

Spring 2011

# A Knock at Midnight: A Pedagogy of Womanist Spirituality

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# A KNOCK AT MIDNIGHT: A PEDAGOGY OF WOMANIST SPIRITUALITY

by

VALERIE MOSS

(Under the Direction of Ming Fang He)

## ABSTRACT

African Americans, who have a spirituality rooted in African American religious traditions, often tend to thrive in life in spite of adversities (Billingsley, 1999; Raboteau, 2001; Ross, 2003, West, 1999; Williams & Dixie, 2003). The voices of African American women, nevertheless, remain marginalized in the larger society (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003), in the Black Church (Coleman, 2008; St. Clair, 2008; Weems 1998/2005), and in academia (Pollard & Welch, 2006). Grounded in a wide array of African American theoretical traditions such as womanist theology (Canon, 1988; Grant, 1989, 1995; Weems, 1993, 1998/2005, 2004, 2005), black liberation theology (Cone, 1975/1997), beloved community (King, 1963), and the African concept of ubuntu (Battle, 2006, 2009; Tutu, 2004), and drawing on a variety of research methodologies such as spiritual autobiographies (Lee, 1836; Elaw, 1846; Foote, 1879; Truth, 1892/1988), narrative and autobiographical studies (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Ellis & Bochner, 2003; Llewellyn, 2006; Nash, 2004), and personal~passionate~participatory inquiry (He & Phillion, 2008) inquiry, I explore my life and the life of my mother as African American educators working during the recurrent historical eras of segregation and desegregation in the U. S. South.

The ideas and works of African American women, such as Jarena Lee (1836), Rebecca Cox Jackson (Walker, 1983), Zilpha Elaw (1846), Sojourner Truth (1850/2005), Julia A. Foote (1879), Ella Baker (Ransby, 2003), Dorothy Height (2003), Katie Canon (1988), Renita Weems (1988/2005, 1993, 1999, 2004, 2005), and Delores Williams (1993) have given me “gifts of power” (Walker, 1983) which encourage me to hope despite the impinging darkness. I turn to the metaphor of "a knock at midnight" (King, 1963) to narrate our stories, paired with biblical stories, to illuminate the persistent nature of African American womanist spirituality in terms of courage, intelligence, persistence, heritage, persecution, hopelessness, unity, abuse, and devotion, which counter the meta narrative that often portrays African American women as invisible, trivial, and powerless creatures. I call for a pedagogy of womanist spirituality that honors black women's voices and experiences, counters hegemonic forces which constantly threaten to silence black women, challenges African Americans' narrowed focus on materiality, honors African American religious and spiritual heritages, and educates African Americans to thrive in life while maintaining dreams, hope, love and freedom in an unjust world.

INDEX WORDS: Spirituality, Womanist theology, African American spirituality, Spiritual inquiry, African American education, Womanism, Education, Critical pedagogy, Curriculum studies, Autobiography, Gender studies, African American studies

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B.B.A, University of Georgia, 1994

M.B.A., University of Georgia, 1995

A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University in  
Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

STATESBORO, GEORGIA

2011

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Electronic Version Approved:  
May 2011

## DEDICATION

*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I will dwell in house of the Lord Forever. (Psalm 23:6 New King James Version)*

I dedicate this work to my Maker and Sustainer – God. It has been the Lord’s goodness and mercy that have granted me wonderful parents and the ability to write the work that follows. Indeed, it is God’s sustaining power that has allowed me to triumph in many situations where I feared I would falter. Thank You for your incredible love, mercy, and goodness!

*Faith is the confidence that what we hope for will actually happen; it gives us assurance about things we cannot see. Through their faith, the people in days of old earned a good reputation. (Hebrews 11:1-2 New Living Translation)*

I also dedicate this work to all the black women – known and unknown; past and present – who have gone ahead of me. It is on their shoulders that I stand. It feels like they are in a stadium cheering me on as I continue to run my race. Their example and their ability to make a way when there was no way is another source that propels me forward. Their faith has not only brought about change and earned them a “good reputation,” but it also reminds me to believe even when I cannot “see” the way.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Most accomplishments in life are not achieved without the help of others. I have a long list of supporters and well-wishers who are too numerous to list here. But, I would like to thank a few of them here.

### **James and Evelyn Moss – My Parents**

You have been my biggest champions and supporters, and I am incredibly blessed to have parents like you. I haven't always appreciated you the way I should have. But please know that I am eternally grateful for your loving guidance and support. You've both done big and small things to support me in this process. Thanks for the words of encouragement.

Thanks for watching Honey when I needed time to write. Mom, thanks for being willing to tell your stories. **Mom** thanks for always being on my side and being willing to tell your stories. Telling your stories was courageous. Thank you. But I have always known you are a woman of courage. You were my first heroine, and your never-give-up attitude has inspired me more than you know. I couldn't have asked God for a better mother. You are truly a blessing, and I thank God everyday for having such a wonderful mother.

### **Dr. Ming Fang He – My Dissertation Committee Chairperson**

Thanks for taking me on as a student when you were already overloaded. Your guidance has been immensely valuable. You have played a huge role in my re-education. You encouraged me to read, learn and investigate my



own African American heritage, which has been something sorely lacking in my education up to this point. Thank you for encouraging me to find and use my own voice. Thank you for your wisdom in many things, but especially in putting together such an awesome committee.

**Dr. Saundra Nettle, Dr. Sabrina Ross, Dr. Wynnetta Scott-Simmons – My Dissertation Committee**

I could not have dreamed of a better set of guiding forces in this process. All three of you have given excellent advice and have been very supportive. I can remember being nervous and worried before each meeting with you. Yet, when I walked in the door, I felt your support and was immediately put at ease. Thank you. I consider all three of you similar to the ladies referenced in the dedication whose faith earned them a “good reputation.” It is on your shoulders that I stand. Thank you for your dedication, faith, and hard work which have prepared a way for me.

**My Extended Family**

My entire extended family has always been supportive of me in this process. As a matter of fact, they have always supported me no matter the situation—whether it was graduating from high school, college, or other graduate schools. You have attended my graduations and wished me well. Thank you for the telephone calls, prayers, and well wishes. I am truly blessed to have such a wonderful family, especially in the light of the many broken families I deal with when teaching students. **Theresa**, thanks

for the hours of listening to me on the phone and encouraging me to finish. I love you. We did it!

**Stephanie Holloway, Rene Stegall, Vanessa Tossie, Mary Beth Whiteside –**

### **Special Friends**

All four of you ladies have supported me through this entire process.

**Stephanie**, thank you for reading my stories and encouraging me to continue this process. Without your encouragement to continue writing, I'm not sure I would have finished. Our bible-inspired conversations in our office after work provided muse for many of my stories. Thanks for trying to understand me when I know it wasn't always easy for you.

**Rene**, we have known each other since childhood and even went off to college together. Needless to say, we have seen each other through a lot of good times and bad times. Thank you for always supporting me. You have always believed in me and my abilities, even when I my self-confidence was on shaky ground. Thank you for dreaming dreams bigger for me than I could dream for myself. **Vanessa**, we began this process long ago together at another university. My experience at the other university was so negative that I was prepared to give up on the whole doctoral process. However, your insistence that I apply to the doctoral program at Georgia Southern University opened new doors for me – doors that may have remained shut had it not been for you. We've had good times and bad times, but through it all you have been there for me. Thank you. **Mary**

**Beth**, I started my educational journey with you twelve years ago, and I couldn't have asked for a better sojourner. Thanks for the hundreds of conversations where we discussed our lives and what it really means to be a good teacher. I know that I have always fallen short of that "good teacher standard," but you have given me the encouragement to keep trying. By the way, you are the real deal. You're a genuine example of an excellent teacher! You genuinely care for and love all students. Thanks for being such an awesome friend and giving that love only Mary Beth can give.

In addition to the above acknowledgments I would also like to thank the following people: **Dr. Francine Breakfield, Dr. Robert Lake, Dr. Derrick Tennial, Shantara Whitaker, all other Modified Residency Program Cohort 2, Julie Cook, Betty Harris, and all the many friends and coworkers who wished me well.**

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## PROLOGUE

*Then, teaching them more about prayer, he used this story: "Suppose you went to a friend's house at midnight, wanting to borrow three loaves of bread. You say to him, 'A friend of mine has just arrived for a visit, and I have nothing for him to eat.' And suppose he calls out from his bedroom, 'Don't bother me. The door is locked for the night, and my family and I are all in bed. I can't help you.' But I tell you this--though he won't do it for friendship's sake, if you keep knocking long enough, he will get up and give you whatever you need because of your shameless persistence." (Luke 11:5-8 New International Version)*

Even though on the surface, Jesus used this parable to teach his disciples about persistent prayer, Martin Luther King, Jr. (1963) in a sermon entitled *A Knock at Midnight*, used this parable to grapple with the contemporary social, political, and theological problems of his day. He begins his sermon by discussing the "midnight" in the social and political order brought about by nationalistic supremacist aims of dominate world powers, nuclear proliferation, and the inability of science and technology to resolve all of humanity's problems. Next, he moves on to describe a "midnight" in the internal lives of individuals, describing how people are plagued with fear, anxiety, and depression. He explains how attempts of mental health workers and "popular clergymen" preaching "soothing sermons on 'How to Be Happy'" (p. 59) fail to assuage these ills. Finally, he describes the midnight in the moral order of things. He says

people no longer seek to do right; rather, they seek not to get caught while doing wrong.

When I listened to and later read this sermon, I was struck by the relevancy of an almost half-century old sermon. We have not made much improvement since King first spoke these words. We are merely singing a different verse of the same song. Today, the United States is engaged in wars with Islamic extremists in Iraq and Afghanistan. Sometimes I think our actions are just another manifestation of United States' imperialist aims. Despite the end of the nuclear arms race between the United States and the former Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, other nations, like Iran and North Korea persist in nuclear proliferation despite other nations' relative commitment to non-nuclear proliferation. Scientists have successfully mapped the human genome but still have no cure for cancer or other life threatening diseases. National Aeronautics and Space Administration and other international space organizations are making plans to colonize the moon and launch manned missions to Mars within in the next ten years. In spite of the advancement in technology and the reign of free markets bringing wealth to more individuals than ever, the global community is still extremely polarized and resists making the positive changes within our capabilities. Jeffrey Sachs (2006), noted economist and director of Columbia University's Earth Institute, says the global community has within its means today to end extreme poverty by 2012. Yet, it seems as if we will not reach this goal for the lack of commitment from the most prosperous nations in the

world. As a global community, it seems we have finally achieved the know-how and technology to solve many problems which plague humanity; however, it appears we still lack the will to make it happen. It is midnight in the social and political order of things.

The internal emotional and spiritual worlds of people are equally as dark. As reported in a National Center for Health Statistics Brief (Pratt & Brody, 2008), the World Health Organization reports the worldwide leading cause for disability is depression, not injuries resulting from accidents or birth defects, but depression. People are depressed to the point where it impairs their ability to function physically within society. Statistics are even darker for certain groups of people. Depression rates are higher for women and people of color. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2010), the third leading cause of death for youth from 10 to 24 is suicide. This statistic points to an internal darkness plaguing the future of our nation—the youth. We watch reality shows on television that glorify dysfunction and poor choices which only reinforce negative habits of being. Despite the feminist movement and the budding economic parity of women, violence against women persists (Rosen, Fontaine, Gaskin-Lanivan, Price, & Bachar, 2009). All of these maledictions and our inability to do right suggest the darkness still abides within many.

To me, on a professional level within the educational field, it seems dark, too. Current national and state economic pressures have forced schools systems to furlough teachers, reduce the number days students are required to attend



class, increase class size, cut programs like art and music, and/or eliminate teaching positions. Additionally, many states, including Georgia, are seeking to develop teacher compensation systems based on student performance in academic areas (math, science, language arts, and social studies). On the surface, this decision seems reasonable; however, student performance is dependant to a variety of factors – parental involvement, natural talents and abilities, motivation, amount of time spent studying, sociocultural influences, etc. – many of which are outside the control of teachers. Considering budgetary deficits, increased focus on high-stakes testing, and increased focus on core academic courses, a business and computer science teacher, like myself, sees nothing but darkness encroaching. Nevertheless, I turn to a bright tradition which has sustained me and many other African American women when their way seemed especially dark.

The ideas and works of African American women, such as Jarena Lee (1836), Rebecca Cox Jackson (Walker, 1983), Zilpha Elaw (1846), Sojourner Truth (1850/2005), Julia A. Foote ( 1879), Ella Baker (Ransby, 2003), Dorothy Height (2003), Katie Canon (1988), Renita Weems (1988/2005,1993, 1999, 2004, 2005), and Delores William (1993) have given me “gifts of power” (Walker, 1983) which encourage me to hope despite the impinging darkness. For example, when I think about how Sojourner Truth (1850/2005), an escaped slave, successfully sued a slave trader for the return of her son or how she won a defamation of character lawsuit against white litigants (the Folgers) in 1835, I am amazed at her

confidence and belief in a God which drove her to seek justice. I think about how Jarena Lee (1836) did not accept Richard Allen's (founder of the African Methodist Episcopal denomination) "no" as he told her she could not preach in his church. I think about how Ella Baker (Ransby, 2003) worked tirelessly to mentor youth organizations like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and her dedicated service to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. I also admire Baker's alternate model of womanhood. She would not allow herself to be defined by the social norms of her time, traveled extensively, and successfully raised her niece simultaneously. These women are my examples of hope and faith in the face of adversity. They represent a hope rooted in Christian faith, and their hope drove them to tell their stories and seek justice despite oppressive voices shouting all around them. It is this female African American spirituality that I would like to turn the spotlight towards. My dissertation is an inquiry into how this African American spirituality has sustained and influenced the pedagogy of my mother and myself in our educational careers.

To further honor the tradition which has sustained me, I am using the metaphor of "a knock at midnight" and King's (1963) sermon of the same name as an organizing framework for my inquiry and to demonstrate the persistent nature of female African American spirituality. Although I realize Martin Luther King, Jr. was a male preacher and I seek to honor the voice of African American women, his ideas should not be disavowed solely because of his gender. Chapter

1: Midnight describes the dark context which has driven me to write a dissertation about female African American spirituality. I discuss my personal reasons for engaging in this inquiry, marginalization of black women's voices and experiences, black people's narrowed focus on materiality, and the often devalued and forgotten heritage of black people's religious and spiritual history. In this section, special interest is also placed on the forgotten religious voices of African American women.

Since a knock often represents an attempt to gain entry, in Chapter 2: The Knock, I review the attempts to theoretically describe how black women have knocked at the door of black liberation movements and failed to find a true home that spoke to our triple oppressions of racism, sexism, and classism. I define and situate womanist theology (Canon, 1988; Weems, 1988/2005, 1993, 1999, 2004, 2005; & Grant, 1989, 1995) among black liberation theology (Cone 1975/1997), beloved community (King, 1963), and ubuntu (Battle, 2006, 2009 & Tutu, 2004). After situating womanist theology among other theological perspectives, I explain how the personal becomes political through the use of autobiography and memoir. I situate autobiography in the world of curriculum studies and explain the significance of black women's personal and autobiographical writings. Specifically, I will explore the works of Jarena Lee (1836), Zilpha Elaw (1846), and Julia A. Foote (1879) as thinking representative of womanist theological ideas expressed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and as examples of spiritual autobiography.

In King's (1963) "A Knock at Midnight" sermon, the request for bread symbolizes hope amid deep darkness. He says people are requesting the bread of faith, hope, and love. The request is a way to find what you are seeking. In Chapter 3: The Request for Bread, using a womanist theological framework (Weems, 1988/1995, 2004, 2005) and the importance of exploring the inner life of educators (Palmer, 1998), I explore ways to think about and tell stories of me and my mother. I describe my search for a specific methodology and my ultimate decision to use auto/biographical spiritual inquiry as the method for story collection and analysis. The ground work for this inquiry is also rooted in the personal, passionate, and participatory (He & Phillion, 2008) because I feel it is important for me to name my own experiences and genuinely engage in my research.

In Chapter 4: The Persistent Knock, I present stories inspired by womanist theological perspectives of education. These stories demonstrate how the spirituality of me and my mother have sustained us in a profession which devalues women and African Americans. I also explain how this spirituality guided and influenced our day-to-day practice in educational and non-educational settings. Specifically, the autobiographical and biographical stories will highlight how our spiritual practices and beliefs have enabled us to remain hopeful while working in the educational field and also how these beliefs and practices fuel our need to promote social justice and compassion in education. Because Weems (1988/2005, 2004, 2005) and St. Clair (2008) contend that both the

everyday experiences of black women and biblical criticism are crucial to womanist theology, I will examine my mother's experiences and my experiences as they relate to stories of women in the bible and biblical principles. Each story from my mother and me will be paired with a biblical story about a woman in the bible. This comparison of real life experience to biblical stories is crucial because for too long biblical interpretation and criticism has primarily come from westernized white male perspectives (Weems, 1988/2005). Telling stories in this fashion is a way to redeem biblical stories and principles for oppressed groups of people and especially black women.

In Chapter 5: *Rising Dawn*, I describe a fictionalized conversation between me and my mother which explores the significance and future implications of these stories. During the conversation, we identify common values which people from other racial groups or religions can utilize to seek justice and maintain hope in dire situations. We also discuss the future implications of this study for educational settings.

## CHAPTER 1

### MIDNIGHT: INTRODUCING THE DISSERTATION INQUIRY

*It is a land as dark as midnight, a land of gloom and confusion, where even the light is dark as midnight. (Job 10: 22 New Living Translation)*

Although I am not a theologian and this inquiry is not a formalized theological treatise, it is important for readers to become familiar with my background. In the autobiographical section entitled *Autobiographical Roots of My Inquiry*, I seek to facilitate understanding and provide a frame of reference concerning my personal experiences without which readers may be left guessing about my true intent. Specifically, the experiences I expound upon explain the reason why I was driven to this type of dissertation inquiry. I write of my personal midnight that drove me from a career in corporate America to a career in education and later how I discovered powerful voices from black women in the past. To provide further context for this study and because this study is about two African American women, I will discuss how black female voices have been routinely pushed to the margins in spite of their wisdom and strength. I will also provide a historical background for African American spirituality rooted in a Christian tradition which is often devalued despite its heritage of hope, justice, and peace. Finally, I will provide what I have termed the “souls of black folks today” or an analysis of how we, as black people, have failed to utilize our great spiritual heritage.

### **Autobiographical Roots of My Inquiry**

*What you say flows from what is in your heart.* (Matthew 6: 45b New Living Translation)

While reading a book, I always carefully read the acknowledgements, preface, and introduction. I look for hidden meanings in whether or not they thank husband or wife, children, family, or friends. I try to imagine what their editors and supportive friends who read the manuscript and made suggestions are like. I want to know what their circle of family, friends and acquaintances are like. I wonder if an author who only lists a string of meaningless names is genuinely grateful for the help provided. At the base of this careful reading is a need to know who the author is. What is her motivation? What is his background? Can I relate to someone like this? Does what I see in these sections warrant reading further? Delores Williams (1993) in *Sisters in the Wilderness* says:

I have come to believe that theologians, in their attempt to talk about religious communication, ought to give readers some sense of their autobiographies. This can help an audience discern what led the theologian to do the kind of theology she does. (p. xi)

Although I am no theologian and this inquiry is in no way an official theological exegesis, I think it is important to explain elements in my thinking and background that have formed the basis of this inquiry. It is my intent that the following two sections will give the reader the additional information I always crave.

### **What? Religion in the Classroom?**

When I began my doctoral program at Georgia Southern University, we were constantly asked about the topics related to education that intrigued us. I was always ashamed to mention my interests because I knew what people would say and think about my fusion of education and spirituality. When I would stand up and say I was interested in studying education and spirituality, my fellow classmate would always remind me of the separation of church and state and suggest that my topic did not readily lend itself to easy study. It seemed as if they thought it was an especially hard topic to study because it involved one of those two things you never talk about with strangers – politics and religion. I would have to be crazy to want to deal with religion in education. Fortunately, I never received this response from any of my professors, and I continued to pursue my interests.

What has made me interested in spirituality and education? I really cannot say one particular thing, event, or experience has compelled to me to perform research in this area. Growing up in Georgia as a little black girl attending a Baptist church that focused on intense bible study via Sunday School, Vacation Bible School, Baptist Training Union, and Bible Bowl quiz competitions may have had some impact; but, I don't think these experiences are the sole roots of my need to study this area.

I think it is far simpler than a set of experiences. I just feel naturally drawn to religious and spiritual issues. Since I work in the field of education, why



wouldn't I take a natural interest and pair it with my career field? My eleven year tenure teaching has led me to believe that education is missing a spiritual piece, or at least an overt acknowledgment and conversation about it. For me, spirituality is about those things related to our souls/spirits, the part of us that is essentially and truly us – not our bodies but our inner selves. It is the part of us that senses someone's displeasure even though her words and body language say everything is fine. I believe there is a dimension beyond what I can physically sense. I view this dimension from a Christian perspective. I know that doesn't really explain much because of the multiplicity of Christian views, but I lean more towards liberal interpretations of Christianity, which can be quite far from my Baptist beginnings. I just know that something from this dimension (I would say God's Holy Spirit) has given me strength and courage when I had none and has helped me speak with wisdom and insight when I felt like my brain was made of mush. I also gain added strength from my African American ancestors, like Jarena Lee and more recent ones like Martin Luther King, Jr., who had a strong, active Christian faith that sought to bring about God's Kingdom, full of justice, love, care, and compassion.

Conceding the point to my Georgia Southern University classmates, in today's political and social climate and increasing levels of polarization, I think it would be extremely difficult to overtly raise religious and spiritual issues in a classroom with students. However, I do think educators should examine their own spiritual beliefs and determine the coherence of their actions in relationship

to those beliefs. Parker Palmer (1998) in *The Courage to Teach* states:

When I follow only the oughts, I may find myself doing work that is ethically laudable but not mine to do. A vocation that is not mine, no matter how externally valued, does violence to the self – in the precise sense that it *violates* my identity and integrity on behalf of some abstract norm. When I violate myself, I invariably end up violating the people I work with. How many teachers inflict their own pain on their student, the pain that comes from doing what never was, or no longer is, their true work? (p. 30)

To me, Palmer's quote has always referred to a spiritual issue. I must examine what I do and measure it against what my soul calls me to do. If I act in ways that violate my soul, I end up doing violence against my soul. This incongruity also causes me to mistreat others around me – using harsh, mean words that murder the soul, being cruel to others and showing a lack of compassion for their grievances. It has been my experience that too many of our students, especially students of color, suffer daily from this soul murder; and, as an educator, I owe it to my students to regularly examine my soul and make sure that I am not working in ways that violate it.

I know firsthand the internal and external damage working in ways that violate your soul can do. Before I began my career in teaching, I worked in corporate America. I never felt fully comfortable and hated it from the very beginning. I can remember going to lunch with my father and crying. He would

say, not quite so bluntly as I now write it, that I was not accustomed to working, and I would just have to “suck it up.” I would dry my tears and think maybe he was right, but my heart still screamed “I hate this!” Slowly but surely, this job was turning me into someone I was not. I began to curse and even cursed out a co-worker once. I was so horrified by my actions that I took the day off and sent my co-worker flowers apologizing for my despicable behavior. Working there, I felt my heart hardening day by day. I was changing into someone I did not know and knew that if I did not get out soon, my steadily increasing salary would win and my soul would be lost. I was killing myself slowly by working there and killing those around me because I was miserable and couldn’t offer the love and understanding that was so desperately needed in that place.

I don’t want to ever make that mistake in education. The souls of young people are impressionable and easily deformed. Students are far too valuable to unleash my rage, frustration, and feelings of unfulfillment on. Simply, in the field of education, I cannot work in ways that violate my soul. This inquiry is a testimony of how my spiritual beliefs, rooted in an African American Christian Womanist Theology, has sustained and guided me while working in education in ways that do not violate my soul, but rather affirm my soul. Additionally, my experiences can serve as examples for others, just as examples like Julia A. Foote and Zilpha Elaw, nineteenth century fearless women of faith, serve as examples for me.

## **You Called Me a 'Bitch'?**

I was on the debate team in high school, and I clearly remember my first debate tournament as if it happened yesterday. The tournament was at Northwest Whitfield High School in Dalton, Georgia (northwest Georgia). My debate partner and I lost every round, but one round, in particular, was extremely embarrassing because we didn't just lose; we got stomped into the ground lower than a well-digger. I remember feeling like the all-white-male opposing team made me look like a fool. I really shouldn't have been so hard on myself because both my partner and I were novices, and we were learning. After all, it was my first debate tournament. But I have always really been secretly competitive and felt like I was humiliated because I lost. After the tournament, I found out that the team that had humiliated us really weren't novices and should have never been in that division. That soothed my bruised ego a little, but I was still embarrassed and subconsciously vowed to be the best I could be in policy debate. Later in the year, I really began to understand the rules and strategies of policy debate and even began to win speaker awards and place in tournaments. At another tournament that year, I ran into the same all-male team that had humiliated me at my first tournament at Northwest Whitfield High School. This time I was ready. I had a new partner, and we crushed them this time. After the round was over, the white male judge gave his critique. He said that my team won, but I was a "bitch." In my mind, I had done nothing that the winning white male teams don't always do. But, now I was a "bitch" for acting as they had

acted. I was shocked at his critique. I had never had anyone call me a word like that and never imagined it would come from an authority figure. I didn't know what to say, but I quickly shook it off because at least I had won.

But thinking back on it now, I'm not sure I ever really got over that critique and let it, along with other sexist attitudes in the world of debate, end my participation in debate prematurely. My partner, a female Chinese American, and I were the best novice team our freshman year. Tradition at our school was for the best team to be groomed to win the state championship. However, our coach told us that an all-girl team would never win state (and especially an all-minority team) and split us up the next year. During my sophomore year, we were both paired with white males. I saw that I wasn't going to get the support I needed to be the best in debate, and I devoted my attention to other affairs. I have always regretted not continuing to fight for my chance to win. I did not stand up to the sexist and racist attitudes that sought my defeat. I let them win. Even though I had supportive family and friends, I wish I had had enough internal fortitude to stand up to this oppression. What's strange is that in high school, I was always outgoing and aggressive in fighting for the things I believed in; yet, in this situation, I quit.

At the encouragement of my dissertation committee, I read some autobiographies of nineteenth century black women and realized, much like Alice Walker (1983) in her reflections on her education at Sarah Lawrence, that my education had a gaping hole. And this hole may actually account for part of

the reason I did not stand up for myself when it came to racial and gender oppression in debate. Except for personal examples in my own family, which were rarely discussed, I wonder if I had known about the courage and faith of nineteenth century black women and black women from other generations standing up to oppression would I have stood up for myself? Their stories are so inspiring to me now that I can't help but wonder if knowing them then would have made a difference. Reading stories about how Rebecca Cox Jackson left her husband and started her own Shaker community in the 1800s demonstrates a depth of belief and courage that is not often displayed (Walker, 1983). Reading about the confidence Dorothy Height (2003) gained when she won a state oratorical contest in Pennsylvania could have bolstered my confidence as a debater. I absolutely love Anna Julia Cooper's pre-womanist sentiments about finding a husband. Cooper (1892/1988) states: "How shall I so cramp, stunt, simplify and nullify myself as to make me eligible to the honor of being swallowed up into some little man?" (p. 70-71). She goes on to say: "Now rests with the man as to how he can so develop his God-given powers as to reach the ideal of [this] generation of women?" (p. 71). Cooper lived in a time when it was expected for a woman to get married, and she did. But after her husband died, she seemed determined not just marry any man just because social conventions said she should. Women today could take a lesson from her. These women have a wealth of wisdom and strength to offer. I can't assume that my stories will be as moving or as powerful as the above were for me, but I want to add two more

sets of stories from a different generation. I want to tell the stories of me and my mother in hopes that other young girls can find someone to whom they can relate and perhaps learn from.

### **Pushed Aside**

*The stone that the builders rejected has now become the cornerstone.* (Psalm 118:22 New Living Translation)

The above verse is often used in reference to Jesus. During Jesus' lifetime, he faced rejection from power structures of his day, such as the Roman government and Jewish religious scholars and teachers. However, despite this rejection which ultimately led to his crucifixion, Jesus eventually became the "cornerstone" or the foundation for a new way of life. Similarly, African American women confront power structures daily which often disaffirm their identity (Cannon, 1988; Collins, 2000; Mitchem, 2002; Riggs, 1994, 1997; Townes, 1995, 1996; Weems 1988/2005). Yet, the continued resistance demonstrated by African American women and their ability to succeed despite the powerful forces arrayed against them is a testament to their strength and fortitude. Cole (1995) makes the following statement about African American women:

The African American woman, then, is the symbol and reality of the bitter sting of oppression **and** the powerful strength of resistance; our sister illustrates the shape of talents denied **and** the amazing creativity that flowers nevertheless; the Black woman has been forced to be the least among us, but she also symbolizes the best that is in each of us. (p. 150)

Cole's statement emphasizes the paradox found in black women. Black women often face oppression. We are stultified and denied the opportunity to fully express our true talents and creativity, but we still manage to resist the pull that tries to diminish our identity. In the section that follows, *No Words for Us*, I have written a fictionalized account of a real event as described by Dorothy Height in *Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement* (Collier-Thomas & Franklin, 2001) about the 1963 March on Washington. This incident illustrates how even though black women's voices are pushed aside, sometimes even by their own black brothers, we do not let this marginalization stop our work for social justice. In the next section, *Hear Me*, I describe how the triple forces of oppression—racism, sexism, and classism—negatively impact black women and how women, such as bell hooks, fought and continue to fight this oppression.

### **No Words for Us**

Recently deceased Dorothy Height, founder and president of the National Council of Negro Women, was a pillar of the 1960s black civil rights movement, and her influence will be felt for decades to come. She was the only female member of the Council of United Civil Rights Leadership (CUCRL) which consisted of the leaders from prominent black organizations such as the Southern Leadership Conference (President, Martin Luther King, Jr.), National Urban League (Executive Director, Whitney Young), and National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (Executive Director, Roy Wilkins). This group



of leaders set the direction for the civil rights movement, coordinated actions among various civil rights organizations, and most famously, planned the 1963 March on Washington. Height (2001) often said that it was as if this group "was part of a divine design" and "it was as if the hand of God had brought us together" (p. 84-85). Despite the outcome of the fictionalized story below, she still held on to her faith in the overall goal of freedom for all of humanity – male/female and black/ white. This fact-based fictionalized telephone conversation between Bayard Rustin – civil rights activist, chief organizer of the 1963 March on Washington, and adviser to Martin Luther King, Jr. on nonviolent protest strategies (De Leon, 1994) – takes place during the planning of the 1963 March on Washington and is based on portions of Dorothy Height's (2003) memoir *Open Wide the Freedom Gates: A Memoir* and "We Wanted the Voice of a Woman to Be Heard: Black Women" and the 1963 March on Washington, a chapter written by Dorothy Height (2001) in *Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement* (Collier-Thomas & Franklin, 2001).

