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## Purgatory's Place in The South: A Black Woman's Journey to the Promised Land

Consuela Jean Ward

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PURGATORY'S PLACE IN THE SOUTH:  
A BLACK WOMAN'S JOURNEY TO THE PROMISED LAND

by

CONSUELA JEAN WARD

(Under the Direction of Ming Fang He)

ABSTRACT

Using critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 2003; Stovall, 2005), Black feminist thought (Collins, 2000), and identity theory of oppression (Hardiman & Jackson, 1997) as the theoretical framework and autobiographical narrative inquiry (He, 2003; Moody, 1968; Angleou, 1969; Hurston, 1965; hooks, 1996; Jacobs, 1861) as the methodology, I explored the formal and informal educational experiences I received and reciprocated in Black church ideology and white schools and how they shaped my identity and lived experience as a Black woman in the South. I chronicled paradigm shifts in my thinking along my journey from Black Christian fundamentalism and poverty to a socially mobile agnostic college administrator and diversity educator.

I used titles of songs from Black church music for chapters and stories which provide a bibliography of gospel music that connected the Black community in the shared need to survive the impact of slavery and its residual effects. Although I was moved by their soulful rhythms and warm feelings from nostalgia, my mind was often bifurcated as many of these songs also served to justify a protestant work ethic (Weber, 1920/2002) that limited the cultural capital of Blacks and especially Black women.

My study used the term Black with a capital B instead of African American or Afro-American to identify the descendants of African slaves in the United States. The term white with a lowercase w is used to describe the descendants of immigrants from European countries who

intentionally melted into North American society. The capitalized B in Black juxtaposed with the lowercase w in white serves to equalize the cultural capital among Blacks and other people of color with that of the white dominate experience in the United States. In addition to leveraging the power of white supremacy, I also use a lowercase c in christian to leverage oppression from christian privilege.

My dissertation adds to several bodies of literature. First, it explores Black Theology Liberation and lifts its monopoly of emancipation particularly for Black women. It also carries the torch and makes meaningful connections from the foremothers of the Black Freedom Movement generation who wrote about their lives and gives strength to today's Black girls. Within the context of multicultural education, it shows dialectical perspectives on how Black women in the South learn. It also challenges educators, teachers, administrators, parents, and education policy makers to consider their own epistemology and validate that lived experience is neither static nor canonically realistic but has the power to impact how one receives, interprets, values and (re)produces education.

Exploring the developing critical consciousness of how I see the world, whether intentionally or inadvertently, impacts how I influence the life of my Black sons and the life of the students I interact with as an educator in the increasingly diversified, complicated, and contested world.

**INDEX WORDS:** Narrative inquiry, Autobiography, Identity, Black theology liberation, Race, Place, Culture, Class, Black feminist thought, Critical race theory

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A BLACK WOMAN'S JOURNEY TO THE PROMISED LAND

by

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B.A., Florida State University, 1994

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A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University in Partial  
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DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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## CHAPTER 1

### HOW I GOT OVER

How I got over  
How did I make it over  
You know my soul look back and wonder  
How did I make it over  
(Ward, 1963, side 1 track 5)

This chapter is intentionally entitled “How I Got Over” because it reminded me of the song of the same title recorded at the 1963 March on Washington during the Black Freedom Movement. Gospel great Mahalia Jackson sang of the resilience of an oppressed people on their journey to freedom in another land. Although this song attempted to parallel the plight of Jews in Israel and Blacks in America, it also speaks to the resilience of my personal and professional journey as a Black woman educator in the South.

This chapter used other gospel song titles to tell the context and purpose of my study, its autobiographical roots, a review of the literature, the methodology, and the study’s significance. “We Shall Overcome” taken from a Black Freedom Movement song, put into context what and why I needed to overcome. “God is Tryin to Tell You Somthin” borrowed from a gospel song title from Alice Walker’s book to movie *The Color Purple*, (1982) outlined the purpose of the study to determine what principles were intended to be realized. “Take Me Back” is reminiscent of an old Andre Crouch (1972, track 10) song and described my autobiographical roots in an effort to remember and appreciate the beginning of my journey to better understand the path that led me where I am today. “There is a Balm in Gilead” taken from an old Negro Spiritual of the same name, suggests finding solace and liberation in the review of literature. “Pressing My Way” inspired by gospel singer Shirley Caesar (Caesar, 1975, side 1 track 2),

explained how I pressed or moved forward in my writing methodically, and “Revolution” from Kirk Franklin’s (1997) popular tune discussed the revolutionary significance of my study.

### We Shall Overcome: Context of Study

Children in the United States first learn about race between the ages of four and six years old. It might seem logical that my first memory of race should be clear given my upbringing in a Southern pocket of Florida just after the Black Freedom Movement had ended. On the contrary, my many experiences actually run together in what I used to view as a normal childhood influenced greatly by the institutions of white school and Black church ideology working in tandem. What is initially clearer is my children’s first experience with race living in southeast Georgia between the ages of four and six in the year 2005.

My son, Charles, was five and son, Cameron, was four. Charles came home from school and expressed that he no longer wanted to be Black. “But I’m the director of the Multicultural Student Center at a major university! How is it that my son doesn’t want to be Black?” I thought. As I conjoined my dual roles of diversity educator and mom, I facilitated an open discussion to encourage self-love and discourage educationally and societal induced self-hate. After some investigation, I found that he liked a little white girl in his class who liked him back. But she began to get teased by other classmates for liking a Black boy which in turn made him want to change himself. He was my easy one. A few months later, I walked in on Cameron, who was four at the time, scratching his skin until the white ash appeared. As he attempted to gain full coverage of ash on his dark arm, he said enthusiastically, “Finally, a little more here and a little more there, I’ll finally be white!” Devastated, I asked him why he wanted to be white. “Mo-om,” he sang, “It’s just so much more fun.” He replied.

I am a mother of two Black sons desperate to create a path to encourage them to be socially responsible, educationally emancipated, critically thinking citizens in our society. My heavy competitors are systematic institutions, namely educational, political, and religious of that same society that have defined my children's places within the outliers of mainstream society while they were still being formed in my womb. Of these institutions, I contend that the most consistent pipeline of messages that reify their distant place in society comes through the mainstream lens of traditional education. No other institution is made mandatory for all children to participate with a purpose of collectivism. Although my two young Black male children have several years ahead of them before they reach the university, which is my current platform to educate, I am professionally aware that the curriculum by which they are looking forward to is no less emancipatory than the curriculum they are exposed to at their current elementary levels. It is therefore my hope to create a curricular path for their future that is diverse in thought and application.

Professionally, I am a former 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grade English teacher, now a college administrator and instructor with several vantage points of the structure of education. More specifically, I am the Director of the Multicultural Student Center at Georgia Southern University, responsible for providing diverse programs that awaken and educate the campus community on pluralism, inclusion and the need to move beyond tolerance reaching toward appreciation and relativism. Henry Giroux (2004) sheds light on what can happen when communities reach this level of awakening.

Being awake meant accepting the demands of worldliness which implied giving voice to complex and controversial ideas in the public sphere, recognizing human injury beyond the privileged space of the academy, and using theory as a form of criticism to redress

injustice. Worldliness required not being afraid of controversy, making connections that are otherwise hidden, deflating the claims of triumphalism, bridging intellectual work and the operation of politics. (p. 150)

I am fortunate to understand my home life from my professional vantage. One way in which I express love for my children is by challenging them to think critically about the world around them. My competitors are the messages of probability that they spend their young adult years in jail versus in a university. Gallagher (2007) found that Black youth accounted for 15% of all youth, 26% of youth arrested, and 58% of youth who end up in state adult prison while The Chronicle of Higher Education (2010) reports that in 2008, only 3.1% of all earned bachelor's degrees in the U.S. were disseminated to Black males.

My professional role at Georgia Southern University charges me to challenge students and faculty to think critically about the world around them as well. I have found that approaching inquiry through the lenses of critical race theory and Black feminist thought gives me new perspectives in which to challenge their ideas. It offers student the opportunity to learn from the lens of the oppressed in addition to the white dominant perspective in which they have become accustomed in traditional curriculum. Freire (1970) personalizes this by acknowledging how seeing the world in relation to connections with others can help distinguish between one's perception of their reality and their actual reality.

Every human being, no matter how 'ignorant' or submerged in the 'culture of silence' he may be, is capable of looking critically at his world in a dialogical encounter with others. Provided with the proper tools for such encounter, he can gradually perceive his personal and social reality as well as the contradictions in it, become conscious of his own perception of that reality, and deal critically with it. (p. 13)

In an effort to put into context the journey of “How I Got Over” to the *Promised Land*, I will begin here with the end in mind (Covey, 1989) by assessing what I know about my current state of affairs concerning Black churches and white schools. I no longer have traditional religious ties so I examined the educational conditions of Georgia Southern University, the white school in which I continue to educate and be educated.

Faculty at an institution of higher education represents the first influencers of knowledge construction for students; therefore, it is important to contextualize the racial and gender diversity of full time faculty and students at Georgia Southern. According to the Office of Strategic Research and Analysis, of full time faculty, 84.9% are white, 6.6% are African American, 6.7% are Asian 1.5%, are Hispanic, and .3% are Multiracial. The gender breakdown of faculty is close to even with 53% male and 47% female. This is juxtaposed with the consideration of the following student body demographic: 66% percent identify with being white, 21.8% with Black, 2.1% Hispanic, 1.7% Asian or Pacific Islander, and .3% Native American. The gender breakdown of students at Georgia Southern University is even closer to the faculty demographic of 50.8% female and 49.2% male (Georgia Southern University Fact Book, 2009, [http://services.georgiasouthern.edu/osra/fb0809\\_web.pdf](http://services.georgiasouthern.edu/osra/fb0809_web.pdf)).

Comparative to the approximate 85% of faculty at Georgia Southern University being white, 89% of national school teachers in K-12 education are white and overwhelmingly female, while the national student demographic reflects 7% Black (but 15% of youth) and 2% Hispanic respectively (National Education Association, 2006). Given these statistics, a critical scholar might ask what knowledge is being presented to whom and for what reason? Carter G. Woodson (1933/2005) noted that, “When a Negro has finished his education in our schools, then he has been equipped to begin the life of an Americanized or Europeanized white man” (p. 4). This can

suggest that all students are presented a cookie cutter perspective of what it means to be educated, defined historically and politically by white men and taught by white women.

The inception of traditional education in the United States is arguably founded on the principles of nationalism and obedience, learning to live both a good and godly life, and to confirm and confer social status (Spring, 2005). One clear example of this strong influence of colonial education is the opening of the New England Primer Today. “I will fear God, and honour the KING. I will honour my Father and Mother. I will obey my Superiors. I will Submit to my Elders” (Spring, 2005, p.15). I contend that traditional education today is perhaps the most consistent contributor in establishing both, places of power and marginalization, and continues to encourage its subjects to conformity and operation within limits. W.E.B Du Bois (1903/1965) consistently upheld the notion that schooling was both personally and socially emancipatory and noted that education should give our youth training designed above all to make them men of power. However, Woodson (1933/2005) writes a contradictory reality that, “In schools of theology, Negroes are taught the interpretation of the Bible worked out by those who have justified segregation and winked at the economic debasement of the Negro” (p. 3). Although Dubois may have been correct in his belief that education can be emancipatory, Woodson’s insight that schooling in the canonized curriculum can enforce subjection cannot be ignored.

Beverly Gordon (2005) notes the reactions of dominant groups upon equalizing such power. “[When] dominant society conceptualizes itself as being in competition with those deemed *other* (e.g. regarding numerical majority, or societal control), it will respond defensively in an effort to maintain its domination, control, and perceived ‘need’ for survival” (p. 160). For example, a student (Nigerian female) walked into my office last summer complaining of a quiz that her communications law professor (white male) distributed. She and her classmates were to

respond to a scenario where a college professor, formally a skinhead, posted a 'safe zone' sticker on his door. The sticker indicated that his office was a safe place for Christians, Conservatives and Heterosexual members of the community to come and express their culture and or viewpoints without fear of debasement. Additionally, students were also asked to respond to the following statement entitled, "A Further Nuisance..." It stated that:

As the VP of Academic Affairs at Midville State, one of your many duties is to approve a variety of event calendars for a myriad of campus organizations. You don't spend too much time on these generally. Normally you just glance at them to see if there might be scheduling conflicts and the like. So, you have just signed off on the following proposal [the event calendar from the Multicultural Student Center at Georgia Southern University] by the university's Office of Multicultural Affairs prior to taking up that nasty business with the truculent professor and his controversial decals. (Course syllabus, Communications Law, Summer 2008)

To the student's surprise, the professor dismissed the class early seemingly out of frustration because they disagreed with his insistence that the professor in question had a moral right to hang his sign.

My doctoral program has sensitized my awareness of the necessity of complicated conversations such as these. Pinar (2004) suggests that "that conversation be among participants, one which supports and explores the possibilities of unpredicted and novel events, unplanned destinations, conversation which incorporates life history and politics and popular culture as well as official, institutional, bureaucratized knowledge" (p. 224). Creating safe spaces then to talk about race, class, and gender is then a fluid connection between the passions of my professional and personal roles which both spring from cyclical oppressive and liberating experiences. Freire



(1970) best explains my objective when he wrote, “The oppressors, who oppress, exploit, and rape by virtue of their power, cannot find in this power the strength to liberate the oppressed or themselves. Only power that springs from the weakness of the oppressed will be sufficiently strong to free both” (p. 28-29). Therefore, it is my challenge to unpack who I am as a professional educator and the personally vested me in my emancipator journey through Black churches and white schools to freedom in *The Promised Land*.

### God Is Tryin To Tell You Somthin: Purpose of Study

I chose to write an autobiographical narrative study in an effort to add to the bodies of literature in curriculum theory that serve to validate otherwise muted voices in the canon. These muted voices include Black women writing about autobiographical life, women’s place in Black theology of liberation, multicultural education, and the education of Blacks in the United States. Beverly Gordon (2005) questions the purpose and in whose best interest it serves to educate the owners of muted voices in the United States: “Will that education function as a mode of ideological domination, working to co-opt Black students to the current societal hierarchy, or function as a force of social reconstruction to help them redefine the nature of their own lives?” (p. 168). The bodies of literature I have chosen will not only address Gordon’s question, but will counter traditional socially acceptable knowledge found in various modes of canonized curriculum.

This study will attempt to unpack my core and locate my voice by examining my experiences and their catalysts in an effort to understand my responses to issues in education and how and why I relate to the students I serve. The following experience brought this into question for me. I received the evaluation results from a class I taught during the spring 2009 semester,

entitled Diversity in an Educational Context. The scores were just below the average within the department. I was perplexed and quite frankly hurt because one of my most natural abilities has always been teaching. The overwhelming concern students had was that I focused my teaching on issues related to Black and white people. Instead, they indicated that they were interested in learning about more areas of diversity. I immediately pulled out my course syllabus to see if it reflected what they said. What I found were varied lessons on Native Americans, people with varying mental and physical abilities, the history of oppression in the United States, religion, gender, sexual orientation, class, privilege, the plight of Aboriginal education in Australia, identity, race and ethnicity, and environmental issues. Although my syllabus easily countered the classes' concern, it did not address my uneasiness toward their perception of my teaching abilities or the intended lessons. I asked myself if this reaction was just the typical resistance that I receive from students forced to sit in my diversity workshops and seminars, or was it something in my actions, body language or curriculum that blocked my students' transformations?

This study will probe into the layered personal experiences that shaped my lens which most saliently include growing, living, and learning as a Black female in white schools and Black churches in the South. It will examine how those experiences shaped and provided meaning to my teaching as a diversity educator and as a mom whose children are students in other teachers' classrooms. I will explore my constructed perception of the world and search for transformation blockers and accelerators. These are words, images, and memories that either clog or embrace new ideas that can transform minds and actions. This accomplishment can lead to the development of a diversity education curriculum that encourages students to socially and responsibly locate their identity shifts in relation to both a regional and global society, as well as, equalize the perception of subjugated knowledge. In gathering and connecting scattered

experiences from documentation of my own journey, I will theorize their culminated form(s) in an effort to offer students and educators blueprints to construct their own translucent boundaries that allow for cyclic pathways to learning, unlearning, and re-learning. This inquiry then proposes to challenge readers to look critically at traditional cultural and sub-cultural values obtained through traditional modes of teaching and learning and empower them to create new traditions rooted in liberation and humanitarianism.

In doing so, I assert that inquiry surrounding race, class, and gender in curriculum not be a component of curriculum in the form of designated months or weeks, chapters or units, or as “add-ons or luxuries disconnected from the everyday lives of students” (Nieto, 2004, p. 345). Rather, its place sits at the core of the story being told with the understanding that voices that have been historically muted have the right to be heard, validated, and celebrated in all aspects of texts.

Lorde (1984) addresses this in her assertion that “community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist” (p. 112). In agreement with Lorde, it is also my desire that the benefactors of my research understand that colorblindness, although often rooted in good intentions, is counterproductive to effective curriculum transformation. Instead, it perpetuates the myth of meritocracy, supports white privilege, and undermines the interest of students of color (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005).

### Take Me Back: Autobiographical Roots

“Take Me Back” comes from an Andre Crouch (1972, track 10) song I listened to as a child. The singer is asking to be taken back to her first memory of believing in god because she has grown away from her early beliefs. This song is her attempt to get back to basics so that she

can remember what made her initially believe. This section will go back to my first conscience beginnings of knowledge and awareness in an effort to help understand the root of my journey today.

I am a Black woman, raised in a grassless community in Apopka, Florida by a displaced Northerner, on the Black side of the railroad tracks and symbiotically connected to a Black church. I was taught my place and mechanically respected its borders and boundaries. This education took place at home and in church and it was perpetuated by schooling, society, and popular culture at large. Woodson (1933/2005) explains the impact of such a conditioning.

When you control a man's thinking, you do not have to worry about his actions. You do not have to tell him not to stand here or go yonder. He will find his 'proper place' and will stay in it. You do not need to send him to the back door. He will go without being told. In fact, if there is no back door, he will cut one for his special benefit. (p. ix)

Essentially, my substandard image was cemented by what textbooks left out and what church and pop culture filled in. Fear kept me docile and submissive, reified through a religion which originated in the Middle East, taught through the lens of conservative and liberal white America in *thee* holy language of Middle English.

When considering the environment that engulfed my childhood, the mere fact that I am sitting in a doctoral program is a serious interruption in the status quo continuum. I went to undergraduate school as a constructive escape from an oppressive situation and found a new freedom in thinking, not realizing that I was only in the embryonic stages of my evolution. I met my middle class husband during my freshman year of college and he was everything my previous environment was not. He was not physically abusive nor did he exhibit other counterproductive vices. Most importantly, he valued work and church. We merged from two

different worlds haphazardly attempting to represent the Black middle class trajectory, a subgroup of the [white] middle class. We met in college, dated for five years, and then married. We began careers in education, bought a new home, began a family in year three, and became an example of the ideal Black church family.

It was not long until I realized something was missing. It was me. I was missing. Someone else named my world for me, one that many resist at an early age. Freire (1970) recognized how some children resist dominant groups naming their world for them. “The young perceive that their right to say their own world has been stolen from them, and that few things are more important than the struggle to win it back. And they also realize that the educational system today, from kindergarten to university, is their enemy (p. 15). Unlike many Black youth, I did not resist having my world named for me. My female assignment compounded my association with being both Black and of a working class background making me more susceptible to being a consumer of education, both informal and formal. I was living what someone else dictated was good for me. It was sustained by religion and supported by education both of which encourage unhealthy codes which benefited a few of the privileged.

Breaking from the marriage also symbolized the beginning stages of breaking from the Black church and becoming a producer of education. Leaving my community baffled, I made my escape to a new level of freedom, Georgia Southern University.

I accepted the position as the Director of the Multicultural Student Center at Georgia Southern University with a sincere desire to sensitize the University community to issues surrounding race, class, and gender. Entering the Curriculum Studies doctoral program complemented that desire and turned it in to a fiery passion by initiating the third shift in my continuum. By offering past and current research and giving me permission to explore me

without obligation of apologies for my findings, it has offered me a new outlook on myself as I relate to my environment, and I am able to directly associate it to my work. My work is me and I am my work. I am curriculum.

### There is a Balm in Gilead: Liberation in the Literature

#### Go Down Moses: The Theoretical Framework of Emancipation

I have chosen the theoretical framework of Hardiman and Jackson's (1997) Identity Theory of Oppression through the lenses of critical race theory and Black feminist thought. This framework served as a vehicle to emancipate through the literature of Black theology liberation, multicultural education, and the education of Blacks in the U.S. The titles in this section will reflect songs by slaves in the U.S. that encouraged the attempt to escape to freedom and later sang in Black churches as Old Negro Spirituals. These titles and the study framed my journey to a *Promised Land* void of the oppression that I have inherited. This land speaks of an often misguided inference in Christian ideology that is rightly reserved for the Jews led by Moses as well as the freedom of slaves obtained through the Underground Railroad led by Harriet Tubman, also referred to as Moses. However, this land for me is not a material or physical place of milk and honey which was promised to the Jews referenced in the book of Exodus or the slaves in the Free states north of the Ohio River prior to 1865. The promise is found in the beauty of my journey. My promised land is an emancipatory "line of flight" (Reynolds and Webber, 2004) in my thinking that redefined my place and how I relate to the world. The study then will focus both on the journey and provide meaning to the destination.

My paradigm shifted several times since I escaped poverty and Christian fundamentalism in Apopka, Florida and absconded to Florida State University through affirmative action policies.

Today, 20 years later, I am still both Black and a woman, but living as the only Black and unmarried woman in my middle class subdivision and with no connection to any church. Alternative college entrance programs catapulted me out of poverty and cracked a ceiling of access that would not have otherwise opened for me. That path led me to the field of education. With this new life came a pre-fabricated blueprint of Black middle classdom which dictated my role in the community, my church, and my conservative gendered roles of wife and mother. This role was constructed through the Black church and reified in the white schools in which I learned and worked. A plan for me had been carefully defined and designed. Subsequently, the alternative was a different pre-fabricated blueprint designed for Black women with less access to education and social mobility. Audrey Watkins (2004) explains further by noting that “working-class Black women have been solely constructed as clients and consumers of education and schooling, as spectators at the spectacle of their education. We have not been perceived as knowers of valuable knowledge who can provide educational leadership” (p. 155).

The appropriateness of the theoretical framework of this autobiographical narrative lies in the examination of the inseparableness of my race, class and gender and how looking at the world from those viewpoints impacts my role as an educator. I contend that I am an educator because of experiences consistent with my Blackness, my female identity, my alternating poor and working social classes and unexpected leap into the Black middle class. Here I will draw heavily from the Black feminist thought perspectives of several scholars (Giddings, 1984; bell hooks, 1981, 1984, 1989, 2000a; Truth, 1852/1992; Wallace, 1970; Lorde, 1984; Beverly Guy-Sheftall, 1995; Collins, 2000; Cooper, 1892/1988; Smith, 1998). I have also chosen to draw from critical race theorists, such as W.E.B. Du Bois, (1903/1965), William Watkins (2001, 2005), Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994, 1995, 1998, 2003), Daniel Solorzano and Tara Yosso (2001), bell

hooks (1990, 2000b), Richard Delgado (1995, 2001), Lewis (1995), Carter G. Woodson (1933/2005), Paulo Friere (1970), John Jackson (2008), Stovall (2005), Delgado and Stefancic (2001) and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2006).

Although the critical race theory originated out of legal scholarship in the 1970's, it is now heavily applied to examining the role of race and racism in education (Lynn, 2006). In these contexts, race is noted as a social construct and racism is noted as a set of institutionalized privileges to advantage or disadvantage groups based on race. David Stovall (2005) suggests that critical race theory serves to identify white supremacy in education and to develop praxis to counter its hegemony. In doing so, it has also provided a means by which Blacks and other marginalized voices can be heard by way of protest in the public sphere as a response aimed at changing the realities of the public institutions, including education.

Critical race theory in education is an oppositional intellectual movement that incorporates narrative, autobiography, storytelling and personal history. Although it does not incorporate one set of ideas or rules, Taylor (2000), Solorzano and Yosso (2001) and Stovall (2005) have collected consensual defining elements as identified by scholars in the field. They include: (a) naming race and racism as the center of structural design of schooling and school practices, its benefactors as white people and its victims as Blacks and other people of color; (b) promoting and legitimizing the voices and narrative of people of color; (c) exposing and challenging the dominant discourse of social inequality and white as a normative standard; (d) committing to social justice by offering a liberatory or transformative response to racial and other oppressions; (e) analyzing race and racism by placing them in both a historical and contemporary context using interdisciplinary methods.



Only in recent years have politically oriented curriculum scholars addressed race (Pinar, et al., 2004) by using critical race theory as oppositional responses of protest and activism. Gay (2000) recognized the importance of its use because the continued ignorance of differences could breed feelings of anxiety, fear, negative attitudes and the cultural imperialist temptation to turn *others* into images of the dominant group. She notes, “Educational excellence included academic success, as well as, cultural competence, critical social consciousness, political activism, and responsible community membership” (Gay, 2000, p. 31).

This study would not be complete without the core themes of Black feminist thought which namely concern work, family, sexual politics, motherhood and political activism (Collins, 2000). Zora Neale Hurston (1937/1965), who, like me, is from Central Florida, wrote compellingly about the issues of Black women when juxtaposed to a male dominant society.

Honey, de white man is the de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it's some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don't know nothing' but what we see. So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He hand it to his women folks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see. (p. 16)

Black feminist thought is a liberating response to the oppression of Black women beyond critical race theory because it outlines the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Since slavery in the United States, Black women have been allocated the role of “mule, mummies, and matriarchs” (Collins, 2000, p. 225). Our duty was to breed, feed, and nurture Black babies and white, while being seen as asexual work mules, left with the guttural question coined by Sojourner Truth, “ain't I a woman?” (Truth, 1852/1992). Our Blackness compounded our gender and our gender compounded our Blackness. They were sewn together with the

stitches of low social class which created challenges separate from feminist literature that included women, especially white women or critical race literature which only included issues of Blackness, especially male.

I spoke with a Black male colleague about this recently and he storied an account of his dating schema while in college. He played college football at a majority white university where dating Black women was not common because they were practically non-existent on campus. “I treated white women like queens, like delicate flowers. When they cried, I came to their rescue with tissue and an embrace. The first time I dated a Black women, she cried, and I looked at her as if she were an alien. Black women were supposed to be stronger than that!”

Morrison (2008) shared a similar experience when she interpreted overt and covert messages in society that defined white women as soft, helpless, and worthy of respect while the messages defining Black women were tough, capable, independent, and not worthy of respect. These examples forced me to consider how my world related back to me. It triggered thoughts of Sojourner Truth’s acidic question, “Ain’t I a Woman?” (Truth, 1852/1992). It brought back childhood memories of my mother warning my brother to “leave those white girls alone before you get lynched!” Did this inadvertently imply that there would not be public outrage if a man mishandled me?

The oppressive messages of standardized family values, gender roles, and expectations are ever evolving and dialectic especially for Black women with a common response of resilience. Our space has typically been defined in nurturing the home (ours or someone else’s) and service to the community and the Black church while disassociating ourselves with self-care. Collins (2000) considered the origins within the Black church and community of this conditioning when she wrote, “But these same institutions may also be the places where Black

women learn to subordinate our interests as women to the allegedly greater good of the larger African American community” (p. 95). We learn to wear the badge of glory of a Superwoman: Strong and Black without recognizing it as a dehumanizing myth. Hooks (1981) similarly comments, “Black women were told that we should find our dignity not in liberation from sexist oppression but in how well we could adjust, adapt, and cope” (p. 7). I contend that Black female educators, administrators, and policy makers can use their positions of power and their knowledge of this framework to empower students, change the rules of supremacy in the canon, and promote cultural capital for women and minorities.

Knowing the process of your own awareness is necessary in both understanding self and others in their process of developing. Therefore, I chose to theorize this autobiographical narrative by placing my developmental process on Hardiman and Jackson’s (1997) Identity Theory of Oppression through the lenses of Black feminist thought and critical race theory. Hardiman and Jackson (1997) offer five stages of identity development. Stage one is naivety. During this stage, oppressors and oppressed people notice differences in race, gender, religion, etc. but have no assigned meaning that characterizes these differences. Stage two is acceptance. Oppressors in this stage believe in meritocracy while the oppressed accepts supremacy as normal and assimilation as necessary. Stage three is resistance. In this stage, oppressors begin to question traditional beliefs and can distance themselves from their group assignment because of anger, guilt, and shame. The oppressed in this stage experience an unexpected event that empowers them to recognize and openly reject and challenge their oppression leading them to define themselves by who they are not. Stage four is redefinition. Here, oppressors search for a new identity and realize that ending oppression frees both the oppressed and the oppressor. They seek to find others like themselves in an effort to redefine who they are. The oppressed in this

stage redefine how the oppressors have named them and how they name themselves. They also search for people like themselves to get a better understanding of who they are. Stage five is internalization. Oppressors in this final stage operate from an inner security and are no longer angry or ashamed. Fighting oppression becomes a personal responsibility and not a cause. The oppressed also develops an inner security. They recognize and acknowledge that there are other oppressed groups and then demonstrate compassion for those groups. They are committed to fighting oppression for themselves and others.

Hardiman and Jackson (1997) suggest that mobility from stage to stage feels like a death occurs when the subject recognizes that his or her current stage has lost all logic. The subject then does a cost-benefit analysis to ensure a move will be meaningful. Using Hardiman and Jackson's (1997) identity theory of oppression and building on the frameworks of critical race theory and Black feminist thought, I draw from three bodies of literature. They include Black theology of liberation, multicultural education, and the education of Blacks in the United States.

### The Gospel Train is Comin: Black Theology Liberation

Central to the narrative of my autobiographical inquiry, lay the significant role of the Black church. Black theology of liberation is the body of literature where I explore this idea of salvation versus liberation in the Black church experience. Its relevancy lies in the Black church bearing the foundation of my safety, security, and sometimes food and shelter. As a preacher's kid (PK), this is where home was rooted, thereby offering codes and messages dictating roles and responsibilities of a born again Christian in my less formal education. Here, being born again was a second birth that signified a new revelation in a world of religion unlike the first birth where one was born into a world where the carnal body was supreme. As I began to grow and

evolve intellectually, I experienced another kind of birth. This third birth was founded in its analyzing of the previous births and could not exist simultaneously with the second. I was torn and was compelled to ask the question, “How can someone, especially a descendant of African slaves in the United States of America with critical and conscious ability be both an intellectual and a Christian?” I took this question to the Black Christian intellectuals and philosophers in the Ivy Leagues, the most respected halls of academia. I shouted my question in the halls of Harvard, Princeton, Yale and Union Theological Seminary in New York. The echoed responses came back from self-proclaimed Christians who are respected tenured scholars, alumni, and their mentors to include the minds of James Cone (1969, 2004, 2008), Cornel West (2001, 2009), Michael Eric Dyson (2004), Howard Thurman (1998), Martin Luther King Jr. (1963/1981, 1998), and Reinhold Niebuhr (1986a, 1986b).

The voices of women in this arena are more audible than ever before. However, men continue to dominate positions of formal authority and discourse in the larger body of literature today while women make up large percentages of the congregations and hold other positions of influence in the Black church (Collins, 2000). The traditional professionals that have served in the Black church were female teachers, while male preachers responsible for leading typically had minimal education. Still, there is a growing body of literature within Black theology liberation from a womanist perspective. Much of this literature unmutes the voices of Black women who have been subjugated by patriarchal Black churches and seek equal opportunity within its walls. In her womanist theology research on gender inclusivity in the Black church, Barnes (2006) found that sermonic issues of racial justice actually undermine support for women in leadership, particularly the pastorate. Other works which uncover this sort of marginalization include Deborah Austin (1995), Evelyn Brooks (1983), Allison Calhoun-Brown (1999), Lett M.

Russell (1985), Jacqueline Carr-Hamilton (1988), Jualynne Dodson (1988), Jacquelyn Grant (1995), Julia Foote (1995), and Maria Stewart (1995).

My approach warrants a different lens. I was conditioned to value the subjugated place of Black women in religion but have since journeyed and evolved to defining place in relation to community away from the patriarchal system of organized religion altogether. My concern then is not to paint pants on women in the church but to question the crux of this religion which serves to dialectically enslave and free in tandem.

The Black church is a traditional social construct with strong European protestant ethical foundations that defined place and morality as lived experience for the Black community. However, Blacks found creative ways of empowerment in this atmosphere of marginalization. In the Black church, upward mobility was a reality in the way of leadership particularly for men, from appointed deacons to self-appointed bishops. It was a place where, “psychological depression, personal worthlessness, and social despair so widespread in black America” (West, 2001, p. 20) could also be addressed.

James Cone, longtime professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York, is considered the pioneer of Black Theology Liberation. In his *Black Theology and Black Power*, Cone (1969) he defines the term as the way enslaved Africans and their descendants attempted to give meaning of hope, justice, and love to a strange new world by mixing remnants of their homeland religion to that of the religion given them by their white slave owners. Essentially, the Black church has served very distinct purposes. Cone suggests that it was a place of social structure that although grounded in a faith espoused by white missionaries, slaveholders, and politicians, it was a place that Blacks were sure that whites could not overtly dominate. The idea

was that through violence, the dominant culture could kill your body, but through the symbolism of the cross, they cannot kill your soul. Therein lays a strength of the Black church.

The Black church experience is a test to faith according to an ingrained Calvinist perspective (Weber, 1920/2002) that took on a life of its own where a congregation proved its commitment to God by determining how long and how thunderous one can worship. The church also provided a meaningful place for Blacks to re-affirm hope for eternal joy during temporary earthly suffering. There they produced the strength necessary to journey their predestined plight to suffer while encouraging each other to look towards the heavenly rewards for working in an earthly life. This is so cemented in Niebuhr's (1986b) famous Serenity Prayer:

God grant me the serenity  
to accept the things I cannot change;  
courage to change the things I can;  
and wisdom to know the difference.

Living one day at a time;  
Enjoying one moment at a time;  
Accepting hardships as the pathway to peace;  
Taking, as He did, this sinful world  
as it is, not as I would have it;  
Trusting that He will make all things right  
if I surrender to His Will;  
That I may be reasonably happy in this life  
and supremely happy with Him

Forever in the next.

Amen.

(p. 251)

In the awakening of my intellectual birth, I have come to recognize how the safety of the Black church assisted in the physical survival of Black people in the United States, but I also understand how it continuously limits our cultural capital and directly contradicts our African roots.

The protestant ethic defines a relationship with God as personal and not communal. This Eurocentric value system is like a square attempting to easily adapt other cultures that are cyclical in nature. One result is a politically incorrect teen pregnancy rate that is portrayed as problematic because its notion of a village of support or community is outside of dominant Eurocentric values. Moffet (1994) speaks to the idea of such indigenous collective consciousness. “Older cultures bought security and harmony for the individual soul by keeping it submerged in the group soul. Oneness or spirituality was achieved by the suppression of individualism” (p. 71). Cornel West (2001) applies this line of thinking to the responsibility he sees of Black leaders, in lieu of the Black church.

To be a serious black leader is to be a race-transcending prophet who critiques the powers that be (including the black component of the Establishment)...It is neither a matter of a new Messiah figure emerging, nor of another organization...rather, it is a matter of grasping the structural and institutional processes that have disfigured, deformed, and devastated black America such that resources for nurturing collective and critical consciousness, moral commitment, and courageous engagement are vastly underdeveloped....(p. 69-70)



The once shared marginalized educational, economic, and political position of Blacks in the United States has historically woven the fabric of the Blacks in the United States into a community of sorts which traditionally convened in the Black Church. There is much cause now to examine how the growing gap in social and economic mobility has impacted the community. Has the *community* disappeared now that Black mega churches extend an invitation to pay tithes in the lobby's ATM machine opposed to traditionally walking it to the front as you socialize with other members of the congregation? If the stronghold of the Black church was relational and social, which bonded the community as one, where is the community left when we now catch 'the spirit' by watching service on the internet in a virtual world? Where is our promise of heaven if no one can see us dance thunderously for God? It is possible then that the foundation of such a religion may not be timeless.

It seems then that social, communal and activist missions can be accomplished outside of the identity of the Black church free of Eurocentric influence if Black political and intellectual leaders acknowledge that the Black church does not have a monopoly of hope or knowledge for Blacks. Martin Luther King Jr. (1963/1981) boldly acknowledged the unpopular belief that religion and science are complimentary and not, in fact diametrically opposed. He asserted to his congregation that "The soft-minded man fears change. He feels security in the status quo and he has an almost morbid fear of the new" (p. 15). Michael Eric Dyson (2004) explains his evolving identity with the traditional Black church and its contrasting ideas of philosophy. "Identity is a process, a continual play of existential choices over a field of unfolding possibility. The self today can be radically different from the self of yesterday" (p. 469). He then owns the tension between the sacred and secular, the intellectual and religious, but maintains that those tensions help to reshape his ongoing evolution as a thinker, teacher, writer, preacher and activist. West

(2009) acknowledges that his faith has been tested but like Cone, insists that he upholds the idea of metaphorically carrying the cross. His existentialist questioning however, leads me to believe he may be grounded in atheistic philosophy but uses Black Christianity as a “by any means necessary” marketing strategy to influence Blacks with hope.

Phillips (2006) articulated the racial divide in the U.S. as a direct correlation with that of “the church.” He argues that religion has historically served to search for meaning for people who are weak and powerless and that Christian nationalists use it as a means to politicize and control. Cone (2007) calls for a healing of the two by necessitating white America to relinquish claims of innocence from any wrong doing which acknowledges the psychosis of going to church in the morning and lynching in the evening. He proposes that a nation cannot heal from something that we choose not to acknowledge.

Purpel (2005) alludes to prophecy as one screaming when everyone else sees normalcy. When Jeremiah Wright spoke out about the issue of race in America, news stations plastered the airwaves of his statements from the pulpit of “God Damn America” (<http://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/DemocraticDebate/story?id=4443788&page=1>) deeming him and his words unpatriotic, when in fact they are not much different in context from the words of the revered Martin Luther King, Jr. in his famous “*I Have a Dream Speech*,”

One hundred years later, the Negro is still languishing in the corners of American society and finds himself an exile in his own land. So we have come here today to dramatize an appalling condition... It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check which has come back marked ‘insufficient funds’. (King, 1998)

Religious leader Malcolm X was even more recognized in the media for his unapologetic stance on issues of race in the United States.

If you speak in an angry way about what has happened to our people and what is happening to our people, what does he call it? Emotionalism... Here the man has got a rope around his neck and because he screams, you know, the cracker that's putting the rope around his neck accuses him of being emotional. You're supposed to have the rope around your neck and holler politely. You're supposed to watch your diction... and be respectable and responsible when you holler against what they are doing to you.

(Malcolm X in Macedo, 2006, p. 74-75)

Weber (1920/2002) acknowledged that thoughts can be historicized and associated with specific social contexts. What then is normal and universal, changes from past to present and to future as ideas move from one social context to another while being appropriated to a best fit then perhaps modified. Some of these ideas are rejected, misinterpreted, and transformed, depending on timing and power in social contexts. Although the effects of control and standardization are common among churches and religious forums beyond the Black church experience, its damages to the Black community soars to depths and breadths that sometimes seem impossible to ameliorate. I am reminded of Paul Jones' (1993) bifurcating soulful cry sang across Black churches entitled, "I Won't Complain."

Sometimes the clouds are low

I can hardly see the road

I ask a question, Lord

Lord, why so much pain?

But he knows what's best for me

Although my weary eyes  
They can't see  
So I'll just say thank you Lord  
I won't complain  
(track 4)

Cone tells Bill Moyers (2007) that the ghetto crams people into living spaces where they will self-destruct, kill each other, fight each other, shoot each other because they have no place to breathe, no place for recreation, no place for an articulation and expression of their humanity. What then is the relationship of the Black church to cultural and emancipatory freedom? James Moffet (1994) would suggest that there can be a spiritual awakening through education. By breaking down the constraints of theocracy, nationalism and centralism in education, spirituality can produce more inclusive wholes that individuals dwell in, making it a holistic, wholesome, healthy, and holy society. His idea of communal sharing and questioning is his recommendation to reach collective consciousness. This is a traditional communal aspect of the Black church built on love. One missing link in Moffet's assertion is the necessity for large amounts of love and humanity required to ensure equity for all and a natural state of checks and balances that would serve as the fuel for its continuum. Bill Moyers candidly interviewed James Cone on November 23, 2007, on the *Bill Moyer's Journal* concerning this concept of love in the Black church.

BILL MOYERS: I would have a hard time believing God is love if I were a black man. I mean, those bodies swinging on the tree. What was God? Where was God during the 400 years of slavery?

JAMES CONE: See, you are looking at it from the perspective of those who win. You have to see it from the perspective of those who have no power. In fact, God is love because it's that

power in your life that lets you know you can resist the definitions that other people are being—placed on you.

BILL MOYERS: So, how does love fit into that? What do you mean when you say God is love?

JAMES CONE: God is that power, that power that enables you to resist. You love that! You love the power that empowers you even in a situation in which you have no political power.

Therefore, you have to love God. Now, what is trouble is loving white people. Now, that's tough. It's not God we having trouble loving. Now, loving white people. Now, that's... that's difficult!

#### Swing Low Sweet Chariot: Multicultural Education

Du Bois' (1903/1965) most famous line in *Souls of Black Folk* was “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line” (p. 1). In a 1964 California State Department of Education report on ‘The Negro in American History Textbooks,’ it was found that Blacks were not seen in textbooks. The result of the study reported Black elementary students drawing white faces as self-portraits (Spring, 2005). Today's curriculum continues to bifurcate many people of color by neglecting *other's* perspectives to the ancestral legacy of the United States. It is especially disconcerting to hear students of color confuse the canonical idea of “the” founding fathers as “our” founding fathers and how “we” supped with the Native Americans on Plymouth Rock. These are only a few of many examples of how identity and one's relation to the world is impacted through a standardized curriculum about historical moments in American history.

The body of literature surrounding multicultural education lends itself to the education I received in white schools and Black church ideology and it influences the education in which I currently produce for students as a teacher and administrator. There are many who resist multicultural education but this sharing of perspectives of current and historical events is

necessary if education is to be a transformative process. Many scholars feel that the aim of multicultural education should focus on movement from resistance to a releasing of power with the understanding that there is enough for everyone to be equitable (Gay, 2000, 2003; Banks & McGee-Banks, 1995; Nieto, 2004; Sleeter, 2005; Ayers, 2004; He, 2003; Delpit, 1995, 2002; Howard, 1999; Siddle-Walker, 1996; Gordon, 2005).

Multicultural education emerged out of early ethnic studies and Black Freedom Movements during the 1960s and 1970s to address equal educational opportunities for students of color, students from various social classes, cultural groups, and women. Its roots, largely influenced by Black scholarship, evolved from a concentration in ethnic studies to multi-ethnic education, charged to bring systematic changes in the total school and designed to increase educational equality. From there, other groups like women and people with disabilities insisted that their stories be told. The last and current phase includes the development of theory, research and practice that interrelate variables connected to race, class, and gender (Banks & McGee-Banks, 1995).

Major critics of multicultural education are D'Souza, Schlesinger, Alan Bloom and E.D. Hirsch (Banks & McGee-Banks, 1995). Bloom (Takaki, 1994; Banks & McGee-Banks, 1995) insists that curriculum taught through the "great books" is intellectually sound and both questions and challenges the intellectual vigor of multicultural curriculum, suggesting its purpose to be that of racial pride. These ideas dismiss both the inclusion of people of color and their scholarship as worthy knowledge. Supporters like Delgado, Bernal, and Villalpando, (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005) describe the devaluing of scholarship of faculty of color by the dominant discourse within the mainstream research community as apartheid knowledge and suggest that "through the form of 'epistemological racism,' the scholarship of faculty of color is rendered to

the margins” (p. 12). Pinar (2004) adds that for some whites, resisting the inclusion of Blacks assures that America would have a history in which they can be proud.

Gay (2000) recognizes that “Many educators have good intentions about not being academically unjust and discriminatory toward ethnically and racially different students...[however] Good will must be accompanied by pedagogical knowledge and skills as well as the courage to dismantle the status quo” (p. 13). As mentioned in Gay’s (2000) work, Aragon adds that ethnic minorities’ lack of academic achievement is more a function of teacher limitation than student inability contending that it was teachers rather than students who were culturally deprived. When educators can enter the teaching learning relationship expecting to learn as well as teach, the shift then can move from the student expectation of consuming information from teachers to a sharing of learning among students and educators. Teachers can be successful in the process of sharing knowledge by self assessments, analyzing their own cultural attitudes, assumptions, mechanisms, rules, and regulations that have made it difficult for them to teach these children successfully (Gay, 2000). This is a necessary process in order to reach the acceptability of multiculturalism as a viable artery of curriculum rather than a supplementary capillary.

My intended research will add to the assessments of supporters of multicultural education by adding to and validating key voices in literature and scholarship that have been disregarded by critics because it is not central to the dominant discourse. It is my contention that the absence of distinctive voices replaced with the presence of re-presented memories, teach inaccurate framings of those experiences. Those ideas become stereotypes that perpetuate a hegemonic hidden curriculum laced with white supremacy. Woodson (1933/2005) further explains that:

The same educational process which inspires and stimulates the oppressor and assumes that he has accomplished everything worthwhile, depresses and crushes at the same time the spark of genius in the Negro by making him feel that his race does not amount to much and will never measure up to the standards of other peoples. (p. ix-v)

This journey of currere can begat residual feelings of inadequacy for the subjugated which appropriates scholars to name, expose, challenge, and analyze why in a ethnically and linguistically growing national student body, 89% of school teachers are still white and overwhelmingly female, while 7% are Black and 2% are Hispanic respectively (National Education Association, 2006). The danger posed here is students largely receive a one sided narrow outlook of interpretation. It also teaches students that authority and the keepers of knowledge are white which then racializes all students on varying levels.

The experience of students and faculty in higher education is left out of the conversation often regarding multicultural education. Beverly Tatum (1997) attempts to fill this void by speaking to the experience of Black students on predominately white college campuses.

That life is stressful for Black students and other students of color on predominately white campuses should not come as a surprise, but it often does. White students and faculty frequently underestimate the power and presence of the overt and covert manifestations of racism on campus, and other students of color often come to predominantly white campuses expecting more civility than they find. Whether it is the loneliness of being routinely overlooked as a lab partner in science courses, the irritation of being continually asked by curious classmates about Black hairstyles, the discomfort of being singled out by a professor to give the “Black perspective” in class discussion, the pain of racist graffiti scrawled on dormitory room doors, the insult of racist jokes



circulated through campus e-mail, or the injury inflicted by the rail epithets (and sometimes beer bottles) hurled from a passing car, African American students on predominately white college campuses must cope with ongoing affronts to their racial identity. The desire to retreat to safe space is understandable. Sometimes that means leaving the campus altogether. (p. 77-78)

These types of experiences often compound self hatred and produce feelings of displacement of these students within both the Black community as well as with white America. It is not surprising that the results of this systematic learning are devastating to all involved. Some common experiences are anger, a sense of being silenced, dissonance between what the United States stands for and what we experience, low self-esteem, high levels of stress, a sense of hopelessness and disempowerment that can lead to crime and self-destructive behavior, frustration, mistrust, and dehumanization (Tatum, 1997). Unfortunately, many Blacks experience this before ever entering into a university, a setting where the expectation is to be groomed into an intellectual. Once groomed, Cornel West (2001) describes the Black intellectual in three ways. The first type is race distancing elitists who are a part of Du Bois' Talented 10<sup>th</sup> and who are not conscious of their own self-hate. Woodson (1933/2005) adds, "The 'educated Negroes' have the attitude of contempt toward their own people because in their own as well as in their mixed schools, Negroes are taught to admire the Hebrew, the Greek, the Latin and the Tueton and to despise the African" (p. 1). The second type is race embracing rebels who substitute rhetoric for analysis. Thirdly, he found that there are race transcending prophets who are self-taught, self-styled and who are not confined to white academia's normative standard.

The Black university intellectual, especially in predominately white institutions, is challenged with upholding the vision of the University and subscribing to its values and

traditions even when those values and traditions have systematically *othered* him or her. These institutions of higher learning as a whole have not yet mastered ways to ameliorate imposed dualisms of *others*. In fact, in many cases, it serves to perpetuate it.

In Schools of Business Administration, Negroes are trained exclusively in the psychology and economics of Wall Street and are therefore made to despise the opportunity to run ice wagons, push banana carts, and sell peanuts among their own people. Foreigners, who have not studied economics but have studied Negroes, take up this business and grow rich. (Woodson, 1933/2005, p. 3)

Anyon (2005) and Nieto (2004) insist that schools are part of our communities that reflect the stratification and social inequities of the larger society. While I agree, I recognize the opportunity for schools from elementary to the university to offer partnerships between students and scholars to work as change agents to the toxic nourishment of white supremacy in current educational practices.

Steal Away: Education of Blacks in the U.S.

The mode of education of Blacks in the U.S. has evolved over time with the onset of new legislation and access to new technology. The year 2010 bears two generations of students who did not experience the national struggle to gain access to formal education and basic civil rights and the canon would suggest that this information is marginal at best in relevance to curriculum. I disagree with this assertion and made a point to interject where I could in my role as an educator.

