President Turner, Provost Currall, Deans Christenson, Collins, DiPiero, Hill, Holland, Knight, and Meyers, and members of the faculty, I want to thank you for the privilege of serving this academic year as President of the Faculty Senate. I would like to extend a warm welcome to Dean Holly Jeffcoat, who has recently joined SMU as Dean of SMU Libraries, and I would like to extend a special thank you to Elizabeth Killingsworth for her careful stewardship as Dean Ad-Interim of the libraries last year. I would also like to extend my congratulations to those being honored for their tenure and promotion. Your contributions in research, teaching, and service embody the highest aspirations of our university community.

I want to thank also the faculty of SMU for allowing me to represent them this year as President of the Faculty Senate. It is a responsibility I do not take lightly.

Those of you who attended the Teaching Excellence Symposium last Friday were probably persuaded to rethink the power of the lecture in the classroom and given great advice about how to lecture effectively. While I don’t know if everything I heard there applies to how I teach my classes or to the task I have before me today, which is, effectively to give a long talk, report, or lecture, one thing that was said resonated and confirmed something I already knew, and that is the power stories in human culture and their ability to teach us, to persuade us, and to open the world to us.

Since my academic area of expertise is film studies, I really needed little persuasion about the power of stories, because I work in the world of narrative. It is fair to say, in fact, that I think in stories, that I comprehend reality through stories, and that something is only true to me if it correlates to a story.

So, I am going to frame my report to you today through a story, and specifically through a film. The film in question is one of my favorite films*.* It is a short, 35 minute film from Senegal called  *La Petite vendeuse de soleil* or *The Little Girl Who Sold the Sun*. It was one of the last films made by the Senegalese director Djibril Diop Mambety (or DDM as people affectionately called him) before his untimely death at the age of 53, and it is part of an unfinished trilogy about the lives of ordinary people.

The film tells the story of Sili Laam, a young, disabled, and poor girl from the slums outside of Dakar, the capital city of Senegal. An orphan who lives with her blind grandmother, Sili leaves the slums to go to the city to try to earn a living. She starts out begging, as that is the only apparent means of support available to her, due to her gender, her age, and her station in life,. However, as she is begging, she sees a group of boys selling newspapers. The boys attract her attention not only because they suggest another avenue for self-support, but also because they are highly individualistic, extremely aggressive and cut throat, and they routinely harass one another and anyone who gets in their way. Sili, is both intrigued by the possibility of selling newspapers and appalled by the method used by the other sellers and the worldview it suggests, and she decides to become a newspaper seller, despite the fact that no other girls sell newspapers in the city.

Sili becomes a successful seller of the newspaper *Le Soleil*, or *The Sun*, which is the paper issued by the Senegalese government. She forges a friendship and collaboration with a boy, Abbas, who sells a rival newspaper, *Sud,* which is a populist newspaper. She impresses a local businessman with her entrepreneurial spirit, and he buys all of her papers and invests in her business. Sili uses the windfall to buy a sunshade for grandmother, who sits on the street in the sun and offers religious counsel, to give alms to the poor and to buy clothes and food for herself and her friends.

At the end of the film, Sili is attacked by the rival newspaper sellers, who are jealous of her success, and they steal her crutches in an attempt to prevent her from selling papers. Sili’s friend, Abbas, however, comes to her rescue, and carries her, since she can no longer walk, and the two move forward into the sunlight as the film ends.

Now, there are many reasons why I like this film. It is a short, but complex and layered film with elements of political and economic allegory and components of an African tale. It comments on Senegal’s transition to post-colonial independence and on the impact globalization has on the small country. The film is also wonderfully affirmative. It incarnates a type of positive resilience in Senegalese culture that is captured by the proverb “it is better to walk forward than curse the path.” The film looks beyond the bleak economic reality of Senegal at the time it was made and imagines the possibility of a brighter future, and it does so by depicting the nation as a community in transition and by advocating for solidarity among the diverse groups in society.

If it is clear from this description why I like this film so much, it may be less clear how this film is relevant to SMU in 2018, to the actions, past or present, of the SMU Faculty Senate, or to what I hope to accomplish this year. After all, Senegal and SMU have very little in common. Senegal is a relatively impoverished nation, barely known to most Americans, and SMU is an elite university, attended by relatively privileged students from the United States and around the world. Moreover, Sili and I have very little in common. She is young, black, illiterate and African, and I am not quite so young white, highly educated, and American.

It is often hard to look beyond differences. After all, differences are, to a greater and greater extent, the mechanisms we use to define and identify ourselves and our relationship to others. As Professor Maria Dixon-Hall has been teaching through the Cultural Intelligence initiative, we tend to carve ourselves out into distinct groups or tribes that are largely defined by differences. And, although I would not argue that those differences are not important, they can, if we are not careful, obscure fairly important similarities that bind together people of different backgrounds, ages, races, genders, and social classes.