**Dorothy:** Good Morning, Mr. Rustin. How are you doing?

**Bayard:** Just fine, Dorothy. To what do I owe the pleasure of your call?

**Dorothy:** I won't waste time in mincing words. Some of the women have come to me with concerns about the representation of women leaders in the March.

**Bayard:** What do you mean, Dorothy?

**Dorothy:** (*Was he going to pretend he didn't know what I was talking about?*). We want to know... will women be allowed to participate in the March?

**Bayard:** Well, of course.

**Dorothy:** (*Feeling that he was deliberately trying to mislead me, I asked him in a more stern voice...*) I mean, what women leaders have you selected to speak to the crowd at the culmination of the March, Rustin?

**Bayard:** Let me assure you...women are included. Organizations like the National Council of Churches, National Urban League, NAACP, and several Jewish groups are all represented and will speak for all of their constituents, most certainly including women. You see each of these organizations has women in them...so how can we help but to speak to the needs of women? We are not seeking to give special consideration to any particular group. We want to make sure the spotlight shines squarely on the injustice of racism.

**Dorothy:** (*I couldn't believe what he was saying. Was he trying to tell me that just because women were members of these organizations, they deserved no "special consideration" ...they had nothing new to add to the conversation...their voices would be heard simply because they are a part of a male-dominated organization. Sexism was taking a backseat to racism.*) Rustin, who do you think you are dealing with?

**Bayard:** Now, Dorothy...don't get upset. We must remember to keep our eye on the prize. We are seeking racial justice. Side issues like

sexism could potentially derail our entire movement.

**Dorothy:** May I remind you that most of our hardest workers in our movement are women. And the vast majority of most civil rights movement audiences are comprised of women and youth. It has never been my intent to derail the move towards justice, but it must be a justice for all--men, women, and children. We want a woman's voice to be heard on that platform in March. Deborah Partridge Wolfe or Anna Arnold Hedgeman along with a number of others would be perfect speakers for this setting.

**Bayard:** Yes. Yes. I know, Dorothy. But there are so many excellent women speakers we don't really know who to select.

**Dorothy:** *(His condescending tone betrayed his words. I wasn't going to let him weasel out of this request that easily.)* That problem can easily be resolved by a vote from various women's organizations. And another thing, Rustin. I think our youth need to have their voices heard on that platform too.

**Bayard:** Yes. Yes. I understand.

**Dorothy:** Youth in SNCC have worked incredibly hard for this movement and deserve an opportunity to speak.

**Bayard:** There are some who would disagree with you. SNCC and their direct action protests have caused some difficulty for our movement. Some of them seem determined to use violence.

(*Silence.*) This will all have to be worked out.

**Dorothy:** So what are you saying about women and youth speakers?

**Bayard:** Listen, we have too many speakers as it is. The program is already too long. You're already represented. Besides, Mahalia Jackson is going to be on the platform.

**Dorothy:** But she is not speaking. She's not speaking on behalf of women or civil rights. She's singing.

**Bayard:** A number of prominent women, including yourself, will have seats on the platform. We are not being unfair about this situation.

**Dorothy:** I don't want a seat on the platform. We want a voice!

On August 28, 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his now famous *I Have a Dream* speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. No women were given an opportunity to speak to the crowd. Student leader, John Lewis of Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), demanded the right to speak or threatened a demonstration from SNCC. The March leadership finally acquiesced the day of the March and allowed John Lewis to speak. Dorothy Height sat on the platform and listened to Mahalia Jackson sing. Height (2001) expressed her dismay and sorrow:

Nothing that women said or did broke the impasse blocking their participation. I've never seen a more immovable force. We could not get women's participation taken seriously....What was most discouraging was that there was no sign of remorse among male leadership, no feeling that

there was any injustice. (pp. 87-88)

Her anger and dismay are still felt among many black women today. To think that a movement of which she and other African American women were such an integral part, were denied the right to be heard, must have been maddening to Dorothy Height. Nevertheless, she never let this slight so injure her soul that she quit fighting for justice.

### **Hear Me**

Sometimes I get angry when I feel like I have to justify why it is important to tell the stories of black women. When I look at pay rates among white men and women and black men, black women are on the bottom, making approximately 67.2% of what a white man makes (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009). Black women have faced centuries of negative stereotypes and role casting. During the antebellum period, black women were at once masculinized by having to work in the fields as slaves and feminized by being cast as the mammy or caretaker of their master's children and home (Williams, 1993; Canon, 1995). Also during this period, black women were sexually exploited – an exploitation that still lingers today in the form of sexually derogatory and belittling songs sung by black hip hop artists and the featuring of scantily clad black females acting as trinkets for a famous rapper in his latest video (hooks, 2003). It seems as if even black men, who face the same oppression from racism, do not even respect black women. Black women along with other women of color face the triple forces of oppression--racism, sexism, and classism (Cole,

1995; Grant, 1995; K. Coleman, 1998; M. Coleman, 2008; Thomas, 1999; Williams, 1993). A little over half the world's population is female; and of that half; most of them are women of color. It stands to reason that when such a significant portion of the world's population is so severely oppressed, the world might want to take notice. Thus far, the power structures of this world are dominated by a male western European ideal which values success, independence, and materialism. It is no wonder a society so focused on such values would not want to hear the stories of such an oppressed group.

Black women face the triple oppressions of racism, sexism, and poverty (Cole, 1995; Grant, 1995; K. Coleman, 1998; M. Coleman, 2008; Thomas, 1999; Williams, 1993); nonetheless, despite these handicaps, black women, such as Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Jarena Lee, Maria Stewart, May McLeod Bethune, Fannie Lou Hamer, and countless unnamed others, have risen to the forefront and improved the lives of our people and, along the way, strengthened the moral fiber of America. Even with all black women have contributed and continue to contribute to this country and the world, the truth of black women's experiences are still underappreciated and devalued (Jones & Shorten- Gooden, 2003). No one understands "the reality that no matter how intelligent, competent, and dazzling she may be, Black women in our country today still cannot count on being understood and embraced by mainstream White America" (Jones & Shorten-Gooden, 2003, p. 2).

The African American Women's Voices Project was developed because the lives of black women are not well understood. The report states that black women lead double lives which often leads to physical and emotional breakdowns and strips their lives of joy (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). "Research consistently shows Black women are less happy and experience more discontent than Black men, White men, or White women" (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). Black women suffer from racism, gender discrimination, sexual abuse and harassment, discrimination at work, and pressure to meet conventional beauty standards. Most black women "shift" their behavior to accommodate others, even black men. It is almost as if black women have a triple consciousness – not just having to live in a black and white world but also a gendered world – instead of the double consciousness described by DuBois (1903/2003). Black women frequently submerge their talents and strengths to support black men. The most blaring example is with leadership roles in the black church. Black women are even discriminated against in their patriarchal-dominated churches. My own personal experiences tell me that black women make up the overwhelming majority of membership in black churches, yet, a minute portion of church leadership. Black mothers are also acutely aware of having to train their children to cope with discrimination. It is any wonder black women have disproportionately high risks for depression (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003)?

bell hooks serves as an excellent example of the world's effort to suppress young black girls' and adult black women's voices. Her story is also a testament to the ability of black women to succeed and persevere despite the triple oppression we face. bell hooks, in *Bone Black* (1996) writes of her voice being silenced even at a very young age. As a child, hooks longed to express herself, but her voice was often silenced by patriarchal and southern cultural forces of the time. In fact, she purports, that "each time she opens her mouth she risks punishment" (hooks, 1996, p. 130). She further states that they punish her so often that she feels persecuted. Her feelings of persecution lead her to feeling like she is "exiled." During her exile, she turns to the imaginary world of books and creates an alternate reality for herself, thus begins her romance with books and writing. Even though her options are limited as a black female growing up in the rural south, she devises a career path for herself. Realistically, she knew that she was only given three career options – marriage, maid, or teacher. Because she was smart, most thought she would become a teacher. But secretly, she also longed to write. Therefore, she decided writing would be the "serious" work and teaching would be her financial means for making a living. She also felt that teaching was a way to give back to the community; whereas, writing was more personal and for her own glory and satisfaction (hooks, 1994). Even though external forces around her seemed to restrict her choices, hooks still managed to resist the oppression and built successful careers in education and writing.



Ultimately, writing becomes her primary means for reclaiming and expressing her voice.

Like hooks, many black women are seeking ways to have their voices heard, and this inquiry will provide another opportunity for black female voices to be heard. This work is my offering to the creation of a more just society by presenting the stories of my mother and me. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1963) would say our society is only as strong as the weakest among us. Despite the perceived weakness of black women, there lies an uncommon strength--a strength which raises families on poverty-level incomes, achieves despite discrimination, and loves no matter how wronged and abused. This strength, often inspired by spirituality rooted in Africa, demands to be heard. These particular stories will be told by African American educators who have managed to maintain hope in a field plagued with despair and seek opportunities to promote justice in educational settings.

### **Saved from the Abyss**

*We are pressed on every side by troubles, but we are not crushed. We are perplexed, but not driven to despair. (2 Corinthians 4:8 New Living Translation)*

Since arriving on these shores, African Americans have faced many trials – trials that would have driven some to despair. In spite of these trials, as a group, we have maintained hope. King (1963) says it is this hope which drives away the anger: “We must accept finite disappointment, but we must never lose

infinite hope. Only in this way shall we live without the fatigue of bitterness and the drain of resentment” (p. 93). In the next section, I discuss a conversation with a coworker and my subsequent musings which typify the classic devaluation of African American Spirituality. Then, in *A Heritage of Hope, Justice, and Peace*, I go on to explain the historical underpinnings of African American spirituality and its legacy of hope, peace, endurance, truth, and justice.

### **A Conversation**

Since Barack Obama announced his candidacy for president, it seems that I'm always rushing to get into the building on time almost daily. I'm so engrossed in the latest political commentary on Tom Joyner's morning radio show that I lose track of time. Today I look to my left and see the new student teacher sitting in his car parked two down from mine. I suspect today's radio conversation has also sucked him in too, which is not surprising. Since the presidential election, he and I had developed a sort of ritual – sit in your car; listen; quickly gather your stuff; and storm out of the car mad as hell because white people just don't understand. This morning was no different.

As I get out of my car, I say, "Did you hear that?"

Shaking his head, he says, "They'll never understand." I nod in agreement.

After putting my things away and posting first period's bellwork, I go to my office to clear my mind and shake off the anger caused by this morning's radio commentary. One of my white co-workers pops her head in my office.

"Good Morning."

"Hey."

"What's wrong? You look kinda tired." I don't want to tell her that I am physically and emotionally tired. My obsession with the election coverage has interfered with my normal sleep pattern. And continual reminders that many white peoples' (some of whom are my close friends) objection to Obama's campaign is based on an unexamined racism have exhausted me. So I say, "I'm ok."

Getting to the real point of stopping by my office, her face and body language change as she leans forward as if she going to tell me a secret. She says, "What do you think about that Jeremiah Wright thing?"

Nerves already a little raw from the latest racially-based attack on Barack Obama I heard on the radio this morning, I say, "What do you mean?" in an effort to buy a little time to both calm down and prepare my defense/attack.

She says, "Well can you believe that Obama would go to a church like that? I mean that Reverend Wright does nothing but spew hate from his pulpit." She spit the words out as if she had finally found what she felt was a legitimate reason to object to Barack "Hussein" Obama.

Finally ready, I say that what Jeremiah Wright said was nothing new and that lots of black people have heard many of the same sentiments from their own pastors. Her mouth drops and an audible gasp comes out. She seems to say with her eyes "You mean black people are angry and hate America? What is this country coming to?"

The 8:20 bell rings. Somewhat relieved, because indeed anger and frustration have swelled almost to the point of explosion, I quickly mumble I have to go and leave her in a state of puzzlement.

I really want to explain to her the entire context of the Jeremiah Wright sermon and how it is rooted in a black prophetic tradition. Prior to the "God damn America" statement, Wright compares and contrasts governments of the world to God's divine rule. Wright says that governments lie, change, and fail but God does not. He discussed how the Roman Empire, the British Empire, the Soviet Union, and Japanese and German governments of the first half of the twentieth century, all of which spread violence and oppression, failed. He says that even the United States government failed when it came to the treatment of its Native American (stolen land and genocide), Japanese (internment camps), and African American (slavery and Jim Crow laws) citizens. God was against oppression then, and he is against now; America gets no free pass. Then next comes the infamous statement: "They want us to sing God bless America [within the context of oppression and injustice he just detailed]...No. No. No. Not God bless America. God damn America. That's in the bible for killing innocent people. God damn America for treating her citizens as less than human" (Wright, 2003). I also want to add that just because I understand and somewhat agree with what Rev. Wright is saying does not mean that I hate my country. My relationship with my country is much more complicated and complex than a mere black-white dualistic understanding. Sometimes it reminds me of a child who is

abused by her mother. Yet, despite abuse, the child still desperately loves her mother and expectantly awaits the day when the abuse will stop. Even though the United States government has done some of the terrible things referenced in Rev. Wright's entire speech, it also provided a framework that gives us the ability to right wrongs. To paraphrase Martin Luther King, Jr. (1963): the moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends towards justice. I feel the same way about the United States. Justice may not have reigned in the beginning, but justice will have its full sway eventually.

But a part of me knows that my co-worker may discount my explanation and suggest that I am just overly sensitive and dwelling on the negative aspects of the past, or she might simply focus on the last part of my comments to serve as proof of the greatness of America. According to my co-worker's worldview, black people and white people live in harmony; and, the ultimate proof is that she has a black friend. In my mind, I ponder about another way to approach this conversation and think of a quote from Wise (2008)—a white man—in *Of National Lies and Racial Amnesia: Jeremiah Wright, Barack Obama, and the Audacity of Truth*:

Indignation doesn't work for most whites, because having remained sanguine about, silent during, indeed often *supportive* of so much injustice over the years in this country — the theft of native land and genocide of indigenous persons, and the enslavement of Africans being only two of the best examples — we are just a bit late to get into the game of moral rectitude. Once we enter it, our efforts at righteousness tend to

fail the test of sincerity.

But here we are, in 2008, fuming at the words of Pastor Jeremiah Wright, of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago...for merely reminding us of those evils about which we have remained so quiet, so dismissive, so unconcerned. It is not the crime that bothers us, but the remembrance of it, the unwillingness to *let it go* – these last words being the first ones uttered by most whites it seems whenever anyone, least of all an 'angry black man' like Jeremiah Wright, foists upon us the bill of particulars for several centuries of white supremacy.

But our collective indignation, no matter how loudly we announce it, cannot drown out the truth. And as much as white America may not be able to hear it (and as much as politics may require Obama to condemn it) let us be clear, Jeremiah Wright fundamentally told the truth. (para. 1-3)

I wonder how she will respond to a white man whose words echo the words of an "angry black man." Perhaps she will see the light and suddenly understand the sentiments expressed by Jeremiah Wright and those like him. Or maybe she will continue to engage in revisionist history and dismiss Wise's statement also.

For me, it is conversations with white people like my coworker that represent a lack of understanding and devaluation of African American spirituality. In Obama's (2008) famous speech about race given in response to the Jeremiah Wright controversy, he speaks of his experiences with Rev. Wright and Trinity United Church of Christ and its similarities to other black churches in

America: “Like other predominately black churches across the country, Trinity embodies the black community in its entirety...” (Obama, 2008, para. 21) – both good and bad. The black church contains a mix of socioeconomic classes which share a common hope amidst a world of oppression. Obama reminds us that the black church is full of contradictions which add to its complexity: “the church contains in full the kindness and cruelty, the fierce intelligence and the shocking ignorance, the struggles and successes, the love and yes, the bitterness and bias that make up the black experience in America” (Obama, 2008, para. 21).

Nevertheless, despite the complexity and contraction contained within the black church and Rev. Wright, he “can no more disown him” than he “can disown the black community” (Obama, 2008, para. 23). At the end of the day, Obama recognizes the value and hope an African American spirituality provides and refuses to let go of it.

Obama's words allude to a great tradition within the black church that is unknown to many whites and others like my coworker. In *Dreams of My Father*, Obama (2004) speaks of a spiritual tradition that sustains black people because it is infused with hope – a hope that is ultimately offered to all. Obama (2004) recounts his first visit to Trinity and the meaning he found radiating from sermons, biblical stories, and the community:

People began to shout, to rise from their seats and clap and cry out; a forceful wind carrying the reverend's voice up into the rafters....And in that single note – hope! – I heard something else; at the foot of that cross,

inside the thousands of churches across the city, I imagined the stories of ordinary black people merging with the stories of David and Goliath, Moses and Pharaoh, the Christians in the lion's den, Ezekiel's field of dry bones. Those stories – of survival, and freedom, and hope – became our story, my story; the blood that had spilled was our blood, the tears our tears; until this black church, on this bright day, seemed once more a vessel carrying the story of a people into future generations and into a larger world. Our trials and triumphs became at once unique and universal, black and more than black; in chronicling our journey, the stories and songs gave us a means to reclaim memories that we didn't need to feel shame about...memories that all people might study and cherish-- and with which we could start to rebuild. (p. 294)

Like Obama, I too embrace the black church and its ability to be a “vessel” carrying our story to future generations of black youth and “into the larger world.” Consequently, I want to tell the stories of my mother and myself, two black female educators, and explore ways in which our spirituality, rooted in the black church tradition, have sustained and influenced our pedagogy and drive for social justice. It is my prayer these stories will add to the conversations of hope, justice, and love and that they go beyond just stories about black women but are also appreciated for the universal themes found within them.



## **A Heritage of Hope, Justice, and Peace**

The faith and spiritual tenacity of African Americans have long been overlooked in this country. Had it not been for the persistent belief that blacks deserved equal treatment and status in American society, I, along with countless other African Americans, would not have many of the opportunities and luxuries we have today. Williams and Dixie (2003) argue that the faith of the black community/church provided the vision, structure, money, and leaders to give rise to the greatest social movement—the Civil Right Movement of the 1960s—in American history. Others (Billingsley, 1999; West & Dixie, 1999; Raboteau, 2001) have alleged that the spiritual beliefs displayed during the Civil Rights Movement finally pulled America from the edge of the evil abyss created by early American slave trade. This abyss threatened America with the destructive forces of racial hatred and terrorism and continually tore at the fabric of a land supposedly based on the assumptions of freedom and liberty to all. Black women like Ella Baker, Dorothy Height, Septima Clark, and Fannie Lou Hamer ( all driven by a Christian ethic rooted in liberation) represent the many women active in this movement who were also pivotal in saving America from its moral abyss caused by slavery and Jim Crow segregation laws (Ross, 2003).

African American spirituality has its roots in three continents: Africa, Europe, and North America. From Africa, African Americans have roots in tribal religions focused on ancestor worship. From Europe, African Americans were introduced to western Christianity. Transported to North America as slaves for

hundreds of years, they managed to merge the two and develop a faith steeped in community and the unquenchable quest for freedom. During the 1800s, African Americans created independent African churches despite the slave masters' brutal twisting of the Bible to justify subjugation and dehumanization of African slaves (Raboteau, 2001; Canon, 1995). Immediately after the end of the American Civil War, many slaves believed they had finally crossed Jordan into Canaan—freedom. However, a reign of terror and legislation quickly dashed their newfound freedom. In hopes of escaping brutality in the south, many African Americans moved north. Yet, they soon found out that the North was no less oppressive. For years, African Americans held onto hope and their belief that God and justice was on their side. With the aid of the African American church and faith, African Americans finally won freedom during the Civil Rights Era of the 1960s.

A distinguishing feature of African American culture is an intense fixation on the Christian gospel. This obsession with the gospel of Jesus Christ is rooted in our absurd encounter with the modern world as slaves in a new land. The African American Christian perspective is profoundly shaped by this history and culture. The traumatic voyage to the New World and slave traders' attempts to methodically strip Africans of their cultures and religions resulted in extreme alienation, especially for slaves brought to North America. The trauma was exacerbated by the low ratio of African Americans to Caucasians. This low ratio caused African Americans to have more frequent and more intense interactions

with Caucasians in North America. Consequently, many African Americans relinquished their African gods and assumed the religion, primarily Methodist and Baptist, of their Caucasian masters. Because these denominations' evangelical outlooks, emphasis on the conversion experience, institutional self-rule, and the egalitarian nature of God, slaves began to see themselves on an equalized status with their masters in the eyes of God. As a result, slaves attained a self-identity and self-esteem despite the second-rate roles imposed on them by society. Additionally, institutional autonomy, unlike hierarchal structures imposed by the Anglican and Catholic Churches in Central and South America, facilitated African American community in the context of African American churches (Ross, 1857; Smith, 1972; West, 1999; Irons, 2008).

After reviewing the historical roots of African Americans, there are three main points that seem to guide and influence African American spirituality: (1) A spirit of hope and endurance; (2) A spirit of truth and justice; and (3) A spirit of peace.

### *A Spirit of Hope and Endurance*

The plight of early African Americans seemed hopeless. Stolen from their homeland, taken and sold as slaves, and stripped of their culture and language, early African Americans must have dwelled in a land of despair. Nonetheless, historical record suggests another story – a story filled with hope in the face of extreme dread and despair. West (1999) describes an “existential freedom” which enabled slaves to resist despair. Slaves were able to celebrate their humanity

despite the reality of harsh slavery. Slaves did not ignore reality; they simply rejoiced in being alive while simultaneously believing in future salvation, represented by biblical stories such as Moses leading the children of Israel out of Egypt. Christianity enabled them to survive and toil in a God-forsaken world (West, 1999, 1982/2002). Sojourner Truth's (1850/2005) actions in the late 1800s are an excellent example of profound hope and endurance. She took a very basic concept of God and prayer given to her by her mother and used it as a guiding force to walk away from her master's house after he had broken his promise to free her. This same hope rooted in Christianity led her to winning lawsuits in an era when black people were not even considered human and women had no rights. Her famous *Ain't I a Woman* (Truth, 1850/2005) speech laid out a foundation for womanism that spoke to her hope in a better future.

Similarly, times are difficult and we face many challenges in the twenty-first century. Cultural and religious conflicts abound today. Students and teachers, alike are filled with despair and wonder about the future of our country and world. I take hope from the courage of my ancestors and in seeing their dream of salvation fulfilled. Their ability to endure urges me forward when I cannot see hope.

### *A Spirit of Truth and Justice*

Anthropologists have noted that there is almost an unqualified absence of tragic themes in early oral narratives of West Africa. This absence was carried over to slave interpretations of Christianity. Some would argue that slaves

refused to face the reality of their situation. Rather, early American slaves refused to accept the seemingly tragic nature of their situation. Instead, truth, for them lay, in the “tragic realism” found in Old Testament wisdom literature (West, 1982/2002). The truth found in this text helped them to view suffering as a “stepping stone to liberation” (West, 1999, p. 438). Similarly, some womanist theologians (St. Clair, 2008 and Weems, 1993, 1988/2005) agree that black women identify with Jesus, not because of his suffering, but because of his ability to triumph over the pain and suffering inflicted on him by the outside world. This sentiment is the beauty many find in Jesus’ resurrection. Ultimately, he was able to overcome suffering and live. Suffering was seen as something to endure until salvation/resurrection and justice came. And, like Jesus, in due course it did. Early African Americans found a truth rooted in their history. Their view of tragedy and suffering was not reminiscent of the Western view of tragedy which merely offers total despair. Western views of tragedy advocate suffering for the sake of suffering. There are no linkages between redemption and suffering; whereas, African American slaves viewed current suffering as a part of their eventual liberation (West, 1999). Thus, they embraced a truth based on their cultural identity.

Personally, this example has encouraged me to embrace my cultural identity and have confidence in making decisions based on that identity. I realize that my truth may often lay outside the truth of the dominant culture in North America. This example from my ancestors also allows me to understand that

suffering can eventually be turned to joy. It is a kind of “subversive joy” referred to by West (1999). It is a suffering that encourages action in the face of tragedy.

### *A Spirit of Peace*

Despite the suffering endured by many African Americans, they eventually gained a peace that comes from “truth pursued, endurance tested, and victory won” (Johnson, 1987, p. 312). This was a peace born of experience rather than definition. The suffering, despair, and hope of generations of African Americans resulted in eventual freedom from slavery and segregationist laws. We can take hope from the eventual prevailing of justice and rest in peace knowing that current injustices will also be defeated. Reminiscent of the prophetic call in Old Testament texts, peace can be found in knowing that good will eventually overcome evil.

This example of peace reminds me that, despite war and conflict, peace can come as a result of setting goals, doing your best to accomplish those goals, creating a plan, and watching your plan come to fruition. There is peace to be found in the anticipation of a hard-won victory. Because Americans think peace often comes from immediate gratification and ease, this is a lesson lost in American culture. As a teacher becoming more self-aware, I can bring this sense of peace to the chaotic world of education and to the turbulent lives of my students.

### **The Souls of Black Folks Today**

*And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul? Is anything worth more than your soul? (Matthew 16:26 New Living Translation)*

Books written by bell hooks always seem to awaken something deep inside me that I knew was there but, until this point, was unable to articulate. While reading bell hook's (2003) *Rock My Soul* and reviewing her discussion of black people and self-esteem, I felt like a person confined to a dark room who is suddenly let out into the bright sunlight. Her argument, as I see it, went something like this: During segregation, black people were infused with a healthy dose of self-esteem through their parents and other adults within the black community. For example, black children were taught to revere education and seek to be a people of integrity. Education was viewed as a way to improve one's self, not just externally through the acquisition of material wealth, but it was also a means of internal upliftment. In this way, it was seen as a form of resistance because knowledge was something white people could not take away. However, in the years following the struggle for civil rights and as evidenced in some ways in the black power movement, blacks began to focus solely on the external forces impacting their lives. On many levels, I think blacks thought the attainment of equal access and civil rights would make us happy and end all of our ills. But, hooks (2003) maintains that when Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X were killed, the conversation about the souls of black folks in

combination with civil rights ended, and the new civil rights and the black power movement agendas solidly focused on achieving parity in the form of material possessions and power. The messages of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcom X about civil rights and Black Nationalism were rooted in religious morality and responsibility. Both leaders sought to address internal and external issues--soul and body respectively. Their deaths silenced this soul discourse on a national level. The new voices of the civil rights movement were male, patriarchal, and solely focused on the external. The only voices still seeking to bring a more fully integrated approach to black empowerment and upliftment were holdovers from the black women's club movement of the early 1900s. Yet, their voices were pushed to the margins because the quest for civil rights for black people, in the eyes of male leaders, was about blackness/race not gender. Underlying this shift was a fear that adding gender to the mixture would only dilute the results. Black women were asked to join solidly with their black brothers even if the structure those black brothers created was patriarchal. A number of black women did agree and suppressed the quest for simultaneous gender equity. Those who did not agree later joined white feminist organizations and/or created a space for themselves through writings and activism about black feminism (womanism).

The shift in the civil rights movement led to an obsession with material security and power (hooks, 2003). This current obsession has led to the crisis in many black communities today. There is a nihilism that now runs deep (West,



2001) within the black community. It's like we have lost our souls. We lost the thing that allowed our ancestors to survive slavery-- that belief that we can make it despite external opposition. Instead we have taken on the ways and characteristics of our oppressors (Freire, 1970/1993) who already know that money, material possession, and status do not fulfill the deep longings of the soul (hooks, 2003). Today, test scores reveal that even wealthy and middle class black students score significantly lower on standardized tests than white students. The National Center for Education Statistics (2006) reports continued achievement gaps in reading and mathematics between minority (African American and Latino) and majority (Caucasian) groups. Moreover, dropout rates, although decreasing in terms of the general student population, are higher for African Americans (11.8%) than Caucasians (6%). As a professor, hooks (2003) saw smart black students of all socioeconomic levels suffer from a curious lack of self-regard and self-esteem which sometimes manifested itself in suicide attempts. In my relatively brief eleven year tenure as a teacher, I have progressively seen more black students who self mutilate (which was something I only initially saw in white female students) and heard more talk about suicide than when I first began. hooks (2003) suggests that these self-esteem issues are not solely the result of racism. hooks (2003) says these internal issues are due to deep and unevaluated psychological trauma of living in a "white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy" (p. 31). Her assertions are controversial for the black community because many want to lay the blame of the ills black people face

squarely at the door of racism, an external force, and refuse to believe that internalized beliefs could perpetuate poverty, lack of respect for education, self-hatred, obsessive quests for material possession, and continued violence in black communities.

However, there is a belief that those who agree with hooks (2003) are wrong. After all, black people have more power, influence, and material possessions than ever before. Barack Obama, the first African American United States President was elected in November 2008. The numbers of wealthy blacks have more than quadrupled with the last 20 years. However, equal rights and access have not cured what ails us. hooks is right on some levels. While hooks (2003) validates that although some blame does belong with racism, we should move deeper to examine the ways in which black people have internalized and validated the workings of racism deep within us. hooks (2003) postulates that without this conscious mental excavation of the ruins of internalized self-hatred spurred on by racism, black people will never be free. The internal work is only something we, individually, can do. External changes of improved rights and increased access to power will not truly heal what ails us.

While I agree with hooks' (2003) assertions, I think the internal ills of black folks go deeper than psychological trauma and the ill effects of racism resulting in poor mental health. In the beginning of *Rock My Soul: Black People and Self-Esteem*, hooks (2003) discusses a general malaise among upper-class whites especially during the period after World War II and the emergence of

psychotherapy to assuage feelings of dis-ease despite seeming prosperity, stable family lives, social acceptance and superior educations. This lack of fulfillment led to the field of psychology blossoming into a full bouquet of pop-psychology, self-help books, self-help oriented talk shows, guidance counselors in schools, Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, psychological marketing, motivational speakers, and a host of other sub-fields and areas I have left out. Nevertheless, the dis-ease remains. I think the dis-ease is spiritual and will remain for black people, too, if we stay the course and fail to grab hold of the hope of our ancestors.