I took a group of middle and high school students on a field trip to visit a slave plantation some years back. (Perhaps it was educational activities like this that warranted me teacher of the

month during the encapsulated Black History Month two years in a row at Deland High School.) This was my first time on a plantation but I felt like I had been there before. I had flashbacks as if I were actually there in a different life. The feeling was overwhelming. I could see myself escaping down the long trail of massive oak trees and wading down the river behind the big white house in attempt at a quiet exodus. The potential impact of this type of experiential education can have on students and teachers alike cannot be gained through a textbook or any other traditional teaching method.

Relative to traditional teaching modes, political scholar Randall Robinson (2001) acknowledges that whites have virtually controlled every mainstream purveyor of instruction, academic and ephemeral in the United States including the airways, mainstream press, publishing houses, commercial distribution networks, school systems, universities and colleges. He boldly states that whites have caused all Americans to read, see, hear, learn and select from a diet of self-interested ideas. The effects have been crippling for Blacks and the nation as a whole.

The history of education for Blacks in the United States was developed in a structure which maintains social order and ensures a climate that protects corporate wealth. There is much literature that can articulate timelines of the creation of this curriculum, the struggles, debates and implications of implementing it, and the thirst for literacy among the Black community. Some of this is found in the works of William H. Watkins (2001), Carter G. Woodson (1919/2004), Richard Wright (1894), James Anderson (1988), William W. Falk (2004), W.E.B. Du Bois (1903/1965), Thomas Jesse Jones (1917), Heather Williams (2005) and others.

My research will add to the body of literature that discusses the current impact of educational processes, other means in which Blacks obtain knowledge, and the impact of what is learned in the lived experiences of Black students and teachers with some intentional focus of

Black women. This body includes the literature of Michele Foster (1997), Beverly Tatum (1997), Geneva Gay (2004), bell hooks and Cornel West (1991), Margaret Alexander (1995), Evelyn B. Dandy (1991), Elizabeth Higginbotham (1995) and Vanessa Siddle-Walker (1996).

Woodson (1933/2005) noted that the impact of the philanthropist's curriculum prepared Black students to become European white men. In hindsight of *Brown* versus the Board of Education, critical race scholars have examined the factors influencing the court decision as well as structures of racial inequity noted by Woodson's assertion where the system was reconfigured rather than dismantled. For instance, Geneva Gay (2004) observed that the court decision assumed (a) the notion that there was nothing of value in all-Black schools before or after desegregation and that dismantling them was the only choice; (b) everything about white schools was good and Black children had to bear the inconvenience of change in order to reap the benefits; and (c) that relocating Black students to white schools was sufficient to leverage educational equality. Before *Brown*, Gay asserts, "African American teachers felt honor bound to ensure that their students were prepared for the racist world in which they had to live" (p.15). In addition to academic knowledge and skills before *Brown*, survival skills, cultural heritage, and ethnic identity affirmation were also incorporated. Gay (2004) recounts the early educational segregated experience of bell hooks:

They [African American teachers] were committed to nurturing intellect so that we could become scholars, thinkers, and cultural workers, Black folk who used our 'minds.' We learned early that our devotion to learning a life of the mind was a counter-hegemonic act...teachers worked with and for us to ensure that we would fulfill our intellectual destiny and by doing so uplift the race. (p. 15)

Today, I continue to fight codes and messages of inferiority that my children receive in their white school with self-love taught in the home. Cameron, now eight years old came home from school recently and excitedly talked of the events of the day in his gifted class.

“Mom! Guess what! I’m Irish!” he said.

“And how did you come to that conclusion?” I said calmly.

“We researched our last names in school today and I found that my last name comes from Ireland so I am Irish!”

He was so excited. I was numb that the lesson did not reach into other possible ways my Black child may have gotten his Irish name, namely by slave masters. I reflected back watching him at four years old intentionally scratch his skin until the white ash appeared in hopes to turn white because “it’s so much more fun mom!” to be white.

In addition to the original formulaic white school curriculum created for students, the education of Blacks also includes a history of heavy interrelated influences from police, home, community, and the Black church. With the onset of segregation, these modes for messages have also embraced television, radio, and the internet, but the education is still the same. The messages are that white is synonymous with normal, smart (bright) and successful, christian is synonymous with being a good person, and Black is synonymous with bad (i.e. blacklist, black market, black sheep, etc.). Messages many Black and poor children receive about policemen in elementary texts suggest that police are protectors, when their lived experiences at home or their community may exhibit a need to be protected from the police. I consider this as I prepare now for the future conversation with my middle class Black sons of how to respond when they are stopped by the police. In preparation for this discussion among many that we have had and future ones in which I can anticipate, I reflect upon my own epistemological experiences of knowing.

## Pressing My Way: Methodology of Writing Toward Liberation

The methodology of my autobiographical narrative is Black women writing about their lives. These stories remind me of the richness of lyrics to the old Negro Spiritual entitled “I Feel Like a Motherless Child.” Although the song speaks to the lens of a child or a slave taken from her home, stories of Black women writing about their lives would also focus on the mother’s perspective of that same journey. In this section, I have included gifted examples of exemplary works of Black women telling their stories that I considered in the title “Melodies from Heaven” taken from Kirk Franklin (1998). I have also included chapter outlines where the title, “Follow the Drinking Gourd” from an old Negro Spiritual, implies the map that slaves in search of freedom should follow.

### A Motherless Child: Black Women Writing About Their Lives

I was born shortly after the Black Freedom Movement which meant I received messages from TV and radio that previous generations had not been exposed as an impressionable youth. There several to choose from and by today’s standards, one’s that are a lot less harmful. Among these messages, I chose to hold onto the image of Claire Huxtable, a character from the TV sitcom *The Cosby Show*. I saw her as a Black woman who was a professional, sophisticated wife and mother worth imitation. The spinoff of *The Cosby Show* was another sitcom entitled, *A Different World* and it was a driving force of motivation for my desire for a college education. These shows introduced other Black role models in which I had not yet been introduced. Models of a life that I would eventually live to emulate and write about.

This paper will be situated among other methodologies where Black women are writing narratives about lives. Meta Harris (2005) acknowledges the value of the interrogation of personal experiences of Black women in multicultural education, as well as, the role and

relevance of their cultural exchange within its context. It is an emancipatory method because it allows the writer to resist imposed dominant perspectives of her experience and instead, humanize and validate her own experiences and locate her connection to her community. Sandra Nettles (2005) further uses narrative to explore the mutual influence of school-community connections by focusing on participatory relations of schools with agencies, churches, and other volunteers in the school. Phillion, He, and Connelly (2005) write passionately about reading these stories with an experimental and imaginative eye within the cultural exchange, “seeing, hearing, and feeling the nuances of multicultural life and illuminating the details of experience” (p. 2).

Love is one consistent theme in Black autobiography. It is layered with some layers that are more static than others. Love is the mortar that binds relationships, communal, familial, religious, and romantic. Some pastes are stronger than others. Love however is not the architect that designed the relationships in need of mortar. Architects of relationships were defined and modeled for me by white schools, Black churches, family dynamics, pop culture and the legal system. My role models demonstrated codes of healthy love and fractured relationships. Love hurt as a child and often did not correct itself. Typical verbal contradictions include:

“I’m gone beat you before the man [the white male police officers] beat you! The difference is they don’t love you and I do.” said mama to my brother.

“Shut up woman before I choke you! You talk too much. You make people hate you!” said Jim to mama.

“Kids, this is your new daddy. You can no longer have any contact with the man you once new as your father.” said mama to Keith and me.

Romantic Black love was static in my Black church, non-existent in the literature within my white schools, fractured at home, and fictionalized in books and television. The church demonstrated romantic love as that of a fixed unit in the church, a dignified positioning of the titles pastor and first lady and deacon and deaconess. The first time I can recall witnessing the earthiness of romantic Black love was between the stereotypical Buck and asexual Black mammy, James and Florida Evans from the 1970's sitcom *Good Times*, followed by more asexuality with George and Louise in the sitcom, *The Jefferson's*, and culminating with the 1980's hit, *The Cosby Show*, featuring the family oriented, Bill and Claire Huxtable. As each show progressed in its dressing of middle classdom, so did they also increase in demonstrating a *plastatic* (plastic and static) like relationship. As I moved from the earthiness of poverty, I longed to be Claire Huxtable. I imitated her walk, her laugh, and the way she moved her head when her hair moved with the bounce of a white woman. Although, Claire was smart, beautiful, and educated, this TV character lacked the passion real life earthy Black women had.

Hurston's (1965), *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was my first example of passionate Black love. Her account, however, began very synthetically akin to the church relationships I was accustomed to seeing modeled, but evolved to a place where love was free to roam outside of the confines of conventional roles and expectations. I began reading other Black women's stories, connecting and writing my stories. Stories I claimed as fiction.

#### Melodies from Heaven: Exemplary Works

An up and coming generation of Black women intellectuals writing about their lives is emerging by which I am able to draw. Such examples come from Wynnetta Scott-Simmons (2008) who discovered the rich and proud educational heritage in the Black community in which



she was raised and the sustaining ethic of care that is rarely discussed and often missing in the public schools and teacher education programs today. Paula Baker (2008), a product of the Black Freedom Movement era, explored the lives of five Black women scholars. She found the common theme of resilience which she discovered was “fostered through cultural socialization as well as affirmation individually and culturally” (p. 62). Although Angela Haynes (2008) does not write from a Black experience, she is a relevant scholar worth mentioning. She tells her story of awakening from the lens of a lower-class white female caught between reality of place and the promise of education that aroused her to issues of race, class, and gender in the rural south. I also looked at the structure of Michel Mitchell’s (2009) work where she wrote narratively then theorized the rising themes and Maqueta Griswold (2010) who infused songs from the Black Freedom Movement in her writings.

My colleagues and academic mothers and sisters and I come from a growing tradition of Black women intellectuals who have written extensively about the experiences of Black women in narrative form. They include the works of Toni Morrison (1970, 1973, 2008), bell hooks (1996), Alice Walker (1982,1983), Terry McMillan (1992), Zora Neale Hurston (1937/1965), Ntozake Shange (1975), Maya Angelou (1969), Harriet Jacobs (1861/2003), Carol Boyce Davies (1994), Marita Golden (2004), and Buchi Emecheta (1974,1994). These women’s stories have all influenced my empowerment at different points of my thinking.

bell hooks writes reflexively about the cultural consciousness of race, class, and gender both theoretically, and autobiographically. In her conversation with Cornel West (1991), she talks about her challenge with marrying the narrative to the theoretical which validated my own struggles to do the same. In *Wounds of Passion: A Writing Life*, hooks (1997), successfully braids them together in a reflexive pattern that is complementary to the rhythmic syncopation of

my own story of self-recovery. In *Bone Black* (1996), she presents a powerfully intimate account of growing up in the South. She remembers learning early about the emotional vulnerability of children and the roles women and men play in society with regards to the benefits of marriage for men and its silencing of women.

Toni Morrison is perhaps most recognized for her analysis of issues concerning identity with race, class, and gender through novels and her non-fiction. In Morrison's (2008) *What Moves at the Margin*, she uses her voice in essays, speeches, and reviews to offer insight into family history, other writers, and politics. Alice Walker's (1983) collection of non-fiction womanist prose entitled, *In Search of My Mother's Garden*, and her Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *The Color Purple* (1982), share candid verbal illustrations of the realities of Black women's experiences and their the connections with their intimate and global communities.

Marita Golden's (2004), *Don't Play in the Sun*, addresses the color consciousness of skin complexion and their implications on the perception of both Black America and overall U.S. pop culture and institutions. This book is important because places the theme of color consciousness in the public sphere.

Buchi Emecheta's major works include *In the Ditch* (1974) and *Second Class Citizen* (1994). They chronicle her life with her husband where she was treated as his property and the challenges she faced after she leaves him. Although her dignity was wounded at times while living on her own, she proved resilient, which is a trait consistent with many Black women in stories written by Black women.

The struggle of Black love with the new dimension of Black women in professional roles captured the economic freedom that Anna Cooper (1892/1988) spoke of over 150 years ago. Concerning women and higher education, she asserts, "that developing their intellects would

render women self-reliant and economically independent, which would make them less dependent on marriage for physical support” (p. 43). Cooper’s work is relevant to my current experience as a Black professional woman. Terry McMillian’s (1992) *Waiting to Exhale* was the first text I read on my journey to economic freedom as a Black woman. She wrote about the Black female experience from a middle class perspective which I used in my preparation of social mobility from lower to middle class.

I felt a Southern kindredness to the women in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs (1861/2003) and *Coming of Age in Mississippi* by Ann Moody (1968/1992). I felt most exposed at that time reading the coming of age stories of the Black girls in *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *Sula* (1973) as Toni Morrison told my story and called it fiction.

While reading, I was constantly evolving, breathing, preparing for the next step. Today, I write more theoretically, analyzing those experiences. bell hooks speaks to me today as Toni Morrison’s coming of age stories spoke to me in my undergraduate experience. These women, through their stories, assist my evolution of consciousness as I attempt to describe how I and perhaps others with similar experiences, see the world and what messages impact that view. When I was a child, I memorized Sojourner Truth’s (1852/1992) “Ain’t I a Woman” and a biography of Harriet Tubman for our annual Black History program in church. However, it was in higher education where I understood these rich stories in context to my own lived experiences opposed to only dis-jointed, literary, segments of history.

I hope to add to the collective body of varying voices of Black women scholars, particularly those who are of the first generation to benefit educationally from the Black Freedom Movement that challenges the discourse and canon. I consider this generation, my generation, the in-between generation. We are the generation after the covert struggle over civil

rights that embarrassed the United States to other nations in its inhumane treatment of people of color, but before the generation who knew of lynching for the first time during the Jena 6 fiasco in the state of Louisiana. It is my generation that carries the baton to future generations, linking current students to inclusive past histories to help them understand their now so that they can use their voice to make socially responsible decisions later.

My experiences are not limited only to the evolution of Black woman consciousness. Students from all demographics will be able to identify with some aspect because members of communities are interrelated whether symbiotically or dialectally. Still, it is important for students to develop this critical consciousness to identify hegemony in educational areas which can expand into social change in greater society in order to empower themselves and realize their own potential (Silin, 1995).

#### Follow the Drinking Gourd: Chapter Outlines

Chapters in this study will infuse the names and use of popular songs found in Black church music that are relative to my growth and development and will end with a theoretical lens that unpacks the meaningful themes of the chapter. When read together, chapter titles tell the story of my journey to the *Promised Land* because Black music, gospel and secular, flowed in my soul like blood in my veins. Cornel West (2009) explains that underneath the “infectious rhythm was the heartbeat of hope...the songs moved us from fear to faith” (p. 121). These rhythms have been an undeniable connector within my community and held the power and ability to change hearts, minds, and moods within four measures. In an attempt to bridge gaps of memory, I listened to, sang, reminisced and lost myself in the warmth of songs that I grew up listening to on my mother’s hi-fi stereo and on the car radio during Sunday morning drives to

church. I also consulted my mother for her perception of my experience and growth and stitched in self-authored poems, stories, lectures, and letters then theorized them contextually. These accounts were intended to be both reflective and reflexive. They are presented like cyclical backstitches, weaving together the forward and backward layers of my experiences, a common form in stories written by Black women writing about autobiographical life. This is evident in the works of Moody (1968/1992), Angelou (1969), Hurston (1937/1965), hooks (1996), and Jacobs (1861/2003).

The title of chapter one is “How I Got Over,” which is a song title made famous by Mahalia Jackson (Ward, 1963, side 1 track 5). This chapter embodies the title of the study, *Purgatory’s Place in the South: A Black Woman’s Journey to the Promised Land*. It puts the study in context and explains the purpose, autobiographical roots, theoretical frameworks used, review of literature, methodology, and its significance.

The second chapter borrows from Aretha Franklin’s song entitled “Precious Memories” (Wright, 1972, side 2 track 1). It begins the chronicle of the education I received in white schools and Black churches and narrates the period of my childhood through high school. Using autobiographical stories named after other influential gospel songs, it lays the foundation and framework of my journey as Black and female in the South destined to work in the area of education. These songs used as storied title are taken from: Kirk Franklin’s “Now Behold the Lamb” (1995, track 2) and “Why We Sing” (1993, track 1), the Canton Spirituals’ “Still Waters” (Watkins, 1999, track 1), “His Eye is On the Sparrow” (Martin, C.D. and Gabriel, C.H., 1905, track 7) recorded by Mahalia Jackson, “Perilous Times” sang by the all male group Commissioned (Abrahams, 1987, track 8), and Timothy Wright’s “Trouble Won’t Last Always” (Wright, 1991, track, 1).

Chapter three is titled “Millions Didn’t Make it” taken from a song from the family gospel group, The Winans, entitled “Millions” (Winans, 1987, track 2). It begins my climb out of poverty and stories classroom and out of classroom educational experiences during my undergraduate tenure at the Florida State University and during my master’s level graduate work at Indiana State University. It juxtaposes these experiences highlighting ebbs and flows of my religious faith, chronicles my trajectory toward upward mobility into Black middle classdom, and it explores the gender roles assigned to me. The first of these storied titles include an old anonymous Negro spiritual, entitled “Gotta Keep Movin.” The next story, “Be Encouraged,” comes from a similar song title recorded by William Becton (1995, track 8). Other autobiographical story titles in this chapter are drawn from “The Battle Is the Lord’s,” sang by Yolanda Adams (Mckay, V.M, 2006, track 7), the Winans’ hit, “The Question Is” (Winans, 1995, track 6), and “We’ve Come This Far by Faith” (Pearson, 2001, track 1).

The title of chapter four is “Be Grateful,” the same title of the song recorded by the late Walter Hawkins (1978, side 2 track 1) featuring his wife Tramaine. Stories in this chapter culminate how growing, living, and learning in the bible belt South pragmatically prepared me for my new engendered roles as a Black professional woman educator, christian wife and mother. It crescendos to my break from christian fundamentalism tied closely to traditional Black family values as consciousness invaded the imposition of a culture and sub-culture taught through physical and psychological institutions. These stories are thematically entitled, “Rough Side of the Mountain” inspired by F.C. Barnes and Janice Brown’s (1983, track 1) album of the same title, James Cleveland’s (1997) “Lord, Help Me to Hold Out” (track 9), “I Need You Now” from Smokie Norful’s (2002, track 2) hit of the same name, “The Storm is Passing Over” inspired by the 1970’s Detroit Mass Choir’s version of Donald Valis’ (2002, track 2) song with

the same title, and “I Know I’ve Been Changed” taken from Shun Pace Rhode’s (1991, track, 4) a cappella hit with the same name.

Chapter five is the final storied chapter and is titled “Through it All.” It is drawn from a song performed by Grammy Award winning gospel singer Andrea Crouch (Crouch, 1972, track 5) with the same name. This chapter outlines experiences that lay outside of any point of reference of my previous lived experience. Here I document the chartering of divorce and single motherhood as a Black professional woman, christian fundamentalism now antagonized by agnosticism, and academic pursuit which once viewed only as the means of social mobility, now an intrinsic calling to unapologetically name acts of in-humanitarianism to include moral crimes against my (and other’s) race, class, and gender that have been justified and normalized by those historically and politically empowered with the cultural capital to do so. These stories conclude the autobiographical storytelling drawn from the following titles: “Shackles Off My Feet” taken from the hit song by gospel recording duo Mary Mary (Atkins-Campbell, E., Atkins-Campbell, T., Campbell, W., 2000, track 4); “It’s Time To Make A Change” taken from the Winans (Bell, B., Winans, M., Winans, C., Riley, T., 1990, track 1) song with a similar name, “Is My Living in Vain” taken from the sultry sounds of the Clark Sisters (Clark, 1980, track 1), and the old Negro spiritual “Go tell it On the Mountain” (Work, 1865, track 14). The chapter intentionally ends the stories with the only title taken from a secular song titled “Beautiful,” (Hicks, K., Mueller, W., and Simpson, 2001, track 14) performed by India Arie. This secular song represents that methods to raise social consciousness, motivation, intelligence, and self-esteem exist outside of the church.

“What Is This?” is the title of chapter six and is derived from a song of the same name by the late Walter Hawkins (2005, disc 2 track 3). This final chapter concludes the study by

theorizing my lived experiences and puts into perspective their relevance to my teaching lens. This chapter reflects on my institutionalized racial, classed and engendered journey from oppression and repression to liberation and reclamation of spirit by clearly locating my varying stages of identity according to Hardiman and Jackson's (1997) Identity Theory of Oppression. It also challenges educators and students to examine their own journey and reflect on how it has impacted their view of the world and provides useful insights on why and how to relate to others who see the world from different lenses than their own.

### Revolution: Significance of Study

Unlike this study, pedagogy from the perspective of the master narrative is one dimensional. It has the power to subjugate voices and experiences in texts, literature, and from classroom participants. This study is important first for my sons because it opens a door to their past so that in time they can contextualize their futures. It is important for students because it teaches them that educators are layered people with multidimensional stories that counter the master trajectories of success. These lived experiences once uncovered can expand and shape their lens to be opened to other perspectives. Lastly, counter-narratives like this study can benefit educators and policy makers by encouraging cultural competence in the classroom and providing insight into managing cultural conflicts that arise through the labor and love of learning. This is accomplished by unmuting voices and validating experiences that add value to universal problem solving.

I pause here to collect myself because coming out from hiding in social closets can often have polarized results, traumatic and therapeutic. This autobiographical study serves as my coming out from being a closeted agnostic in the Black community, a community where religion is revered as the savior of my race and the provider of grace. In doing so, I risk losing the support



and protection that my community can provide and any credibility of integrity to my race. I have come to acknowledge and respect how religion saved the Black race from genocide in a physical and spiritual context. Therefore, I both honor my lineage and recognize the contributions of the Black church community to who I am and who I am able to become. I also recognize and name how the Black church has stunted the growth and minds in that same community and crippled our ability to gain cultural capital in a country built on the sweat of our ancestors. This bifurcation is powered by polarized magnetic dialectical forces between knowledge and ignorance.

This study has challenged me to introduce my personal voice to my academic voice. Survival on my journey required me to keep them in separate compartmentalized boxes. However, I am encouraged that once they become one it can symbolize a freedom to let my personal become professional, my good become bad and my bad become good. Unifying my layers gives my students, my children, and others who model me, an unfiltered view of my reality in order that they make informed conclusions.

I was both nervous and excited as I began to explore how these experiences bifurcated my journey as a Black woman raised with working class values but afforded the opportunity to raise her children in a middle class environment. I offer my voice as a member of the post segregation generation where the common condition of being Black and of low socio-economic status (often confused with the term culture) was addressed as a collective through the Black church and reified through white schooling. As that collective has morphed with time, so have the dynamics surrounding issues concerning race, class, and gender. The implications of this study are to offer students, parents, educators, and policy makers an opportunity to revisit a past

with fresh lenses in order to bridge a new understanding of our now as we embark on a future together as one community.

## CHAPTER 2

### PRECIOUS MEMORIES

Precious memories, how they linger,  
How they ever flood my soul;  
In the stillness of the midnight,  
Precious, sacred scenes unfold.  
(Wright, 1972, side 2 track 1)

This chapter begins with my first memories of life and ends with the completion of high school. In this first paradigm of my life, nostalgia is contested as memories are revisited in narrative form then theorized. One of my early memories include listening to the song “Precious Memories” (Wright, 1972, side 2 track 1) on my mother’s hi-fi stereo where she played gospel albums every Sunday before church. The second story is entitled “Now Behold the Lamb” which refers to Jesus’ introduction into the world as a baby in Kirk Franklin’s (1995) Christmas song of the same name. Although I do not compare myself to Jesus in this story, I do use this section to introduce my background and early years. The next story, “The Reason Why I Sing,” is borrowed from another Kirk Franklin tune (1993) and describes the beginning of my love affair with gospel music and traces my roots in Black church tradition of community contrasted with stories of fire and brimstone. This story also parallels my young voice to my young life, eager to explore but suppressed by convention. “Still Waters” describes the calmest part of my early life. The title is taken from a song from the Canton Spirituals’ Quartet (Watkins, 1999) that spoke of being baptized in water in order to come out with a new (born again, christian) identity. This chapter describes how roles associated with my identities of race, class, and gender was first formed. “His Eye is on the Sparrow” projects jarring movements in my young world but suggests that someone is concerned about my well being. This story, taken from a gospel hymn (Martin, 1905), identifies communal care I received from Black teachers in white schools and from Black

women in Black churches. Their care assisted in my survival of extroverted situations with an introverted personality void of direction in locating my voice or my place among Black peers who teased me and white peers and teachers who were seemingly colorblind and sometimes hostile. The story entitled “Perilous Times” is derived from a song from the gospel group Commissioned (Abrahams, 1987) and narrates challenges with my immediate family values and dynamics, which were antagonistic compared to the values of my Black church community environment and among Black teachers in my white schools. I craved healthy role models on love, marriage, gender roles, and familial relationships and dynamics, but I was sorely confused. The last story in chapter one is entitled “Trouble Won’t Last Always” and is taken from a Timothy Wright (1991) song. This story crescendos from a comfort zone with subordination to inquiry about the possibility of a freer life beyond my community. I imagined this life could include independence, a love of God without fear of damnation, and romantic love. My escape from my troubles was to be a college education.

#### Now Behold The Lamb: An Intro To The World

I was born the daughter of a self-proclaimed whore from the streets of Chicago, who married a preacher in an attempt to find redemption with a greater hope of salvation. Her education was focused on physical, spiritual, emotional, and psychological survival which came from Black and white schools, family dynamics and racially divisive work experiences. She was a C + student, strong in the physical and spiritual, weaker in the psychological, and displaced in the emotional.

Her maternal grandma was half Native American and half Black and her maternal grandfather was half white and half Black. From this multiracial union, Moses and Gertrude Elam bore 11 Black children. They moved from Vaughn, Mississippi to Chicago during the

historical Great Migration. Story has it that Moses' brother left in the middle of the night as the white townsmen gathered for a search-and-hang mission because he was rumored to have whistled at a white woman. After he found work and settled in Chicago, he convinced his extended family that life was better in the North.

My grandmother was then moved to and raised in Chicago as a child and grew up to marry Amos Lyke. The story passed down was that his grandparents were slaves on the Lykes plantation. When they were freed, they kept the last name of the master but dropped the s at the end of Lyke. James Patterson Lyke, granddaddy's brother, made the name Lyke a nationally recognized name. He was made an auxiliary bishop of Cleveland in 1979 at the age of 40. At the time he was the youngest bishop in the country, only the fifth U.S. Black bishop and the first Black from the North to become a bishop. In April 1991, nearly 10 months after he had become administrator of the Atlanta archdiocese, Pope John Paul II appointed him archbishop. I did not inherit Catholicism. I only met the archbishop, my family's claim to fame, while he lay in his casket and I watched Andrew Young and other dignitaries say good-bye. More importantly, I never inherited family as a sense of community. He was just a light skinned man whom I did not know.

My father is the key missing link, a disconnect in my spirit, reminiscent of my ancestors of which I have little memory because I have little history. I feel an illogical connection with no guide to assist in a clear meaningful interpretation. These pieces are lost and re-presented by core curriculum and stories from my mother glossed in religious justification.

My parents married after three months of dating and divorced after three years of marriage. My mother absconded in the night with my bastard brother, me and tickets to Walt Disney World with the intention of making this vacation a relocation destination. She still calls

me on the anniversary of the move claiming, “Well baby, this day marks the 20<sup>th</sup>...25<sup>th</sup> ...30<sup>th</sup> year when God spit us out of hell...” but I cannot remember this hell. I lived my own hell. We lived in two different hells in one house.

I saw my dad up to age three, then at seven when I suffered migraines and had to see a specialist in Chicago and at eight, when he came to visit us for a week in Florida. He left in June. Jim came in November. The green monster, that’s what we named our station wagon, broke down, again. We stopped at the nearest automotive shop and there he was, tall, dark, and grimy. I distinctly remember my mother enthralled when he mentioned he was a praying man while I couldn’t figure out how she missed or dismissed his dirty fingernails and the dirty underwear that unsuccessfully reached for the top of his uncovered ass. Her response was “Honey, if you love God for a man, any relationship can work.” They were married on January first. “Kids, this is your new daddy. You can no longer have any contact with the man you once knew as your father.” I was eight and my brother Keith was twelve. I was 16 the next and final time I saw or spoke with my biological father. I did not know what to feel, think or say to this strange man on his deathbed of whom I shared so much and so little. I just stared, waiting for someone to tell me my next move, but he couldn’t wait so we said goodbye for this lifetime.

We spent the first two weeks in Florida at a resort. Years later, I remember riding by the resort trying to hold on to a memory of luxury as we left there for South Street, a one bedroom, one bathroom, two windowed project near the Orlando Citrus Bowl, fully decorated with poses of white Jesus’ and old furniture from Goodwill. While at the resort, my mother’s survival skills pointed her in the direction of the Black church. It was at Mt. Calvary Missionary Baptist Church that we would find our next family, our church family. This is my first memory of church.

## The Reason Why I Sing

Church is where I fell in love with music and where a template for my life was created. I wanted to understand the rhythms inside of me because there was something about music that I couldn't ignore. I loved singing but struggled in the youth choir's soprano section to match the musical runs in my head with the reality of my unsure voice. My voice was a metaphor for my life. I felt it strong and deep but it sounded weak, so I blended in with the rest of the choir instead of taking any serious leads. Just as passionately, I wanted to play the piano because she sang like the music in my head. For years I begged my mother to let me take lessons but for years she simply said, "I don't have the money." While I would hear secular songs like Anita Ward's, "You Can Ring My Bell" (Knight, 1979, track 1) blasting from the apartment on the end of our complex and a slim dark skinned woman briskly walking by snapping her fingers to the rhythm, my mother was playing gospel albums by pioneer artists like James Cleveland, Andre Crouch, and State Choirs from all over the South. The soulful music lifted the downtrodden spirits of Blacks while many of the words subliminally preached justification to our lack of cultural capital. The song "I Won't Complain" by Paul Jones (1993) was a great example of this.

I've been lied on

But thank you Lord

I've been talked about

But thank you Lord

I've been misunderstood

But thank you Lord

You might be sick

Body reeking with pain

But thank you Lord

The bills are due  
Don't know where the money coming from  
But thank you Lord  
Thank you Lord  
Thank you Lord  
(track 4)

But my embryonic stage of life ignored the damaging undertones and extracted only the feel good of every other melodic phrase. I dreamed of playing the piano to songs we learned in the youth choir at church and the gospel albums that my mother played. One day, I drew piano keys on a piece of cardboard and pretended like I was playing along with gospel greats like LaShaun Pace Rhodes and Shirley Caesar as I listened to their records.

I used those albums to keep me calm on Sunday mornings as my mom pressed the kink out of my hair with a comb heated by the orange eye of our stove. “Crackle crackle pop pop!” Was the sound of the hot comb meeting the oozing sweat and Blue Mountain brand of grease placed on my scalp to help straighten my hair. “POP POP POP” went the sound of the cool comb tapping on my head from mama’s other hand chastising me for sweating and jumping at the sound of the crackle. “Be still so you can look good for church!” She’d say.

I was comforted by James Cleveland (1997) singing melodically on our old hi-fi record player, “Where is Your Faith?” (track 7). Then I heard Andre Crouch (1976, side 1 track 5) and his choir remind me that “soon and very soon, we are going to see the king!” [musical notes of dunt dunt dunt] “No more crying there, we are going to see the king [shouts]!” I had to do something. Music was the only thing that soothed me other than reading. It got me through dry church services where every Sunday at Mt. Calvary Missionary Baptist Church, the deacons



would start devotion with the traditional call and response hymn, “A Charge to Keep I Have” (Wesley, 1762) “A charge to keep I have a God to Glorify,” sang the Deacon. “aaAAAA ChaRRRRRRge TOOOoooo kEEEEeeeP IIIII haaVVVVE, AAAAAA gOOOOD TOOOOooo GLLLLOR-i-Fyyyyyy!!!!” repeated the congregation with long drawn out diction. No one ever knew what was being said after that phrase of the song. They were just words with disregard to real meaning. Tradition. Once devotion was over, the choirs sang two selections like clockwork. Each choir was uplifting except Choir number one which no matter which Black church you attended, was made up of the elders of the church. I respected them but they were lethargic to hear. Then Pastor T.E. Gainous would encourage the congregation to “bring your tithes into the storehouse” (Malachi 3:10, King James Bible) as we slowly sang,

You can't beat God's giving [musical notes of dunt dunt dunt dunt], no matter hOw you try. The more you give, the more he gives to you. Just keep on giving, because it's really true. You can't beat Gods giving, [musical notes of dunt dunt dunt], no matter hOw you try. (Anonymous)

The deacons would call those tithing to come to the front of the church to be seen giving their money. Then ushers would instruct the remainder of the congregation to rise and walk to the front of the church, pew by pew. This was also the time to be seen in your best Sunday clothes.

When I turned 12, my mom said that I could start wearing pantyhose to church. I was excited as I pictured myself strutting past the offering plate in my womanly garb. I felt like I was finally entering into womanhood! She sent me into the local Bi-Lo located near the railroad tracks alone on a Saturday. I sorted carefully through the sizes and colors. According to the chart describing my height and weight, my size was B. Looking at the colors, I figured Black would be

too dark for my chocolate complexion so the color nude, I rationalized should match perfectly. Unfortunately, at 12 years old, I learned that the pantyhose executives who had the cultural capital to define colors did not look like me as I walked past the collection plate and up the aisle for my church family to see me with white legs and a chocolate body.

Soon, Pastor Gainous would begin his sermon. I would take the opportunity to read the bible since I didn't understand what he was talking about until the end of his message. The other children in the church were monitored by the motherly ushers for talking and gum chewing if they weren't sitting with their parents. The theme of the sermon always seemed to end with "God knows your struggles and that he [God] said soon it will be alright!" You could count on Pastor ending with shouts and fists flailing in the air, "And the third day he (Jesus) rose from the dead...he got up! He Got Up! HE GOT UP so that we can have church EVERY Sunday!" I prayed for forgiveness at the thought of not wanting to be subject to this every Sunday for eternity because the alternative of fire and brimstone was simply not an option! "When he comes back for us, the dead in Christ will rise first and EVERYONE else left behind will meet with fire and brimstone!" The piano would co-sign every word "dunt dunt dunt" along with random shouts from the congregation. "Preach preaCHER! HallelUUUah." My mom was sure to chime in every Sunday with screams of "THANK YOU JESUUUUUUUS. THANK YOU JESUUUUUUUS!" The ushers would rush to encircle her as she "got the holy ghost." Their mad dash was to keep her from hurting herself or others as she jerked around, arms flailing uncontrollably. Ushers also kept cloths handy to keep ladies' panties from showing in case anyone else caught the holy ghost and fell to the ground wildly. It was as if the louder you shouted for Jesus, the closer you were to salvation or the more likely you were saved from the fires of hell.

## Still Waters

Our routine on South Street was simple. Mom worked nights, slept days, and was entertained by an occasional John Wayne western when she had time. We walked home from school about three blocks and were latch-key before the term was invented. Keith cooked my oatmeal and toast in the mornings before school and ironed our clothes because mama was still at work. After school, we were to be quiet so as not to wake mama before 7:00 p.m., which was pretty hard since her bedroom was the living room and the only room with a television set.

One day, mama had to miss her sleep to go to our school because Keith had reportedly bitten a teacher. That day included a round of standardized testing practice in our white school and the teacher marked a question wrong where Keith insisted his answer was correct. The question asked how do you make toast. Since he made it for me on weekday mornings, he was confident in his answer. He described how you spread butter in the corners of a slice of bread and an additional smear in the middle then broil the bread for a couple of minutes in the oven. The teacher corrected him by stating that the correct answer was to place the bread in a toaster. Embarrassed for being called out and confident that he was correct, especially since he'd never had or used a toaster, he lashed out and bit the teacher.

I always admired my brother for his gift of gab and the courage to speak whatever was on his mind, even if that meant getting a 'whoopin' with mama's belt. However, condoning the biting would just be wrong. I am able to document this as my first memory of conflict surrounding issues of class. Class compounded by his race backed my brother in a corner where today I would have struggled to hold on the melodic lesson of "I Won't Complain" (Jones, 1993, track 4). Our white female middle class teachers may have had good intentions, but they knew nothing of this, our lived experiences.

From watching my older brother, I learned how to avoid trouble, be quiet and let mama and God fight my battles. She and God were the strongest sets of authority in my life, then teachers. Jesus walked on water and sacrificed himself for us and would burn you forever if you didn't both appreciate and fear him. Mama's image warranted similar respect. Mama beat up thieves trying to break in our home and the gas man when he came by to collect a bill she claimed she'd already paid then praised the lord for victory. Sometimes I thought mama and God were either closely related or one in the same person because rebelling against either authority was a painful experience.

Saturday was clean up day. Keith and I would complete our assigned chores while mama slept. Afterwards, I would pretend to cook on my easy bake oven and practice combing and styling hair on my white dolls. Saturday nights were the best because we couldn't wait to watch the Dukes of Hazard on our remote less 15 inch black and white television. Daisy Duke was the symbol of beauty for many girls at that time. I vividly remember her long full hair that moved whenever her head moved. I imagined my hair having that kind of body. I'd close my eyes and toss and shake the white t-shirt that I purposely stopped at my hairline as I undressed, as if Daisy and I had something in common. When Daisy went off at 9:00 p.m. we watched The Love Boat, then Fantasy Island at 10:00 p.m.

My hair got its weekly wash before the evening shows began so that it would be ready to be straightened Sunday morning. I can still smell the burnt hair and hear the snap, crackle, and pops from the meeting of the hot comb and my sweat! My hair had to be as tame as Daisy's hair to look presentable for Jesus in my Black church on Sunday and white folks in my white school on Monday.

## His Eye Is On The Sparrow

We lived on South Street for 5 years before we got our very own income controlled 1200 square foot, 3 bedroom, 2 bath home with a front and back yard and a detached carport. Our home on 148 West 6<sup>th</sup> street in Apopka, Florida was situated 12 miles north of Orlando and was a microcosm of the community around us. Our home sat just close enough to the railroad tracks, which was the racial landmark dividing the whites and the Blacks, for me to be bused to the white elementary school, Dream Lake Elementary. The further into the community and away from the railroad track, the more the grass receded. Most of my peers from our new church and later middle and high school went to Phyllis Wheatley Elementary, where there was no grass. I didn't know the context of the name of the school until high school or maybe even college. Before that time, it was just the Black elementary school with no grass.

Our new church home in Apopka was New Hope Missionary Baptist Church. It smelled of the same warmth of the creaking wooden seats mixed with cheap perfume at Mt. Calvary in Orlando. This is where I was introduced to the Negro National Anthem written by James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson (1998),

Lift every voice and sing,

'Til earth and heaven ring,

Ring with the harmonies of Liberty;

Let our rejoicing rise

High as the listening skies,

Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.

Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us,

Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us;

Facing the rising sun of our new day begun,

Let us march on 'til victory is won.

(p.878)

We would sing all three stanzas when I participated in the annual Black history program. It seemed to bother the song bird leading the melody at the front of the church that with each stanza, the congregation relied more and more on the printed lyrics in the church program and less on memory. I also participated in the annual christmas and easter programs and youth day each forth Sunday. Mt. Calvary had them too, but now I was old enough to participate in the big kid speeches that preceded the actual plays that served to be church service for that identified Sunday. I was always shy to perform, but the adults in the church made a habit of encouraging us children as we stumbled. "It's alright baby! Take your time. You can do it!" Then cheers would ring across the lips of women in the congregation during and after we successfully completed the speech. The encouragement was enough for most kids but because I was more motivated to meet the challenge of memorizing and repeating the words line by line with flair, I was hard on myself if I stumbled.

Keith and I were different than our new peers. The kids in my neighborhood said we talked funny. "You talk proper!" they said. "You must want to be white." they antagonized. "You think you smart!" they continued. In this world, white symbolized access, success, and intelligence. My peers knew their place and our educators and church leaders encouraged us to dutifully learn and stay in ours.

I was in the third grade when we moved to Apopka which was a critical year for me. It was the last year our family spent together before Jim, my step-father, came and it was the year that I found my passion for reading. It was that year that I won the read-a-thon for the first time. I was home with the chicken pox and wanted to escape my physical situation and exercise my

competitiveness at the same time. Turns out I was a multi-tasker from my beginnings. When I won again the next year, it was no longer a challenge. I was assigned a few books here and there in school that I read because I was motivated to get good grades or simply escape. I scored many more awards for read-a-thons, but reading allowed me to escape to a place where I fit in.

Mrs. Williams was my third grade teacher and one of two Black teachers I'd have in elementary. She is one of three I'd have before I left for college. All of my other academic teachers were white, and only two were male. I liked my teachers because most were not antagonistic. I was taught well at home and at church not to question authority or anything perceived as authority, so I did what teachers expected and we got along as long as I etched the lyrics, "I won't complain!" (Jones, 1993, track 4) in my head. All the Black teachers in the school knew me, whether I was in their class or not, and I felt a sense of intentional and urgent care from them. In fact, Mrs. Williams told me that she was disappointed in me because my best friend Sharon was failing 4<sup>th</sup> grade math. "But we aren't in the same class this year!" I explained. But she insisted that we were to look out for each other. Messages of community were being taught in my white school by a sub-culture of Black teachers.

I liked school because it presented me with challenges. However, I didn't like the social aspect of school. In fact, socializing was unpleasant work for me especially with groups of people. It was too draining to explain why I couldn't participate in extra activities or why we went to church so much. I was usually ignored by the white kids although I was usually the darkest child in our advanced classes. Somehow, I preferred being invisible over being teased by the Black kids. To them, I was too dark, too smart, and too proper. My mom was too strict, too holy, and too mean. Neighborhood kids went so far as to nickname me the ugly one and

Stephanie, my best friend through Junior High, the pretty one. Upon sending my maternal grandma in Chicago school pictures during my fourth grade year I said,

“Grandma, I really don’t look like that. The morning dew got to my hair when I walked to school and messed up all of the curls and I’m only that dark because we are just coming off of summer!”

“Yes you do you lil ugly nigga! Hee hee hee! ”Jeered my elder.

Some key things still stand out to me about my school experiences by grade level. There was Mrs. Featherstone in kindergarten. She was short and likable. Kindergarten was also the time frame where my brother and I participated in a 4-H funded afterschool program through Orange County.

White Mrs. Jones was my first grade teacher not to be confused with Black Mrs. Jones, the para professional that worked in her classroom. One day, I asked to go to the restroom during a test and White Mrs. Jones said no. I really had to go but I quietly and dutifully obeyed. I wore my favorite frog green jumpsuit that day. It was the same one I took my school pictures in that year. Then came the uncontrollable flow of warmth taking over both my jumpsuit and the floor. I went home that day in tan shorts and a brown paper bag in my hand. Second grade is a blur. Third grade was my favorite year to date. That was with Mrs. Williams. I could look forward to her putting up Black history posters during the month of February and I was probably considered the teacher’s pet. Fourth grade was a trip! Mrs. Bowers was my teacher and Mrs. Garcia was the para professional who worked in her classroom. This was my first antagonistic encounter with a teacher. My grades were good like always without having to put forth much effort. I was mannerable and complied with an awesome respect of authority. I never knew there was an issue until I casually told mama about the events of the day. Mrs. Bowers asked me to



discuss my recent court experience during a class discussion on the structure of government and the court system in front of the entire class. When mama found out, she came to the school and cursed Mrs. Bowers out until she turned beet red.

Kristie Sanders was in this class. She had long blonde hair and blue eyes like my baby dolls. I didn't think she was exceptionally beautiful, but I admired her hair. She would let me play with it as much as I wanted. I would comb my fingers through it and admire its natural smoothness from the root to the tip. Each time I would attempt to sculpt it like mine into braids, its slickness would take over and the braid would unravel like rope. The only time I would intentionally avoid Kristie's hair was when it rained. The texture and the smell of her wet hair reminded me of the smell and texture of the stray dogs in our neighborhood after a rain shower. She would come to school with it wet each morning in the absence of rain and only then did it have a sweet smell. I was fascinated.

"Why is your hair wet EVERY morning?"

"Cause I wash it and come to school."

"So you don't dry it before you get here?"

"Oh no, that would take hours of blow drying!"

"Hours! Oh my god!" I said.

"Why isn't your hair wet in the mornings?" said Kristie.

"Well, I only wash my hair every week and sometimes every two weeks."

"That's a long time! Won't it get too greasy from dirt and sweat?"

"Uh uh. But my mama puts grease in it on purpose every time she washes it. It won't look good without it."

She couldn't play in my hair like I could play in hers. My hair didn't have the buoyancy to fall back into place like hers and my hairstyle had to last a week. We continued to ask each other questions. I learned that her hair smelled good because of the hairspray she sprayed in it every morning. She learned that hot grease and heat straightened my hair then I sat for hours to get colorful beads and braids in my hair. She went to bed at night, hair to pillow. I went to bed at night, rollers, beads, braids, and head wrap tied to my head.

Sometime that year, my mom surprised me and let me get a Jheri Curl in my hair. This was a wet curly fad that would last through high school but it would only last on my head for a couple of weeks! My hair broke off so much that I had to go natural which meant it was short like a boy's hairstyle with no chemicals or heat.

At the beginning of the school year, Mrs. Garcia decided to teach all of the students in our class our names in Spanish. Hand raised,

“Mrs. Garcia! My name is already Spanish!” I exclaimed.

“Really? Well what is your name?” said Mrs. Garcia.

“Consuela!” I said with an enthusiastic grin.

“But that's a little girl's name.”

“I am a little girl,” I said as my grin drowned in front of the entire class.

At that moment, I wished I'd had Mrs. Jackson, the Black teacher in the classroom next door.

I can't remember the name of my fifth grade teacher, but I remember her rigorous vocabulary lists! I was especially perplexed by the word *aquiline*. She defined it as the beak like noses of Jews. “What was a Jew?” I thought. This was also the grade that our music teacher formed a ukulele band. I didn't know what a ukulele was, but I wanted to join because I loved

music. "I can't afford to pay for it baby" I'd hear mama say again. The last memory of fifth grade was our themed days. We all dressed up in garb reflective of the 1950's which was for *us* girls poodle skirts. I had never seen those styles in mama's old pictures. Then there was the day we learned how to square dance. We had so much fun as we do-si-doed and hopped around the classroom!

Sixth grade. We are changing classes but, Mrs. Montgomery, my Black social studies teacher is the only teacher I remember. I often saw her, Mrs. Jackson, and Mrs. Williams together. One day, I along with the rest of our class was invited to spend the night at her house. Games. Laughter. Pizza. Her family got along. Very nice! Mrs. Drayton was my guidance counselor. She was Black, but she was not Black like the other teachers. She had light skin and long hair and walked differently. She reminded me of Claire Huxtable from *The Cosby Show*. I liked her too, but admired her from afar.

One day, our P.E. teacher arranged for our class to do a relay race. Michael Tsoirus was a team captain and picked me right way. In fact, he put me on the last leg of the race, which is the spot reserved for the fastest runner. Our team was winning by a large margin when the baton was handed to me. I grabbed the baton and ran with all my might as the other team whizzed by me. Upon losing the race, Michael said exasperated, "I thought you could run!" "Why would you think that?" I inquired perplexed. This year would also include performing in the first of many school plays. I was the only Black student cast in the production of the *Wizard of Oz*. I tried out for the role of Dorothy and was assigned the role of the Wicked Witch of the West. By the end of the final performance, I received a standing ovation in my dying scene, practically stealing the show from Dorothy. I still smile at that thought!

Junior high was one big conglomerate layered with hormones, Black church ideology, band practice, and academic success except in math. Xiomara, my stepfather's niece, let me borrow the clarinet she used when she was in band so that I could participate as well. It wasn't the instrument I would have chosen but its cost effectiveness allowed me to get close to music. Competing for first chair and the complexity of marching were healthy challenges, for me but I never felt connected to the majority of the music we played. It seemed to lack feeling and soul, unlike the music in church. In my last year, I competed for the spot of drum major. Patty Sanders and I tied. There was a play off and the votes were racially divided, but because there were so few Black kids to vote, mama paid a visit to Mr. Barrett our band teacher. I remember him getting cursed out and Patty and I named as the first co-drum majors in the school's history. We performed at football games, competitions out of town, and the annual christmas parade, where the Ku Klux Klan marched each year.

My best friend Stephanie begged me to go out for track in junior high. She was a natural athlete. All of the boys thought she was pretty and I lived vicariously through the attention she received. I was never athletic, but since she was my best friend, I begged my mom to let me try out. Everyone made the team. Damn! I smiled for Stephanie but personally, I wasn't looking forward to the season. I placed in only one track meet. I won third place in the 880 meter race but there were only three competitors. I was a lap behind the athlete ahead of me in this two lap race. Shortly afterward that meet, mama felt that coming home at 7:00 at night from practice was too late for a school night and made me quit. I dutifully obeyed with a sad face and happy heart. At the end of junior high, Stephanie became involved with an abusive boyfriend who convinced her to move in with him and have a family.

It was 1986 and junior high was almost over. I was looking forward to the ninth grade cotillion. Dressed in a \$29 blue satin dress, \$7 matching Payless brand shoes, and \$14 fancy boutique jewelry, I hoped to slow dance with Kenny Williams sometime that night. He wasn't very attractive or flashy but he was committed to God and he liked me. We were nice. Kenny and I shared a memorable kiss at the cotillion. It almost made me forget the argument I had with mama before the dance.

“Mama, can I have five dollars to buy a 5X7 picture? I can make cheaper copies at Eckerd's later.” I asked excited.

“Every time I turn around, all of y'all always wantin something! Always got your hands in my pocket!” she said frustrated.

