

Muggin

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Abstract:

Having taught Advanced Human Growth and Development for the past seven (7) years, the students' paper and presentation is entitled "The Heroes' Journey"; which seeks to capture the "defining moments" and experiences within their lives which helped to produce the teacher and counselor persona. Each semester, the students have asked me to write my "Heroes Journey". Last summer, I wrote a series of essays which seek to chronicle the archetypes and teachings of childhood and adolescence. Mrs. Margaret Flemons was our housekeeper, my nanny and our family friend; lovingly known as "Muggin". Thus, my personal favorite is presented in its entirety.

The text of the essay:

Her "real name" was Mrs. Margaret Flemons. She had been a "widow woman" for many years prior to her becoming a part of our family; in the guise of housekeeper, cook and "nanny" when I was three (3) years old. She must have been "at least" sixty (60), when she came to work for Mother and Daddy; and stayed to become a family member, a wizened sage, confidant and friend to Mother, Daddy and me. She had already raised her own family and was a wonderful role model for her new "chosen" family.

As I reflect upon my "life and times" with Muggin, Mother was forty (40) years old when I was born. What a life change for a woman who had been told previously that she "would never have children". So here was Mother in her forties with a toddler "in her midst". I suspect that Mother needed help. The help came in the form of "Muggin" in ways we could not "even begin" to imagine "back then". Mother and Daddy put the store in when I was three (3) that they might "make a living" and "raise the baby".

The store was a "full-time job" for both of my parents. They opened Brown's Grocery and Station at six (6) in the morning and closed at ten (10) at night. They literally worked "themselves to death", but they loved it. I guess in some way, we all live our lives as a "sacrifice daily" to and for the people, things and ideals that we love. I wonder if my notion of service was not born right there in Brown's Grocery and Station.

I was so young when Muggin came into my life that I could not say "Miss Margaret". My attempt at "saying her name" came out something like "Muggin". Muggin "took her new "child given name", like a coveted title, given to her by a dignitary and wore it proudly like a "badge of honor". Muggin had a way of saying "when a child gives you a name, then that's your name". She had a way of "honoring folks", particularly children, which was simple and

yet, profound. I wonder if my “attitude toward children, clinically” began in the tender care of my “beloved Muggin”.

Muggin believed there are two (2) groups of folks we really “ought to listen to”: “children and old folks”... One set “just got here” and the other bunch are “leaving”. She believed they were “closest to God” and “most protected, respected and revered by God” and that we “ought to do likewise”.

Muggin was the color of milky coffee. Her beautiful skin fell in folds from her jaw line and chin; and was decorated with light brown freckles and tiny, black moles. Muggin’s eyes were hazel-colored, flecked with gold. She had “whiskers”, which she would allow me to touch, when I sat upon her lap; which was not often. She did not believe in “coddling children”.

My maternal grandmother, Mabel Dickinson Arnold, plucked her “chin whiskers” like they were something to be ashamed of. Muggin wore hers proudly like they were “battle decorations from wars, well fought” and let them grow. I pluck mine today, but/and feel guilty each time I do. I hope, one day, I will be able to wear them proudly like the “battle decorations” that they are, along with “celebrating” the skin color and texture changes that are beginning to appear.

Muggin taught that there are “two (2) types of family members, some you are given at birth, and others you choose”... And sometimes “Others choose you”. In my three (3) year old way, I believed Muggin to be my “chosen” grandmother; and that the choosing was mutual.

As I reflect upon my early days with Muggin, I am just taken with the notion that I was “not aware” of color. Though this would have been in the late 50’s and early 60’s, racism and prejudice had not entered my home, nor the treatment of folks based upon the color of their skin.

If there was a prejudice in my family of origin, it was a kind of “sorryness”; folks that would not take care of their families, keep their bodies clean and their homes in good repair. Daddy often quoted the scripture in regard to “the man who will not take care of his family was worse than an infidel”. Daddy believed in a “literal translation” of Holy Scripture.

Muggin came to visit every Thursday. I loved the smell of the house after she had been there; Pine Sol and that “red liquid furniture polish”. She would leave me “love notes” on my dressing table; bits of scripture, words of wisdom or encouragement that she knew I specifically needed.

Sometimes there was a special treat in the kitchen, on the days that I was “at school”. My favorite was Muggin’s Homemade Banana Pudding without the bananas. Mother thought that silly. Muggin would make a huge Banana Pudding for the family and a small “special one” for Linda. She never called me ‘the baby’. She always called me by my “Christian name”, Linda. If I were in trouble, it was Linda Gayle. When she was “teaching”, she called me, “Child”.