Martin Luther King, Jr. preached a sermon about the parable of the rich fool. The parable centers on a man whose crops were plentiful. In fact, they were so plentiful that he decided to build more barns to store his overabundance and then sit back and enjoy his wealth. The parable ends by God telling the man that he was a fool because that very night his life was going to end. As King (1963) says, "At the height of his prosperity, he died" (p.69). King is careful to point out that Jesus was not indicting wealth because wealth is amoral and can be used for either good or evil. It was the misuse of wealth and the sole focus on the acquisition of material possessions which became the problem. The parable illustrates the following larger point: "There is always a danger that we will permit the means by which we live to replace the ends for which we live, the internal to become lost to the external....The richer this man became materially the poorer he became intellectually and spiritually" (King, 1963, p. 71). In effect,

this is what has happened to black people in America. With increased civil rights, glorification of wealth acquisition, and the attainment of power positions, black people have forsaken the internal for the external resulting in spiritual and intellectual decline. Also like the fool in the parable, black people have forgotten that it took the sacrifices and work of others to enable us to be where we are today. We are all “caught in an inescapable network of mutuality” (King, 1963, p.49), with the network extending into the past. My ancestors were able to withstand terrible brutality and subjugation during slavery, reconstruction, and the Jim Crow era due to their spiritual beliefs. It was their spiritual beliefs which enabled them to endure, hope for a better future, and raise families as best as they could while simultaneously reaching towards a better future. Black people have an incredible spiritual heritage on which we are refusing to draw because the lure of the external is so much more enticing. This dissertation inquiry is an attempt to bring the discourse about the souls of black people, women in particular, to the public domain once again.

### **Stories I Had to Tell**

*Jesus always used stories and illustrations like these when speaking to crowds.*

(Matthew 13:34 New Living Translation)

Now that I have expounded on my personal reasons for this inquiry and the context surrounding the inquiry, I will discuss why I feel these stories need to be told and introduce the major characters – my mother and myself – in Chapter 4: The Persistent Knock.

“More, more, more story. That’s what I wanted,” (p. 20) says Baldwin (2005). Like her, I was the child who sat silently around adults so I could listen to the stories they told. I was the child at the beauty shop straining to hear, while under the dryer, the latest ruined marriage tale. I was the child who loved to hear my dad tell stories about growing up in a small mountain town in north Georgia. I pretended to be busy while in a room with men so I could hear their stories. I would lie in the floor in the kitchen and listen to my mother’s phone conversations while she was cooking dinner. Looking back at my childhood and my more recent adult years, I realize that I love hearing other people’s stories. Today, sometimes I feel like I am a huge container for secrets because so many people-- friends, family, coworkers, and sometimes complete strangers – tell me their stories. Maybe, they tell me because I genuinely want to hear them. Maybe I look like I would be sympathetic to their plight. I really do not understand why people tell me their stories, but I do like hearing them. As my friends and family weave their personal tales, I genuinely try to place myself in their situation and seek to feel what I think they might be feeling.

Baldwin (2005) expresses the beauty of personal storytelling this way: “The practice of story creates a social net that makes us capable of seeing each other’s unique contribution and incapable of simply dismissing someone as ‘not like me’” (p. 18). Hearing other people’s stories helps me to connect to the human family. It helps me to step outside of myself while simultaneously drawing from something deep within myself. In the end, I am connected to the

one I called the “other.” I want to hear my mother’s stories and share her unique contribution with the rest of the world. Sharing life stories among black mothers and daughters is common. Black women of all ages commonly share their life stories with each other while getting their hair done in beauty salons, cooking for family get-togethers, and shopping at the mall. Yet, sadly many of these tales are not formally recorded. This inquiry is an opportunity to share some of these stories, thus helping the world to understand the “unique contribution” of black women and see black women a little less as the “other.”

I understand that we live in a hyper-connective world and are bombarded daily with stories on the internet and television. The entertainment industry stands ready to supply us with stories from the latest reality show, soap opera, or primetime sitcom, action/adventure film, or the latest webisode. Perhaps there is no need for more stories? After all, aren’t some of the stories provided by the entertainment industry about African American women? Can’t people gain a better understanding and compassion for black women by watching these stories on television? The answers can be found on both ends of the spectrum. Yes, people are more exposed to stories very different from their own. No, because the entertainment industry is a business driven by profits and primarily controlled by dominant western European male views, stories from marginalized groups are not brought to the forefront. Are these the stories that inspire and motivate me to create a better world? Do they help me to have a heart connection with someone different from me? To be honest, sometimes they do. But, it is a

rarity when these stories so alter my internal state that I am moved to action. For me, these entertainment industry-driven stories do not inspire, motivate, or capture my imagination the way personal stories told at Marcia's Beauty Salon did. Listening to stories told while washing dishes and cleaning up the kitchen helped me to make life-altering decisions.

Over the last couple of years, I have wanted to grow out my relaxer (a chemical process that makes curly hair straight) that I've had since I was twelve. I have had this burning desire to know what the true texture of my hair was like. I haven't been very successful until this year (2010). The process of growing my relaxer out has been a learning and trying experience. I have a good friend and white female co-worker whose comments have been very telling about this process of trying to find and use my voice amid hegemonic forces. Whenever I wear my hair straight in a more European look, she compliments me on it. If I come in with my hair in its more natural curly state, she says something like: "I think you need to give up this quest of growing out your relaxer" or "what did you do to your hair? It's all poofy." I'm always taken aback by her comments especially---one because she has curly hair that she goes through great lengths to straighten everyday and two, because she's my only white friend who says anything about my hair. I'm not sure if she feels free to say these things about my hair because she feels close to me and thus free to do so, or if she's just openly honest about how she feels. I suspect it may be a little bit of both.

This interchange always reminds me of a Jacquelyn Grant's (1995) womanist analysis of the Esther story in the bible and my growing ability to find my voice, use it, and face whatever backlash may come my way. Hadassah is a young orphaned Jewish girl living in exile in Babylon while being raised by her older cousin, Mordecai. Mordecai instructs her to take the Babylonian name Esther to assumedly conceal her ethnicity and to fit more seamlessly into Babylonian society. Over the course of six months, King Xerxes, king of Babylon, has a massive celebration to his wealth and power. During the final week of celebration, King Xerxes banishes his wife, Queen Vashti, because of her refusal to appear before him and his drunken party associates one night. That's a story full of male-domination and the results of female resistance that will be told at another time. To assuage his grief, his advisers recommended that he find another wife by rounding up all the beautiful virgins of the land. Hadassah (Esther) is one of the beautiful virgins who is taken to the king's palace. She is ultimately selected to be the King's new wife. Haman, a trusted counselor of King Xerxes, decides he wants to cleanse the land of all Jews and is able to get the King to agree to issue a decree to that affect. Mordecai warns Hadassah and says she must intercede with the King on the behalf of her people. Esther knows that to enter the King's court without invitation she risks death, and knows full well, through the example of the former Queen Vashti, it is a task he will follow through on. It is at this point that Esther decides that she must do whatever it



takes to attempt to save her people and sums up this resolution by saying “If I perish, I perish.”

Grant (1995) says Esther has two major opportunities for obedience in the story. First, she allows her cousin to change her name from Hadassah to Esther which calls her to deny her true identity in order to fit more seamlessly into Babylonian culture. Second, she chooses to obey her cousin’s request to reveal her true identity and save her people. The first act of obedience brings her favor with the King and material wealth. The second act of obedience calls for her to risk all she has gained and ultimately risk her life. I feel a kinship with Hadassah, I choose to call her by her Jewish name because her name itself is an act of resistance to assimilation and hegemony. Being educated in predominately-white settings has left me lacking in voice. In school, I was not taught to act or express myself in ways outside the white male westernized norm. I was like Hadassah who changed her name to Esther just to get along and fit in. My behavior ensured that I was always a teacher's pet, my professors at the University of Georgia liked me, and I was totally accepted in my white-male dominated first job after college. It seemed I was always the acceptable black person, not like the others of my race. This favor, or assimilation as I now know it, afforded me lots of privileges. I was selected by administrators to be on student council. I often had lunch with the president of UGA. I was a member of the most prestigious organizations on campus. I had all the right contacts. On my first job, I flew on private jets and ate in the finest restaurants. Certainly I was no

queen, but I had trappings that many others seek. This approval and acceptance dwarfed my voice—so much so that when it came time to be me and use my voice, I felt like I was risking a lot. Of course, I was not risking my life literally, but it often feels like I was. Using my voice causes me to face rejection—a rejection that I am not accustomed to. This dissertation requires me to use my voice to tell my truth and like Hadassah, “if I perish, I perish.”

### **Mother and Daughter**

*Don't ask me to leave you and turn back. Wherever you go, I will go; wherever you live, I will live. Your people will be my people, and Your God will be my God.*

(Ruth 1:16 New Living Translation)

The above quote is from the biblical story of Ruth and Naomi—a daughter-in-law and mother-in-law respectively. Both had faced incredible tragedy and were headed towards Bethlehem, Naomi's hometown, when Naomi tells Ruth to leave and go back to her own people. Ruth responds with the declaration recorded above. It is a statement of love and commitment. It is a declaration which symbolizes the relationship between me and my mother. My mother and I have a special relationship. When all goes wrong, I know she is there for me, and I would like to think she knows I would always be there for her. Our special relationship has given me the wonderful opportunity to include her in this inquiry. Since my mother and I are the primary storytellers in this inquiry, it is important to provide at least some preliminary information about both of us.

## **Evelyn**

My educational story begins here. I have been an educator for over thirty years. It hasn't been easy, but my career is extremely fulfilling – so much so that I have not fully retired. I initially started my teaching career as a paraprofessional at a school in my current hometown. While in this position, I decided to go back to school and get my teaching credentials. After graduation with a master's degree in elementary and middle grades, I began teaching at a small rural K-8 school in west Georgia. Even though the school was small and mostly white, it was one of my most satisfying experiences as an educator. At this school, the entire staff and student body were genuinely a family. For the most part, we sincerely wanted what was best for all students, and we worked hard to see that our students – most of which were impoverished – were successful. Those bonds were so strong that we have yearly reunions even though the school no longer exists. I taught third grade there for ten years. After those first ten years, I became a teacher and later administrator at the school where I initially worked as a paraprofessional. Because of the size of the school system, the school environment was not quite as family-like as the rural school in west Georgia, but community bonds helped to bind me to this school. Here, I faithfully serve until the present day.

Where should I begin my spiritual story? I was raised in a medium-sized town in northwest Georgia during the 1950s and 1960s with four other siblings. Because my father is a World War II veteran, we had a few more opportunities

than most others. He was able to get a good job and buy us a house in a middle class neighborhood. Even though my father is a preacher, my mother was the real spiritual backbone of our family. My mother grew up in the Pentecostal tradition and always wore dresses. She never forced me or my sister to wear dresses, but you can bet we were all religiously educated. We were in church every time the church was open. Sitting in those pews for all those years has ingrained a strong sense of fairness and justice in me. I do not like to see people, especially children, being mistreated. It is fundamentally not just and not of God. I also guess that's why I strive to apply all school rules fairly and consistently across the board. Black, white, rich or poor – they all must abide by the same rules. Some see my actions as harsh, but I think deep down students respect the consistency. I also guess my upbringing and the emphasis on religious education has led to me teach eight-, nine-, and ten-year olds Sunday school for almost thirty years. I believe that it is important for children to have a strong moral upbringing. I suppose in some way this is what has led my daughter to engage in this type of dissertation work.

### **Valerie**

When I look back to the reasons I became an educator, I automatically think back to a career in corporate America that feed my pocketbook but not my soul. Because my mother was a teacher and my father was a human resources manager for a fortune 500 company, I felt like teaching and business were my only options. I definitely did not want to go into teaching because I felt teaching

was for those unable to select more challenging majors (that's a nice way to say that I felt education majors were only in school to receive MRS- degrees). Before I entered my MBA program, my cohort underwent a series of psychological evaluations. I'll never forget sitting in an auditorium looking at an overhead with all our personality types grouped into quadrants. Most of my classmates were clustered in the upper and lower left quadrants which represented logical and analytical personality types. They were the perfectly ambitious and competitive future business leaders. A few more of my classmates and one of my close friends was in the upper right quadrant which represented creativity. According to the psychologist, they were the entrepreneurs of the group. Then there was me, I was a dot in the lower right quadrant. I don't even remember what my quadrant represented, but I remember he said famous people with personalities similar to mine were Mother Teresa, Jimmy Carter, and John the Baptist- a motley humanitarian bunch. I felt this incredible urge to run out of the auditorium and quit the program. I knew remaining in the program wasn't the right decision. I also remember my mother reading my psychological evaluation and being upset because it said that I could work in a menial labor job if I felt spiritually fulfilled. After one year of graduate school and five years in Corporate America, I could take no more. My desire to help others overwhelmed my desire to make money, and I became a teacher.

How did I decide to tie education to spirituality? It all started with a doctoral program that made space for my interest in spirituality and education:

Big-eyed and staring at a tree, my mother interrupts my thoughts and says “snap out of it.” She asks me how work on my dissertation is going. I give her my typical response of “it’s going ok,” not wanting to explain my struggles. Yet, this time the big-eyed stare had yielded some fruit. From the beginning of my doctoral program, I had always known I wanted to research the intersections of education and spirituality. However, I never could exactly pin down why I wanted to study spirituality and its relationship to education. Nevertheless, that day the fruit finally ripened, and I knew what in my past urged me to study this subject. First, there was a gut-level feeling that I desperately needed to help people, partially driven by my youthful idealism and my early religious training. But I had somehow ended up working in a field that I would only drive me towards self-aggrandizement. Second, I have a love and respect for the black church. Despite its many shortcomings, the black church has produced the ability of a people to hope in spite of utter hopelessness and has been the leader in one of the greatest social justice movements in recent history. Third, specific classroom experiences have helped me realize that objective, scientific methods and approaches to education have not led us to the proverbial “promised land.” In fact, these approaches may have been very harmful. Fourth, after engaging in a progressive pedagogy, I began to develop a sense of hopelessness due to the enormity of the task ahead. In the end, I discovered it was my spiritual beliefs which have sustained me in this process.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE KNOCK: LITERATURE REVIEW

*Keep on asking, and you will receive what you ask for. Keep on seeking, and you will find. Keep on knocking, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives. Everyone who seeks, finds. And to everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. (Matthew 7:7-8 New Living Translation)*

Just as a knock is an effort to gain entry, this review of literature serves as an entry point for a conversation about various theologies surrounding African American spirituality. I explain how African American spirituality is grounded in womanist theology, black liberation theology, Martin Luther King Jr.'s beloved community, and Bishop Desmond Tutu's and Michael Battle's African concept of ubuntu. In addition to gaining entry into the world of African American spirituality, this section also illuminates the role of autobiography in the lives of African American and educators, in general. It focuses on how the personal often becomes the political. Finally, in this review of literature, I describe the spiritual lives of three African American women in the 19th century whose views and experiences were recorded in their spiritual autobiographies.

#### **General Christian African-American Theological Perspectives**

*It should be explained that all the Athenians as well as the foreigners in Athens seemed to spend all their time discussing the latest ideas. (Acts 17:21 New Living Translation)*

Like the ancient Athenians, scholars today are always discussing and

debating various theological and spiritual theories. This section seeks to explain fundamental African-American viewpoints from a Christian theological perspective. It will describe basic tenets of womanist theology (Mitchem, 2002), black liberation theology (Cones, 1975/1997), Martin Luther King, Jr.'s (1963/1981) beloved community, and Desmond Tutu's (2004) and Michael Battle's (2006, 2009) ubuntu.

### **A Black Woman's Jesus: Womanist Theology**

*Womanist theology uncovers and incorporates the ordinary theologies of black women's lives.* (Mitchem, 2002, p. 47)

When asked what womanist theology is, many practitioners find difficulty in giving a simplified definition. Rather they provide a set of principles governing womanist theological thought. However, Mitchem (2002) provides a general definition which provides an excellent umbrella for the principles yet to be discussed: "Womanist theology is a place of discovery, in faith, that analyzes both politics and culture" (p. 46). Womanist theology is a philosophy which encourages black women to view their lives as a text which allows them to validate and celebrate their lived experiences while seeking liberation for themselves and others who face oppressive forces. In fact, womanist theologians assert that it is this very quest for liberation through the "interpretations of individual or communal lives, church doctrine, or scripture from the perspectives of people of color [that] have provided a critical difference in the development of liberation theologies" (Mitchem, 2002, p. 47). Much like black



liberation theology, womanist theology seeks to reconsider Christian doctrine from the perspective of an oppressed minority; however, it uses the lives of black women as the starting point rather than the lives of blacks in general. Points central to womanist theology are as follows: (1) womanist theology reveals and includes the everyday theologies of black women's lives; (2) the communal dimensions of black women's experiences include social activism and collaboration rather than competition; (3) womanism suggests a methodology that is interdisciplinary; (4) ethics is the foundation of womanist theology and its continued focus on critical social analysis; (5) continued dialogue and forthrightness are essential to womanist theology because it breaks with traditional western thought (Mitchem, 2002).

Womanist theology has three major pioneers, Katie Canon (1988), Renita Weems (1988/2005, 1993, 1999, 2004, 2005), and Jacquelyn Grant (1989, 1995). Each researcher offers a unique perspective which adds to the cohesive whole of womanist theology. Katie Canon (1988) was the first to combine womanist thought with an ethical perspective, resulting in womanist theology. She analyzed black female literature to validate black women's perspectives and truths. In her initial studies, she used Zora Neale Hurston, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Howard Thurman as authorities for the construction of womanist theological thought. Weems (1988/2005, 2004, 2005) uses a different approach and analyzes biblical texts to find a place for everyone, especially the marginalized. For example, in *Just a Sister Away*, Weems (1988/2005) selects

marginalized biblical women to demonstrate a need to resist competitive western society, bolster familial connections, and display wisdom and leadership in today's world. In *I Asked for Intimacy: Stories of Blessing, Betrayals, and Birthings*, Weems (1993), uses her own life experiences as a subtext to examine relationships and her personal struggle to find faith and intimacy. Grant (1989) adds to the conversation by also stressing the experiential nature of womanist theology. Grant seeks to examine the association between the oppression of women and theological symbolism while simultaneously investigating the question of what Christ means in a society of increasing haves and have nots. Overall, Grant (1989) seeks a more constructive and liberating Christology.

In addition to these three pioneers, other voices have added to the theoretical foundations of womanist theology. Patricia Hill Collins (2000), a sociologist studying black feminist thought, was one of the first to express a black female epistemology and use the experiences of black women as the frameworks for further study. Darlene Clark Hine (1989, 1990), a historian, collaborates with other black female historians to situate black women in history and document their continued invisibility. The works of Emilie Townes (1995, 1996) is grounded in history and documents the past and present courageous work of black women working for social justice. She also demonstrates how the basis for their activism is rooted in a Christian ethical imperative. Marcia Riggs (1994, 1997) examines social classes within black communities and analyzes black female voices that do not divorce body and soul. Monica Coleman (2008) brings a

postmodern element to this womanist theological discussion.

### **A Black Man's Jesus: Black Liberation Theology**

*I am black first – and everything else comes after that. This means that I read the Bible through the lens of a black tradition of struggle and not as the objective Word of God. (Cone, 1975/1997, p. xi)*

Black liberation theology is a theory which seeks to utilize the experience of Christian African American peoples as a source of theology which espouses freedom from oppression. Its primary and most eloquent proponent is James H. Cone (1975/1997) whose foundational premise is that God is on the side of oppressed blacks in their fight against white supremacy. The primary focus of black liberation theology is on black experience and how liberation is found by examining biblical narratives and other sources, such as speeches of Malcolm X or Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the novels of Zora Neale Hurston, or the jazz of John Coltrane, or the blues of B.B. King (Cone, 1975/1997). Although Cones is a Christian theologian, he is adamant about not absolutizing his view that the God of the Bible is solely on the side of oppressed blacks. His view has evolved over time as critical voices from womanist, gay, Native American, and South African theologians arose.

Cone's (1975/1997) view of Jesus, his Christology, is also very important to the concept of black liberation theology. According to Cone it is important to understand that one's Christology is shaped by the "religio-cultural" and "socio-political" forces which impact how one interprets Jesus. For Cone, his

interpretation flows from an African American freedom struggle narrative unlike many other protestant Christologies which stem from Lutheranism, Calvinism, or the Nicene Creed. For Cones', Jesus is intimately linked with oppressed peoples and says "that to know Jesus is to know him as revealed in the struggle of the oppressed for freedom" (p. 31). One cannot know Jesus without understanding past cultural and historical influences at the time Jesus lived. Jesus, when viewed in the proper context, was a political figure who fought openly against the forces of oppression. Thus, black people can relate to and embrace a figure who fought for liberation.

### **Beloved Community: King**

*Every man is potentially every other man's neighbor. Neighborliness is nonspatial; it is qualitative. A man must love his neighbor directly, clearly, permitting no barriers between. (Thurman, 1976, p.89)*

Even though the black church was the catalyst for the civil rights movement, it rarely gets enough credit for its foundational role in the movement. Many merely credit it with providing the momentum for the civil rights movement (Battle, 2006) while ignoring its fundamental role in the movement. The most outspoken advocate of the civil rights movement is Martin Luther King, Jr. and his views are deeply rooted in the black church. Four deeply held beliefs of the black church provided King with his philosophical and theological views: (1) the sacredness of human life; (2) moral obligations of Christians to resist social and political evils; (3) the belief of life after death; and (4) "the power

of Christian love to make a difference in personal *and* social life” (West, 1999, p.430). King’s beliefs were also supplemented by the liberal Christian ideas of George Davis, Walter Rauschenbusch, and L. Harold DeWolf, all of whose philosophical and theological perspectives, linked personalism to politics and social activism.

The crux of King’s philosophy was the love ethic of Jesus, on which Gandhi based his loved-centered non-violent resistance. This love ethic entails a “way of life and way of struggle in which oppressed people could fight for freedom without inflicting violence on the oppressor, humiliating the opponent, and hence possibly transform the moral disposition of one’s adversary” (West, 1999, p. 432). For King (1963), this non-violent resistance is rooted in radical forgiveness. This form of forgiveness does not entail “ignoring what has been done or putting a false label on an evil act” rather “it means that the evil act no longer remains a barrier to the relationship” (p. 50). Jesus’ love ethic is also rooted in acknowledging the sacredness of humanity, and it is this recognition that makes forgiveness easier. King (1963) states:

We recognize that his [one’s enemy] hate grows out of fear, pride, ignorance, prejudice, and misunderstanding, but in spite of this, we know God’s image is ineffably etched in his being. Then we love our enemies by realizing that they are not totally bad and that they are not beyond the reach of God’s redemptive love. (p.51)

While considering the sacredness of humanity, King also contends that the “evil

deed of the enemy-neighbor” does not represent the sum total of that person and some goodness can be found in everyone. In addition to this radical forgiveness entrenched in Jesus’ love ethic and human sacredness, King (1963) also argues that it is important to seek to win your enemy’s “friendship and understanding” and not attempt to “defeat or humiliate” them.

In the sermon *Love Your Enemies*, King (1963) explains why it is important to love your enemies. First, he affirms that “returning hate for hate multiplies hate” (p. 53). Only light can drive out darkness, not more darkness. King says that we cannot live in this modern society and not learn to forgive our enemies because “the chain reaction of evil” will destroy us if we continue with hate and violence. Second, loving one’s enemies is necessary because “hate scars the soul and distorts the personality” (King, 1963, p. 53). Hate ultimately destroys people’s sense of values and their objectivity. Third, King (1963) avows that love is the only force in the world that can transform an enemy into a friend. It is on these principles that King sought to build his “beloved community”.

### **I Am Because I Belong: Ubuntu**

*Ubuntu does not say “I think therefore I am.” It says rather: “I am human because I belong. I participate. I share.”* (Tutu, 2004, p. 27)

Ubuntu is a term that reflects the African concept of personhood which emphasizes “the communal and spiritual dimensions of human identity” (Battle, 2009, p. 1). It is a distinctly non-western view of personhood because it does not focus on individuality but rather explains personhood through interdependence

and community. Ubuntu, the term itself, originates from a group of Bantu Sub-Saharan languages and literally means personhood or human being. Further analysis of this term also reveals a common shared spiritual belief among Sub-Saharan Africans that humans and God have a direct, communal relationship. Thus, the term carries with it a theological understanding of interdependence and relationships. Battle (2009) succinctly sums up ubuntu by saying “a person depends on other persons to be a person” (p. 3). The concept of ubuntu also conveys a sense that people are not only aware of their own individual rights but they are also aware of their duties to others. In other words, people are only aware of their rights in relationship to the rights of others. Battle’s (2009) scholarly definition of ubuntu reads: “Ubuntu is the interdependence of persons for the exercise, development, and fulfillment of their potential to be both individuals and community” (p. 3). Battle (2009) also postulates about the five following points important to the concept of ubuntu: (1) competition is not the optimal way to form personhood; (2) those seeking to build community must employ skill because community can be elusive; (3) ubuntu will broaden viewpoints; (4) ubuntu deepens spirituality; (5) being a person in community requires practice. Each aforementioned area will be discussed in greater detail below.

Battle’s (2009) first and second significant points are link in a web centering on personhood, competition, and community. Because westerners are guided by a social Darwinist principle of survival of the fittest which seeks to

gain importance, success, and a sense of self-identity through competition, western thought often imposes dichotomies damaging to personhood and community. For example, Battle (2009) states popular beliefs among westerners include:

I know myself as strong only because someone else is weak, if I know myself as a black person only because someone else is white, then my identity depends on a perpetual competition that only leaves losers, if I know myself as a man only by dominating women, if I know myself as a Christian only because someone else is going to hell, then both my masculinity and my Christianity are devoid of content. (pp. 6-7)

Rather, Battle (2009) argues that ubuntu seeks self-discovery, not through competitive methods, but through community and interdependence. The only true way to know one's self is through community. The level of competition bread in western societies may ultimately be its undoing. According to ubuntu theory, being fully human means being a "self-differentiated person" in community. In others words, people cannot understand their uniqueness until they are in relationship with others in community. Battle (2009) defines this "self-differentiated person" in community as the communal self and acknowledges that this communal self cannot be effectively developed in unrestrained, individualistic competition. Ubuntu helps us to see the complementary relationship between individual and community and helps us to guard against using people and relationships merely for our own selfish aims.



For those who wish to build communities in which true personhood can healthily grow, they must realize its elusive nature. Nowhere are communities more elusive than in the United States where people live in the same neighborhood for years and never get to know their neighbors. Competition is the primary culprit to the elusiveness of community. Because competition forces comparison, people are continually compete on a multitude of levels—academically, socially, economically, racially, etc. This type of competition makes cooperation more difficult; thus, true community is never fully developed (Battle 2006, 2009).

Battle's (2009) third significant point of ubuntu discusses how ubuntu can expand and enrich western horizons. The rapidly advancing technological culture in the United States has led to increasing control over our comfort level and the lessening of effort people must exert to perform tasks— necessary or unnecessary. In some ways, the advancement of a technological society has made community harder to create and maintain. Families no longer spend time together. People do not write letters anymore or exercise regularly. The television, video games, internet surfing, etc. consume our spare time. Ubuntu can help us to provide individual and technological boundaries and while embracing the concept of ubuntu, our goal should be to “create positive conditions in which individualistic tendencies become less compelling” and “communal engagements thrive and flourish” (Battle, 2009, p.20).

Battle's (2009) fourth and fifth significant points focus on how ubuntu can

deepen our spirituality and the development of the communal self. Ubuntu spirituality depends on interdependence. Tutu (2004) discusses the evils of apartheid in South Africa and explains how reconciliation was South Africa's only hope after apartheid ended. Tutu's beliefs in the power of reconciliation are a direct result of a Christian theological perspective based on the African concept of ubuntu. From a Christian perspective, Tutu explains that ubuntu helps religious people to better understand salvation because they will begin to realize they cannot be saved if we all are not saved. Africans and Afrikaners in South Africa must forgive and seek to live in true community if their country is to survive its terrible legacy. Religious extremists, xenophobes, and racists fail to realize our interdependence; yet, ubuntu, seeks to remind us of our interconnectedness and seeks true community (Tutu, 2004). Battle (2009) asserts that the key to cultivating the communal self is education. We must begin to teach our young people to value others and community and not monitors, cell phones, computers, and other material possessions.

### **The Personal is Political**

*To place the question as a "personal" and not political matter...is to be guilty of the worst kind of...bourgeois-liberal thinking.... (Jones, 1949, p.117)*

The phrase "the personal is political" became popular during the 1960s and 1970s feminist movement, but its origins are unsure. It has been attributed to Claudia Jones, in her 1949 essay entitled *An End to the Neglect of the Problems of Negro Women*, among others. In her article she asserts that for white liberals to

say they will fight for the rights of black people; yet, will not socialize with them or considering marriage is a high level of hypocrisy. She maintains that their “personal” preference is really a political decision. Like Jones, I maintain that the personal really is political. The choices that create our lives are political; therefore, it is important to reflect on autobiography in the African American community and in educational spheres. This section will describe the use of autobiography in the African American community and autobiography in education.

### **African Americans & Autobiography**

The most literal definition of autobiography entails a detailed narrative of a person's life from birth until the present. However, the category of autobiography can be greatly expanded when memoir is included. Memoir involves the telling of one's life experiences during a specific period or centered on specific themes. Memoirs take on many different formats (Rainer, 1998). There are vocational/occupational/calling memoirs like *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (X, M. & Haley, 1987) or Gandhi's autobiography (Gandhi & Desai, 1957/1993). Jean Sartre (1938/2007) wrote a philosophic memoir entitled *Nausea*. There are confessional memoirs like the one written by St. Augustine (1977/2005). Memoirs written about overcoming adversity, in particular medical adversities meant to inspire others in difficult situations are also popular. Nettles' (2001) *Crazy Visitations* is an excellent example of this type memoir. Nettles (2001) successfully weaves a story of spiritual and physical resilience centered around

the removal of a brain tumor in January 1995. She writes: "...the tumor had undermined my motivation, confidence, and desire to be a teacher...." (p. 110). Yet, after a year marked by a brain tumor, her father's heart attack, and other medical scares, she manages to find "a surge of energy mingled with relief and gratitude and hope for a better year" (p. 128) during a New Year's Eve mass on December, 31, 1995. Her account inspires many to keep putting one foot in front of the other when you do not feel like it, especially when you feel like you are literally or figuratively losing your mind.

