



SENIORS, ELDERS AND GRANDPARENTS DAY

CULTURAL RESOURCES

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I. Remembrances

“The eye which saw the past is not living, but the ear, which heard what was said in the past (still) lives.” An Akan Proverb¹

At my grandmother’s surprise 70th birthday party, we gathered around her and listened. Mama Burks said, “By God’s grace, I have reached 3 score plus 10 which was promised if I lived right. The rest of my time is not promised. Anything that I have to say to you, I will say whether you like it or not; at this stage in my life it does not matter...” Well, you could have picked children, grandchildren, close friends and anyone who had interacted with her or had heard her preach, up off the floor, because none of us could recall ‘Mama’ holding back her opinion, advice, praise, nor admonishments. We could not even imagine what she was talking about.

However, we soon learned that what she was saying was that she would now be more intentional and thoughtful when speaking to us. When she admonished us about something, she took more time to explain things to us. She often talked about “those days when...” and things that her mother told her, what she heard her older sister say and what ‘old’ folks said...” She now was more willing to share her life’s experiences; in fact, she actually enjoyed it.

II. Becoming an Elder and Related Rituals

Malidoma Patrice Some talks about two kinds of elders in his book “The Healing Wisdom of Africa.” He describes the Dagra definition of the *young* in contrast with the *old*. He states, “In the Dagra language, *young* means “that which is still moist,” which needs to be dried and cured in order to last. The *young* is raw and untested. *Old* means someone who is dry, solid, lasting. Thus the old embody stability, dependability and wisdom. They become the frame of reference, a resource, a research center.”

Elders, who are members of ruling councils in a village, are selected in similar ways throughout Africa. In Ghana for example, council members consist of the chief and the queen mother of the village, heads of families. These individuals are selected through lineage, certain criteria such as age, good character, demonstrated maturity, and wisdom, etc. and a vote by existing council members (in that order). State and family rituals are performed to anoint these elders who are then formally introduced to the public. Each elder then has access to the special rituals and ceremonies related to their family, and the village ancestors, which gives them an expanded historical knowledge of all aspects of the traditions and customs of the village.²

During meetings of mediation, judgments, or other impending decisions, the younger elders almost always have immediate contemporary solutions to whatever the situation while the *senior* elders sit quietly listening, observing and sometimes asleep or ‘just resting their eyes.’ Ultimately, they are pressed into service to share information concerning similar situations in the past and the traditional solutions. Most of the time, and when possible, a compromise between the past (older elders) and present (younger elders) is made without destroying the intent of the customs and traditions.

The breakdown of this ancient African, tried and true, system of elder leadership seems to have occurred in the past forty years or so in contemporary urban communities. We live in a time when culture places its main emphasis on the core family unit (husband, wife and children). Many parents and children do not live in the same place as their grandparents or great grandparents. However, more than ever, during the many crises that we face we need the input of our seniors, our grandparents, our elders. They are the sages who hold the keys to our ability to continue in the face of the many and varied adversarial conditions of this century. They are our reservoirs of knowledge about how we as black people can face our circumstances with courage and dignity. They are our wisdom keepers who have the examples, the stories, to help us understand how it can be done, how to rise above the clouds of destruction which are devouring our youth and young adults. Many of our elders do not have the technical knowledge of today but they have

the accumulated wisdom of decades of life experiences. They have their own lived experiences that can become contemporary resources upon which we can draw as we seek to find ways to effectively address current problems.

III. Poetry and Proverbs

A. Maya Angelou has penned a poem, “Elder Grace,” which perfectly sums up the sentiment intended by this moment on the lectionary calendar. For copyright reasons, we share only portions of this poem. The entire poem can be found in the book, Elder Grace: The Nobility of Aging.

Elder Grace

The Grace of these Elders has been gravely earned and sorely paid for:

The winds blew

The storms raged

And they stood like pillars...

Fourth verse

These Elders of Grace show that poverty need not grind the spirit into dust,
nor should prosperity separate the fortunate from the needy.

Their resolute faces attest to the mountains climbed and the rivers forged.

The somberness of their eyes is evidence of the demons they have faced down and the despair they have overcome.

And then there are those smiles.

Hallelujah for those smiles.

They tantalize, “Don’t you wish you knew what I know...”³

B. The Lectionary scripture and an Akan Proverb

“Honor your father and your mother” Akan proverb

Honor thy father and thy mother that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy god giveth thee. Exodus 20:12

The former Akan proverb is also the 5th Commandment in the Holy Bible. The story behind this proverb as passed down in my village in Ghana, similar to the story of the prodigal son in the Bible:

Several young people wanted to leave a small rural, out-of-the-way village in southern Ghana to search for work and prosperity in the north and other parts of the country. In order to leave the village, permission was sought and granted from the family, the chief, and elders of the village. Various rituals were performed, the young people made promises concerning how they would assist their family and the village as they themselves began to prosper in this faraway place. The

rituals ended in celebration and a spirited send off, with the entire village population escorting them to the gateway with shouts of blessings and good luck wishes.

The young people traveled far and indeed found work and prospered. However, they did not fulfill their promises. Later, as fate would have it, various social and financial ills began to affect the young ones who did not keep their promises. Finally, they had to return home to beg for forgiveness and assistance. The family accepted them but as custom dictates, not without punishment for the disgrace brought on everyone in the village due to their irresponsible behavior.⁴

Thus, the proverb “Honor your father and your mother” is taken very seriously among the majority of traditional West Africans.