On the days that I was home, like in the summertime and holidays, I was Muggin's shadow. She "raised me" just like she raised her own children. While I was learning "Mary Had a Little Lamb", Muggin was teaching:

Good Morning, Mr. Jaybird,
I came to borrow your wings,
To fly across the river,
To hear Miss Lucy sing.

Miss Lucy has a baby,
And every time it cries,
She puts it in the cradle,
And feeds it chicken pie

"Miss Lucy and her baby" made a lot more sense to me than "lambs at school". My, how fortunate I was to have such a multicultural upbringing. Thanks to the care and loving kindness of a fine ole' black women.

My favorite teaching had to do with "inclusion within the family unit". Muggin always said, "It doesn't matter, Child, who the parents are, if they are 'at my house and hungry', you can always add a little more milk or water to the gravy". I wonder if my acceptance of children, regardless of parentage, did not begin under the tutorage of this wise Southern woman.

In early adolescence, sitting on the dressing table stool in my bedroom, seeking Muggin's wisdom in regard to "my latest boyfriend"; I asked aloud, "How will I know when I love someone? Her wise reply was "No such thing, as like, Child, only different kinds of love". In the body and form of a "fine ole' black woman" beat one of the kindest hearts and sage human nature specialists that I ever knew.

When I was about eight (8) years old, (circa 1965), I was in the kitchen, pestering Muggin, as she prepared lunch. There was a large cast iron skillet filled with grease on the stove nearby. Muggin had already cautioned me about its presence and "not to touch it".

Busy talking, trying to help and without thinking, I picked the skillet up and burned my right hand pretty badly. As I am trying to get to the kitchen faucet to run cold water over it, Muggin grabs my hand and begins to "speak silently" (with her lips moving) just inches away from my hand. I thought she was "saying a prayer". When she finished, I respectfully asked "what she had done?" Muggin's soft reply was "I talked the fire out of it". She asked "if it still hurt? ". I realized in that moment that the pain had stopped instantly and did not return.

I asked, “Would she teach me to do ‘that?’”. Muggin assured me, that if I would “come to her on her deathbed”; she would pass this particular “gift of healing” on to me.

I did not and part of her “spiritual gifts” died with her. I wonder if my journey as a “wounded healer” did not begin in that moment.

When I had a sore throat, she taught me to “bend my thumb level with my palm and make a fist. Then try to insert the thumb into my mouth. It does two (2) things. It stretches the throat muscles and relaxes the person. I suspect it entertains folks nearby, as well. Dr. Young at the Prescott Family Clinic has a “way of saying”, “Medicines entertain the patient, while the body heals itself.” Wisdom is wisdom; regardless of its form. Sometimes the form it takes will surprise you, however.

She also believed in a “hot toddy” for colds and sore throats. Daddy and Muggin had many conversations as to what the “exact ingredients” were and “how much of each“. What I remember is Irish whiskey, lemon juice, peppermint candy and honey given by tablespoonfuls, when ill. It must have worked. I remember sleeping incredibly well through the night without coughing.

Muggin passed away when I was an undergraduate at Henderson. Her daughter, Emma, told me that I was welcome at the funeral and “could sit with the family”.

I did not attend. I regretted that for years. I did not “pay my last respects” until now. With the writing of this story, I have the opportunity to pay my lasting respects to Mrs. Margaret Flemons, my “chosen” grandmother and friend.

Within the past seven (7) years at Henderson, I have been given the honor and privilege of mentoring many African American women as students and then later in supervision as they enter the counseling profession. I credit Miss Margaret with my ability to relate and work with these bright and gifted young healers. Two (2) of my favorites currently are Lisa and La Shon.

Within the past five (5) years, Lisa’s mother died. I had “given my word” to Lisa that I would attend the memorial service. The funeral was held at a Baptist Church, in Hope, just off Highway # 67. Lisa’s best friend, La Shon, had called several times in the days prior with directions and reassurance that it was “more than OK” to attend. They knew the many “Muggin stories” and were most anxious to see, if I would have the courage to attend and pay my respects on so many levels to multiple generations of women, collectively, and black women, specifically.

When I arrived, I was about fifteen (15) minutes late. Cars were everywhere; a very large gathering. I parked several blocks away and walked up to the church. The church “was packed”, “standing room only. There were five (5) elderly gentlemen in the vestibule. My best guess is probably two (2) funeral home employees and a portion of the pallbearers. Two (2) of the gentlemen “fetched a folding chair” for me at the back of the sanctuary. I sat down. There

was a lovely lady minister bringing a heart-felt message in regard to the life of “Miss Frankie”, Lisa’s mother. I was enthralled.

As I looked around the sanctuary, “one by one”, each row of pew members turned their heads in sequence to “look at me”. I smiled. They did not. I held my spot. When Lisa, La Shon and their families “looked at me”, I knew I was “in the right place”.