The types of personal writings are almost as numerous as the different types of people writing them, and I could go on describing more types. However, the type most relevant to this inquiry are those in the category Rainer (1998) calls the individual against oppressive societal forces. Typically these autobiographies and memoirs are written by people whose oppression is based on race, sex, social class, sexual orientation, and/or any other category of which oppression found. Examples include Frederick Douglass'(1845/2005) autobiography, Richard Wright's (1944/1995) *Black Boy*, James Baldwin's (1961/1992) *Nobody Knows My Name*, Harriet Jacobs' (1861/2006) *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself*, and Ida B. Wells' *Crusade for Justice* (Wells-Barnett & Duster, 1928/1991).

African Americans have a rich history of personal writings with aims of social justice and alleviation from oppression. Frederick Douglass (1845/2005) was encouraged to write his story in an effort to aid emancipation for slaves.

Sojourner Truth's (1850/2005) narrative, dictated to Olive Gilbert, also served the same purpose and added women's rights to the emancipation struggle. These are but two examples of many blacks who used their personal stories to help bring about social justice. Pinar (2004) says "autobiography is the pedagogical political practice for the twenty-first century" (p.38); yet, it is clear that blacks have historically mixed the personal and the political in efforts to free themselves and others. Pinar (2004) also understands the value of past autobiographies from black writers and even goes on to say that their stories provide inspiration for all Americans and serve as the "American conscience." European Americans can benefit from the "spiritual and psychological powers" (absent from their own culture) of which they are ignorant, but which are clearly demonstrated in many of these autobiographical writings about African American culture and spirituality (Pinar, 2004, p. 46). Even though these personal writings are subjective, they also simultaneously exhibit a collective nature and should be mined by educators for inspiration and serve as positive examples of outrage expressed at injustice. Perhaps, then educators would begin to act like "outraged mothers" and "sassy back talkers", both archetypes found in autobiographies of blacks (Pinar, 2004; Braxton, 1989).

Since this inquiry focuses on the lives of two African American women's stories about education and spirituality, I feel it is important to illuminate a few past autobiographies and/or personal writings of black women who have demonstrated a worldview guided by their religious beliefs and focused on

social justice for all. Sojourner Truth (1850/2005), a deeply religious woman, used her own speaking abilities and her story to inspire people to continue to fight against not only the injustice of slavery, but also fought for women's rights. Ida B. Wells-Barnett (1928/1991), a teacher turned journalist, fought an anti-lynching campaign while also simultaneously fighting for women's rights. In her fight for equal women's rights, she also contended with early white racist feminists who did not want their cause tied to anything racial, especially her anti-lynching campaign. Although Cooper lived during an extremely conservative age in the black community when politics and academia was dominated by black men, she refused to let her life and the lives of other black women be dominated by this context and also managed to simultaneously fight the forces of white supremacy. Her chief interest was in the education of the underprivileged and powerless. Throughout *A Voice from the South*, Cooper is concerned about the unrestrained power of the dominate forces that crush the lives of the weak and powerless (Washington, 1988). Her critique was not merely concerned with gender and racial inequities, but she saw the key issue as using education to overcome the domination of the strong over the weak, no matter the form it took (Cooper, 1892/1988). All these women are representative of women who have written about their lives using an African American spiritual worldview which drove them to seek social justice.

## **Autobiography & Education**

When I describe what my dissertation is about and the methodology for this inquiry, many ask me what does my personal story and my mother's story have to do with education. Instinctively, I know the answer, but the external world, driven by data and proof, demands more. Luckily for me, there are other academics who have come before me who feel the same way. Pinar and Grumet (1976) understood that life history, intellectual development, and school knowledge can and do intersect. According to Pinar (2004) autobiography has a unique way of linking culture, history, the personal and the public. It allows for self-engagement while simultaneously engaging with students and colleagues. In other words, it is the linking of the private room with the public square. Pinar and Grumet (1976) developed a systematic method for autobiography in education called *carrere*. This method has the following four steps which are designed to systematically support the "study of self-reflexivity within the processes of education" (p.35): regressive, progressive, analytical, and social reconstruction. Overall, this method "provides a strategy for students of curriculum to study the relations between academic knowledge and life history in the interest of self-understanding and social reconstruction" (Pinar, 2004, p. 35). This methodology, influenced by literary and feminist theory, is a version of cultural criticism which can sometimes be prone to self-display and exhibitionism. However, Pinar (2004) points to the African American

autobiographical tradition which never engages in such negative displays and finally contends that it is a valid method for promoting social reconstruction.

Among those educators writing autobiographical and biographical works are Ming Fang He (2003), Sonya Jefferson (2008), and Wynnetta Scott-Simmons (2008). He (2003) has written a cross-cultural narrative about her life and the lives of two other Chinese women who lived through the Cultural Revolution in China. All three feel neither at home in China nor in Canada, their place of residence at the time the book was written. To protect those who were a part of her narrative, He (2003) situates her book "between nonfiction, fiction, and academic discourse" (p. xix); nevertheless, the autobiographical nature of her book is undeniable. Her stories are effective counter-stories to the "Transformation Myth" or the belief that people are radically transformed as they transition from one culture to another. He (2003) provides comfort to those who feel like they are caught "in-between" two worlds and never fully embrace the "river of the past" or the "river of the present" but exist in the ebb and flow of the river of their current lives. Sonya Jefferson (2008) tells the generational narratives of herself, her mother, and her grandmother. Her stories, too, provide a counter-story to the dominating narratives which portray black women as ignorant and un-empowered. She uses her stories to provide a new vision for education-- a vision which reflects "the care-and-justice ethic early Black educators demonstrated" (p.33). Wynnetta Scott-Simmons (2008) tells the stories of her childhood playmates who formed a "jump rope community"-- or a



community which symbolized the strength, power, and victory, found in their segregated communities. It was the positive experiences in the “jump rope community” that Scott-Simmons and her friends drew on when sent to desegregated schools where, all at once, they were devalued and belittled. Scott-Simmons and her three friends later attended an elite boarding school in Philadelphia and drew on the same values and positive models displayed in their “jump rope” community. Their stories are captured to help those in similar situations (transplanted to a “foreign” setting where you may not be supported) cope and develop strategies for success.

### **Historical Spiritual Autobiography**

*Those opposed, I went forth laboring for God, and He owned and blessed my labors, and has done so wherever I have been until this day. And while I walk obediently, I know He will, though hell may rage and vent its spite. (Foote, 1879, p.53)*

Julia A. Foote wrote the above words of resistance over one hundred years ago. Yet, I did not know who she was until a few short months ago. African American women have been writing about their lives since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the New York Public Library has an extensive online collection of writings from many of these women. As I read through the collection of fiction, poetry, and autobiography, I was struck by the level tenacity and strength presented in many of their stories. I was also taken by the fact that many of these stories were no longer published, which represents both a vast loss in wealth and knowledge.

My interest in black female spirituality and the writings of black women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century led to three women in particular: Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw, and Julia Foote. All three of these women displayed an amazing amount of inner strength and conviction. They were all forerunners of modern womanist theological thought, and their contribution to the field of black spiritual autobiography has been too long overlooked.

Like other American spiritual autobiographies in the Christian tradition, Lee Elaw, and Foote chronicle the journey of their souls from damnation to salvation and a true understanding of their destiny here on earth (Andrews, 1986). Because the focus of these spiritual autobiographies is driven by a salvation narrative, much of the younger life of each lady has been excluded from their writings. The childhood memories which are included are framed within a context of sin and salvation. The reader is told about their childhood worldliness which portends their coming redemption. All three speak of spectacular conversion experiences which seem to have emboldened them and forced them to fulfill their divine mission despite external influences to the contrary. It is this boldness that is commendable. Andrews (1986) states that each of the ladies "lived experimental lives, exploring possibilities of a deliberately chosen marginal identity that morally and spiritually engaged the world without being socially engulfed by it" (p.12). It is their conversion experience which gave them a boldness to seek out and fulfill their destinies. Their writings reveal a

group of women who were remarkably self-confident despite the racist and sexist restraints of the time.

### **Lee, Elaw, & Foote**

Lee, Elaw, and Foote all possessed a sense of self-hood, derived from their conversion experiences, which drove them to fight against social conventions of the nineteenth century. They rebelled against social expectations of wives, mothers, and black women in general. This radical individualism can first be seen in their marriages. Lee (1836), married to a preacher, moved a distant community, far from family and friends, out of obligation to her husband. However, she suffered so gravely from this decision that she experienced a nervous breakdown, only recovering when her husband took a six-month sea journey. From that point on, she embraced Isaiah 54: 5 (For my Maker is my husband) and from then on followed only the guidance and rule of her true Husband in Heaven. Both Elaw (1846) and Foote (1879) attempted to follow their husbands, too. Both their husbands were nominal Christians, feared public retaliation and humiliation, and fought their wives' religious activism. Neither husband took their wives' spiritual views serious. Nevertheless, Elaw (1846) and Foote (1879) were convinced of their divine calling to preach and evangelize. Thus, like Lee, they felt they were independent of their husbands' rule. Their behavior was judged by a Higher Power.

Despite their husbands' opposition to their preaching and evangelizing, all three women did so anyway. Elaw (1846) preached in both England and

America to the disapproval of clergymen from both countries. Foote (1879) fought for her right to preach with Jehiel Beman at the AME Zion Church, while Lee (1836) battled with Richard Allen, founder of the AME Church, for her right to preach. Foote (1879) effectively sums up the attitude of nineteenth century clergyman: “there was not justice meted out these days. Even ministers of Christ did not feel that women had any rights which they were bound to respect” (p. 207). Lee (1836) and Elaw (1846), at certain points in their lives, abdicated their motherly duties and responsibilities to follow their Divine calling. These actions would have even offended even the most liberal sensibilities found in the Quakers and Seventh Day Adventists (Andrew, 1986). Elaw (1846) placed her daughter in care of a couple while she traveled on a seven month preaching trip which took her into the dangerous southern states. Lee (1836) received an invitation to preach at a distant church and left her sick child in the care of someone else. She also recalls in her autobiography that she did not even worry about the child while she was following God’s will. Even today, those sentiments would receive sharp criticism.

Elaw and Foote also criticized white Christians of their day. Elaw (1846) said their genuineness was suspect and criticized the “morals of the more cultivated Saxon stock” (p. 118) and preferred the simplicity of worship found within black churches. Foote (1879) said that whites in America were “deluded by a spirit of error, which leads them to say to the poor and the colored ones among them, ‘Stand back a little—I am holier than thou’” (p. 167). No doubt this

view was rooted in a childhood experience in which her parents were not allowed to take communion until after all white people had participated in the sacred event. All three women lived their convictions, even if external forces arrayed against them threatened to derail their callings.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE REQUEST FOR BREAD: THEORIZING THE STORIES

*You parents – if your children ask for a loaf of bread, do you give them a stone instead? (Matthew 7:9 New Living Translation)*

The request for bread in the parable told by Jesus was an attempt by the knocker to seek nourishment and sustenance for both himself and others. This section of the inquiry describes the nourishment (theoretical framework and methodology) that sustains this inquiry and my process for selecting a methodology. The purpose of this study is to explore the ways in which the spiritual lives of my mother and me impact our pedagogy, drive for social justice, and our ability to remain hopeful in an often underappreciated public service field dominated at the highest levels by men. The theories which provide the framework for this inquiry includes the importance of exploring a teacher's inner life (Palmer, 1998) and womanist theology as presented by Weems (1993, 2004, 1988/2005). Auto/biographical methodologies along with the subtext of biblical narratives provide the methodology for this inquiry.

#### Inner Life

*How can the teacher's selfhood become a legitimate topic in education and in our public dialogues on educational reform? (Palmer, 1998, p. 3)*

Daily after work, usually on her ride home, a friend/co-worker and I analyze the school events of the day over the telephone. I have always been one to go home and try to forget about the events of the day. But, since I have known

this friend, she has always insisted on this critical review of the day which always goes beyond school gossip and complaints and often results in a level of critical self-reflection of which I am not accustomed. And over time, I have come to appreciate these conversations because they have helped me to understand myself and the responsibility of my calling as an educator. Many of our deepest and most philosophical conversations lead back to the same point over and over – the inner life of a teacher either nurtures students and supports learning or does incredible violence resulting in inhumane schools that destroy children. I appreciate these conversations and her genuine dedication to and love for the profession, her subject, and most of all her students. Her example is a true inspiration to those who feel they want to engage in the incredibly difficult work of teaching and especially teaching in a public school.

Palmer (1998) states that “good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher” (p. 10). The two points he raises – identity and integrity – are essential to educational reform and ultimately good teaching and learning. Teachers must have made a careful exploration of whom they are and why they teach. If this level of self-analysis does not take place, teachers risk doing “violence” to themselves or others because they are “working in ways that violate” (p. 30) their souls. Teachers who merely teach for a paycheck and a three month summer vacation will often not have a passion for the subject matter and will treat students in harsh ways hindering learning and relationships. These teachers reduce students and

subjects to I-It relationships, mere things used to meet and fulfill their wants and needs (Buber, 1970). Thus, students and teachers remain separate, never fully engaging with one another, and the separation is reified by the fallacy of objective knowledge touted by our scientific and technological world. Therefore, it is imperative that teachers make a careful exploration of who they are. All aspects of the selfhood should be examined--- ethnic background, gender, social class, spiritual beliefs, upbringing, family relationships, etc.

I especially think an exploration of teachers' spiritual beliefs or of their souls are warranted because it is the well from which true aspirations, beliefs, hopes, dreams, and actions flow. It is the essence of who a person is. Our souls function to keep us grounded in our own being, connected to community and engaged in relationships without which we die. Our souls enlighten us with the truth about ourselves and our relation to the world around us, and give us true life which can be passed on in a world plagued by death (Palmer, 2003). Too many of our souls have been afflicted by racism, sexism, and other injustices or malignancies of the world. Teachers have an obligation to students to investigate the inner working of their souls. Undividedness and the fallacy of objective knowledge undergird and surround the importance of inner exploration. Both are inextricably linked to exploration of the inner life. Undividedness provides the foundation on which the value of inner exploration rests. The fallacy of objective knowledge illustrates how my profession was led into thinking that inner exploration is unimportant to the overall education of students.



## **Undividedness**

It is my belief that teachers who are spiritually self-reflective bring an awareness and wholeness into personal and work lives. To maintain personal integrity and wholeness, spirituality must spill over into their classrooms. Palmer (1998) would argue that teachers who live and teach in this manner are living an “undivided life” resulting in increased satisfaction, and they ultimately make great strides towards reform. Consider Freire (1970/1993), who maintains that love, humility, faith, and hope are critical parts of dialogue. It seemed apparent to me the first time I read *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* that Freire’s (1970/1993) educational theories were a result of his spirituality. Also consider hooks (2003), who has written a trilogy on love and openly discusses how her spiritual beliefs impact her teaching. In a letter to Cornell West, hooks (2003) writes: “I can testify to the meaningfulness of spiritual practice and that such a practice sustains and nurtures progressive teaching, progressive politics, and enhances the struggle for liberation” (p. 164). Both Freire and hooks are examples of teachers who lived and taught “undividedly” and allowed their spirituality to impact their pedagogy. Their lives have directly impacted the lives of students and countless others around the world who read their works.

## **Fallacy of Objective Knowledge**

The industrial revolution ushered in a new way of viewing the world and our interaction with it. In business, time and motion studies led to increased efficiency through assembly lines and mass production. The social behaviorist

school of thought lead in by Franklin Bobbitt promoted scientific and technological approaches to education (Schubert, Schubert, Thomas, et al, 2002). Students were, for the first time, viewed as empty units to be filled in the most efficient manner possible. Both were indicative of the scientific knowledge and the rise of objective knowledge. Even now, these views persist and prevail in the current landscape of education. When K-12 education faculties write school improvement plans, they are often encouraged not to include goals that are not easily measured. In other words, the only important scorecard is student performance on standardized tests. In reality, these tests measure only a small portion of student abilities and often serve to exclude and belittle students whose intelligences lie in other non-academic areas.

Unique to our way of knowing based on scientific and technological methodologies is the concept of objectivity. We espouse objective facts, objective knowledge, and objective theories. If your views are not “objective” they are considered to be tainted by fanatical fervor or prejudice. This way of knowing often puts us in adversarial relationships that polarize instead of unite (Palmer, 1983/1993). Despite our best efforts to be objective, we are never that. We can never divorce our evaluation of a subject or a person from who we are. The very questions we pose are a reflection of our values, beliefs, and experiences. Thus, researchers are never fully able to be objective in the true sense of the word. Of course, we can develop the ability to seek situations, theories, and experiences

from multiple perspectives; yet, that practice is not truly objective and never will be.

Furthermore, in a discussion about teaching with love, hooks (2003) argues that objectivism in the classroom hinders the student-teacher relationship resulting in dispassionate teachers and students who are unable to emotionally connect with their teachers – who are perhaps the only stabilizing forces in their lives. Objective thought requires a certain level of distance from a subject or a person, thereby, inhibiting true knowledge and relationship. To counteract the wave of objectivism and demonstrate the importance of delving into the inner lives of educators, I want to tell my story and my mother’s story – the stories of African-American educators who subscribe to a set of spiritual beliefs that drive their actions in the educational environments.

### **Womanist Theology**

*It was an experiment in combining autobiography and biblical interpretation, the personal and the public, the scholar with the believer who wished to remain faithful. (Weems, 1988/2005, p. xiv)*

As I was walking to my car, I overheard two deacons saying that a Sunday School class was going to be dissolved and combined with the adult class in the sanctuary. It piqued my curiosity, but ashamed at my eavesdropping, I quickly pushed speculation out of my mind. I got in the car and drove around to my aunt’s car to pick up her covered dish for our regular third Sunday meal after church. Getting out my car, my aunt came up and asked if I had heard.

“Heard what?”

“Reverend Ansley is going to get rid of the Daughter’s of Ruth Ladies Bible Class and combine it with the [coed] Saint Luke Young Adult Class.”

“What!?!?!?”

“Yeah. He asked the deacon board if it was ok for him to do this. And guess what?!?! They agreed!!!!!!”

“What about Sister Wilkinson?”

“Well, Reverend Ansley came to her and said that since she was such a good Sunday School teacher, she could co-teach the new combined class with him.”

“Wait a minute. You mean to tell me that a bunch of men decided to dissolve an all female class, and they try to placate Sister Wilkinson by telling her she can ‘co-teach’ a new class with him? Her class was growing and thriving. You mean to tell me that Reverend Ansley was so threatened by her class that he got rid of it?”

“Yep.”

“Did anybody ask the women in the class what they wanted to do?”

“Nope.”

It is situations like this in black churches that illustrate the devaluing of black women and the callous disregard for our feelings and abilities which have kept the black church alive. If it were not for the support of women in the black church, it is doubtful that the black church would still be in existence. Yet, men

still dominate key leadership positions in the church and (as you can see from the above example) are not afraid to make decisions at the expense of the very women who keep the church afloat. It is time for black women to take back their power, and that is why I have embraced a womanist theology.

Mithcem (2002) provides the most succinct yet comprehensive definition of womanist theology: "Womanist theology is a place of discovery, in faith, that analyzes both politics and culture" (p. 46) as they relate to the life experiences of black women. Essentially, it is a theory which seeks to examine the relationships between spirituality, politics, and culture within the everyday context of black women's lives. In deciding how to present information gathered in this inquiry, I could have chosen the methods from a number of different womanist theologians – autobiography, biography, literature/fiction, oral history, and/or historical analysis. While trying to decide which method to use, it was important to me to make use of biblical stories (because of my abiding love of these stories and the inspiration they have always provided) while simultaneously including the everyday stories of me and my mother. I decided to use Weems (1988/2005, 2004, 2005) as part of the guiding framework for this inquiry because her method of practicing womanist theology combines feminist biblical criticism with African American oral traditions which emphasize storytelling and drama. Her work also not only makes room for black female voices in religious arenas, where they have been strangely absent, but it also seeks to genuinely create "a place for everyone in the Kingdom" (Weems, 1988/2005, p. x). Her work has two main

thrusts: (1) opening an avenue for missing modern African American female voices in religious books by combining a womanist critical perspective with biblical criticism, and (2) examining women's relationships with each other by bringing together biblical stories of ancient women and auto/biography.

As Weems (1988/2005) was completing seminary in 1989, she browsed the bookshelves of mainstream, feminist, African American, and Christian bookstores for stories of women she could recognize and a God she could trust, but was unable to find stories fitting this description. With encouragement from a friend, she set out to write the books she wanted to read. She wanted to write religious books with African American women in mind. Although today we can find many such books in the bookstores, her books are still easily distinguishable from the current borage of books by mainstream evangelical authors such as, T.D Jakes (1995, 1998), Sertia Jakes (1999), and Michelle McKinney Hammond (1999, 2000) who reduce Christianity and women to a set of rules, that if applied properly, result in a lifetime of peace and happiness. Unlike these authors, Weems (1988/2005, 2004, 2005) takes a distinct womanist approach to Christianity and the bible. For example, she notes that most women portrayed in the bible are depicted as "thoroughly selfless or resolutely wanton" (p. ix) which gives the impression that God thinks women must be one or the other. Therefore, Weems (1988/2005, 2004) attempts to wrestle stories of biblical women from male narrators of the bible and draws conclusions from both information contained within and missing in the text. Black women make up a majority of

most black church congregations. They dutifully listen to sermons, bible studies, and lectures from black male preachers/teachers. Many dutifully regurgitate what those male preachers/teachers have taught them. Still, there are those who feel their souls “have remained starved for a new revelation on the role of women in salvation history,” and feel that “surely, God did not mean for us to be a footnote to redemption” (Weems, 1988/2005, p. ix). Weems’ (1988/2005, 2004, 2005) works meets this need.

Another unique aspect of Weem’s (1988/2005, 2004, 2005) work is her ability, through the analysis of biblical stories about ancient women, to give us glimpses into how women feel about themselves. This is accomplished by showing women in relationship with one another and focusing on their treatment of each other. Their treatment of other women gives us key indications about deeply internalized, often negative, views of many women. After writing *Just a Sister Away*, Weems (1988/2005) said she never dreamed of the criticism she would receive by asking new questions of sacred texts. But, more overwhelmingly she received letters and emails of hope. Many women and men were inspired and liberated by her critical “reimaginings of women’s lives” (Weems, 1988/2005, p. xv). This reimagining is needed for women in the church to take back their power and voice, and I want to add to the growing body of work promoting this empowerment.

### **Auto/Biographical Spiritual Inquiry**

*...I wrote Just a Sister Away searching for a way to color outside the lines when interpreting traditional sacred stories.... (Weems, 1988/2005, p. xiii)*

In searching for a method of inquiry, it was important for me to find a method which made room for my subjective experiences, allowed me to remain undivided, appreciated my African American spirituality, and provided a place for black female voices to be heard without impediment. He and Phillion (2008) showcase research, mainly from women, which demonstrates personal, passionate, and participatory inquiry. In the forward to the He and Phillion's (2008) book, Ayers (2008) states:

We see a faith in people to name their own predicaments, to tell their own stories, to ask questions of the universe, fighting to make sense of it all as they construct their own lives. The researchers understand that to alienate people from their own judgments is to turn them into objects, to prevent people from naming their situations and entanglements and predicaments is a form of violence. (p. xi)

It is important for me to find a method of inquiry which makes room for my voice and my mother's voice – both the voices of black women who have been deeply influenced by our spirituality. To do otherwise would cause me to deny who I am, thus becoming divided – always denying a piece of myself for the sake of others. To me, this denial is an act of violence because it robs me of my voice and serves as yet another example of stifled black women voices. This level of



pent up frustration, on occasion and often unwittingly, can cause me to “do violence” (Palmer, 1998) to others whether it is in the form of harsh words or an inability to fully engage with others. Traditionally, academia has not been open to the voices of black women and especially not to narratives about spirituality (Pollard & Welch, 2006). Scholars, such as He and Phillion (2008), are opening space for qualitative inquiry methods which are genuinely personal, passionate, and participatory. This space is exactly what I was seeking when I reviewed methods of inquiry.

In addition to the personal, passionate, and participatory inquiries described in He and Phillion’s (2008) book of the same name, I read about the following forms of qualitative inquiry research: scholarly personal narrative (Nash, 2004), spiritual inquiry (Llewellyn, 2006), autoethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2003), and narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Each is briefly described below.

The cornerstone of scholarly personal narrative (Nash, 2004) is an “unabashed, up-front admission” that the researcher’s “own life tells a story (or series of stories) that...can deliver to your readers those delicious aha! moments of self and social insight that are all too rare in more conventional forms of research” (p. 24). This methodology requires the researchers to deeply mine their life experiences, beliefs, and values in order to connect with the reader and create an opportunity for change in both the reader and researcher. The end product could take on a variety of the formats (memoirs, autobiographies, personal

narratives, personal essays, etc.) depending on the wishes and needs of the researcher. The key to the entire process is to take the “raw materials of life” (day-to-day experiences) and reflect inwardly, at least initially (Nash, 2004, p. 27). Herein lays the crux of validity and truth in this form of researcher. Nash (2004) states that this personal form of writing is only valid when the researcher takes those “raw materials of life” and works hard to make personal meaning out of them, a personal meaning that is also meaningful to the reader. Nash (2004) argues that stories can be considered true based on many different criteria-- aesthetically, scientifically, philosophically, theologically, etc. Yet, what makes a story valid for all at all times is not an empirically-based scientific test that would enable the reader to make predictions, rather truth and validity in scholarly personal narrative is found in “what works best for the narrator and the reader in the never-ending quest to find and construct narratives of meaning, both for self and others” (p. 33). Thus validity in scholarly personal narrative is a negotiation between the reader and writer.

Nash (2004) also warns against telling self-indulgent stories with “no explicitly intended meaning for the readers” (p. 27-28). There are many other avenues for this form of communication in our society today. Rather, he elaborates that scholarly personal narrative is meant to help readers by informing their perspective. Scholarly personal narrative is not meant to solely benefit the writer, but it is also intended to aid the reader as well. In fact, Nash (2004) contends that if this interplay does not occur, then it is not valid.

Llewellyn's (2006) goal in spiritual inquiry is to use spirituality as a way of knowing and being that enables educators to re-imagine school as places of education focuses on enhancing "one's life journey" (p. 108). Spirituality is not to be simply viewed as another pedagogical technique to be used to improve teachers and teaching. More precisely, it should be viewed as quintessential to the very being of a good teacher. Llewellyn's (2006) approach to spiritual inquiry mingles her spirituality and pedagogy by crafting an educational memoir after recollecting a lifetime of defining moments which she terms kairotic moments. She uses the term kairotic to denote a biblical notion of time – periods of significance rather than chronological, linear time streams. Her methodology focused on engaged contemplation (reminiscent to a meditation designed to focus on kairotic events), meditative writings, and exegesis (a critical interpretation of her text).

Although narrative inquiry is a bit more traditional than the aforementioned research methodologies, it does offer an additional piece not as readily apparent in scholarly personal narrative and spiritual inquiry. Clandinin & Connelly (2000) state that narrative inquiry is highly autobiographical because it requires the researcher "to articulate a relationship between one's personal interests and sense of significance and larger social concerns expressed in the works and lives of others" (p. 122). Not only does narrative inquiry offer a voice for the researcher, it also has an added dimension of community – direct overt community not discussed in the other methods. This methodology affords me

the luxury of including my voice and views while studying or including the experiences of others. Narrative inquiry fosters true relationship and community building between researcher and participants. There is a direct, overt interaction between the two. It is more than a writer-reader relationship. It actively seeks a response from the participant or reader. Thus, the researcher and participant are in a true dialogic communicative pattern.

Ellis and Bochner (2003) contend that the “third-person, passive voice standard” in academic publications reinforces a lack of accountability and inadvertently gives more credence to “abstract and categorical knowledge” (p. 201). Consequently, the personal and autobiographical is devalued as a form of expression. Through the use of story, Ellis and Bochner (2003) present their interpretation of autoethnography. They describe a student in search of a dissertation committee member who stumbles into Ellis’ office one day. The narrative describes the student’s journey in conjunction with the journey of two married professors (Ellis and Bochner) interested in autoethnography. Throughout the narrative, they weave in personal stories and more traditional theoried discourses. In one of the theoried discourses, Ellis and Bochner (2003) describe autoethnography as a “systematic sociological introspective and emotional recall to try to understand an experience” the researcher has lived through (p. 206). Additionally, they explain that most social scientists do not write well enough, are unwilling to engage in sufficient levels of introspection, and/or have an inability to succumb to the vulnerability required to make

autoethnography meaningful and impactful. Consequently, the rewards of deeper self-understanding and writing to change the world (Pipher, 2006) will be missed. Autoethnographic texts are written in first-person and can appear in a variety of formats – poetry, fiction, novels, personal essays, journals, memoirs, etc. Ellis and Bochner (2003) further elaborate that these texts “contain action, dialogue, emotion, embodiment, spirituality, and self-consciousness” (p. 209) that are influenced by the relationships, personal histories, social structures, and cultures of the writers.

In the end, I decided to utilize an amalgamation of the aforementioned methodologies which I term auto/biography spiritual inquiry. Below I highlight the major aspects of my auto/biographical spiritual inquiry. Because the nature of spirituality requires us to delve into thoughts, attitudes, values, and beliefs held in our inmost being, the nature of the narrative is intensely personal. Thus, the researcher and the subject are one. My form of auto/biographical spiritual inquiry required me to engage in intense personal introspection. This introspection was achieved by reviewing past and current journals along with answering questions and completing writing exercises found in Renita Weems’ (1997/2005) *Just a Sister Away: Understanding the Timeless Connection Between Women of Today and the Women of the Bible*, Nan Phifer’s (2002) *Memoirs of the Soul: Writing Your Spiritual Autobiography* and Elizabeth J. Andrew’s (2005) *Writing the Sacred Journey: The Art and Practice of Spiritual Memoir*, both recommended as starting points in Nash’s (2004) *Liberating Scholarly Writing*. Later, I developed

further questions based on where I felt a deep need. As for my mother, I asked probing questions that sought to bring out stories which reflected her deeply held thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes. I also asked my mother some of the same questions referenced in the above books. My mother and I created a sort of book club by reading Weem's *Just a Sister Away* (1988/2005), *Showing Mary* (2005), and *What Matters Most* (2004) and discussing the questions at the end of each section. These discussions also provided material for stories.