She had argued with my step-father prior to the dance. He felt I was too young to attend dances, but mama surprisingly thought I should go. She gave me the five dollars, and I never asked for anything else to date. In fact, I can tribute this experience from my inability to ask anyone for help. My rationale was that if I couldn't ask my mother for it, who could I ask?

High school was different. We moved to Yonkers, New York for the first half of my 10<sup>th</sup> grade year because Jim took a job that offered insurance opposed to the auto mechanic hustle that he used for many years. Taken over by inertia, I begged not to go because I was in love with Keenan, my “see you tomorrow in school” boyfriend. Mama attempted to give me a lesson on the inevitability of change when she quoted Reinhold Niebuhr (1986), instructing,

“Repeat after me. God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference.”

“God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference,” I repeated with a hard heart.

Jim went first and sent for us a few months later. The last time I am consciously aware that I fought feelings of inertia was when we moved back to Florida when the contract on Jim's job was complete. I enjoyed the exposure New York offered while we lived there. First, we lived in the projects, which were more extreme than the projects in the south. I felt like we were in the middle of the 70's hit sitcom *Good Times!* After about a month of sharing Jim's co-worker's (realized later to be his girlfriend) apartment, we moved into our own, three family home. The idea that three families could rent separate floors in the same house and at astronomical prices was novel to me, just as novel as my accent was to my new friends. The kids were nice to me there but they said, sounding tickled, "You talk country!" Go figure. I would take a city bus across town to get to my magnet school for *smart* kids. I remember having all white teachers, but none of them ignored me or were antagonistic. Strange. The climate in the school was not overwhelmingly white like my school in the Southern pocket of Florida. I felt no pressure to apologize for being Black or interested in school. This was even stranger. My social studies teacher did something that would change my life forever. I can't remember her name but I remember her impact. She took our class to see a play entitled *Fences* starring Billy D. Williams on this place called Broadway. Right away, I knew I had to be on stage.

Our family understood that if you move to a new town, the first on your to do list is to find a Black church home and transfer your membership from the previous one. I liked St. James African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church. The pastor there used to joke that AME stood for "after meetin eatin" so we ate Sunday dinner after church every Sunday. I had friends. I fit in. I was at home.

When we moved back to Florida, I was placed in regular classes at Apopka High School opposed to the advanced classes I was accustomed to taking. This was the first time I had ever

fallen asleep in class, especially an English class which was my easiest subject. Mrs. Mott, my Black guidance counselor, who transferred from the junior high school, worked with me and mama to get me the correct placement. We were told that there was no more room in the advanced classes that year. One day, I was late to Mrs. Adams' English class because I was in the counselor's office getting paperwork to be placed into advanced classes for the next school year.

“How dare you walk in late to my class!”

“I was in the counselor's office getting my schedule for next...”

“I don't care where you were.” Mrs. Adams said interrupting me. “I will have to give you a 0 on the quiz being taken right now.”

“But...”

“But what? You think you are so smart! Get out!”

I peacefully walked out snickering because I knew she was going to get cursed out by mama!

I also remember Mr. Head's world history class that year. He was a tall white man who moved and talked slowly. While seated at his desk, he'd instruct us to read assigned chapters and memorize long study sheets filled with dates and events just before he began his morning newspaper ritual. Mrs. Lowe, my Spanish teacher, was perhaps the most energetic teacher I ever had. She had a deep tan, dark hair, and was fascinated with Mexico. She taught all levels of Spanish so I had her for three years. Her class came in handy while working at my first job. Serving food at Walt Disney World gave me a chance practice my Spanish regularly.

My junior and senior years ebbed and flowed academically and was strenuous at home and socially. I continued to struggle in math classes alternating the grades of B and C while maintaining A's and B's in my other classes, without initiating much effort.

I remember the day in February when we talked about Black people in Mrs. Slonaker's 11<sup>th</sup> grade American history class. There was a picture in our text book of slaves in a boat and Carolyn Taylor raised her hand justifiably, "Mrs. Slonaker, it wasn't just white people who owned slaves. A lot of Black people owned slaves too." I was uneasy. I had no defense, only confused emotion that retorted, "uh uhhn." We moved from that discussion through the Black Freedom Movement into the bus boycotts and sit-ins in one class period. After we learned about Rosa Parks, I stopped myself before I reached the back of the school bus on my way home that day. I vowed to never sit in the back again in honor of those that fought to give Blacks the opportunity to sit wherever we wanted. Mrs. Slonaker incorporated the styles and platforms of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. in her lesson. "Malcolm X was a militant who hated all white people. Now Martin Luther King Jr., he was non-violent. He was a good man," she cemented in our minds. I remember being very confused in a different lesson on the McCarthy Era and communism versus capitalism. I could not relate any of this information to my lived experience.

During my senior year of high school, Jim was diagnosed with cancer in his throat. This preempted Mama to stop smoking cold turkey. I always admired her strength and determination to quit smoking, to cursing out authority figures, and beating up burglars and bill collectors. Now she had to care for a dying man, a man who often abused her. I was confused.

I found a new escape in acting. I was in all of the school plays at Apopka High School and won several thespian competitions. But I still struggled to identify with a place that could



complement all areas of my life. The white kids in my white school expected me to relate to them as if we had the same forefathers as we had been taught for years. And as long as I pretended to agree, they would tell Black jokes and *compliment* me, “You’re not really Black. Not like the rest of them.” At lunch, the Black kids would say, “you are so stuck up and you just want to be white.” Meanwhile, I reflected on being in downtown New York where I could be amongst thousands of people but happily alone and without pretense. New York was a place where it was less of a strain to be Black and smart. The truth was that I never saw myself as smart. I just did my homework as I was told and the labels befell on me.

The lessons I was learning in white schools included both formal and informal education. The lessons among social settings were more salient than those in classrooms and the textbooks because they were more relevant to my lived experiences. The through line of this education overwhelming concerned my race, class, and gender. This was world would be normal until I tasted life in New York and I would look to move back to recapture that in the future.

### Perilous Times

Navigating white schools was my day job. Navigating a home influenced greatly by Black church ideology was my night and weekend job. The clash of the Northern upbringing of my mom and the Southern influence of my step-father made life that much more interesting. I couldn’t put my finger on it, but something seemed to make mama angrier each year.

Jim’s family became the only family outside of church that I knew for most of my time in Apopka. I longed for my blood family but became closer to the Ellicks due to proximity. Jim had seven sisters all of whom were dark like coal, big like egos and flamboyant like peacocks. Most of them lived between Miami and the everglades, and we visited them from time to time. But my aunt Betty and her children Xiomara, Lisa, and Junior lived halfway between the railroad tracks

and Phyllis Wheatley Elementary School in Apopka. Soul food always seemed to be cooking in their house. The aroma mixed of collard greens made with pork, homemade macaroni and cheese, and freshly killed opossum roamed through each room of their green wooden house that sat on bricks in sandy dirt, suffocating any chance of grass attempting to grow. “Baby, you hungry?” Aunt Betty would ask each time I came over.

She and Jim would eventually go into enterprise selling raccoon and opossum. It wasn't until I went to college before I understood what a possum was but mama's Northern reaction to opening up the deep freezer to see a hundred eyes staring out was priceless! She was also reminded of her Northernness when he brought home freshly hunted rabbit or venison for dinner, the alligator he skinned on the carport, and the gofer turtle he picked up crossing an old country road. The turtle was yet another meal on the move. The worst of these experiences was visiting Jim's friend's pig farm and eating the chitlins (the intestinal walls of the pig) that I was forced to squeeze clean earlier that day. Although I came to value living off of the land and may occasionally be seen eating chitterlings today, I made a conscious decision that I would be a city girl when I became an adult.

Aunt Betty's home is where I would go when I ran away after mom beat me in the head in front of my best friend Stephanie in a discrepancy over my math project. “BAM BAM BAM BAM BAM BAM BAM!” Her fists replied to the sides of my head. I was 13. I envisioned a math project on timelines, she envisioned one on military time. She won. She tried to body slam me to keep me from running away but I was able to maneuver out of her grip. I ran to Aunt Betty's but Jim knew where to find me and made me come home. “I know it's not your fault. Your mama's going through something so just apologize and it will blow over.” He said. Mama had recently been arrested and fingerprinted for arguing with a white male bus driver when he would not

accept her bus transfer. She had not yet recovered from the experience. I listened to Jim. I followed his instructions though he was wrong. She accused me of hitting her in our tussle among other things.

“Y’all always doin wrong then want to apologize and it’s supposed to just be ok?” Mama said after I came back home. “Well, I’m gone get the devil out of you yet! [SLAP] Say Jesus!” she said slapping my face, waiting for the devil to leave my body.

“Jesus.” I said softly.

[SLAP] “Say it louder!”

“JESus”

“Again!”

“JESus!”

[SLAP] “SAY IT LOUDER!”

“JESUS!”

This was not the only time extremities were used as punishment. Mama was sleeping in preparation for her night job when I was nine and Keith was 13. Keith got side tracked and left some bacon grease cooking on the stove. The kitchen was scorched but the commotion wasn’t enough to wake mama. He woke her up to enlighten her of the incident and she calmly, perhaps groggily, said, “ok, just clean it up.” When she got up to check on the clean up, she noticed that he used her good towels and went ballistic. I had never seen her beat him that bad. Unlike me, Keith didn’t know his place and allowed his words to stay at odds with authority. This of course made her even angrier. When she was finished, she left to pick Jim up from work and Keith decided to do the unforgivable. He called the police and he called our forbidden daddy in Chicago. When my parents got home, we were gone and there was no note. We were placed in

foster care for a couple of months at Great Oaks Village, a residential facility in Orange County Florida. It would be Jim's legal care that the court decided Keith and I should be released to before the discussion on the court system in Mrs. Bowers' fourth grade class. After we came back home, mom was instructed to never hit us again. "BAM BAM BAM BAM BAM BAM!" Her fists replied to the sides of my head when I later ran away at 13.

Aunt Betty's was the only place mama would let me go that wasn't a Black church or white school. By now, the beatings, mental, spiritual, and physical ones at home were on the rise. I wasn't comfortable in or out of classrooms in my white schools. I loved God but the fire and brimstone scare tactics from my Black church kept me fearful. My only escape was to graduate and get out of town. But I still had five years to count down. I held on to the scripture, "Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning" (Psalms 30:5, King James Bible) as a means to soothe my unhappiness. By now I was a gigantic ball of depression and void of even a corner self esteem.

I was so grateful to Aunt Betty's children, who were older than me because they seemed to rescue me from misery. Lisa taught me how to drive, Xiomara's house was a change of scenery and Junior offered me money just because. Having this family substituted for the family I longed to get to know back in Chicago. Largely, they provided support that compensated for Jim, but no one could substitute the broken relationship with daddy when mom married him.

Buddy, Xiomara's husband came over one day when Jim was drunk again. Usually, no one except the police ever came over and actually saw the arguments between him and mama. He had peed in the bed again from being drunk the night before. "Shut up woman! You talk too much! You make people hate you!" He would say to her before he'd throw her up against the wall. The day Buddy came over, he had her in a choke hold. I no longer viewed Jim as authority

the first time I saw him beat mama. I grabbed the red broom and beat him across his disabled back as hard as I could. That riled me more than him unzipping my pants when I was in the fourth grade. “Get off my mama!” Keith cried threatening him with a butcher knife. Buddy unsuccessfully tried to divert Jim’s attention but only the police that showed up shortly afterwards had the power to calm him down. We got up the next morning as if nothing happened. Mama taught Sunday school with a smile, shouted “THANK YOU JESUUUUUUUS. THANK YOU JESUUUUUUUS!” and nobody ever knew.

It was difficult for all of us when Jim came. The books I read in white schools had pictures of white families with a mommy and daddy to signify a standard of normalcy. My Black church doctrine was stern in lessons of designated roles of men in leadership and of women in subordinate caretaker roles. Both experiences contradicted my lived experience at home. Life wasn’t perfect before Jim came, but it was a lot easier.

I hated that I was told I’d never see my daddy again, but Keith was not as easy to accept it. He did everything he could do to rebel. Once, he got caught stealing a flashlight from the local Winn Dixie grocery store and mom had to go get him from the police station. Mom beat him worse than the time we were sent to Great Oaks Village, but he didn’t call the police this time. “I’m gone beat you before the white man beats you cause when he beats you, he won’t beat you with love like I will!” she said. Jim yelled at him and he yelled back, “You’re not my daddy!” Mom chimed in, “It’s not like Johnny is your daddy anyway!” That’s when we found out that we had separate dads. The scare from the police station calmed Keith down. He was not equipped to survive in prison. He soon joined the debate club in high school and found that he could talk his way into and out of just about any situation.

For me, I was confused about family dynamics, marriage, love, religion and gender roles. I witnessed a strong woman who had repeatedly stood up to any man or authority figure remain in a marriage where a man beat her and molested her daughter because it was godly for a woman to be married.

One day, my maternal grandma was visiting from Chicago. Everyone in our family always said she and mama were just alike which is why they couldn't get along. On this visit, mama accused grandma of trying to seduce Jim. "Old lady, it's time for you to go!" she said as she packed grandma's suitcase and headed for the Greyhound Bus station. This led me to question, what will my relationship be with my mother when I grow up? Would I learn to resent my mother as much as she resented hers? Why was their relationship so volatile? These are questions that swirled in my head for years.

### Trouble Won't Last Always

Until I was in junior high, I didn't understand what had happened in the fourth grade when Jim unzipped my pants. He came home drunk again. "Come sit on my lap Missy!" he said before he passed out on the couch with his hand still touching my panties. I dutifully obeyed. I later told Keith. He was upset which is why I didn't understand why he unsuccessfully tried to penetrate me when I was in the ninth grade. I didn't say no. I respected my big brother. Does that mean it I consented? He told mama what happened with Jim and Jim was gone. Three days later Jim came back. I was told to dress differently around the house and he was told to get Jesus or get out. No one knows about Keith and me. The incident with Jim was never discussed again.

Upon Jim getting Jesus, we changed churches. He grew up A.M.E. (African Methodist Episcopal founded by Richard Allen) and insisted we move from our Baptist denomination, to his denomination, if he was going to attend church. We left New Hope Missionary Baptist

Church and St. Paul A.M.E., where the Reverend J.O. Williams was Pastor, was to be our next church home. Both of my parents immediately enrolled in the church's seminary school together. I also participated heavily in the YPD (young people's department) where I sang soprano in the youth choir and Keith served on the usher board. Most of the organizers of the youth department were Black school teachers who graduated from Historically Black Colleges and Universities. They would organize easter and christmas productions and take us on trips to Orlando during the annual A.M.E. conferences, where we would interact with YPDer's from other churches. Participation in the YPD was a chore. When it came to interacting with other children, I struggled to locate my place with conflicting influences from my mother and influences among my peers. Like in school settings, I was not comfortable among my Black church peers, but could navigate life comfortably under the subordination of authority of the elders in the church. However, participation in the YPD was a duty and a requirement so I survived it.

Keith was the extrovert and enjoyed the attention he received in the YPD. Everyone always flocked to my big brother. His charisma was amazing, and my heart was stuck on him. Keith would soon leave for the military leaving me more alone than I could have ever dreamed. He married Angela Bruner on his first trip home to convince his 16 year old bride that he was committed to their love. More shocking than marrying her when she was 16 was that she was Black. Girls of all shapes, colors, and sizes liked Keith, and he like them all, but especially the white ones. "Boy, you'd better leave those white girls alone before those white boys come lynch you!" mama would say over and over.

Neither mama nor Jim was well liked in our Black church and I felt some of the residual feelings from the children in the YPD but I was forced to participate in YPD activities. I did not

like feeling odd and I did not like knowing that my parents were known to be odd. I quietly prayed about this dilemma, confident that my reward was waiting for me in heaven. Mama taught Sunday school for years and had an antagonistic relationship with the officers of the church. She felt that they didn't have a substantial understanding of the bible and they didn't appreciate her inappropriate shouts of "THANK YOU JESUUUUUUUS! THANK YOU JESUUUUUUUS!" in this much quieter more dignified church.

Jim's second home prior to seminary was the Big C Bar. Before they enrolled in seminary, the police were at our house often for domestic disturbances. We'd talk to him during visiting hours through the thick glass windows with attached phones when he'd go to jail for DUI's and assault charges at the Big C. Although his vacations (jail time) slowed, many of his associated behaviors did not come to a complete halt right away. It was difficult for folks to listen to an alcoholic chain smoking minister.

Mama was committed to making her marriage work in the godly way. She insisted, "If you love God for a man, there is nothing he can do to hurt you." She once informed me how to situate my body should I ever be raped. "Now when it happens, try to relax because your body will be sore later if you tense up." She later advised, "Missy, the only thing that better than an organism during sex with a man is the organism you get from being intimate with God!"

Angela, my new sister in law, would come by to rescue me since I couldn't hang out in any of the places the other kids did. We'd ride all over Apopka and mama approved because I was with her. I loved Angela. She was pretty and I felt pretty just being around her. We started hanging out with some of her friends and I suspected one liked her. I didn't want to believe she may like him in return. That would mean our relationship would have to be over, right? Eventually, she and Keith cheated on each other and I was alone again.



While they were still married, Keith and Angela decided to go see daddy in Chicago. He was grown and married and didn't need mama's approval. He had actually been in contact with him since he graduated. During this time, daddy sent me a package in the mail. He probably got the address from Keith. I was hysterical when I opened to find a disfigured picture of my daddy. I was 15 and hadn't seen him since I was eight. The time did not matter because the way he looked was like a different person altogether, a person whose eyes looked discolored and deformed. His eyes were bulged, his skin patchy, shoulders hunched and his smile animal like. "He's just possessed with the devil" mama explained, "that's why he looks like that!" Of course, he got a phone call from her and got cursed out. I later learned that he was combating heart and kidney disease and the years of dialysis took an impartial toll on his body. A few months later, mama let me go see him. Daddy sent me an airplane ticket and Keith and Angela met me there by car. I was so nervous! What would I say? Regrettably, I didn't say much. I was so used to being told what to think or say that I didn't know how to prepare. My flight left to return to Florida on a Sunday morning in late December. While I was in flight, daddy's trip to dialysis was cut short. His death certificate was completed later that afternoon.

Meanwhile, the A.M.E.'s found a way to get rid of my parents. They were assigned a church where they would co-pastor in Polk City, Florida. Even though the church was located an hour from our home and the church had no members, they were elated. We'd drive there each Sunday with several church programs printed just in case someone came. There were a total of five visitors in the twenty years to follow. If the programs called for a selection from the choir or an offering, I was instructed to sing a solo at the front of the church. Sermons usually depicted a topic discussed at home the week prior, making the point more pious coming from the pulpit. I would later invite a couple of friends from college to witness this to ensure I wasn't imagining it.

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I met Michael after Jim found Jesus. We both worked at Walt Disney World. It was my first job and his summer internship as a student at Harvard. He was my first real boyfriend that I spent any time with after school. I was so proud that he went to Harvard because it symbolized a constructive way out of Apopka and out of the house. Mama had not attended college and advised against going.

“I can’t pay for it.” she’d say, reminding me once more that we were poor.

“Go into the military,” she said. “they’ll pay for it. Besides, that’s what I wanted to do but my mama didn’t let me.”

I wasn’t sure how, but I planned to quietly disobey.

When I would describe my boyfriend as being a Harvard student, I was often asked, “Is he white?” I took great pleasure in saying he was Black. Others like Mrs. Hubbard, my 12<sup>th</sup> grade honors English teacher would correct me saying, “You mean Howard?” “HARRRRVARRRRD!!!!” I’d clarify. It was easy to date Michael because he lived in a different state. That made getting approval to spend time together much easier because he was only home for winter and spring break. He wrote me love letters and I’d have to use a dictionary to respond. I loved the challenge and I no longer felt alone!

I was assigned Zora Neale Hurston’s (1937/1965) *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in the eleventh grade and was taken aback. This was the first book I could relate to my day to day lived experience. The book was laced with Black people, issues of class and gender roles of women in the South. Even more shocking was the romantic love story involving Black people. I felt Janine’s pain as a woman but resented that her first husband wanted her because she was light skinned with long, silky, white, folks hair. It was at that point that I made the decision to be

attracted to dark skinned men during a time where light skinned was more popular among the members of my community. I continued to read. I lost myself in the love story. I later compared it to my love story with my boyfriend Michael. Well, love may have been a strong word for what we had, but he did represent security like Janine's first husband. That's what Janine, and my mom married for, each on their own terms. Mama insisted that love could come after marriage. I was happy when our pastor disagreed with her because my fairy tale image was still intact. I imagined Michael and I would get married too someday, so I consented to giving my body to him as an *early* gift to secure my future while ignoring earlier homegrown lectures of the birds and the bees: "Why would a man buy a cow if he could get the milk for free?" mama would preach. I was conflicted when it finally happened. I felt like an animal instead of a lady. There were no bright stars or fireworks. Perhaps I was a cow after all. I felt god's fiery eye staring at us during the entire episode, and I cringed at the thought of doing it again. I cried from guilt and shame, but I endured because my body was to be for him and to secure my future. "For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man" (1 Corinthians 11:8-9 New International Version). All of these thoughts compounded my mind. Then, as mama and I were separating clothes to be washed one day during my senior year of high school, she busted me:

"And you ain't no virgin no more either!" she snapped unexpectedly. "I know cause I been smellin your panties!"

"You're right," I said bracing to be slapped across my face.

"A woman is to give her body to her husband as a gift on their wedding night," mama reminded me. "It is better to marry than to burn [in hell]!" she continued.

I wanted more books like Hurston's to read to help me navigate my life, but my middle class

white teachers in my white school were not able to offer any other recommendations. My Sunday school teachers referred me to the love stories in the bible.

I turned to Mr. Hill, my white, male, gay, drama teacher, who recommended a performance piece he wanted me to use as a monologue about a poor woman living in Cabrini Green, then the roughest projects in Chicago. This was my birth state and the state in which my mom developed her world view. It did not speak of frivolous love, but it did speak of a Black female experience in which I could relate. It spoke of her pre-fabricated blueprint of a life of poverty, and her failed attempts of getting out of the projects with hopes of her son going to college. I owned that monologue and successfully competed with it across the state as a thespian. I felt my character. Hers was a road not far from my own until Mrs. Davis, my new Black female guidance counselor, exposed me to the road map to the yellow brick road leading out of town to Oz.

No one, including the teachers, liked Mrs. Davis, but she, like other Black teachers and counselors paid special attention to me. I was preparing for college curriculum in my honors classes but the admissions process or how to pay for it never entered my mind. She gathered college applications, told me where to apply, and helped me complete them. She found Upward Bound, a federal program hosted by the University of Central Florida and encouraged me to participate. Upon teacher recommendations and parent approval, this program took students who were promising first generation college students and or below the poverty line to the campus once a month to learn about the admissions process, financial aid, housing, etc. We were to miss most of school on that day so we had to get permission from the school principal. I came in late to my 7<sup>th</sup> period career class from one of the field trips.

“Why are you late to my class?” asked Mrs. Blandy.

“I’m just getting back from my Upward Bound field trip.”

“Make sure you don’t let it happen again. You know that program is racist.”

“I don’t think its racist, Mrs. Blandy.” I defensively replied.

“Then why isn’t it opened to white students?”

“There are a few whites that attend.” I answered.

“Well, I was raised in upstate New York where there were very few Black people and there were never any problems with race. I think you people just perpetuate racism by considering programs like these.”

I was confused, enraged, and downright peeved! But I knew I could not win this argument. It also seemed inappropriate to have an argument with a teacher in front of the entire class, so I demonstrated respect for my teacher by keeping my mouth closed. The hope of me attending college was bigger than what she thought of me or the upward bound program.

With letters of recommendation from Mrs. Davis, Mr. Hill, and Pastor Williams, I applied for college, as was the expectation of all of the students in the honors classes. The same was not expected of my peers from my side of the railroad tracks who took regular classes. I was on my way to Oz, Florida State University. Mrs. Davis found a summer bridge program there so that I could attend during the summer. I also made a quick stop along the way. I graduated on Friday June 4, 1990 and left to see Michael in Boston on Sunday, June 6, 1990 and returned just in time for my first class in Tallahassee. I never looked back or visited *home* for more than two to three days once or twice a year. Before I left for college, Pastor Williams reminded me from the pulpit to be strong in my beliefs and hold on to my faith as it will be challenged in the University classroom. This advice I took from a man who never attended a university. I never thought to question that.

## Precious Memories Unpacked

In an attempt to explore the education I received from white schools and Black church ideology in chapter two, I have unpacked the several themes within the literature to conclude this chapter. When examined closely, nostalgia can present warm feelings from a-historical memories. While I was a youth, I was a consumer of education in white schools and Black church ideology and both consistently reminded me that I was Black, female, and poor. The songs in church were saturated with hidden curriculums that were co-signed by doctrine from the pulpit and Sunday school. These lessons served as oral maps to freedom for the Underground Railroad and compared the plight of Black people to Jews in historic Israel from a christian perspective in Negro Spirituals. The doctrines patriarchally maintained inferiority of women to men, which resonates in the scripture “For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man” (1 Corinthians 11:8-9 New International Version). It justified Black’s second class citizenship in America and piously validated that white is better.

The music reached back all the way to the beats of Africa and gave us a sense of hope for today. Although we sang about encouraging themes of strength to endure, it was an endurance that we contended would suffice until we reach the mis-aligned Jewish *promised land*. This was the next life where we would rest and receive our reward for coping with today’s shared hardships. These songs often referenced Black dehumanization, i.e. “a wretch like me”, with a desire of purity often confusing it with being, “white as snow.” LaShaun Pace Rhodes, a sultry Black gospel great sang (Rhodes, 1991, track 4):

Somebody said how can a brown cow

eat green grass and give you white milk  
well if you think that's something  
God's chemical laboratory of redemption  
took my black soul and dipped it in red blood  
and I came out white as snow  
I know I've been changed  
Cause the angels in heaven done signed my name

The affective connection to the music was undeniable so much so that I could get lost in the rhythms and ignore the subliminal contested contradictions of the words. When my mother found out that I had lost my virginity, she made inference to this cow, "Why would a man buy a cow when he can get the milk for free?" This idea of Black women being juxtaposed to cows is disconcerting. It could be suggested that the brown cow in Rhodes' song was a Black woman, eating green vegetables and producing white milk for her babies. Mama's interpretation is derived from christianity's draw from arranged marriages in orthodox Jewish tradition equating the value of women to costly dowries. Even still, its analogy to an all powerful god pouring life into a Black soul and it coming out white and solidifying the change by heavenly bodies co-signing my name is a testament to self-hate.

Dialectically, Black church ideology espoused a curriculum of care in an uncaring world. Siddle-Walker and Snarey (2004) discuss the West African origins of care in Black communities. "To care for the group is to care for the self, and to care for the self is to care for the group." This made it safe for Black bodies to attend church. The Black church also made being Black and poor comforting because it consisted of a network of support among other people who were also

poor and Black. We came to church with the intent to leave with our spirits raised during a time when the rest of the world made you feel bad about your Black body or our neighborhood.

Teaching self-esteem to children was a focal point of my Black church experience. In every church I attended, one Sunday out of the month was reserved for youth day where the children in the youth department led the services. We were also cast in holiday plays and could either sing in the choir, or serve as an usher to assist in our ability to speak confidently in front of large crowds. Sunday school began at 9:00 a.m. and included formal curriculum, which was taught within the doctrine of obedience. Instruction was followed by quiz bowls to ensure we learned the material.

The church created hierarchies within their subculture to allow poor Black people to experience could have positions of power that were not accessible in larger society. However, rules and standards were in place that encouraged Black men to lead and Black women to hold subordinate worker positions. Congregations were largely made up of women and led by a few usually uneducated men. The male leaders were often surrounded by a harem of caring women who cleaned, cooked, organized, and taught the children. The men preached, counted the money, and cut the grass. I witnessed my mother attempt to break the ceiling, but she was met with much resistance.

The liberation of Black theology was two-fold in my Black church experience. It was Black empowerment in the absence of white privilege at the beginning of the week. This was followed by stirring up the motivation to tolerate it during the remainder of the week. Secondly, it was the birthplace of social action and hope that ensured Black men and poor people that there was a just and caring metaphysical being larger than this world and our oppressed situation that was in control of our well-being.



During the week, I navigated life in white schools from a Black, poor, and female lens. The historical foundation of public schools was sewn with spools of racial and cultural superiority, with defined patterns of exclusion of people of color and women. A gross contradiction lies in the democratic American value of equality of opportunity while legalizing acts of segregation, deculturalization, and blatant cultural genocide. Noted and respected educator Noah Webster openly resisted and rejected a multicultural society by instituting a national common language defined by the dominant culture in his wide spread speller and dictionary (Spring, 2000), which continues to resonate in classrooms across the United States today. One threat to this idea of nationalism was Black American literacy and any resistance of cultural conversion by Native Americans.

It is not surprising that the formal education I received in white schools was not culturally responsive, (Gay, 2000) except for my brief stint in a northern school in New York. There, race was important, but I did not feel the need to put on daily armor to repel white supremacy as a part of my school attire. Through twelfth grade, I often encountered lessons that were outside of the realm of my lived experience, allowing me only to memorize rather than relate the information. The curriculum attempted to shame me of my Blackness, confuse my forming identity, and shouted my lower socioeconomic status throughout the school halls. For example, the cost associated with extra activities was a constant reminder that I was poor. Fundraising for school initiatives was equally difficult in my community because everyone was poor; I never participated.

Lessons were usually from the lenses of white, male, heterosexual, Christian, and middle class perspectives. Audrey Lorde (1984) explains the impact of this normative standard, “It is with this mythical norm that the trappings of power reside within society.” (p. 114). These

include lessons on capitalism, books about Dick and Jane, dress up days to reflect life in the 1920's and 1950's. To acknowledge my place as a Black woman in those eras would have made the class uncomfortable by bringing up a painful past. Therefore, we were all encouraged to participate as if we all melted into a white colorless world. Color was usually brought into the classroom during Black history month and was taught as a monolithic experience unattached to American history.

The idea of a harem of female caretakers in my Black churches was also evident in the white schools I attended where all of my principals were white men surrounded by female teachers and assistants. I was perceived by whites as the exception to my race in school, but the intentional communal care from Black teachers and guidance counselors protected me like a family of mothers, grandmothers and aunts. The care provided by these women was in the lineage of Harriet Tubman and other foremothers who sought to plant seeds of freedom to future generations. Vanessa Siddle-Walker (1996) Michelle Foster (1997) wrote about similar exchanges between Black teachers and students in the South. The magic potion that these teachers conjured to make their students succeed was to simply pay attention to them and make them feel valued.

The support I received from my Black teachers was not enough to help me navigate interactions with other students. Instead, they were a haven away from the white students who deemed my dark skin invisible (unless they saw me among a group of other Black students) and the Black students who were suffering their own identity crisis. There was an unspoken question about self segregation among students in our white schools. Tatum (1997) explains this phenomenon,

When the Black people are sitting together, the White people notice and become self-conscious about being White in a way that they were not before. In part the question reflects that self consciousness. What does it say about the White people if the Black people are all sitting together? The White person wonders, ‘Am I being excluded? Are they talking about us? Are my own racial stereotypes and perhaps racial fears being stimulated?’ (p. 89)

Both Black and white students in my white school often associated academic achievement with white behavior. If white students did not achieve in school it was perceived that the student was facing a challenge unrelated to their race. Whereas, if a Black student did not achieve academically, it was considered normal. However, when a Black student did achieve academically, he or she became the exception to their race in the perception of whites and an outsider to their race among their Black peers. Tatum considers this to be a post-desegregation phenomena and suggested that Black achievers reacted racelessly, rejecting anything associated with being Black in order to be accepted by their white peers or emissarily where they saw their achievements as advancing the Black race (Tatum, 1997). I uncomfortably waddled my way through both crowds many times enduring rejection from both.

Black people shared shame about natural kinky hair and dark bodies (hooks, 2003), and I saw it play out in white school settings, Black church ideology, and pop culture. Attending church on Sunday meant looking your “best.” “Best” for Black girls inferred using traumatizing measures to lengthen and straighten out the natural strong kink of their hair to look as close to the standard of beauty both defined by white supremacy in school and Black church ideology. 1 Corinthians 11:15 describes the expectation of a woman’s hair by stating, “But if a woman have long hair, it is a glory to her: for *her* hair is given her for a covering.” We were too bifurcated to

recognize the strength in the thick full hair that is naturally bestowed to us. The hair was resilient and could remain in one style throughout the school week or be sculpted into several different styles. It would take years for me to escape the shame of not having long flowing hair like Daisy Duke from the show the Dukes of Hazard and appreciate my diametrically opposed natural kink. The stories of Toni Morrison (1970), and bell hooks (1996) capture the roots of this sort of white supremacist induced self-hate. I apologized and made excuses for my dark complexion on my school pictures to my light skinned maternal grandmother in the fourth grade who comically inferred that it made me ugly. I did not, however, fall prey to the color caste system created by white supremacy that was discussed in bell hooks Rock My Soul (2004). I possessed psychological resilience more than physical narcissism. If light skinned people were considered more attractive than dark skinned people solely based on complexion, I was charged to champion the plight of the dark skinned person as my fight to equalize our oppression.

We are all students in the world, and we are constantly learning, whether we are conscious of the lesson or not. Other ways I learned my place as a Black woman in the South was from television shows, social settings, and family dynamics. Race was discussed at home with the purpose of learning and accepting a second class place in society for safety and survival reasons. A major theme of the lives of poor Black people is to learn obedience in a world where rules were created to keep them away from access. Resisting or responding to marginalization could get you labeled as a criminal or a threat. A common example of this label is the stereotypical “angry Black man” or woman. Many resist or act out but others do not. Before I left for college each member of my immediate family, and most of the boys in my neighborhood, were arrested except me.

I attribute my resilience to my mother. I have only known her to struggle, but always seem to witness her survive physically, though not always psychologically. The most useful lesson I learned in my home was how to survive. Survival skills have been transferrable to protecting my Black female body from attacks and in preparing meals fit for a Great Depression.

The lessons from television were skewed in comparison to many of my peers because my family we didn't have cable in our home. I was only privy to four channels until I left for college. In my early years, I enjoyed the PBS educational shows like the Electric Company, Sesame Street, The Great Space Coaster, Captain Kangaroo, and Mr. Rogers neighborhood because I liked learning. I later enjoyed dramas and comedies like the Dukes of Hazard, Love Boat and Fantasy Island that allowed me to escape. It was the shows that reflected people that looked like me or could relate to my social class with which I felt a connection, like Good Times and the Jefferson's. Of the programs within that genre, I most appreciated the Cosby Show and its spin off about college life at a Historically Black College and Institution. On these shows I met Claire Huxtable, the mother figure on the Cosby Show. She was the epitome of Black womanhood in my limited experience. She was the end result of freedom from the Underground Railroad I hoped I could eventually experience. It was her conservative sophisticated example that I would imitate and take with me beyond the viewing of television programming. This example merged with the survival techniques I learned at home.

## CHAPTER 3

### MILLIONS DIDN'T MAKE IT

If I can just make it up there,  
and if I can walk through that city bright and fair;  
there'd probably be a thousand things  
I want to tell the Lord on that day.

I'll just begin to cry,  
You'll wipe the tears from my eyes,  
I'll say thanks, You'll ask why,  
this will be my reply, You know...

Millions didn't make it,  
but I was one of the ones who did.  
(Winans, 1987, track 2).

The title of this chapter is taken from a Winans' (1987, track 2) song and speaks of a person's state of being overwhelmed because they made it to destination heaven while millions of others did not. This chapter discusses my unlikely exodus from Apopka, Florida to the predominately white institutions at Florida State University and then on to graduate school at Indiana State University when few other Blacks from Apopka left for higher education. "Gotta Keep Movin" is the first story. The title is taken from an a capella Negro Spiritual of the same name that speaks of slave's resilience to survive their new world. Likewise, this story highlights the navigation of my unchartered new world during my first semester of college. This chapter also signifies the support I received through affirmative action programs that conducted a path to college success. The next story is entitled "Be Encouraged." It describes my adjustment to college life and symbolized a way for me to stay motivated while faced with an onset of personal tragedies. The story title is drawn from a gospel song by William Becton (1995) that encouraged me to, "Be encouraged, no matter what's going on. He'll (God) make it all right, but you gotta stay strong." (1995, track 8) "The Battle Is Not Yours" is a story about out of classroom college

activities and experiences of love, heartbreak, racial undercurrents, and the search for my place in the christianity but outside of a Black church home. Contemporary gospel singer Yolanda Adams made the song title popular when she reminded me of how Jesus felt my pain and sadness but that all things are going according to God's will for me. "The Question Is" is a story outlining my academic experiences as an undergraduate student. Inspired by a Winans' song (1995, track 1) made up of the questions the singer wanted to ask God, this chapter explores the idea of questioning as a part of the academic experience. "We've Come This Far by Faith" ends the narrative of this chapter. The title is drawn from a Carlton Pearson (2001, track 1) song and reminded me that I had been stretched far beyond my limited view in Apopka and I could never go back to that life. I had come this far by faith and felt obligated to see how far it would take me. It took me through graduate school and catapulted me back to Florida with the promises of freedom of middle classdom.

### Gotta Keep Movin

Dream Lake Elementary, Apopka Junior and High School, and now Florida State University. I was accustomed to attending majority white schools. I couldn't imagine any other learning environment. Mrs. Davis was disgusted that I chose Florida State University over the Historically Black College and University, Florida A&M. The truth was, being around that many Black people made me uneasy on several levels unless it was in a church setting. The messages of locking your door or clutching your purse upon seeing a Black man were messages that didn't escape me even though I grew up in a Black community. I knew how to lay low in white environments and didn't know how to avoid ridicule and judgment within Black ones.

I arrived at Florida State University during the summer of 1990 through Horizons Unlimited, an alternative admissions program brokered by a white male history professor. It was reserved for students who were first generation college students and or who were below the poverty line and scored just below the required SAT score. Students in this program received support services through a larger retention program called the Summer Enrichment Program (SEP) housed in the Multicultural Student Support Center. Everywhere I went, I saw people who looked like me, talked like me, and thought like me, all together in one big bowl. We were Blacks in numbers in an educational setting and not in church. I would never want to let go of this feeling of empowerment ever again. I can't speak for the other 50-60 students in this program, but my life would never be the same after that summer.

We all lived in DeGraff Hall. Upperclassmen were assigned to us as mentors and counselors to guide us through this strange new world. They assisted us in registering for classes that were already chosen for us, buying books, and learning the campus. As long as we earned a letter grade of C or better, we would be unconditionally admitted into the University in the upcoming fall semester so mandatory study halls were instituted. I was focused. I couldn't mess up. I was in survival mode with no contingency plan.

In addition to the study sessions, there were spades tournaments til 5:00 in the morning, talent shows, pool parties, and rap sessions. I didn't know how to play spades, but I did know how to play bid whist, tunk, and gin rummy. Those were games we played before Jim came to live with us. Bid whist was very similar to spades. Spades was a game of life and I witnessed it being played at the playground on 6<sup>th</sup> Street in Apopka by grown-ups smoking reefer and drinking alcohol out of brown paper bags. It was a stage play with rich language and passionate antics acted out in real life. Stories of prison stays, yo mama jokes, and signifying (witty insults)



were off stage original comedies. Sometimes a bad play of game or a hint of cheating tragically led to threats of bloodshed predicated by verbal assaults, promises of stabbings and gun shots. The spades games at Florida State were born from that same fervor. Knowledge of the game and its participation in its antics whether you were a player or audience member, was an unwritten pre-requisite to be a part of the Black community in my new environment. The difference between 6<sup>th</sup> Street and DeGraff Hall was that bragging rights replaced the threat of fatal violence in this Black sub-culture of my new white school.

I was excited when the counselors announced that there would be a talent show at the end of the term. I was a ball of nervous energy when I opted to sing a duet. “Sing Anita Biscuit!” Yelled a football player from the crowd, comparing me to sultry singer Anita Baker. I was never sure why my new friend Stephen agreed to sing the rendition of Johnny Gill’s and Stacey Lattisaw’s (1989, track 7) R & B duet “Where Do We Go From Here” with me because although he defined handsomeness, he wasn’t that good of a singer. In fact, I believed the audience’s reception of my mediocre performance was due to his poor one. Stephen’s creamy complexion was mixed with white and Black and was complemented with the body of a quasi body builder. His good looks were easy for me to disregard as I reflected on chants of “the ugly one and the pretty one” by Black peers in Apopka who equated good looks with light skin. All of the girls in SEP were enamored with Stephen but all he’d ever do is smile at them. My mind of course was still on Michael and the standing ovation I received at the talent show.

My first pool party at my new white school afforded me a lesson I never expected to receive at college. There were no pools on my side of the railroad tracks in Apopka but we took day trips to Rock Springs, a lake on the other side of town. All of us Black girls wore long white t-shirts over our one piece bathing suits and faithfully wore rubber swim caps to keep our hair

dry. At my first pool party at Florida State, I noticed that none of the girls wore the overlay that was so accustomed by the girls in Apopka. With nervous energy, I took off my shirt and left my cap in my bag. I wanted to feel free like these down to earth yet sophisticated Black folks. A student in our group named Gary helped me to realize that sophistication did not go without rule books.

“Consuela!” yelled Gary in front of the other students.

“What.” I replied, alarmed that I had broken an unwritten rule in my new environment.

“You need to take care of that!” He said pointing to the bushels of hair trying to escape my underarms and to the hair stretching from my pelvis toward my ankles. “That’s just nasty!” Gary finished.

Some lessons are harder than others. In Apopka, I had learned in my Black church about the role of women being that of virtuous but I never had the lesson of appropriate female etiquette to fit in outside of a church setting. Neither was that lesson ever on *The Cosby Show* nor its spin off about college life entitled, *A Different World*.

Rap sessions during the program included the counselors and Black faculty across disciplines offering information on how best to navigate the educational system in which we had just become immersed. They warned us that the academic requirements are much different than high school, but that managing time and making smart choices were the real keys to meeting the challenges of college life. They answered our questions and gave us more of the right questions to ask. They told us to sit in the front of the classroom and to approach professors after class with questions. If we didn’t have a question, we were told to make up one so that he or she would remember our name. They also encouraged us to make good use of a professor’s office hours. The message was that professors were there to assist our learning and that it was up to us to

ensure this process worked without giving up. They also taught us community by insisting that we acknowledged each other by saying hello to other Black students that we passed on campus. Like church, there was strength in community.

In one rap session, Dr. Sandra Rackley answered a question about test taking that raised my concern about my ability to be successful here. Her answer was both simple and profound. “Dr. Rackley, you said that we will have to take a lot of tests. Well, what if you are not a good test taker?” I asked. “Learn.” She said.

Dr. Rackley was the Associate Dean of Undergraduate Studies at the time. She was light skinned and sharp in her suits, her poise, and her words. She and Claire Huxtable could have been friends. She exuded attitude and confidence whether warranted or not. Damn I admired her confidence. She and our counselors had just given me permission to create road maps to chart my own success and offered themselves up as guides.

My SAT math score was deficient so I was to take a non-credit class to prepare me for college algebra. I had never studied so hard in my entire life. The white female professor was good at teaching the material, but I was afraid that I would forget her explanations by the time I went back to my dorm to complete my homework. So, when she would assign problems 1-30 even, I would do 1-30 all. Then it clicked. I found that repetition was the key. I earned my first ever A in math and was good enough to tutor others in my class! I felt accomplished and it felt good.

English 1101. This subject came easiest to me so I assumed I wouldn't have to use much energy here allowing me to preserve it to concentrate on math. I was wrong. My professor was a tall white woman who told us to call her Sheila. It was uncomfortable for me to call an authority figure by their first name at first. She was very earthy with wild hair and a wild spirit that made

her always seem mad at something. She assigned us weekly journals encouraging us to write whatever came to mind, even curse words. I was speechless. I was a good writer but Sheila made me better. I still reflect on the five page document she distributed, listing all of the words and clichés we were never to use in a formal paper. Words like thing, stuff, and many. She listed clichés that had not even reached my vocabulary at this point.

History. Dr. William Jones, a seasoned Black male professor, made it his mission to teach history from the lens of the oppressed and how to apply the lessons in our current lived experience. I'll never forget our first day of class.

“Have a seat.” He said sternly. “Take out a pen. Open your books.” He continued.

We dutifully obeyed playing an orchestra with the sounds of our movements.

“Stand up. Sit down.” He retorted. “Close your books.”

Again, we obeyed without question. Then he hit us with something I'd never heard.

“From this day forward, NEVER so casually do what someone even in authority tells you to do without questioning and searching for the why, who, what and how it will impact.” He was teaching us to empower ourselves, to live in a world where we have the power to create many of the rules regarding our best interest rather than living in a world where all the rules are created for us. He was planting seeds in the lawn of the grassless Apopka in my mind. Prior to that, I only sought God or mama to power situations for me on my behalf.

My new life had begun. I met people that summer that I remain friends with today. Now doctors, attorneys, educators, managers, and entrepreneurs, we all served as support systems to each other through college and life after.

Michael and I spoke a few times a week and I spoke of him a few times a day. I was blind to the eligible men I ate and studied with everyday. I was sure Michael and I would marry eventually because I had already given him the gift of my virginity.

### Be Encouraged: Adjusting To College Life

The summer was now a blur and the fall semester was here. I moved into a scholarship house funded through the southern scholarship foundation. There were 17 girls in our house. The scholarship stipulated that we each paid between \$500-\$700 each for the semester in exchange for shared chores and a minimum 3.0 GPA. Jen was an upperclassman assigned to our house as a den mother. I was the first to arrive. She showed me several rooms that I could choose from but emphasized one room over all the rest. “It has the most lighting, it’s closest to the bathroom, and oh yeah, you’ll really like Lavenia who would be your roommate if you chose this room.” I understood Jenn’s insistency a few days later when I met Lavenia who was the only other Black student in the house.

Most of my friends from SEP lived in either Kellom Hall which was nick named “the zoo” because of its infamous wild residents or Smith Hall which was nick named “the projects” because it had no air conditioning and most of the residents were Black and seen hanging out of the windows during the summer.

I was almost set. I was registered for classes, moved into my room, and the bookstore gave me books against my pending financial aid check. The day came for me to pick up the financial aid check, and to my surprise, the funds from my private scholarships were deducted from my federal pell grant, citing my need was met from a different source. I went to the Multicultural Student Support Center (MSSC) to ask for direction and to find out what my

options were. Mr. McGharah, the director, offered me a job on the spot. I fit in well with the staff and it was great interacting with all of the SEP students who would stop by to lounge, seek guidance, or do homework. Bruce, a thin Spike Lee looking student from Miami, was my co-worker and soon good friend. Bruce was naturally funny and I needed that in my life.

One day, Bruce's roommate Charles, came to visit him at work. He was by far the most attractive student I had seen on campus and much too handsome for me I thought. He was about six foot, dark, brawny, and had the most inviting eyes. He reminded me of the Theo character from the Cosby Show. But I was still pretty enthralled with Michael, or at least the idea of him. Charles started coming by the office more frequently to see Bruce and he would make random conversation with me. We soon realized that he, Bruce and I all had a class together, which gave us a reason to see each other more. It was fun to flirt but I was true to my boyfriend back at Harvard.

That was a tough year for many reasons but it was better than life could have been in Apopka after high school. My attention to academics was focused on passing classes with average grades instead of testing my learning or social boundaries. I focused on ensuring adequate employment to make sure that I had food, shelter and water which meant various combinations of cleaning houses, babysitting, call centers, and campus work-study positions.

I only worked for the MSSC for one year. As I recall, Mr. McGharah preferred his workers to maintain at least a 3.0 of which I fell slightly short. I found another job working at the campus post office with mostly working class Black people old enough to be my parents. They were from depressed nearby towns and mindsets like those in Apopka. None of them seemed particularly happy to be there except one gay man named Clive. They walked differently than the Black professors and staff I encountered through the MSSC. Their energy was gray and their

walk lacked vigor. I worked mechanically and efficiently but the energy was too reminiscent of home so I left there to work in the college of education the following year.

I also had challenges with adjusting to my living situation during my first year. I had to get used to sharing a room as well as a house with 16 other women. This had seriously impacted me having space to rejuvenate from the day. One of the white women in my house decided to toy with my religious paranoia and wrote something about the bible in backwards letters on my bathroom mirror in red lipstick which I was sure was a satanic sign. I lived with hippies, lesbians, wiccans, sorority and pageant girls. I was a long way home from Apopka. I gravitated to my roommate Lavenia because we shared a commonality of racial experiences and Amanda, a white girl from Alabama who was a combination of quirky, smart, and earthy. I often forgot Amanda was white. She had a new car and never seemed to worry about money. Amanda was used to having access and thought it was normal. When she offered that we buy a house together as an investment, I thought she was crazy! She had lots of ideas that required a risk beyond my experience while I was simply happy to be away from home. I left the scholarship house after my first year out of my inability to feel comfortable in my living space and because I fell below the GPA requirement. I moved to Seminole Village, a renovated hotel to dormitory situated across from Bruce and Charles's dorm. It worked well because the rent was less expensive than the scholarship house and I only shared space with one other person.