One of the messages that Sili’s story powerfully embodies, in fact, is that our similarities can be more powerful than our differences. Sili succeeds because she is willing to challenge the boundaries placed on her by her society’s emphasis on difference and because she is willing, herself, to look beyond differences and to work with people of different genders, different political viewpoints, different generations, and different social classes. Sili would never have made it to Dakar, much less succeeded as a newspaper seller, but for that she needs, right from the beginning, the help of others to accomplish her goals, and she recognizes and embraces that.

SMU, like Senegal, is a community in transition. We have, over the seventeen years I have been here, changed profoundly as an institution. The physical campus has expanded, the student body has become academically stronger and more internally diverse, and the faculty has become increasingly research-oriented. We have embraced these changes and we look to build on them, or to “continue the ascent” to borrow a term from the Provost’s report on meeting the strategic objectives for academic and research excellence at SMU. There will be, this year, concrete opportunities to move the university forward. There are capital improvements going on that will strengthen the physical infrastructure of the university. I have greatly appreciated, for example, the planned improvements to Clements Hall, a listed building, and the second oldest building on the campus, which has long been in dire need of attention and repair. There will be an opportunity to revise and streamline our general education curriculum through the adoption of the proposed Common Curriculum, a revision of the University Curriculum that seeks to strengthen the infrastructure of our student experience. There will be concrete efforts made to increase our online footprint and to expand interdisciplinary research. Our success in continuing our ascent will depend on all of us working together to advance the interests of the university.

While we all, no doubt, want to see the university ascend, we will be challenged by our divisions, like community depicted in the film,. As with any community, we are made up of different groups: students, faculty, staff, administrators. Even within those groups, there are a number of differences, ranging from race, gender, age, and class to, among the faculty, differences of discipline, department, rank, and status. We must be careful not to let those differences define us. We must be careful not to let the proprietary nature of academic publishing, or the competition for research funding, or the constant competition for students and majors or resources in the university make us act like the gang of newspaper sellers, who perceive life as a zero-sum game, in which someone has to lose for someone else to gain. What Sili teaches us is that we will be more successful in our forward ambitions if we walk and work together. Therefore, one thing I would like to accomplish this year—and I will need your help—is to have all of us try to think a little bit less about the things that divide us, and more about the fact that we belong to the same community and that, even if we play different positions, we all play on the same team..

There are many ways to live out our collective identity at SMU. We can enroll in the CIQ training, we can become involved in interdisciplinary research or teaching, we can serve on university-wide committees, act as faculty mentors or advisers, become faculty in residence or faculty affiliates of the Residential Commons, get involved in the Faculty Senate. However you choose to do it, I am going to challenge each and every one of you this year to actively work to improve the SMU community and to try to think and act as a member of the SMU community, rather than as a member of some constituency of the university.

One of my other priorities for the year will be to build on what has been started, but not yet finished, by past-President Paul Krueger. This is important, because one thing that Sili Laam and I have in common is that we enter the story in the middle, not the beginning. At the beginning of *The Little Girl who Sold the Sun*, we are introduced to a woman who is falsely accused of stealing, and who is arrested and put in prison. Although many people stand and watch this, no one intervenes to help her.

Later in the film, after Sili receives her financial windfall, she too, is falsely accused of theft, by a corrupt police officer who can’t imagine that a poor, disabled girl could come upon the sum of money she has by honest means. Unlike the woman at the beginning of the film, Sili ably defends herself by demanding to take her case directly to the chief of police. While Sili succeeds in vindicating herself and defending her innocence, she becomes aware that this is not the first time this injustice has occurred, and she asks, also, that the other wrongly accused woman be set free. She thus recognizes, that her story is a continuation of a longer story, not a story in and of itself.

My story is also a continuation. I am following in the footsteps of the many Senate Presidents who have preceded me, and I am, as noted, directly following in the footsteps of Past President Paul Krueger. The foundation for any actions I might take have been laid by the Paul and the Senate last year, and possibly by previous iterations of the Senate and previous Presidents. Similarly, some of the things that will come to completion during my term will be things that were started and advanced by those who came before me. Although we have no corrupt policemen working at SMU and no one has been falsely imprisoned, we do have places where our community could be improved, and Paul and the Senate worked very hard last Spring at partnering with others at SMU to make the university a more equal community and at moving the university community forward in a number of ways.

The full list of the Senate’s actions and accomplishments is contained in a report prepared by that is included in today’s program. However, I would like to take the opportunity to highlight a few key actions and initiatives.

The Senate worked with Provost Steve Currall and Associate Vice President Jim Quick to increase URC funding to $230,000 per year. Similarly, the Senate worked with Elizabeth Killingsworth and the Provost to increase the spending on the university libraries, thus avoiding substantial cuts to available resources. The Faculty Senate and the Senate Executive Committee met several times with the Provost about the “Continuing the Ascent” plan and document and the strategic priorities associated with it, and the Senate advocated for and submitted a budget request to provide health-insurance coverage for terminal academic degree seeking students at SMU. Past-President Paul Krueger and I also worked with members of the SMU Student Senate and SMU Facilities to identify potential areas of improvement in operations and delivery of services and to develop solutions to existing problems. Finally, the Senate monitored progress on the beautiful new SMU Childcare Center, which opened on August 6th of this year, and it passed a resolution honoring the many years of service and dedication to the SMU community of the staff of the previous daycare center, which was located in Hawk Hall.

