



## **SENIORS, ELDERS AND GRANDPARENTS DAY**

### **CULTURAL RESOURCES**

**Sunday, September 13, 2009**

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#### **I. Historical Background**

In her famous recorded testimony of miraculous deliverance from near death prompted by long-term drug addiction, former R&B singer turned gospel music artist, Helen Baylor, returns again and again to the chanted refrain—“But I had a praying grandmother,” crediting her grandmother’s prayers for sustaining her when life was at its darkest.

The trope of the praying grandmother is oft-repeated by gospel music artists, among them is Mark Kibble of the multi-platinum selling contemporary gospel group, Take 6, who says “Praise God for grandmothers, because they pray for you no matter what’s going on. You know she was probably the one that kept me from really falling into some deep trouble.”<sup>1</sup> The Rev. Jesse Jackson speaks to the enduring legacy of his own grandmother’s prayers, a tradition which stretches across barriers of time, place and circumstance, to nurture, empower, guard and protect, in other words—to move mountains.

There is a prayer tradition that emerges from the black church. My grandmother doesn't have any money, doesn't know anything about a balance sheet, but she knows the worth of prayer. My grandmother doesn't have any education, she can't read or write, but she's never lost. She knows the worth of prayer. She's never taken a course on nutrition at the university and can't read the directions of Betty Crocker, but she's a chemist in the kitchen. She knows the worth of prayer. To the world she has no name, and she has no face, but she feels she has cosmic importance, because there's a God she communicates with in heaven who is eternal. And so she knows that every boss is temporary, that every rainy day is temporary, that every hardship is temporary. She used to tell me, "Son, every goodbye ain't gone. Just hold on; there's joy coming in the morning."<sup>2</sup>

While historically grandmothers are most often celebrated as cultural and spiritual anchors in the familial lives of African Americans, the significance of grandfathers in our communities is of consequence as well. It was Mahalia Jackson's love for her grandfather Paul that prompted her to commit to singing religious music exclusively in her career. In 1934, during a visit to Chicago from his home in New Orleans, Mahalia's Grandfather Paul consented (at Mahalia's urging) to a session at a photography studio. Because her grandfather suffered a stroke during the sitting, Mahalia blamed herself for his misfortune. Praying that God would spare her grandfather's life, Mahalia promised God in return that she would give up attending vaudeville shows and movie theaters, both of which she dearly loved. In her autobiography, *Movin' On Up*, she recounts, "I feel God heard me and wanted me to devote my life to his songs, and that is why he suffered my prayers to be answered—so that nothing would distract me from being a gospel singer."<sup>3</sup> Mahalia's testimony illustrates the degree to which grandparents are venerated in the African American community as a source of deep and abiding love, wisdom and enduring strength.

For the first time, in the year 2000, the U.S. Census Bureau collected data on grandparent caregiving, documenting that approximately 8% of African Americans aged 30 and older live in the same household with their grandchildren. In over half of these cases, the households are actually headed by grandparents. Across the U.S., over 700,000 African American grandparents assume responsibility for rearing their grandchildren, in most instances, serving as caregiver for five years or more. Reasons vary for the parental role that grandparents play in today's society: the death of a parent; parents serving in the military or incapacitated by drug or alcohol addiction; incarceration; or simply children who require a change in their social environment. The role of grandparents in sustaining our communities is far-reaching and critical. To honor grandparents is to honor who we are and who we will become as a people.

**Grandparents are but one component of the larger category of elders who merit our praise and respect as African Americans.** Lessons from our African American cultural heritage teach us the degree to which ancestors were held in high regard historically. During slavery, older women were assigned the task of caring for young children whose parents were at work. In the antebellum period, old men and women were viewed as sources of wisdom and as links to the African past, as evident from their reservoirs of

riddles, proverbs, songs, folktales and other cultural traditions that they passed down. Insulting an elder was a punishable offense, and *any* adult, not just a child's parents, had the authority to administer correction. In African American culture, elders were to be treated with respect.<sup>4</sup> The presence of elders in our lives is critical to our well-being as a people. We owe them our continued love, respect and admiration. Because of them, we are.

