

Words for the Journey – May 2021

I grew up in a home in Compton, California where my grandmother lived with us. Mama and Daddy were pioneering vanguards in their families' treks during the Great Migration of African Americans who journeyed from the southern United States to the north and west during the 1940's and 1950's. When Grandpa Malachi died, Mama and Daddy sent for my Grandma Laura and my then sixteen year-old Uncle Charles who were struggling to eke out a living in Oklahoma. I have wonderful memories of living in that three-bedroom, one bath, eleven hundred square foot house where my parents, three sisters, my uncle, my grandma and I lived.

Grandma Laura was barely literate but miraculously memorized vast amounts of scriptures from the King James Version of the Bible as they were recited to her. One of my favorite childhood activities was reading scripture out loud to her as we sat hip to hip on the front porch of our home while she chewed tobacco and plaited my baby sister's hair; adorning her tiny head with brightly colored ribbons while the tender headed child fought to hold back tears. Often, Grandma Laura would sing as she sat braiding and chewing as I read the Bible to her. Sixty plus years later, I can still hear grandma singing:

Walk together children

Don't you get weary

Walk together children

Don't you get weary

Oh, talk together children

Don't you get weary

There's a great camp meeting in the promised land!

I ponder today what my grandmother must have been thinking about as she sang those words back then. Certainly, the temptation to succumb to weariness must have been a constant companion for her. Laura was born just after this nation reneged on its promise of reconstruction and reparation to newly emancipated and formerly enslaved persons. Laura Pearl knew what it was like to see black men hanging like strange fruit from trees. Laura Pearl Dawson had personally experienced race based sexual assault as a teenager. Laura Pearl Dawson Stokes and her family experienced the bombing, burning and pillaging of Black Wall Street in Tulsa in 1921. Grandma Laura personally experienced the degradation of having to drink from "coloreds only" water fountains, and although she could not really read the signs distinguishing "White Ladies" from "Colored women", she knew that these were meant to denigrate and ultimately annihilate her humanity.

"Sister Stokes" or "Mother Stokes" as she was called at the New Jerusalem Baptist Church of Muskogee, raised six children during the Great Depression in the dust bowl of Oklahoma where she and "Deacon Stokes" labored as a domestics and dirt farmers. She often boasted that none of her sons ever went to jail and nary a one of her daughters was found to be with child outside the holy bond of matrimony. However, Grandma Laura's highest praise was reserved for the fact that through the grace of God, she and her husband did manage to send one child, Elva Loraine Stokes, my mother, on to

attend and graduate from Langston University. My mother the first person in her family lineage to go beyond high school. And then, through her, all of Elva Stokes Riggins' children went on to earn college, graduate or post graduate degrees.

No, I do not recall Grandma Laura singing James Weldon Johnson's, "Lift Every Voice and Sing". But I will take poetic license in affirming that one particular stanza had to reverberate within her as she sat on the front porch of the home of her college educated, middle class daughter; combing her youngest granddaughters hair, listening to her grandson read scripture to her and undoubtedly thinking about how the chickens had indeed come home to roost in her own lifetime, as she experienced firsthand how that humble home in Compton California had become a waystation of sorts, a 20th Century version of the Underground railroad for her, her son and later, a waystation for scores more of displaced or immigrating black folks. So yes, I place these words on her lips as well:

"We have come over a way that with tears has been watered. We have come, treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered. Out from the gloomy past, here now we stand at last, where the white gleam of our bright star is cast."

To mothers, grandmothers, graduates and those who produce graduates, when your feet get tired, may your soul find rest and restoration,

Aidsand F. Wright-Riggins