Lots of other unexpected changes occurred as my freshman year moved along. Mrs. Davis, my high school counselor, was brutally murdered in her home by an intruder. I was stunned but rationalized that God put her on earth to help me escape Apopka and when that was done, it was her time to go. Less tragically, Jim's cancer had progressed and he died in October of that year. I was numb. Shouldn't I have felt something? Mama sold the house to pay off

doctor bills and was virtually homeless for a while. She kept up the church's monetary assessments so the A.M.E.'s allowed her to continue to pastor the church in Polk City alone and to hers and to my surprise, she soon had a church member. Mr. Dyer, the older Jamaican man who lived across the street from the church began attending mama's services after Jim died. They were married less than a year later and she was no longer homeless. Keith and Angela's divorce was final. He mismanaged money, disregarded women, and often struggled from depression. I sent him scholarship money to get his car repaired and to pay store credit cards when he called with thoughts of suicide but it didn't solve his problems. Shortly after his divorce, he was stationed in Fort Polk, Louisiana where he quickly met and married a pentecostal preacher's kid in an effort to find Jesus and love in the same place. Lastly, the letters from Michael slowed dramatically.

#### The Battle Is Not Yours: The Co-Curricular Experience

I refused to attend a church because I was determined to go when I was ready and not out of obligation as when I was a child. Instead, I registered for the one credit hour class offering participation in the University gospel choir to appease my need to stay connected to God. Like back home, I was timid and sang in the background of the soprano section with my passion greater than the voice that emerged. William Powell, my gospel choir director at Florida State University, constantly told me, "Get on TOP of the note!" The more I reached for it, the more my throat closed so I practiced in my room and in the shower in an effort to locate and mount that note. I would fervently sing along with gospel greats like the Winans, the Clark Sisters, Commissioned and Take 6 as if I were preparing to open up for them in concert. During Tuesday and Thursday night choir rehearsals, I saw the music progress from Walter Hawkins, Shirley Caesar, James Cleveland and Andre Crouch to the new generation of gospel to include, Yolanda



Adams, John P. Kee, Richard Smallwood, Fred Hammond, and lots of Kirk Franklin. My participation in this atmosphere kept me grounded and connected to God. The songs spoke to my situation and brought familiarity to my strange environment.

Florida State offered an escort service for students who needed to get around campus after dark so I made good use of it after choir rehearsals. The first Tuesday night of rehearsal, Bruce's friend, Charles showed up as my escort home. That was the night we learned Kirk Franklin's (1997, track 11) melodic song, "The Storm is Over Now" which I named to my life in Apopka.

It's over now

I feel like I

can make it

the storm is

over now

No more cloudy days

there all gone,

gone away

I feel like I

can make it

the storm is

over now

If I walk alone

I'm not on my own

I feel like I

can make it

the storm is

over now

(track 11)

It only took 15 minutes before the escort car arrived after my call.

“Hey,” I said partially out of surprise and partially still full and keyed up from the rehearsal, “You’re Bruce’s friend right?”

“Yeah.”

“Charles?”

“Mmmm hmmm.”

“I didn’t know you worked for the campus escort service.”

“Feel like riding for a while?” he asked after we made more small talk.

“Ummm, sure.”

I rode with him to pick up other people until 1:00 in the morning. We talked about everything and nothing. I learned that he was a music major, an only child and grew up in Summerville, Georgia which was 45 minutes from Chattanooga, Tennessee, and an hour and a half from Atlanta, Georgia. He learned that I was from Florida and that I had one brother, a mom and a step-dad. He took the call every Tuesday and Thursday night for the remainder of that year.

Charles was often stopped by the campus police that year on his way from dropping of clients including me.

“Where did you get this car son?” said the officer waving his flashlight in the car.

“Sir, I work for the campus escort service.”

“License and registration please.”

“What did I do officer?” Charles said handing the police officer the requested documents. The officer walked back to his police car and sat for awhile. Moments went by before he approached the car where Charles sat behind the wheel.

“It’s almost one o clock son. It’s time to take the car back. You are free to go and stay out of trouble.”

Charles quit working for the campus escort service after our freshman year and took a job at the instrument checkout counter in the school of music, but that didn’t stop the police from stopping him on foot with demands of identification after walking me home at night.

Charles had a large family which I envied. His dad was a deacon in their church where every Sunday he led the call and response hymn so reminiscent of Mount Calvary in Florida. “A charge to keep I have a God to Glorify...aaAAAA ChaRRRRRRge TOOOoooo kEEEEeeeP IIII haaVVVVE, AAAAAA gOOOOD TOOOOooo GLLLLOR-i-Fyyyyy!!!!” His mom, a seemingly stoic lady, sent him care packages in the mail regularly. His roommates and I would raid his boxes filled with Kool-Aid, Little Debbie snacks, and microwavable meals. Charles and I seemed to be spending all of our available time together. Meanwhile, Michael’s calls and letters practically halted. I did not know if I should fight for him or allow Charles into my life officially. Charles went home for the summer and wrote me every week, sometimes twice.

*June 8, 1991*

*Brown Sugar,*

*Tonight things were going well with this girl while I was over my friend Gandhi’s house. She ended up talking to my other friend about his girlfriend. Well the point is that no matter if I try to or not try to talk to other girls, dumb things seem to happen. I kind of*

*think that is it an omen that I shouldn't even try. I do because I am still scared. I feel if I don't put all of my eggs into one basket, they all will not get broken. I know I shouldn't feel that way but I do. I haven't decided if these dumb things happen because of you or it if it happens just because I am not supposed to be messing around.*

*Sometimes I can't believe it's me you call when all those other guys have been hounding you, especially the football players. I thought about the fact that Michael called you but I have nothing to say. I don't think there is anything I can say. I also thought about that song "When I'm With You" by Tony Terry. I am falling in love with that song. It makes me think of you. While I am with you I feel so good and happy you wouldn't believe. If you have that song at your wedding, hope I am there to hear it.*

*I know sometimes I seem uninterested but I am but don't know why I come off like that. It seems as if you have me hooked, I hope nothing ever changes between us but I have a strange feeling about your conversation with Michael. Did you know that I can smell the perfume from your letters when I am in my bed? I wish I could just hold you. Just hug squeeze and kiss you. I am still scared you will change your mind. You don't have to worry about my feelings changing. You seem to have some magical root in your corner that does not allow me to do anything else.*

*Love Always and Forever,*

*Charles*

We made our relationship official on June 27, 1991.

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Ever since I saw the Broadway play Fences in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade, I loved the stage so I took the opportunity to perform wherever I could. In this environment, I learned to situate my home in

performing in Black productions. One night, after choir rehearsal, I saw a sign posted that read, “Black Player’s Guild Auditions.” I did not expect this kind of experience in a white school but I was thrilled. I auditioned for this performing group with Ntosake Shange’s (1975) *Woman in Blue* from her play *For Colored Girls Only Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf*. The first performance assured me that I was on my right path. I was cast as Rose from the play, *Fences*, in a campus production called *Montage of Blackness*, which was a collage of theatrical scenes and prose woven through music put together by Wendy Coleman, our advisor. I recalled my white social studies teacher taking our class to see this play on Broadway when I moved to New York in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade and thought it must be kismet. I was mesmerized at the atmosphere that live theatre produced and imagined being on stage with Billy Dee Williams as I saw him perform as Troy. I knew I had found a home on the stage.

The last performance I participated in at Florida State was written and directed by a white male theatre graduate student for his exit exam on the life of a guy named John Brown. I focused on my lines but I didn’t really understand the play in its abstractness except that it dealt with a slave revolt. Three of us cast members were Black and everyone else was white. I began dreading rehearsals because I could not connect with the eccentricness of the other cast members or that abstract play itself. Jessica and Tony, the other two Black actors were theatre majors and were also members of the Black Player’s Guild. Their laughter made me assume that they found ways to fit in with our white co-actors. Jessica confused me at times though, like when she expressed concern for Tony’s safety when he flirted with the white female cast members. She had said one of them yelled at him for coming in the dressing room while she was in there naked even though she laughed and keckled when two other white male students came in together. Downtime in rehearsals consisted of white penis’ being whipped out randomly and white boys

tongue kissing the pet dogs they brought with them. I had faced challenges on several occasions but I never made quitting an option. However, I swore, the next time that I performed on stage, I will have written the production myself. “Eclectic” is how Jessica described our other cast members to me. “You’ll get used to it.” She said. I never did. In fact, I felt like I was in the devil’s den.

I did not take advantage of the party option of being a college student in my white school. Survival mode dictated that I play it safe. I had one boyfriend. Safe. Sang in the gospel choir. Safe. Acted in the Black player’s guild. Safe. I kept at least two jobs at all times. Eat.

The boyfriend secured my reputation as a clean, honest, good girl. The choir did the same and allowed me to release my passion for singing and my dedication to God without having to be tied to a church. The Black Players Guild fulfilled my other stage passion of acting and pretending to be someone else for a change. Working. Well, that was the only way I could eat and pay rent. Drinking reminded me of Jim and brought with it the potential to act in ways that might ruin my strategic plan of success without the recollection of even doing it. I may have drunk alcohol or attended a total of four or five parties during my undergraduate experience.

I did not consider sorority life as a part of my undergraduate co-curricular experience unlike so many other students. I was not readily exposed to fraternity and sorority life (also referred to as Greek Life) in Apopka so I was objectively learning about it for the first time as a first generation college student. As I investigated more, I found that their purpose was to promote brotherhood and sisterhood in the college environment and to improve Black communities at the local level. What was disturbing was that there seemed to be a monarchy like class division among the Black colligate community at my predominately white institution between those who participated in a bourgeoisie-like Black Greek Lettered Organization’s

(BGLOs) and the Black peasants who did not participate. Students in BGLO's were usually referred to by their first name and their fraternal or sororal affiliation, like Ben the Omega, or Tonya the Delta. They daunted the union courtyard in their colorful garb and matching shields whose codes represented their territory while peasants looked on longing to be voted worthy to be in their royal court. Unfortunately for some of the peasants, character worthiness was not enough. There was also a cost that ranged between \$500 and \$1500 to join and additional costs to maintain membership. Answers to questions about the organization or the process to join were never disclosed nor was it considered appropriate to ask until the process was over.

My discomfort rallied as that secrecy carried over to the initiation or 'pledge' process which was known for the totalitarian rule of the pledge master over the peasant proletariat through violence referred to as hazing. The National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC), the governing body for BGLOs, defines hazing as:

...any action taken or situation created that involves or results in abusive, physical contact or mutual harassment of a prospective fraternity or sorority member; and that any such action is considered hazing, whether it occurs on or off the fraternity or sorority premises, campus or place where chapter or prospective members meet: and that hazing has also been described to include any action that results in excessive mutual or physical discomfort, embarrassment or harassment; that such activities include, but are not limited to paddling, creation of excessive fatigue, physical or psychological shock, morally degrading or humiliating activities inconsistent with fraternal law and regulations and policies of the affiliated educational institution and federal, state or local law.

([www.nphchq.com](http://www.nphchq.com))

Instead, I attempted to join Alpha Phi Omega, a community service organization focused on community service with a very low cost to join. I was disappointed throughout the pledge process because it seemed more social and in ways that could taint my good girl image. We were required to go to parties that were mostly attended by white members with lots of alcohol, marijuana, and rock music. I was so uncomfortable, that I refused to complete the requirements to join, but I was initiated anyway. I was never active.

During the spring semester of my senior year at Florida State, I landed an internship at a local TV station news room by looking up their number in the phonebook and calling with a purpose. If I could not become a stage actress, then I would prepare to be a glamorous anchor woman. My diction was great and I had *classy* conservative overtones like Claire Huxtable.

As I was leaving to go to the newsroom one morning, I noticed a tall distinctive guy outside of his apartment reading a newspaper. His name was Brian. I noticed him out there again the next morning so I said hello. He returned the greeting and soon he began reading his paper every morning before I left for the station. We made small talk in passing and although I could tell he was brilliant from our short conversations, he was far from the ideal student. He lived downstairs from me and across the street from Charles. He was in a popular fraternity, he smoked marijuana, and his girlfriend, yes his girlfriend sang in the same section of the gospel choir as me. I felt like I was going to hell for the thoughts I was having but the ride was too exhilarating to stop! I intellectualized why sorority life wasn't for me and had not considered dating someone going through the pledge process because of the negative stigma associated with it. This included heavy drinking and sex with lots of girls. However, there was something in my wiring that shook when I met this man who challenged everything that I was taught to like. Where did this come from?



Timing was everything. Shortly after meeting Brian, Charles met me after class and walked me to my car. He was fidgety and random. Random was normal for him. "I love you but I feel like I am missing out on college life because you are always around." I was crushed. The sun was shining but I felt like I was in the middle of a tornado swirling around and around. The walls inside of my stomach were collapsing from the rotation. I cried until my head hurt. Then two hours later, I realized how good I felt. My experience with Charles had seemed like a role in a play that fit into the life of Cliff and Clair Huxtable. But like TV relationships, ours was static and seemed great mostly from the outside looking in because the cameras eventually turned off. I had spent a lot of energy in this script not realizing it was taking more energy away from me that it was replenishing. It started out like a romantic Hollywood movie and ended up as pure melodrama. Three days later, Charles changed his mind but I was tired.

*Consuela,*

*I came by just to tell you that you don't know how much I love you but I really do from the bottom of my heart to the depths of my soul. I'm trying to give you space and I'm trying to be patient but damn!*

*Why is it when I'm finally all secure and madly in love with you, you go the complete opposite way! If this is how you felt you can't believe how sorry I am. I don't mean to be so persistent but I just can't let you out of my life. I came by tonight at 1:00 in the morning and you weren't home. Of course I wondered if it was another man, but I decided that if this was all over another man, you would tell me. I feel like a complete idiot, sitting here writing you this letter when you're not here. I was wondering if we could still meet tomorrow. If you do or don't, call the job and leave a message.*

*You said you don't know how things will be in six months and I can't see the future. If I could make the future, it would simply be you and me. I swear to the lord above there's nothing I've ever wanted as much as you.*

*You just got to leave the past behind us and start anew. I know you say you have to go on my past record but doesn't it say that I love you? No matter all the dumb things I've done or said, I have always loved you.*

### *Charles*

The experience with Brian was exhilarating and I felt alive when we were together. But the sneaking and uncertain future was too overwhelming for me to handle. Charles was safe and felt like the right thing to do. When logic reappeared, I stopped seeing Brian and went back to Charles in order to fill the void and ease the pain. Brian knew my situation and understood why I left him but advised against going backwards. He was so much smarter than me.

### The Question Is? The Academic Experience

My knack for acting in dramatic Black inspired stories continued and was a staple of my undergraduate experience. Much of this stemmed from my ability to get standing ovations from acting out someone else's dysfunctional life thus forgetting my own if only for a while. Confidence on stage was easy because the person being portrayed wasn't me and I could reach back to the encouragement given by the women in my childhood Black churches while performing in annual church plays, "It's alright baby! Take your time. You can do it!" They would say.

The day came when I had to make a decision on a major, the discipline in which I would have to choose as a career. I had to give this much thought as I came to college not for an

education, but as a constructive escape from my life on 148 W. 6<sup>th</sup> Street in Apopka, Florida. As I contemplated, I thought theatre was too risky as a career choice so I chose it as a minor emphasizing in Black theatre. The next best choice was then to major in Communications with the intention of becoming an anchorwoman. In this career, I could still replace my problems with the familiar problems of others and call it objective reporting. I envisioned myself on air with the poise of Claire Huxtable from the *Cosby Show*. Claire was my role model of excellence, womanhood, and success. However, I fell just below the required grade point average to be accepted into that college. The only other area that was natural to me was reading and writing so I declared my major as English with an emphasis in creative writing. This was so fluid for me that I could hardly believe it was a real major. Here is where I began reading other Black women's stories, connecting and writing my own stories.

I was a junior in college the next time I fell in love with another book since reading *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937/1965) in high school. It was Terry McMillan's *Waiting to Exhale*. McMillan (1992) wrote about the Black female experience from a perspective that I had not experienced or heard of. It was of joys and struggles of middle class women who were Black. I read about independent women, career women, women who talked about loving men in a non-biblical way. It spoke to the experiences that I had envisioned my life to be but did not have the modeling to articulate a path to get there. It ignited a fire to want to explore more. Then a friend suggested I read *Coming of Age in Mississippi* by Ann Moody (1968/1992). This could have been the story of my mother if she were born in Mississippi instead of Chicago. Then I read *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs (1861/2003) and thought she could have been in the lineage my great grandmothers. I decided to take a class on African American literature which catapulted my thinking into an unfamiliar familiar. There I read and was

traumatized by Toni Morrison's *Bluest Eye* (1970) and *Sula* (1973). They spoke of the coming of age stories of Black girls. Morrison exposed much of my own traumatic childhood experiences and offered them on pages for the rest of the world to see without my permission. Mainstream America perhaps thought of these stories as fictional, but spoke of my realities, my lived experience. These realities didn't seem strange in the microcosm of 148 West 6<sup>th</sup> Street in Apopka, Florida.

Other classes within my major and minor that I consider instrumental in my undergraduate academic experience in a white school were all of my Black theatre classes, classes on Shakespeare and the Canterbury Tales, and writing classes on short stories, fiction and scriptwriting. Before these classes, I had not considered anything that was required to also be enjoyable.

There were also a few classes outside of my major that impacted me in some way. My humanities professor challenged Pastor Williams' warning of not yielding my faith upon the onset of new information when a class lecture suggested that Mary, Jesus' mother, wasn't a virgin by today's definition. My first conscience realization that Jesus was not white was in a Black studies class. In this class, I learned that Mrs. Slonaker from 11<sup>th</sup> grade history lied or perhaps was uninformed when she said Malcolm X hated all white people. She obviously never finished his autobiography. One of my professors talked about her research of a small town in Florida, called Rosewood, where in 1923 it was burned to the ground by a white lynch mob because a white woman claimed she was attacked by an unidentified Black man. Her accusations were later found false but not before lives were lost and the entire section of the Negro town was burned. The story was made into a blockbuster movie a few years later and the descendants of the town were awarded scholarships by the state of Florida. I was hungry and I wanted more. I

wanted to take one last Black studies class by Dr. Niam Akbar, however that would have deferred my graduation by an extra semester so I chose to graduate on time.

Conversations in these classes offered information that disturbed me but was necessary for my development. These lessons spilled into other areas of my life and I stumbled when trying to process and apply the information from day to day. I remember becoming angry at the thought of all of the white Jesus pictures in our home and church and how they must have shaped my thinking. I remember wanting to quit a babysitting job over racism in Killarn, an upper middle class white subdivision outside of Tallahassee, but I needed the money because the rent would soon be due.

“Oh I wish we could go back to the early 1900’s when things were so much simpler.”

Sighed the feeble white grandmother of the child entrusted in my care.

“I would not want to go back there.” I indignantly replied. The words flew out before I could catch them.

“Why not?” she inquired.

“Because Black people were treated horribly. If I lived during that time as a Black woman, my life would have been all but simple.”

“How do YOU know? You weren’t there! Besides, there was a Black family in our town and they were treated just fine. I think you’d better go check on the boy.” she said offended.

I left but my feelings of frustration did not.

Harder lessons came with college algebra, and geology. After earning an A in the non credit algebra class that I took during SEP, I still had to take other required math courses toward graduation. I earned B’s but had never worked that hard in any class up to that point. Geology

was the only class or thing that I ever failed. After waking up from three days of sulking and feeling there was no reason left to live brought on by the failure, I learned a valuable lesson. The lesson was to make the most valiant effort toward success, and if you fail, find a different path to that same success.

The other classes I took in my white school can be lumped into courses that required rote memorization and regurgitation of facts. Larger classes, like biology which held 1800 students and theatre 1000 which held 700 students, required tests to be taken at a central testing center. Students were to enter with a number two pencil in hand and student ID in the other. Students were given scantrons and alternate tests for the appropriate class among the several available for various classes.

I was afforded the opportunity to have two internships. FSU had a career center but they did not have what I was looking for so called the newsroom of the ABC affiliate in Tallahassee, identified myself as a FSU student interested in offering free labor in exchange for information and experience. I was asked to come in for an interview and was hired immediately to be the intern on the morning show. I learned most that my dreams of being an anchorwoman would have quickly turned into a nightmare had I continued to pursue this career choice. Although I enjoyed writing, I was challenged by writing for airtime which stifled my creativity. I witnessed tapings, editing, and teleprompting and found that I wasn't interested in any of it. Neither was I impressed with the idea of gaining entry level experience that required me to report at wages deemed for poverty especially in the middle of hurricanes or war.

Using the same phone tactics, I called the Tallahassee FOX affiliate and was again immediately hired, this time to be the intern for the FOX Kids promotions department. This

allowed me to flesh out my creative ability by creating contests, writing press releases, and assisting with live remotes. This I could do.

### I've Come This Far By Faith: Graduate School

During my senior year at Florida State, I worked for the theatre department's graduate program. There I received an education once again privy to those in power. One day, a department head came into the office instructing my supervisor, the department secretary, to send letters to prospective graduate students. Waving some papers in his hands, he said, "Viola, I need you to send this student a denial letter. Her GRE scores and GPA are nearly perfect but her essay makes her sound strange. And send this other student an acceptance letter. I know his scores are barely average, but we don't have anyone with his background in our department." As I was now approaching my senior year of college with no plan, I thought about applying for a degree called a Master's. I had just learned about education beyond a four year college degree while working in this graduate department. Prior to that experience, I spent much of my energy getting in and surviving college. The time came where I had to think about planning life beyond Florida State. I never dreamed I would actually make it this far so I had no contingency plan for the future.

Through my job, I researched requirements and programs across the country. I decided that I wanted to fulfill my desire to study communications. I learned to look for schools with stellar programs even though I wasn't a stellar student. I applied to Syracuse in New York and Northwestern in Chicago and I was denied entrance to both institutions. Then one day, I received a letter in the mail from Indiana State University, a white school in the Midwest. It explained that although I had not applied to the University, that I would be granted admission if I simply

sent in my application and test scores for their records. I wasn't sure at the time how this happened but I sprinted through yet another window of opportunity, headed to another white school to start another chapter in my life.

When I arrived in Terre Haute, Indiana, I immediately noticed two things: The awful smell from the paper mill and that there were no people of color in the cars that drove by, that is until school started. Because I didn't have the GPA to gain an assistantship, I took out lots of loans but I still needed a job to survive. Florida State University taught me to look for an office dedicated to supporting students of color and first generation college students. I sought that office and was again given a job on the spot. Dr. Dorothy Taylor, the Special Assistant to the President on Ethnic Diversity, would be my supervisor and my next mentor. I noticed a pattern of care among Black sub-cultures within white schools I attended, especially among Black women and I was being trained to carry their torch.

I was a consumer of the MSSC at Florida State and now I was working as a paraprofessional in this area at Indiana State, assisting the office to help other students of color the way I was helped. It was the best time of my life to date. I already had a bachelor's degree and most folks back home never would understand what a master's degree was. I had no dependants and worked in an office critical to the strategic planning decisions for the university as it related to students of color. I was finally able to study communications and for that I was grateful to the heavens.

There were a few undergraduate classes that graduate students in my department took with additional assignments in order to receive graduate credit. These classes largely required reading and regurgitating information but at least I was interested in the material.



There I met Dr. Duncan. He was a white haired, white male, professor who often referred to women as broads during class and incorporated his golfing rendezvous in class discussions. His class was filled with shards of racist and sexist micro aggressions that left me frustrated but unable to find the words to articulate why. During a class discussion on advertising strategies, he asked me, “Wouldn’t you be more prone to buy products if the commercials had Black people in it?” He spoke as though he was confident of his knowledge of my experience, an experience in which I had not considered analyzing until now. Shopping for goods and services had been out of necessity and cost rather than choice or entertainment. Should I answer no, in an effort to save my race from appearing as though we were gullible? Should I answer yes under pressure to respond when I had not yet processed the answer, submitting to the possibility that we were easily predictable? Did my white counterparts ever find themselves in a position to speak for or defend their race? It is one thing to predict human behavior when all of the qualifiers are consistent yet another to predict based on an uncontrollable factor like race or gender. I once heard a Black person say he liked to visit the Caribbean because if he were mistreated, he knew the person was probably being a jerk because they would both likely be Black, whereas if he were mistreated in the U.S. he had to filter information to determine if the guy was a racist or a jerk.

Shay and Chris, the other Black students in my cohort, never seemed bothered by Dr. Duncan’s frequent comments and insinuations and often suggested that I let it go. I complained of many uncomfortable experiences to my supervisor who was the special assistant to the president on ethnic diversity. She listened and informed me of my options. I never made a formal complaint because each individual micro aggression, though frustrating, didn’t seem triable. They actually motivated me to learn more and to disprove every inferior idea he’d believed about

Blacks and women. My pride wouldn't allow the audacity of white supremacy to beat me. I reached back to the lessons of having to work harder to gain the same recognition of my white peers and was forced to learn effective study habits for the first time. I learned the material and found myself the initiator of study sessions among my Black peers, and Mike, a white New Yorker who was openly surprised and disgusted with the racial inequities within our department.

I also protested white supremacy through my job with Dr. Taylor and the president's commission on ethnic diversity. There, I organized the first ever Black Leadership Conference at Indiana State University, conducted research on diversity, facilitated diversity conversations on various college campuses and school systems, and spearheaded ISU's Social Action Theatre.

Although I did not care for his often racist and chauvinistic personality, I learned the most about TV and advertising from Dr. Duncan. Dr. Sharon, my other primary professor, reminded me of an older version of Shelia, my white English 1101 professor at FSU. She had the same wild hair but her once wild spirit was seasoned with wrinkles of time. She taught me how to analyze film critically and was one of the few professors I had encountered who encouraged critical thinking. I could no longer watch a movie without analyzing it as if I were getting class credit. It was in her class that I made a conscience decision to spend my money on non matinee tickets to see Black movies while renting everything else. My rationale was that if I didn't support the Black film industry, who would? She and I shared several conversations about Black nationalists and the plight of Black America in the 1990's. Her perspective came from her experiences fighting for civil rights. She was the first white woman I met who marched with Dr. King in the 60's.

I looked to find a church home to show God my gratefulness in positioning me with a new opportunity. Church allowed me to release the pressure from my white school environment

by providing support from my new Black church family at Bethel A.M.E. church where reverend Swarn was my pastor. He made the one hour trek from Indianapolis each Sunday for service for the 12 or so members of the church. Miss Betty, the 76 year old mother of the church, nurtured me as if I were in her blood lineage. I wanted to make her proud so that the history she lived wasn't in vain. Sister Armer led Sunday school and bible study and also had a place in that lineage. She took the torch from Sister Betty and would hope to pass it to me.

I also found support within the Black graduate sub-culture in my white school. It seemed that when I received my unsolicited acceptance letter from Indiana State University, I was not the only student that received a similar letter. I met at least 20 other Black graduate students that were heavily recruited across disciplines, mostly from two Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU)'s. We all crossed paths in no real organized way. Once we found each other, we gathered regularly and served as each other's support system throughout our time in graduate school. This was reminiscent of SEP at Florida State University except this time I took advantage of the social aspect of college. We loosely organized trips to Indianapolis, gathered for "Black TV night" where the Thursday night line up on NBC featured Black comedies. We played drinking games occasionally and orchestrated random intellectual discussions on topics ranging from the difference between HBCU's and predominately white institutions, the million man march, and the OJ trial which were hot news topics that year. We all had something different to bring to the conversations. Rasheed was the radical Muslim, Shay was the most inexperienced about life, Tony was the down low gospel choir musician, Chris' light skin and attractiveness often disguised his lack of knowledge, Tim was from Africa and was the most intriguing, and Charmaine, she was the life of the party and could signify beyond measure. I was the intellectual with the southern accent. Although we all spent significant time together, I

became closest to Charmaine. She was a light skinned woman from Ohio who spoke wittingly and unapologetically and I admired her high self esteem. Most of all, she was pure fun at a time where everything in my life was all serious. One night around midnight, Charmaine and I were typing 20 page papers in the 24 hour computer lab when she suggested, “You know what, let’s go to the spot!” She was referring to a night club in Indianapolis. It didn’t take much prodding, especially since I was on page 15. That was the best outing in my two year stay in Indiana. After partying with Indiana Pacers basketball players, we returned to the computer lab at 5:00 am to finish our work still high on life. I completed my project on time and earned an A from Dr. Duncan and kudos from my classmates on my presentation.

Charles and I broke up shortly after I moved to Indiana. We still talked often and flew to see each other periodically but I subconsciously failed to mention him to anyone in my new environment.

All the girls in our larger group wanted Tim. Tim wanted Consuela and I was technically available. When I obliged him, I was surprisingly disappointed. He insisted that sex on a first date was as necessary as conversation in order to assess compatibility. I was insulted and offended but then he captured me with late night stories of watching his family murdered by militia and him growing up to join that same militia with the intent of revenge. “So did you actually kill them?” I asked. He answered with a blank stare in his eyes and I wanted him.

After a couple of weeks I realized we were not compatible after all and made the decision to stop seeing him. He insisted that he could please me and that our status would make a bold statement of envy to others. That night, we fell asleep to my soft rebuttals to his pleads of a second chance. Was I dreaming? Were my eyes open? These thoughts paraded in my head as I tried to determine if he was actually on top and inside of me. I froze until it was over, then the air

flooded with loud sounds of air squeezing through his nostrils. I was not in physical pain. I could still function mentally the next day. But I had difficulty identifying what I felt as my space and body had been compromised. For the first time, I made use of the counseling center on campus. The counselor wanted to start from my beginnings and work up until now. She immediately classified my experience as rape but I did not feel the violence that I associated with rape. That was too easy of an answer and I couldn't let it go until I was satisfied. Looking for an answer that made sense, I searched under every possible rock. I called mama for advice. "Well baby, if you didn't want it, why was he in your room." Now I was satisfied. I would establish a new boundary that I was comfortable in voicing unapologetically that would not allow any man in my bedroom unless I was open to sex. This incident never came up again.

My last year of graduate school arrived and it was time for me to consider and weigh options regarding my future. I interviewed in Detroit with the top five radio station in the country and they actually considered me to sell radio advertising. Charles and I discussed the idea of marriage as a *what if*. He presented me with an engagement ring during a spring break trip to Florida before I graduated and I immediately slipped into an archetypal female gender role.

"Yeeeeeeesssss!" I screamed as though I had just won a prize after seeing the ring.

"What are you talking about? I didn't ask you anything!" Charles said laughing while his words stepped on my heart.

Still, I couldn't wait to show off my ring when I flew back to Indiana. "I'm getting to married to Charles!" I exclaimed to Charmine when she picked me up from the airport. "Charles who?" She sincerely inquired.

Meanwhile, I was very nervous about my oral examination required for graduation. I wasn't sure what to study or expect. Finally, the day came. I thought it was strange that Shay,

Chris, and I (the only Black students in our cohort) were asked to do a group oral examination. Dr. Duncan and Dr. Sharon asked three questions. “What did you learn from the program?” “How was your experience here?” and “How can we get more Black students interested in our program.” I was numb and felt like my intelligence had been insulted. Even though I graduated on my 24<sup>th</sup> birthday and Dr. Taylor threw me graduation party and hosted my family, I questioned that validity of graduation until I received the actual degree in the mail.

By the end of the week, I had sold my car, and moved to Florida to begin the next chapter of my life with Charles.

### Millions Didn't Make It Unpacked

During my college years, I was still a consumer of education in white schools and struggled to find my place in Black church ideology. The education was offered through affirmative action alternative admissions programs. It was supported and maintained with a revolving curriculum of care from Black faculty, staff, mentors, and peers. Where college education was generational in other families, the support I received allowed for both in and out of classroom experiences to be meaningful in my first generation college experience. As a child, I was taught to search for Black church families upon moving to a new place in our white world in order to tap into a network of communal support. I learned in this chapter that it was just as important to search for Black school families among white schools to garner the same meaningful connections

Affirmative action widened the privilege base with people of color like me as it relates to college entrance but it didn't come without critics. Anti-affirmative action in admission processes resulted from political climate shifts towards color blindness which frees

administrators and law makers from considering the impact of interrelated issues of race, income, educational attainment of family members and college preparation. There is a myth that meritocracy supersedes the lived experience of poor people and people of color who have never had equal opportunity to compete with their middle class white peers. Interestingly, race intersects with class in a way that induces white poor people to identify themselves more with race than class when politicians evoke affective reactions toward policies regarding affirmative action, patriotism, school prayer and other wedge issues which tend to compound their socioeconomic class oppression (Kincheloe and Steinberg, 2007). Political scholar Randall Robinson (2001) deconstructed the idea of meritocracy especially for Black people in the United States when he wrote,

No nation can enslave a race of people for hundreds of years, set them free bedraggled and penniless, pit them, without assistance in a hostile environment, against privileged victimizers, and then reasonably expect the gap between the heirs of the two groups to narrow. Lines, begun parallel and left alone, can never touch. (p. 74)

Critical race scholars, Dixon and Rousseau (2005) suggest that opposers of affirmative action perceive it as victimizing innocent whites who are not personally guilty of racist acts. By disallowing universities to consider race in its approach to college admissions, courts have been attempting to establish the position of race neutrality. Dixon and Rousseau (2005) further examine contradictions in anti-affirmative action policies.

It is noteworthy that the plaintiffs in such cases do not challenge the admission of other white students with lower test scores and GPAs. Nor do they question admission points given for other factors (legacy, high school quality, geographic location, etc. (p. 21)

The opportunity of the education afforded to me through affirmative action had the intent to propel my life from poor and working class to Black middle class society. This would deem me as classy, high class, or a class act like Claire Huxtable from the Cosby Show. However, the high visibility of class mobility experienced by a small portion of Blacks is often misinterpreted as evidence of the economic success of Black Americans as a group. (Kincheloe, 1999)

Entrepreneurialship was reserved for the ruling class and the middle class was to manage the poor and working classes for them. However, it seemed that the more class a person had, the further he or she was from god. One of the Kirk Franklin song's I sang in the gospel choir at my white school spoke of the fallacy of having both economic empowerment and spiritual empowerment. "I'd rather have Jesus, than silver and gold." (Franklin, track 3)

I received a public education but not one that was comprehensive. I sought survival in these new worlds, not knowledge. Pinar (2004) spoke of the impact a public education that is comprehensive should have for students. "If public education is the education of the public, then public education is, by definition, a political, psycho-social, fundamentally intellectual reconstruction of self and society." (p. 15) This can only be complete with a curriculum taught from a multi-educational and multidimensional perspective. William Watkins noted the absenteeism of other cultures in the canon.

Afrocentrics have identified six areas in which the Eurocentric curriculum has failed: 1) the history of Africa before the slave trade is omitted; 2) the history of the people of the Africana Diaspora (including, for instance the Fiji, the Philippines, Dravidian India) are ignored; 3) cultural differences rather than similarities among Africans in the Diaspora are underlined; 4) the struggle against racism is insufficiently communicated; 5) analyses



of the global systems of racial oppression are undertaught; and 6) the history of the peoples of Africa is omitted. (Watkins, 1993, p. 332-333)

Toni Morrison similarly noted that “certain absences are so stressed, so ornate, so planned, they call attention to themselves; arrest us with intentionality and purpose.” (as cited in Pinar et al., 2004, 356)

Fortunately, I was able to collect the residuals of powerful information and experiences that would move my thinking more forward than it was upon my matriculation. Most of this information came from classes whose objective was to challenge white, male, middle class, and or christian privilege like Black Studies or Humanities. Although my conditioning was strong, here is where the first seed of doubt about christianity first entered my thoughts. The pictures of Jesus’ that dawned my homes and Black churches for years was somehow just unveiled to me as a white man and I was angry. Did this same man influence how Pecola (Morrison, 1970) and I viewed our hair and our bodies? I saw Pecola’s and my rejection of us as self-hate but my move to a healing action was stagnated by the will to survive it. I could not heal that which I did not recognize as sickness. I was upset with mama and Black church ideology for not teaching me what they did not know themselves. I eventually forgave them both and decided to find a church home.

I was exposed to a few white teachers that were anti-racist in my white college experience but it was important for me to run a litmus test of Derrick Bell’s interest convergence theory first. Derek Bell’s (2005) theory of interest convergence espouses that whites will promote the advances of Blacks only when it serves the best interest of whites. He quotes Mary Dudziak’s contention that the, “*Brown* decision advanced U.S. interest because racial segregation was hampering the United States in the Cold War with communist nations and undermining U.S.

efforts to combat subversion at home.” (Bell, 2005) *Brown*’s emerging media coverage then compounded the negative imagery observed by foreign constituents. Woodson (1933/2005) describes dozens of Black schools at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century which were largely financially supported, administered, and taught at the hand of whites (where Blacks were only allowed to dawn the back door of their white teachers and administrators). Using Bell’s theory of interest convergence, Watkins in Lynn (2006) suggests that the school’s intended purpose was to control the impact that freed slaves would have on white supremacy after reconstruction.

That life is stressful for Black students and other students of color on predominately white campuses should not come as a surprise. Whether it is the loneliness of being routinely overlooked or being made to apologize for bringing race into the room, the discomfort of being singled out by a professor to give the “Black perspective” in class discussion, the pain of racist graffiti scrawled on dormitory room doors and mirrors, and constant police harassment, Black students on predominately white college campuses must cope with ongoing insults to our racial identity. Racist, classist, and sexist micro aggressions were less overt and harder to prove than macro aggressions but were my reality. John Jackson’s (2008) *Racial Paranoia* referenced this kind of racism that is often difficult to see, touch, and define but nevertheless exists. Our desire as Black students to retreat to safe spaces then is understandable. Toni Morrison traces this sentiment back to the exodus of classical slavery and the Black Freedom Movement.

Even the educated colored: the long school people, the doctors, the teachers, the paper-writers and businessmen had a hard row to hoe. In addition to having to use their heads to get ahead, they had the weight of the whole race sitting there. You needed two heads for that. (Morrison in Tatum, 2000,10)

Intentional care of Black teachers and administrators along with some white ones, allowed me to negotiate my place in white universities especially being Black and poor. I lagged further behind in my own understanding of the implications of adding female, making it a trifecta. I struggled with my role as a plastic but virtuous woman that tolerated the world on her shoulders or one that was uninhibited to love.

## CHAPTER 4

### BE GRATEFUL

(Be-e-e-e-e Grateful) Be Grateful  
Because there's someone else who's worse off than you  
Be Grateful (Be Grateful)  
Because there's someone else who'd love to be in your shoes  
Be Grateful ( Be Grateful)  
(Hawkins, 1978, side 2 track 1)

Chapter four marks the beginning of the third shift in my life and another destination on my journey. I named this chapter “Be Grateful” after a Walter Hawkins (1978, track 5) tune because even though my next path was uneven, I was grateful and filled the potholes along my journey with thanks. This path began with marriage, middle classdom, my “give back” to education, as a Black educator in white schools, and building a foundation with a new Black church home. The next story was named “Rough Side of the Mountain” from an F.C. Barnes and Janice Brown (1983, track 1) song of the same name and meaning. It suggests that the path I chose to take was not paved, so I chartered a rocky upward road and made it look smooth. My standardized life looked standard on the outside but was actually just as dysfunctional or even more dysfunctional than the childhood I tried to escape. “Lord, Help Me to Hold Out” taken from a James Cleveland (1997, track 9) song, is the part of my journey where I longed for God to help me learn how to navigate my roles as a wife, mother, daughter, and teacher who wanted out of the classroom. “I Need You Now” is a story inspired by a Smokie Norful gospel hit (2002, track 2) that I sang at the top of my voice in desperation as my professional life soared and my personal life spiraled out of control. “At this moment with my arms outstretched, I need you to make a way as you’ve done so many times before, through a window or an opened door, I stretch my hands to you. Come rescue me. I need you right away.” (Norful, 2002, track 2) “The Storm Is

Passing Over” inspired by D. Valis and the Detroit Mass Choir signifies my outlook on my marriage, organized religion, and everything I was conditioned to believe as right succumb to a catatonic state, while my husband unsuccessfully attempts to revive me. “I Know I’ve Been Changed” is a story that brinks another evolution on my journey. LaShun Pace Rhodes’ (1991, track 4) song of the same name speaks of redemption when she sang, “Stepped in the water and the water was cold. It chilled my body but not my soul.” I, too, had been changed and my inner core was released from the obligation of organized religion and felt free to explore other spaces, including reinterpreting my views on race and gender roles. I was renewed with peace and a healthy balanced lifestyle. I exhaled and left for another part of my journey and remained grateful.

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I moved to back to Florida and became Mr. Pender’s wife. I remembered Tony Terry’s song (Reeder, 1990, track 5), “When I’m with You,” when I think back to the time when Charles and I were in college at Florida State. I even used it as the first song to be played at our wedding. I chose the song because in a dated letter he wrote to me, he expressed that he hoped he would be around to hear it played at my wedding. The wedding was held at the Embassy Suites Hotel in Altamonte Springs, Florida right off of Interstate 4. From the outside looking in, everything was beautiful. It was a wedding befitting of a queen like Claire Huxtable. “It was a fairytale wedding!” Mama bragged to anyone who would listen. It seemed that I had finally made it to the mountaintop of the *promised land* in Martin Luther King’s I have a Dream Speech, or so I thought. After the show went off, nothing was scripted for us to say to each other during the commercial breaks, so it usually went awry. “Hello, my husband,” I said in an attempt to create

an intimate moment once the wedding was over. “Don’t be saying that!” Charles chuckled, while subsequently ripping a hole in the heart.

Prior to the wedding, Charles had commented that his dad said he wasn’t ready to get married and asked what I thought. Flabbergasted, I told him that if he had to question it, he obviously wasn’t ready. I began preparing for a relocation to Detroit or any other job opportunities that I could secure when he was ready to get married. Technically, he never asked me to marry him, he simply handed me a bag that had a ring inside of it, and I yelled “Yeeeeeeesssss!” We only negotiated a date because I needed to know which direction my plane from Indiana was headed. He would often let people know that he never asked me to marry him. “Yeah, she tricked me into it!” he’d say laughing. “I think I’ll lease her for a couple of years then decide if I want to buy!” he laughed again.

I was so caught up in the idea of starting life our like together while making sure that the television show we were preparing was picture perfect that the reality of cultivating a new identity jolted me. After this marriage took place, where would the Consuela I knew myself to be go? These questions only entered the forefront of my mind when my new fiancé and I began discussing the possibility of names changing and wedding bands. I wanted to hyphenate my last name to keep a portion of my identity, but Charles insisted I take his. I only agreed because he agreed to wear a wedding ring against his will. “My daddy doesn’t wear a wedding ring!” he insisted. “Your daddy is a maintenance supervisor, so a ring could easily get lost.” I retorted. I was quietly uneasy about being referred to as Mr. Pender’s wife, simultaneously I was baffled, yet content, that someone of his middle class upbringing was interested in marrying me.

I moved into his apartment when I left Indiana. Living together before marriage made us both uncomfortable, but I justified that it would only be for the two months before the wedding.

The morning after we were married, I instinctively went into the kitchen to cook breakfast. He looked at me and said, “That’s nice, but you don’t have to cook every day.” Although I willingly assumed it as my role, I gladly relinquished it. I did, however, feel obligated to make sure food was easily accessible. Charles would sometimes come in the kitchen when I was in the middle of preparing a meal and want to join in. He was usually too late to be any help because by the time he joined the cooking effort, he was experimenting with what I already started, which muddled my system and broke my concentration. We only briefly talked about expectations of the marriage, when Charles agreed to one of the five sessions of marriage counseling Rev. Swann insisted on before he drove from Indiana to marry us. Unfortunately, not much was actually accomplished in that session. In front of other people, colleagues, friends, church folk, and family, we put on a hit Black TV show. There was no real intimacy, only short sound bite comments to each other. The majority of the air-time was devoted to the interaction between the individual members of the couple with other characters on the show or in the room. Each time the commercial break came on, the car ride home, after people left our house, after church services were over, our interaction was awkward, but I was grateful.

We lived in DeLand, Florida where Charles had been working as a middle school band director for a year. Now it was my turn to secure employment. I was committed to making use of my recently earned Master’s in Communications degree by working in TV or radio, but those careers did not share a mutual commitment to me. I took a job as an adjunct instructor at Keiser College, a private Jewish two year vocational institution in Daytona Beach, where I taught scriptwriting for film and television and public speaking. When I was in front of a class, I felt like I was back on stage at Florida State. I was both animated and passionate about what I taught, and I always had my audiences hanging on to my every word. I thought to myself, “I

could get used to this.” While there, I also directed Keiser’s first Black History Month Program using students in my class. Subsequently, I won teacher of the month that February.

I related well with my students because we shared the lens of life through the eyes of the poor and working class in search for alternatives. Just as I was evolving and finding my way, the direction of the college changed, and I was no longer needed during every term. This was my first memory of being cognizant of a school serving as a business.

The admissions department misled prospective students into believing Keiser was their best mode of social mobility. The school denied being considered a vocational institution because vocational credits cannot transfer to four year universities, as students were assured they could do after completing their tenure at Keiser. Unfortunately, the reality for many of these students was to work full time on minimum to just above minimum wage jobs and attend night classes costing \$24,000 in student loans. Their *degree* then afforded them the ability to earn an additional \$3.00-\$5.00 an hour more in a different field or a continuation onto a four year institution. Unfortunately, Keiser credits did not transfer. A program of study with the promise of quickly immersing the student into career training was often the first sign that credit hours were not transferable to four year institutions. These programs usually offer the two-year Associate of Science degrees because the completed courses were scientific or technical in nature. However, an Associate of Arts degree, which are terminal degrees offered at community colleges, indicate course work equivalent to the first two years of study at a four year institution. It consisted of liberal arts credits such as math, English, history, humanities, science. These courses are intended to provoke inquiry rather than teach a skill or trade. Either may be a viable option for any student as long as they are given a fair opportunity for both. Unfortunately, quick fix schooling, like this, was presented as the best option for most poor people and people of color in



my old community of Apopka and my new community of Volusia County. However, Black churches seemed to provide the solace needed to rescue and remind congregations of poor people that the real reward is in heaven for hard work here on earth.

In the meantime, I acquired another part-time teaching job at the English Language Center housed at Stetson University in DeLand. In this role, I taught English as a Second Language to affluent students from abroad, mostly from Brazil, Columbia, Venezuela, China, Japan, and Korea. I was definitely falling in love with teaching and found that the more I taught, the more I learned. The teaching-learning exchange with these students was vast. Through lessons in conversational English, I learned that the hero in many Asian films was a white male. Not cognizant of his identity crisis, one Korean student expressed how much he wanted to be Tom Cruise because he was always the hero. But no matter how much English he learned he would never look like Tom Cruise, nor should he strive to be something he'll never be. In turn, many of the international students were shocked to learn about slavery and the Black Freedom Movement in the United States for the first time. I learned about different non-verbal communication in different cultures, like the unspoken lack of personal space in Brazil compared to that of the unspoken four foot rule of distance in American culture. I learned that many Asian students, especially Japanese, excelled in English grammar and sentence structure, but were challenged with conversation. On the other hand, many students from Spanish or Portuguese speaking countries suffered through grammar and sentence structure and picked up more quickly on conversational aspects of language acquisition. I also witnessed the stereotype of being Asian automatically qualifying a student as smart shattered into pieces. My mind was opening to new experiences, and I liked it, but this part time job alone was not enough to make ends meet.

I began substitute teaching in the school system for \$50 per day, which was the pay for someone with a Master's degree. I did it smiling on the outside grateful for the income but grunting on the inside because I didn't really like children. I especially hated subbing for the middle school students because they were in such an awkward, in between, hormonal stage where both their attitudes and bodies stunk. The high school in DeLand, which was predominately white, wasn't as difficult to work in as substitute, and they usually kept me working every day. Then July of the following year came and I still had not secured full time employment at a TV or radio station, so I went to the Volusia County educational job fair. My second interview was with DeLand High School, the predominately white school in which I did most of my subbing and to my surprise, I was told by the vice principal, "I remember you from subbing! Please come work for us!" And it was that simple. I had a college degree, no criminal record, was breathing, and they remembered me as being dependable. I was hired on the spot even, despite not having completed the appropriate education classes. I was given two years to make up the classes I needed. I also was required to pass the teacher certification tests, and my public school teaching contract was signed.

I was hired to teach 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grade English, and eventually speech and debate. I put great effort into this job despite how I felt about students. To my surprise, I fell in love with education and found that students were naturally drawn to me. My starting salary of \$28,000 per year with a master's degree was not enough so I did extra duties that earned more income. After school, I taught dance to middle school girls at Charles's school and marched them in Christmas parades. I also worked summers teaching career development through a county grant I co-wrote with another teacher.

At my school, I was the assistant track coach for the girl's team because the school needed the presence of a female faculty member, and I needed the extra \$1600. I quickly learned style and runners technique, held a stop watch and yelled, "Run faster!" My only previous experience with track was the dreaded stint I ran during junior high school. I was also the 10<sup>th</sup> grade level leader, advisor to the 10<sup>th</sup> grade class, and advisor to the PUSH club, (People United to Serve Humanity) which was the club that was primarily Black in membership. PUSH was a spinoff of Jesse Jackson's organization called Rainbow Push Coalition, which fought for social change. PUSH club at Deland High had two major foci, stepping (a dance made from the sounds and complex rhythms of hands claps, foot stomps, and spoken word) in school and community performances and marching in the homecoming parade. I attempted to connect with the national organization to ensure we were in line with their goals and mission. They were both surprised and elated that we existed. We were soon invited us to a voter's registration rally at a private high school in Orlando. I was assured that it was a non-partisan event, which is why my principal allowed me to take students there during a time where no more field trips were allowed. It was thought that field trips and homework took time away from learning how to take the FCAT, Florida's standardized test. I was disappointed to find out that the voter's registration rally was in fact partisan, and my distrust began. We continued to step because it gave the students something constructive to do and no one else cared.

