serving detention time. The company did not matter to me. Reading was my pleasure.

Homer, the poet, was my favorite author. I loved Greek mythology. Reading *The Iliad and the Odyssey* was thrilling. I read an abridged version of the book as a seventh grader. I read "The Real McCoy" later in college. Reading books of this nature expanded my knowledge base. Rapid knowledge acquisition occurred as I read classical literature by various authors.

Each Sunday my father and I would read the entire newspaper section by section. Reading broadly increased my vocabulary and aided my conceptual understanding of many ideas from other cultures. I followed this pattern for many years. As a beginning teacher I would read great books every summer.

### **Literature Contributes to Insight**

In his book *Ways of Knowing Through the Realms of Meaning*, Dr. Kritsonis (2007) writes about the great value of literature in the development of personal knowledge. All arts make a contribution to self-insight. Literature also contributes to the insight that one has of others. This insight differs from understanding the meaning behind the plot of a play and understanding the relations between an individual's self and that of others people.

Literature is the most influential esthetic when compared to other cultural resources. Drama, poetry, novels, and biographies effect the conscious imagination of the reader. Kritsonis (2007) states that the great works in literature have always provided models for meditation extending back through the years.

## **A Change of Career**

My change of career choice came when I was a high school sophomore. My band director heard my singing voice and was impressed. That gentleman introduced me to his wife, a vocal major. She was excited and asked the school to add high school choir to its curriculum. The choir was formed, and this wonderful teacher became my personal voice coach for two years. Even though this musical couple moved to another school district before my senior year, they always kept in touch.

This choir director encouraged me to apply for a vocal scholarship. She even drove me to the college for the audition. She was as excited as my parents were when I was awarded a full vocal scholarship. Her experience and insight helped me reach the next level of my achievement. Mrs. Rhodes helped me to establish my college career.

My vocal studies and my general music classes led me to the notion of teaching music. I had given piano lessons to younger students while I was in high school. I enjoyed helping them learn. I wanted to work with children. I pursued music with the intent to teach at the elementary level.

I desired to complete college as quickly as possible. I needed to finish my degree before my source of funding came to an end. I took as many college hours as my academic dean would allow. I graduated with honors in 3.5 years.

December graduates usually find few job vacancies. My experience was no different. Very few teaching positions were available. I lived in a college town. The chances of getting a job in a school district were not very good. My supervising teacher recommended me when a job position became available. I began my career as a resource teacher for kindergarten students. It was a dream job. I worked with kindergarten students. I worked to reinforce basic Mathematic and Language Arts concepts. This job was outside of my certification area. I was blessed to get it. The children were wonderful and so were the teachers. I studied, asked questions, and patterned myself after successful teachers at the school. My knowledge base was continuing to grow.

At the end of that first school year it was time for my new family to move. I loved my school and my school loved me. But, I was a newly wed and my husband was ready to go. We moved back to my hometown and set up house on my family's homestead. I was happy to be back in familiar surroundings, but there was not a teaching job to be found. The job turn over in my hometown had always been minimal. This time the pool of teaching positions in the entire county seemed to have evaporated.

## **Facing Challenges and Creating Opportunities**

Teachers in small county towns rarely leave. Individuals live in those places because they do not wish to live in the larger cities. It was not long before reality set in, and I began to grow desperate. I found no available jobs within a 20-mile radius from my home. The new school year was less than two weeks away.

I was about to look for a job outside of the teaching field when a former schoolmate told me that a nearby district was searching for a self-contained special education teacher. I was not certified to teach special education, but I needed a job and that district needed a willing teacher. I applied and the school was interested. The only directive that I received was that I not become a “troublemaker”. When I heard those words I was crushed. No one had ever said anything like that to me that way before. I had never been a “troublemaker.” I was insulted at the notion that I fit that profile. Many of my African American friends told me that they would have declined the position. I was hurt but I accepted the position. I replied in a positive manner that I would be coming to teach the children, not to make trouble. I was given the position and I silently vowed to do my best.

I had one week of preparation before school started. I prepared by talking to other special education teachers and by reading all of the information that I could find about the children themselves. I planned for the first day as best as I could.