Spiritual inquiry has both autobiographical and biographical elements (taken from scholarly personal narrative, autoethnography, and narrative inquiry) that will be used to describe my personal history (family, cultural, educational, religious and social backgrounds), classroom experiences, and other related situations. I also included similar experiences from my mother. Her portion of the inquiry was biographical in nature and relates more to narrative inquiry because I am no longer the subject, but now become the researcher while still engaging fully with my subject. The resulting stories became a true mixture of researcher-subject narratives.

Spiritual inquiry is not merely another tool to improve teaching. Instead it seeks to tie my life journey to my life's vocation—teaching—and investigate the impact of spirituality in classroom practice and interactions. Just as Llewellyn (2006) uses biblical concepts, in her case the biblical concept of time, I also used the bible as an aid in analysis. In the womanist theological tradition of Weems (1988/2005, 2004, 2005), I utilized biblical stories, interpreted through a

womanist lens, to analyze and explain the stories of me and my mother. Only stories that have an ability to impact the perspective of others (Baldwin, 2005) and contain a certain universal element were included.

The stories used in Chapter 4 were generated after reading the commentary about biblical women in the works of Weems (1988/2005, 2004, 2005) and the Women's Bible Commentary (Newsom & Ringe, 1998). My mother and I read Weems' work (1988/2005, 2004, 2005), reviewed portions of the Women's Bible commentary, and selected stories which most naturally appealed to us. She and I both discussed the major themes of the stories that appealed to us and how we each related to them personally. Then, we were able to see parallel themes in our lives and the lives of the women portrayed in the biblical narratives. All narratives included a retelling of biblical stories utilizing a womanist theological framework and personal stories about our spiritual experiences as they relate to education and our ability to maintain hope in hopeless situations.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE PERSISTENT KNOCK: OUR STORIES

*And suppose he calls out from his bedroom, 'Don't bother me. The door is locked for the night, and my family and I are all in bed. I can't help you.' But I tell you this--though he won't do it for friendship's sake, if you keep knocking long enough, he will get up and give you whatever you need because of your shameless persistence." (Luke 11:7-8 New International Version)*

The persistent knock in the story told by Jesus represents repeated attempts to meet needs. Like the persistent knock mentioned above, these stories represent one of many attempts from African American women to tell their stories and have them heard by the larger society. Each group of stories consists of three parts: the biblical story coupled with background information to help contextualize the story during biblical times, a story from me or my mother labeled as Valerie's Story or Evelyn's Story, and a reflection using a womanist theological framework.

#### **Queen Vashti's Exile: A Story of Courage**

*But when they conveyed the king's order to Queen Vashti, she refused to come. This made the king furious and he burned with anger. (Esther 1:12 New Living Translation)*

King Xerxes I, also known as Ahasuerus, was the fifth king of ancient Persia and Media from 486-465 B.C.E. Persia, at this time, was considered a world power. Consequently, King Xerxes I was one of the wealthiest men in the



world, and Vashti, as his Queen, would have enjoyed immense riches and luxury. Queen Vashti's story takes place during a great 180 day celebration Persian kings often held before going off to war. Historians say that the six month celebration was more like a battle strategy planning session. During celebrations like these, it was common for women and men to be entertained in separate areas of the palace. So, it is likely that Queen Vashti was hosting a vast celebration for women of the palace and wives of other prominent men. In 481 B.C.E., Xerxes I launched an attack against Greece and won a victory at Thermopylae and was defeated by Salamis in 480 B.C.E. Queen Vashti was disposed in 483/482 B.C.E. before his victories in Greece. Queen Esther, the namesake of the biblical book where Queen Vashti's story is found, became queen in 479 B.C.E. This story is an amalgamation of Queen Vashti's story in the book of Esther of the Bible (found in Esther 1-2:4), my imagination, and biblical commentaries (Weems, 1988/ 2005 and Crawford, 1992/1998).

### **Vashti's Victory: Biblical Story**

King Xerxes I of Persia and Media wanted to expand his vast kingdom. He decided to go to war to conquer Greece. Like many kings of his day, he threw an 180 day celebration at his winter palace in Susa to demonstrate his vast wealth and his ability to undertake such a military feat. Military officers from Persia and Media along with princes and nobles from his provinces were invited. Towards the end of the celebration, Xerxes held a seven-day feast to which he invited all men, from nobles to commoners. Feeling generous, he decreed that all should be

able to drink as much of the king's wine as they pleased. This was an uncommon decree to make during his time. Typically, others were only allowed to drink when the king was drinking or when he made a toast. To further emphasize his wealth, all were served using intricately designed golden goblets.

Simultaneously, Xerxes I's wife, Queen Vashti, gave a banquet for all the women of the royal palace.

On the seventh day of the feast, Xerxes, in a drunken stupor, sent eunuchs (some of his most trusted personal advisers, who just happened to be castrated because they also spent a lot of time around the women in the king's harem) to bring Queen Vashti to him with the royal crown on her head. To those sitting around he him, he bragged, "She is the most beautiful thing you have ever seen. Why even her name means 'desired'. For she will be desired by every man here, but she is mine alone." In their drunkenness, the men around him roared in laughter and anticipation. "You'll see...She is beauty incarnate and she will bear my son. I am a man to be envied by all."

Biztha, one of Xerxes' eunuchs, entered the royal lady's chambers where Queen Vashti was holding her banquet. Like the great hall, it was adorned with white cotton curtains tied with white linen cords and purple ribbons fastened to silver rings embedded in marble pillars. Queen Vashti was reclined on a golden couch just behind a beautiful mosaic made of marble, mother-of-pearl and other precious stones. Other guests were lounging on gold and silver couches like

Queen Vashti. There were dancers whirling around the room and servants silently moving among those reclined on couches and others standing.

Queen Vashti immediately spotted Biztha when he entered the chambers and knew Xerxes must have another ridiculous request. She would not be deceived again. The last time Xerxes sent Zethar, Zethar had told her that the king requested the presence of her sister. Apparently, he wanted to prove to other nobleman that Nebuchadnezzar's granddaughters were some of the most beautiful women in the world, but she wasn't aware of his true motives until her sister returned an hour later stripped of her clothing and barely able to walk. Eyeing Biztha, she made up her mind to no longer bow to his whims and submit herself or anyone else to humiliation. She and her cohorts were worthy of respect even if they were women.

Bowing deeply, Biztha greeted her with his weaselly smile and said, "Queen Vashti..."

Nodding slightly, Queen Vashti said, "Yes, Biztha."

"The honorable King Xerxes I requests your presence in the great hall. I have brought the royal crown so you can be properly adorned." As he reached to place the crown on her head, he said, "May I escort you?"

As she rose from the golden couch she touched the jewel encrusted crown Biztha just placed on her head. It reminded her of who she was and the respect to which she was entitled. "No, Biztha, I will not go." Perplexed, Biztha pleading reminded her that what King Xerxes wants, he always gets.

"Is the king drunk?" demanded Queen Vashti.

"It is a time of celebration, my queen, and the king has pronounced a decree that all may enjoy his wine at anytime. Of course, the king is in high spirits."

"All the more reason not to go. Tell the king that I will not come to be humiliated in front of a hall of drunken men. I have spoken." Biztha bowed to the queen and turned to leave.

Anxious Biztha entered the great hall and scurried along the far right side up to the king's table and whispered in the king's ear. "What! How dare she defy me! I am the king of all Persia and Media and soon to be Greece. I'm king of the world!" Suddenly looking around and seeing the stunned faces of noblemen around him and embarrassed by Queen Vashti's obvious refusal to parade in front of these nobleman, he had Carcas send them away. Then barked, "Carcas, send Memucan, Tarshish, and Marsena to me immediately." They were his wisest advisers and came to his side immediately.

With anger and fury flashing in his eyes, Xerxes said "Queen Vashti has refused to come! What can I do? I can't have these military leaders thinking I am weak because I cannot even control my own wife! What penalty does the law provide for a queen who refuses to obey her king?"

Memucan, Tarshish, and Marsena looked at each other confused because they knew what the king said was true, but they also knew of the king's extreme

fondness for Queen Vashti. Besides, there was no law which addressed such a refusal.

Memucan, with a sudden flash of insight, said, "Queen Vashti has not only wronged you, King Xerxes, but she has also wronged every citizen of your empire. Now women everywhere will think they can defy their husbands when they learn of Queen Vashti's actions." The other advisers nodded in agreement, and the king's eyebrows raised in interest.

The king leaned in and said, "Tell me more."

Memucan was only too happy to comply, "Wives all over the empire will start to treat their husbands the same way, and there will be no end to their contempt for us. King, you need to issue a law to be declared all over Persia and Media which cannot be revoked. The law should forever banish Queen Vashti from your presence. When women and men hear of the law, women will see what happened to Vashti and have proper respect for their husbands. Once she is banished, you can find a wife more suitable to your tastes."

Liking Memucan's reasoning, Xerxes said, "Make it so." Letters were sent to all parts of his empire, and Queen Vashti was banished.

### **A Day in Court: Valerie's Story**

The message said to meet at the old Fullerton City Hall main courtroom at 9:00 am. I was over an hour late as I rushed up the stone steps. The courtroom had large stained glass-like windows and wooden benches. It reminded me more of a church than a courtroom. The only other two times I had been in this

courtroom was for a school field trip and reporting for jury duty. Ironically, I brought one of my business law classes to see justice at work in the Fullerton County court system. I quickly scanned the room to find a place to sit. The half-full courtroom was scattered with many black professionals from Fullerton, most of whom I knew.

Sitting down I quickly surmised that I had only missed the opening statements and was listening to the plaintiff's first witness, my sorority sister, Diane Luke. She was the reason I was there. Her church had held a prayer vigil for the success of her trial and had sent out messages for us to attend the trial and show our support. Diane was a retired teacher who ran for the school board and had already served two terms. However, during her third term, officials in Fullerton County petitioned the Georgia State Legislature to increase the school board membership from five to seven. The petition, with the help of our local representative, succeeded. This action required redistricting and new elections. The subsequent redistricting and elections shortened Diane's current school board term by two years. Diane was suing the Fullerton County Board of Elections because she believed they had unfairly shortened her term as an elected official. The voters had elected her for four years, not two. But we all knew the actions were really politically motivated because there were those who wanted Diane and two other board members removed. Diane and another member were both black women and the third person was a white male who had also lost favor in the community. In the words of many white people around town, they

were all considered trouble-makers, and the Fullerton County Board of Education would operate much better without them. I had heard some of the conversations.

As I listened to Diane and one of the other ousted board members testify, I thought her lawyer's line of questioning made sense. There was almost a palatable feeling among most of the other black people in the courtroom that this case was going well. That feeling only grew stronger as the defense called their witnesses, several of whom really could not defend their actions. The defense never addressed the real question: what was the justification for nullifying an election with a law passed by a set of legislators unfamiliar with Fullerton County Schools? Now, I understand there are circumstances where the will of the majority is sought at the expense of a minority, and we need to use laws or supreme court rulings to overturn such unjust situations. Yet, in this situation, it was clear to me that a bunch of good ole boys had concocted a plan to rid the county of these three troublesome figures. Intimidation through fear was not feasible, so they used legal measures within their grasps.

Defense witnesses fumbled over words and failed to present their positions clearly. So when the verdict was handed down by the judge, imagine my surprise, our surprise, when he ruled in favor of the defense. The judge declared that the Fullerton County Board of Elections had acted within its legal bounds. It felt like a blow to the stomach. The evidence was clear. I felt like I did when I watched the OJ Simpson trial. Each day I would watch the trial during

the day and listen to the news reports at night. Often the nightly news reports made me feel like I had watched something else entirely. Their interpretation of gestures, words, phrases, and facial expressions were totally different from my interpretations of what I had seen. How could such a clear-cut case lose? I could feel hope slipping away, but fortunately for me and our community, Diane did not need this decision in the Fullerton County Superior Court. She appealed her case all the way to the Georgia Supreme Court, and the decision was eventually reversed. She returned to her position on the board which she still holds today.

### **Reflection**

These two stories represent women speaking truth to power, especially patriarchal power structures. Gill (2003) asserts that Queen Vashti's story "addresses the issue of women who are still controlled by patriarchal customs and cultures in our contemporary societies" (p. 11). Queen Vashti courageously spoke up for herself and her self-respect. She was willing to face death in order not be exploited by the patriarchal power structure of the day. Like Vashti, Diane Luke would not allow her seat on the board of education to be stolen by political willing-and-dealing. She fought for her rights all the way to the Georgia Supreme Court. Dorothy Height is a historical figure who also stood against patriarchal forces to defend a women's right to speak during the ceremony at the March on Washington. Although, her fight was lost that day, she never quit fighting for justice.



All three of these women and their courage serve as an example to all female educators. Often times, a school's teaching staff is primarily female while the administrative staff is predominately male. This situation is even more true in secondary and post-secondary schools. This sometimes leaves female educators at the mercy of male-dominated decisions, and it can be difficult for female teachers to speak out against injustice. Queen Vashti, Diane Luke, and Dorothy Height model "what we know as God's call to resist oppression" an give us and "example of what it means to be able to say 'no' to oppression and to have faith enough to accept the consequences" (Gill, 2003, pp. 12-13). As a teacher, I know I can learn from their examples and begin to speak out more.

### **Queen of Sheba: A Story of a Beautiful Mind**

*When the queen of Sheba heard of Solomon's fame, which brought honor to the name of the Lord, she came to test him with hard questions. (1 Kings 10:1)*

Newsom and Ringe (1992/1998) say the kingdom of Sheba was somewhere on the southern end of the Arabia peninsula, near modern day Yemen. While others (Weems, 1988/2005; Gill, 2000) suggest her kingdom was somewhere in modern day Ethiopia. Despite the actual location, what is clear is that the Queen of Sheba decided to take an arduous journey through the desert to meet King Solomon because of his alleged wisdom. After reading her story from a womanist and justice perspective, it is my contention that the Queen of Sheba may have made this journey because of her quest for knowledge. She herself was intelligent and knowledgeable. She must have been able to challenge

King Solomon in all his God-given wisdom. The following fictionalized letter is an attempt to understand the inner working of such a beautiful mind and explain how the quest for knowledge would have driven her to make such a difficult journey. The fictionalized letter is based on the account of the Queen of Sheba's journey to meet King Solomon of Israel in I Kings chapter 10 and 2 Chronicles Chapter 9 in the New Living Translation of the Bible. Commentary from Weems (1988/2005) and Gill (2000) is also used to create this letter from the Queen of Sheba to her mother who remained in the queen's homeland, Sheba. Her story can be found in 1 Kings 10:1-10, 13:2 and in Chronicles 9:1-9, 12.

### **Letter from Sheba: Biblical Story**

Lately the queen had been hearing astonishing stories about King Solomon of Israel. At his birth, she had heard of a prophet named "Beloved of the Lord" and his kingdom prospered beyond anything ever seen before. Some said he was building a fabulous temple to his god and even his servants drank from golden goblets. But what intrigued her the most was that many said he was the wisest man in the world. That fact intrigued her more than the prospect of opening new trade routes with his country. She felt sure that the spices, gold, and precious jewels were more than enough to convince him to enter into a trade agreement with her country. After all, she had engaged in diplomatic missions like this before, and she was always successful. But, she knew if he was as wise as the reports portended, his knowledge would be the greatest asset she would bring back.

She thought of the story about the two prostitutes. Two prostitutes came before him with one baby each claiming the baby to be her own. Knowing the real mother would relinquish her rights rather than have her baby die, King Solomon ordered a soldier to slice the baby in half so each woman could have an equal piece of the baby. Exactly as he thought, the real mother begged him to let the other woman have the baby, and he gave the baby to the woman who was willing to relinquish her rights.

As her mile-long caravan reached Jerusalem, the anticipation within her swelled to the point where she thought her heart might explode. King Solomon's envoys soon approached their caravan and led her immediate party into the gates of the city. His palace was indeed impressive and bespoke a king of great wealth and influence. His god had indeed blessed him and his kingdom.

When she met with Solomon, The Queen of Sheba talked to him about everything that was on her mind. He answered all her questions and riddles, and nothing seemed to be too hard for him to explain to her. Amazed by his wisdom, the organization of his officials, the splendid clothing of his servants, and the luxury surrounding them, she said:

Everything I heard in my country about your achievements and wisdom is true! I didn't believe what was said until I arrived here and saw it with my own eyes. In fact, I had not heard of half of your great wisdom! It is far beyond what I was told. How happy your people must be! What a privilege for your official to stand here day after day, listening to your

wisdom! Praise the Lord your God, who delights in you and has placed you on the throne as king to rule for him. Because God loves Israel and desires this kingdom to last forever, he has made you king over them so you can rule with justice and righteousness. (2 Chronicles 9:5-8)

Then she gave him the 9000 pounds of gold, precious jewels, and spices she brought with her. The spices were a welcome gift because the land of Israel had never before seen such spices. In response to the Queen of Sheba's lavish giving, King Solomon gave her whatever she asked. The Queen of Sheba returned to her own land with double the gifts she had given to Solomon.

### **Girls Doing Boys Work: Valerie's Story**

From behind my desk, I quickly scanned the room to see who was actually working on the project. I saw two football players who were not working with their heads on their desks and one boy who claimed to possess so much "pretty boy swag" that he was unable to work on his assignments consistently. Most of the other students were reviewing their stock information on the screen or comparing stock market game rankings. Instead of calling on the three non-working students individually, I decided to make a general class announcement. "Please remember, your project is due on Friday. You only have three more days to complete your portfolios and obtain the appropriate information. Make sure you review your project sheet and the rubric. You cannot afford to waste time. This project is ten-percent of your grade." I waited to see if I saw some movement among the three non-working boys in my class. I was lucky this time. The two

football players heads popped up and "pretty boy swag" rolled his chair closer to his neighbor's computer and asked him a question. Good, I thought. I didn't have to move to Plan B to get them working.

As I walked around the room helping students find the correct information and review project assignment requirements, I saw Joe, one of the football players, sitting next to Anna. At first, I thought maybe he was just asking her a quick question, but he never rolled back to his desk. On closer inspection, I saw that she seemed to be doing his project for him. Anna said, "It's really not that hard. All you have to do is copy this and paste it here in Word." As she said this, she was pasting the required research information to a template in Word she had created for her project. Joe feigned ignorance. He pretended not to understand what she did. So, Anna did another one and she proceeded to do the rest of it for him.

Furious, I quickly looked for the other two students who weren't working and saw them employing the same strategy with two other girls. Before I knew it, I lost my temper, slammed a book on my desk and said, "I can't believe you girls! These boys are lazy and haven't been doing their work and now you are doing it for them. What are you thinking? Are these the kind of boys you want to date? Are these the type of men you want to marry? Why would you do your work and someone else's too? Some of you are even putting your own grades at risk by simply letting these boys copy your work. You would take a zero for a boy who is too lazy to do his own work?" Just as quickly as I lost my temper, I

snapped back to reality and looked at the faces of my students. They looked strangely confused which made me feel confused. What did they have to be confused about? But they looked as if what they were doing was the norm. They had always done it this way. Girls were always willing to do the boys' work, even at the peril of their own grade. Stunned at the lack of reaction from my female students, I went back to my desk to ponder what just happened. It was only two minutes until the bell rang. When the bell rang, they all bounded by my desk and said their normal "see you later," "bye, Miss Moss," and "see ya tomorrow."

Still thinking about what just happened, I pondered was their behavior something new or had I seen it before. I remembered Alice, a cute student who graduated a couple of years ago. Alice was smart, creative and beautiful. But she was so wrapped up in her modeling career that she neglected her studies and often pretended to be dumb during class. She would often stop by during my planning period or after school and we would talk. Even when she graduated, she would come back and discuss her life with me. She was obsessed with her weight and finding a rich man to marry. I always felt like she had failed to use her intelligence wisely and was wasting her time and brain energy trying to find a rich boy to marry, but her mom was the same way and had done the same thing. I often wanted to tell her the Anna Julia Cooper quote that I clung to when it came to men: "how shall I so cramp, stunt, simplify and nullify myself as to make me eligible to the honor of being swallowed up into some little man?" but

it "now rests with the man as to how he can so develop his God-given powers as to reach the ideal of [this] generation of women...?" (p. 70-71). Here was a woman who lived in the late 19th century and early to mid-twentieth century-- not exactly a time of extreme feminism-and cherished learning so much that she earned her doctorate at age 63 while raising the children of her brother. She had enough guts to stand up to male chauvinism and demanded a man equal to her own fierce intelligence. How could a girl in the 21st century "so cramp, stunt, simplify, and nullify" herself that she would ultimately place herself at the mercy of a rich husband? However, part of me knew it would be wasted on her because society and her mother had thoroughly convinced her that to marry rich was the only way.

As I thought about Alice, I thought maybe it was a white girl thing. But just as quickly as the thought entered my mind, I thought of a black girl from last period who had just copied her project on a flash drive for "pretty boy swag." I knew this was a phenomena common to all high school aged girls because I had also seen Latina students doing work for boys. I thought back to my own education--had I or any of my friends acted the way my students do? No. We cherished being smart and pretty much only associated with smart boys. We really didn't give boys who weren't taking the same type of classes as us the time of day. We would have never given a football player or a boy with "pretty boy swag" our homework to copy. The boys we were surrounded with never even dreamed to ask to copy our homework. My friends and I, on some level

inherently respected intelligence and wisdom--much like the Queen of Sheba. We didn't take 1500 mile arduous journeys in search of wisdom, but we worked hard to learn more. I was so obsessed with going to Georgetown University and majoring in international relations that I begged my parents to send me to summer camps there so I would have a better chance at being admitted. I took all the right classes and would have been a slave to the 24-hour news cycle if it had existed in the 1980s. But I had to make due with Newsweek, Time, USA Today, and the nightly national news. I would use my allowance to buy books about world history and SAT preparation. In high school, I never would have "cramped, stunted, simplified, and nullified" myself to be "swallowed up by some little man."

I was ready to pat myself on the back when I realized that I dated a "little man" in college, and then I had indeed "cramped, stunted, simplified, and nullified" myself and he nearly swallowed me up. I'm really not sure why I shrank. Maybe, like my female students, at the time, the "love" of a man was more important than knowledge and wisdom. Maybe I yielded to cultural forces? Maybe I failed to surround myself with those same type of wise and intelligent friends I grew up with? I definitely dated someone who wasn't my equal. People (family, friends, professors, and parents) around me saw it immediately. But I was blind for four years. Looking back on it now, I think I was just in love with the idea of being in love. In combination with relatively nice commentary from my mom and sudden revelations based on the following



scriptures, I was able to free myself from the "little man" who nearly swallowed me up.

### **Reflection**

Looking back at my experiences, the experiences of my female students, and the story of the Queen of Sheba, I have realized that it's important to surround yourself with wise people. A verse in the bible says: *Walk with the wise and become wise; associate with fools and get in trouble (Proverbs 13:20 New Living Translation)*. I am reminded that even if I am unwise, wisdom always stands knocking. It's never too late to open the door and let her in, even if you previously slammed the door shut. I did.

*Wisdom has built her house; she has carved its seven columns.*

*She has prepared a great banquet, mixed the wines, and set the table.*

*She has sent her servants to invite everyone to come.*

*She calls out from the heights overlooking the city.*

*"Come in with me," she urges the simple.*

*To those who lack good judgement, she says*

*"Come, eat my food,*

*and drink the wine I have mixed.*

*Leave your simple ways behind, and begin to live;*

*learn to use good judgment."*

(Proverbs 9:1-6 New Living Translation)

Now, I can appreciate the beauty of the story of the Queen of Sheba meeting King Solomon. She was a woman of means who so valued wisdom and intelligence that she was willing to travel 1500 miles from her kingdom to determine if King Solomon was as wise as legends said. She had enough wisdom and intelligence to recognize it when she saw it in others (Weems, 1988/2005). Beyond the recognition of wisdom and intelligence, she also understood that it was God who granted Solomon this wisdom which resulted in blessings for his kingdom. Two key lessons in this story for me are: (1) the importance of the willingness to work hard to gain knowledge and wisdom; and (2) the importance of women not succumbing to cultural forces which tell them that they must shrink in order to enjoy the companionship of a man. I would have thought that this last message was no longer needed. But I have seen how my current students are impacted by it and how I was impacted by it in college.

### **The Gentile Woman: A Story of Persistence**

*"Dear woman," Jesus said to her, "your faith is great. Your request is granted."*

*And her daughter was instantly healed. (Matthew 15:28 New Living Translation)*

This story of the Gentile Woman is found both the books of Matthew and Mark in the Bible. The woman is described as a Gentile, someone of non-Jewish descent. Mark describes her as a woman of Syrian Phoenician descent which alludes subtly to her mixed race heritage. In the book of Matthew, she is described as a Canaanite woman who serves to reinforce her situation as an outsider to the

Jewish people despite living in the land of Israel. Her ethnicity itself would label her a pagan and an enemy of the Jews (Gill, 2000). Strangely, after teaching and healing people in Galilee (a primarily Jewish region), Jesus journeys to the city of Tyre (primarily non-Jewish region). It is during his time in Tyre that Jesus encounters the persistent Gentile Woman. Traditional commentaries commend the Gentile Woman for her faith (Barnes, 1884; Mays, 1988). Yet, commentaries with a more gender and ethnic-conscious focus, suggest that it is also about her encountering Jesus based on her own culture (Mills & Wilson, 1995; Levine, 1992/1998). Other commentaries (Gill, 2000) point to her perseverance despite being insulted and belittled. It is her perseverance concerning the healing of her child that caused her to continue to press for her miracle. Her story is found in Matthew 15:21-28 and Mark 7:24-30.

### **Help My Daughter: Bible Story**

I heard he was coming to our city, but then again, I had heard that he was always traveling around, even though mainly amongst his own people. But, Sarah insisted he was staying at Benjamin's house. Hope leapt in my heart that I could barely contain. Could he heal my daughter? If all the tales I'd heard were true, there is no doubt he could heal her. She was possessed by a demon which continually afflicts her by throwing her into these violent fits.

If anyone could help, it would be Jesus who had already healed many who were blind, lame, sick, and demon possessed. I even heard how he healed this Roman military commander's servant who was over five mile away. This

man was truly great! He could even heal at great distances! Running on my way to Benjamin's house, I ran into a large crowd. "Is that Jesus?" I asked one of the women at the edge of the gathering crowd.

"It is some of his disciples."

I had hoped for the Master himself, but if his disciples were all I would be able to get to, perhaps he taught them his healing powers. They would have to do. I struggled to get to the front of the crowd. Finally, reaching the front of the crowd, I saw a group of about ten men. In my desperation and hope, I cried out for them to heal my daughter.

Throwing myself at their feet, I yelled, "Have mercy on me, My Lords! If you are disciples of Jesus, heal my daughter."

I managed to grab the robes of one disciple. Immediately someone grabbed me and pulled me away saying, "Go away foolish woman. No one grabs the Master the way you did."

Undeterred, I ran around to the man whose robe I had grabbed and pleaded, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David! For my daughter is possessed by a demon that torments her severely" (Matthew 15:22, New Living Translation). Jesus looked at me and said nothing. Where was the compassion, the mercy, the grace I'd heard people talk about? His look was not mean, but I expected to see more, more, more...I don't really know what I expected. I was just sure he could heal my daughter. So I yelled out again, "O Son of David! Please! Please! You must heal my daughter. Have Mercy! Please help me!"

One of his disciples, I believe it was one who pulled me away from the Master's robe, said, "Master, tell her to go away. She is bothering us with all this begging."

Finally, the Master spoke. He said to me, "I was sent only to help God's lost sheep – the people of Israel" (Matthew 15:24, New Living Translation).

Desperate for his help, I threw myself at his feet and said, "Please help me!"

"Woman, it isn't right to take food from the children and throw it to the dogs" (Matthew 15:26, New Living Translation).

Shocked at his response and wondering why he was in this region if he weren't here to heal the sick and oppressed. Most of us weren't Jews, and he must have known that before he came to Tyre. Why would he come here if he didn't want to help us too? Then I said, "That's true, Lord, but even dogs are allowed to eat the scraps that fall beneath their master's table" (Matthew 15: 27, New Living Translation). I was determined that he was going to help me, too. If he healed others, Jewish or not, he would heal my daughter. That Roman officer's servant wasn't Jewish.

Helping me to stand, Jesus said, "Dear woman, your faith is great. Your request is granted."

Instantly, I knew it must be so. I thanked the Master and ran all the way home to find my daughter no longer demon possessed.

### **For My Daughter: Evelyn's Story**

She walked into the kitchen, shoulders slumped with dark circles under her eyes. From the look of her, I hoped the meeting had gone better than her demeanor implied. She had a wild flash in her eyes that typically meant anger. That look was not often in her eyes. But, being her mother for over thirty years, I knew all the looks she could give, even if they were not frequent looks. She sat down at the table across from her father as I stood at the sink, washing dishes. I started the conversation, "So how did the meeting go?"

"Well, ok. I guess." She went on to tell us about her meeting with the principal.

Overall, it did not seem to go too badly until she got one part of the story, and her father interrupted with, "You shouldn't have said that!" That flash of anger reappeared in her eyes. I stayed silent. She questioned her father about why she shouldn't have said what she did. He went on to explain that what she said was said from a position of weakness and it could cost her future promotions.

She exploded, "I'm tired of sitting around not expressing how I feel. I'm tired of always having to make accommodations for white people. We always have to be on guard about how they might take what we say the wrong way. Our voices have to be heard. And if this costs me. It costs me." Her father quietly tilted his head to the side and his facial expression read, "so be it."

But, she wasn't through. "They never try to see things through our lens.

It's always theirs and I'm sick of it. Look at how they've treated mom. They need her and only use her for her blackness. She can deal with the black parents. The black children. And even the black official on a committee from which the school is seeking approval. But we don't want to give her the more important responsibilities. Let's just keep her in her place. It's not fair. They have not given her the opportunities she deserves. They use her for their own benefits. How it best suits them. If we don't speak out now, we'll always be in the same spot."

As she spoke, my face got hot. She was right. But I knew, I had a role to play. I was paving a path for her. I was making a way in the wilderness for her. I was taking a backseat so one day she could have a seat in the front. Heck she could even own the bus if she wanted to. With tears rolling down my eyes, I said, "I know I haven't always been treated fairly. But I'm making room for you. I would endure anything, including being marginalized, just so you can have better. Have more. I would do it over and over again. I make room for you and others like you. You won't have to go through what I went through." Tears welled up in her eyes. I knew she understood, and I knew she knew I endured what I have because I love her. I have persevered so one day she would not have to be marginalized because of her race or gender.

