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Unfinished: My Journey to Who I Am

"You are the sum total of everything you've ever seen, heard, eaten, smelled, been told, forgot - it's all there. Everything influences each of us ..." Maya Angelou

It is in the spirit of Maya Angelou's quote that I proceed along in my journey to who I am and where I'm from.

My journey to knowing all of me and all of where I am from is incomplete. I am learning that the process of unpacking one's identity is not linear; one cannot simply move from point A to point B and say "that's me." Well, maybe some can, but I cannot. There are too many layers, too many experiences to sift through, too much history to uncover, too many influences. Not to mention that there are so many unknowns, things we do not know about the people and places connected to our lives, as well as the people and places that have influenced who we are. We do have license to assert the identities we choose and to reject labels that have been ascribed to us. We can acknowledge and reflect on how we came to be who we are or we can ignore or deny the impact experiences have on us. I believe we know whatever it is God desires us to know, but only if we are willing to seek out that knowledge. This narrative represents my journey in progress—the results of my seeking, and reflections on what I have found. I invite you in for a glimpse of the unfolding journey of my attempt to understand the connections between where I'm from and who I am.

I am from racism.

I am a survivor.

The brick crashed through the front window from somewhere near the creek that streamed from the front of the house to the backyard. I was cocooned within my mother's womb as she sat on the couch just inches away from where the brick landed. The house was in Willoughby Hills, Ohio, a rural area where my family was one of only two black families in the neighborhood. It

was a storybook home: a split level on lots of land, surrounded by trees, and bordered by a meandering stream. My dad was shocked when our family became the targets of racial violence. My dad grew up in a predominantly white and Italian working-class neighborhood, went to a predominantly white school, and was comfortable around white people. According to my mother, he did not understand why our family seemed to be unwelcomed in the neighborhood. “He was never the same after that,” she said. “I think he couldn’t believe the white people treated him so badly.” The property defacement and racial slurs my family endured while living there were frightening, so much so that they sent my sister who was then five years old to live with family elsewhere while they prepared for the move. My father worked long hours as an advertising account executive during that time and my mother was often alone in the home, with me in her womb. I imagine I felt her fear and confusion and uncertainty and I also felt her determination to move us to a safer place of peace and inclusion. After many calls to the police and an FBI investigation, my parents learned the perpetrators were the children of the physician who lived only a few doors down. *Neighbors*. The year was 1977.

As my physical body was developing, wicked forces were already hard at work on killing my spirit. But, like my mother and the many women and men before her who endured even harsher attacks, I am a survivor.

I am from faith.

I am a child God.

I come from a legacy of faith, so I know that what the devil means for bad, God uses for good, and I know that while the disease of racial strife was infiltrating my life before I was even born, that my birth was a good idea—God’s good idea. It was God’s idea that I have breath and become a human being and that I be of African descent. It was God’s idea that I *be*, and I am ultimately *from* God. I am from God’s genius and creativity, from God’s love and intellect; I am from God’s power and compassion; and I am from God’s wrath. The spirit that is housed in my body is the same spirit of the living God. These are the truths I rest in.

I am from integration and the perks of privilege.

I am a dreamer unlearning naïveté.

When we left the house in Willoughby Hills just before I was born, we moved to the newly integrating suburb of Cleveland Heights, Ohio, where I would spend my elementary, middle, and some of my high school years. This home, in a progressive, family-oriented community, served as the backdrop for my formative years. It was the background for all of the scenes that played out in my life.

I am from green ivy and weeping willows, from digging for worms and catching butterflies, bees, and lightning bugs; from steep descents on ravine hikes, dips in the creek and courageous climbs back up to the backyard; I'm from bike riding on dirt hills; from neighborhood talent shows and Fourth of July-lit skies at Grandma and Pa pa's; from fresh peaches from Grandma's peach tree and from peanut butter and jelly snacks greeting me after school; I'm from Daddy's riding lawn mower and from a stay-at-home mom; from ice cream sandwiches and ice cream trucks, from high water, low water, and Double Dutch on Dunham Avenue in the Hough community of Cleveland, Ohio.

I am from the House off of Hough.

I am a seeker who values the past on the path to the future.

Off of Hough Road is where my grandmother lived and where my mother was raised shortly after her family of 13 joined The Great Migration and migrated from the southern coal mines of Roda, Virginia to Cleveland, Ohio. It is where the family gathered for all types of special occasions and for no occasion at all. It is where cousins sat on steps and aunties and uncles on metal or wicker chairs on the front porch, watching the comings and goings on the street, telling and listening to stories... "My'a Ann, My'a Ann..." "Ma'am?" My childhood memories don't recall the topic of all of the stories, but my heart recalls the belly laughs, the thigh slapping, and the spontaneous re-enactments and impersonations of family matters and family members. I also remember just sitting there, admiring the flower gardens and hanging plants, and just chatting about life while Grandma nursed a cup full of cubes of ice.

Green and white and four stories high, the House off of Hough is a home that stands majestically in my memories as a symbol of family, fun, fellowship, and stability. The parts of me that cherish family fiercely and that hold fast to my goals and dreams, the parts of me that lift my eyes to the hills when I need help, the parts of me that love and laugh—anyways—these parts are inspired by the legacy of the House off of Hough.

As I move forward, I draw courage from looking back.

I am from Africa and America.

Two DNA lines run through my blood, one originated in Guinea-Bissau, a West African country once colonized by the Portuguese, and the other in Sierra Leone, a West African country once colonized by the British. I am a descendant of Africans enslaved by European descendants in America; I am an Americanized African who has been labeled by the government as Black. I have always thought that an inaccurate label—not only because it is a social construction created by white men to empower white people and disempower those they would call black or colored—but also because the color simply does not describe my skin complexion. Still, I come

from the culture associated with Blackness in America, the African American Culture. I am an African American.

I am from “Lost at Sea” and Found.

I am a Daughter.

I am from a gulf that exists between the American and the African in me, the part of my identity lost at sea and on the cotton fields; I am from Africans whose descendants say that we are not cut from the same cloth, that they in all of their indigenous African do not identify with me, a black American, an African American. I am from that disconnect, that stolen, thrashed identity, that was perverted at sea and then whitewashed ashore into a new forced identity. But there is beauty from the ashes, new life from the lost; the me that was God’s idea survives.

I am from mothers and grandmothers and great grandmothers who birthed new generations of black children. I am from Myra, born 1949; from Lucille, born 1925; from Curley, born 1907; from Annice, born 1875, from Caroline, born 1851, from generations whose identities I still seek; I am from a Mende woman in Sierra Leone, West Africa. I am a daughter who continues the legacy of mothering.

I am from mothers who took care of their children by any means necessary, from fathers who worked and provided no matter what. I am from rice, cassava, and the Atlantic Ocean, from Jim Crow and slavery’s legacy and The Emancipation Proclamation and from the leadership, the front-line shoulders, and the families of The Civil Rights Movement. I am from *Brown* and bussing and from Women’s liberation and from spiritual awakenings and renewals, from Christ.

“Everything influences each of us...” Angelou reminds. Everything. “We teach who we are¹.”

What have you learned during your brief glimpse into my journey, into some of what makes me who I am? What do you now want to know? About me? About yourself? About others?

What will you do with this narrative that has now become a part of you?

¹ Parker Palmer (1998). *The courage to teach: Exploring the inner landscape of a teacher’s life*