V. You’ve Been Here Before (Old Souls)

In Ghana, one might hear the children addressed by parents and family members alike as “Nana” which means grandfather or grandmother. This is recognition of the strong belief that some of these children are ancestors returning to complete their work on this planet. Thus, they are being addressed with the proper title for an Elder which is “Nana.” How often have we heard it said of a young person or young adult. “You’ve been here before.” or, “You are an old soul.”? We are simply agreeing with what our African ancestors have long known.

The Civil Rights leader and gifted teacher and organizer, who was the creator of the Citizenship Education Program of SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference) Septima Clark, shared that as a child not yet 10 years of age, she was often called, “little momma” by her elders. She further stated that she was always surrounded by the younger children of the neighborhood who obeyed her as if she was a parent. She grew up to become an innovative teacher, becoming involved in organizing to challenge the inequities between black and white teachers in the South. When she retired from SCLC at the age of 75, she ran for the school board of Charleston, South Carolina and won. It was this board that had decades earlier fired her from her teaching job, when she refused to give up teaching adults in the evenings to read and write so they could register to vote.

VI. An Akan Proverb Provides a Solution

“It is a wise community which uses the accumulated wisdom of age and the active energy of the youth.” This Akan proverb provides us with a solid solution as we seek answers for so many of the problems that are plaguing our families and communities. We have an accumulated wisdom base in our living elders who are waiting and wanting to share their experiences with us, but they are waiting for us to ask. **The elders among us are waiting for the opportunity to carry out their special responsibility within their communities.** It not only means that they share from their lived experiences, but elders are often the link to two generations. Most persons who are now age 65 or older grew up when there was more room for children to sit among the elders of their families, and hear

their life stories. Our elders are vital to the healing process that will guide us into a deeper understanding of who we are as African people, assist us in rebuilding our communities, and bring us together to celebrate, rather than denigrate, our worth on this planet earth.

We also have youth and young adults who have an enormous amount of energy, intelligence and technology that could be used in a much more creative and positive manner. We must make room for them and not wait until they are elders to allow them to share and participate.

The wisdom keepers, contemporary griots in the person of our elders, grandparents, and seniors, are waiting for their assignments. They are often, as elders are inclined to do, listening, observing intently, and waiting for us to ask. ***This is the right time for the asking!*** Deacon Boards, Youth groups, Choirs, and other church organizations have an opportunity to enlist the services of our elders to increase their visibility, their self-worth, and longevity due to their usefulness, while helping to address many of the societal and family challenges of today. A mandate from pulpits around this country for individuals, families, and organizations to create new spaces to honor our seniors, our elders, our grandparents would hasten the involvement of the seasoned saints..

There is a need to structure within our congregations, and the wider communities, organized efforts that responds to the needs of our elders to be useful in providing their perspectives to youths and young adults. Programs such as youth and elder quilting, evenings of recitations of oral histories, churches and schools adopting grandparents, and elders, and many other activities can be established. Collectively, we can accept the responsibility for raising our elders to their rightful, honored and revered places in our community structure. If we harness the wisdom of the elders and allow young people to partner with them in a broad range of efforts we can make a difference in the black community.

VII. Facts About Grand Parents

Grandparents Day was the brainchild of Marian McQuade of Fayette County, W.Va., who hoped that such an observance might persuade grandchildren to tap the wisdom and heritage of their grandparents. The first presidential proclamation was issued in 1978—and one has been issued each year since— designating the first Sunday after Labor Day as National Grandparents Day.

In honor of our nation's grandparents, the Census Bureau presents an array of data about these unsung role models and caregivers.

5.7 million

The number of grandparents whose grandchildren younger than 18 live with them.
(Source: 2005 American Community Survey)

Grandparents as Caregivers

2.5 million

The number of grandparents responsible for most of the basic needs (i.e., food, shelter, clothing) of one or more of the grandchildren who live with them. These grandparents represent about 43 percent of all grandparents whose grandchildren live with them. Of these caregivers, 1.5 million are grandmothers, and 915,000 are grandfathers. (Source: 2005 American Community Survey)

1.4 million

The number of grandparents who are in the labor force and also responsible for most of the basic needs of their grandchildren. (Source: 2005 American Community Survey)

912,000

Number of grandparents responsible for caring for their grandchildren for at least the past five years. (Source: 2005 American Community Survey)

496,000

Number of grandparents whose income is below the poverty level and who are caring for their grandchildren. (Source: 2005 American Community Survey)

753,000

Number of grandparents with a disability who are caring for their grandchildren. (Source: 2005 American Community Survey)

28%

Among preschoolers with employed mothers, the percentage regularly cared for by their grandparent during the hours their mom works.

<<http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/childcare.html>>

Grandchildren

5.7 million

The number of children living with a grandparent; these children comprise 8 percent of all children in the United States. The majority of these children, 3.7 million, live in the grandparent's home. <http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/families_households/009842.html>

2.1 million

The number of children who live with both a grandmother and a grandfather.

<http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/families_households/009842.html>

NOTES

1. Bannerman Kyerewee, J. Yedu. Mfantse Akan mbebusen: Ghanaian proverbs translated into English. Ghana. 1974.

2. Somé, Malidoma Patrice. The Healing Wisdom of Africa: Finding Life Purpose Through Nature, Ritual, and Community. New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 1998.
3. Higgins, Chester, and Betsy Kissam. Elder Grace: The Nobility of Aging. Boston: Bulfinch Press/Little, Brown and Co., 2000.
4. The Quest for Spiritual Transformation: Introduction to Traditional Akan Religion, Rituals and Practices. New York: iUniverse, Inc., 2005.