## II. Personal Testimony

I was blessed growing up to have all four of my grandparents as a part of my life. I was sixteen when the first of my grandparents, my maternal grandmother, died. She died much too young, in her early sixties, but her many years of being considerably overweight with high blood pressure had simply taken its toll. My mother's parents lived on the outskirts of Greenville, Texas, a town two hours away from our rural home in Teague. Capturing the spirit of the era, Greenville greeted its visitors with a welcome sign at its boundary declaring it as a city with the "blackest land and the whitest people."

Having married at age fifteen and completed only the seventh grade, there were few sources of employment available to my grandmother as an adult other than domestic labor. Rather than follow that route, self-pride and sheer willpower led her to exercise her entrepreneurial spirit to make ends meet. While Daddy Joe, my grandfather, farmed the land, Grandmother Brigham (her last name), as we called her, seized every opportunity to learn how to fashion crafts which she could sell to friends, family and strangers alike. There were planters constructed from coffee cans, covered with plaster of Paris, etched with a fork and stained several times to simulate the color and markings of tree bark. I also remember stuffed throw pillows, bedspreads and purses of gingham, all hand stitched in intricate patterns, just so—perfect to add a touch of beauty and character to any home.

Grandmother Brigham was resourceful, resilient and strong. It was she who provided the needed moral support for each of her three daughters who sought a college education in order to have a better life. Grandmother was a rock, the glue that held the family together, a pillar of the C.M.E. (Christian Methodist Episcopal) Church, where my Daddy Joe served faithfully as Sunday school superintendent and church trustee. Growing up, my brother, sister and I were always expected to sing to my piano accompaniment when we visited their church; refusing to comply was simply not an option. Our grandparents were to be respected and honored.

My father's parents lived in Nacogdoches, deep in the Piney Woods of East Texas. My strongest memories of Granddaddy and Granny Dear reflected their mastery of the division of labor which governed their household of six children. In outside labors, granddaddy reigned supreme, while Granny Dear's stamp was evident throughout the inner workings of family life. Granny Dear lived to be 103 years old, and distributed among her sons, daughters and grandchildren are the beautiful hand-stitched patchwork quilts which she constructed throughout her adult life. Breakfast in Nacogdoches was always a treat. The eggs were fresh from the hen house, the biscuits and jelly were

homemade, and the butter had been churned right in the middle of the kitchen. My brother especially looked forward to the delectable morning feasts, which prompted him to routinely overindulge and suffer a stomach ache. Somehow, the food at grandmother's was simply better. No doubt, the love that went into the preparation had something to do with it.

What made our Nacogdoches visits particularly special was Granddaddy Brisco's gift with horses. Known for miles around as a skilled bronco buster, granddaddy built a corral some 100 yards from the house where he boarded horses whose owners from far and near had hired him to tame. Armed with his hand braided whip, whose precision crack could be heard well in the distance, granddaddy never failed to achieve his intended goal. I watched him work for hours and days on end, and oh, how I did admire his seeming magic in training horses to follow his command.

The family homestead of some fifty acres also included a pasture where Nancy, the gentle mare granddaddy had trained to be safe for even the smallest of children to ride, lived. Our annual family reunions in Nacogdoches, with its fish fries and barbeques, simply were not complete until all of the ten grandchildren had been granted a turn riding Nancy. Granddaddy taught us all to ride, but he also taught us to love—ourselves, each other, and life in general. With his captivating stories told with incredibly exacting detail, impeccable pacing and engaging humor, we learned that granddaddy was a careful observer of interactions among people he encountered, including us. He taught us to walk tall with dignity; to look out and care for each other; to work hard; to respect our elders; to aspire to greatness. I never heard him raise his voice, or get unduly excited, but when he spoke, he commanded everyone's attention. My granddaddy was somebody to be reckoned with.

As I reflect on my childhood having grown up with four loving grandparents, I treasure the time that I spent in their presence, and the life lessons I learned from observing and listening to them. My grandparents were special; and for the lasting memories we made as a family, I am grateful.

### **III. Litany and Poetry**

**Leader:**            Respect your elder's instructions and do not forsake your elder's teaching.  
                         Our elders, of all people, were selected for a unique lesson to humanity.  
                         God guided our elders in the paths of righteousness. Their love nurtured us  
                         and is written in our very walk.

**People:**            *When we walk, our elder's words will guide us;*  
                         *When we sleep, they will watch over us;*  
                         *When we awake they will speak to us.*

**Leader:**            The sayings of our elders are a lamp; their teachings are a light; and the  
                         corrections of their discipline are the way to life.