Teaching was natural to me and, as many first year teachers, I was a bit over-zealous. I believed that because I was excited to learn and study the material that the students would share in my enthusiasm. As the weeks and months progressed, I learned that the more homework I gave them, the more work I made for myself in grading, especially if it was writing assignments. I learned that the more weak and grammatically incorrect the writing, the more difficult it was to

grade, and unfortunately, most were difficult to grade. Writing also came naturally to me, so I assumed everyone could appreciate it like me. I was wrong again. Although they could not use profanity like Sheila, my freshman English 1101 teacher, allowed me to do, I gave them an opportunity to be free in their writing, to discuss things that mattered to them, to write their perspective on a given topic. I made them read and discuss as much as I could creatively allow, those stories from the perspective of someone who was not white and male. Unfortunately, that wasn't very often as most of my lessons were prescribed by curriculum designers.

I loved teaching Shakespeare because we read it like an episode of Jerry Springer, which was relatable to my students. The main characters always seemed to commit infidelities or deceive or betray someone because of jealousy. Most reading assignments were read in class because I didn't trust them to read it at home. Sometimes, I would even make them write their own ending to a story we read. They loved and hated it all at the same time.

Each of them had their own story and brought their own culture from home into my classroom. Certain students stuck out very plainly. Tia was my protégé and wanted to be like the conservative me that I only knew to portray. Jessica had a crush on me and so did Tryone and Carl. Zach by far was my most intelligent student when I came to synthesizing information, but he was usually disregarded by other teachers and students alike because he was mainstreamed into regular classrooms. Tiberius was the drummer in his Black Pentecostal church's ensemble and was usually clueless to common sensical matters. I often led him outside of my classroom with my hand gripping his ear while threatening to tell his parents I had done so. Michael was a preacher's kid who wanted to debate the bible but appreciated learning the skills of speaking from fact rather than emotion. With each class came a different set of personalities and perspectives, which gave me the opportunity to learn more than I could possibly teach.

Although many of my colleagues often complained about the administration, I found them to be fair and accommodating to anything I needed, which is another reason I was able to take students on the field trip. I was never a complainer. Growing up in Apopka gave me the life lessons of turning lemons into lemonade, and I prided myself of sharpening that skill. I was given a task, and I completed it in as thorough a manner as I could. I even did everything I could to keep students out of in-school suspension because it was too difficult teaching subjects like Julius Caesar from a distance, while many of my colleagues purposely sent students down for minor infractions like a low-grade curse word. This is probably why I got immediate results when I marched down to the office demanding that a new student by the name of Mark be taken out of my classroom after pulling out his penis in class. After some research, Mark had an IEP that no one knew about and had been missing medication to help him cope during the day. I never saw Mark again.

In order for me to continue to work in this environment, I had to find a motivation other than money. I became determined to expose as many students to a world outside of DeLand as much as possible because I paralleled this city closely to Apopka. To begin, I volunteered to direct the annual Black history month play and received teacher of the year during the month of February (Black History Month) two years in a row. I also placed on my desk a picture from a wedding that Charles and I had attended. The picture depicted Black men who participated in SEP at Florida State who now were doctors, attorneys, real estate agents, high ranking military personnel, and executives in the field of information technology. I couldn't recall seeing or hearing of anyone, especially Black men, from my side of Apopka in roles like these, nor were there many if any to speak of in DeLand. My favorite part of teaching is when students got an "aha" moment. Whether someone finally understood basic grammar, understood how a modern

day holocaust could happen, or allowed their imagination to run free when reading books like *The Giver* (Lowry, 1993). I was frequently amazed at how far one compliment about a student's strength could go. Unfortunately, I couldn't save them all. Tammy, one of my best students who made straight A's, came to me upon graduation and exclaimed, "Mrs. Pender, Mrs. Pender! Guess what! Publix said that they would hire me full time after I graduate!" I sincerely believe that all work is honorable, but she was wasting potential. I was heavy for days wondering what I could I have said differently to convince her to at least try to go to college. In reality, I could have been her, if I liked my surroundings better.

There was something that I noticed about my new white school that disturbed me to my core. Of approximately 100 teachers, 10 of us were Black and one was Hispanic but the student population was at least forty percent minority. This kind of environment was a recipe for racial divides. The white female English teacher, who I considered to have the most compassion for students of color compared to all the other white teachers, made me perhaps the most uncomfortable. She chose to dress me in my overalls and straw hat as Buck Wheat on the day we were all encouraged to dress up as our favorite book character. I don't quite remember who I was dressed up to be, but I remember seeing red when I was addressed as Buck Wheat and was more upset because I could not articulate why I was upset.

Most of the students in my regular English classes were students of color and poor white students. The students in the honors and above classes were generally white and mostly middle class with maybe one Asian and/or one Black student. My concern became that the curriculum for students in regular classes did not include preparation for college study, and its most negative impact was felt among students of color and poor students. I thought back to my own experience in a regular English class when I moved back to Florida from New York. It was the only time I

ever fell asleep in class because I was not challenged and was subsequently bored. When I mentioned my concern to a female white veteran teacher, she replied, “Someone has to be the ditch diggers of society.”

Many of the 10<sup>th</sup> graders in these regular classes slept their way through, biding their time until they turned 16, so that they could legally drop out of school. There came a point where I stopped trying to wake them up. Although I love teaching Shakespeare, teaching it to 40 students at a time was not an easy task. If students and/or their parents had no interest in their education, then they would be one less discipline problem for the ones trying to learn. I was learning boundaries. I loved education, and I considered it my “give-back” for all of the educators who helped me along my way, but I was more drawn to students who wanted to learn, needed coaching or guidance, or were on the cusp of understanding. Students who required me to motivate or convince them to want to learn were a drain on my spirit.

### Rough Side Of The Mountain

The next step to my new Huxtable like family was the creation of the clan. Charles and I had to secure a Black church family before we started an immediate family of our own. Although the Huxtables were not overly religious, church was a staple of my reality and Charles’s idea of the settlement of marriage. It would be membership into a community of supporters and an outlet to show God appreciation for his mercy. Since he had been in DeLand for a year already, Charles had already made social connections. Roy Hodges, a para-professional at the school where Charles worked, was also a minister at New Hope Baptist Church in Deltona, Florida. Roy’s older brother Billy was the pastor. The church members met in a school while their church was being built. Charles really liked Roy and his family, so we attended services a few times upon

Roy's invitation. Charles eventually insisted we join. I thought the church was ok but really wanted to explore other options. I chose not to fight this battle because I was just happy that he wanted to join a church.

We met another young couple (though slightly older than us) at New Hope named Tabitha and Arthur Robinson who had a four year old son. Charles and I often spent time with them, and Tabitha would later become my confidant. She is who I would tell when I got a phone call from one of the sisters in the church before morning service who said, "Morning Sista Pender! I hope you are up cooking breakfast for your husband." When I mentioned it to Charles, he just laughed, which made me even more uneasy. I asked Tabitha if she thought I was over-reacting. "Well, although I think it was inappropriate, I'm sure she didn't mean any harm knowing her." I started data collecting, filing things away in the file cabinet in my mind. Then there was the woman who asked one day after service, "Sista Pender, How is OUR husband today?" said my sister in christ. "MY husband is fine! How is YOURS?" I replied. And I can't forget about the recent female college graduate from church who always wanted to visit our home and constantly told me how lucky I was because I had the perfect husband, the perfect family, the perfect home, the perfect life. Charles insisted that I was over-reacting when I said these women were interested in him. But like college, he seemed uninterested in what I said and insisted that I was being over sensitive.

Charles liked Tabitha because she enjoyed gadgets and sports. I liked Tabitha because she was objective. She was always amazed and torn on how Charles and I interacted. "He's a really good guy, but he can be so stupid when it comes to you!" She'd say. She and Arthur were not a happy couple, and so we were a support system for each other. One day, both couples had a debate on my interaction with minister Llewyln at our church. Llewyln made me uncomfortable



by touching, looking, or speaking to me inappropriately. “You sure do look mighty good this morning!” he said looking me up and down like a doggy bone he was about to attack after church. Then he hugged me 10 seconds too long in front of his wife and my husband while the Robinson’s looked on. “I can’t believe you didn’t say something to him Charles!” I said. “I think it’s cute!” he replied, “Besides,” he continued, “what did you want me to do, beat him up or something?” “Well, you can talk to him. I’ve told you how he caresses my back and waist after church and the groping way he looks at me.” Arthur said to Charles, “Man, you are crazy! I might not fight him, but I would at least pull him aside and have a man to man talk with him about my wife. And then if he continued, I’d have to make myself clearer in a more physical way!” A few months later, minister Llewelyn was removed from the pulpit because other women complained of sexual harassment. I knew this because Pastor Hodges and I had become close when he appointed me as the director of the youth department making Llewelyn my direct report. I told Pastor that I was relieved Llewelyn was gone because he’d also made me feel uncomfortable.

I went on to write scripts and direct the Black history month plays, easter plays, and christmas plays for the church and the congregation would encourage the children in their performances much like the old ladies in my childhood Black churches would do when I performed. “It’s alright baby! Take your time! You can do it!” they would say. I would also teach praise dance, organize vacation bible school and other activities for the youth of our church. Singing in the adult choir was just icing on the cake! I worked in church so much that I probably should have been on the payroll, but I enjoyed the challenge and the opportunity to hone my creative ability, and of course, it was my way of showing god my appreciation.

The graduate chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Incorporated noticed my involvement at the high school where I taught and my church. They were eager to have me join their organization. The process was much different than when I was at Florida State. As an undergraduate student, you express interest, but as a college graduate, especially in small towns, the chapter expresses interest in you. Mrs. Irvin, a teacher at the middle school where Charles taught, prompted to him to let me know that they were interested. I was resistant because I did not care for what I knew of sororities as an undergraduate student, especially the hazing and bickering among women when so many were expected to agree on the same issue. I did not like the inability to ask questions about the organization prior to joining. I already had a lot to do. We couldn't afford it because we could not write off any of the incurred fees on our taxes. It didn't seem like a great idea to join. Charles had joined the graduate chapter of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity Incorporated the year before and was persistent about me having a similar experience. "But I don't want to join!" I explained. "But you have to! When will you EVER have an opportunity like this again?" he exclaimed in a tantrum state. "They'll even pay for most of it!" he continued. After a week of Alpha Kappa Alpha being the topic of conversation at home, I reluctantly conceded and received my paperwork to be completed almost immediately. I convinced myself that I was more comfortable with a graduate chapter because they had a reputation of no hazing, and that older women would not bicker as much. The experience was still costly, even more so than what I was comfortable with, but I would not be hazed and most of my questions were answered. Before I knew it, I was elected to lead, organize, and participate in activities in addition to those I was already committed to in the church and afterschool activities.

Everything was in place, so now it was time to consider making a family of our own. We had just bought a brand new home that would accommodate a small family. I didn't like the house but Charles insisted it was the perfect opportunity for us as a starter home and believed we could always buy a nicer one when we were more established. I reluctantly conceded.

We discussed having children in the one session of marriage counseling Rev. Swarn gave us. I wanted to be married for three years before we started our family. Charles was frustrated that I put a timeline on it. "You're just worried about your biological clock. I think we should wait until our mid 30's." "Well you're not the one that will have to carry a child and you know there is higher risk having babies in your 30's."

Three years later, we had Charles Jr. Married couples didn't try to get pregnant where I came from. Teenagers had babies haphazardly without any preparation. We tried for eight months before we conceived. During that process, I witnessed teenage girls find out they were pregnant almost weekly at the high school where I taught, and I couldn't understand what was wrong with me. The high school even accommodated the babies in a campus daycare while the mothers continued their education.

During the time when I was trying to conceive, the Columbine Massacre at Columbine High School occurred. The shootings impacted schools across the country, and DeLand High was no different. Attention was put on a group of students who dressed in black trench coats in my school. They were referred to as the "trench coat gang." I was never sure if they were dressed in trench coats before the shootings, but their gothic image certainly preyed on the culture of fear created by the tragedy at Columbine. I tried to stay as calm as possible because my doctor said that stress could be hindering me from getting pregnant, so I warned my students

not to bring not to bring gunfights to my classroom. I instructed them that if something happened, we were all running!

When we finally got pregnant, Charles and I agreed we would not learn the gender of the baby until it arrived. Although we both wanted a boy, a healthy baby was more important. We also agreed that the baby's name would begin with the letter C like both of ours. Because my faith was so strong, I was leaning toward the name Christian, if it was a boy. However, I had always thought that a man's first born should be named after its father if the father requested it, and so it was done.

When I told Charles that I was pregnant the looks of both happiness and fear invaded his face. We both just realized that life would never be the same but we had no idea how much. Tabitha, my friend from church got pregnant a month and a half before me, and my other church friend Aditee got pregnant a month and a half after me. Everyone at church was at ecstatic for us, and the youth department surprised us with a triple baby shower.

My life was going as planned, but something was still missing. I just couldn't put my finger on it. It became clearer on New Year's Eve when the first light bulb turned on in my head. Charles and I attended watch night service at church where Pastor Hodges asked the congregation to volunteer their testimonies leading up to the clock striking 12:00 a.m. To my surprise, Charles stood up and offered his. "I want to just say that I am thankful for my life this year. I went on a wonderful vacation, have a beautiful home, two nice cars, job security and a beautiful wife. This is what I worked so hard for, and now I am here, and I am grateful." He was almost teary eyed while nausea assaulted my stomach. While he testified to the material gains we were afforded, I was reminded of the tantrum he threw because we had yet to go on a real vacation. I used our income tax return that year, instead of paying down credit card bills, to plan

a vacation for us in Arizona. We visited the Grand Canyon, rode in a hot air balloon, and took a hummer ride through the desert. The excursions were exciting but the company was miserable. Like at home, there were no intimate moments or conversations. Instead, it was a week of random complaining from Charles about how everything in Arizona was better than life in Florida. At one point, I went for a walk alone just to get some peace.

His teary testimony also reminded me that we had a mortgage and a second mortgage on a house that only he liked, a time share in Daytona he insisted we needed, two car payments, student loans that were deferred with accruing interest, piling credit card debt, and a baby on the way. All of this was to be managed on two teacher's salaries. We purchased three cars in two years, traded one, and he was anxious to trade in another. We were living pay check to pay check. Soon, we would have one of few actual arguments in our marriage about 40 acres of property he wanted to buy in Arizona that he found online after our vacation.

“Ok, show me on paper how we can afford to buy this property in another state that you've never seen,” I said.

“You never support my ideas! Why do I have to explain every detail to you when I come up something?” he shouted.

“I have supported your ideas even against my better judgment, just because you were the ‘MAN’ of the house so much that we are so much in debt right now that I can't see a way out and now you want more?” I shouted back. I was fed up.

My life wasn't like it could have been in Apopka, but it certainly was not a Huxtable life, although I had tried hard to make it seem otherwise. We were definitely on two different planes, but I was sure that things would get better if I continued to pray.

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I respected pregnancy, but it was not a fun. I didn't realize that pains didn't wait for the labor process. My doctor said it was the baby moving things around to make room for itself. "Pregnancy is hard on a man!" Charles would tell people in front of me, so I would do everything to not be a bother to him. My morning routine was to get up, throw up, brush my teeth, throw up again, drink ice cold water that I craved, then throw up one more time. Charles would fix me brown sugar oatmeal before we both headed to work, which soothed another craving and calmed my stomach. He made it clear in front of people that "if she starts all that craving stuff in the middle of the night, she'll have to go get it herself," he'd say with a chuckle. I never asked, so he would never have an opportunity to complain about it. My level of efficiency in my classroom, with my middle school dancers, and the church activities I organized was under attack by the overwhelming feeling of tiredness, nausea, and imbalanced taste buds. It was difficult to get comfortable. I was no longer in control of my body. Toward the end of the pregnancy, the baby was so low that it felt like a sharp knife was cutting a way out for the baby, and I could feel his head touch the chair if I was sitting. I remember praying that I would not resent the baby for slowing me down and beating up my body. My blood pressure was high during most of the pregnancy and the gas pains were almost unbearable. I had Tums for gas relief in the car, the kitchen, our bedroom and my classroom. One day, I crunched over in pain from the gas and asked Charles to grab the Tums for me from the kitchen. "Can't you wait until a commercial comes on?" he answered. The baby rarely moved in the daytime. Instead, like clockwork, it would wake up around 11:00pm and stay awake for hours. When my stomach grew bigger, I was enthralled to see a hand or butt imprint move across my belly. Charles even touched it once.

I enjoyed the Lamaze classes Charles and I attended. The information was comforting. It made me realize that my body knew how to conceive and deliver a baby and that it was perfectly natural. I laughed when we learned that remembering to breathe through the process was important because it wasn't so natural to remember during delivery. Nonetheless, this class really eased my fear.

The delivery date was getting close. I was sent to the hospital two weeks before my due date because my blood pressure was so high that I was developing a condition called pre-eclampsia which could be fatal if untreated. I was released later that afternoon to be sent home on bed rest until the baby came. "I can't believe you didn't have that baby! Don't you know I got off of work to come down here?" said Charles.

The night before I went into labor I got up to pee every 20 minutes. I also heard an annoying sound that kept me from resting. It was more of a loud squeak or squeal. "You hear that?" I said as I tried to wake Charles. He eventually opened one eye and grunted, "I don't hear anything." The squealing seemed to get louder every hour and the hunt for its origin overtook my need for sleep. I never found it, but I did find a fleshy plug in the toilet after my last pee early that morning. I had to do my routine throwing up in the car on the way to the hospital to verify that my water had in fact broken. I was so accustomed to throwing up that I had a bag prepared to take with me and threw up on the way to the hospital like a champ. After I was admitted, a nurse confirmed that my water had broken. I saw stars from the pain of her putting her hand and arm inside of me to check to see how far down the baby was in the birth canal. Her hand in my birth canal felt downright ungodly and unnatural, worse than any contraction. Nonetheless, I was definitely going to have a baby.

Charles was there during the entire delivery, and so was Tabitha with her new baby. I was glad he was there like Cliff Huxtable would have been for Claire, but it didn't feel endearing. His birth coaching was as that of a football coach yelling a player. It was his way of helping, but it broke my concentration. "Stop yelling at me!" I exclaimed while the doctors encouraged me to push. I refused the epidural because having the baby as naturally as possible seemed more natural than having a needle injected into my spine. Instead, I accepted two doses of a drug called stadol which relaxes you for 30 minutes, but does not alleviate much pain. I felt everything, and it made it difficult to ignore the screams coming from another soon to be mom from down the hall. I was in labor from 9:00am until I had the baby at 4:57 p.m., but it only took 20 minutes to push the baby out. I was told by the hospital staff that my having pushed for 20 minutes was great because other women push for hours. When I was ready to push, the doctor had not yet come, but the baby wasn't listening. "The baby is coming," I said in a semi-relaxed tone as the stadol was almost worn off. "Hello, excuse me, the baby is coming!" I repeated more frustrated, interrupting everyone's idle conversation. I'm not sure who but someone told me to hold it in.

Finally, the doctor arrived, and it was time. There was a peaceful stillness in the room that was louder than Charles's yelling on one side of me and Tabitha's coaching on the other. It kept me focused. It was almost as if I was having an outer body experience. I was in pain, but it was tolerable work with the help of Charles and Tabitha lending me their hands to squeeze as shock absorbers through the pain.

At 4:57 p. m. on Friday, February 18, 2000, Charles Alonzo Pender Jr. was born. Upon seeing that it was a boy, Tabitha squealed with joy and Charles jumped up and down yelling in excitement, "You done good! You done good!" I was glad to hear the excitement in his voice



but I was exhausted. My baby came out with red skin, a bald spot and one eye closed. His mouth was opened and seemed to make a dramatic pause before a massive screeching scream exploded out of his lungs so loud that his body flailed out of control. They asked if I wanted to see him, but I wasn't interested so I looked away unresponsive. My little boy was handed to me and I tried not to resent him for what my body had just experienced. He only calmed down when he was close to me. Amazingly, when he did calm, he squeaked and squealed like the noise I heard the night before he was born.

My church family and my sorority sisters came by the hospital to see me and the new baby. My mom also came to see us. She lived an hour and a half away in Polk City. I was nervous from anticipation from her visit because I never knew if she would act unstable or not. We didn't talk or visit often. Seeing her reminded me of a world I had memories I'd tried to forget. I usually called out of obligation. Her growing angry stage during my high school years had morphed into depression. When I was in her presence, I felt her take my breath as her own.

When mama came into my hospital room, everyone there respected her position and our time together and left. She was overjoyed to see her new grandson. Grandma Bernadine lifted the new bundle from my arms, and he cried immediately. The nurse walked in and said that it was time to breast feed. I adjusted myself in bed and mom gave the baby back to me. He was having a difficult time latching on to feed, and we were both frustrated. I was sore and he was hungry. Meanwhile, mom attempted to help us in our frustration. "You're doing it all wrong!" she said as she haphazardly took my breast from my baby's mouth and attempted to re-direct it so he could feed. That set him into a whirlwind of holleration, and the nurse rescued us both by handing me a bottle of sugar water. I was torn. I felt obligated to be a respectful daughter and I wanted to be a good mother, yet my body had its own recovery issues.

When we had gotten home, Big Charles' parents were there waiting. They had driven from Summerville, the northwestern part of Georgia, to see their first grandchild from their only son. Big Charles complained on the way home about how his dad reprimanded him about the messy state of our home, so tidying up the bedroom was the first thing on my agenda when we made into the house. Granny and Paw Paw stayed with us for about a week. Granny didn't talk much but she washed, cooked, and cleaned. She even bathed me one night, and I was grateful.

People often dropped by from my Black church to check on me while I was on maternity leave. The six weeks of maternity leave were some of the longest weeks of my life. I attempted to bond with my new baby. I read books on what to do and I was committed to doing all of the right things but I was always frustrated. He cried because he was gassy. He cried because he was wet. He cried because he was hungry every two hours and could not latch on without making me bleed. He just always seemed to cry, and it was a noise as piercing as the looks Big Charles gave me at the foot of the bed during my struggle with 2 a.m. and 4 a.m. feedings. I called La Leche, a volunteer group that assists new mothers and babies through breast feeding struggles, and it helped but it wasn't enough. After four months of scabby bleeding nipples and cramps reminiscent of labor contractions, I gave up breast feeding and began pumping the milk. Now Charles could help.

Maternity leave was finally over, and it was time to go back to work and resume church responsibilities. It did not appear that I missed a beat, but it showed up in other ways. I only gained 20 pounds while I was pregnant, but I didn't lose it after I delivered. When we enrolled little Charles into daycare, I realized that he would be in daycare during significantly more waking hours of the day than with me, which meant other's influence could possibly be seen as

more influential than mine. That idea made me uncomfortable with letting him out of my sight because he was my responsibility.

The baby went to daycare at the white high school where I taught. Luckily, I had first period planning so I a little extra time in the morning to get us ready. I taught by day, worked extra-curricular activities after school with my baby by my side, then we were off to church for church activities. Saturdays were reserved for sorority meetings. Then I went home to feed, change, and bathe baby; grade and plan the next activity; make sure there was food for Charles and I; and if I wasn't too tired, clean something that required my attention. One day I had to make a quick stop at the grocery store before going home and rationalized that it would be ok to leave the sleeping baby in the car, snug in his car seat. He would never know the difference and it would relieve me of carrying him in his 18 pound carrier just this one time. I tried to shift guilt to joy as I enjoyed the peace I felt from the break as I walked up to the store, but by the time I was at the register, fear and panic overwhelmed me. Thoughts of him choking or someone calling the police because they saw that he was alone raided my mind.

What was wrong with me as a mother? Charles even expressed how upset he was when he noticed how I reacted to the baby when he first came out and also commented on my struggle with breastfeeding. "Aren't you supposed to know how to do that?" he asked. I sometimes over-compensated my actions of care to offset my feelings of frustration. I thought I was alone until one day my inner feelings were validated after watching an episode of Oprah. I wasn't a fan, mostly because of her non-religious views, but I flipped through the channels to find an episode about motherhood and post-partum depression. When I heard one woman in the audience refer to her baby's infancy stage by saying, "I hate it seventy percent of the time." I felt like she admitted outloud what I thought. Someone else retorted how babies smelled bad because they constantly

threw up or had dirtied diapers then commented on the effort it took to make them smell nice for company. One other woman talked about how she did not feel an instant bond with her baby. I was being empowered in a way I didn't know existed. Somehow, I was able to get a second wind for this thing called motherhood after I found out that I wasn't alone.

Money was tight, and it seemed to get even tighter. Big Charles took a second job at Target stocking shelves at night which eventually led to door security in the evenings. "Why don't you offer to teach private music lessons? It would bring in more money and require you to work less," I offered. "Cause I've never worked nights before and I want to see what it's like," he replied. We were becoming roommates.

Time was moving slowly. Months had gone by since I'd had a decent night's sleep. Eventually, I began enjoying some relief of independence. At five months little Charles could sit up in the tub. At six months I could introduce baby food. This cut the amount of costly formula we introduced when my milk stopped reproducing because I could not pump at consistent times with my busy schedule. At eight months, he could hold his own bottle. At 12 months he could drink whole milk, which meant no more costly formula! I was convinced that the day would come when he would be able to get himself into his car seat. But before that, came D-day, the day he would be able to walk on his own. The house had to be baby proofed with gates and plastic electric outlet inserts and void of mouthwatering shining pieces of anything on the floor that would be easily seen at his height.

One day, Big Charles came home from Target. Little Charles knew because the sound of the garage door gave him away. "Daddy! Daddy! Daddy!" my baby exclaimed as he wobbled toward his dad entering the door. Another light bulb in my head went off when I witnessed his dad walk past him without any acknowledgement. Unbecoming of the stature of Claire Huxtable,

I snapped. “Didn’t you hear him calling you? Oh my god, I just realized that you have ignored me the same way all these years but you WILL NOT ignore him!” I said sharply. “Oh my bad, I didn’t even notice him,” he said chagrined. This was the second light bulb that turned on in my head that told me I was in an unfamiliar space between Apopka and Huxtable life.

The final light bulb occurred during little Charles’s first winter. He was a sickly child who demanded a lot of attention. If it wasn’t severe gas pains that sent him wailing and flailing, it was an ear infection, an asthma attack triggered by a new tooth or something else. It was cold and he was weezing at christmas play practice at church. I was trying to hurry up so that I could get him home to give him his medicine.

I already felt guilty because he fell off of the bed a week ago. I had placed him on the bed for just a minute while I re-stocked his baby bag before we went to play practice. He was scooting toward me while my back was turned and BAM! He fell to the floor and between the sound of the thud of him hitting the ground and his piercing screams, I was a nervous wreck inside. He couldn’t tell me how hurt he was, he just screamed until his body was hot. I walked him in my arms trying to calm him down and making sure he didn’t drift into unconsciousness. At what point do I take him to the hospital and pay the \$50 co-pay that I don’t have? Luckily he calmed down, but I’m not sure how I was able to hide my anxiety during rehearsal that night. I confided in my co-director because she was a nurse, and she looked him over and assured me he would be fine.

I was torn with splitting my attention to all those whom I felt responsible. Play practice ended, and I rushed him home to give him his medication. I let him out of his carrier and darted for the albuterol and nebulizer as he slowly crawled toward the living room. Just before he made it to the carpet, his chubby little body just stopped and went limp. I set up his nebulizer in record

time, scooped him up like a super hero and waved the steam like medication in front of his nose and mouth. He perked up almost immediately. I handled this crisis seemingly well. By the time daddy made it home, baby was resting comfortably. As I attempted to tell Charles about the evening's events, my calm voice grew shaky until I began hyperventilating from the anxiety. "Aw, calm down. He'll be fine," chuckled his dad.

I was terrified of not hearing him breathe at night, so he slept with us, with me, that night and many others for months. I also endorsed this sleeping arrangement because baby and I both enjoyed the cuddling of another warm body. When he was well, the routine was to put him asleep in my arms, lie him down and expect him to come boulder our door open at 2:00 a.m. and get into our bed on my side. Frustrated, Big Charles decided to put a stop to our love affair because "I'm tired of him in our bed! He has a bed of his own, and its time he starts sleeping in it!" he said firmly. "I would understand if we were doing things that married people do which would warrant privacy, but we're not. The baby likes to cuddle with me while you tell me to get on my side because my body heat is too hot. What is the problem?" I pleaded. Nonetheless, the man of the house had spoken, and he locked the door. Like clockwork, 2:00 a.m. came and so did little Charles. When he could not open the door, he banged, cried, screamed, scratched, kicked, and sweated for hours until he fell asleep at the foot of our door. I sat on the bed facing the closed door crying until my head hurt. After two nights of this, baby was broken.

Eventually, the winter attacked his lungs, and he had to be admitted into the hospital. During the four days he was there, I felt the most helpless I ever felt, and the feeling was not comfortable. I managed to escape life in Apopka, make it through college and graduate school, wrote and directed plays and was even recognized for some of my accomplishments. But I could not control this. My baby was sick, and there was nothing I could do. Was I being punished and

if so, why? I surrendered that part of my will to god and realized that he was ultimately in control. I begged and pleaded for my son to get well and god came through for me.

Christmas was almost here. The play at church was a hit and Charles was off for a few days from Target. “So when do you think we should leave to go to my parent’s?” he asked. “Are you serious? The baby just got out of the hospital, and you want to take him to even colder weather?” I exclaimed. “He’ll be alright, otherwise he wouldn’t have been released from hospital,” he replied. “Look, if you need to see your mama that bad you can go, but the baby and I are staying here.” I said as the final light bulb in my head went off. He sulked for days and I felt bad, but not bad enough to make the trip. Instead, I mimicked what his mom would do and stuffed Christmas stockings for all of us, and put them out for everyone to see. “Why would you put hand sanitizer in our stockings?” he complained, still upset that we were not in the cold county of North Georgia. I also got Big Charles the remote control car and some boots I noticed he had been eyeing. He got me a massager, so that I can massage myself instead of asking him. There was no more need for light bulbs to go off in my head. Although we appeared like the Huxtables to the world around us, things were not going as planned, and I did not know how to fix it.

### Lord, Help Me To Hold Out

It was a Saturday. Mom called and wanted to come over because she wanted to see the baby, and she had some news to share with me. Myrna, her only friend was staying with her and Mr. Dyer and would be coming along with them. Myrna’s presence added a third body to mom’s Sunday’s services in the church where she still pastored. Charles’s mom was also down visiting for the week so we were expecting a full house that day.

She was so excited when she came through the door. The grandmothers immediately greeted each other like they were complying with some Black baby boomer code of respect. Then there were the introductions, other greetings between my visitors, and gazing at the baby.

I was feeding the little Charles in the dining room alone when they came and like most grandmother's, Grandma Bernadine had to hold him. She took the bottle out of his mouth to play with him, and he immediately screamed until his body turned red. "What's the matter with the little man?" she said picking him up in a baby voice. He squirmed and reached for me but I hesitated before I took him back. "Aw, girl I know what I'm doing. He just doesn't like me." She said smiling to hide her disappointment. "He's just hungry that's all," I said trying to comfort her. "So what's this news you're so excited about?" I said as she sat in the dining room with us.

"Baby, I had a dream, and the Lord spoke to me the other day. He said I am to preach to 10,000 people kind of like when Jesus spoke on the Mount of Olive and when he fed the multitude in the Bible," she said excitedly.

"Uh huh," I replied feeling numb.

"What I need you to do is to make me 10,000 copies of this pamphlet for me to pass out to them."

I was so glad no one else was in the kitchen with us. I took the booklet that she created as I maneuvered the baby in a position where I could burp him. I flipped through her packet to see hymns she'd copied from a hymn book, scriptures copied from the new living bible, hand written poems, cross word puzzles, and a message written using mixed matched cut out letters from a magazine resembling a random note. I had to think quick to diffuse this situation before the conversation spread to the rest of the house.



“Ma, I can’t do this for you because there are things in here that are copied directly out of published books and re-copying them would violate copyright laws.” I said.

“But you have to. I don’t have anyone else that can make the copies.”

“Mom, it’s illegal! It’s not worth going to jail over.”

“Ok well just make 1,000 copies.”

“Mom, if I could do it, I would.”

“But Consuela, let me read you this scripture. It will make you do it,” mom said turning to the book of Matthew. She started reading, but I interrupted her. Her voice was getting louder. Mr. Dyer and Big Charles came to check on us to see what was going on.

“Shut up Dyer. Everything is fine. Gone on in there and sit down somewhere,” she said then continued to read.

Dyer and Charles attempted to calm her down while Myrna called me aside.

“Consuela,” she said, “there is something wrong with your mother. I have known her for 15 years, and I never knew she had multiple personalities until I started living with her these last few weeks.”

“I’ve known for years something was wrong but I had no choice but to live with it.

That’s why I don’t let anyone meet her unless it is unavoidable,” I confessed.

I went back into the kitchen where she was still reading in a loud dogmatic tone and motioned for Charles to get the baby.

“Look, mom,” I interrupted in the same tone that she created, “I said no and I am not going to have my baby grow up around this craziness so it is time for you to go.”

She ignored me and kept reading, so I got up to go to my room. She got up and followed me to my room. I tried to shut the door, but she got to it before I could lock it. We were both pushing

antagonistically against my bedroom door. She was obviously stronger than me, and on her last push the bottom corner of the door caught my big toenail and ripped half of it off. I let the door fling open and ran to the garage. This was too much. I had to get out of here and get some air. On my way out, I heard Charles say to my mom, “Lady, you have upset my wife and my mom, you have got to go.” I sat in the garage until they were gone.

When I came back in, I apologized to my mother-in-law for having had to see this. “Sick people can’t help that they are sick. All we can do is pray for them and help them get the help they need,” she said. I was embarrassed because my Huxtable image was shattered with my husband’s family.

I tried to compartmentalize what had just happened, but it was difficult. I did not want my husband thinking that I was crazy because my mother was unstable. I also was committed to not bring this kind of energy into my new life and my new family. I wrote a letter to my mother on Monday and told her that she was no longer welcome in my home until she sought professional help. This episode made me think back to when my mother kicked my grandmother out of our house during a visit when I was 12.

I was able to hide her antics at last thanksgiving’s dinner in our new home. My maternal grandma was there from Chicago along with my mom, Mr. Dyer, my big brother Keith and his wife and baby son. Charles’ parents, two of his two aunts and uncles and a few cousins were there as well.

Mom had been in a car accident a few months prior and drew a lot of attention when she showed up with a new curly wig that was tilted on one side, a neck brace and cane because, “You know I’m trying to get disability from my accident and you never know who’s watching you, when you leave the house,” she confessed to me. Everything was going well until dinner

was over. Keith and I were having a conversation in my bedroom because he wanted to express how proud he was of me for making a picture perfect life for myself, especially since he could not seem to get his life together. “My baby sister has moved on up to the East Side like George and Weezy Jefferson!” Keith commented about my new middle class home and neighborhood. ”You know you’ve made it when you live right next door to white people,” he continued. I had not thought about the fact that I had not lived in an all Black neighborhood since I left Apopka. One by one, mama, Charles, and Keith’s wife came into the room and joined in on the conversation that had now shifted to life in Apopka and how we got there from Chicago. “God spit us out of hell (Chicago) and provided us a good life here in Florida!” she exclaimed defensively.

She reminisced on taking the vacation tickets to Florida and leaving with us in the middle of the night. Keith was eight and I was about to turn four when she left my father. She described how before she met my father, a minister in the Black church, she was a whore on the streets of Chicago who had stabbed people and put murderous hits out on others. She had countless self-induced abortions, some with coat hangers and some with bleach. She was in love once, but he wouldn’t marry her after she got pregnant with my brother from a one night stand during a time they had an argument and broke up. When she was ready to change her life, she found a preacher and rationalized that she could become his wife and begin a picture perfect life. They met in May, married in August, and conceived me on their honeymoon. “Everything was going as planned,” she explained until her mom and her brother told her new preacher husband that she was a whore.

“It was all her fault!” my mother cried and pointed her piercing energy through the wall aiming for my grandmother.

“Why didn’t you tell him while you were dating that you were once promiscuous?” I asked.

“You don’t understand!” she was crying. “I was waiting for the right moment of pillow talk. He would have never married me if he knew!” Both mama and her new wig looked frustrated.

“Don’t you see, by not having this conversation with him earlier, he could have easily felt like you tricked him. And if he could not have accepted you and your past, then you then you didn’t need him anyway!” I said self-righteously.

“Don’t YOU see, little Miss Know it All, it wasn’t that simple in those days. A woman was respected because of the man she married. I even convinced him against his will to give Keith his last name so he wouldn’t look like a bastard child. And when he found out about my past, and by my own family, he started treating me differently. He figured that I must have been a monster for my own mother to say that about me. He wouldn’t buy me my own house and made us live with his so-called sick mother. He wouldn’t have sex with me anymore, and he didn’t even believe you were his child throughout the whole pregnancy. I was hoping by leaving that he would miss us and follow us down here in Florida, but he’d rather stay with his MAMA!” she screamed.

I was glad this conversation was contained in my bedroom away from the people for whom I was performing my picture perfect life. I had a new perspective of my mother on this day, but it was a lot to process.

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Charles was getting more serious about trading in another vehicle for a truck, but we could not afford it, and I wasn't willing to work my magic and find a way to make it work. I had already made it work when Charles came home with the decision to obtain his Master's degree from a private school that required private school tuition. I could not deny him the opportunity, but would have at least appreciated the opportunity to discuss how it would impact me and the baby's life too. My focus at that time was finding a way to alleviate the debt we had already accumulated on our teachers' salaries.

Charles was serious about this truck and came home with one that he was test driving in an effort to make me change my mind. Unfortunately for him, I had some news that would make him change his mind when I saw the truck in our driveway. "I'm pregnant," I informed him. "But I want my truck," he replied in a whiny voice.

I cried when I found out I was pregnant just a few days prior. We planned for little Charles and it took months. The new baby was only one random night of "You want to?" "I don't care. You want to?" I cried because I couldn't imagine starting over and going through another pregnancy. I had not even lost my baby fat from the previous one, and I didn't know how we were going to pay the extra daycare costs and other baby related expenses.

That spring was the worst teaching semester of my time at DeLand High School. It was the first time I was assigned a planning period other than first period, so I had to report to work at 7:00 a.m. every morning, instead of strolling in at around 8:00 a.m. I threw up in the morning, prepared myself and the baby for the day, and arrived at the daycare portion of the high school only to hear from the ladies in the daycare, "Um Mrs. Pender, you missed the button alignment on your shirt again." Or "You forgot your ponytail at home again." Or "We got the baby. Go ahead to class since you're running late again." My students were understanding, even the ones

that waited for me to open the door while the morning announcements were still on. I started getting my hair braided using hair extensions so styling hair was one less responsibility I had in the morning. Upon seeing my new hair, one of my white female colleagues commented, “Oh my Mrs. Pender! How did you get your hair to grow so fast overnight?” I had to find another job.

Everyone at church was happy for us when we made the announcement about the baby. I was relieved that Pastor Hodges felt that it would be best for me to finish out the Christmas play that year, but that I would step down from my role as the director of the youth department to cater to my own family.

I saw a job announcement in the newspaper for the position of Assistant Director of Student Life and Coordinator of Intercultural Programs at Stetson University. There was a prestige within Volusia County associated with Stetson. It was a private, seemingly affluent, white liberal arts university where students paid close to \$30,000 each year to attend. Most of the position description read like my graduate assistantship at Indiana State with Dr. Taylor. The major addition was that I would have to work closely with the gay and lesbian population, which was in direct conflict with my Christian beliefs. I called Dr. Taylor because of my reservations with working with the gay and lesbian community, and she advised that should I get the position, preserve my belief, but remember that everyone deserves to be treated with love and respect. I also discussed the general job specifications with Toni, a woman in my church who already worked at Stetson, and she encouraged me to apply. She also gave me some books on student development theory, which she said I would need to at least be familiar with if I was serious about getting hired. I applied and to my surprise, I got a call inviting me to phone interview and then to campus for a campus interview. The campus interview was grueling on my five month

pregnant body. Every hour, from 7:30 a.m. until 4:00 p.m., I met with a different person or a group from across the campus.

After the campus interview, I received a phone call from Donald Stubbs, the hiring manager for the position. He called to inform me that I did not get the job, but that I was a close second choice. He also let me know that if anything happened with the person who accepted his offer, he would be sure to call me back. I was overwhelmed with rejection, but appreciative of the sincerity in the call. To my surprise, he called back three days later to offer me the position of Assistant Director of Student Life and Coordinator of Intercultural Programs.

It was official. I was no longer a teacher in a classroom. Although teaching was not a part of my original plan, it was a blessing in disguise because I found that my place was in education. I was able to finish out the school year and began at Stetson in June of 2001.

I was forced to take a pay cut, but the strategy was such that I could make \$50,000 per year in college administration in five years opposed to the 30 years it would have taken by staying in the classroom of secondary education.

My principal and my students were sad to see me go but they understood. My church family put me on a pedestal because of the prestige of Stetson without a clear understanding of what was to be my role. My sorority took the opportunity and elected me to advise the young women involved in AKA at Stetson University. I was the logical choice, since I was the only 'soror' (the name given to sorority members), who was also a college administrator on the campus. This was by far the most challenging element associated with my career to date. It was too much work for a process that I did not have a sincere appreciation for perhaps because I did not go through it as an undergraduate student, or because, logically, I deduced that these

organizations are elitist and promote separatism and violence among Blacks on white campuses in order to prove one's loyalty.

Charles was not as eager as others for me to be at Stetson initially. "Who cares about Stetson," he blurted out in a conversation we were having about my new duties. He was jealous. Someone at church pulled him aside and told him to be strong and be prepared to be supportive because I had a calling on my life to do great things. He eventually apologized and would ultimately show his support. He was realizing he was becoming Mrs. Pender's husband. I had no idea what to expect, but I was ecstatic about my future.

This pregnancy was easier than the first, though not easy at all. Charles and I decided that this would definitely be the last addition to our family. Our insurance did not cover the costs for me to get a tubal ligation (tying of my fallopian tubes), so we would have been responsible for its cost of \$1000 out-of-pocket. Instead, our insurance covered Charles to get a vasectomy. Arthur had one and convinced Charles of the safety and benefits of the procedure. When the time came, we paid two \$10 co-pays for him to be the one to prevent our family from growing again.

Meanwhile, I gave in more to my body, as it slowed down and relaxed more into my second and third trimester at Stetson. It helped that summer's at Stetson was the slow time in my department. Although I tried to avoid stress, I attempted to reconnect with my mother. I felt bad about kicking her out of the house wanted to break the cycle of our antagonistic relationship before I marked such a relationship between me and my children. She was slow to respond, and it would take years to be on a regular talking routine.

Charles called me at work early one morning a couple of weeks away from my due date with some news that I could not seem to process. He said that a plane had flown into one of the twin towers. I can't say that I knew exactly what the twin towers were, but the idea of a plane



running into a building of any sort was unfathomable to my comprehension. Before I knew it, everyone in my building was gathered around the TV's in the lobby. I could only watch for a little while. I walked back to my office before I was overwhelmed with stress. I had to find a way to compartmentalize this for the health of both baby and me.

Like the first pregnancy, we agreed not to learn the sex of the baby until it was born. I still hoped for a boy for several reasons. First, we would save money by using all of Charles Jr's. hand-me downs. Second, I feared for a little girls developing body, ready to be taken by any man at his whim. Lastly, I was afraid that Charles Sr. would treat a daughter like a princess, while he treated me like the frog.

The week after 9/11, I decided to lighten up the mood in the building and play a joke on Donald. I filled a balloon with water and put it between my legs. When I was ready, I signaled for my helpers to get Donald. "Donald! Come quick. I think Consuela is in labor." My screams could be heard in the background. "OOOOHHHHHH!!!!!!" I screamed with a straight face. "Donald! God it hurts!" I screamed and squeezed his hand while I lay on the floor. Then to his surprise, a sound went "POP" and water started leaking from up under me. "Okay, stay calm. I'm going to call an ambulance," he responded calmly, then sprinted toward the phone when I screamed, "Gotcha!" There was a crowd that had gathered at that point. Some were in on the joke while most were not. We laughed for the rest of the day about that.

Interestingly, the next morning at work, I noticed that my unmentionables were damp. I didn't notice a fleshy plug in the toilet like when my water broke with Charles Jr., but with the onset of some moderate contractions, I thought my water might have broken. I decided to eat lunch before I drove myself to the hospital because I knew the nurses would not let me eat if I

were admitted. After I ate my soup, I waved good-bye to everyone and went to meet Charles at the hospital.

A young woman was checking in at the same time as Charles and I, and they immediately recognized each other. She was an ex-student of his. We were admitted at the same time and placed in a room together until another room was available. My contractions were coming quick, and I was uneasy. I refused the epidural again and didn't want the stadol I'd had with little Charles. I was offered and accepted one dose of Demerol, which made me dizzy, but I still felt the contractions. Right next to me, that young girl was losing her baby. Her nurse was unnerved and responsible for both of us. Each time she attempted to put in my IV, my veins collapsed. She and Charles both raised their voices to me to try to get me to relax so that my veins could take the IV. There was a lot of commotion on the other side of the room, and I could not concentrate on what was going on with me. "Charles," I said in between breaths, "I really need you to get either me or her moved sooner than later because she is messing up my energy and something feels different than last time." "I can't believe you can't feel for that girl!" he said disappointed. "Don't you know she's losing her baby? And what's the problem? You've done this before. And don't you know that she's one of my ex-students?" he finished. It was clear that I was on my own. Unfortunately, death was in the air as she lost her baby. She was eventually moved. Meanwhile, I was on my own. Charles coached, but I was in the room by myself and soon, my second little boy made it into this world whimpering and moving slow from the demoral.

Although he wasn't planned, he definitely planned for us. Cameron Ward Pender was born on Friday, September 21, 2001 at 5:21p.m. He and his big brother were born 19 months apart on Fridays within 20 minutes of each other's time. I was in labor approximately the same time of day and pushed them both out in 20 minutes. We were flooded with visitors and both me

and baby were alert as soon as the demoral wore off. My most magical moment was when little Charles kissed his new brother.

Cameron was a happy baby. He didn't cry if his diaper was soiled and only whimpered when he was hungry. He slept through most of the night after two months and although he loved snuggling, he would only fall asleep if he were sleeping alone. This was diametrically opposing to my first experience with an infant.

One night, little Charles was having a rough evening with cold symptoms while four month old Cameron lay smiling in his basinet. I touched him tenderly to say goodnight and found that his skin was burning with a temperature of 104 degrees. We rushed him to the hospital where he stayed for a week with a stomach virus. I now had to watch both babies closely.

I was able to enjoy the experience with Cameron. I saved him and me both the trouble of breast feeding by by-passing it altogether. I pumped for two months until my milk stopped reproducing. I wasn't as stressed or as technical because I had already done the baby research with little Charles. Second babies were definitely easier. The challenge was that I now had two babies in diapers, two babies in and out of the doctor's office, passing colds between each other, extra food to pack and more baby weight. I looked and felt a mess. One of my sorors at church, who had recently lost her husband, pulled me aside one day and told me to "get it together!"

I felt indebted to Donald since he hired me while I was pregnant, so I worked hard to be efficient in my job because I did not want him to regret his decision. I worked a minimum of 50 hours a week because there was always something there that seemed pressing, and I wanted to learn more.

Donald was the smartest man I had ever met, and I was eager to learn from him. He was from the Bahamas and a graduate of Stetson, my newest white school. Donald was the first Black

person I had known who joined a white fraternity. I asked him some years later why, and he explained that when he was in college, there were only a few Blacks there so his choices were limited.

When the novelty of working at a university wore off, I was able to assess my new environment more closely. The differences in private and public schools became clearer to me during my time at Stetson. Like Keiser, Stetson was private, which meant that it answered to a private board of directors instead of state regulations. Because these entities are for profit, they are allowed room to make their own rules. This is usually found in the mission, monetary, judicial, and spiritual aspects of the college. For instance, because Stetson is considered a liberal arts college, you may have students and parents paying over \$100,000 for liberal arts degree. This is most challenging when the form of payment is in student loans that need to be repaid in a field of study that may yield \$25,000-\$30,000 per year in salary.

Crushed was an accurate feeling as I began my first position into higher education where the majority of buildings resembled plantations. The first observation I noticed was that the majority of the grounds workers, housekeepers, cooks, and custodial staff were Black. Some respected my position, as if I had made it to the *big house*, other of those *others* looked at me with initial distrust. The surrounding Black community saw me as their voice. White faculty disregarded my role, leaving me to do the work of managing the underrepresented student groups, as if I was an overseer keeping them under control.

I saw that this prestigious university did not have a gospel choir. Aware of how my affiliation with a gospel choir was instrumental in my undergraduate experience, I approached Donald with a plan of how I could start one. He gave me direction on how to approach the school of music to gain their support, and I was on my way. To my surprise, the chair of the music

department, an older white man said to me, “I hope you understand that it won’t work because all of the men will be playing basketball.” Against his better judgment, he offered to pay the salary choir director’s salary for one semester. I was to raise the money for the salary for the duration of the choir’s existence. I hired a director who also served as the musician, and I marketed the choir to local churches, who paid us in a love offerings. Those collective love offerings were how we were able to continue paying the director after the first semester.

We were eventually asked to sing at convocation, the city of DeLand’s annual MLK celebration, and other community programs, but our staple programs were our annual Christmas and spring concerts.