Then on the first day of school I realized that nothing in my background had prepared me to teach the eight severe to moderately handicapped children now in my care. Each day was a struggle from start to finish. I cried on my way home each day. Then I would dry my tears, make dinner, and clean the house and work on lessons until I was too sleepy to hold my eyes open. Learning each day depended on a subject to subject engagement. I learned how to teach the children by my interactions with them. My personal knowledge (synnoetics) grew as each child’s needs were assessed and later met.

I often felt that my work was inadequate but the children were happy, their parents were pleased, the director of special education was satisfied and my principal was relieved. Eventually, I was told that my work was exceptional. Other teachers from our region were brought in to observe my classes. Things seemed to be rolling along. I worked hard and the children were thriving. Experience taught me that good teachers always go the extra mile for their students. Teaching special education had given me the opportunity to gain synnoetics as to what comprises good teaching for any child. The children’s needs must be considered first.

The job as a self-contained special education teacher was both the most challenging and the most rewarding job that I have ever held. I reiterate that I actually shed tears each day on the way home. In the process I grew to love the children and their parents. I enrolled in college and became a certified special education teacher. I held that job for 4.5 years. I was told that I made a positive difference in the lives of all of the children that I taught. I had to be persuaded by many others before I accepted an offer to become a second grade teacher.

As a second grade teacher I found that working with the students was just as rewarding as working with my special students. I held that position for 1.5 years. The time passed quickly. It was at this point that I had my first meaningful contact with other members on the elementary staff. There were five other second grade teachers, and we worked together closely. It was then that I came to know and fall in love with my school family.

Seven years after college graduation I was offered an elementary music position. By that time I had forgotten that I had ever wanted to be a music teacher. I was flexible enough to become happy in each of my situations and as with my other positions I had to be persuaded to give this one up. I did and the job as elementary music teacher was the best position that I have ever held. I worked with music seven days per week. I taught private music lessons after school and on weekends. I played the piano at my church throughout the week and on Sunday. I felt that I was in my element during those nine years. At that point my personal knowledge was extending out to many others. Kritsonis (2007) says that these outwardly extending circles are the consequence of basic human association.

During those nine years as the music teacher I stood in good relation to many children and adults. I enjoyed people. People always came to me with their concerns. I became known as a good listener. I was encouraged to seek a master's degree in Counseling. I did so, and I received a Master's degree in 1990. My knowledge base was continuing to grow and so did my opportunities.

My next assignment would take me beyond anything that I had planned for or expected. I was not offered the job as counselor when the position was added on my campus. I was truly disappointed. Soon the disappointment wore off and I was still thrilled to be teaching music and enjoying my students. I had the best job in the world.

### **Applying for the Assistant Principal Position**

It was then that I learned that I would soon be a mother. I was filled with joy. To me this news was a miracle. I had been told that I would never be able to have a child. I was still in shock over that news when my principal spoke to me about applying for the assistant principal's position on my campus. I hesitated because I had to consider my unborn child. I loved my principal, our staff, and the children on our campus. Making this decision turned out to be one of the most difficult decisions that I have ever faced. Finally, the love for my school family swayed my decision. Another principle of synnoetics, I-Thou, (Kritsonis, 2007) helped me to make the decision to accept the position. I felt supported as a person.

I held the position of assistant principal for three years, and I was quite happy. I was happy until my principal told me that she was retiring. I had just completed my mid-management certification and passed the principal exit examination. I felt secure with my job and I was set to enjoy motherhood. I was not ready for her next words. My principal told me that she was going to recommend me as her replacement. She told me that she had confidence in me. She had enough insight about me to know that I would be able to handle the position. All of the stakeholders, including those at the central office level were convinced that I was the right person for the job.

## **Accepting the Position as Elementary School Principal: Making History**

I decided to accept the position as the elementary campus principal. I made history in the county and the school district. I was the first African American to be named as a principal since the schools were integrated.

### **Early Administrative Experiences and Challenges**

I was overwhelmed. It was unlike any other position that I had ever held. I was now responsible for everything concerning my campus, both the good and bad. Many people supported me. Only a few appeared to be outwardly skeptical. As with most new administrators, I was going to have to prove myself. To my horror, seventeen position changes occurred when I was announced as the next principal. Some people retired or resigned and others simply changed campuses. As the mother of a two year old and a new principal, I was too busy too cry and too tired to rest. Ethridge Townsell, my paternal grandfather, always said, "Wide awake and full of fun, scared too death but won't run." That saying described my feelings perfectly.

