

Upon Their Shoulders

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On November 14, I received the sad news that my maternal grandmother had passed way. She died 4 days before her eighty-seventh birthday. There is an African proverb that says, "The death of an elderly (wo)man is like burning a library." When our elders die they take with them the history of our lineage. Sad to say this is oftentimes a history that has not been passed down from one generation to the next. In many instances we have failed to take the time to learn about our identity by listening to their stories. Our elders often do not share or stop sharing their stories because we are not interested. We are too busy chasing after new things in our lives. What we have failed to realize is that the stories of our elders make up the fiber of who we are. Their struggles and triumphs are etched into our identity; it is all part of our DNA. Is it any wonder why our children go through life seeking and assuming identities that are not theirs? Is it any wonder that our young men and women fall and fail? They do not understand that they come from some strong people. They do not know that the determination to succeed is already etched in their DNA. All they need to do is claim it.

Since the passing of my grandmother I have questioned myself as to how much more about her life I should have known. What I do know about her origins was that she was the youngest daughter of Jamaican immigrants who relocated to Panama for the building of the Panama Canal and the planting of banana plantations. Her parents made Bocas del Toro their home and my Grandmother, Puffenia Moodie, was born on one of the many banana farms in the area. Hard work, discipline and a strong work ethic were core essentials that her parents passed on to her and her eight siblings. As a young woman she migrated to the city in search of better opportunities. There she got a job working as a washer woman for American soldiers stationed in Panama. Married and with a growing brood of children to feed she had no time to even pursue an education. She did make sure however, that all her 10 children were educated. When I think about just these meager details of her life I wonder how on earth she did manage. As if that was not enough; my grandmother provided food and shelter for anyone who would knock on her doors. Often relatives who wanted to relocate to the city or wanted their children to go to school in the city would appear at her doorstep, unannounced, asking for shelter. They were never turned away and many stayed on until they started their own families or until they could make it on their own.

Anyone in the neighborhood who needed a plate of food could always knock on her door and eat from whatever she had.

I cannot ever forget that for every one of my birthdays until I got married, and every Christmas, she had a monetary gift for me. As one of the older grandchildren I was given \$20. A widow at a young age, she was left to provide for six children who were still not old enough to make it on their own. Yet, she managed to send four of them to college. How did she cope? Only God knows. Her struggles just to survive seems insurmountable to me, a woman living in an era when life was much easier. I don't think that I could do half the things she did, even though I have more money, more education, and more resources than she did. At the same time I wonder if she ever thought of giving up. Did she ever cry in solitude for her tough circumstances?

My generation has done much less than hers and we have so much more. Complaining about

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our troubles has become our past time. Superficial pursuits and concerns suck away at our energy. We have become “therapy junkies” always needing someone to coddle us with our problems. Are we less resilient than our elders? One has to wonder.

One thing I do know for sure; it is because of my grandmother’s strength and determination that I am here today. There is much that I am grateful to her for. If she had not made sure that my mother had education, my mother probably would not have married my father and I probably would not be where I am today. If she had given up who knows what would have become of her children and their offsprings.

There is much that we can learn from our elders. We have half-a-chance today at making it because they were determined to beat the odds long before us. We must never forget that it is upon the shoulders of strong and courageous men and women that we stand. They were not perfect. They did not always have all the right answers. They often did not do the right thing. They did what they knew best with the little knowledge that they had. Most often they did not have the education or the money that we have today. Yet, they gave it all for us to be where we are today. In our thanksgivings and celebrations of the season let us put some time aside to honor our elders. Make a few phone calls to see how they are doing, write a letter thanking them for their sacrifices, listen to their stories and learn more about your ancestry. But above all, lets us give thanks and celebrate the shoulders of those upon which we stand.

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