I was the official advisor of the gospel choir, but was also a choir member. Donald showed his support by also joining. The director was also my choir director at my Black church. He was a talented visionary, progressive, and perfectionist. I was confident he was the perfect person to take the choir to the level of excellence that would give us the campus and community respect we needed. Upon my audition to assess which section of the choir I belonged, he quickly regulated me to the alto section. “Um, are you sure? I have sang, soprano all my life,” I said with some indignation in my voice. “Trust me!” he said delicately. After everyone was placed in their appropriate section, we began learning our first song. When it was the altos turn to practice our part out loud, mine was the strongest voice heard. Everyone turned to look at me in surprise as this unknown voice came out of hibernation. But no one was more surprised than me. I was confident in the choir, believed in what I was doing, and I was finding my voice.

When the choir formed, it was made up of an almost equal number of Black and white students. One pastor at a church performance commented, “Now this is what heaven is supposed to look like!” Before that moment, I never imagined heaven would have white folks! This

pastor's statement quietly disturbed me. I associated gospel music with a community of people who struggled together. The music reached back all the way to the beats of Africa and gave us a sense of hope for today. The affective connection was undeniable, so much so that I could get lost in the rhythms and ignore the contradictions of the words. Intellectually, it made sense that heaven should be made up of Black and white people, as well as other races, ethnicities, religions, classes, varying abilities, etc. However, the heaven I sang about in Black churches spoke to a community of safety on earth in wait to receive a promised reward in heaven. This idea of heaven being for those who already have their reward here on earth didn't seem fair.

My job description outlined that I create diversity programming for the university in collaboration with multicultural student organizations and the community. I began creating diversity workshops for leadership groups and as sanctions for judicial cases. One memorable discussion of which I was asked to facilitate for a Pan-Hellenic (historical white) sorority because some members were heard calling a Black student a nigger while she was attempting to join their organization. The first hour was relatively quiet with only my voice echoing off of the walls. But after initiating the hot topic of the confederate flag being flown or worn freely, the young women came alive in fervor for the affirmative. The conversation was passionate among the women who finally opened up in frustration over the idea of their lifestyle being challenged. A few faces softened when they were presented with different ways a situation can be interpreted based off of who has power in that situation. After two hours of dialogue, past working hours, I had to get home to my family. I went home exhilarated, confident that at least some of these women would be changed by this conversation even if they were quiet because it is not possible to unlearn what you now know.

I also served as advisor to the nine multicultural student organizations, and with their help, we planned and executed mock Indian weddings, multicultural winter holiday celebrations, open mike nights, contracted speakers and panel discussions on issues of race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation and many other programs. The more programs we had, the more I learned and the more I learned, the more my passion for diversity education grew. The progress I made motivated me to sharpen my skills and my knowledge even more.

In addition to the multicultural affairs portion of my job description, I was also responsible for other campus wide program including organizing family weekend, advising the programming board which was responsible for major concerts, comedians, and the fun provided for students, the chartering of new student organizations and maintenance of the existing ones as well as other duties as assigned. Under my leadership, students and I were responsible for bringing the first hip hop group to campus to perform. After the students were surveyed, hip hop was the genre that was listened to by most of the student body. The evaluations only proved what I already knew. It was common that when you heard hip hop blasting from a car attempting to park, it was usually a white driver at the wheel.

The rapper, Juvenile, was selected to perform, and the students came out in droves, but Juvenile was late. I felt pressure to make the show a huge success to prove that programs and performances by Black people could be efficient. The audience was not seemingly upset because he was late, but they were disappointed that he only performed for 20 minutes. "We were told that it was supposed to be a show with limited profanity so we had to make it a short show," said the manager. "Well, I can't give you this check because you are in breach of contract." I replied, handing him the contract with yellow highlight on all areas that were breached. I negotiated for two hours the next day with two different people who claimed to represent Juvenile. "Aw, come

on Consuela, the kids enjoyed the show, everyone had a great time, go ahead and put the check in the mail,” said one. “Look, Consuela, I know people in the business. I can make life difficult for you!” said another. They even called my students and asked why I was such a bitch. Donald told me to pay it because the university would not want to go to court over this issue, but I couldn’t let it go. “Look, here’s my final offer, I got half of a show, I’ll give you half of the money we contracted, and if you don’t like it, we can go to court, and when a judge sees where you are in breach of the contract, you won’t get anything.” After they agreed to my terms, I began throwing air punches and kicks because I just outsmarted some patriarchal bullies and saved the university money. My voice was confident and strong like it was in choir rehearsal. I was finally learning to sing “on top of the note” both physically and metaphorically.

I was promoted within two years, as the Cross Cultural Center moved into our division from academic affairs. I was to be the new director responsible for the leadership, management and operations of the Center. My primary responsibility was to encourage the Stetson community to explore attitudes, beliefs, feelings and behavior toward individuals from different racial, ethnic and socio-cultural backgrounds and to create safe environments for groups of ethnically and culturally diverse students to interact. The promotion afforded me the opportunity to work and develop my passion for diversity without having the added responsibilities out of the mission of the Cross Cultural Center. I was finding my voice on this thing called my journey.

### I Need You Know

Charles and I had just taken another vacation. This time we cruised to the Bahamas. Like our trip to Arizona, the plans were flawless. We parasailed and snorkeled in water so blue it did not seem real. The idea of riding jet skis was exciting, but the actual ride wasn’t as fun. When I rode full throttle, which is the highest speed, my body would begin flying off of the bike. If I



rode slower, I would hit the bumps in the waves which were strong enough to knock me off. I could see the panic in Charles' face because, although I had on a life jacket, he knew I couldn't swim. After that episode, he made me cancel our plans to go scuba diving for non-swimmers. Nonetheless, the excursions and the scenery were great.

Unfortunately, like our wedding, other vacations, and home, there was occasional sex, but no intimate talks or touches. Charles said I was needy when I wanted to talk about us, or exchange I love you's, or hold hands. He didn't like to kiss because my lipstick was clammy. I pinched his butt one day when his mom was visiting, and he hit the roof worse than he did when I tried to give him more than a peck on the lips at our wedding. "Don't do that in front of my mother!" he said angrily. I concluded that it must be the extra weight gain from the pregnancies. He did grope me once in an effort to compromise, but it was during a work event and students were around. My resistance prevented him from trying again.

Our marriage was full of the conversations about kids at school, complaints about school systems, cars and gadgets we didn't have and couldn't afford. At some point I remember praying to God to take my desire for my husband away, so that I could feel less needy.

I drew on my relationship with god and church to keep my self-esteem intact, when I realized I hated coming home and felt like I had no way out. With tears drowning my ducts, I would practically scream at the top of my voice Smokie Norful's song, I Need You Now (2002, track 2) praying that god heard me. No matter how low my spirit, the Huxtable's could never look unhappy. So I practiced what they modeled and most never knew my struggle. In fact, at my lowest I heard other women, particularly in my Black church, "You're so lucky!" "You have the perfect life and the perfect family!" But if that was so, why did I feel so unhappy? I wanted to make use of the marriage counseling services offered through the employee assistance programs

at either of our jobs. Charles refused. My coping mechanisms were work, food, and reading, and writing Black fiction. The more I worked, the more rewarding results I saw, whereas nothing came of the energy from the work I put into my marriage.

I asked my husband why he never looks at me. He paused before he admitted, “I’m just not attracted to pregnant women.” I was crushed, since I had been pregnant or recovering from pregnancy for the last three years. Another time I asked why he never touches me. He didn’t respond at first. I asked if it was the additional weight from the babies. “Yeah,” he muffled at 290 pounds himself. I was getting dressed one morning shortly after Cameron was born and before he knew it, “ugh” leaped from his tongue, over his lips and into my gut. I thought about the kids’ well-being, if I were run in front of a bus as my way out of my marriage. They’d be fed and clothed and may never miss what they didn’t remember of their mother, I thought. Meanwhile, I would give anything to make my family happy, and I wanted my husband to want me like I wanted him.

January 20, 2003 2:30 a.m. Written for Charles’s 30th Birthday

When I look at you,  
you are more handsome  
than the day I saw you twelve years ago  
and thought,  
“He’s too good looking for me.”  
As I walk toward you  
to receive your embrace  
I get lost in you and our souls meet  
Our bones become one and I rest awhile  
in the warmth of your spirit  
When other women look at you,  
I know they see what I see  
and envy what I have  
It makes me insecure that what you have  
may not be reserved for me  
But when you show me your love  
the sun exposes my innate passion for you

Even at the midnight hour  
I become your super woman  
When we are good  
nothing is better, stronger or more fierce  
When we're not  
God braids us together  
as the 3rd string of the chord that binds us

I am addicted to you  
My heart takes you back at hello  
even when my mind says hell no!  
I trust you not to intentionally hurt me  
That fear does not reside  
I am hooked on your hugs and back rubs  
I crave them in my sleep  
One touch, any touch, anywhere  
sends power surges through every capillary  
that calms me with a warm assurance  
You are the note underneath my melody  
Our harmony sounds professional  
to all who hear our song  
we consider ourselves amateurs  
I am attracted to your mind  
You teach me about sensitive matters  
Intelligence, gentleness, and kindness  
these lost basics reign in you  
Soulmates...mating souls  
Constantly, continually  
Thriving on one another  
Loving each other  
Til death do us part

Our bleak financial situation had climaxed, and it began dismantling my resilience in loving Charles. In addition to our mortgages, car notes, deferred student loans, we now had five credit cards in which we could only afford the minimum payment. There was a lot of tension in our home. Charles attempted to show me that he cared by sending flowers to my office for Valentine's Day. I wanted to be grateful and soft, but all I could think about is if he used money from the bank account reserved for bills, or if he used one of the credit cards, which would mean the minimum payment on that card would be raised.

It was a tough conversation, but we agreed to only use what we had left on credit cards for emergencies, and after a few months, I could see some of the balances go down. Then I opened up one credit card bill and found that he had charged \$500 on random items like gas, sodas, and CD's. I gave up and refused to be responsible for handling the bills anymore.

“You do it from now on and see how stressful it is!” I said. “No problem!” he responded. “I paid my own bills before we got together. Surely I can pay them now.”

I gave him a spread sheet of which bills needed to be paid with which paychecks and the dates of when each was due. Three months into the change of duties, four of the five credit card payments were paid late, which meant the interest rates went from averaging 8% to now 25%. We could still make the minimum payments but not for long. Something had to be done. “I thought you said everything was fine!” I said both angry and surprised. “It was. I just paid them a few days late but I paid them!” he replied defensively. I called all of the credit card companies to negotiate a fair interest rate that we could afford, and they each refused to talk to me. They said they would only negotiate with a credit counseling agency. And so I researched a company that would negotiate for us. We were scheduled to pay the credit counseling agency \$855 per month until our \$47,000 debt was paid in full. They divided \$800 among the credit card companies and kept \$55 for themselves. Just as our new budget was about to be settled, we received a notice in the mail indicating that payment for the water was past due and that the water would be cut off in days if payment was not made. “Ok, I forgot about that one, but everything else is up to date,” Charles said. To both of our surprises, the next day, we received a similar notice from the electricity company. Luckily that was the last of the turn off notices, and now we could move on. I made a spread sheet of our new budget, which was down to the bare essentials. We sat down to

discuss our new agenda, but I found him to be abrupt in his responses and interactions, which turned my already frustrated tone more sour.

“Why is it that YOU, of all people, have an attitude right now when we should be working together?” I said.

“Because I’m mad, and this is how I act when I’m mad!” Charles exclaimed. “You just want to say that all of this is my fault!”

“Well, the majority of it is your fault, but the focus should be on us fixing it.”

“How am I supposed to feel like a man when you are giving me an allowance every week? I can’t use my cards or the checkbook. What am I supposed to do if there is an emergency, and I need to get money out of the bank?”

“How about go to the bank and show them your ID.”

“Fine,” he said still mad. “I said I’ll do whatever it takes to make this work. You said you want to go to counseling, then let’s go to counseling.”

“Ok, then show some initiative for a change and make the appointment, if you are really sincere.”

By now, one of my prayers had been answered. I no longer desired my husband. I lost respect for him as a man because I could no longer look to him for security. “Hey, this is a cool watch!” he said flipping through a magazine after a month of getting our bills re-aligned. “I think I’ll ask my mom for \$50 so I can get it,” he continued.

I would have to be under the influence of alcohol to relax enough to accept him when he did touch me. I could laugh and not think about responsibilities and life’s pressures, if I had a glass of wine. Then when one glass no longer worked, it turned into a bottle. I also tried marijuana, but it made me paranoid instead of relaxed, so that didn’t last.

I searched for attention in any other place I could find it. I looked for men to chat with on the internet, and I searched for men from my past. I was successful in my search, but never took it past conversations or a meeting. Sometimes I would go out with Tabitha and not come home until 4:00 a.m., and as long as I didn't wake him, Charles never said anything. I confided in her a lot during this period in my life, and she seemed to understand. She and Arthur had moved 40 minutes away to Orlando and left our church, but we still remained close. One day, I shared a story with her that I had written fantasizing about a meeting I had coming up with Brian, my old fling from college.

*My Victoria's Secret package came last week. I was so excited. My girlfriend convinced me that this would get me some attention. She talked about me terribly after I told her what I slept in every night.*

*Well, I was wrong. I pranced around for the last two weeks, in my new sexy lingerie. Nothing. Then yesterday morning, I caught him in a scurry to press STOP on the VCR remote as I came out of the shower. Like I didn't see the black permanent marker reading XXX on the tape he inadvertently popped out by hitting stop one time too many. I used to get mad when he would use these videos to please himself instead of me. But at some point I have grown numb to it. Today, I am claiming it as fuel looking for a match.*

*Brain is coming in town today on business. I can't wait to see him. We're doing lunch at our spot, Charlie's Steak House on Orange Blossom Trail. I wonder what it will be like to be WITH him. I wonder if I have the guts to actually do something like that within the confounds of my marriage. Considering the status of my self-esteem, I know that I could. The question is, will my conscience dictate my will? I thought I was ready*

*the last time he was here but he wouldn't even kiss me. He claimed I wasn't ready. Too torn. But today, ready or not I am going for it if it feels right.*

*Silence invades the car, but he grips my hand and periodically squeezes it tightly reassure me he was happy to be here. I wait in the car while he checks in. Still time to change my mind, but I don't.*

*We enter the room. I rush to the bathroom full of doubts. I can hear Brian put on a Maxwell CD collection that he'd burned. He knocks... "you ok?" nothing..."Consuela?" I come out. "You ok?" "I'm fine." I said bashfully. "I've waited for you for what feels like a lifetime and tonight, you are all mine." I needed him in that moment. He took my chin softly with the tip of his middle finger and raised my lips to taste his. I want to resist but the dark side is taking over. He pauses, and grabs my body in a hold, as if I were dying. He picked me up, carried me to the bed and kneeled gallantly. "My only goal right this moment is to please you," he whispered in my ear. I want to say something but can't. Too many emotions colliding from too many directions. He's sees my frustration and simply touches my lips. That one touch said a thousand words. He looked into my eyes and reached into my soul.*

*He slowly began to undress me. He took off my blouse with care, helping each arm out of its sleeve. He admired the lift in my push up bra, caressing the mounds before him. He laid me on the bed and unbuttoned my slacks and pulled them down past my round hips. I closed my eyes, savoring the moment, pushing back the creeping guilt. As I lay there in my new cream satin and lace underlay, Brian traces the outlines of my new ensemble. I enjoy the attention, the kisses, the caresses. I opened my eyes and my panties are on the floor.*

*Brian showed me the strength he held inside of his jaws. His oral muscle flattened and gently opened the door to my pleasure. He roamed. He explored. Softly kissing the landscape as he journeyed. Soon, his saliva mixed with my love potion until they became one. Then, like the wing of a bird, his tongue fluttered, flapping the space just above the tip of my small mountain, sending me into pleasure overload. He breaks briefly the massage the terrain, then he flies again. I beg him not to stop. To keep it right there. In the next second, I am a bird flying toward heaven. I am a bungee jumper, leaping off of the San Francisco Bridge. He rested while my heart beat raced. A throb so strong, it pounded outward from inner essence. I reached for his lips. I wanted to taste me on his warm breath. I kiss him deep and he received my gesture.*

*He mounted my frame like a panther easing up to its prey. He feels around to locate my gate. He enters with ease. Gliding in reaching for my happy place, out only to re-enter to take me higher than the moment before. He is slow, accompanying the rhythm of Maxwell's "A Woman's World." This is nice. I take it all in. I take him in. In sync, we switch to my favorite position. He runs his fingers down my back and squeezes my ass. I love being handled by his mammoth hands. Then he re-enters my threshold. This time finding the grove that sends my body to the land of uncontrollable shivers. He taps the spot and I let out a desperate squeal from the erotic sensation. Then, like a woodpecker he rat tat tat taps, connecting each sensation to the next like a monkey swinging from limb to limb. This drummer played his rhythm until his body jerked in uncontrolled spasms.*

*The experience was good for both of them, but more exciting for Consuela more meaningful for Brian.*



## The Storm Is Passing Over

I was slipping away from Charles, but had no direction in where I was going. Divorce had not entered my mind as an option because giving up was not part of my character. However, staying in the marriage would change me into someone I did not know. I stopped going to church regularly because my situation had changed, but I found that the messages in church had not. I was working minimally 50 hours at Stetson, I had two children in diapers and sorority obligations. I was exhausted at trying to make my marriage look like the Huxtables, and the message of “just pray about it” was no longer helping.

I began questioning my beliefs after several religious programs my office sponsored. I learned that Christmas was a pagan holiday that celebrated the winter solstice December 25th. I considered for the first time that if you believed in something other than Christianity, these holidays did not apply to you, even more, it was probable that you had special days that may have been more sacred to you. I mentioned my line of questioning to Charles. He said he’d always seen holes in Christianity but that he goes to church to socialize with people more than for any religious meaning. I also enjoyed the community aspect of my Black church experience, but I thought that my primary reason for service in the church and to god was his doctrine. How could I continue if this doctrine has been compromised?

Charles noticed I was changing. He recognized my lack of interest in him and had no idea of what to say to get me back. He finally set up the marriage counseling appointment. This was the turning point in our marriage. He also spoke to Pastor Hodges and set up an appointment for us to talk with him. We only had one session with Pastor, and he did most of the talking. Afterward, Pastor asked to speak to me privately. “Sister Pender. I had no idea Charles was so immature. He is a good guy, but he needs some mentoring to show him what it means to be a

man. I promise I will commit to spending more time with him.” I was hopeful, but it never happened. I also spoke to some of the elder women in our church about relationships without going into detail about my own. Surprisingly, they were eager to share. “Honey, the first 20 years was hell, but through prayer, these last 10 have been wonderful!” Another commented, “I should have left when the children were too young to remember us together. Now that they are grown and gone, there is no use leaving now, especially since he’s too old to cheat on me anymore.”

We finally made it to see our assigned counselor. He was a middle-aged white man of whom I was skeptical because I wasn’t sure he could relate to us. Charles and I actually liked secular counseling better than talking with Pastor because it focused on Charles and I doing most of the talking. After about four sessions, there was no need for us to go back. For our first session, we were to meet with the counselor separately to tell our perspective as to why we need counseling then he met with us together twice. We met separately again for our last session.

The summer months of 2003 came up in one of those sessions when we were asked to describe a good memory in our marriage. “We had a great time this past summer because we were actually often both home at the same time.” Charles offered. “Wow! I thought this summer was awful!” I said when it was my turn. “Yes, were home together but we didn’t spend any time interacting! I was in one room, and you were in another. Or I was on one couch, and you were on another. Any other couple would have been all over each other like rabbits!” In an early session, the counselor deduced the plausibility that Charles is ADHD, which is why he can’t focus attention on me. He suggested that I write down all of the compliments and nice things I want to hear Charles say and post them around the house. I refused. “You are an adult, not my student or child. If it’s that hard for you to remember to say something nice to me than write them down yourself. My self-esteem won’t be able to handle this task.” The possible diagnosis of ADHD

was a relief to Charles because it answered some questions he'd had about himself. The counselor also suggested that since we have difficulty in having a conversation about anything, that we should consider writing each other at least once per week. Lastly, he suggested that we read John Gray's (1993) book *Men are from Mars and Women are from Venus*, which was helpful for both of us. Two points of discussion were brought on by that book. One was the idea of the metaphorical "cave" men hide in when problems arise. It explained how some men intend to remain there until the problem passes. The other point of interest was the idea that men are natural givers and women are natural receivers, and that somehow the roles have reversed and imbalanced how we relate to each other. Therefore, if women stopped doing so much for men, men would eventually do more. The authors explained that men rationalize that there is nothing for him to do if the woman is already taking care of the situation.

Charles admitted in counseling that he punished me for the first few years of our marriage because I gave him an ultimatum on getting married. "I wanted you to move to Florida where I was after you graduated. You could have gotten an apartment or lived with your mom until I was ready to get married. I figured accepting a job in the same state as your mom would have made you want to come back even more," Charles rationalized.

In my last alone session with our counselor, he gave me something strange to think about. "I don't understand why you are trying to save this marriage. He is a nice guy, but he is selfish and immature and he's not going to change." We never went back to the counselor, although we took his advice and wrote each other through email. I was less motivated, but decided to go through the motions anyway.

*August 2003*

**Charles Pender emailed:**

Man you just got off the computer, huh? And now you are sleep. Oh well. Just a little note to say I love you and am always thinking about you. Seems like sometimes we can't ever get a moment when we are alone to just be alone without any stress or worries, etc. You are still the apple of my eye and will you always be the gas that makes my car go even if I seem to buy the regular instead of the premium. That sounded odd, but I think you know what I mean. This week has been busy, it seems, but I am always happy to come home to you, even if it doesn't always show.

PS. Remember when I thought you I said you seemed relieved that we weren't going to the movies? I found out too late that wasn't the case or I would have switched back. My, bad Consuela Pender.

**Consuela Pender emailed:**

I said I would see the movie SWAT again, and I meant it. Still think, even if you were taking advantage of an opportunity, there was still some spite, some hate involved. This was obvious when and how you told me you saw Bad Boys, not to mention you said it was some of your "machismo." The fact that you are "not mad now" is a clear indicator of this. I don't deal with this well because it is childish. If you were dying for us to go see a movie, we would have seen one last weekend. You had everything planned out, even down to movie tickets, and we still didn't go see anything.

Sure, I will forward a copy of the "what I want" document even though the original copy I sent you stayed on the floor for a long time.

**Charles Pender emailed:**

Just so you know. I can agree that my argument of you always doing what I want to do with someone else, didn't quite hold water, at least not fully.

I was thinking, hey I have been wanting to take you to the movies cause we haven't been in a while. I finally get a plan together. And wham, you already went. Here I am dying to go, can't wait, feeling bad, cause we haven't gone and wham you already did. Guess what, I am not mad, pissed, jaded or the like, at least not now. For real, the reason I went was not out of spite. I was thinking, "Hey, she is taking my advice about opportunity. Take it when it comes." Then I just started thinking, I have opportunities that I have not taken because I was waiting to do them with you. There are a lot of things that I would much rather share with you. Sometimes our schedules won't allow it to happen. I am just learning to do some on my own. I decided on Wednesday to follow my own advice and go see a movie.

Believe it or not, I was getting ready to tell you about it anyway, cause I could see how it might cause a future problem. If you go to the movies just let me know, but you might have to be prepared to see it twice. LOL

I must say, this is wonderful. A full conversation and no arguing. I get to say what I want and hear what you say. Eventually this will translate to verbal in your face communication.

I don't claim to remember the past perfectly, that is why I have you which helps to remind me. And again, anything you bring up from the past I am not trying to take offense to, hence anything you mentioned, I am learning to take it as a reference, from which it came or happened.

As far as the grain of salt, what I was trying to get across is that my thoughts are real, but don't take it as a total bash. I think part of the communication thing is that I have never said what I was thinking, for trying to avoid an argument. This e-mail thing is a way for me to say what is on my mind or express my thoughts no matter how trivial. Unfortunately I have a little Venus in me tucked away. I sometimes say things just to heard.

I am really excited about the response of this in the fact that we are communicating on different levels (sort of). I am also glad that you understand, I sometimes flex my manhood. Flex on Consuela Pender.

**Consuela Pender emailed:**

You say take everything with a grain of salt....correct me if I am wrong, but to me that sounds like...don't take anything I say to heart or seriously because it is likely to be a passing thought that may change at a moment's notice. That contradicts effective communication because then I am left to assume or guess what you are serious about or what is funny to you and the degrees by which to measure each.

About your email addresses...Since we have been married, you seem to do things periodically to flex your manhood. Fine, you need that, I don't question it. It was funny however, your reaction to upon hearing I had a second email address now. It seems like another part of that double standard. You say now you feel a little paranoid because you know I am not at one hundred percent in the relationship, well, imagine feeling that way for years. It makes you do strange things and it gets old.

I never tried to smother you, but at the onset of marriage the idea of being married seemed to smother you. Your idea of college women when we met was that they

went school to find husbands. You spent a lot of time paranoid about women and it seems like you have a difficult time differentiating between me your idea of women in general. I spent a lot of time resenting that and trying to prove you wrong. I never asked for or expected all of your time and energy then, upon marriage, or now. You assumed that, no matter what I showed you or told you. All I ever asked for was to make the time spent, quality time. Instead, I was ignored or got what you call funny jokes that ended up hurting my feelings of which were never balanced by loving comments. Which means, I received hurt without anything to counter act it. You mentioned how well things worked in college because we had our separate lives. Think again Charles. It wasn't like that.

We fought about quality time then too and your lack of interest in me (unless you thought someone else wanted me)! We were miserable but stayed together partly because of love, partly because of security, and partly because it seemed like our guardian angels kept intervening. Think back to the reasons why we broke up. When it was good it was really good, but there were times where the bad became tiring for both of us. Our marriage had the same re-occurring theme in that life is good as long as she is in reach (the room or house). Yeah, encourage her to do other things so that takes the pressure off of me. Think back to when I was teaching, you complained that I was at school too much and wanted me home more. Same thing about Stetson (with other variables involved). Like a toy, you would pick me up off of the shelf when you felt like it and leave me on the floor when you were through. From the beginning, you have said you were quite comfortable with me being in the same room without acknowledging my presence, yet you say I am needy because I want more.

I will accept my part of this mess in that I didn't break plates and cups the first time I felt less than your wife, which was our wedding day when you jokingly told me not to refer to you as my husband. Instead, told you on deaf ears that I was unhappy and other times, I shucked things off to keep "peace" in my home. You were spoiled and I helped. I should have found a different way to make you listen or left. I wish you had have chosen not to ignore things for so long, I had broken plates, or we just plain talked it out when you were unhappy with me and then be willing for us to base decisions for the good of both of us. Like the comments about sleeping with other people. Believe it or not, the comments about sleeping with other people were never literal (unlike your thoughts). The comments were an attempt to make you hurt like I hurt and to see if you even cared about it. The message I received was that no you didn't, because the conversation never went anywhere and you retreated to your cave. I don't have a problem with the cave. I have a problem on the length of time you stay in there. The full picture that I am getting is that you remember the good times when we first dated and the lack of energy it took from you. You treated the marriage with the same lack of energy but the outcome was different. I see your point but I just see much more than that. Let me know if I am wrong.

I do get frustrated when I feel like you don't like to take responsibility for your actions, be it good or bad (refer to the "What I Want" document that I wrote.) My expectation was that, if someone does something wrong, upon their realization, admit it, own it, fix it if it is fixable and move on. I think it's a shame that you don't feel the need to say I'm sorry. This is evident in things as drastic as our money situation and as a little as stepping on my toe. Because I know you are going to go off here...let me elaborate.



First, I both recognize and acknowledge that you are working on this and are making slow progress. Second, I only bring up the money thing to make a point and NOT to re-hash or re-blame. With the money, you sarcastically admitted to mishandling everything and went back into your cave to hide, not to come out until after a year later all of which drastically de-valued any apology or admittance to me. I never wanted to hold anything over your head. To me that is not productive. Instead, you did it. Then you said upon seeing things getting a little better you were cool with the new system but you gave me such a hard time until then which I didn't think was necessary.

You say you want the marriage to work. Define that exactly. Do you want us to be head over heels for each other, do you want me to accept what you can give without complaining, nagging, or communicating about it, do you want us to tolerate each other for the sake of the kids, do you want us to live harmoniously accepting that there will be good times and bad times and to enjoy the good and that working through the bad will make the good better. How can I stay married you asked. Well, first my expectations have changed and second, I am realistic enough to know that the grass isn't any greener on the other side. I am content with getting what I can with what I have because there are more people and issues involved than just me and my feelings. I don't think leaving is the answer to solving our problems and neither is throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Because I am taking care of my mental and emotional well being doesn't mean that the entire focus of us being together has to be from you to me; there is more than me and more than you. I have simply changed my expectations. For me to be head over heels again, some of those previous expectations would have to resurface. Think about what it is you really want out of this marriage. I've mentioned that it would be a good idea for

couples to sit down and write and discuss expectations for clarity and you agreed. I think this would help us. Part of my request for you to go above and beyond what you are giving would be you spearheading this imitative or some other initiative that would help us long term instead of waiting for me to take care of everything. By you bringing up talking the other day was a great step in this direction.

**Charles Pender emailed:**

Even in my anger, I still have my sight.  
Even in darkness, I can still see the light.

I am standing at the bottom, gazing at you alone on the top,  
wishing, hoping and praying that this madness will stop.

My journey is not over, alas it has just begun  
for you see what keeps me going is the prize to be won.

Just a continuation, I am still working on it (it being communication). I know the first e-mail went on and on and around and around. I noticed you refer to emotional abuse. I guess you get that drama from the lifetime movies I always said you wanted. That's a joke too but if you feel I abuse you, then you really don't need to be with me. If you perceive it, then it must be true. I would never want to be in abusive relationship as the abused or as the abuser. Seems like you have a ton of reasons why we shouldn't be together, but not very many why we should.

Remember, when I am writing I am voicing what is in my head at the time, whether good or bad. Whatever is out there is fair game. Just remember always take everything with a grain of salt.

I have re-read this e-mail and am very glad I did. I took it a different way than I did the first time. My original response is much different. I might send it to you later,

anyway, but not sure there would be a reason too. The first time the only thing I came away with was "Why exactly don't you want a divorce?" Seemed to me, if I lost you, we need to end this now and move on. On second reading, unclouded with rum, I just see more communication. Now to be honest, I don't feel like the situation is much better than before, but there seems to be a ray of light.

You are right I obviously do have another e-mail address. Why did I get it?

Good question. Partially because it came with AIM and the other reason is not so simple. You see while you have been having your rebirth, I have noticed that it seems you want me to change. I saw you growing apart from me on purpose. You see all of this is still not just about what I have done. You helped create the mess. In a way, you are exactly the same person I met and the same person who spent 2 years in Terre Haute. When I met you, you were very independent. What made us click was that we always had our separate things going for us, so that when we came together it was cool. You say you realize it was because you had so many people giving you that emotional support you needed. I assume that means guys always on your jock. Yes, I had the same. I was in music. You were in drama, Gospel choir, etc. Grad school gave you time to explore. You had greater opportunity to be on your own and be the boss. You use to say you liked it because you had to answer to no one. You had your own apartment, car, furniture and the whole nine. And lot's of guys drooling over a sexy independent woman. You see I got accustomed to us having separate, but lives that complemented each other. You had your thing, I had mine, but when we came together it was cool.

Somewhere along the way, as you were trying to suppress your feelings we forgot what worked. If you remember, I have always encouraged you to do other stuff,

probably because I was never able to get used to having to devote so much energy or give so much attention to you. Call this a lack of maturity. How do you think I could slip backwards or ignore so easily. If we are not as tight as you would like, I think everything is fine, because that's what I remember it being like when we first started. There was a time where I could just sit at your apartment or you could watch me do home work, or practice and it seemed like life was good. Now things like that are unacceptable to you, not that it shouldn't be, but I hope you are seeing the whole picture here.

Me having another e-mail was my testosterone building up saying "hey, I am my own man. I won't be dictated to." Yeah I was like I could speak to people privately. Of course the only person that has been, has been Tabitha, but that is probably a good thing. There have been two times that you have randomly read my e-mail. Neither time was bad, but both made me feel uncomfortable. You said you were shocked when you found out my password wasn't goodfoot and felt I had something to hide. I had the same question when I helped you remember your password that wasn't goodfoot. HmMMMM. believe it or not, I don't remember that password and wasn't in mind to try and remember it. My password only changed this past spring, mainly cause of a student and the other is because I had an intern who loved to be on the net more than me.

Unfortunately, I have feelings that you have been sneaky, too, over the past few years. I took all of your little jabs in stride or tried to ignore them. I knew they were partially true, but didn't know how to respond to them. The easiest way was to ignore them. You talked about being able to sleep with other men. Hey I felt the same way about other women. It seems like for this to work for you it has to go 180 degrees with you being the focus. That can't happen. Or we will be right back where we started. There are

some things I need too in this relationship. I have not been able to voice them as of yet, but I will. It can't be all about you, nor can it be all about me. There has to be some middle ground. Hell I can even go 98%-2% (you-me). That is a joke! I am not trying to strip you of you, by the way. I love you because you are independent, always have.

On a different note, what would be the outcome, if I told you I had applied for a credit card, whatever the reason.

**Consuela Pender emailed:**

You are right about me trying to look at your aim password. I'll say it again, it was wrong and you should have been ticked. What made me do it? I realized you had several email addresses a while ago (not through snooping) and it made me think, again, you had stuff to hide. And no, I didn't know who all was on your buddy list. You saw mine one day ALONG WITH the saved password. This was the day you helped me remember what it was. Anyway, I theorized that you knew mine and that if you didn't have anything to hide it would not matter, besides...it would be goodfoot anyway.

BOOM, I was wrong..."He really must have something to hide." Wrong or right, this is why. The idea was not to log on as you and talk, although it has crossed my mind that you could do that for me. It won't happen again out of respect and, frankly, because I am tired of trying to know you through means other than you. It is tiring and I think I deserve better.

I have finally gotten to the point that I accept you for what you can give without trying to re-arrange the family or judging you. I understand you are very comfortable being the way you are and I don't want you to change for me. At the same time, I no longer pray my needs away to accommodate you or what you could give. Now

you want me to change again because you are ready to give me a few more bits of you, partly because you think someone may be interested or now you are of the right age to be settled. Now that you are attempting to make steps forward, it is difficult accepting some of it, for several reasons. One is knowing that when you come home, you still have to work to make me feel loved. Home is supposed to be a place of comfort, peace and love. Believe me, I know what it feels like to not want to come home because the climate was chilly or stifling or you'd just rather be doing something else. I never wish that on anyone especially if I was the cause. Not the persona I want to portray and don't want to feel pitied. Another is, which we have already discussed, we have different expectations of marriage and different needs and have not reached a solid compromise. Another is, I have been where I let you back in all the way only for you to retreat back to was is normal for you with maybe a slight improvement towards us. I realize I don't like to be ignored or taken for granted. You may call this needy. I call it me. Again, I have no desire to change you and don't want my needs to be changed. Does all this mean you have lost me now? Yes. How much...I DO NOT KNOW!!!! I have no desire to go back to the way we were or the way I was and am not sure where I am going, but I know where I am not. Either I have to slow down or you have to speed up. It doesn't seem to be any middle ground. But I don't feel like slowing down anymore. I need you to go above and beyond for you to catch up and for it to seem natural. But if I were totally gone, I would have said, "Hey, I am going to NY, no matter what you thought." Which by the way the trip is definitely cancelled but I think Tabitha and I may cruise to Miami that same weekend. I don't think you are a bad person. In fact, you are really cool. That's what complicates things. It would be easier to let go of the years of emotional abuse and move on if it

sprouted from maliciousness. But we are definitely on two different airplanes and I don't know how we can land to board the same plane at the same time. I was baffled to realize we weren't on the same plane. I don't know how I missed it. I guess love is blind. Funny thing is, I guesstimated it would be when we were 40 before we caught up with each other since that was our other alternative for a marriage date. We'll see.

**Charles Pender emailed:**

Sometimes on the spur of the moment I have a bit of an artists' flare. Just remember before you read you had better beware. Sometimes it's good, sometimes it's bad. Sometimes it just plain stinks. You don't have to like them for grade a. They are just thoughts.

Lights down low, music just right  
Luther says the words that I am feeling tonight.  
Fresh from the shower, your scent fills my nose,  
Where the feeling might takes us, only the future knows.

As I lay here looking at you on this bed,  
my mind is focused, like a bull seeing red.  
With your clothes now removed and your back to my eyes,  
I watch the delicate rise,  
of your spine and your butt  
that I want to taste so much.  
So I rub your flesh, and let it feel my hands,  
groping and stretching at my mind's command.  
I feel your body relax as I place a gentle kiss,  
on each cheek and in the middle I let my tongue diddle,  
back and forth up and down,  
slow and fast, round and round.  
Your legs begin to spread offering me the prize that I want to claim,  
Your hips rise to the rhythm that is making my mind go insane.  
I lick and I suck every hole is fair game  
like the brush strokes of an artist  
no two strokes are the same.

Just testing to see if this works or not. SO now you have a new e-mail address. Good for you. You could have used your AIM one, but oh well be different.

For the record, don't be trying to snoop on my aim password. That ticked me off when it happened. I was like she knows who is on my account. She has seen it before. What purpose would she have to sign on. Were you going to AIM people disguised as me? Why? All of these things went through my head. I tried to convince myself that it may have been a student. I didn't think so, though. That's why it got changed in the first place.

Yes I have seen your long list of buddies. DO I know who all those people are, no. Should I know? Probably not necessary. Have I ever wondered if they were some secret dude you were having an affair with? Of course! A Thousand times. Why didn't I react more? Good question. I think I got in my head that I had lost you and I'm still not totally convinced otherwise.

You should realize that I have never been one to show much emotion, even if I was feeling it. You are probably right that I picked up some of those habits from parents while growing up, which is why I am still content to sit in a room and not talk. Actually that has changed. Now, if we aren't talking, I am wondering what you are thinking. And are you filling up your head with a whole bunch of unproductive stuff. My mind still wonders a lot and my stream of consciousness is all over the place as you can tell from this email. The problem is I have so much I would love to share with you that don't for whatever reasons. I think this e-mail thing will help for me to get to know you again, and for you to get to know me. Yes, there is more to me than you think. Just wait and see! The freak will come out.



I have to stop now, but know that you are always on my mind.

### I Know I've Been Changed

All of the drama in my life was taking a toll on my body. I had had baby fat left over from two babies in addition to my own. I worked massive hours, ate on the run, took care of the community, my church, my house and two children in diapers. But I did not take care of me. I could see why Charles was not attracted to me.

The realization that I needed to lose weight hit me like a brick thrown on my forehead in November of 2003. This was because I was in denial, asleep. I recognized that my clothes sizes were getting larger, but I rationed that they must be cut differently. Then I told myself that although my size 18's were as tight, I didn't look like the chunky women who usually squeezed into my growing sizes. Then one day it hit me. My youngest son's teacher gave me a picture of my son and me taking a hayride with his class. When I looked at the women holding and smiling with my son, I barely recognized her. She looked swollen. Her face looked to have an imprint of the face of a pig. Then I realized that Miss Piggy was actually me. Was I subconsciously avoiding mirrors? I took a long hard look at myself and rationed that I must not have real friends if no one told me I looked like this. Well, perhaps I did hear some remarks here and there but I blamed the messenger for what he/she witnessed. I had to do something. I remembered looking at a picture of me in college, shortly after I'd met my husband. I was a size 5/6 and had no idea at the time of how good I looked. What happened to me? I thought to myself, if only I looked like that now, the world would have to watch out. Then I asked myself, why can't I look like that? Don't I have some choice in the matter? And then it came to me in a dream. I envisioned layers of weight literally falling off. I was standing there, and I saw thin brown layers of skin peeling

off me like an orange and falling like feathers. I was mentally ready and later wrote about my journey.

## Mental Readiness

This is the first and the most difficult step to work through. The beauty of the difficulty of it however, is that difficulty does not constitute impossibility. This means that just because something is difficult, doesn't mean it is impossible. It simply means that it is one of many challenges in our lives that can help us to grow stronger mentally and help prepare us for places in our lives that we never dreamt we could go. Until we allow ourselves to flow to the next level in excellence, we would not be able to appreciate this new and improved place. Once a mind is strong, the body can easily follow.

Once you reach the point of complete mental readiness, you are not concerned about gaining the weight back. Acknowledging the problem by saying, I need to do something about my weight is only one step. You can't stop there. Then there are those who do some research and stop and settle for diets. Diets are temporary. Lifestyle changes are for life. This is why diets fail. You have to be true to yourself about forming habits that you can continue for the rest of your life. One step many of us never reach is that you have to be open-minded. Many of us see small people and think, "They are so lucky!" Then we hear about how many of them stay small and immediately say, "Oh I can't do that!" Some of us are gung ho and go the extreme by exercising too hard or starving ourselves, which are tactics that are set up to fail. Charles decided he would make up his own diet of a snickers bar and coke. Rationalizing that he could burn the sugar faster in the gym when he worked out and if that was all he ate, he was sure to lose weight. Losing weight is a science. If you take in more than you burn, you'll gain. If you burn more than you take in, you'll lose. If you burn what you take in, you'll maintain. If you took a science class and

started making up your own formulas, you'd fail the class just like we fail our bodies by making up ways to lose weight without thorough research.

Once you have completed your research, come up with a plan and stick to it. Remind yourself that it will not happen overnight and if it does, something is wrong! Take baby steps but make sure you challenge yourself. Babies are intended to walk but they first have to crawl.

Even though I have had success with my weight issues, I try not to talk to people about their weight issues unless they ask. I have found that telling someone they need to lose weight with the intention of them listening is a waste your time. It is probably something they have heard a thousand times but until they make up in their minds that this is something that they need to do for themselves it will never happen. Ever tell a feening drug addict that they need to stop doing drugs or a person who horribly mis-manages money that they need to learn money management? This is a very personal decision and no matter how much we love them, they have to do it for themselves.

## Research

I was enlightened and dismayed to find that many poor people are fighting a losing battle when dealing with obesity. Our economy and the food industry encourage this by overpricing foods that are good for you and allowing the affordable foods to be highest in calories, fat, sugar and sodium. Consider all you can eat buffets. These are generally inexpensive for the amount of food some of us can inhale. But body was never designed to eat all that it can hold at one time. Unfortunately, the very health insurance needed to receive care and treatment from disease caused by these foods is not marketed to the segments of our population who cannot afford better food choices.

I had to re-evaluate how I viewed food. I had to “unlearn” that it was normal and acceptable to eat until you are full then “learn” that it is in fact normal and acceptable to eat until your body understands that it is no longer hungry. This is difficult for many of us who grew up in the South where food is a welcoming gesture or for those who were raised by parents who encouraged kids to eat until they were full because they were not sure when or where the next meal was coming. This is also difficult for those of us who tie food into our emotions rather than view food as substance and nourishment necessary for survival. In this privileged society, we have been conditioned to seek instant gratification. You have got to appreciate the irony of America being the most advanced nation on earth, yet we are typically in baby stages of maturity, stuck in oral fixations to solve our problems. Another important fact I had to unlearn was my definition of eating. It is necessary to balance foods throughout the day and less important to make sure each meal is balanced. Your body wants you to eat something every two to three hours but just because you are eating, doesn’t mean it has to be a meal. Small frequent snacks speed up your metabolism so that you can burn fat quicker. Fewer meals slow you’re your metabolism. This is why most people don’t lose significant weight if they choose to eat once per day.

I am the classic case of tying food into my emotions and I have lot of emotions. I first had to acknowledge this, which for me wasn’t done gracefully. While discussing a work issue with a colleague, she asked if I was ok because she noticed that I was eating the popcorn like I needed to breathe. I shoveled the popcorn in my mouth so fast from nervous energy that my jawbone ached. There are two things I learned to do to combat this challenge. First, I had to find other ways to channel my emotions. I do this through journaling, exercising, talking to people, cleaning.

I had to put some war tactics in place to fight the counterproductive measures of running to food for comfort. First, to ward off the urge to want to eat more, I found myself dousing food with condiments and sauces because I knew a moment of weakness was on the rise. Contradictory to how I was raised, I also realized that it was ok to not eat everything on my plate at one time if I misjudge how much food to put on my plate. Some families praise children when they eat all of their food. Babies have not yet been conditioned to eat until oblivion. They naturally listen to their bodies when they have had enough. Yet we forced them to eat everything on a super size me plate, rather than allowing them to eat what portion size their bodies can naturally handle. We teach them not to drink their liquids first because they won't want all of their foods, then we grow up, get fat and have to learn that we need to drink water before each meal so that we won't eat too much food.

Because I worked on a college campus, I had access to colleagues in recreation and faculty in nutrition and dietary science. I went from eating 2000 to 1800 calories to 1500 calories and now I maintain a healthy 1300-1500 for my body type. Counting calories was not a chore for me because I was focused. I was on a mission. One year later, not only do I not count anymore; I don't know at what point I no longer had to count. After a time, you know what you can and cannot eat. You know if you splurged on one meal or snack, to take it easy on another. The only time I ever count now is when I introduce something new to my menu. It is just as important to read labels for fat, sodium, and carbohydrates and make choices that will balance out throughout the day.

I quickly found out why people said that if you drank lots of water, you'd lose weight. Water has no calories whereas juices and sodas range from 100-160 calories per serving and a

serving is 12 ounces, not the 32 and 64 ounces we have been acculturated to buy. Also, if you if you drink more, you feel fuller, thus naturally not wanting to eat excessively.

## Rewards

Set short attainable and long-range goals and reward yourself as you reach them. Do not reward yourself with food. By doing this, we are saying that food is a prize or a treat. Although this is true in most countries, it will be counterproductive to the average U.S. citizen attempt to lose weight. Remember, we eat to live, not live to eat! One of my long-range goals was to lose thirty pounds. My reward was to cut my hair. By doing this, I saved myself time and money on the upkeep of hair and rewarded myself with a stylish look to compliment my new figure.

If you want to reward yourself, consider taking a day off and pamper yourself. You could see a movie, go to the beach, or go to the spa to get a facial, a pedicure, a manicure, or a massage. You could do something that you've been putting off until you got around to it like read a book that you've always wanted, or fix, re-organize, or decorate something around the house. Take a get-away. This could range from an inexpensive overnight stay a few hours away to a week wherever your budget can take you. Get a babysitter and GO DANCING! This is a double reward because you get out and you get to burn additional calories. You might consider collecting something if you don't already and each time you reach one of your goals, add a piece. For instance, my husband's aunt collects all types of clowns. If you collected clowns, reward yourself by getting a new one each time you reached a goal. Do something adventurous that you couldn't have imagined you doing before. Skydive, parasail, go snowboarding, make a snow

angel, make a mud angel, play in the rain or ocean in the middle of a non-electric storm, ride an electric bull. Life is too short not to enjoy it!

There are other rewards that happen as a byproduct of your labor. You might find that you no longer need the seat belt extension on a plane, and the selection in style and fit of clothes are better and so is sex. The compliments you'll hear are great "feel goods" and they are sincere. "My favorite is, "You don't look like you have two kids!" You might find that seats are fit more comfortably, you may not sweat as much or breathe as hard or get as tired from walking up a flight of steps or going down the block. This also means you smell better longer.

### Cheating

There is no such thing as cheating when you make this lifestyle change. If you want cookie, have one; just don't finish the box! And don't have a cookie every day.

### Motivation

People are motivated in many ways. For some, it takes a strong support system of friends or family. I was motivated in several ways. First, I got that Miss Piggy picture and displayed it in my car next to my sexy college picture, so that I could see them every day on my commute to work. Also, the more I lost the more I was motivated to lose. I remember several times where I would look at a food or dessert that was once my kryptonite, and say is this worth it? And I could genuinely smile and say, "No!" Or I would take a bite just to remember its taste and disregard the rest. One last thing that I attributed to initial motivation was watching weight loss and challenge stories on cable.

## Exercise

First thing to know is that for a body to burn fat, it must do cardio for 20 minutes at the body's given target zone. After the first 20 minutes, you burn calories. Refer to the target heart rate chart. Consult a doctor on what your body can take based off of various health conditions. Next, the best I can say here is JUST DO IT! 20 minutes seven days a week to form the habit. Marking off days on the calendar that I exercised was a visual reminder as well a motivation. The 20 minutes was very difficult for a long time so I spoke power into my routine to shouting words of encouragement to myself. I'd shout, "You can do this Consuela!" POWER, GOD, PUSH, WORK, BURN. I was talking to my spirit and to the fat. I even would call in Charles or my children if I were too tired to shout out power words and asked them to shout them out loud for me. Then, I played a mental game with myself. While convincing myself not to quit, I rationed why I wanted to quit and couldn't come up with a good enough reason. I'd say, I am only walking so my legs aren't heavy, my heart is beating faster than normal but it is not about to beat outside of my chest. I could breathe steadily as long as I was not panicking triggered by mental weakness. So, I kept going, continuing to repeat the regenerating words.

Strength training is a great way to speed up your process of getting healthy and compound your success. Be aware that you might not lose weight as quickly because you are gaining muscle but you will lose inches!

## Buying a Wardrobe

Again my goal was to get back into a size twelve. By the time I got to a weight where I could easily maintain, a year had passed and much to my surprise, I was a size 8. I lost 60 pounds and lost 4 sizes. My budget wouldn't allow me at the time to purchase a new wardrobe



each time I went down a size. Also keep in mind that I wasn't in one size long enough to enjoy a new outfit. Something that helped me out was that friends loaned me clothes that were tucked away in their closets for sometimes years. Drawing on my poor and working class life as a child, I even hit the consignment shops and goodwill. I often saw college kids in the Goodwill store buying interview clothes and such and no one would have ever known the difference. The one thing that I did buy new each time was undergarments. Everyone has to have his or her limits! There is no need to spend a lot on this if your budget doesn't allow you to because you will continue to drop sizes until you stabilize.