People: *When we walk, our elder's words will guide us;  
When we sleep, they will watch over us;  
When we awake they will speak to us.*

Leader: We are an historic people. The blood of our elders, who knew two worlds, made history a sacred tradition.

People: *When we walk, our elder's words will guide us;  
When we sleep, they will watch over us;  
When we awake they will speak to us.*

Leader: Against seemingly impossible odds, our elders maintained families, reared children and passed on the elements of our soul.

People: *When we walk, our elder's words will guide us;  
When we sleep, they will watch over us;  
When we awake they will speak to us.*

Leader: They are the roots and we are the branches. We remember that in their pain, the oak, hickory and magnolia shouted in ecstasy.

People: *When we walk, our elder's words will guide us;  
When we sleep, they will watch over us;  
When we awake they will speak to us.*

All: We stand firmly on our past, full of thanksgiving for elders who cleared for us a path. Guided by God's grace and wisdom we reach in hope toward the future, which is ours.<sup>5</sup>

## **Poetry**

### **For My People (excerpt)**

For my people lending their strength to the years,  
to the gone years and the now years  
and the maybe years,  
washing ironing cooking scrubbing sewing mending hoeing plowing digging planting  
pruning patching dragging along  
never gaining never reaping never knowing and never understanding...<sup>6</sup>

### **Gift**

Christmas morning  
I got up before the others and  
ran  
naked across the plank  
floor into the front  
room to see grandmamma

sewing a new  
button on my last year  
ragdoll.<sup>7</sup>

#### **IV. Traditional Songs for this Moment**

##### **Stand by Me**

Heralded by Thomas Dorsey as “grandfather” of gospel music, Charles Albert Tindley, Methodist Minister, pastored a Philadelphia congregation of over 10,000 members during the 1920s. With an output of over fifty songs, Tindley compositions are included in Gospel Pearls, the 1921 National Baptist Convention landmark compilation of African American religious music favorites. “Stand by Me” has become a standard, along with other Tindley favorites such as “We’ll Understand It Better By and By,” among African American Christians of all denominations.

##### **Verse**

When the storms of life are raging, stand by me.  
When the storms of life are raging, stand by me.  
When the world is tossing me, like a ship upon the sea,  
Thou who rulest wind and water, stand by me.

In the midst of faults and failures, stand by me.  
In the midst of faults and failures, stand by me.  
When I’ve done the best I can, and my friends misunderstand,  
Thou who knowest all about me, stand by me.

When I’m growing old and feeble, stand by me.  
When I’m growing old and feeble, stand by me.  
When my life becomes a burden, and I’m nearing chilly Jordan,  
O thou Lily of the Valley, stand by me.<sup>8</sup>

##### **This Ol’ Time Religion (Spiritual)**

Since “This Ol’ Time Religion” is a spiritual, no individual composer can be credited with this song. The text cited here differs from the more well-known “Gimme that Ole Time Religion,” reflecting how songs transmitted via oral tradition existed in multiple variations. References to “ol’ time religion” acknowledge the role of elders in maintaining the historical legacy of African American religious and cultural history.

O This ol’ time religion,  
This ol’ time religion  
This ol’ time religion,  
It’s good enough for me.

It is good when I am dying,  
It is good when I am dying.  
It is good when I am dying.

It is good enough for me.

It will take me home to heaven,  
It will take me home to heaven,  
It will take me home to heaven,  
It is good enough for me.<sup>9</sup>

### **Witness (Spiritual)**

In this spiritual, Methuselah is credited as the oldest man in the Bible with nine hundred and ninety nine years. Genesis 5:25-26, however, indicates that Methuselah lived to be only 969. The significance of the reference, is of course, not the precise number of years that he lived, but the symbol of his long life as a testimony of God's grace and mercy, and as an example worthy of emulation.

My soul is a witness for my Lord.  
My soul is a witness for my Lord.  
My soul is a witness for my Lord.  
My soul is a witness for my Lord.

### **Verse**

You read in the Bible and you understand,  
Methuselah was the oldest man.  
He lived nine hundred and ninety nine,  
He died and went to Heaven, Lord in a-due time.