### **Reflection**

Gill (2000) questions what Jesus was really trying to do in the Gentile Woman story. After all, Jesus insults this woman by comparing her to a dog; yet, in the end he heals the Gentile Woman's daughter because of her persistence.

Gill (2000) concludes: "Jesus, a divine man in a human body, reached beyond ethnicity, classism, and hatred and healed a demon possessed child because of the persistence and perseverance of a mother..." (p. 105). Thus, it seems the main point may be the persistence. However, I would also like to mention another element that is missing from Gill's commentary. That element is love. It is a love that results in people's willingness to do anything and endure anything for those they love.

Both of these stories have two common elements: persistence and love rooted in action. The gentile woman loved her daughter to the point where she was willing to risk ridicule. My mother loved me enough to put up with ill treatment in hopes that one day I or others would benefit from her sacrifices. Both women persist in their actions of love. As teachers we must examine our reasons for teaching. Is love somewhere in the mix? It could be love for students, learning, subjects, etc. If love is there, then maybe we will be willing to persist when all seems hopeless.

### **Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth: A Story of Heritage**

*This is the record of the ancestors of Jesus the Messiah, a descendant of David and of Abraham. (Matthew 1:1 New Living Translation)*

The Bible contains many sets of genealogies. However, in most of these genealogies women are not normally mentioned. Yet, in the book of Matthew, the author includes five women who are in the genealogy of Jesus. What makes the mention of several of their names even more remarkable is the fact that



several of these women were deemed unworthy by others and were not Jewish. Three such women are Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth. Bible scholars have speculated about the reason for the inclusion of their names in Jesus' genealogy. Perhaps it foreshadows Jesus' offer of salvation to the gentiles. Perhaps it demonstrates the ability of anyone, no matter how marginalized, to join the family of God. We may never truly know why their names were included. Consequently, we must attempt to make meaning for ourselves. For me, it demonstrates the value God places on women even in a culture which consistently devalued women and denied them of basic human rights. It also demonstrates how God looks out for the oppressed, especially those who are marginalized because of their race or ethnicity (these three women were not Jewish). God always has a place for everyone at the table of salvation, even those unjustly oppressed. Their inclusion in this genealogy reminds us that it is important to remember their stories because they serve as a reminder for those who are considered the "wretched of the earth." Their names are listed in Matthew 1:1-16.

### **A Bedtime Story: Biblical Story**

"Grandma I want you to tell me about the ancestors of Jesus. I like the way you do it better than Grandpa. He doesn't stop in the right places." No matter how many times I asked her to repeat our special version of Jesus' ancestors, she never got tired.

She smiled and began the recitation.

*"Abraham was the father of Issac.*

*Issac was the father of Jacob.*

*Jacob was the father of Judah and his brothers.*

*Judah was the father of the father of Perez and Zerah*

*whose mother was Tamar.*

*Perez was...*" (Matthew 1:2-3 New Living Translation)

"Wait a minute...You forgot our special part about Tamar," I said as I interrupted.

She chuckled as she said, "I just wanted to see if you were paying attention. Well let's see. Tamar was the courageous one who despite the death of two husbands and no children, she was determined to get her just due and had the twins Perez and Zerah." She began again:

*"Perez was the father of Hezron.*

*Hezron was the father of Ram.*

*Ram was the father of Amminadab.*

*Amminadab was the father of Nahshon.*

*Nahshon was the father of Salmon.*

*Salmon was the father of Boaz*

*whose mother was Rahab.*" (Matthew 1:3-5 New Living Translation)

"And Rahab was a gentile prostitute who helped Caleb overthrow Jericho. She was saved from the slaughter because of her faithfulness to our Lord and went on to live with Jews until she died," I said in a rapid fire of words.

"Wait a minute. Whose telling this ancestry?" she said with a grin. I just

looked up at her and smiled. She began again:

*“Boaz was the father of Obed*

*whose mother was Ruth. (Matthew 1: 5 New Living Translation)*

Ruth was faithful to Naomi. She gleaned in the fields of Boaz and won the heart of the richest man in Bethlehem. She never lost hope even when all seemed lost. I think that’s enough for tonight. We can finish tomorrow.”

“Nooooo. Our God loves all people, foreigners and women too. Doesn’t he, Grandma?”

“Yes, now it is time for you to go to sleep, little one.”

### **A Conversation with Nanny: Valerie’s Story**

“Well, let’s see. I started school when I was five years old. That would have been in... Let’s see, I was born in April of 1921. So that would have been in 1926. I remember it like it was yesterday. My Aunt Emma always made me five new cotton dresses for school each year. It was late September. We didn’t start school so early like ya’ll do.” There was a long pause and Nanny had this far away look in her eyes as she stared out of the big picture window next to her favorite chair.

“Nanny, I think you were about to tell me about your first day of school,” I reminded her. At this rate, I was definitely going to miss the movies at seven o’clock. My favorite actor, Robert Steven, was starring in a new action adventure called *Hot Boyz*.

“Oh, yeah. Because of the chill in the air, I was allowed to wear my yellow

Sunday sweater. Like, I said, I started first grade when I was five, but they didn't call it first grade back then. They called it 'primer' back in those days. I know you don't think it was unique that I started first grade at five. But, back then, there was no kindergarten or pre-school. You started school when you were six, and you began first grade or 'primer.' The school was about two blocks from my house. About as far as the Johnson's house down the street."

"Nanny, what kind of stuff did you learn," I asked impatiently. Boy, I was going to be here all night.

"Well, we learned our letters, counting, and drawing. The regular stuff. But what I remember most is that my three best friends, Sara, Vivian, and Loretta, all moved on to Ms. Hannah's class at the end of the year, but I had to stay behind in Ms. Whitaker's room. I didn't understand it at the time, and eventually grew to accept it without further question. But, now, I realize that I was kept back in the first grade because I simply wasn't old enough to move to the second grade. It certainly wasn't because I couldn't get my lesson like some of these hard-head-soft-behind children today. Second grade was where I began to realize that I was no dummy and that I was pretty smart when it came to getting my lesson. I remember Ms. Hannah bragging on me, in front of the whole class, about a report I had done on Indians. It was all neatly written and I had taken the time to draw a picture of an Indian. Just think. My first illustrated report. Boy, could I draw. She said my paper was 'a model to be followed by all.'"

Nanny stopped talking again. She was staring out of that picture window again. I sat up in my chair so I could see what she was looking at, but I never saw anything amazing outside. At this rate, we were sure to be here all night, especially if she kept up with the window staring.

Suddenly, she started again. "I remember the first time I got in trouble in school. For the most part I was quiet shy and very well behaved in school. That was expected of children in those days. You didn't sass your teachers or make fun of other kids. Well, I'll never forget that day. We were reciting our multiplication tables. Back then, you had to stand in front of the class and say all your multiplication tables. You would say -- 'ten times two is twenty; ten times three is thirty.' And so on. Well, I would snicker under my breath anytime someone forgot one. Really, I shouldn't have been laughing because each time you missed one, you were switched with a hickory or popped in the mouth. Well, the teacher noticed my mild amusement. When it was my turn, I'll never forget, I missed ten times ten. I knew it because I had said them three dozen times to my mamma last night. But standing in front of that room, my mind went blank as it does all too often now. Well, she let me have it. She popped me in the mouth and scolded me for making fun of other students."

My nanny, making fun of people. Even though the thought of it all was mildly amusing, I could still tell that this was going to be a long story. She had already been talking for over forty minutes, and she was only on the third grade. I could kill my professor. She must have known that making us interview an

elderly person was going to be a trying experience. Since it was an interview for school, Nanny had insisted that we sit in the parlor because “of course it was the only proper place to discuss such things.” Old people and all their strange ways. Even though as a child, I had always loved the beauty of the Queen Ann furniture and the Victorian blue walls and longed to have tea with my dolls in this room, I can say that now I was all too eager to escape these Victorian blue walls. The chair I’m sitting in is the most uncomfortable chair I have ever sat in. It forces you to sit up straight.

“Nanny, I can’t believe you got in trouble in school,” I said.

“Yes, child. And that wasn’t the only time either. Let’s see. In fourth grade, my teacher, Ms. Arlene, she played the piano. She kept me after school one day. I had asked to go to the bathroom. You make think this is... What’s that word you use all the time? Gross?”

Annoyed I said, “Nanny, the word is grodie. That’s the way we say gross now.”

“Well, you may think this is grodie, but we had about eight outhouses lined up out behind the school. There were four on one side and four on the other. One side was for girls and the other side was for boys. I had worn my new Sunday knickers because I wanted to show Sally the pretty red ribbons mamma had put in them. We didn’t have underclothes like you do today. We had knickers that came down to your knee. Instead of elastic at the knee and waist, my Sunday pair had ribbons laced through slits at the knee and at the waist.

Needless to say, it was hard to get all that undone, use the bathroom, and get back quickly. But, I didn't think I had taken that long. When I got back to the classroom, Ms. Arlene said that I had to stay for thirty minutes after school because I took so long. We got out of school at four o'clock, and I knew my two younger brothers would beat me home and tell mamma. When I finally got home, it was almost five o'clock and mamma met me at the door with a hickory. She spanked me and didn't ask me what I had done until she finished spanking me. You see, my mamma was a school teacher until she married daddy. Back in those days, once a woman teacher got married, she wasn't allowed to teach anymore. At least that's the way it was in North Carolina."

"Nanny, I didn't know that great grandmother was a teacher, too. Wow! You and Pop were teachers, and my mamma's a principal. Do you think I should major in education?"

"Baby, you can if you want to. But you've got more opportunity than we did. You can be pretty much whatever you want to be. Back then, if you wanted a decent job where you didn't have to work for white folks, teaching was your only option. Now let's see. Where was I?"

"Fifth grade, Nanny."

"Yes, fifth grade. Oh yeah. *Pandora's Box*. At the end of each school year, our school produced a series of operettas, one for each grade. We had one each night in the spring for two weeks. I always loved this time. Our parents would come and watch us. It was so much fun. Well, my grade was producing *Pandora's*

*Box.* I'll never forget Ms. Alice. She was the other fifth grade teacher across the hall. One day, she stuck her head in the door and said she needed two blacks to be bats."

"Wait a minute," I interrupted. "I thought you went to an all black school. I thought black folks and white folks didn't go to school together?"

"Baby, I did go to an all black school. But I was from a unique community. There were only two black families in the town I lived in. Of course, there were other black families, with students who came to my school, who lived in the county. If you weren't from my area, you couldn't tell the white folks from the black folks. Ever heard of 'passin'?"

"No, Nanny."

"Well, a lot of the kids in my school could have passed for white if everybody in my community didn't already know they were black. Back to Ms. Alice. My friend Vivian and I were the darkest ones in the fifth grade."

"But, Nanny, you're light-skinned. Look at how pale your legs are."

"Yes, baby, but I was still darker than most of my classmates. Back to my story. That ole teacher said she needed two black students to be bats and that Vivian and I would do. Needless to say, I was insulted. I just knew that when I told mamma what happened, she wouldn't allow me be in the operetta. But, I desperately wanted to be in the play even though I had been insulted. They were always so much fun, and I wanted to be a part of it. When I told mamma, she wasn't upset. Anyway, I didn't end up being a bat. I ended up with a singing



role. And if I must say so myself, I did an excellent job. I actually received a standing ovation.”

I had to get Nanny back on track or we were never going to finish this interview. “Nanny, what kind of classes did you take?”

Ignoring my question, she went on. “Let’s see. My sixth grade teacher was Ms. Flora Collins. She was the sister of my third grade teacher. And boy was she lazy. We use too...”

“But, Nanny, what about the classes?”

“Shush child. I’m getting to that part. We use to have a chalk board on three walls of our classroom, and she would fill all those boards with work for us. Then she’d sit there and read the newspaper. I guess there were bad teachers even back then. Well, anyway, we took classes like English, reading, arithmetic, health, geography, and history. Just like they have Georgia History here, we took North Carolina History. And I learned all sorts of stuff about the Indians, white folks, and blacks in North Carolina. I lived in a small town close to the coast, and they taught us about the slave ships and the white folks efforts to drive the Indians out west. It’s amazing the stuff I still remember. Baby, I know you’re getting tired of my ramblings; so I’ll go on.

I had my first male teacher, Mr. Yates, in the seventh grade. That was the year that I blossomed. Well, maybe blossomed isn’t the right word. I guess you could say that I gained some confidence in my abilities. We had chapel everyday, but on Fridays, in chapel, we were read our school newspaper. Mr. Yates picked

me to read the newspaper on Friday. I was scared out of my wits. You see, the high school and the Grady School, (that's what they called my school) would all be there at the same time. I guess there were over a thousand students there. Despite my fear, I got up on that stage and read that newspaper. At that moment, I realized that I could present myself well in public settings.

Now, let's see. Eighth grade. I remember being good at algebra and geometry, but I struggled with writing compositions. I remember one big project we had. We had to read five novels, five essays, and five poems, all by great classical authors. We memorized and recited a lot of poems in front of the class, too.

High school only went to the eleventh grade. I can remember taking biology and chemistry in high school. But I still struggled with those compositions. You know how people ask kids today what they are going to do after they graduate. Well, they did ask us such things. I was expected to go to college. There was absolutely no discussion about my plans after high school. I was expected to go to Hampton, Virginia State, Elizabeth City, Winston, Shaw, Saint Og, Benedict, or Fayetteville. These were the black colleges in my area. North Carolina A & T was another college, but it was an all boys school. Benedict was an all girls school. I chose to go to Elizabeth City. It was a state school, and I had a cousin who went there. Daddy worked at the fishery in the spring to earn enough money for me to go. My parents paid seventy-two dollars twice a year."

“Wow. That’s cheap.”

“Back then, it was a lot of money. I graduated high school in 1938, and back then it would have been like paying to go to the University of Georgia now. Now, that gets us up to college. I know you want to get to that picture show. Why don’t we finish tomorrow?”

“When did you meet Pop?”

“That’s another very long story,” Nanny sighed.

With a new fascination and excitement, I said, “Mom says you and Pop were married three years before your parents ever found out. How did you get away with that? Did you meet Pop at that all boys school? What did you call it? North Carolina T & A?”

“It was North Carolina A & T. Now don’t we seem so interested all of a sudden?” Nanny said with a twinkle in her eye.

“Nanny, I just never thought about you being a child. And I want to hear this story about you and Pop. Besides, the movie will still be there tomorrow.”

We talked late into the night while eating sweet potato pie and drinking milk. I realized that sometime we get too caught up with there here and now to appreciate the past stories of our elders. In a way, I’m glad my English teacher made this assignment. If she hadn’t, I may never have known all this cool stuff about my Nanny.

## Reflection

Both stories suggest the importance of sharing information and life experiences between generations. Each successive generation has a tendency to think that they are the first to journey down a particular path. However, as King Solomon is accredited with saying in the biblical book of Ecclesiastes: nothing is new under the sun (Ecclesiastes 1:9). We can learn from those who have gone before us. They can serve as our cheerleaders, mentors, and sustainers. I know that older teachers who served as my mentors would always say – if you stay in education long enough the pendulum will always swing back in the other direction. Secretly, they were telling me to hold on because things will always change, no matter how immovable we think the current situation is. Younger educators have much to learn from older educators despite the current trend of pushing older educators out of education.

### **Hagar: A Story of Persecution**

*Hagar used another name to refer to the Lord, who had spoken to her. She said, "You are the God who sees me." She also said, "Have I truly seen the One who sees me?" (Genesis 16: 13)*

Hagar is a character often evoked by womanist theologians and used as a symbol of the marginalized position of black women in American society (Weems, 1988/1998; Williams, 1994; Grant, 1989). Hagar has been identified with by many African American women because her story parallels the historical story of black women in America. Both were slaves. Both suffered sexual abuse

resulting in offspring from their masters. Both were resented by the slave master's wives because of the children she bore to the slave master's wife. Finally, both were cast out without any hope of any inheritance (Gill, 2000). She was an Egyptian slave of Sarah and Abraham, who are the roots of two major world religions-- Judaism and Christianity. More specifically, she was Sarah's personal attendant. Hagar's story is told in two places in Genesis, the first book of the bible. She first appears in Genesis 16:1-16 when her master, then named Sarai, who unable to conceive a child, followed Mesopotamian customs and commanded her to sleep with her husband, Abram, to produce the child promised to both of them by God. Next, Hagar's story continues in Genesis 21: 8-21 when she and her son Ishmael are expelled from Sarah's and Abraham's encampment. This retelling of Hagar's story will focus on a period right after Hagar has Ishmael and meets God for the first time.

### **A God Who Sees Me: Biblical Story**

I was fearful of the whole situation from the beginning. Sleeping with my mistress's husband to produce the Heir of Promise? Ridiculous! Abram's God had told him he would make him the father of many nations; yet, Sarai's womb remained shut. I've told my mistress to remain faithful. She must believe that Abram's God will bring it to pass. He has kept them safe and prospered them in the ten years since he left Ur. Oh no, she wasn't hearing any of the faith talk. She kept telling me that in Ur, where they came from, it was common for a woman's handmaid to be given to husbands in situation like hers. I told her that what she

suggested was ridiculous. She always comes up with the wild ideas. We would have never done such things in Egypt. But she insisted anyway. Luckily, I got pregnant after the first time.

I was really afraid of being pregnant. I've seen too many women die during childbirth. I was five months pregnant and fear plagued me continually. An older wiser slave, Tamar, always sought to calm my nerves. She even tried to speak to Mistress Sarai on my behalf. But her attempts only resulted in more harsh treatment of me. Sarai said that I was acting as if I was better than her because I was pregnant with Abram's child. She threatened to have me whipped several times, but knew that it put the baby at risk, and she also knew that Abram would never allow it.

On that dreadful day, I was putting away my mistress's linens and clothes in her tent when she stormed in and said, "That's it! I've had enough of you! I am your mistress! You get no special treatment around here. You've got other people doing your regular chores. You do you think you are? You think I'm nothing because I can't have children? I am your mistress – child or no child. Don't think that when that baby gets here you're going to walk in my shoes. Abram loves me and will always love me. Me! And Me only!"

As she moved closer to me I looked up. "You dare look me in the eye." As a stinging slap came across my face, she yelled, "You haughty bitch. I will fix you." She slapped me again and threw the flap back yelling Abram's name. Even though Abram was known for not whipping his slaves, I was fearful that her

anger would somehow persuade him. His love for her was not in doubt and everyone knew he would do almost do anything for her – even sleep with her handmaid. I had to flee. I had to get away. So quickly, I bundled up my few possessions, a flask of water, and set off into the desert.

At first, I ran to get far away from the encampment. When the encampment was out of sight, I slowed to a walk. What was I doing? I had no place to go. I was five months pregnant. I was on the road to Shur and didn't really know what I was going to do when I got there. I didn't check to make sure I got a full flask of water, and my mad dash out of the encampment caused me to drink most of the water I had. I needed to find water. I looked ahead down the road and saw what looked like a stream. Good. I could replenish my water there.

No one was around when I approached the stream. Good. No one was there to ask me questions. I filled my flask and sat on a nearby rock. Suddenly, an angel appeared and said, "Hagar, Sarai's servant, where have you come from, and where are you going?" (Genesis 16: 8 New Living Translation).

I was shocked, and thought maybe the combination of the heat and the baby was causing me to hallucinate. But what did it matter anyway, I was ruined. I was done. I had no future. So I responded, "I'm running away from my mistress."

The angel said, "You have nowhere to go. Return to your mistress. The Lord sees your distress. You will give birth to a son, and I will give you more descents than you can count. Name your son Ishmael, which means "God hears"

and always remember that the Lord has heard your cry of distress.”

The words of the angel caused a peace to over wash me. I haven't felt this type of peace since before I was pregnant. All the fear left me. I turned my head, and the angel had disappeared. I turned my face towards the sky in prayer.

“Truly, you are the God who sees me in my distress and cares about my plight. So I will return to my mistress Sarai trusting that what the angel said will come to pass.” At the end of the prayer, I turned back and walked towards Abram's encampment.

### **A Sociology Degree: Evelyn's Story**

I graduated from college with a degree in sociology. However, I never used this degree because I visited a prison my senior year as part of my degree program requirements. My experience at the prison was so frightening that I decided I didn't want to work in that field. However, newly married and with a small child, I needed a job. My sister was a physical education teacher, and I thought maybe I could teach, too. So I got a job as a paraprofessional at a fifth and sixth-grade school near my home. I really liked working with the students and loved the school environment. The teacher I worked with even trusted me to teach the class while she was gone for a week on a school-related trip.

While working at this school, I began working on earning my teaching certificate and a master's degree in middle grades education. After earning my teaching credential and master's degree, my next task was to find a teaching position. I did not think it would be that difficult because there were several



positions open at the school where I was working as a paraprofessional. However, when I turned in my application for the positions I knew were available, I was told that there were no teaching positions open. I was livid. I knew teaching jobs were available, and I had already proven my teaching abilities as a paraprofessional. Why wouldn't they give me the opportunity to teach? I suspected that it was because I was black. I felt betrayed. I was good enough to assist a teacher, but not good enough to be "the teacher?" At this point, it would have been really easy for me to give up, but I always felt God would make a way out of no way for me, and that's exactly what he did.

A lady, who was already a teacher, living in our apartment complex, knew of some openings at her school. She gave me the name of her principal and suggested I give him a call. I did and arranged an interview with him. Unfortunately, this principal told me that he had just filled the vacant teaching position. On a more positive note, he told me that he knew of another principal in his county who had an opening.

When I met with this principal, I immediately felt at ease. He began to tell me about the school, and he asked a few questions about my family. Our meeting felt more like a general conversation than an interview. After this conversation, he jumped up and said, "Come on. Let me show you where your room is." I couldn't believe my ears. Was he offering me this job? As it turned out, he was. I joyfully worked at this school for the next ten years. The biggest lesson I learned from this experience was that even when you are being treated

unfairly, God is still on your side. He sees what's going on and always makes a way out of no way.

### **Reflection**

Both stories speak of a God who doesn't always step in to change oppressive situations; yet, both Evelyn and Hagar saw God's goodness. God promised Hagar that he would make a great nation out of her son and later did exactly as he said. Evelyn eventually got a satisfying teaching position at a school system she never would have known about had it not been for the suggestions from a neighbor. As educators, we learn about the value of perseverance despite persecution and oppressive forces. Even when the situation looks grim, we should have faith that options we never considered could contain the key to our success.

### **Michal: A Story of Hopelessness**

*When she saw King David leaping and dancing before the Lord, she was filled with contempt for him. (2 Samuel 6:16b New Living Translation)*

Michal was the daughter of King Saul, the first king of Israel. Her story is told in the following biblical passages: 1 Samuel 14:49, 18:17-30, 19:8-17, 25:44; 2 Samuel 3:13-16, 6:16-23; and 1 Chronicles 15: 29. She was David's, the future King of Israel, first wife. She was later given as a political bargaining tool in marriage to another man. Finally, later in her life, David became king of Israel and reclaimed her as his wife. These fictionalized journal entries tell Michal's story over a period of years and are based on the above biblical verses and biblical

commentaries from the following: *Women's Bible Commentary* (Hackett, 1992/1998) and *Vashti's Victory: Other Biblical Women Resisting Injustice* (Gill, 2003).

### **Michal's Journal Entries: Biblical Story**

Entry #1-I know my sister is Merab has been offered in marriage to David by my father, but I have fallen in love with him. He is brave and courageous. Clearly, the favor of the Lord is upon him because he has returned victorious from his battle with the victory over the Philistines. Even the women of all the towns around have created a song in his honor and sing it jubilantly in the streets: "Saul has killed his thousands, and David his ten thousands". Every time I hear it, I long to join them in the streets, dancing for joy with my tambourines and cymbals. Of course that could never happen; for a King's daughter must never show such common and undignified displays. Oh, I envy my sister. To be his wife would be a supreme joy.

Entry #2- Oh the Lord's face does shine upon me! Father has decided to give Merab in marriage to Adriel, a man from Meholah. There is still a chance for me to be with my love, David. While I rejoice in this convenient occurrence, it does seem a bit odd that father should change his mind. He is always lecturing Jonathan, my eldest brother, about the word of a King and how irrefutable it is. It should never be violated or changed in any way. Yet, David goes off to fight yet another Philistine village, returns victorious, and is denied Merab's hand in marriage before he returns from the battlefield.

Entry #3- I was called to Father's court today. It was dreadful. I pouted about all morning in dread of my appearance before him. Jonathan says he has not been in good humor lately and has even thrown a spear at David's head. But all praise to the Lord, when I arrived he questioned me about my feelings about David. I could hardly deny that I loved him. What young woman in the kingdom did not love him? To my surprise father was elated at the news of my love for David. After I was ushered out of court, I ran around to the galley. It was a place where I could see and hear what was going on inside court. I was desperate to know when my marriage would take place. I heard father tell Jonathan that he would tell David my bride price was to be a 100 Philistine foreskins. Their conversation continued, but not wanting to get caught, I ran back to my chambers. Oh the joy! I knew the task father asked was not too much for my David.

Entry #4- I have been so busy in preparation for my marriage to David that I haven't had time to write much. David in all his bravery and courage far exceeded father's bride price. He brought back 200 philistine foreskins. My heart is bursting with joy for David must surely love me! I could not have asked for more, an actual marriage where we both love each other from the beginning.

Entry#5- Jonathan sulks around all day and keeps constant company with David. They are always whispering in some corner. I've attempted to remind Jonathan that David is newly married and he consumes far too much of David's time. Jonathan tells me that kingdom affairs are none of my concern. I must

know what's going on. Tomorrow morning I'll sneak into the galley and listen to Jonathan and father during their regular advising session.

Entry#6- I have come undone. My spying session has revealed that father wants David dead. Faithful Jonathan finally convinced father that he should not harm my beloved David. Father vowed to Jonathan that nothing would happen to David. Father's final words ("As surely as the Lord lives, David will not be killed.") to Jonathan were a blessing to my ears.

Entry #7-David came home tonight and said that father hurled a spear at his head as he played the harp for my father. He believes father will try to kill him. Troops have arrived and surrounded our house. I have pleaded with my love to escape tonight. For if he does not, I fear he would be killed at sunrise. My father is no man of honor. He clearly vowed by the name of God not to kill David. I will help David escape! He can climb down the back window, and I'll place one of Merab's idols in his bed. With a bit of goat's hair and a blanket, that should look like a sleeping David.

Entry #8- My plan worked. My beloved is saved. When the guards banged on the door in the morning, I told them David was sick and could not get out of bed. The guards left immediately, but returned almost an hour later. This time undeterred by me they stormed into the house, ran upstairs and immediately stabbed Merab's idol covered in a blanket. I was seized and taken to my father's court. He demanded to know why I would betray him in such a manner. Had he not always been good to me? How could I let his enemy escape?

His eyes were wild with rage, and I feared he may kill me instead. To spare my life, I lied. I told him David threatened to kill me if I didn't help him. Luckily, my lie worked, and I was taken back to my old quarters.

Entry #9- It has been almost a year since David escaped. I had hoped he would return for me or at least send word of his health. But, alas, nothing. My heart sinks into pits of despair that were formerly unimaginable. With no word from David and my father's increasing madness, my future is not at all how I imagined it. What have I done to bring the wrath of God down on me so forcefully? Rumors have reached me that David has married again. He now has at least two more wives. Father seeks an alliance with Laish from Gallim and I am to be given to Palti, Laish's son. I am once again a political pawn in father's game. I am to be given in marriage to Palti tomorrow.

Entry #10- Marriage to Palti has not been as I expected. Palti is a gentle man, and during the course of the past year, I have come to respect him immensely. He is truly honorable and kind to all, even his servants. He seems to understand my bitterness towards my father, and makes concessions for my love for David. But, as the days go by and war between the house of Saul and the house of David continue, the flame of my love for David dims. All this time and six wives later, David has not even tried to inquire about my welfare. The 200 foreskins weren't just for my love. Perhaps they were just a way for him to become king? Yet, there is one bright spot in my life – Palti. His gentleness,

kindness, and genuine respect for me have sparked a flame. Hopefully, with time that flame will turn into a blazing love.

Entry #11- Father and Jonathan are dead. Ishbosheth, another brother of mine who was always cruel to me as a child, has been crowned King of Israel and David has been crowned King of Judah. Today a messenger was sent to our house. He said David has requested my return and Ishbosheth has agreed to comply. Palti is beside himself with grief. I, on the other hand, cannot bare to feel another emotion for I am tired of being treated like a pawn. My songs of joy and sorrow are long gone. David doesn't really care about me. I'm sure he thinks I, a daughter of Saul, will legitimize his claim as king of all Israel. My returns guarantees Ishbosheth's eventual downfall.

Entry #12- That accursed David! I do not understand why the crowds cheer for him so! He is no more honorable than my father, King Saul, and everyone knows his treachery! Today David danced in the streets nearly naked as the Ark of the Covenant, our most holy and sacred object was brought to Jerusalem. Such a display is dishonorable, and as he arrived at the palace I rushed out to tell him so: "How distinguished the king of Israel looked today, shamelessly exposing himself to the servant girls like any vulgar person might do" (2 Samuel 6: 20b New Living Translation). His defense was that he was dancing to the Lord and was willing to look even more foolish for the Lord Almighty. He further said that his nakedness was something I would never

witness personally again, thereby banishing me to remain childless for the rest of my life.

### **My Almost Lost Song: Valerie's Story**

When I was in college working on an undergraduate degree in business, I vividly remember a conversation I had with my father about the types of people in my business classes. I always felt they were not to be trusted and had the potential to act unethically if a business decision called for such action. I can still hear my father's response today. He said I had nothing to worry about because unethical business people would not survive in any industry (I'm sure investors with Bernie Madoff wished he was more accurate in his assessment the ethics of business people). They would be "weeded out" and only the best would remain. In my relative youth and naiveté, I trusted my father's judgment and trudged forward to not only receive a bachelor's degree in business but also a master's degree. Yet, a small voice kept whispering that I made the wrong career choice. Recently, since the economic breakdown our nation has experience and a host of other life experiences, including the "downsizing" my father right out of a job in 2000, I asked him if he remembered that conversation we had long ago about my classmates and asked if he still felt the same way. Naturally, he has adjusted his opinions somewhat.

