

A Series: THE BLACK FAMILY AND THE CHALLENGES OF THE 80's

PART VII - OUR CHILDREN ... THE QUEST FOR EXCELLENCE - A QUEST FOR TRUTH

by Maudra Jones

My grandmothers were strong.
They followed plows and bent to toil.
They moved through fields sowing seed.
They touched earth and grain grew.
They were full of sturdiness and singing.
My grandmothers were strong.

My grandmothers were full of memories
Smelling of soap and onions and wet clay
With veins rolling roughly over quick hands
They have many clean words to say.
My grandmothers were strong.
Why am I not as they?

REFLECTING

It was a year ago, this date, that I was privileged to address the 5th Annual Conference of the National Association of Family and the Religious Community in Washington, D.C. During the weeks of preparation for a presentation on "New Directions For the Black Family," the words of Margaret Walker's poems "Lineage" and "For My People" continued to pervade my conscience. Prayer-fully searching for "direction" in approaching the

critical question of "new" directions, I was constantly drawn to the "old" directions which have historically provided the answers to the needs of Black families.

Every path I took led me back to the strengths and resources which have always been part of the Black family tradition — specifically, our strong spiritual base and kinship bonds. I thought about those valiant "soldiers of the cross" who stood the storm and, among other trials and successes, made it pos-

sible for us to be here — with many more opportunities than they had. Some of us remember the miracles that came with those prayers during illness and trouble — the good times, the bad times, the happy times and the same times. Some of them have left us; but not without their legacies of love, faith, courage, determination and endurance. It occurred to me that these were directions for all times. Our grandmothers were indeed strong — and they knew what we needed to face the times ahead.

I grappled with the question "Why are we not as they" and the answer finally came: our grandparents had their own personal relationship with God. (Many of us "rode" on their relationships, until we discovered that we must establish our own personal relationship with God.) Then the words of Ralph Ellison came into view:

"... The Black Experience has been one of the great triumphs of the human spirit in modern times, in fact, in the history of the world." Lerone Bennett called it "an epic of endurance ... a testament to the indomitable tenacity of the human spirit." It all adds up to belief, trust and faith in the God of our history.



Maudra Jones

By then, I was convinced that any "new" direction we might take, in this decade, to reaffirm the family as a viable institution and resource for developing inner strength, must first be based on our individual, personal relationships with God — not our grandmother's relationship, but our very own. What He did for them in their time, He will do for us in these times. There is nothing new about love, faith, courage, determination and endurance; but there can be, tied to these strengths, a new sense of hope and vision that is related to meaningful change in the condition of our lives, our homes and our communities.

Believing that history is an important "tool of analysis," I concluded that the task of charting new directions for the Black family requires us to know our history; but more than that, to do as Vincent Harding urges: "To search for the meanings in our history." He writes: "A sense of meaning — which we surely create out of our particular responses to the 'facts' of experience — is critical if we are to join ourselves to the past and the future, to commune with the ancestors as

represent a luxury for well as the coming children. Without it we lose touch with ourselves, our fellow humans and other creatures, with the earth our mother, and with the cosmos itself. Harding makes the point very strongly, that without meanings in our history, there can be no true identity. "Above all," he states, "where there is no vision we lose the sense of our great power to

Black people, but is, in fact, a demand which life makes upon us. I agree; what are your feelings? If you have not already done so, you need to begin that search with your grandparents. They are truly the "human bridges between our past and our future," as Harding reminds us. Now, as never before, we must reach for the "history in their strengths and courage, their songs

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transcend history and create a new future for ourselves and others, and we perish utterly in hopelessness, mutual terror and despair." He admitted that he did not know when this concern for the meaning of our history began to fully grasp him (having been raised in a "tightly-knit Bible-centered Black church community in Harlem," and, I might add, blessed with a brilliant career as a historian, theologian, assistant to the late Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., past chairman of the Department of History and Sociology at Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia and the first Director of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Center. Dr. Harding is on the faculty of the Iliff School of Theology at the University of Denver in Denver, Colorado.) He stated, however, that his many experiences in the freedom pilgrimage helped to fortify his feelings that such a quest for meaning and vision does not

and silence." And if our grandmothers and grandfathers have left us, then we must reach out to others. We must especially give our children the opportunities to go to those bosoms, laps and knees to feast on the treasures found in the "memories they are full of," the endless treasures of wisdom, faith, courage, strength. Indeed, we can be as they.

And so, from the age "old" strengths of the Black family, I developed a presentation of "new directions for the Black Family," recalling some of the great Black Americans who stand as testimonies to those "great triumphs of the human spirit." Our history has recorded the testimonies of many who forged new paths to freedom, built institutions and helped to build a nation — among them are scholars, leaders,

scientists, artists, inventors — strong Black men and women of achievement from all walks of life, who acknowledged the God of our history and used history to nurture and preserve the strengths of the "traditional Christian Black American Family."

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