Methuselah was a witness for my Lord.  
Methuselah was a witness for my Lord.  
Methuselah was a witness for my Lord.  
Methuselah was a witness for my Lord.<sup>10</sup>

## **V. Modern Songs for this Moment**

### **If It Had Not Been for the Lord on My Side**

Daughter of Rev. Earl Pleasant, Margaret Douroux's compositions include such standards as "Give Me a Clean Heart," and "Trees" both of which are included in Songs of Zion, the African American supplement to the United Methodist hymnal. This selection speaks to the powerful faith in God that African American elders demonstrate in leading and sustaining our communities.

(Chorus)

If it had not been for the Lord on my side  
Tell me where would I be  
Where would I be

He kept my enemies away  
He let the sun shine through a cloudy day.

He wraps me in the cradle of His arms  
When He knew I'd been battered and scarred.

(Chorus)<sup>11</sup>

### **Great Is Thy Faithfulness**

Representing the hymn tradition, and the fact that African American religious practice embraces music created outside of our culture, "Great Is Thy Faithfulness" attests to those legions of African American grandparents and elders who depended on God as their source of strength and sustenance. It was written by Thomas O Chisholm (1866-1960).

Great is Thy faithfulness, O God my Father  
There is no shadow of turning with Thee  
Thou changest not  
Thy compassions they fail not  
As Thou hast been Thou forever will be.  
Great is Thy faithfulness  
Great is Thy faithfulness.  
Morning by morning  
New mercies I see.  
All I have needed  
Your hand hath provided  
Great is Thy faithfulness  
Lord Unto Me.<sup>12</sup>

### **Mama's Song**

Adopted by his sixty-four year old great aunt Gertrude when he was only three years old, multi-platinum selling contemporary gospel music artist, Kirk Franklin, referred to her as an "angel... put here on this earth to try to pour some stuff into my soul, to keep me out of prison, out of gangs, out of drugs..." To raise the money Franklin needed for piano lessons as a child, his aunt collected aluminum cans. Franklin credits her "for anything good I've ever done." "Mama's Song" was written in her honor at the time of her death, and is included on Franklin's sophomore release, with him singing lead vocals, something he rarely does on his recordings.<sup>13</sup>

YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T7lZ0XqB-u8>

Summertime has come and gone  
The leaves are slowly falling  
The other day my Mother heard  
The voice of Jesus calling  
He said, "Come on with Me my child  
I'll take away your strife"  
Mama went to sleep on this side  
And woke up in paradise.

(Chorus)

Oh, but how I miss her so  
More than you'll ever know  
How I miss her so  
More than you'll ever know  
How I miss her so  
More than you'll ever know

When I was a little boy Mama rocked me in her arms  
She protected me from danger  
She kept me safe and warm  
But Mama is not here now  
And I'm standing by myself  
But as long as I've got Jesus  
I don't need nobody else.<sup>14</sup>

### Notes

1. Jones, Bobby, and Les Sussman. Touched By God: Black Gospel Greats Share Their Stories of Finding God. New York, NY: Pocket Books, 1998.
2. Jackson, Jesse Louis. "The Prayers of Our Grandmothers." 1977. In Conversations with God: Two centuries of Prayers by African Americans. Ed. James Melvin Washington. New York, NY: HarperPerennial, 1994. p. 228.
3. Jackson, Mahalia, and Evan McLeod Wylie. Movin' on Up. New York, NY: Avon Books, 1966. p. 68.
4. Berry, Mary Frances and John Blassingame. Long Freedom: The Black Experience in America. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1982. p. 31.
5. This litany was adapted by Mellonee Burnim from Proverbs 6 and "The Way," by Molefi Asante.
6. Walker, Margaret. "For My People." The Poetry of the Negro 1746-1970. Ed. Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps. Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, [1941] 1970.
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8. "Stand by Me." The United Methodist Hymnal: Book of United Methodist Worship. Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989. #512
9. Work, John, Ed. "This Ol' Time Religion." (Spiritual) American Negro Songs and Spirituals. New York, NY: Bonanza, 1940.
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11. Baylor, Helen. "If It Had Not Been for the Lord on My Side." Helen Baylor--live. New York, NY: Verity, 1999.
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13. Franklin, Kirk. "Mama's Song." Church Boy: My Music & My Life. Nashville, TN: Word, 1998.
14. Franklin, Kirk. Whatcha Lookin' 4. Inglewood, CA: GospoCentric, 1995.