The accomplishments of the Senate last year, like Sili’s successes in *Little Girl Who Sold the Sun*, were not unilateral accomplishments. They involved close collaboration among the President of the Senate and various members of the Senate and Senate committees, members of the SMU administration, including President Turner, the Provost, members of the Provost’s Office, SMU Libraries, and the SMU Office of Research and Graduate Studies. I would like to ask Paul Krueger to stand, so that we may recognize his contributions. I would similarly like to thank all members of the 2017-2018 SMU Faculty Senate for their service.

I, like Sili, have and will be carried and supported up to this moment and through the rest of the year by those around me. Paul spent last year carefully preparing me to take on this role, and this year, I will look to him and to the other members of the Senate Executive Committee to help me navigate the challenges and opportunities this academic year will bring. I would ask that the members of the 2018-2019 Senate Executive Committee stand and be recognized, so that we may thank all of you for your past and future service. I would also like to recognize Julie Maynard, the administrative assistant to the Senate, who prepared me, and a long list of Presidents before me for this job.

There is another important connection between myself and Sili. Sili, is part of a film that dreams of a future that lies beyond its own narrative space. For example, it imagines that Senegal and other West African nations renounce the French-backed CFA franc as currency and that they break with the economic policies of the IMF and the World Bank. The film also imagines that Senegal moves toward full gender equality, and that it actively works to ease or erase income inequality. While none of these things have yet occurred in the real world, they are aspirations that the film transmits to the spectator in the hope that they will come to pass. Mambety announces in voice-over, at the end of the film, that it is “a tale thrown to the sea.” His film, he is telling us, was made to inspire us to make the vision a reality.

As in *The Little Girl Who Sold* the Sun, there are places where the SMU community could be improved upon. We can work, for example, to better recognize the contributions of our non-tenure line faculty, who comprise approximately 30% of the total SMU faculty. In fact, a report submitted by the Senate Ad-Hoc Committee on the Status of Non-Tenure Line Faculty recommended that we do just that. This year, we can follow that committee’s recommendations, by ensuring fair and consistent standards for hiring, review, renewal and promotion. We can also make sure that the service contributions of non-tenure line faculty, which are often substantial, are recognized and accounted for. There are other improvements we can make. We can, through the Provost’s salary task force, monitor and assess all faculty salaries for equity and fairness in accordance with market standards, for example. Or we can work toward creating a graduate school to make SMU more competitive.We can, as the Senate requested last year, ensure that all graduate students seeking terminal degrees have health insurance coverage of a standard equivalent to that of full-time employees. We can, this year, honor a recommendation from the Senate from several years ago to create a family leave policy that allows all full-time faculty, regardless of gender, to take paid leave to take care of newborn or newly adopted children or family members whose health requires attention and care. On these and other issues, we can come together to t find solutions. We will have the greatest success in doing so if we see ourselves as parts of a whole, rather than as rival constituencies who must battle one another for resources.

This vision may sound like an ideal that lies outside the frame of our current narrative. However, we can actively push ourselves toward that ideal by building bridges and taking down walls. I will try to follow Sili’s example this year and serve as a conduit and bridge builder who encourages members of the Senate, the faculty at large, the staff, and the SMU administration to work together to solve shared problems and to push the university forward. And, I will, when I become aware of problems, speak frankly and honestly about those problems to those with the power and the authority to correct them.

I can do none of this alone. I will work closely with the Senate Executive Committee, I will also work with and rely on the Chairs of the Senate Committees, and the Committee members. Senate Committee Chairs, will you please stand so that we may recognize your service? Finally, I will work Provost Currall and his office and President Turner and his office, and with the Deans of the individual colleges and schools to represent faculty interests and concerns in a way that moves the SMU community forward.

We will have challenges ahead of us, both this year and in the coming years. We have vision, and talent, but we don’t always have the resources necessary to fully realize the potential of both. We have a wonderful library, but it isn’t sufficient to support the grandeur of our aspirations. We have an excellent faculty, but they are not always sure their contributions are seen or valued. We have motivated students, but they need our guidance to be successful. We have an insightful and dedicated administration, but they are, like the Chief of Police in the film, sometimes cloistered. These are all challenges we can overcome, but it will require all of us working together to that end. As another Senegalese Wolof proverb says, it is better to farm your field than to pray for it to be farmed. Let us not wait for someone else to do the things we know need to be done. Let us take those areas where we wish to see growth and wish to see change and work together to find ways to make that growth and change happen.