There was a section of ladies over on “the Mary side” dressed “all in white”, with hats decorated with ribbons and bows and sequins and plumage. I was mesmerized. I learned later they were “the Usher Board” and the “ladies of the church”; true matriarchs of their families, church and community; so, whether it was Daddy and Mr. Cliff in their Stetsons or these “ladies in white”, “Crowns, all”.

As we filed out of the church, we sang, “When They Ask You Who I Am, Tell Them I’m Redeemed”. I was moved to tears.

Outside and still mesmerized by the “Ladies in White“, I found myself drawn to these “women of the church”. I approached the eldest lady, placed my hand gently on her forearm and said; “Grandmother”. She touched me gently in reply and said, “Yes, Child”. As I prepared for the teaching to come, I realized that Muggin’s spirit was “alive and well” and “in this place”. I was, once again, among family. I approached each “Medeara” with a gentle touch, made eye contact and they “responded in kind”; “Paying my respects”, at last“.

The most beautiful women that I know of are “aged church women” who seem to be “lit from within” “with portions of their souls beginning to show through”, quote Dr. Clarissa Pinkola Estes`, Jungian psychoanalyst, teacher and sage.

Muggin taught me to “transcend color” just by being herself. Lisa and La Shon tease me openly about being a “Sistah“. I received my lifetime membership card in “Southern womanhood” from three (3) fine Southern women; Mother, Granny and Muggin. The pathway (left by their footprints) was there, “all the time”; when I was able to see it; and was ready to “make the journey”. It did not take me but thirty-two (32) years, however.

So, some thirty (30) years later, I was able to attend a funeral to honor my present relationship with a former student and supervisee and “pay my respects” to “Miss Margaret”. Color was not “then” and is not “now” part of the equation.

While I worked at Prescott Family Clinic, from time to time, kindly older black gentlemen would “speak and ‘tip their hats’ to me” when I went to get clients for their appointments in the waiting room This particular day, one of the new secretaries asked me about the ritual she witnessed. Her comments were “something like” how respectful the gentlemen are, but that they “do not ‘tip their hats’ to her” and was questioning these gestures of “implied relationship”.

Dr. Young was nearby and never misses “a beat”. Dr. Young begins his soliloquy with “Linda had a nanny that loved her and that she loved“. “These gentlemen and their families loved and respected Miss Margaret just like Linda does“. So, as Muggin’s “child of the heart” and “spirit child“, they are acknowledging Linda’s kinship to Miss Margaret; and theirs to a Matriarch in their lives and within the community. Through Miss Margaret, Linda is “sovereign” within a heritage that she is just now discovering.

Within the past seven (7) years, I have watched ‘Dr. English’ mentor many supervisees right here at the Clinic. It will be interesting to “see how all this plays out“. This is only the beginning.

“Her daddy, Mr. Luther, and her mother, Miss Hazel, helped “many a family” by extending them credit during hard times through the store“. “I understand that Luther and Hazel did not ‘cotton to the notion’ of folks going hungry“. “My understanding is that the families paid them as they promised and appreciated their compassion“.

Thus, these gentlemen “tip their hats’ to honor and in memory of Mr. Luther, Miss Hazel and Miss Margaret; Linda’s family lineage, both of blood and spirit.

“For the love of a child and her family heritage“...

It is to Miss Margaret that I offer this story and my thanks for her wise teachings in regard to “color and culture”, “life and love” and for a multicultural upbringing capable of being shared with others. I had no notion that I was being adopted via “heart and spirit” by a Medeara; my dear mother. “If you are going to ‘lead’, Child, you must learn to serve“. Little did we know, we had “Mary” in our midst.

When we interview prospective students for inclusion in our graduate program @ Henderson, we always ask about their “experiences in diversity”. Each time, I silently say a prayer of remembrance and gratitude to my “beloved Muggin”.

As I complete this remembrance of Mrs. Margaret Flemons, I am taken with “finally” I have found a way to honor and pay my lasting respects to one of the most wise, kind and loving folks I ever knew. She found a way to help a frightened younger woman to come to terms with the raising of a small child in middle age; helped a middle-aged father to find and enjoy the role of Daddy and to love a child unconditionally and to broaden her world to include folks from all walks of life.

As always,

Linda~

Biographical Sketch

Linda G. (Brown) English is a native of Prescott, Arkansas. She taught for twelve (12) years within the public schools of southwest Arkansas before “running away from home” to pursue her doctorate and return to her alma mater, Henderson State University in 2001 to teach. Currently, Linda is an Associate Professor of Counselor Education in the Teachers College of her “beloved Henderson”.