I went from an 18 to 8 in a year without dieting! The more weight I lost, the clearer my thoughts became about who I was and what I wanted out of life. Charles continued to write and I continued to exercise.

Sunday, November 16, 2003 6:19 PM

**Charles Pender emailed:**

*RE: Shitty!*

Man, this has been a shitty week. Really Shitty! One of those times I wish I could cry! Sometimes I really wish I could share my cave with you, but I really don't think it could hold us both. It is a very lonely place and is probably best that you don't come in. This way, I can find my way out by the light that you hold up as a guide! That sounds like a poem. Hmmm! At least the new week offers a new chance to renew and rejuvenate. Kind of cool how our connection has been thriving again. Before you called Saturday night, I had just gotten off of the net, anticipating that you would be calling soon. No more than 3 minutes and the phone rang. Funny I should wake up just as you

get home as well.

Each day is like a picture. Smile and make it the best one you can!

The more weight I lost, the more clarity invaded my head. Charles went back and forth with his comments about my weight loss and they usually landed on me overdoing it. But I no longer needed his validation. I allowed the writing gods to take over my keyboard and I exhaled.

EXHALE - December 2003

I release the frustration from the labor of loving you, carrying you, the rejection from you  
Inner peace resides where you once stood as the priority of my attention  
I release you to fly where you need to be free.  
Self-confidence now fuels my flight to the heavens of success and security.  
Neglect has escaped my vocabulary of expectations,  
Instead, I choose me, loving me, caressing me, enjoying the very essence of me  
Words can hurt but your words hurt no longer,  
That power accompanies respect which left when I was left to fend for myself.  
I'm Done.

*Friday, February 20, 2004 12:54 PM*

**Charles Pender emailed:**

*RE: hello*

Let's see. I am sorry, if I do not light up the moment, I see you. Inside, I am excited, but sometimes I cannot figure out how to let it show. I am sorry if I do not touch you the right way or say the right thing to make you tingle inside. I feel bad that that you are not exercising. Even though I know it wasn't for me in the first place. I have been proud of you for the effort that you have shown and yes I can tell the difference. I wish I could be your motivation but I am willing to accept the residuals.

I get upset when it seems you turn away my every advance. I get frustrated and pull away. I am sorry that I have not written you in quite a while it has been on my mind I

have been weak in my actions while this is kind of like a love letter, it is not because I have not written a response but it is something that was on my mind. Anyway, I think I will write you at least once a week. Today is just a start.

- Each day is like a picture. Smile and make it the best one you can!

*Sunday, February 29, 2004 10:02 PM*

**Charles Pender emailed:**

*RE: Hello. This still counts as last week!*

I said I would write once a week so here goes, nothing or something, depending on how you look at it. Not even close to be in the love letter technique. Have to work on that one some more. See there you go interrupting me, while I am writing you. How do you expect me to keep my train of thought? Now what was I writing about not sure. Oh yeah, seemed like there was tension in the air. Seems like I am supposed to be saying or doing something that I am not. Like when you said I was here, but not here over the summer. Well hey you have to help me out sometime. I can't figure this thing out on my own. Some prompts, or better yet some encouragement would be nice.

Where exactly are you in this relationship, anyway. You still don't know? I keep thinking you are in a "deal with what I got for the sake of the kids" program. Not good. I feel like whatever I do is not good enough. I am at least of going for little points and not big ones. I know all of this is hard for you, but it's hard for me as well, please don't forget that. Like I said sometimes I just get the feeling that you are accepting of me, but are looking to be fulfilled elsewhere. No, that is not necessarily sexual. But every time, I get to feeling that way, it makes me want to hold back. Like a defense, a way to keep from getting hurt as much if the walls come tumbling down. Yeah, I know there internet dating

sites out there. You seem to know about them as well. I wonder if these places are inviting to you. Ms. Karema joined, so I checked her out on the web. Seems to be the popular thing to do especially according to that book. There are lots of women in Deland. You can search almost any kind of way, occupation, college, etc.

I am rambling now, so that means it is time to stop. These aren't meant to ramble, since I know how much you hate my meaningless chatter. I think that sometimes why we don't talk as much. I have to go through my chatter to get to the next level, sometimes. Usually by the time I get there you are reading, or watching TV, or on the phone. Or just simply seems as though you have me tuned out. Yes, these are generalizations. Give me a break, here. Geesh! Ok, stopping for real. Almost.

I am sorry if you think, I am not interested in you, cause I am. I am sorry if you think I don't find you attractive (sexually) cause I do. I hate the fact that you don't think I wouldn't make love to you every night, cause I would, if we could get the timing right. It makes it real clear when you say you want some, though. Maybe I will come and rub your knee or something. Maybe you should go back on the pill. Only three days of the rag!

If I never showed it, I did.

If I forget to say it, I do.

If you doubt, I am failing.

If you believe it, there is hope.

IF you feel it, then I am not alone.

If you can hold on to it, hold tight.

If it is mine, I won't quit without a fight.

It's called love, nothing more nothing less.

If you will accept it from me, I will give my best!

That was a quicky! Not great, but they all can't be! When are u going to share some more of your writings with me?

- Each day is like a picture. Smile and make it the best one you can!

**Charles Pender emailed:**

*Tuesday, March 16, 2004 10:48 PM*

*RE: Hello!*

Well here is a quickie of sorts. Another week has reached the halfway point, almost. I cannot believe the school year is almost over, only 9 weeks left. For you it is even less. I bet you are excited. I am tired. Not really ready to deal with the end of the year problems. Festival, kids shutting down, etc. We will be babysitting for the next few months, now that FCAT is over.

On to other things. How U feeling? I assume neutral, neither good, nor bad. I could be wrong. I am hoping that you are appreciating the fact that I am trying to get the boys dressed and make half of their lunches. Don't want to hear how "It must be nice to just get yourself ready in the mornings." Even though I do have an actual sign in time. And I don't want to hear how you have lost your "me" driving time. That is why I am trying to take the boys home, sometimes. You seem to be needing a lot of you time lately. Looks like me and the boys just need to leave on the weekends. LOL. Well, we will try and do that as well!

On another note, glad you are going to church on Sunday. As usual, pastor is interested in me, after he talks to you. I think he wants to fuck you. Can't blame him

though. You are pretty attractive and sexy! What man in their right mind isn't at least thinking about it, after they meet you!

Kudos on the weight loss. Very impressive. I am proud of you. A little jealous as well. I have reached a stand still. Just can't seem to commit to changes that will make my weight go lower. Hopefully the gym will help. Maybe one day, we will both look like super models.

- Each day is like a picture. Smile and make it the best one you can!

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#### *Memorial Day Weekend 2004*

I made lots of progress with my weight loss and weaned the males in my house off of me long enough to get time for myself. Work wasn't going as well. Our Vice President implemented a new program in my area that was fiscally in the interest of the university, but not within the mission of my office. Then everything changed. Donald, my mentor, was let go. It didn't matter to me why. It only mattered that I could see no future at this white school because he was the center of why I came to work. Who would I look to now? The only way to describe how I felt when the only positive stable thing in my life left me was grief. I cried for days, and then I started job searching in and out of the state of Florida.

Charles had been asking me to consider coming to church from time to time because he was tired of people asking him where I was. I went to church on the Sunday after Memorial Day. I was dressed covered from head to toe but I donned style and sophistication to match my new attitude, short hairstyle, and weight loss. Several people stopped me after church to say how good it was to see me in church and to comment on my new look. The assistant pastor's wife, a stout homely looking woman had other concerns. "I need to watch you for Mr. Pender." she said

looking me up and down with her lips poked out. In that moment, I realized that the message of “It will be alright” I’ve heard since I was a youth in the church was meant to keep me dependent on the church. If I made it to the promised land of “alright” I would no longer need it.

Along with the new outfit I wore to church, I also brought home one to model for Charles as I made it into my goal size. I turned around and around as he stoically looked me up and down. I was on my way out of the room because I knew how fabulous I looked and didn’t need to hold out for his validation.

“Wait!” he chuckled, “Don’t go! You know how my brain works. One minute I might like it, the next I might not and then I might like it again.”

“It’s ok Charles. I am ok. There is nothing you can say or do or not say or do that will ever hurt me again,” I said confidently.

“You say that like you feel you are settling.”

I continued into the bedroom in silence so that I can take off of new clothes.

“So you think you settling?” he asked following behind me.

“Yes and I deserve better,” I said unapologetically.

That was the end of that conversation. His demeanor was much softer afterwards, but it meant nothing to me without closure to the conversation. For the next few days, Charles was giddy and touchy feely, and it felt strange and almost displaced.

“Why are you touching me? That’s not like you,” I inquired.

“I don’t know,” he said smiling. “It’s just that you’re looking better, the money is better, and I am falling in love with you all over again! I know I still have to program my brain to compliment you and tell you I love you, but it’s [touching you] becoming natural to me now.”

“What?” I said in disbelief.

I knew what I had heard, but now that I had heard it out loud, it was real.

“Why would you want to be in a relationship with someone where it takes 13 years of touching someone for it to become natural? I sure as hell do not want to be in a relationship with someone who had to work that hard to be with me. I don’t know how it’s going to happen, but I just know I can’t do this anymore. I’M DONE!”

The weight that immediately lifted off of my shoulders felt as if it were as tangible as a boulder. It prompted an uncontrollable laughter rising from my gut and I said, “If I knew it would feel this good, I would have said it a long time ago.”

### Be Grateful Unpacked

I entered the field of education with little expectations because it was not the field of my study of my formal education. However, I am now sometimes referred to as a Black educator and a Black intellectual. These titles gave me membership into the Black middle class. The qualifier Black situates my place as abnormal to middle class as does “poor” white qualifies an anomaly to being white. The absence of the antecedent “white” when referring to an educator, intellectual, or a member of the middle class assume precludes it as the normative standard. The Black scholar then becomes an anomaly, whose identity is bifurcated as she adjusts to reap her consolation prize, “cultural capital” (Kincheloe, 1999) and a coveted invitation to “melt physically and mentally into the white world” (Williamson, 1984, 11). In addition, the invite comes with shackles of debt and life on the newly developed gated community, Plantation Estates, located in Suburbia, America.



The idea of an organic society resonates with me because of its implications of one's place and function on a social body. Understanding that everyone has a functional “organic” place in society (Williamson, 1984), white supremacy has concluded some social body parts more expendable than others. As a Black woman, historically and today, expendability can mean finding creative ways to find an acceptable "place" on the body for survival's sake by obtaining and retaining a function on the social body worth keeping. My hope was that mobility into the Black middle class as an educator raised my value.

Teachers have often been tagged and branded as property. At first sign of trouble, they are first known as the slave (teacher) of a particular plantation (name of school) then lynched in the public (media) for their wrong doing. They are stripped of their constitutional right to visit unengendered establishments at will and are assumed by those they nurture to remain in slave quarters (classrooms and portables) at all times.

They are shackled to teaching to standardized test using prescribed lesson plans with little to no freedom to think or question. It can be a thankless job, many times unsupported by their overseers (administrators) when an unfruitful crop (students) is produced. In that event, the punishment is more standardization and rigidity of the whip. Jonathan Kozol (2005) spoke of the implication of considering students as products when he stated,

'Dismayed by the faulty products being turned out by troubled public schools,' The Wall Street Journal wrote in 1990, 'some 60 of the city's giant corporations have taken over the production line themselves,' a reference to the efforts that these corporations had invested in creation of a model school in a predominately black neighborhood that was intended to embody ideas of managements and productivity. 'I'm in the business of developing minds to meet a market demand,' the principal announced during a speech

delivered at a 'power breakfast' of the top executives of several of these corporations. (p. 96)

But the dutiful, nurturing (customer service driven) mammy, puts others above her own needs.

There were thousands of slaves on one plantation per one master. To manage this enslaved labor force, masters used various methods of discipline and control. They sometimes use kindness. "Now I contend that the surest and best method of managing Negroes is to love them...we know that if we treat our horse well, he will become gentle, docile and obedient" (Takaki, 1994, p. 111). This is evident in recognition initiatives like teacher of the month or year awards. Other teachers experience administrative control defined by the continued additions of assessments and standardizations.

Life in the classroom had become too oppressive for me to continue. When I came to work in Stetson University, another white school, I began to hear my voice unfold in starting new diversity initiatives and facilitating diversity programs across the university. I started a gospel choir on this small, private, white college with a four percent Black student population. When the choir formed, it was made up of an almost equal number of Black and white students. One pastor at a church performance commented, "Now this is what heaven is supposed to look like!" This pastor's statement disturbed me for years because before that moment, I never imagined heaven would include white folks. As I played and revisited songs for this research, I felt a sense of nostalgia where I associated Black church music with a community of people who struggled together. Intellectually, it made sense that heaven should be made up of Black and white people as well as other races, ethnicities, religions, etc. However, the heaven I sang about in Black churches spoke hope to a community of poor Black people supporting each other until

they reach their promised land. The idea of heaven being for those who already have their reward here on earth did not seem fair.

Starting the choir gave me a sense of accomplishment and boosted my self confidence as I began to see a trend of doing what those who had more power said I could not. I was transitioning out of only consuming information to learning how to produce it. I was grateful for having more choices and my gratitude showed in my willingness to help others, especially marginalized Black youth succeed. I happily robed myself in the cloth of superwoman, strong and Black tackling work, babies, church, husband, and sorority. But that resilience would not last. bell hooks (1981) explained this best when she said,

Usually when people talk about the strength of black women they are referring to the way in which they perceive black women coping with oppression. They ignore the reality that to be strong in the face oppression is not the same as overcoming oppression. (p. 7)

Mama PhD (2008) is a great example of narratives of women educators who are faced with this balance. It humanized female teachers with lived experiences outside of the classroom and told their stories of coping with the balancing academia. It is taboo to think that teachers are people who love, hurt, have sex, drink alcohol, have marital or other problems. However, like people in other professions, our professional lens cannot be void of our personal lens. It became apparent that my resilience was waning and I was caving to weight of oppression of taking care of everyone else.

I had pieced together how to balance my life from a television character name Claire Huxtable from the Cosby Show because The Huxtable's were the first middle class Black home in which I had been exposed. I applied Black love and personal and professional relationships from that show and the fictional books I read (McMillian, 1992; Hurston, 1937/1965; Morrison,

2003) because it seemed less oppressive than the example of Black love relationships modeled by my mother. I encountered the upward mobility which afforded me to bypass the James and Florida Evans paradigm from the show about poverty called Good Times and assumed my journey would be over. The challenge was that I would need to move from being grateful and apologetic to humbly entitled. I was still evolving on my journey while world around me had stopped.

## CHAPTER 5

### THROUGH IT ALL

Through it all  
Through it all,  
I've learned to depend on Jesus  
I learned to depend on God  
I learned to depend on God's holy word  
(Crouch, 1972, track 5)

I chose to title my last storied chapter “Through it All” from a 1972 hit by gospel great Andre Crouch. I envisioned sitting on top of a mountain, thinking back to all of the spots along my journey from Apopka to college to marriage and now divorce singing this reflective song. “Shackles Off My Feet Now I Can Dance” is taken from an upbeat song from the gospel duo Mary Mary (Atkins-Campbell, E., Atkins-Campbell, T., Campbell, W., 2000, track 4). It shouts of the freedom to move around because there are no more figurative chains holding me back from excelling to the highest line of flight imaginable. I was able to leave Charles and move to a place where I could begin exploring me. I left the Black church and was committed to making changes in my new white school. “It’s Time To Make A Change” is taken from the Winans (Bell, B., Winans, M., Winans, C., Riley, T., 1990, track 1) song with a similar name, and it narrates my role as a college administrator in this new place, Georgia Southern University. “Is My Living in Vain” describes the complementary nature of my new job to a doctoral study to which influenced how I now related to the world charted new lines in my thinking. It is drawn from the sultry sounds of the Clark Sisters (Clark, 1980, track 1) who similarly ask if they were living out their purpose. “Go Tell it On the Mountain: The Gospel According to Consuela” is taken from an old Negro Spiritual that boasts of good news and the need to “Go, tell it on the mountain, over the hills and everywhere.” (Work, 1865, track 14). The good news in this section

refers to the production of information I offered to students at Georgia Southern University, my current white school. This section includes examples of my new voice in invited speeches, workshops, tools, and exercises facilitated in classrooms, for special programs and professional development training. “The Journey Beautiful” is the final narrative and reflects on my evolution on my journey and away from a fixed destination. It was inspired by an India Arie track (Hicks, K., Mueller, W., and Simpson, 2001, track 14) song where she sang of a journey and called it Beautiful. The song is not one heard in Black churches, but it is one heard in the experiences of Black women who have learned to practice self care. “Please understand that it's not that I don't care, but right now these walls are closing in on me. I love you more than I love life itself but I need to find a place where I can breathe. I can breathe. (Hicks, K., Mueller, W., and Simpson, 2001, track 14) On this journey I learned that life is messy and that I could love, laugh, and learn unapologetically.

### Shackles Off My Feet Now I Can Dance

I had no real plan which is scary for a person who plans most everything. However, my life was aligning in chaos theory, it seemed haphazard but there was an order to which began to slowly make sense. The boys would soon be visiting Charles' parents for the summer and work was slow because it was summer. I received a call about a position I'd applied for when Donald was fired. The name of the school named Georgia Southern University in Statesboro, Georgia, and the position was Director of the Multicultural Student Center. They were interested in a phone interview. Meanwhile, I researched the school because it did not stick out among the schools of which I applied. The school was immediately attractive when I saw my role would be like that of Mr. McGarrath, the Director of the Multicultural Student Support Center at Florida

State. The school was a moderate size at about 16,000 students. Twenty-four percent of them were Black which was double the national average of Black students at a white university. I was curious to see what that tasted like. Lastly, I read that I could earn a doctorate degree there and the state would pay for the tuition and my new salary would increase to a level where I would have had to work for 30 years as a teacher in Volusia County according to the pay schedule at the time. This sounded like a no brainer.

The phone interview went well so I waited to see if I would make then next cut for a campus interview. They were moving aggressively and I received a call within a week. They wanted a campus interview. The moon and the stars aligned just right because on the day I received the call to interview, Charles received a call indicating that was being promoted to an assistant principal at a nearby high school. I interviewed the next week and was made an offer the following week! My salary would increase enough so that I would no longer have to rely on a second income. This was really happening! Charles was torn. He didn't deal with change well and this would have been a lot to deal with even for the most flexible person. I asked him to consider moving with us to Statesboro even though we were separated. We both would have equal access to the kids which meant no need for child support. "Just because you're leaving doesn't mean the boys are leaving." He responded. I heard screeching halt somewhere in my head and became discombobulated. His interest in the kids was equal to that of an occasional babysitter so I was side blinded by his response. I didn't know my legal rights so I compromised. He would have the boys during this first fall while I got settled and I would have them during the spring. We were to decide after the spring semester which state the boys would live. My mind was made up before the move. If a judge ruled them back to Florida, then I would have to find

another job and apartment and move back. “Why are you trying to make me feel guilty about this? I think the boys would be fine either place.” Commenting on my prioritization of the boys.

I asked him to reconsider moving to Georgia. He could find work in his field a lot sooner than I could in mine. “I’m not going to follow you around the country like a love sick puppy dog. What happens when you get bored and get an even better opportunity?” He said. “Ok that’s fair. I will sign a contract stipulating that I stay for a minimum of 10 years and if I choose to leave earlier, I relinquish the boys in your custody.” I offered. He said he would only agree if we got back together. Otherwise, he has friends in Florida he did not want to leave.

I prepared for life in a new city and state as a divorced single mom. I was the same age of my mother when she left my dad to go to another state when I was the same age of my oldest son. The parallelisms both unnerved me and motivated me to survive life on my own.

I would enter yet another white school but without the support of a Black church home. New chapters in my life were being scripted as I lived it and it was exciting! All of my new passwords were *freeee* to symbolize my new found freedom in life. Along with my new job were promises of growth professionally and educationally, and promises of a personal life that allowed me to define as I go. I was cognizant that I was in no position to begin a new relationship but was excited at the opportunity to explore who I really was.

Leaving my marriage also signified me leaving the paradigm of the Black church that embodied life as I knew it. There was no one tragedy that caused me to detach myself from the Black church ideology and retreat into an agnostic closet. I was a work in progress, constantly shifting and learning and it no longer made sense to my situation. I questioned how to apply the bible literally in my place and space in the united states south, when it was written centuries ago in a different country, for a different culture, in a different language and translated by a king in



yet a another country. I had been taught to live and die by this faulty foundation by those who had been psychologically violated into believing that their loving omniscient god suffers from anger management.

I visited a few churches in Statesboro out of obligation of being a good person but I felt very confined. Mama advised me to find a church home soon, so that I could have someone to help me with the boys. I visited Black churches, white churches, and some that were racially mixed but I did not find a comfortable place. The Black churches preached a familiar message of christian cannibalism permitting damnation to anyone who does not comply with the word of the blue eyed, blonde haired, god pictured behind the pulpit. White churches spewed hatred of Muslims and homosexuals from the pulpit so I left thinking my Blackness or my gender had to be next on the roster of condemnation. The racially mixed churches were still finding their way.

I was content not to attend any sanctuary and perpetuate a religious tradition that may no longer if ever applied to me, but I missed the idea of a church family. Part of me is sad that Charles Jr. and Cameron will miss that warm feeling of love and connection. I found solace in exercise, self help tapes and listened to that guiding voice inside of me that was audible when I was in my quiet place. Church folk would identify the voice as the holy ghost, a metaphysical being that serves as the conductor that channels information to and from God. Buddhists and some African traditions believe a similar conductor to the spiritual world exists and describes its location to be in the core, or abdomen of a person. Scientists have located a nervous system identified as the autonomic nervous system in the upper intestines also known as the gut of a person. It controls the organs just below the level of consciousness and some scientists believe this is where science and metaphysics meet, where science can no longer be explained. My autonomic nervous system was about to be tested.

Three months into my exodus, I got a call from mama saying that Mr. Dyer had to have emergency heart surgery. She said the doctor found ninety percent blockage. I took my new skinny look back to Florida to check on him. Keith whizzed by me in the hospital without ever recognizing me. I walked in the hospital room as Mr. Dyer was coming out of the anesthesia. He didn't look so good. The smell of sickness dissolved the gravity in my stomach. His complexion was red but so did the entire room appear. He was shaking; his eyes were rolling around his head. My stomach and my head were misaligned and sent signals to my knees to buckle. I had to escape. I went into the hall way to find air that was not so stale. I found Keith and mama and fulfilled my obligation of catching up and went back to mama's house to sleep. The next day, we all went back to the hospital to visit Mr. Dyer. Keith and I went in while mama stayed behind to talk to doctors. He looked better. His color settled and his eyes stabilized but the smell was still overwhelming. It made me uneasy so I sat in a chair while Keith and I visited. The air in the room seemed to disappear more rapidly with each passing minute. I could no longer talk and signaled to Keith that we should leave and come back later but his gift of gab was in full force. As empty words flowed out of his mouth, my body slid from the chair onto the floor and everything went dark.

I woke up in a hospital bed lethargic and unsure of where I was or how much time had passed. Charles and the kids were there. Shit. What had happened? They said they thought I had a seizure but that doctors needed to run tests to be sure. I just started a brand new job in another state and I was stuck in a hospital bed unsure of what was wrong with me. Would Charles fight me for the kids now that I may be sick? How is Dyer doing? How long would I be here? This is too much.

I was in the hospital for three days and endured extensive neurological tests. I was diagnosed with a hypersensitive autonomic nervous system and was told to follow up with a local neurologist for the next six months. My triggers were later identified as stress, dehydration, sleep deprivation, and or lack of food. Controlling them would enable me to live a normal life.

Mama would lose the church shortly after Mr. Dyer went into the hospital. Throughout that 20 year time span, she had only five members sprinkled throughout that time. It was her designated place of peace, the only place where she could flex her uncultivated leadership skills. She wasn't concerned about her lack of social skills there because christians are not supposed to judge. In her case, no one was around to adjudicate.

Keith was divorced, remarried and divorcing again as he passed in and out of the pulpit as a quasi preacher. Admiration for his gift of gab was why I was first interested in the area of communication. He grew lazy with his craft while his demons lay in wait. They tussled so until demons won and he could no longer talk himself out of dire situations. Gab could not convince his superiors to keep him in the army or save his third marriage. He wanted his wives at home covered and obedient but his outside women were always feisty. Neither his wife nor the army approved. The military gave him a \$47,000 severance pay with his forced leave. Keith was different when he had money. The world was his and no one else mattered except his outside women. I asked my older brother if I could borrow enough to get un-financially tied to Charles guaranteeing that he would be repaid within two years and with an extra \$1000. "Well, I know the loan will cut your interest rates to almost zero but if we just cut them in half, you'll still be better off. The grand isn't enough return on my investment." I was not hurt because he said no, I was hurt because my big brother was trying to make a profit off of my misfortune. I declined but I insisted that he give me what he owed me from getting his car out of the shop during my

freshman year of college and he still shorted me \$10. Keith was broke and jobless within a month and I was debt free in six. Charles refinanced our house in his name and used the leftover monies to pay off our joint bills. I was finally free.

### It's Time To Make A Change: College Administration

I accepted the position as the Director of the Multicultural Student Center at Georgia Southern University and was to start on August 16, 2004. I moved here from Florida during Hurricane Charlie. I was eager to taste an environment where Black students thrived in student population, retention, and leadership roles in a white school. The idea of this dynamic was fascinating to a young Black woman growing up in the rural south where survival reigned over intellectualism.

The support I gained through Donald was not realistic as I soon found out that I was hired to be an overseer in my new white school. My direct report was a young Black male who told me early into my time there that he can "relate to me and is impressed by my work and concern for students but that he can't be seen with me often because it may not be looked well upon by other administrators." He has also reprimanded me verbally and through email when later meeting me in private to vent and say I was in the right all along but not to worry about it. He has not fought on my behalf (unless it was beneficial for him) and has encouraged me not to fight or defend myself, stating that, "it's no use, we won't be heard." I was equally disturbed when he shared that he can't support me if it will infringe on how he is perceived by our white colleagues because he has a family to support. Carter G. Woodson (1933/2005) framed how some *educated Blacks* react to these stimuli when he stated that "The only question which concerns us here is whether these 'educated' (Black) persons are actually equipped to face the ordeal before them or

unconsciously contribute to their own undoing by perpetuating the regime of the oppressor” (p. viii).

As he evolved in his role as a senior level administrator and advocate to issues around race, but he was careful to remain within the boundaries of comfort and safety. You will find that his is the only senior level office on campus comprised of at least fifty percent staff of color. He also wrote and received a grant to aid in the retention of Black male students now housed in the Multicultural Student Center.

One senior level administrator Caribbean colleague consistently vented to me about the racism of her peer vice presidents. One particular vice president stated to her that he hadn't learned until adulthood that Black people were actual humans, contextualizing his need for her to be grateful for the position she has. She felt her intelligence was grounded and unequivocal, so she would only be questioned on the basis of her ethnic style and Caribbean accent. The difference between her and other *others*, is that she openly questions without the reflex of fear or apology.

I had to find my own way in my new environment but I was motivated to do so with excellence. I began to realize the power I inherited in my professional role as director of the Multicultural Student Center at Georgia Southern University. I used that power to produce experiences and information for students, faculty, and staff that had the ability to change lives.

I used my role to bring public intellectuals and scholars, of whom I read and respected, to the university to address the campus and surrounding communities. I was honored to bring Myrlie Evers-Williams, widow to Medgar Evers. This was powerful on several levels. As she approached the podium to speak to the 800 spectators, she began, “Mr. House Manager, can you please turn the house lights up. If you have been doing this kind of work for this long, you never

know who's in the audience waiting to shoot you." Mrs. Evers-Williams set a tone that took onlookers back in time to the days of Jim Crow. Upon taking her back to the airport, I was honored to have a frank conversation with this living history. We talked freely about the dim state of Black America particularly our youth. She offered a perspective that I had not considered. "It is my generation's fault that our Black children are lost. We gave to you but didn't teach you the struggle or what it was about, so your generation grew up thinking that you opportunities afforded to you as a birthright." She explained. I took the opportunity to describe the mission and dynamics of the Multicultural Student Center which included four components: multicultural programming, the minority advisement freshman mentoring program, diversity education, and leadership development and advocacy. She replied, "That is wonderful! It makes me feel that all we fought for during the civil rights movement wasn't in vein." I was humbled as my elder and foremother passed the torch to me.

I redeemed my youthful mistake to take Dr. Naim Akbar's class while I was a student at Florida State University by inviting him to speak at Georgia Southern. His message of "living and studying my Blackness *unapologetically*" unleashed a new dimension in my thinking. I am not sure if he repeated the word *unapologetically* several times or if it did back flips in my head. It had reminded me of seeing Black men hold their heads down when speaking to white men. I saw Black vernaculars stand up in the midst of whites entering a room in inadvertent attempts of acceptance. I saw peripheral glances at my dark silhouette by white men. Damn. I left frustrated and cognizant that there are experiences that help shape who I am, who Black people are and our responses to stimuli solely because of various combinations of race, class, and gender.

Myrlie Evers-Williams and Dr. Akbar were great beginnings to a tenure of knowledge encased by Black intellectual thought to visit Georgia Southern. Nikki Giovanni, Dr. Cornel

West, Dr. Michael Eric Dyson, and Dr. Angela Davis are included in this list. None were considered “heavy hitters” by my vice president who funds the large events that I organize. Instead, she recommended Bill Cosby because, “He’s not controversial.” Each time, her approval came on the eve of a non-available speaker that she preferred so I was give the approval to make offers of my choice. When Dr. Cornel West accepted my invitation, she said that I “had better make sure that the Performing Arts center was full!” On the evening of the program, 2,000 people came to fill 1,200 seats.

My conversation to gain approval to invite Angela Davis was a similar struggle.

“I know you want to bring her but I don’t understand how she is relevant to our students today.” said my vice president.

“Well, Dr. Thompson, it is a program in honor of Dr. Martin Luther King and she was an integral part of the Black Freedom Movement.” I replied.

“No, not really.” She continued. “I mean, she is just so in your face. We need someone who can provide solutions and not be negative. Can you promise me that she won’t be negative Consuela?”

“Dr. Thompson, what I can promise is that this program will maintain the standard of excellence it has received since you first entrusted it to me years ago.”

Michael Eric Dyson’s visit to campus equally concerned my administration but they could not ignore his ability to capture the attention of an overflowing auditorium of students by weaving the power and intellectualism of rap music in his powerful message of contextualizing Martin Luther King’s “Dream” in today’s lived experience.

I also invited Dr. William Ayers, a Distinguished Professor of Education and Senior University Scholar at the University of Illinois at Chicago, to campus to speak on issues of

equity in education. Dr. Ayers has been a scholar for over 30 years and has published over several books, articles, and book chapters related to looking critically at issues regarding education. This time, I needed no approval. My vice president only approved the MLK celebration speaker because she incurs the cost of the program. This was an unprecedented event on campus because it was the first that had been cancelled by senior level administration at Georgia Southern University. The director of Marketing and Communications for the university had refused to place the announcement on the university website because, “this talk is going on during the same time as the Youth at Risk Conference and that would be a conflict of interest” when in reality both programs were complementary of each other. The rationale of the cancellation was that the university could not afford the ‘necessary’ security needs for the talk. Safety concerns arose when a phone and email letter writing campaign was aimed at the president, all vice presidents, the dean of students and the Multicultural Student Center. There were a number of blogs and facebook groups dedicated to show support of him not coming. The attendance of the faculty senate meeting was the largest to date because the cancellation of Dr. Ayers was placed on the agenda. A petition was presented to the president in hopes that the cancellation would be reconsidered. However, he allowed my vice president to make the call and she stood behind her decision to cancel. In a more private meeting, the question was raised to my vice president, “What if the money for security can be raised,” “No.” she replied. “It would be too much of an inconvenience.” Many were chagrined to find that Dr. Ayers had been on and off the campus for years lecturing to students in the college of education and serving on dissertation committees.

My professional role at Georgia Southern University charges me to challenge students and the campus community to think critically about the world around them. Shon, a student who



I advised in her student organization came to me upset because the Black history board she displayed on her floor as a resident assistant was repeatedly taken down. After putting it back up for the third time, the vandal used cigarettes to burn the picture of president Obama. There have been other types of random vandalism that took place in the newest and most expensive residence hall in the first semester of its opening that year. This is significant because the vandalism was consistent and costly, and after some research, was found that the residents were over ninety three percent white and from affluent backgrounds.

The fact that privilege and its sense of entitlement played a role in the vandalism phenomena was not obvious in the conversation. This idea of privilege being invisible to some brings me to a classroom discussion where I was an invited guest lecturer on diversity. The economics class was engaged in a very open dialogue about privilege and the resistance was loud. One student, a white male, commented that he was not privileged because his dad had to cash in his 401k for pay for his college. It never dawned on him that many U.S. citizens do not have a 401k to cash in to pay for college. Another student insisted that racism no longer exists. Another echoed that a person's background isn't important because they have all made it to college. The only Black male in the room did not participate in the conversation. It was my duty to leave this class with a few things to think about. By the end of the class period students had the opportunity to hear about institutionalized racism, the myth of meritocracy, negative impacts of colorblindness, and the definition and components of privilege. They were also given practical strategies on how to learn more about others and what they can do to be more aware of experiences through someone else's lens. Whether students accepted the lecture or not, they could no longer use the excuse that they did not know.

Faculty at an institution of higher education represents the first influencers of knowledge construction for students. When I was given the opportunity to teach a class on diversity for students who wanted to be teachers, I could influence student at yet another angle. The class was titled Diversity in an Educational Context. I often facilitated interactive exercises with this class to allow their development to unfold without them realizing it. One such exercise is called the Game of Oppression. Lisa, a white woman from Portal, Georgia, a small rural town outside of Statesboro would be impacted by this exercise more than she knew. She had tanned skin and long thick dark silky hair. She was instructed to respond to a card she pulled from the game's deck where she had to express a time where she felt oppressed. She said that hated the way she looked because she was often asked if she was Mexican. "My grandmother is one hundred percent Indian and that's where I get my dark skin and hair. One time I dyed my hair blonde to keep from looking like this. I just want to be white!" In reality, her response may have changed me more than it changed her.

The topic of diversity in the community also came up in the Diversity in an Educational Context class. One white female student shared that while working at the Beaver House Restaurant as a server, she was instructed by her white male supervisor that if any Black person asked for an employment application, she was to say they were not hiring. If a Black person turned in an application, she was instructed to put it in the trash after they left.

An ongoing concern for minority students in the community also dealt with the local clubs. Interestingly, I have heard from both Black and white students that clubs like Rude Rudy's charge \$10 to \$15 on *Black* night compared to \$2 to \$3 on other nights. Black students realized the difference, and began attending on other nights. However, they were refused entry because of their attire, even though white students were allowed entrance with the same attire that club

owners used to deny entry to Black students. Two students decided to go in suits during the Fall of 2008, and were still refused entry. The police were later called and arrested the students. Around that same time, one student alumnus heard about the ordeal and sent me a picture of the owners outside of their club dressed in Black face for Halloween.

### Is My Living In Vain: Curriculum Studies

Prior to moving to my new life, the thought of a terminal degree had not been a consideration. The state offered tuition remission for employees as part of a benefit package and I saw it as another window of opportunity that I could not allow to pass. To be sure, I made an appointment to speak with Dr. Sandra Nettles, the director of the program. Because she was a Black woman, I had hoped that my elder would be as forthcoming as the Black women I had encountered in the previous white schools I had attended. She proved to be a part of the lineage of Black women conductors whose aim was to guide their people into freedom. When I was admitted, I felt the obligation to complete the program because I wanted to contribute to work of my foremothers and earn my own conductor's credentials.

I waited a year to begin the program and within that first semester, I knew that I was on my path. The Ed.D program in Curriculum Studies sensitized my awareness of the necessity of "complicated conversations" (Pinar, 2004) and propelled my thinking into a new paradigm. The first semester was a mental and emotional boot camp. My first instructor was Dr. Reynolds, a white man who was not from the South. Unlike Dr. Duncan from Indiana State University, he did not bite. In fact, he co-signed Dr. Akbar's sentiments of being unapologetic and gave me permission to study me. He validated the micro-aggressions I had experienced and put names to them. *A Different Mirror* (1994) by Ronald Takaki was the first text he assigned. I read the

history of America from the lens of those who did not write the history recognized in the cannon. Damn. “Why didn’t learn this before now?” I lost my appetite for buffoonery comedies and predictable films. I read more, assigned and unassigned. Booker T. Washington and Dubois had become a debate instead of the wall poster hung on the walls of Black elementary teachers’ classrooms. Indian removal laws became a government policy instead of an accepted staple of the John Wayne movies I watched with mama as a child.

Throughout the program I interacted with other instructors who did not look like me who provoked thoughts to challenge the status quo. Dr. He, a Chinese woman, who would later chair my dissertation committee, said to me, “Consuela, quit reading so many white people! You have been made to read them all of your life. It is time that you read the work of Black intellectuals.” By the time I interacted with Dr. Chapman, a Jewish man, the discussions were more of an exchange of ideas and materials that we each used to impact students. It was however, his class on Ethical Dimensions in Education I felt safe to question the Black church and organized religion in general without fear of exploding into flames. By questioning an unquestionable faith, I could no longer identify with it on this part of my journey. I came out of my agnostic closet and replaced christianity with a fluid spirituality that can transcend space and time.

My intellectual well had been tapped and was overflowing with new ways to process and present this new and re-presented information. It provoked a call to action in me and it spilled over into both in my personal life and my career. Professionally, it caused me to restructure the university diversity programming scheme produced by the Multicultural Student Center. First, I ensured that the calendar was balanced and inclusive of concerns related to varying levels of ability, American Indians, Asians, Blacks, gender identity, Latino(a)’s, religions other than christianity, sexual orientation, social justice and women. Next, I replaced the celebration of

nationally recognized diversity months and weeks to include contributions of underrepresented groups in the curriculum and co-curriculum throughout the academic year. My rationale was that when February which is Black history month is over, I am still Black. I realized by only celebrating Black people one month out of the year, gives the message that it is acceptable to not consider us during the other 11 months. This then had to also be true of other groups, i.e, women's history month, Native American month, etc. Lastly, I was able to sharpen my consultation skills and the ability to be an effective advocate for those who voices had been muted. My own voice had changed. With each shift in my thinking, my voice transitioned to a different octave as I used my diaphragm to metaphorically sing on top of notes, unapologetically asking questions and changing the discourse and narrative to tunes I sang. Freire (1970) wrote of a similar shift in the awakening of oppressed people when he wrote,

Those who, in learning to read and write, come to a new awareness of selfhood and begin to look critically at the social situation in which they find themselves, often take the initiative in acting to transform the society that has denied them this opportunity of participation. (p. 9)

I escaped my busy office and carpooled to Savannah to take classes for two years then another year of online coursework. The weekly road trip took one hour, followed by four hours and forty five minutes of class, and one more hour for the return trip. I paid a student to play mommy as I did so many times when I was in college to other children while their parents were away. My sons were either with their dad or his parents during fall, winter, thanksgiving, spring, and summer breaks which was my time to write class papers. Other times, I read, I wrote, I worked. I visited my sons' schools, checked homework, refereed fights, administered medicine in the middle of the night, and chauffeured to music lessons, sport practices, and doctor's

appointments. I wanted to quit school every day for two years and even during the dissertation process, but I remembered the lesson I learned from failing geology at Florida State. When my mind got tired, my body convinced me to go one more day. When my body got tired, my mind convinced my body to go one more day. I kept moving and each day, each semester was one more day toward my goal. This reminded me of the old Carlton Pearson (2001, track 1) song I sang in church as a child, “I can’t turn around, I’ve come too far by faith.”

I continued to exercise my body while I took classes to relax my mind until my responsibilities increased and my sleeping slowed. Soon, my weight fluctuated, my sleeping heart rate increased, and I passed out again. Damn. The stress of work, school, and single motherhood had aggravated my triggers as they competed for first place on my list of priorities.

Mama and Mr. Dyer drove up a couple of times to help me with the boys, once while I was away on a recruiting trip and once while I oversaw my office’s first Drag Show. She had gotten disability from her car accident a few years ago and Mr. Dyer’s health would not allow him to go back to work in the orange groves so they had the time to travel. Unfortunately, their help added to my stress. “I just called to say I bent Charles Jr.’s fingers back cause I had to try break them tonight.” Mama called to tell me as I was dealing with media and police during the Drag Show. From her lens, she meant well but she was not stable and I sometimes worried that if I continued my life in this direction, soon I also might be unstable. Nonetheless, it was clear that my children could no longer be alone with their maternal grandmother.

Balance was difficult to maintain without an outlet to release some pressure but Statesboro had nothing to offer. After fighting the marginalizing systems of privilege during the day, ensuring the needs of my sons by evening and studying by night, I was often asked why there is no superman in my life to balance my role as superwoman. The idea of balancing my life

with companionship sounded appealing, I was not overly eager. I had a husband once and am less lonely without the one I had. I was committed to staying peaceful by any means necessary. Second, Statesboro did not match my progressive needs and neither did its inhabitants. People stared but I was rarely approached. Uncertain on how to read my body language, I was often referred to as intimidating. Interestingly, I was most often approached by married men who woke to find that their family unit had lessened with passion with the onset of more responsibility. Others were just greedy. My choices were to fraternize with staff or faculty but I could fit neither outside of my compartmentalized “work” box neatly or comfortably.

I reconnected with my graduate school friend Charmaine, who lived three hours away in Atlanta. She was definitely my sister from another mother. One December, she convinced me to climb Stone Mountain with her. I found that first climb to be symbolic of my life. The journey was hard and uphill, and the climate was cold. We were in between giving up and moving forward at times, but we made it to the top of the mountain, King’s promised land, with all of the mountain’s negative historical undertones under our feet. I inhaled in slow motion, breathed in the accomplishment then enjoyed the pleasure of laughing and crying out loud.

Here is where I found some release. I liked visiting Atlanta because I was surrounded by progressive Black people who looked like me, dressed like me, and thought like me. It was empowering and I thought, “This must be how white people everywhere else feel all of the time.” Here, I was not an anomaly. I accepted it as my personal playground meant to stabilize the battleground of responsibility and reality in Statesboro. There was always something fun to do in Atlanta and I reverted back to my carefree days in graduate school. Charmaine’s carefree antics kept me laughing when Statesboro was no joke. I only visited Atlanta a few times a year and rarely took the kids because they fit in a different compartment. This was my time.

## Go Tell It On The Mountain: The Gospel According To Consuela

The relationship between course work in my doctoral program and my professional role was symbiotic and produced an urgency to teach a new gospel in my educational setting.

I was taught that gospel meant *the good news* and that as christians, it was our job to spread it so that others can be saved. The need to be saved was an urgent one. To be saved meant avoiding the fire and brimstone from the depths of hell which was the only presented alternative to heaven. The following are examples of the new gospel that I teach when asked by faculty to talk to students about diversity. This *gospel* is not grounded in any organized religion. In fact its fluidity resembles a spiritual connection between the mind and the metaphysical, a sort of virtual autonomic nervous system. It may seem chaotic to those whose thinking is sure. Nonetheless, it is to teach awareness about privilege and oppression and forces participants to think about their place in both.

Due to the nature of my role, creating safe spaces to talk about race, class, and gender was a logical initiative. The sighs of resistance and guilt from classroom participants challenged me to frame race, class, gender from both a historical and political perspective which serves to include everyone. And teaching from the point of view of curriculum theory “is a matter of enabling students to employ academic knowledge (and popular culture, increasingly via the media and the Internet) to understand their own self-information with society and the world.” (Pinar, 2004, 16)

Just as resistance was expected from some, so was gratitude from others. The poem *Being Black in the Workplace* circulated the internet and gives an accurate description of the journey of oppressed people.



They take my kindness for weakness my silence for weakness. They consider my uniqueness strange and they call my language slang. They see my confidence as conceit and my mistakes as defeat. They consider my success accidental. They minimize my intelligence to potential. My questions mean I am unaware. My advancement is seemingly unfair. Any praise is preferential treatment. To voice concern is discontentment. If I stand up for myself I am too defensive. If I don't trust them, I am too apprehensive. If I am defiant if I separate, but fake if I assimilate. So constantly I am faced with school/workplace hate.

(<http://www.tributetoblackwomen.com/poems/workplace.htm>)

My real passion lies in my connection to the subject matter. This then, is the great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed: to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well. (Freire, 1970, 28-29) The challenge here lies in coping with the dualisms of who I am as an educator versus my emotionally invested me. The feeling of pretense can be seemingly overwhelming as I attempt to merge my personal self with my professional self.

The following are examples of the *Gospel of Consuela* in the form of speeches, interactive diversity exercises, autobiographical accounts, and lectures.

## Fallout Shelter

### Group Directions:

The people in your group are members of a department in Washington, D.C., that is in charge of experimental stations in the far outposts of civilization. Suddenly the Third World War breaks out and bombs begin dropping...nuclear and biological. Places all across the globe are being destroyed. People are heading for whatever fallout shelters are available. You receive a

desperate call from one of your experimental stations, asking for help. It seems that there are 10 people, but there is only enough space, air, food, and water in their fallout shelter for 6 people for a period of 3 months, which is how long they estimate they can safely stay in the fallout shelter. They realize that if they have to decide among themselves which 6 should go into the shelter, they are likely to become irrational and begin fighting. So they have decided to call your department, their superiors, and leave the decision to you. They will abide by your decision.

But each of you has to quickly get ready to head down to your own fallout shelter. So all you have time for is to get superficial descriptions of the 10 people. You have 15 minutes to make your decision. Then you will have to go to your own shelter.

So, as a group you now have 15 minutes to decide which 4 of the 10 people will have to be ejected from the shelter. Before you begin, I want to impress upon you two important considerations. It is entirely possible that the 6 people you choose to stay in the shelter might be the only 6 people left to start the human race over again. This choice is, therefore, very important. Prepare a group consensus for your group by crossing out the 4 that your group would eliminate. Make the best choices possible. If you do not make a choice in 15 minutes, then you are, in fact, choosing to let the 10 people fight it out among themselves, with the possibility that more than 4 might perish. You have exactly 15 minutes to decide. Here is all you know about the 10 people:

1. A 16 year-old girl of questionable I.Q., a high school dropout, pregnant,
2. A policeman with gun, thrown off the police force for brutality
3. A clergyman, 75 years old
4. A 36-year-old female physician, unable to have children

5. A 46-year-old male violinist, served seven years in jail for pushing narcotics, has been out of jail for six months
6. A 20-year-old Black militant, no special skills
7. A 39-year-old former prostitute, retired for 4 years
8. An architect, homosexual
9. A 26-year-old male law student
10. The law student's 25-year-old wife, spent the last 9 months in a mental hospital, still heavily sedated. They refuse to be separated.

This exercise challenges students to think about hidden messages and where these messages originate. Participants were pointed to the five roles that could have easily been men or women when most participants assigned a gender based off of an assumed connotation. They were also asked to consider the race or ethnicity of the folks listed above since only one was mentioned. Most participants, even people of color, are shocked to realize that they assumed everyone except the Black militant to be white. Two white men in different settings responded similarly to eliminating the Black male militant. "I think we should get rid of him because it would be the perfect opportunity to start the perfect race." one said unapologetically. "Well I know this is racist, but you said be honest. I would get rid of him because he is Black and militant." We also take a look at the power of language and perspective. For instance, a militant is a person who is challenging a system supported by law or an imposed standard that was created to limit or disadvantage him or her. Where a dominant group has the power to name someone else a militant or terrorist, the person being named might call him/herself a freedom fighter.

IQ and other standardized tests are questioned. The questions include, “Who creates standardized tests?” “From whose ‘normal’ or ‘standard’ are they being drawn?” and “Who is benefitting and who is not benefitting from these tests?” Other discussions include the role of religious fundamentalism in a small space for a period of time where folks may or may not share the same beliefs. The role of the elderly is also considered. Most participants are quick to eliminate the 75 year old person because they feel he/she has lived a long life rather than take the opportunity to value the person’s experience to assist in creating a new world. The idea of survival over affective morals, come into consideration with the architect who is homosexual. One white male participant was horrified at this person surviving the war in the fallout shelter and said, “I would rather the world not start over again if gays have to be in it.” Lastly, scientific research within the last 100 years on mental illness was incorporated into conversations to consider its implications behind diagnosis and perception of those diagnosed.

### Affirming Diversity

This exercise is primarily used for freshmen college orientation classes. The objective is diversity awareness in a non threatening format. There are five parts to the exercise. Begin with a discussion of what diversity means to them and end the discussion with a clear definition including one of ideas, ability, ethnic origin, sexual orientation, educational background with the list going on. 1. Call out the following list of identifiers. Instruct the students to stand if they affiliate with any of these identifiers and the audience will applaud (affirm) them for who they are. Please note that if a student is not comfortable identifying with some of these categories, they are not required to stand. 2. Students are to call out identifiers that they identify the most with. These can include ones that were called as well as ones that were not called earlier. The

facilitator should write them all on the board. 3. Students are now to choose only one of the identifiers listed on the board. It should be the one in which they identify the most and are most passionate. They are to get into like groups or caucuses to discuss and record those things that they are most offended about when people think or say things about their group.4.