Eventually, I ended my career in business and started a career in education. At first, it was satisfying. But, even as a teacher, I still felt unfulfilled. On the career happiness scale, I had moved from a four to a seven. I still craved



that perfect ten. I was making progress, but not quite there. As a teacher, I felt inadequate to meet the needs of the students in my classroom. I thought additional education was the key and started a doctoral program in curriculum studies. As I studied the field of critical pedagogy, I have been continually perplexed and troubled by one thing— a cloud of hopelessness. In my classes, we discussed the myriad of ways teacher, students, and marginalized groups of people are continually oppressed by existing power structures. The task to bring about justice seems almost insurmountable. Dialogue, political action, intellectualism, and critical self-reflection have all been discussed as ways to help bring about justice. Despite all of these suggestions (and many of them I agree with and regularly engage in), I still feel this tug of hopelessness. What do I do with these feelings? Where do I turn so I will not feel so overwhelmed that I do nothing? If all of these methods lead to increased freedom, why are so many people still oppressed? Why are so many people still seemingly asleep in a world which devalues children and destroys the very planet we inhabit? Can I find the answers I need in examining existentialism, postmodernism, post structuralism, postpositivist realism, or another philosophy or theory we have discussed in my doctoral program? What about Freire's talk of courage, humility, faith, and love? Why is it that no one has discussed these attributes? Freire (1970/1993) says these aspects are essential to dialogue and liberatory pedagogy. The questions are endless, but, for me, they all have one thing in common--- the struggle to maintain hope in an increasingly hopeless world. How do I keep up the

exhausting work of critical pedagogy?

Finally, I found someone who spoke my language, understood my frustrations, and offered hope in this weary valley of spotted despair. bell hooks (1998) says that “profound commitment to engaged pedagogy is taxing to the spirit” (p. 202). Indeed, I must say she is correct. However, studying the works of bell hooks began to give me a ray of hope. For me, she has been a lily in the valley. More than hope, hooks has also given me a mission. In *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, hooks (1989) states: “fear of saying or doing that which will be considered ‘wrong’ often inhibits people who are members of exploited and/or oppressed groups....This inhibiting factor acts to suppress and stifle creativity both in terms of critical thinking and artistic expression” (hooks, 1989, p. 161). I began to realize that it was imperative that I use my voice and my teaching to help members of exploited and oppressed groups. Martin Luther King, Jr. also once said: “The saving of our world from pending doom will come, not through the complacent adjustment of the conforming majority, but through the creative maladjustment of a nonconforming minority” (King, 1963, p. 27). Even if the rest of the world is marching in a different direction, I must stand up for those in the margins of society. My responsibility is to travel my road, make meaning for me, and help change the world for the better. As a teacher, I encounter many children with serious problems. It is my spiritual beliefs that sustain me and prevent the spiral downwards into despair. It is also my spirituality that allows me to treat my students with compassion and spark hope

in their hearts. There are broad spiritual themes like love, compassion, humility, kindness, hope, and forgiveness that need to invade our schools. Maybe then, schools would be physical and emotional safe harbors for children tossed about by the storms of life.

### **Reflection**

I can draw a number of lessons from Michal's story. First, I could look at the courage and strength of Michal and her ability to fight for what she believes even if the consequences are negative. She risked her life to save David, the future king of Israel and progenitor of Jesus. She risked her future yet again when she told David her opinion of his public display during the entrance of the Ark of the Covenant. That opinion caused her to die childless. Second, I could review men's use of women as pawns in their power struggles. Michal was used twice by her father to meet his political aims. He hoped her marriage to David would either control David or lead to his death. Her marriage to Palti was in creation of a political alliance, not at all something uncommon in those times. Third, the loss of joy and hope can make people bitter. Michal once loved David; yet, after being repeatedly used as a political pawn she lost her joy and became bitter.

As an educator in the twenty-first century, the third lesson is probably most relevant to me today. As I type this reflection, teachers in Wisconsin are the latest political pawns in Wisconsin's governor's attempts to take away their rights to collectively bargain. The political atmosphere surrounding education is

electrically charged, and teachers sometimes play the Michal in the latest political drama. Consequently, it can be difficult to maintain hope and joy in the face of such cynicism. We must guard against the bitterness and hopelessness Michal conveyed in her later years.

### **Phoebe's Delivery: A Story of Unity**

*There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:28 New Living Translation)*

Paul, the writer of over two-thirds of the New Testament, preached the message of Jesus Christ all across the Mediterranean region and established churches in many places. In his travels, he often wrote letters to churches in various regions to reaffirm and clarify his teachings. In the closing to the letter Paul wrote to the churches in Rome, he mentions Phoebe. In the closing to the letter, he seems to recommend her to a fellow group of Christian believers. He says:

*I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a deacon [a leadership position] in the church in Cenchrea. Welcome her in the Lord as one who is worthy of honor among God's people. Help her in whatever she needs, for she has been helpful to many, and especially to me. (Romans 16:1-2 New Living Translation)*

Gaventa (1992/1998) speculates that Phoebe was actually the person who delivered the letter to the churches in Rome. Based on the supposition that Phoebe delivered the letter to the Romans, I have written a fictional conversation to describe her delivering another letter from Paul to the churches in Galatia.

Because Phoebe lived in Cenchrea, a seaport eight miles from Corinth, she had access to sea travel and may have delivered another letter to the churches in Galatia.

Galatia was a Roman province in what is now modern day Turkey. Often in Paul's absence, other teachers would come in preaching a slightly different message. "Judaizers" were those who insisted that Gentiles must follow Jewish laws and traditions to be "true" followers of Christ. The book of Galatians, in the Bible, is a letter Paul wrote to the churches in the region of Galatia to remind them of their freedom in Christ, thus, implying that it was not necessary to follow Jewish laws and traditions. The following dialogue describes as fictitious conversation in which Phoebe discusses the letter to the Galatians that she is about to deliver for Paul.

### **Neither Jew nor Greek: Biblical Story**

**Phoebe:** I must be leaving soon. Paul said it was very important that I deliver this letter to the churches in Galatia as soon as possible. He fears that some false teachers have bewitched them, and they will soon fail to follow The Way.

**Marcus:** What do you mean? "Fail to follow The Way."

**Phoebe:** Paul is afraid that these false teachers will mislead them. He is afraid they will no longer live in the freedom Christ provided and will no longer follow His Way.

**Marcus:** Oh. What else does the letter say?

**Phoebe:** Well. From my brief review of the letter, Paul is reminding the churches in Galatia that we are all children of God. Because we are children of God, we are heirs of His Divine inheritance – His very Spirit which He placed in us. And His Spirit will produce fruit in our lives. Paul says that this fruit which proves we belong to Him is love, peace, kindness, patience, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control. It is this Spirit that should guide our actions and not the Jewish laws of old.

**Marcus:** What is your favorite part of the letter? You've delivered other such letters in the past, and you always have a favorite section. So what's your favorite section this time?

**Phoebe:** You know me so well. And as you'll probably guess, it's not a section that I think Paul really meant to emphasize. But, in part of the letter Paul says something like this: There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female for we are all one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28).

**Marcus:** That sounds strange. No Jews or Gentiles? Men or women? But there are Jews, Gentiles, men, and women. That makes no sense to me. Are you sure Paul wrote that? What could he mean?

**Phoebe:** We are made God's children through faith. In other words, it is our belief that makes us children of God. And, Paul means that because we are all God's children and His Spirit is in us, we are all equal

before God. God's Spirit isn't solely Jewish or Gentile or male or female. But His Spirit is all of those labels and more. God is All. Allness doesn't value those who are free more than those who are slaves. Allness doesn't value men over women. And that's why Paul has entrusted me with this letter. You know there are many men who would not do so. A woman's status in this society is precarious. But we serve a God who values us all equally – no matter our position, gender, or race.

### **East Main High School: Evelyn's Story**

This is the story of two ladies who attended East Main High School in a medium-sized town in Northwest Georgia, Homerville. What follows will briefly detail their high school careers during the period of integration. Eva Lewis is an African American who attended East Main High School from 1966 to 1970, and Judy Sullivan is an Anglo American who attended East Main High School from 1971 to 1973. Even though both ladies are from different ethnic backgrounds, it will become apparent that their experiences of desegregation were more alike than different.

My school newspaper teacher had given me a tough assignment. Since it was homecoming week and it was exactly 25 years since East Main High was integrated, she suggested that I interview the first black homecoming queen of East Main and another white student who attended East Main at the same time. This way we could get a perspective from people who actually experienced

desegregation. Mr. Maze thought it would be an “eye opening experience” for today’s student to get a glimpse of what this school was like just 20 years ago. He gave the names and telephone numbers for an Eva Lewis and a Judy Sullivan. After calling to make appointments with them, I was surprised to found out that they were both in education and worked for the same school system.

When I arrived at Mrs. Lewis’ office I was greeted by a cute short freckled-faced African American woman. She offered me a seat. I introduced myself and we began the interview. I asked her the preliminary questions: what is your position in this school? Are you married? How many children do you have? And how long have you lived in Fullerton? Where did you go to college? I found out that she was an assistant principal who was married with one daughter. She attended Mid-Georgia College and has been in Fullerton ever since--- almost thirty-three years. Now it was time to get to the specifics. As I moved closer to Mrs. Lewis, I asked “What were your first experiences with integration?”

In a quiet voice she responded, “It was in the eighth grade that I had to make a decision to go to the white school in my town. I don’t remember it being a difficult decision to make. My parents had always taught me the importance of a good education, and I simply saw this as an opportunity to better myself. No one really ever encouraged or discouraged me to go, but it was something I wanted to do. Me and five of my friends made the decision to attend East Main High our ninth grade year. My first day at East Main High was rather uneventful.”



“You mean to tell me there were no police, riots, fights?” I said astonished. This certainly did not match what I had always seen on TV or read in history books.

“No,” she replied calmly, “None of that occurred. As a matter of fact, after we got to know each other better, we all got along fine. The only tension I ever remember was when West Main High School, the all black high school, was finally closed. Some black students were upset with having to move to another school their senior year.”

“Tell me about your being crowned homecoming queen so soon after integration.”

“I was elected homecoming queen in the fall of 1969. I remember sitting in Coach Magills’ history class and being called to the office. I was nervous because I had never been in trouble before. When I got there he told me that I was going to be crowned homecoming queen that night at the football game. He wanted to warn me that there might be trouble but that I would be well protected because police would be all around.”

“Was there trouble that night?”

“No. Everything went smoothly.”

“Wow! That’s shocking. An African American named homecoming queen so soon after integration. Well, did you ever experience anything negative associated with segregation or desegregation?”

She looked as if she was thinking about something that happened a long

time ago and responded, "Well, when I was a little younger my father once took us to a field in the country to see a KKK ritual. Of course, we were far enough away so as not to be seen. But he took us there so we would not be afraid if we ever saw them in public. Shortly after this experience, we were harassed by the KKK. They called all day long and said that they would burn a cross in our yard. My daddy finally told them that he would be sitting on the front porch waiting on them with a shotgun."

"Did this occur when you were crowned homecoming queen?"

"No. That whole homecoming situation went off without a hitch. Nothing ever really resulted with the KKK incident either. The KKK never showed that night."

"Overall, how do you feel about integration," I asked trying to wrap up the interview.

"The best thing I liked about integration was the fact that we got new books. You see, we use to get the used books from the white schools, but when I went to East Main, I got new books for the first time in my life. Although, I never really experienced racism from my teachers and, for the most part, they treated me fairly, I believe that integration may have had a negative impact on black children. Unlike black teachers in segregated schools, white teachers don't seem to have a vested interest in seeing black children succeed. And many black children today are falling behind."

I concluded the interview and headed down the street to the high school.

When I entered the vocational wing, Mrs. Sullivan greeted me at the door. She ushered me into a conference room where we could have more privacy. I began the interview with the same preliminary questions I asked Mrs. Lewis. I found out that Mrs. Sullivan and Mrs. Lewis use to be neighbors and that is how they were reunited. Mrs. Sullivan had given a neighborhood Christmas party at her house. During the party Mr. Rivers, Mrs. Sullivan's father and former principal who crowned Mrs. Lewis homecoming queen, recognized Mrs. Lewis. Mrs. Sullivan remarked that this was certainly a "small world." I also found out that she was married and had three girls. She only attended East Main High school from 1971 to 1973 and graduated from Wells County High School. Mrs. Sullivan had been a homemaker for many years and was now re-entering the workforce. She worked as an administrative assistant for the vocational director.

I began with the same question I asked Mrs. Lewis, "What were your first experiences with integration?"

"The schools were already integrated when I started East Main High. To be honest with you, I really don't remember anything significant. Black students were friendly for the most part. Many of them participated in athletics. A few joined clubs. I was a cheerleader my sophomore and juniors, but we didn't have any black cheerleaders."

"With your father being a principal, what views did he express to you about integration?"

"Yes, my father and mother were both educators, but political issues like

integration were never openly discussed in my home as a child. I don't remember them ever talking to me about that."

Trying to get at least one juicy tidbit, I asked, "Was there ever any tension associated with integration?"

"Well, no not really." She paused for a second and said, "Wait a minute. I do remember one incident. My junior year, during a pep rally, I remember a group of black kids getting up and leaving the pep rally all at once. From what I remember they were protesting the fact that they were not represented on the cheerleading squad. Parents seemed to get really upset, and many came to pick up their children from school that day. After that event, we definitely felt some tension in the school. But I think it was more because of parent reaction."

Finally, something juicy. "Did any riots breakout? Were the police called? Did people protest in the streets?"

"No. The school board and superintendent wanted my father to severely punish the students who walked out of the pep rally. When my father refused, they transferred him to another school that was not even built yet. So we moved to Wells County the next year. It was upsetting to my parents because they had built their dream home and planned to retire in Homerville."

Suddenly, she became teary-eyed. She continued, "I remember picking up a telephone and hearing a neighbor ask my mother if we had set our Christmas tree on fire in the front yard. When I ran to the window, I saw a cross burning in our yard. I had almost forgotten this happening. I guess talking about the past

brings it all rushing back.” She wiped a tear from the corner of her eye. “I guess my father paid more of a price for his beliefs than I realized” she commented sadly.

Closing the interview, I asked, “What are your overall thoughts about integration?”

“I think the best thing about integration was that it brought diversity. On the flip side, I don’t think integration was nearly as bad as adults wanted us to believe. Their attitudes tainted our innocence.”

I thanked her for the interview and headed back to Homerville to begin writing my article for the *East Main Chronicle*. As I drove, I began to think about the interviews. For the most part, both ladies had had a relatively positive experience with integration. It was a far cry from all the riots, police dogs, water hoses, and people yelling racial slurs that you always see on television. I was going to have to give some serious thought to the approach I was going to take.

### **Reflection**

King (1963) refers to the mutuality of all mankind. Essentially, he says we are all united despite our differences. One cannot succeed if all don’t succeed. He further advocates that we should help our brothers or sisters when we see them in need. For, aiding them ultimately means helping ourselves. The letter Phoebe delivered advocates the same sense of unity King (1963) espoused. The East Main story also suggests a unity because the key character in both ladies’ stories was the principal. This principal sought justice when he allowed Eva to be crowned

homecoming queen, and he also sought justice when he would not suspend a group of black students. He was an educator who did not allow skin color to interfere with justice even if it meant harm to him and his family. We need more educators like him to speak out against injustices and seek the unity King (1963) wrote and spoke about.

### **Jephthah's Daughter: A Story of Abuse**

*I will give to the Lord whatever comes out of my house to meet me when I return in triumph. I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering. (Judges 11:31 New Living Translation)*

Jephthah was a judge of Israel. Judges were often political, military, and spiritual leaders of Israel before their first king – King Saul. His entire story is told in the eleventh chapter of Judges. He was an illegitimate son of his father, Gilead, manish, and only rose to power because his brothers needed his military prowess. Just before he defeated the Ammonites, he made a vow to sacrifice to the Lord whatever came out of his house to greet him after his victory. Unfortunately, his only child, a daughter, came out to joyously greet him. Later, his daughter was sacrificed. After the death of Jephthah's daughter it became customary for young Israelite women to go away for several days each year to reflect on this poor daughter's fate. The story of this ill-fated daughter is told in Judges 11: 29-40.

## A Letter to My Daddy: Biblical Story

Dear Daddy,

I was so proud when the elders of Gilead came to you and asked you to lead the military campaign against the Ammonites. Just think – my father! – who was once disgraced would lead the Israelites to victory. I never had any doubt that you would be victorious. When word of your victory reached our village, I was ecstatic. Some of the others were shocked, but I knew you would bring us a mighty victory. The messenger told us you devastated twenty towns of the Ammonites from Areor to an area near Minnith. Some even said that you even destroyed towns as far away as Abel-Kermin. So when you returned I was so overwhelmed with joy and pride that I ran out of the house. I wanted to be the first one to greet you. I ran out dancing and playing my tambourine. Imagine my shock when you met me with grief and tears in your eyes. I had no idea of the vow you made to the Lord. How could I have known that you promised to sacrifice the first thing that came out of our house to meet you? Oh, to see the anguish and pain in your eyes. I'm sure the realization that you had just promised to sacrifice me to the Lord Our God was enough to overwhelm you. I tried to soothe your grief. I reminded you that if you made a vow to the Lord, you must fulfill it, even if it means I must lose my life. After all, the Lord had just given you a great victory over the Ammonites and you must fulfill your vow. But there is one thing

I'm asking you. Since we must fulfill your vow to the Lord, let me at least do this one thing before I die. Let me go into the hill country with my friends for two months. I will never experience the joys of marriage. At least I can enjoy my friends and be comforted by their presence. When I return, I will faithfully consent to die a virgin.

Love Always,

Your Faithful Daughter

### **Story 2: Valerie's Story**

Reading the story of Jephthah's nameless daughter and thinking about one man's strange notion of what is right that ultimately resulted in the death of his daughter, I reflect on school settings and wonder if violence takes place against women/girls in school. I don't have to think too hard before many examples readily come to mind.

The first one involves a male student, Barry, I first taught when he was a freshman. As a freshman, he was probably reading on a third or fourth grade level and had already fathered a child by a senior girl in another one of my classes. Outwardly, Barry pretended to be tough, but when he flashed his smile, I knew that he was still a little boy inside. For me, he was a good student. Despite his reading capabilities, he always tried his best to complete every assignment and did everything I asked him to do. As far as I was concerned, I couldn't have asked for more from a student.



Four years later, I also taught Barry as a senior in a math class. His demeanor in my classroom was pretty much the same as before--eager to learn and trying desperately to understand despite his deficiencies. One day I was walking down the hall, and I saw another side of Barry. As I was moving through the crowded hallway, I saw Barry and his 5 foot 6 inch stocky frame hulking over his petite freshman girlfriend. He was pointing his finger at her like a gangster pointing a pistol at the head of a rival gang member and said in a menacing tone, "You'd better have my books ready like I told you!" Shocked and outraged by the scene, I screamed, "I better not ever see you talk to another female like that again!" Immediately, Barry backed down and his faced changed to the sweet little boy innocent smile I was more familiar with. He flashed his gold tooth and said, "Aw, Miss Moss. She knows I was just playing. It ain't serious."

Not dissuaded by his sudden charm defensive, I informed him that we would discuss this situation later during third period. Looking at the girl, I tried to gauge if she felt relieved or comforted by my intervention. I guess I wanted to be her savior, but I saw no comfort in her eyes. I didn't think it was possible, but she looked even more afraid.

Later during third period, I asked Barry, "What's up with that situation in the hall earlier?"

"Aw, Miss Moss. She just didn't bring my books to me in time yesterday. So I was late for second period. That's all," Barry said casually as he strolled to

his seat. He had reduced the situation to a matter of her not obeying his orders; therefore, he was just scolding her for her poor performance. Was he kidding? He couldn't seriously think he was justified in speaking to her in a way I would never even speak to my dog. Attempting to bring some enlightenment to Barry, I said, "Barry, she's your girlfriend, not your slave. Why is she getting your books for you? I think it should be the other way around?"

"Aw, Miss Moss. That ain't the way we do thangs. She ok with it."

Seeing that my attempt at enlightenment was falling on deaf ears, I issued my initial warning again. "You shouldn't talk to female or anyone else in that way, and I'd better not catch you doing it again," not really knowing what I would do if I witnessed a similar scene again. But I knew he had enough respect for me not to act that way in my presence again. And for the moment, I would have to be satisfied with that.

### **My Journal Entries: Valerie's Story Continued**

4-21-05

Thinking about this situation (Barry hallway incident), I can think of other similar situations concerning past students. I remember Jason. He was a boxer and had a restraining order issued against him. He had beat his girlfriend, and they were not allowed to communicate inside or outside of school. This abuse situation began almost four years ago when they were freshman. I had always suspected something was going on because he always hulked over her. It was almost daily event where we saw her cowered in a corner of the vocational wing.

I reported my suspicions, but I never had concrete proof. How can I as a teacher help, especially when the victim won't ask for help? I feel paralyzed and at the mercy of a cruel system that is incapable of fully taking care of our young girls.

3-12-10

A fellow teacher and friend saw a boy slam a girl into a plate-glass window in the hallway outside her room. Of course, she escorted the boy to the office, but she said the girl looked bewildered and looked as if she wasn't going to be cooperative with the administrators during their investigation of the incident. The biggest shocker about what she saw was that it happened in a U.S. high school in the 21st century. Most violence against women is hidden, done behind closed doors. But this boy felt brazen enough to perpetrate his violence in a public place. What's changing in our culture that is making violence against women in public acceptable, especially among the younger generation? Is the level of violence in video games? I heard there was a Japanese game about raping women. Is it the general belittling of women in some music today? What is it? What can I do?

7-11-10

I have been forced to deal with male-on-female violence in my personal life. My maternal grandfather, who I have never been close to, has come to live in close proximity to my house, and his presence has forced me to do a lot of soul searching and reconciliation. My maternal grandparents were divorced when I was six or seven. From stories my grandmother tells me, my grandfather was an

emotionally and physically abusive man who eventually shot her, resulting in their divorce when I was six or seven. Her stories reveal that she and her children often suffered at his “misguided notions of what was right.” What makes the situation even more tragic and ironic is that my grandfather is a preacher. My grandmother says that he was more “went” than “sent” meaning that she questions the legitimacy of his call to preach. I’m inclined to believe her based on his track record. Growing up, he was often rude to people; he would openly call people “fat,” “bald,” “too short” or any other negative epithet that he felt suited the target of his criticism.

Now, I’m forced to be around him because he is in the beginning stages of Alzheimer's disease. It’s difficult because I really want to hate him for what he has done to my grandmother, mother, and other relatives. On the other hand, I am sympathetic and compassionate towards his situation. Part of me feels like he doesn’t deserve the excellent level of care he’s receiving now because of all his past sins. After all, you should reap what you sow, but on some levels this doesn’t seem to be the case. I mean Alzheimer’s is a dreadful disease, but he is being well taken care of. But a huge part of me not only resents the unfairness of the situation, but I also resent him because of all the awkward moments I have to put up with now. I have to put up with all the awkward moments of silence when people realize my grandparents are divorced. Everyone knows people in their 80s shouldn’t be divorced. Or so society tells us. From what I can tell, a lot more 70 and 80 year old couples ought to be divorced. The biggest thing this

situation has taught me is that violence in the home has far reaching consequences even if the involved parties eventually divorce.

Snapping back to reality and drawing on my spiritual beliefs--I think about forgiveness. Jesus said to forgive those who curse and spitefully use you (Matthew 5:44). God has also shown incredible mercy to us. Stories in the bible like the woman at the well who is caught in adultery also demonstrate God's mercy. We don't always get what we deserve, and I would want someone to treat me well in my old age. So I've worked to develop a new relationship with my grandfather, and I'm beginning to see that his actions were simply a function of his cultural environment. Now that he is living in a better environment and is immersed in our 21st century world, I think he's beginning to realize the world had changed and times are different. He still thinks cell phones are little boxes that people gamble with, but we're working on that. His shift is not complete and radical, but it's enough of a shift to have softened his heart. Perhaps his situation has brought about a certain level of humility that's resulted in the slight shift. Or maybe the process of relationship building has caused my perception to shift.

7-12-10

I think the key to the break from violence was my grandmother's eventual ability to stand up for herself. Somehow she was able to gain a more accurate perception of the reality. In school situations, I've come to understand that boys who abuse girls are still children of God and deserve my love too, not just my

rage and frustration. Just like with the renewed relationship building with my grandfather, I can use the same strategy to help those male students see things differently, and perhaps their behavior will change. It didn't seem to work with Barry, but I don't think I tried hard enough. One conversation doesn't change most people, including myself. As for the girl in the situation, she needs my guidance and support. She needs some courage found by women like Sojourner Truth and Jernia Lee. Eventually, they came to believe in themselves, and their examples are powerful. I need to share their stories more.

### **Reflection**

Both of these stories reflect the continued vulnerability of women in society – both past and present. Just this morning, the news reported that an adult man living with his mother in Villa Rosa, Georgia- a town about 10 miles away from my home, was arrested because he pulled a gun on his mother who refused to iron his clothes. Even though women are better off in America than any other part of the world, cultural values and mores, especially those of southern men, have a long way to go. Renita Weems (1998/2005) said something like this: “Women are still suffering as a result of some man’s misguided notion of what is right” (p. 72). It is time for women of the world to break these cultural mores and learn to stand up for our just treatment.

### **Naomi and Ruth: A Story of Devotion**

*But Ruth replied, "Don't ask me to leave you and turn back. Wherever you go, I will go; wherever you live, I will live. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God." (Ruth 1:16 New Living Translation)*

The story of Naomi and Ruth is found in the book of Ruth, one of only two books named for women in the mainline protestant bible. It is set during the time of judges in Israel before Kings ruled the land. The political structure was simplified and Jews mainly concerned themselves with local tribal and clannish issues. Most families depended on their crops and livestock to support their families. Naomi and her husband, Elimelech, lived in Bethlehem with their two sons until a famine struck the land. Unable to support their family, Naomi and Elimelech moved to Moab which was just across the Red Sea. While raising their family in Moab, Naomi's sons married Moabite women which was strictly forbidden according to Jewish custom. Unfortunately, Naomi's husband and her two sons died while in Moab leaving Naomi and her two daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, in a dire situation without economic support. Ruth and Naomi's story is a long one filled with faith, loyalty, hope lost, and hope renewed. Here I will only relay the beginning of their story (Ruth 1:1-18) which demonstrates loyalty between a mother-in-law and daughter-in-law.

#### **We You Go, I Go: Biblical Story**

"Ruth! Ruth! I've heard the most wonderful news!" said Naomi as she ran through the door almost knocking over the flour jar. I wondered what it was, I

had not seen Naomi this excited in months. Actually, she been sullen and almost speechless since Kilion, Orpah's husband and her youngest son died. Since then, it is almost as if the light in her once bright eyes was replaced with an eternal blackness. I wondered what news could have her rushing around like she was 40 years younger. "Hurry! Hurry! We must make preparations at once."

"What on earth has you rushing around so? I've never seen you so," I said as I scooped up the flour she just knocked over.

"Ruth, we must pack at once. I've just heard that the Lord has once again blessed the land of Judah. Crops are growing again. People are prospering. We will return to my homeland. All is not lost. Hurry! Hurry! We must leave at once!" Truly this was shocking news. I can remember sitting around after dinner listening to Naomi and Elimelech talk about their homeland in Judah. From their descriptions it seemed to be a land flowing with milk and honey, at least until the Lord cursed it with famine. Could it really be that the land was prospering again? My hopes too were beginning to bubble to the surface. Naomi's joy was contagious. Just then, Orpah came in through the back. Immediately, I pounced on her, spreading Naomi's joy around.

"There is hope my sister! Naomi says we shall return to Bethlehem. There is no more famine in the land. Her kinspeople will provide for us. We will not be reduced to starving beggars in the land of Moab. Isn't it wonderful!?" I said as I grabbed her and whirled around the middle of the room. We were all dancing around the room like a bunch of little girls at festival time.



In two days we had made all the preparations for our journey and set off on the road leading towards Judah. After one day into the journey, I noticed Naomi's countenance fall. She seemed to be slipping back into the depression that I was only too familiar with. I approached her around the fire that night. "Is everything alright? Are you ill?"

"No, I am not ill my daughter, but I have been thinking. You and Orpah have been so kind to me, especially to leave the land you are from to follow me back to Bethlehem based on some rumors I heard in the town square. I fear that I have been a fool. I don't really know that the famine is gone in the land. And even if it is gone, there is no guarantee that any of my kinspeople will still be there. They too may have perished, just like Elimelech, your dear Mahlon, and Orpah's Kilion. Oh, I've been such a fool."

I scooted next to Naomi to comfort her as tears followed from her eyes and said, "That's nonsense. That's the darkness speaking. Bethlehem once again flows with milk and honey." I looked to Orpah for help in comforting our mother-in-law. Yet, she looked almost as dejected as Naomi.

"No my daughters, I was foolish to drag the both of you along with me. I took you from your homeland. Go back to your homes. And I pray that the Lord will bless you with the security of another marriage. There is only doom if you follow this road with me." At this Naomi broke down into a puddle of tears. Orpah and I locked arms in an embrace around Naomi and told her that we would not leave her.

But Naomi replied, “No, you must return. Even if I remarry, get pregnant tonight and have sons, then what? Would you really wait for them to grow up? Be realistic. Leave me now and save yourselves. Things are very dark for me because the Lord himself has raised his fist up to me. Leave now before my punishment clings to you too.” We all wept bitterly. Then Naomi said again, “You must leave now. Go back to your homes before it’s too late.”

Orpah gathered her things hugged us both and went back. I stood there in shock that Orpah could leave a woman who had treated us as her very own daughters. A woman who I knew would have laid down her very life for us. Yet, Orpah just walked away like Naomi meant nothing to her. Naomi’s wisdom and strength had kept us all going. As far as I was concerned, I had nothing to go back to. Naomi said, “Ruth, you must do as Orpah has done. She’s going back to her people. Her gods. My God has forsaken me. You should do the same and go back.”

I could not believe my ears. What was she saying? Before I knew it a rush of words gushed from my mouth and in tears I said, “Don’t ever ask me to leave you and turn back. Wherever you go, I will go; wherever you live, I will live. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. Wherever you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord punish me severely if I allow anything but death to separate us!” (Ruth 1:16-18 New Living Translation)

Stunned, Naomi looked into my eyes and knew I meant what I said and that I was determined to go with her. Then we set off on the road to Bethlehem.