My first year was challenging. I took one day at a time and tried to stay focused on the students. That had worked for me before. It was the secret to my success. Synnoetics worked again and I am beginning my eighth year as a campus principal.

I strive to look for the good in people. Humor helps me to put our short comings into perspective. Such as when have people breeze right past me when they enter the building for the first time. They often fail to check the badges. Without hesitation many begin speaking to the first Caucasian that they see. Some people are really rude but most of them are quite innocent in their assumptions. One salesman presented my secretary with a box of expensive chocolate candy for the principal. I had spoken to him from my doorway but he failed to associate the signage on the door with me. He ignored my presence and was about to give the secretary his spiel when she stopped him and introduced me. That poor man quickly apologized, ran to his car, and returned with enough candy samples for all of my staff. We still laugh about him.

My former superintendent always had a twinkle in his eye when he introduced me to families. Especially those telling him that they were moving form the city to escape minorities. He said that their expressions were priceless.

People withdraw their children for many reasons. But I have never been told that any family has withdrawn their child because of my race. I have noticed that most parents do not care about my skin color. Parents want to know their child is valued. They want professionals who are skilled enough to educate their child to his/her maximum potential. Parents want positive results.

At times I am told that I am one of the preferred administrators. I have heard this from students, parents, teachers, community members and other administrators. I believe

that comfort that they experience is perhaps more related to my personality than my race or position.

### **Existentialism Emphasizes Connections and Individual Relationships**

The existentialist theorists call the anguish that I was experienced during my decision making periods an inescapable fear. Kritsonis (2007) writes that the basic principle of existentialism is that reality is concrete. To be and to know are one in the same. Knowledge is determined by what a person does. Existentialism helps to emphasize the connection between people and an individual's relationship to himself.

Observance of the golden rule has always been a good practice for me.

### **I-Thou Relationships Essential**

I have found that treating people with respect and decency opposed to treating them as an object makes an important difference in life. People remember how they are treated. Kritsonis (2007) says that manipulation is absent in I-Thou relationships. Individuals are free to be themselves and not bent to serve the will of others. We affirm each other. Love in I-Thou relationships does not refer to a passion, feeling or experience. This relationship represents caring and responsibility. This is the type of love that a caring teacher would feel for her class.

In the spiritual sphere I-Thou relationships are an expression for reverence. Living beings are to be respected. Some theorists hold that these relationships are so spiritually rooted until individuals extend their respect to insects. For example, some extremists neglect bathing as not to kill a living thing on their body.

### **Two Stages in the Full Development of Self**

According to Kritsonis (2007), social psychologists hold that there are two stages in the full development of self. The first stage is where the self is made up of one person's attitude towards others about the self and others in social situations. The social group to which he belongs generates the second stage in the full development of the individual's self-attitude. Here language is used to transmit and express meanings. Being able to articulate feelings and understandings of ones' person and others is as essential in this realm as the others.

### **Love Helps the Person Develop a Healthy Sense of Self-Confidence**

Psychiatry studies the concept of relations. Kritsonis (2007) reports that an individual's personality cannot be removed from the complexities of a person's interpersonal relations. The self is made up of the appraisals of others that are in relation with the person. Good appraisals and love help the person develop a healthy sense of self-confidence. Negative appraisals in turn cause the individual to develop a poor sense of self. Love is essential in the development of a healthy personality. Love is said to exist when the safety and satisfaction of another becomes as important and the safety of one's own safety and satisfaction.

Kritsonis (2007) tells the reader that the field of psychoanalysis is not one of theory, but one of therapy. One in which the client is reeducated by revisiting the past. With the help of a trained specialist the person is helped to gain and maintain more satisfactory relationships.

### **Concluding Remarks**

In conclusion, personal knowledge is gained without a deliberate attempt on the part of the individual. I thank God for His supreme guidance. I credit my family's value of a good education and their support for my love of reading. This was the foundation for my success. My former teachers were wonderful role models. They helped me learn to put my students' needs first. This gained the attention of those in authority and gave them desire to continue to place me in various positions within the school district and to ultimately advance me to the status of campus principal. Finally, attention to the study of symbolics, empirics, esthetics, ethics, and synoptics feed the body of synnoetics (personal knowledge). This in turn creates an individual who is able to use his insights into himself and others to obtain a satisfactory level of education and life's work.

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