Groups/caucuses are to present their recording at the front of the room without any interruptions, questions, or debate. When they are finished, the class applauds (affirms) that group. Before the groups begin, the facilitator presents a disclaimer. a.) Some of the lists may sound funny and it may be ok to laugh. b.) From now on, you can no longer say you did not know these responses exist. c.) Remember that everyone outside of this room who also identifies with these same groups may or may not feel the exact same way. Some may feel more or less emotion given the same circumstances. 5. Debrief: What did you learn? How did you feel? Where do we go from here? Students usually enjoy the up and down of standing and the break-up of activity. The seriousness comes into play with the acknowledgement of I am different and I am important, learning what is offensive that may not be so common sense to that individual.

#### List of Identifiers to Use

##### **Gender:**

Male  
Female

##### **Marital Status:**

Single  
Married  
Attached

##### **Parent's education level**

High School  
Some College  
4 yr. College degree  
Masters  
Doctorate

**Ethnic Descent:**

African  
South Asian (India, Laos, Pakistan, etc...)  
Middle Eastern  
Pacific Islander  
European  
British  
Central or South American  
Native American  
Caucasian  
Asian American  
Hispanic/Latino  
Caribbean  
Middle Eastern  
African American  
Bi Racial  
Multiracial  
Other

**Financial Status:**

Poor  
Less than Enough  
Enough  
More than Enough

**Classification:**

Freshman  
Sophomore  
Junior  
Senior  
Graduate Student

**Sexual Orientation:**

Straight  
Gay, Lesbian,  
Bisexual  
Transgender

**Political Party**

Republican  
Democratic  
Independent  
Other

**Region**

From the North

South  
Southwest  
Southeast  
Northwest  
Northeast  
West Coast  
International Student

**Family Background**

Nuclear Family/Two parent household  
Blended Family  
Single Parent Home  
Raised by Someone other than mom or dad

**Sibling Order**

Oldest Child  
Youngest Child  
Middle Child  
Only Child

**Sexual Orientation**

Straight  
Lesbian  
Homosexual  
Bisexual  
Transgendered

**Religious Affiliation**

Baptist  
Methodist  
Lutheran  
Catholic  
Episcopalian  
Baha'i  
Pentecostal  
Presbyterian  
Atheist  
Agnostic  
Jewish  
Hindu  
Other

**Ideas**

Pro choice  
Pro life  
Legalize marijuana

Do not legalize marijuana  
For capital punishment  
Against capital punishment

**Other**

Greek  
Non-Greek  
Athlete  
Computer  
Artistic (includes dance, theater, music, etc...)  
Feminist  
Techy  
Environmentalist  
Honor Student  
Non-Traditional Student  
Residential Student  
Commuter Student  
Extrovert  
Introvert  
1<sup>st</sup> generation college student  
1<sup>st</sup> generation American

The three groups that are most often chosen are southern, female, Black, and christian. If there were no Black students present or the Black participants do not chose that identifier, I usually choose it and participate. My list includes: I hate it when I am told I am too Black, too white, or not Black enough, I hate it when we are called complainers when we identify where things are unjust in within systems of privilege. I hate it when we are encouraged to believe racism no longer exists in order to make others feel more comfortable. I hate when people think colorblindness is acceptable. If you see me and deny my color, you have now disregarded every experience related to my color that has helped shape me into the person I am today. I hate when we are thought of as unintelligent and when I am told that I am articulate. That suggests that it was the expectation that I am not intelligent, leaving the person surprised. I hate when I am said to be cute for a Black girl/woman or when others approach me speaking ebonics thinking they are trying to relate to me. I hate when others assume we all think alike and all like the same



things. I hate the good hair versus bad hair discussion because I refuse to allow anyone to suggest that something that is natural on me is bad.

### Privilege Walk

This exercise is reserved for students beyond the freshman experience and adults. Students are lined up horizontally and instructed to close their eyes. This will be significant in the discussion. Instruct students to listen carefully to each question being asked and to answer non-verbally only by either stepping forward or stepping backwards according to the directions given.

1. If you walk on campus alone at night and you are concerned about your safety because of
2. your race, class, ethnicity, religion, gender, or sexual orientation, take one step back.
3. If flesh colored Band-Aids are at least 2 shades off of your original complexion, take one step back.
4. If you see often see couples that look like you and your mate of choice portrayed passionately on TV, take one step forward.
5. If your race, class, ethnicity, religion, gender, or sexual orientation may impact who rooms with you, take a step back.
6. If your ancestors were forced to come to the USA, not by choice, take one step back.
7. If your primary ethnic identity is American, take one step forward.

8. If you were ever called names because of your race, class, ethnicity, religion, gender, or sexual orientation, take one step back.
9. If there were people of color who worked in your household as servants, gardeners, etc., take one step forward.
10. If you were often embarrassed or ashamed of your clothes, house, car, etc., take one step back.
11. If your parents were professional, doctors, lawyers, etc., take one step forward.
12. If you were raised in an area where there was prostitution, drug activity, etc., take one step back.
13. If you ever tried to change your appearance, mannerism or behavior to avoid being judged or ridiculed, take one step back.
14. If you studied the culture of your ancestors in elementary school, take one step forward.
15. If you went to school speaking a language other than English, take one step back.
16. If there were more than 50 books in your house when you grew up, take one step forward.
17. If you ever had to skip a meal or were hungry because there was not enough money to buy food when you were growing up, take one step back.
18. If you were brought to art galleries or **plays by your parents**, take one step forward.
19. If one of your parents was unemployed or laid off, not by choice, take one step back.
20. If you attended a private school or summer camp, take one step forward.

21. If your family ever had to move because they could not afford the rent, take one step back.
22. If you were told that you were beautiful, smart, and capable **by your parents**, take one step forward.
23. If you were ever discouraged from academics or jobs because of race, class, ethnicity, religion, gender, or sexual orientation, take one step back.
24. If you were encouraged to attend college by your parents, take one step forward.
25. If prior to age 18 you took a vacation out of the country, take one step forward.
26. If one of your parents did not complete high school, take one step back.
27. If your family owned your own house, take one step forward.
28. If you saw members of your race, ethnic group, religion, gender, or sexual orientation portrayed on television in degrading roles, take one step back.
29. If your parents did not grow up in the United States, take one step back.
30. If you ever felt uncomfortable about a joke related to your race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, take one step back.
31. If your parents told you that you could be anything you wanted to be, take a step forward.

It is typical that when done with a heterogeneous group, white men are at the front and minorities saturate the back of the room by the end of the exercise. Over the last few years, I have presented this at leadership conferences, economic classes, and student leader organizations and have gotten heavy reactions. On April 25, 2008, The Georgianne College Newspaper printed the following article in the opinion section as response to this exercise when I facilitated it during a co-curricular student development workshop.

*As a little white girl with blonde hair and blue eyes, talking about racism can easily be twisted. I was called on. I said, 'The question that stood out the most to me was, 'If your ancestors were forced to come to America, not by choice, take a step back. I disliked the question because there is such a negative connotation of slavery in the south. I realize and acknowledge that the majority of the slave owners were abusive but that was not the case with my family. My great-grandfather, P.S. Barber, had taken care of his servants and adopted one of them. The servant went on to move to Canada and became a successful horseman and later the first black man to enter into an interracial marriage.*

Interestingly, the printed word “servant” substituted the word “slave” which was used during the discussion and the adjective “successful” was closer in proximity to interracial marriage indicating the marriage helped to define his success. While I may have not been comfortable with this student’s comment, I openly expressed appreciation for her honesty because she had the courage to say what others may have thought. It is here, when students begin to get comfortable with being uncomfortable, the labor of learning can flourish.

It would be a difficult task then for a person come to understand systems of privilege and marginalization if their own privilege is unrecognizable to them as abnormal to others’ reality. In the case of white privilege, students who have lived in whites spaces all of their lives do not recognized that space was a racialized space. Many young white people have no historical connotation of race. In their contemporary understanding, race isn’t a problem until a person of color brings it up.

Scholar Peggy McIntosh (1988) defines white privilege as,  
an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was ‘meant’ to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless

knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks. (McIntosh, 1988)

I spoke with her personally at the Cross Cultural Conference in Counseling and Education in Savannah in 2006 and asked her thoughts on the widely used exercise. I was disappointed at her response. She resented the exercise because she felt it devalues her research insisting that the exercise goes beyond white privilege unlike her research. Based off of the wonderful conversations spawned by this exercise, I would have to both disagree with her view on the exercise. I both value her research in the literature and in application but I recognize that white privilege does not have a monopoly on privilege.

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### Breaking Cycles

It is normal for me to leave students with opportunities to learn more about the lenses of others. Breaking Cycles is a one page list of ideas in which workshop participants can begin a journey of inclusivity and pluralism if they so chose. Commentary usually accompanies some points and I end with a self explanatory poem at the end entitled The Cold Within by James Patrick Kinney.

1. Introduce yourself to someone who is different than you.
2. Initiate a discussion at work, home or school about racism.
3. Challenge biases and stereotypes of family and friends.
4. Encourage your workplace or organization to assess how inclusive the organization is through workshops and surveys.
5. Take a public stand against the isms, discrimination and bigotry.

6. Volunteer at an organization that confronts the isms.
7. Interrupt prejudice and take action even when people from a target group are not present.
8. Take risks and be uncomfortable.
9. Support the value of separate meetings/groups/activities for members of different groups.
10. Attend a cultural event.
11. Listen openly to others who are different from you.
12. Read a newspaper or magazine geared toward a group different than you.
13. Actively pursue a process of self-education.
14. Learn about the history and culture of other identity groups.
15. Read a book by an author who is from a different identity group.
16. Acknowledge and take responsibility for your own prejudice.
17. Learn and take pride in your own identity group.
18. Solicit services or shop at a store owned by a different identity group.
19. Contribute funds to an organization that confronts an ism.
20. Interrupt a ism joke.
21. Write the TV station manager when you observe stereotypes.

### The Cold Within

By James Patrick Kinney

Six humans trapped by happenstance  
in black and bitter cold  
Each possessed a stick of wood,  
Or so the story's told.

Their dying fire in need of logs,  
the first woman held hers back

For on the faces around the fire  
She noticed one was black.

The next man looking 'cross the way  
Saw one not of his church  
And couldn't bring himself to give  
The fire his stick of birch.

The third one sat in tattered clothes  
He gave his coat a hitch,  
Why should his log be put to use  
To warm the idle rich?

The rich man just sat back and thought  
Of the wealth he had in store,  
And how to keep what he had earned  
From the lazy, shiftless poor.

The black man's face bespoke revenge  
As the fire passed from his sight,  
For all he saw in his stick of wood  
Was a chance to spite the white.

And the last man of this forlorn group  
Did naught except for gain,  
Giving only to those who gave  
Was how he played the game.

The logs held tight in death's stilled hands  
Was proof of human sin,  
They didn't die from the cold without,  
They died from the cold within.

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## Black History Month Speech ~ Claxton High & Swainsboro High February 2010

Willie Lynch, a slave owner in the West Indies was invited to speak to southern plantations owners in the South in 1712 to give them advice on keeping their slaves loyal to only them. He told them if they would do what he said for a period of one year, the impact will last

for at least 300 years. He said, you must pitch the OLD Black male vs. the YOUNG Black male, and the YOUNG Black male against the OLD Black male. You must use the DARK skin slaves vs. the LIGHT skin slaves, and the LIGHT skin slaves vs. the DARK skin slaves. You must use the FEMALE vs. the MALE, and the MALE vs. the FEMALE. You must also have white servants and overseers [who] distrust all Blacks. But it is NECESSARY THAT YOUR SLAVES TRUST AND DEPEND ON US. THEY MUST LOVE, RESPECT AND TRUST ONLY US.

The Willie Lynch letter is not just Black History. It is a part of American History. In that history, there is no Black without white and no white without Black. This is a story of humanity. This story along with many others should make you uncomfortable no matter what your race, ethnicity, religion, gender, or social status is. In fact, if you were not around to create or enforce a law or policy that disadvantaged one group and advantaged another, you have nothing to feel guilty about. However, if you are in a position to speak up for someone whether they are present or not when they are being torn down, disadvantaged, or simply wronged, and you say nothing, then you have every right to feel guilty and that can transcend race, ethnicity, religion, gender, or social class.

Now, let's refocus and put some things in perspective. There are 100 years in a century. Slavery lasted over 2 CENTURIES. Then came another century of Jim Crow laws where the separation between Blacks and Whites was enforced by law. Lynching of Blacks was most popular during this era after slavery and did not begin in Louisiana during the Jena 6 fiasco a few years ago. Its objective was to make an example of one to remind the other Blacks, who was still in power. Legislation in the form of Brown vs. the Board of Education was passed almost one hundred years after slavery to desegregate schools in 1954. Nonetheless, most schools ignored the original legislation so it was reissued in 1955. However, most schools only really began



desegregating in the early 1970's. In 1964 and 1968, through the Black Freedom Movement that included men and women of many races struggling together, legislation was passed to give Blacks and other marginalized groups their basic civil rights and to end the Jim Crow era. Now let's do the math. Over 200 years of slavery plus 100 years of Jim Crow. That's 300 years of conditioning and cultivating of all of our minds in what Cornel West describes as psychological rape and barely 50 years of legislation put in place to eradicate those injustices. 300 years to 50 years means we still have a long way to go thanks to Mr. Willie Lynch.

Today, Black youth account for 15% of youth in our country, 26% of youth arrested, and 58% percent of youth who end up in state adult prisons. The comedian Chris Rock said that if you want to hide something from the N words, then put it in a book. Do we get upset with him because he said that or do we get upset because we question if Willie Lynch's strategy may have worked. Carter G. Woodson, the father of Black History Month wrote in his book, *The Miseducation of the Negro*, that, "When you control a man's thinking, you do not have to worry about his actions. You do not have to tell him not to stand here or go yonder. He will find his 'proper place' and will stay in it. You do not need to send him to the back door. He will go without being told. In fact, if there is no back door, he will cut one for his special benefit."

In the halls of high schools around the country we hear students of all colors cornering their peers negatively saying, "Oh, he thinks he's smart! and She thinks she's cute!" Since when has it become cool to be ignorant? I'm here to tell you, you were made both smart and beautiful! I believe that you are so smart that if a person shows you who they are, you actually believe them. I believe in you so much that I know that you will think about everything around you with a newness and with critical thought, deconstructing subliminal messages in the simplest of songs,

cartoons, and nursery rhymes. Do you remember the nursery rhyme rock a bye baby? Let sing it together slowly,

Rock a bye baby on the tree top,  
When the wind blows the cradle will rock,  
When the bough breaks the cradle will fall,  
And down will come baby, cradle and all.

We have to be careful with tradition. Blindly celebrating and perpetuating things just because that is what we've always done it. For instance, there was a child who saw her mother cut the edges off of a roast before she put it in the freezer.

"Why do you cut the edges asked the child to her mother?"

"I'm not sure baby, it's the way my mama always did it."

So the child went to ask her grandmamma.

"Big mama, why you always cut the edges off of the roast before you put it in the freezer?"

"Well, baby," she said, "It's the way my mama always done it."

So the little girl found her great grandmamma and asked her.

"Gmama, why you always cut the edges off of the roast before you put it in the freezer?"

"oh hee hee hee! That's simple child! Back when I growed up, the freezer was so small, that that was the only way we could fit the roast inside of the freezer.

The only thing constant in life is CHANGE. Have you ever heard from someone, "You've changed. You're different." Guess what, you are supposed to change! It called growth. Imagine how different you were in your thinking five years ago compared to how you think today. You will continue to grow at that rate until you're 40 and it doesn't stop there! So what might be good for you at 15 will not be good for you at 20 and what may be good for you at 20

may not be good for you at 30 and so on. Growth and change are both normal and natural. And whether we like it or resist it, it is inevitable! Imagine working out at the gym after not having done so in 6 months or more. It hurts! It's called growing pains. Well when your mind grows as your ideas are challenged, it will hurt as well. Your mind is the strongest muscle on your body. Compare it to that of an iron rod. If you want to mold that iron rod, you have to put fire under it. That fire is called conflict. CONFLICT IS GOOD. Ask our civil rights leaders of the 60's and 70's. How you MANAGE that conflict can make or break a situation.

When we don't adapt to growth and change, it results in prejudice then hate, then violence which leads to slavery and holocausts, ask survivors of the holocaust. When we react to fear of something that is different and create superiority over other groups based on differences, slavery and holocausts can evolve, ask the Native American ancestors. I am here to tell you that difference is good and is just as important as similarities. In fact difference is GREAT! For example, let's take this melting pot theory some of us learned about in elementary school. Let's put all of our favorite flavors of candy in a big pot, stir and melt it all together. Let's have snickers, twizzlers, starbursts, lemon heads, Boston baked beans, Hershey kisses, recess peanut butter, peppermint. Ok, now stir it all together. Can you taste the distinct flavor of the lemon

heads? The snickers? The peppermint? NO. Not only that, it will sicken you with diabetic shock and you'll be rushed to the hospital! Now let's make a healthier meal like a salad. Let's put some lettuce, cucumbers, croutons, tomatoes, bacon bits, cheese in a salad bowl and stir in a little dressing. You can still feel the crunch of the lettuce, and softness of the tomatoes, and still get bacon bits stuck in your teeth but we are still one community of salad, all adding different flavors but making up a whole. So when you see me and try to describe me and my role in this salad, it is ok to acknowledge that I am a Black woman because to be colorblind or simply,

disregard my color, you have now dismissed every experience I have related to my race that has helped to shape me into the person I am today. However, to use a person's race (or other identifier for that matter) as a way to enforce negative stereotypes like referring to someone as a Black president when we never said white president, is simply inappropriate.

Always remember, if you don't create your path, someone else will create it for you and it will be to their benefit, not yours! I'm sure you've heard one of your history teachers say if you don't know your history, it is sure to repeat itself. And don't just remember the history that makes you feel good. Journey through the history that is painful because on that journey is where we gain growth. But, I implore you, don't rely on one book or one teacher or one administrator, or the TV, or the radio to give you all of the knowledge you consume. Go find several sources and find your own truth and become a supplier of information instead of a consumer of education. I hope that you take this one last thing with you, if you continue to do the same thing, expect to get the same result. If you want different, do different. THANK YOU!!!!!!

### The Journey Beautiful

Gospel great Tramaine Hawkins sang about a wonderful *Change* (Hawkins, 1975, side 1 track 4) that came over her after finding god.

He changed my walk, (CHANGE)

He changed my talk, (CHANGED)

He changed my life he even changed (CHANGED) changed my soul,

My new way of thinking was intellectually liberating but it made it difficult to relate to others. I needed a release. I was changed and was excited to get acquainted with the new me, or perhaps the 'me' that was always there but I never knew. I symbolized that by hiring an attorney

to start the process of a name change. I would no longer be Mr. Pender's wife, I was Consuela Ward again.

When I first moved to Georgia with my children, I was concerned about how teachers and my new community would perceive my sons and me if we had different names. But my outlook evolved again and I could no longer script or apologize what family looked like.

I liked the idea of my boys growing up with the privilege of educational opportunities. Where my window into college life was through the Cosby show spin off *A Different World*, their window was tangible as they attended campus programs like salsa dances, open forums, and speakers the Lost Boys of the Sudan and holocaust survivors. They had passports and visited four different countries by the time they were nine and ten respectively. With this, I am reminded by my elder conductor and foremother, Myrlie Evers-Williams, "Don't just give to them. Remember to teach them about the struggle so they don't waste their opportunities."

New career. New town. New start. New relationship? Now the latter scared me because I was still learning me. I was an emotional dessert when I first moved to Georgia but wanted to have some explore my options and test some boundaries. My personal escapades in Atlanta were stark polarizations from the professional college educator administrator that I was during the day and I had no religion to regulate my actions or emotions. Ruminants of this me had attempted to surface before in college experiences with Brian from Florida State and Tim from Indiana State but I insisted that she go away. I was excited to cultivate this other me and I was neither comfortable nor safe mixing it with my professional me. The free me enjoyed exploration and life and I wrote about basking in this freedom in a new encounter. Matt was such an encounter. This was not a relationship meant to endure a lengthy stay but it reminded me of what living and being open felt like. The experience was a nice balance for my structured life.

## **Matt**

### Reflection

The warmth of your touch sends me into a tailspin of metamorphosis, changing me from a strong solid state into ice cream on a searing summer's day, dripping and drooling in your hands.

When you hold me our souls assimilate, transcending our original flesh. As I taste your lips, I savor the honey from my beehive on your tongue and bask in the intoxication from its liquor.

You enter me and fill me with a passionate rage that has my body screaming in agonizing bliss. I spasm uncontrollably until the rapture comes like a thief in the night, stealing my pleasure and my pain.

Could this fever be infatuation? You see, I don't know you but I crave you. I want you but our fervor frightens me, for we are scared of unfamiliar territory so I caution my mind to remain in a 200 mile safe zone where control is always attainable.

## **Matt**

### Dream Island

Last night I dreamt of you.  
While splashing around my irrigation of thoughts  
I Swam in the resonance of your voice  
The waves carried me to our private island  
Where I sunned in your love  
And baked in its marinade.

We survived on the fruit of our passion  
And the synergy of our talents.  
You built us a house of devotion  
Laying solidarity as the foundation,  
Surrounded by a framework of respect.  
I decorated the walls with loyalty  
And the windows with adoration.  
Your seed flowed upstream and  
I bore you gifts created by the one  
Who gave us each other.  
The energy from our spark  
kept us warm and woven at night  
While our gentle words ventilated us by day.

Ships outnumbering the sand beneath our feet  
have admired our island from afar  
but apprehension leads to their prevention  
from going beyond the bouie, You see,  
it is outside of their comprehension  
how we found electricity  
on an island in the simplicity  
of two rocks from the earth  
working together for a purpose.  
We were natives of this island's dream,  
dream island, island of dreams

### **Matt**

#### Love Sickness

We have been here before, Going in circles  
You get ghost then when I am almost over you  
your sweet words give me a love high  
Whirling me back to step eight on my  
12 step program to recovery of this love sickness

Never felt like this before  
Some kill, steal, and lie for love's sake  
Didn't understand til now  
How love can grip you and make you do  
What you know you shouldn't  
Act like there is no such thing as shame or self respect

I've told you what I use to consider too much  
Like I'll drink your dirty bath water  
With a lil sugar to taste  
I am willing to share you as long as I get my turn  
With you, hours go by like minutes  
I don't sleep when you're next to me  
I am like a baby fighting it  
Not wanting to doze on one moment of time with you  
Your voicemail is how I can control hearing  
That electrifying resonance you call voice  
Til your caller ID blows my cover  
I am amazed at my own resilience  
Of this painful pleasure

With you, I am outside of my safe zone  
In a foreign element unlike that of fire or ice  
My level of experience cannot define a box  
To compartmentalize what I feel  
Don't know how to navigate through  
With my emotions intact  
My arms are stretched on an old rugged cross  
Love riveted in my hands like nails as  
I unsuccessfully struggle to get loose

Perhaps I am caught up in a memory  
One memory so sweet,  
it outweighs the 10 rancid ones  
a memory of a high that like an addict  
I am constantly trying to regain

### **Matt**

When You're in Love By Yourself...

Dimension is stolen from reality  
Gutted like the corpse of a geechee smoked mullet  
With only your voice left to boomerang  
From one corner of your hallowed head to the other

Your heart speaks but is not heard  
Reciprocity is thrust from Webster's memory  
Words randomly abscond as you try to create songs of  
Love and longing turning them into songs of  
Loneliness and sorrow

Dreams rain like monsoons  
Muddying reality of what is, but  
Inevitably, the sun rises, drying up dreams  
Blinding a fabricated happiness with its sobering light

Life cannot survive in this dry land  
Fish from the sea wash ashore  
in an attempt to feed your hunger for love  
But even the meatiest don't stand a chance  
They suffocate because your love is no longer liquid

You send them to the graveyard where your heart is buried  
They sleep in unrest until you decide  
That life in the richness of its reality  
Can be as full as you determine it to be



I looked back and saw that the darkness from the lives I escaped was thick and thunderous as I came out of my storms. It seemed unbelievable to survive such a gale. While in the middle of it, survival had me blind to its severity. Or maybe like death, my body and mind adjusted and numbed to tolerate the pain of transition, making its severity more manageable. Each time I climbed to a new dimension of my thinking and realizing my oppression, my old life was cremated and I soared to new levels of freedom. Indie Arie's poetic song entitled *Beautiful* (Hicks, K., Mueller, W., and Simpson, I., 2001) described these stopping points along my journey when she sang,

The time is right

I'm gonna pack my bags

And take that journey down the road

Cause over the mountain I see the bright sun shining

And I want to live inside the glow (track 14)

## Through It All Unpacked

Things came full circle. I found my voice and became a producer of information and guider of education in white schools. For years, I sang in soprano Black church choirs but it was a stretched falsetto keeping me reaching for a place I would never reach until I changed my approach. Dr. William Powell, my gospel choir director at Florida State University, constantly told me, “Get on top of the note!” I didn’t realize at the time that singing under the note was directly linked to my lack of self-confidence. Today, I am singing on top of the note. I am making decisions using my own thinking opposed to using the thinking I inherited. I was able to consume less education and coach students into their own reflective learning. Freire (1970) suggested the implications of such an educational process when he wrote,

There is no such thing as a neutral educational process. Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes ‘the practice of freedom,’ the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. The development of an educational methodology that facilitates this process will inevitably lead to tension and conflict within our society. But it can also contribute to the formation of a new man and mark the beginning of a new era in Western history. (p. 15)

My break from organized religion and marriage had the same premise. Christopher Hitchens’ (2009) *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* was instrumental in validating my questioning of an omniscient religion by grounding it in historical and cultural contexts. This line of questioning is dialectical to the inspiration in Samuel Freedman’s (1993) story about miracles of the Black church entitled, *Upon This Rock*. In reading both I was

validated that inspiration can be found in but not limited to religion and is usually related to a person's cultural capital or organic place in society.

My discomfort of oppression had gotten larger than its comfort and I had to unlearn the conditioning that made a good person synonymous to christian and a good Black woman one that cared for her children and others with her breast milk with no regard to self care. I was committed to leading others down the Underground Railroad of emancipatory freedom through education as my foremothers and other educators did before me.

A culturally responsive (Gay, 2000) curriculum is both an emancipatory and a responsible method of organizing education. Reading the literature on Black feminist thought and critical race theory has assisted me on my journey in framing both. In addition, I situate my transparent knowledge of self within the literature of multicultural education because it has been useful in understanding and organizing education for students both inside and outside of the classroom. However this undertaking does not go without resistance from those in power. My success was partly driven by Du Bois' prophetic assertion that "we can force ourselves in the canon by out-thinking the owners of the world today who are too drunk on their own arrogance and power" (as cited in Lewis, 1995, p.126).

I have found several useful texts within the body of literature for educators who teach from a multicultural lens. Some include: Lisa Delpit and Joanne Dowdy (1995) *The Skin That We Speak: Thoughts on Language and Culture in the classroom* which talks about, Sonia Nieto (2004) *Affirming Diversity*, Gay (2000) *Culturally Responsive Teaching*, Gay (2003) *Becoming Multicultural Educators*, Michelle Foster (1997) *Black Teachers on Teaching*, Christine Sleeter (2005) *Un-Standardizing the Curriculum: Multicultural Teaching in the Standards-Based Classroom*, Kozol (2005) *Shame of the Nation: Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America*.

This lineage of foremothers that have also assisted me on my journey include a network of Black women in Belinda Robnett's (1997) text entitled *How Long How Long?* which accounts Black women who were instrumental during Black Freedom Movement. Other foremothers who moved the plight of Black women are Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Fannie Lou Hamer, Ella Baker, Gloria Richardson, Mary McCleod Bethune, Shirley Chisholm, Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, bell hooks, Angela Davis and so many other Black women who were seen as more as leaders than organizers, many of whom have never been acknowledged.

Although I can read about the contributions some of these women made, what is often less shared is their lived experiences as women coping with sacrifices, love, and, and family which contributed to who they were. This transparency helps students to understand how their mentors were able to reach the goals they achieved and the images they were able to establish.

Counseling psychologist, Thomas Parham, in his article, "Cycles of Psychological Nigrescence" argues that "the middle-adulthood period of life (between the mid thirties and mid fifties), may be the most difficult time to struggle with racial identity because of one's increased responsibilities and increased potential for opportunities." (Tatum, 2000) Ronald Takai's *A Different Mirror* (1994) was the first of many texts to come in the Curriculum Studies program at Georgia Southern University that ignited a transformation in my thinking about racial identity. This awakening or jolting in my core connected my mind and my body to my environment. I found that there were names to feelings and experiences I have had through several paradigm shifts of alterity, more so than what I had read in fiction as an undergraduate student years ago. Here I read about the racist, sexist, and classist micro aggressions I had experienced while the authors gave me the name, *other*. Although I did not decide to keep the name, I was validated because someone understood my plight.

Black teachers and administrators cared for me and taught me how navigate and survive my Blackness in white schools but it would be literature recommended by a white man that validated it and a Chinese woman that acknowledged me both as Black and a woman. Finding emancipatory freedom in literacy was my promised land. This land is the journey itself. It challenged me to revisit how I was conditioned, explore who I am in relation to the world, and how the world relates to me. It is constantly evolving, liberating compartmentalized boxes of arrested experiences originally stored for survival. The benefit of being able to narratively articulate these experiences is that it can validate the experiences of others through teaching education from the lens of a Black woman.

## CHAPTER 6

### WHAT IS THIS?

What is this  
That I feel deep inside  
That keeps setting my soul afire  
That makes people say I'm mad and strange  
And it won't let me be ashamed  
To tell the world that I've been born again  
Whatever it is  
It won't let me  
Hold my peace  
(Hawkins, 2005, Disc 2, track 3)

“What is This” summarized my study by detailing my trajectory of oppression according to the five stages of Hardiman and Jackson’s (1997) Identity Theory of Oppression: naivety, acceptance, resistance, redefinition, and internalization. The title of this chapter is taken from an upbeat gospel song by Walter Hawkins (2005, disc 2 track 3) that asked an important phenomenological question in which Toni Morrison (2008) also wrote about narratively in *What Moves at the Margin*. That question asks “What moves and motivates us to be who we are?”

This song is therefore relevant to the exploration of my passion for emancipatory education as a Black woman educator in the South in-between the oppression of contested race, gender, class, and power. The chapter acknowledged both my motivation and my movement from stage to stage according to Hardiman and Jackson (1997) Identity Theory of Oppression where they suggest that upward mobility feels like a death upon realization that the current stage has lost all logic. It also looks at cost-benefit analyses I made to ensure each move would be meaningful, and describes how I came to terms with contested contradictions along my journey to the promised land.

As I began, I considered Pinar's (2004) inference of autobiographical narratives to aid in understanding and honoring lived experiences with power to shatter forms of suppression, oppression, and repression.

The autobiographical method [of curriculum studies] asks us to slow down, to remember even re-enter the past, and to meditatively imagine the future. Then, slowly and in one's own terms, one analyzes one's experience of the past and fantasies of the future in order to understand more fully, with more complexity and subtlety, one's submergence in the present. The method of *currere* is not a matter of psychic survival, but of subjective risk and social reconstruction, the achievement of selfhood and society in the age to come.

(p. 4)

During the stage of naivety, oppressors and oppressed people notice differences in race, gender, and religion without assigned meaning that characterizes these differences (**Finding 1**). Tatum (2000) suggests that the parts of our identity that capture our attention are those that other people notice and that reflect back to us. The aspect of identity that is the target of others' attention, and subsequently of our own, often is that which sets us apart as *exceptional* or *other* in their eyes. For this reason Black men and Black women and other oppressed people of color assign race as the primary factor in their ontology because a place based on color has been established for them by which serves as a basis of their day to day functionality.

Although I had identified as being female from the time I cooked with easy bake ovens and nurtured white baby dolls as a child to having my own children while working and caring for others in my community. It was through reading Black feminist thought that I was able to associate a different layer of oppression in addition to my race and class. I was a Black woman which wasn't the same as being Black, a term reserved for Black men, and different than a

woman, a term reserved for white women. My naivety became even clearer when I moved into administration in bible belt Southeast Georgia where I became an anomaly because I was considered successful without being defined by a husband.

During the stage of acceptance, oppressors believe in meritocracy while the oppressed accepts supremacy as normal and assimilation as necessary (**Finding 2**). Many of my white teachers were culturally deprived and limited in their view of the world, having learned from only one lens themselves. They used their classrooms to uphold the dominant discourse by presenting one side of the story and called it normal. Their classrooms also served as a vehicle to mute my voice and the voices of others whose story might challenge that same discourse. For these reasons, I and other students of color were schooled in a contested environment. For instance, we were encouraged to memorize and repeat the pledge of allegiance for a country that had no allegiance to us or our histories, in an effort to maintain our oppression. This is reminiscent of the New England Primer in colonial education that indoctrinated its students of their commitment to god, the king, and parents (Spring, 2005). It was also easier for me to get a lead in a play in my Black church where pictures of civil rights workers hung amidst the blue eyed white Jesus, while it was acceptable to expect a secondary role in a white school play. This was evident when I was cast as the Wicked Witch of the West in my elementary school play *The Wizard of Oz*. White students were racialized as well. They had no outlet to participate in Black history month programs so they were instinctively taught and motivated by white history during the remaining 11 months.

In 2006, teen film director Kiri Davis repeated the doll test originally facilitated by psychologists Kenneth and Mamie Clark in 1954 for court case of Brown vs. the Board of Education. The tests were facilitated within approximately 50 years of each other but the results



were the same indicating that most children between the ages of three and seven preferred white dolls over Black dolls. My personal childhood did not escape this result as I had mostly white dolls whose hair was tame and manageable unlike mine.

I have seen the acceptance of the dominant discourse resonate not only in mine and my peers experience in consuming education, but as an administrator today, I witness seeing Black students and colleagues in the University bury their responses to micro aggressions of racism. I have seen Black vernaculars change and postures straighten upon a white person entering the room. It reminded me of how my Black church family as a child, responded to the white politicians that came to my childhood Black churches to win over the Black vote.

In the stage of resistance, oppressors begin to question traditional beliefs and can distance themselves from their group assignment because of anger, guilt, and shame. The oppressed in this stage experience an unexpected event that empowers them to recognize and openly reject and challenge their oppression leading them to define themselves by who they are not (**Finding 3**). I was conditioned and accepted the standard of what was right in society as white, male middle to upper middle class, heterosexual, and christian. Although my identity was originally shaped through these oppressive identifiers, I evolved to sustain that very system that oppressed me. As a educator, I could now use my power to oppress non christians and homosexuals in the classroom. The oppression I gave was not overt but it would not question the status quo of power.

Gay rights with this level of thinking, was not the same as civil rights. The obvious racial profiling of Middle Easterners and Muslims was somehow not the same as racially profiling Blacks. It felt wrong but I didn't know the difference between good ones and bad ones as if I understood how to distinguish good Black people from the bad or good white people from the

bad. This same psychosis allowed me to believe that all Asians looked alike, much like when some whites thought that all Blacks looked alike. What was missing was dialogue and curriculum across cultures. Learning about other cultures in curriculum can both prevent and dissipate fear when faced with differences in the lived experience. Gay (2000) expound on this premise “Ignorance of people different from ourselves often breeds negative attitudes, anxiety, fears, and the seductive temptation to turn other into images of ourselves.” (p. 23). I learned more than I had expected from the diversity programs I brought to college campuses intended to teach the campus community everything different from the normalized standard.

I looked to the Black church as a guide to live my roles of wife, mother, and educator but I found it difficult to apply the rule book to my lived experience in my early 30’s because the messages in church had remained the same while my living conditions had changed. When I began questioning my own oppression as a christian woman, one of my first actions was to test a preacher’s kid in the high school speech and debate class I taught. I challenged her to debate christianity from texts in addition to the bible. I also challenged her to argue against christianity altogether in an effort to help her (and me) understand other points of views. If done well, her original argument for christianity would have either been made stronger or she would begin to question its foundation. I began to question and eventually grew angry and withdrew from religion by the end of chapter four. This death was a difficult transition because everything I knew about life revolved around religion.

When my expectations of religion and the roles in it were compromised, I began to resist Black church ideology because it no longer made sense to my current situation. Its power kept me and other women all of races and ethnicities in an oppressive marriage. My marriage was not oppressive because I had a domineering husband, but because it was unhealthy. Black church

ideology advised me to pray about it instead of encouraging my husband and me to work together to proactively heal it. It also gave me the burden to remain in a subordinate place until he decided to move forward. I changed and I have no intention of re-defining a man made church ideology nor try to situate myself into a doctrine intended to keep me oppressed. That action is counterproductive because takes an established normative foundation and dresses it up to meet a temporary occasion to passively satisfy those who reside on the outliers of society. Other examples of this are Black santas and Black barbies. The foundation has not changed, but a temporary surface was applied to pacify those who were oppressed long enough to keep them from rejecting and revolting against the system used to oppress them.

As a woman in search for love relationships after high school, it was important that I openly resist and challenge qualities in a man that subjected my mother to sexist oppression. This led me to marry someone who was everything different than what was modeled for me in my home instead of someone who was compatible with me. I did not know what I wanted as a consumer of knowledge, only what I did not want. Now at almost 40 years old, I unintentionally became the middle class statistic of the respectable Black women referred to in Collins (2000). “Despite the often remarkable achievement of middle class Black women, the pain many experience on the way to middle class respectability, while masked by achievement, is no less real” (p. 174).

During the stage of redefinition, oppressors search for a new identity and realize that ending oppression frees both the oppressed and the oppressor. They seek to find others like themselves in an effort to redefine who they are. The oppressed in this stage redefine how the oppressors have named them and how they name themselves. They also search for people like themselves to get a better understanding of who they are (**Finding 4**). Blacks in the United States since slavery

defined family as a community network of shared care without the necessity of a blood connection. This was often seen when mommies, daddies, and babies were sold to other plantations. The sense of a caring community has what defined family in Black communities. I have found strength in these networks among Black churches and white schools during times when I had few blood relatives. White supremacy infiltrated attempted to these networks at times in order to maintain its oppressive power. One initiative was to treat us differently based on the lightness or darkness of our skin which spilled into the community. Detrimental to the oppressor's control was confidence in the oppressed, because it came with unapologetic empowerment. I reached this stage when I no longer hid from the sun and apologized to family, friends, or white people for my dark skin or kinky hair. Remnants of this began in high school when I chose to sit at the front of the school bus to reject the idea of the back of the bus as my place.

Once I was empowered, I was no longer in a position to thank my oppressors for equalizing or sharing power. Nor did I own the burden of balancing the oppressor's moods. I no longer felt I owed my oppressors for the affirmative action policies that provided the window of opportunity for education or employment because no affirmative action policy would allow me to continue if my performance was substandard. Instead, I was intentional about proving to society and white professors like Dr. Duncan from Indiana State and the Music professor at Stetson University, that I could name myself by rejecting any labels or assumptions about me based on race. Although I embraced the understanding of my experience through texts that named me *other*, I rejected the name, *other*, itself because of its implication to be measured by a standard other what was standard for me.

I also did not owe a man because he bought me a meal, gave me an engagement ring, or signed a marriage license. I accepted that it was appropriate to feel upset instead of making excuses for a man's shortcomings to keep a plastic image alive in a relationship. I decided offer mutual respect over the expectation of servitude for that same relationship. .

In renaming myself and establishing new expectations, I offered assistance to students interested in journeying to their own promised land of emancipatory education through the Underground Railroad. I am currently committed to progressing this mission through support services on college campuses because it was that area that made me feel most safe and connected to the university as a student.

I also visited a network of friends in Atlanta, Georgia in this stage where I met more people who were like me which gave me a better understanding of myself. I felt free and uninhibited in this environment.

Oppressors in the stage of internalization operate from an inner security and are no longer angry or ashamed. Fighting oppression becomes a personal responsibility and not a cause. The oppressed also develops an inner security. They recognize and acknowledge that there are other oppressed groups and then demonstrate compassion for those groups. They are committed to fighting oppression for themselves and others (**Finding 5**). Human rights activist, Ella Baker is a great example of fight for oppressed groups during the Black Freedom Movement but she clearly reached stage five when she addressed concern over "the Vietnam war, Puerto Rican independence, South African apartheid, political repression, prison, conditions, poverty, unequal education, and sexism" (Ransby, 2003, p. 6).

Likewise, Bill Ayers continues to be arrested in peaceful protests over human rights. Dr. Ayers was invited back to Georgia Southern University by a different department in the Spring

of 2011 and he challenged the audience to explore that which we know is morally wrong but goes against the law, your church. He mentioned that in 1840, it was not safe for a person privileged or not privileged to avoid slavery, to advocate for its abolition. Today, talking about issues related to the LGBT community is a necessary “complicated conversation” (pinar, 2004) particularly for Blacks. Where whites once used the bible to justify enslaving Blacks in the United States, Black church ideology piously uses that same bible, without considering historical or cultural context, to condemn convict gays and lesbians. When I realized that I would never again accept a white man’s definition of me because he has not lived my experience, I would be imposing the same hegemonic privilege used to oppress me if I had not lived the experience of a gay or lesbian person and attempted to define what was right for them.

Committing to fighting for other oppressed groups would normally take place through my Black church or affiliation with a sorority but I am no longer tied to either. However, it is not a difficult task to do, considering my professional role as Director of the Multicultural Student Center at Georgia Southern University. I have used my knowledge of the literature to further these initiatives and I am empowered to do them unapologetically. I no longer intentionally celebrate or recognize nationally recognized cultural months or weeks as a part of the Multicultural Student Center’s programming because it implies that it is appropriate to ignore the accomplishments and value of those groups in American history when the month ends. These would include but not limit Black history month in February, women’s history month in March, Native American month in November, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, & Transgendered awareness in June, Asian awareness month in May, Hispanic American month from September 15-October 15. Today, cultural awareness programs at Georgia Southern University can be seen at anytime during the academic year.

I also advocate for various service and social justice initiatives through the Center. This has to be done with care because service can be seen critically as a divisive way to define boundaries of the advantaged (us) and the disadvantaged (them) which lends the lack of necessity to question the privileges of the advantaged but rather focus on the disadvantages of others. The relationship is then defined based off of a normal standardization to the reality of others reality, rather than a community of equals.

It can start as a privileged choice to be a part of a good cause, to do good work, or to get service hours to join a fraternity or sorority, leaving the oppressed feeling like they were on the other end of a one night stand. The deed should not be weighted itself, i.e. making work in animal rights equal to that of anti-racist work. The caution here that is not often taken into consideration is the lens of the individuals be learned from and or serviced. How is their view of the world impacted when others come to learn about their world? What (if any) relationships are being nurtured in gaining rapport? Purpel (2005) suggests five criticisms of service learning: 1. There is likelihood of insensitivity to cultural differences and relevant history, 2. Cognition of misuse and abuse of power, 3. The dangers of implicit elitism, and 4. The futility of the action itself.

It is the hope for a connection to humanity which can foster an innate responsibility to civic engagement. It is important then to recognize as Friere (1970) said that we should forge *with* and not *for* the oppressed.

## Further Considerations

In addition to my findings on Hardiman and Jackson's (1997) Identity Theory of Oppression, I have found another trajectory that is directly related to my social mobility as a Black woman. When I was in poverty, I was apologetic to oppressors, sought support in my community, was under someone else's constant control, looked to a man for security, was judgmental of those who did not follow the same rules, was sexually repressed, and looked to Black church ideology as an anesthetic for my oppression. The farther I moved away from poverty, these dynamics evolved. I received more education, I was less apologetic to my oppressors, I was more spiritual and less religious, I was less dependent on community, I was less judgmental of people and more critical of rules and rule makers, I saw men for companionship, and I was both economically and sexually freer.

As I reflect upon my inquiry, I have found that my polar experiences often left me stuck in a metaphorically purgatory place while trying to switch codes from one social class to another. Whenever I learned a lesson along my journey, my purgatory place evolved which left me to find my next lesson. I have also found that it is important for me to deconstruct my experiences so that I can unapologetically deconstruct my ways of thinking as a Black woman in the South. I can never understand the world until I first understand myself by going back to my beginnings so that I can contextualize my now.

The Black female experience in the United States is multidimensional and was both founded and compounded separation, marginalization, and dehumanization. It was supported by education (and the lack thereof) and an imposition of dialectical religious morals. From the time slaves were brought to the United States from Africa, families from differing African cultures, languages, and mores were physically severed and were collectively placed in a dehumanizing



monolithic condition where survival was their common goal. This condition has often been confused with a monolithic Black culture.

The slave experience included those of both African woman and men which harbor some distinct differences that continue to impact our identities today. It included the experiences of people who were free then catapulted into slavery; people who were born and died into slavery; and people who were born into slavery and freed from legislation but not from the minds of those who had cultural capital. During this transition, their once imposed religion morphed. It was originally accepted to appease white people and used as creative ways to communicate to each other. It was re-defined and taken more literal in application. It was accepted as their truth and an opportunity for leadership and community, and a seemingly metaphysical tool for survival.

Those experiences transitioned to 100 years of Jim Crow, again encompassing those women and men who knew various combinations and vantage points of slavery, Jim Crow, and the civil rights era all grounded in the Black church. The next stage of metamorphosis occurred and is occurring as a result of social mobility of some Blacks, thus un-surfacing the major commonality of our once low socio-economic status. The church that once kept us together changed with the social and economic growth and so did the people inhabited by it. The high visibility of class mobility experienced by a small portion of Blacks is often misinterpreted as evidence of the economic success of Black Americans as a group (Kincheloe, 1999).

This produces more than ever the necessity of recruitment and retention programs to equalize generations of marginalization. Harriet Tubman helped more people than she ever set out to do. She has reached to save the enslaved and those impacted its psychology. Her reach and journey of care extended to this lifetime and is continuing to outlive her body but not her spirit. It

is alive in programs like Summer Enrichment Program at Florida State and Minority Advisement Program and Georgia Southern, and all of the Black teachers and a few white that have crossed my path. I have seen where enrollment and retention programs like these are often administratively refused, tolerated and or diluted to appease. However, I choose to continue what Harriet Tubman started as I teach and model for other students.

Programs like these afforded me the social mobility to move into the Black Middle Class. In some respects, the Black middle class is a group revered because they are thought of as having reached the promised land. They are the slaves who have escaped through Tubman's railroad and made it to King's mountaintop heard singing "free at last, free at last, thank God all mighty, we are free at last!" In contrast, I contend that the Black middle class is an illusion created by conservatives and liberals alike in America to pacify the Black community and to passively exonerate white guilt from generations of inhumanity and blatant cultural genocide. This illusion presents itself in a kaleidoscope of magnificent colors while iridescent ropes and chains covertly control the limbs of this bifurcated class. It is my contention that the consistent pipeline of messages stratifying the Black community as a whole is traditional education, powered by systematic violence, religion, pop culture, law, and politics. Harro (2000) speaks of breaking this cycle,

Some of us who are targets try to interrupt the cycle. When groups begin to empower themselves-by learning more about each other, by, unlearning old myths and stereotypes, by challenging the status quo-we make the difficult decision to interrupt the cycle of socialization. We begin to question the givens, the assumptions of the society, the norms, the value, the rules, the roles, and even the structures. We will gain the necessary vision and power to reconstruct new rules that truly are equal, roles that complement each other

instead of competing, assumptions that value all groups instead of ascribing value to some and devaluing others, and structures that promote cooperation and shared power instead of power over each other. (p. 20-21)

Jean Anyon (2005) suggests that social movements can build partnerships between students, communities, and scholars to work as change agents to the toxic nourishment of white supremacy in current educational practices. She recommends a redistribution of economic resources to alleviate the educational gap. It is just important for students to develop a critical consciousness to identify racism in educational functions which expand into social change in greater society in order to empower them to realize their own strategies to be perceived as strong rather than weak (Silin, 1995).

Learning the cycle patterns of life will help teach students including my own children how to prepare for life as contributing citizens. The challenge is studying the patterns to predict what they will need as tools to achieve social, cultural, educational, and political capital. Just as students read about struggles related to these forms of capital 100 years ago and consider much of the history's rationale archaic, so will future students think that about current systems. The hope is that the one thing that will not change is the ability to think critically, which is a transferrable skill. In order for this to happen, it is necessary for curriculum to teach students to embrace change at least as much as we embrace familiarity and to strive for cultural competence. This is reached when oppressors feel it a personal responsibility to fight oppression rather than a cause or work with the privilege of turning it on and off at will. They will no longer articulate the experiences of oppressed people for oppressed people, instead, they assist in making room for their voices to be heard. Listening and application will replace resistance and denial of

oppressors. For oppressed people, cultural competence is reached when they can acknowledge other oppressions in addition to their own and work to form coalitions to fight all oppressions.

## EPILOGUE

This is story of my evolution to midlife and I am excited to live the second half. A few months ago, my 89 year old maternal grandmother expressed to me that everyone around her was dying and she was one of few left of family and friends her age. I could not relate because we are on different sides of the mountain. However, her statement reminded me that what we are today, our choices, concerns, and expectations, may not be who we are tomorrow.

In order to get an even better understanding of my story, it is my intention to write my mother's story using remnants of what she and my aunt can remember. I only knew of her what she chose to present to me as a child, not considering her journey before she conceived me or her vantage point while I was growing. She and my grandmother were never close and I am trying to break the cycle that looms to persist. Grandma is in hospice now fading from Alzheimers and mama's memory has not been stable for some time.

I hope that students, who see me today, understand my guttural passion for teaching after having read this work. My story was emotionally difficult to write but necessary for others to read so their experiences are validated and I can only hope that it helps someone along their journey. I will always teach in some capacity as it is my calling to channel students down an Underground Railroad to emancipatory freedom of the mind. My hope is that my sons, who are both my love songs and my future, one day read my story to fill in missing gaps they may have in the future and then one day, write their own stories.

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