### **Peace in a Time of Trouble: Valerie's Story**

In the story of Naomi and Ruth I have often wondered what would have caused Ruth to be so loyal to Naomi. The type of loyalty displayed in this story does not seem to come from economic desperation or tribal bonds, for Ruth had both of those in her homeland of Moab. I thought about who I was loyal to and who I would follow to the ends of the earth, and my mother was the first person who popped into my mind. Then I began to think about all the reasons for my loyalty: she was the woman who gave birth to me; she loves me; she has taken care of me all my life; she supported me financially and emotionally. The list of things could go on and on. Yet, the feature that stood out the most to me was my mother's quiet in my time of storm.

Let me explain. Fair or not, my mother is the first person I run to when I'm in trouble. I can't tell you how many times I've called her up crying or gone to her office, closed the door, and spilled my sadness, confusion, or frustration all over her floor. The best thing about running to my mom is that when trouble strikes, she never judges or criticizes me in that moment. She only provides wisdom and guidance, and I love her for that. I suppose that's why I keep running to her in my times of desperation. I wonder how many times Naomi was there for Ruth. I've heard stories of other mothers who immediately launched an attack on their children, but my mother is different. Later she may explain to me the error of my ways, but even then it is never harsh criticism. Her love demonstrated to me through thoughtful advice and guidance over the years has

instilled a sense of comfort and trust which enables me to seek her wisdom when I've blown it yet again

### **Reflection**

Overall, I think it was the relationship Ruth had with Naomi that bound them together. Like my mother and I, I think their relationship could have been one built on non-judgment, wise advice, and love. As educators, we could learn from both sets of relationships. We should support each other and remain committed to seeking the mutual advancement of our profession instead seeking to tear one another down. All educators, no matter the grade level taught, subject taught, or the school system for which they work, should realize that mutual support of all educators results in success for all.

## CHAPTER 5

### RISING DAWN: MOTHER~DAUGHTER CONVERSATIONS ON THE INQUIRY

*Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days. (Psalm 90: 14 New International Version)*

After the knock at midnight, the initial request for bread, and the persistent knocking, the morning came. Morning, in the bible, has always been a symbol of renewed hope and joy. It symbolizes the hope in what comes next. This chapter expresses the hope in what comes next. The sections that follow are reconstructed conversations between mother and daughter – Evelyn and Valerie. The conversations are divided into the following sections: What Have You Learned? What Challenges Have You Expended? What Has This Inquiry Taught You Personally? What Implications Does Your Inquiry Have for Education? Why Do You Advocate for a Pedagogy of Womanist Spirituality?

#### What Have You Learned?

**Evelyn:** So, this process is almost complete. What have you learned?

**Valerie:** Well, I started this process because I felt that spirituality was an area underrepresented in academic research about education and recognizing that there are segments of school children who are lagging behind. I wanted an inquiry that addressed spirituality and culture – my African American spiritual heritage specifically – and demonstrates how it sustains people like you and me in our profession.

**Evelyn:** Of course, those are your personal reasons for wanting to start this study, but what were some of the other external reasons for wanting to undertake this study?

**Valerie:** You know I decided to use Jesus' parable about a Knock at Midnight and Martin Luther King, Jr.'s sermon of the same title as the framing metaphor. Like Dr. King, I describe the midnight surrounding this study – the marginalization of black women's voices and experiences, African American's narrowed focus on materiality, and the devaluation of African American religious and spiritual history. Of course, special emphasis is placed on the often forgotten voices of black women.

**Evelyn:** I think it was informative when you included dominant African American spiritual thought. You talked about womanist theology (Cannon, 1988; Weems, 1988/2005, 1993, 1999, 2004, 2005; & Grant, 1989, 1995), black liberation theology (Cone, 1975/1997), King's (1963) beloved community, and the African concept of Ubuntu (Battle, 2006, 2009; Tutu, 2004).

**Valerie:** I also explored the use of early womanist thought as expressed in the spiritual autobiographies of Jarena Lee (1836), Zilpha Elaw (1846), and Julia A. Foote (1879). Then I looked at the use of autobiography and *personal~passionate~participatory inquiry* in the field of curriculum studies (He & Phillion, 2008; Scott-Simmons,

2008; Nettles, 2001).

**Evelyn:** The methodology you used seemed unique. It seems to focus on the everyday experiences of black women.

**Valerie:** I read a book by Renita Weems (1988/2005) and St. Clair (2008) which validated the approach I took. I used what I termed auto/biographical spiritual inquiry with a focus on everyday women's lives and womanist biblical interpretation. Remember we read *Just a Sister Away* (1988/2005), *Showing Mary* (2005), and *What Matters Most* (2004). Then finally, in Chapter 4, I paired a bible story, told through a womanist lens, with one of our stories that contained the same themes. Each set of stories was concluded by reflections about the stories' themes and the lessons for educators.

**Evelyn:** I really liked reading those books together. It was like we had our own private little book club.

### **What Challenges Have You Experienced?**

**Evelyn:** I know from our many conversations that this inquiry was not without its own set of challenges. I know that I had to really think back and reflect on the stories. I really wanted to make sure that I got the stories right.

**Valerie:** Yes. Sometimes memories do not reflect the actual historical events. Our memories are the past as you or I chose to remember it. But I think we did a good job overcoming this problem. Our discussions

with each other helped. Also asking others who experienced the events with us helped us to recall things we may have forgotten and clarify issues that were fuzzy in our thinking. I think a more difficult issue was deciding which stories to include in the inquiry. Reading Weems' (1988/2005, 2004, 2005) books together was a big guiding force. After reading her books and considering our own biblical knowledge, we had a better time deciding which personal stories to use and what bible stories to use.

**Evelyn:** I can remember you saying at times that it was difficult to get stories out of me.

**Valerie:** I think telling stories about ourselves makes us vulnerable and sometime maybe reluctant to tell such stories. Fictionalizing some of the stories helped to ease these fears. I think the bigger issue was telling stories related to our positions as educators.

**Evelyn:** I think you are right; we work in a small school system and live in a small town.

**Valerie:** Stories directly related to our positions, as educators, could have negative political consequences for both of us if the stories are not deemed to positively reflect our school system. But, I think fictionalizing some of the stories and focusing on how these events impacted us personally alleviated the fear of negative political consequences.



### **What Has This Inquiry Taught You Personally?**

**Evelyn:** The nature of this inquiry is intensely personal because you and I tell our own stories. Your theoretical framework is womanist theology, and from what you are always telling me, there is no reason a dissertation cannot also aid in the personal growth of its principal researcher. What has this inquiry taught you?

**Valerie:** Huh. As you already know, over the last couple of years I have wanted to grow out my relaxer that I've had since I was twelve. I have had this burning desire to know what the true texture of my hair was like. I hadn't been very successful until 2009. The process of growing my relaxer out has been a learning and trying experience— kind of like this dissertation.

**Evelyn:** Yes. I have been there with you for every step of the way with both— your hair and your dissertation.

**Valerie:** Trying to overlook other people's comments about my hair and using my voice in this dissertation are both representative of my fight against hegemonic forces which seek to impose Western European ideals on me. For example, some of my students, especially the white ones, make it a point to tell me they like my hair best when it is straight. There seems to be some curly-haired bias in this world. I have a friend who had natural curly hair and she said that she read somewhere that at least 80% of the women in

the world have naturally curly hair. If that's true, isn't it strange that most women try to straighten their hair. Who says curly hair is wrong? Writing our stories for this dissertation also felt like I going against some ingrained standard. Because of those hegemonic forces, I constantly questioned myself, just like I constantly considered getting a relaxer again.

**Evelyn:** So how does this situation relate to what you have learned during this process?

**Valerie:** Just like with my hair and other's opposition to me going natural, I have fought against all the forces out there – academic ones, hegemonic ones, internal voices of fear – to speak out anyway. As one of raps songs says – “I'm doin' me” and not worrying about what the oppositional forces say. It's been freeing.

**Evelyn:** I heard you having a conversation with one of your cousins during Thanksgiving. Tell me a little more. That conversation seemed to reveal that you learned more than just this psychological liberation you're talking about.

**Valerie:** We were discussing Tyler Perry's (2011) latest movie, *For Colored Girls* based on Ntozake Shange's (1975,1976, 1977) *For Colored Girls Who Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Isn't Enough*. My cousin expressed her disdain for the movie, and several of us were shocked. We wanted to know why she hated the movie. She said

she hated it because it did not represent black women like her, or for that matter, any of the other black women sitting around that table.

**Evelyn:** What a strong reaction...

**Valerie:** That's what we thought. But after more questioning, I understood where she was coming from. From her perspective, she wanted to see movies about black women who were succeeding, honorable, and heroines. She wanted to know where those movies were.

**Evelyn:** She has a point. Every black woman in that movie had major problems.

**Valerie:** I tried to convince her that there was a place for this movie because some women were dealing with the same issues expressed in the movie. As for the heroines she was looking for, she needn't look that far. My dissertation work has taught me that history was full of courageous black women. Sojourner Truth successfully sued white people four times in the 1800s and won. Women like Ella Baker, Dorothy Height, and Jarena Lee fought gender role stereotypes and racism to follow their hearts and fulfill their dreams. Granted there are no movies about these women, but that doesn't make them any less heroic. And, unfortunately, I would have felt just like my cousin had I not engaged in this inquiry and followed the advice of my dissertation committee. My education,

like my cousins, had left me sorely lacking in information about these female heroines. But this inquiry gives me the opportunity to highlight such courageous women and tell stories from everyday black women.

### **What Implications Does Your Inquiry Have for Education?**

**Evelyn:** What implications does your study have for education?

**Valerie:** Wow. That's a pretty weighty question. We all have hopes of changing education. But if anyone had the magic bullet, I believe it would have been used already. The solutions to our problems are just as varied as the number of people on the earth. Pedagogy as womanist spirituality is another voice in the conversation. A badly needed voice.

**Evelyn:** My experience has been that kids and sometimes even teachers are searching for something deeper than we have been able to offer up until now. I have many teachers who experience personal problems. Depending on what book I'm reading at the time, I have suggested that they read certain passages of scripture or other Christian inspirational books. I don't have this luxury or freedom with students. But, I offer my silent prayers to them.

**Valerie:** You know Parker Palmer is a person who says that it's important for teachers to regularly examine their inner selves. If they don't, they may end up doing damage to themselves and to those around

them. He speaks to the heart hungers you alluded to. Listen to this quote: *The 20<sup>th</sup> century, for all its scientific and technological amazements, might be described as a century of thin soup, and not only because too many people went hungry. It was a century in which we watered down our own humanity – turning wisdom into information, community into consumerism, politics into manipulation, destiny into DNA – making it increasingly difficult to find nourishment for the hungers of the heart (Palmer, 2000, p. v).*

**Evelyn:** Thin soup. I like that. It's time for a real meal. But I don't see how we can address the spiritual in education.

**Valerie:** You make a good point. But, I think some kids bring their religion and spirituality with them. And, as a teacher, I do them and myself a disservice to ignore this fact. You know our school just adopted a mandatory drug-testing program for students who participate in athletic and performing arts extra-curricular activities. Wanting to hear my students' opinions about the new policy, I asked them about their feelings concerning the drug testing policy. Generally, students were divided into two basic camps. I had the "drugs are bad" students who thought the policy was a good idea. They thought that since students engaged in those activities represented our school, the new policy was a good idea. Obviously they didn't want "drugees" representing their high school. Then I had the "we

should legalize marijuana” students who wanted to know why administrators had waited until now to implement such a policy because students have been using drugs for decades and had done nothing to damage the reputation of the school so far. Despite the liveliness of the discussion, it was not the overall debate that captured my attention. Nothing in particular about their comments stood out until two students engaged in a mini-debate of their own. One student said she believed her body was the temple of God and that she would never do anything to harm it and would hope that others felt the same. Another student, in front of her, looked to me and as if to say “wait a minute; time out – she’s broken the rules.” He raised his hand and said that she had no right to bring a Christian viewpoint into this discussion because her viewpoint was not based on scientific fact. I interjected and noted that just because a student’s opinion was not based on a scientifically-provable fact, did not mean that that opinion or alternate viewpoint was not worth hearing.

**Evelyn:** But you do have to be careful about discussing these topics in the classroom.

**Valerie:** You are right. But I think we have to be reminded that everything should not always be analyzed in the terms of data.

- Evelyn:** Yes. I'm in a data overload. If data and techniques were the sole answer, every student in the United States should be a genius.
- Valerie:** I agree. This exchange between these two students opened my eyes more than a book about modern and postmodern theory ever could have. Almost instantly, I realized just how much our society is entrenched in a scientific "fact-based" worldview and how other viewpoints, just as valid but simply not yet "proven" or "acceptable," are marginalized like certain groups of people. For example, in academia, researchers who engage in quantitative research are much more respected than those who utilize narrative-based forms of inquiry. Narrative forms of inquiry are marginalized even more when it is used by marginalized and oppressed groups (Pollard, 2006).
- Evelyn:** Yeah. In schools today, educators are not allowed to implement innovative programs if they are not backed by empirical data proving the program's future success. Success? Success at what? Somehow I don't think building good people to inhabit this planet is a process which can be entirely left to a data-driven process. I would like to think that we humans are far more complex than widgets, cars, televisions, or computers.
- Valerie:** Sounds like you're anti-science, anti-technology, and anti-future. You sound a little like those people who don't believe in evolution

despite the scientific proof.

**Evelyn:** No. I believe in evolution. In no way am I complaining about science and the progress we have made through technological and scientific advancement and innovation. But, it does not hold the total answer.

**Valerie:** I read this book once that asserted that the dominant left-brain analytical scientific approach is quickly reaching its limits, and it is time for us to consider other approaches more seriously. Pink (2006) in *A Whole New Mind: Why Right-Brainers Will Rule the Future*, suggests that significant levels of material abundance, cheap technical labor in Asia, and increasing levels of automation will push us towards more right-brained approaches employing spirituality, creativity, and wholistic viewpoints. He states: “The prosperity it [left-brained thinking] has unleashed has placed a premium on less rational more right-directed sensibilities – beauty, spirituality, emotion. For business, it’s no longer enough to create a product that’s reasonably and adequately functional. It must also be beautiful, unique, and meaningful” (p. 121).

**Evelyn:** What I hear you saying is that it is time for us to begin to embrace new modes of learning and begin to validate research methods that are not primarily left-brain which is what you seem to have done. Are there any other educational implications that this inquiry has



raised for you?

**Valerie:** Yes. The educational climate is stormy. It often feels like a category 5 hurricane is just around the corner. I'm really tired of the achievement gap issues. Despite efforts in our school to address the achievement gap, I still feel like there is an unspoken belief among some colleagues that something is inherently wrong with black students, and if their parents would just be parents and if the kids would just pull themselves up by their bootstraps all things would be perfect. We should just forget the psychological and spiritual impact of hundreds of years physical, economic, and psychological abuse perpetrated in systemic racism.

**Evelyn:** Yes, I agree. There seems to be this belief, reinforced by educational statistics, that the underachievement of African American and Latino/students are uneducable.

**Valerie:** For example, minority students are more often referred to special education services and remediation and are less often referred to gifted programs (Howard, 2003). Instead of asking what role race plays in the underachievement of these students, educators simply assume and act as if these students fail because of their race. Even though it would never be politically correct to say African Americans and Latinos are intellectually inferior to Caucasians, this unspoken belief contributes to the continued failure of these

students. Educators often see African American and Latino students who are successful as anomalies rather than typical representatives of their race (Ladson-Billings, 2001). This issue will only worsen as diversity levels – diversity beyond race and culture – in schools increase. With increasing immigration, poverty levels, homelessness, levels of student emotional problems, more students will fail to achieve high levels of success in schools. It is imperative that teachers begin to believe that all children can achieve despite the cultural capital or liabilities they bring into the classroom. Without the teachers' implicit positive beliefs about student achievement, teacher pedagogy will not be imbued with a sense that students of color can achieve (Ladson-Billings, 2001). Critical self-reflection is imperative to designing and implementing culturally responsive lessons (Irvine, 2001). Without self-reflection many teachers are simply unaware of long held beliefs that are implicit in their actions and views towards minority students. Gay (2003) concurs that self-reflection and cultural consciousness are crucial to improving achievement for students of color.

**Evelyn:** What you're saying is that without the careful examination and monitoring of personal beliefs/values and instructional practices, teachers are less likely to value and incorporate activities that value diversity and provide more relevant pedagogies encouraging

success for students of color. But first, you seem to suggest that it must begin with a teacher's own self-examination.

**Valerie:** And in another way this inquiry has been that for me. I have reflected on my practice and my cultural influences. According to Tisdell (2003), "spirituality is an important part of human experience. So is culture" (p. ix). In recent decades, there has been much talk of building culturally responsive pedagogies to aid in student achievement for students of color, and there has been growing discussions of the importance of spirituality in education. Yet, few seek to unite the two concepts. I have attempted to marry the two in this inquiry. Tisdell (2003) theorizes that there are spiritual dimensions to many cultures and there are cultural dimensions to spirituality. Students and teachers from different ethnic backgrounds often do not share similar spiritual beliefs, even if they practice the same religion. Differences in spiritual beliefs and practices are due to their ethnicity and cultural background.

**Evelyn:** But I don't think many educators even consider their own cultural background in relation to their spirituality. You can forget about giving thought to students' religious and spirituality and it's relation to their cultures.

**Valerie:** Tisdell (2003) teaches a master's level course entitled "Spirituality and Culture in Adult Education" and has noted in general that

more often students of color feel more of a connection between their spirituality and culture than students of European ancestry. For students and people of color, the merging of spiritual and cultural knowing is exhibited through image, ritual, and symbol. For instance, in our community, which is becoming more and more stratified (Ladson-Billings, 2001), Negro spirituals, gospel music, and “chittlin’ circuit” plays were all born out of a merging of culture and spirituality.

**Evelyn:** When comparing Christian church services in African American communities and Caucasian services within the same the same denomination, great variety can be found in service content and overall character. Many of these differences, such as noise level and movement, are attributable to culture and are not a direct result of spirituality. But, like I said earlier, I’m not sure that teachers will do this.

**Valerie:** I think you are right. Many teachers do not consider the two factors (spirituality and culture and their interrelated nature) when teaching children. But perhaps an awareness of these issues could be translated into the classroom and help improve student motivation. I hope this study will prompt more teachers to think about their own spiritual beliefs and the impact their cultures have had on them.

- Evelyn:** I think more teachers are beginning to think about the impact of cultures in the classroom. You know our school system has been active in addressing issues of race and culture in the classroom. I think what is missing is the spiritual piece. We seem to have forgotten that there are spiritual dimensions to students.
- Valerie:** I think it is also important to review the importance of student spiritual development in education.
- Evelyn:** How is that practical considering the separation of church and state?
- Valerie:** Kessler (2000) defines soul education, in non-religious terms, as focusing on the inner lives of students, exploring the intensity of the human experience, and supporting student longings for something extraordinary, transcendental and whole. Utilizing Kessler's (2000) definition of soul education, it becomes apparent that American schools have rarely, if ever, focused on the spiritual development of its students or teachers.
- Evelyn:** As an administrator, I deal with broken students all the time. Students are plagued by emotional and identity issues resulting in eating disorders, self-mutilation, drug addition, suicide, and violence.
- Valerie:** Often these ailments are driven by consumerism, materialism, and lack of identity which ultimately stem from a lack of wholeness. In

*Lost Boys: Why Our Sons Turn Violent and How We Can Save Them*, Garbarino (1999) suggests that “personal and spiritual development” are key factors in restoring our children to wholeness. Kessler (2000) also advocates using our educational process not only to nourish the mind, but also to satisfy the soul hunger of today’s students. Like Garbarino and Kessler, Glazer (1999) also thinks it is time to begin a discussion about spirituality in education.

### **Why Do You Advocate for a Pedagogy of Womanist Spirituality?**

- Evelyn:** I think this topic will give teachers and students an opportunity to validate the importance of addressing spiritual issues in the classroom.
- Valerie:** In addition to that, African-American female spiritual voices will be heard and add a rich texture to the spiritual conversation occurring in America. On issues related to spirituality, the African-American voice has traditionally been excluded. Throughout history, the African-American spiritual voice has been one of the few moral voices speaking out against injustice. Through this inquiry, African American teachers will have their voices heard and their history validated.
- Evelyn:** Besides the validation of black teachers’ voices, students will benefit from exposure to an honored diverse voice. Maybe, through

the voice of their teachers, students will come to value other cultures in an age where cultural conflict is increasingly the norm.

**Valerie:** I think the primary significance of this study is its timeliness. As a country, we are in the midst of a spiritual renaissance. More people are discovering that materialism and consumerism driving their decisions and actions hold no satisfaction. People are searching for something more. This urge to find something more has led to a fresh wave of religious fundamentalism as exhibited by the growing numbers of evangelical Christians.

**Evelyn:** Yeah. I saw a TV report saying that some people are interested in more ancient mystical religious sects, such as Kabbalah. Even teens are seeking solace in Wicca and other non-traditional religions.

**Valerie:** That reminds me of a quote I read in a book about education and spirituality. Glazer (1999) talks about the importance of spirituality in education: *The question of spirituality in education is a timely one. There is a renaissance of interest in paths of the heart and spirit, and this resurgence of spiritual values crosses racial, ethnic, political, cultural, and class lines. At the same time, there is a strong resurgence in fundamentalism, sectarianism, and religious politicking. To a great extent, both of these 'movements' result from (or are an outgrowth of) the same single, pervasive dis-ease: the experience of loss of meaning in our culture.* (p. 2-3)

**Evelyn:** Your inquiry seeks to acknowledge and affirm this quest for meaning and explain why it should be respected and encouraged by our educational institutions. It is something that is needed in our time.

**Valerie:** Historically, I think spirituality has received very little attention within the education realm. Despite the religious indoctrination found in early American education, no universal themes such as love, compassion, or care of the soul were ever seriously incorporated (Spring, 2001). My inquiry is significant because it shines the light on a key factor in resolving some of the issues we are facing in education by aiding students and teachers in their spiritual identity formation.

**Evelyn:** I feel spiritual identity formation is crucial to building life-enhancing communities and ultimately in living in a pluralistic society.

**Valerie:** Since spiritual identity formation is important both for teachers and students, I would like to see further study in this area, including the study of the soul in teacher education programs. You know, despite the blatant materialism and competition fostered in my MBA program, they did make an effort to educate the whole person, unlike teacher education programs. In my MBA program, we had seminars in stress relief which focused on yoga and



meditation, both of which are activities focused on nurturing the soul. Miller (2000) states that disciplines, such as business and healthcare, have realized the need to incorporate wholeness by focusing on the soul of a person.

**Evelyn:** Yet, education has failed to follow suit because of its fear of mixing secularism with spirituality. Are the two concepts diametrically opposed?

**Valerie:** It is time we moved beyond our simplistic, dualistic views of issues. My experience has taught me that things and people are rarely that simplistic. These issues should be addressed in teacher education programs.

## EPILOGUE

### **Evelyn**

Despite the many troubles that plague education, I still cannot bring myself to fully retire. I have a passion for students and their education. I dream of opening my own school or writing a book to help parents raise their children. I have had far too many experiences that bring me into contact with parents who are crying out for help in raising their children. Even though I earned my doctorate during the latter part of my career, I still hope to use it in the service of improving education. Working on this inquiry with my daughter has reinforced the necessity of using my voice. It has become very important that I define myself and never again allow others to define me. When others define you, their definitions are often ill-fitting and confining. I need to fully live in the uniqueness that God created called Evelyn. No one else can be me better than I can be me. I will continue to use my voice and encourage other young black women to do the same.

My daughter and I remain close. This process has allowed us to share in a way that we have not done before. We were able to share in an academic setting which on some level has added extra dimensions to our relationship. No longer is she my little girl, who tried to express her independence at two years old by walking out the door and saying "I be back" and walking back in another door saying "Told you. I be back." She is growing in wisdom, and I am proud. We stand together – united in our quest to have marginalized voices heard.

**Valerie**

I was reading a book (Tiberghien, 2007) about the writing life, and the author asked the reader to evaluate a journal entry of another author. She asked the reader to select words or phrases that stood out. The phrase that stood out the most to me was a phrase about a tree in winter time. The journal entry said that the stars hung like fruit in the branches. I think the word “star” was what first drew my attention because I really love stars and space. I feel like the vastness and beauty of the solar system, galaxy, and universe scream God. To me, there’s nothing like space to testify to the existence of God. That part of the journal entry made me long to see stars more clearly in our night sky. But, alas, there’s too much light pollution to see the night sky the way the author of the journal entry did. I had always heard that if you lived in a metropolitan area, light pollution prevented us from being able to see all the stars in the sky. Light pollution? What an interesting concept? Light is generally associated with something positive. But in this instance, the light was concealing the stars or what represented God to me. I think a lot of the initiatives in education are like light pollution. They appear to be positive on the surface, but they are hindering us from seeing true and lasting reform.

With this inquiry, it is my intention to eliminate some of the light pollution so we can see the stars. Sometimes it seems like the fight against the light is impossible. I still get frustrated because educators seem like pawns in larger political battles. I still get frustrated because my voice doesn’t seem to

matter even in situations where we are discussing the welfare and education of black children. My experiences as a black child growing up in America seem irrelevant to conversations about closing the achievement gap. I still get frustrated when I suggest that part of what makes good teachers is their ability to be in touch with their inner selves. I still get frustrated when I'm told that spirituality has no place in the classroom, as if my students are not integrated and whole people who deserved to be taught in a fully integrated manner.

I could go on and on. Light pollution is systemic and pervasive. To combat hopelessness, I tell myself that just because the light conceals the stars (God) doesn't mean they aren't there. When I think back to strong black women like Jarena Lee (1836), Rebecca Cox Jackson (Walker, 1983), Zilpha Elaw (1846), Sojourner Truth (1850/2005), Julia A. Foote (1879), Ella Baker (Ransby, 2003), Dorothy Height (2003), Katie Canon (1988), Renita Weems (1988/2005, 1993, 1999, 2004, 2005), and Delores William (1993) and the "gifts of power" (Walker, 1983) they have given me, I know there are solutions to the problems that plague education. I know there are solutions to the marginalization of black women's voices. This inquiry is reflective of my hope. The unrelenting nature of womanist spirituality as reflected in terms of courage, intelligence, persistence, heritage, hope, unity, and devotion counter the meta narrative that often portrays African American women as invisible and powerless. I call for a pedagogy of womanist spirituality that honors black women's voices and experiences, counters hegemonic forces which constantly silence black women, challenges African

Americans' narrowed focus on materiality, honors African American religious and spiritual heritages, and educates African Americans to thrive in an unjust world by turning to hope, love and freedom. For me, I'm not sure what is next; but wherever my journey takes me, I will use my gifts and talents to advocate for the voice of marginalized groups, especially black women.

My mother and I strive daily to maintain our hope. We both find the following poem (Westfield, 2006) inspirational because it demonstrates the wisdom of black women and testifies to the tenacity of black women. The qualities it details are ones to which we all should aspire.

### **Wisdom Rocked Steady**

*Wisdom rocked steady in her mahogany chair*

Purple floral cotton draped mid-calf at her varicose veins

Nude-colored support hose rolled just below her knees

Her wide feet tucked neatly into the worn tan-corduroy slippers she

borrowed from Grand-pa thirty-odd years ago

Her swollen knuckle hands rested softly upon her big belly

Wisdom's silver-gray man frames her burnished leather face calm with

compassion & mercy – lament & sorrow

She smell like Nana's salve rubbed on my child-chest to rid me of croup

She tastes like mother's milk – sweetness & warmth

She feels like old/new – then/now & always will be – rolled up into

One

Gazing on her beauty I see – my child, Mama n’em, Pooky, Big Mama

& I see myself – ancient & yet-to-be-born

*Wisdom stirs    clears her voice then takes a deep breath*

*Rocking back & forth*

I stretch to listen afraid I will miss some bit of truth

Rapt by her soothing voice we begin by singin’, hummin’, maonin’

together....

At the Cross....At the Cross....Where I first Saw the Light

In Times Like These.....You Need An Anchor

Blessed Assurance.....Oh What a Foretaste of Glory.....

During the singin’, hummin’ moanin’ She looked deeply into my eyes &

she spoke to me with conviction

“Our freedom is not out there/it is in here”

*she lays her hand on her own bosom*

She says with audacity *still gently rocking herself*

“Our freedom does not rest with the good will of Mr. Charlie & Miss Anne

Our beauty is not measured by Massa’s wife nor his girlchilids

Our salvation is not in the hands of the White Woman’s Christ”

*Wisdom narrowed her eyes    balled up her fist & struck her own knee – real*

*hard*

Wisdom says in a serious willful tone

“It took a woman to turn dis ole worl’ up-side down

It'll take a woman to turn her right-side up"

With a twinkle in her eye she says

"Baby you gotta act grown up

act courageous

even when you feel skirred"

*Wisdom frowned – her large lips turned down – momentarily like she*

*remembered a nightmare then her sad eyes returned to mine –*

*She took a short breath, wiped the tears from her big brown eyes*

With a timbre of determination Wisdom says

"We got to keep expanding, keep moving, keep going to the next level

Gathering as we go, including all the folk,

Learning that the journey is home

Baby concern yourself about others & their struggles

But not to the hurt of our own souls"

*Wisdom leaned forward & touched me gently on my cheek*

"Chile we got to love our own strength – our own roundness – our own

men & children"

*Wisdom smiled at the thought of men & children, then her smile gave way to laughter*

Through her own giggle she said

"Sing often, dance furiously, watch the moon & consider her tides,

Above all else – Love"

*Wisdom's voice grew passionate as she spoke*

“Love Spirit, drink deeply, eat often with friends – love yourself – inside & out, no matter what, no matter what...no matter what – love your Self...

Baby Girl you got to want to know more

learn to resist & refuse madness

accept the good love of women

dig deeper into our ways & wit”

Sage words pulsed & vibrated ‘round the room

*Wisdom sat back in her rocking chair spent & joyful*

She rested her head back against the doily & eased off into her nap

I retrieved her favorite hand sewn quilt from Nana’s cedar chest & tucked her

snuggly in

Her words echoing in my mind

“Baby Girl, You gotta keep loving – you gotta keep moving....”



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