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**AN AWESOME FORCE: BLACK SPIRITUAL WOMEN AS
POWERFUL RESOURCES IN THE EDUCATION
OF POOR STUDENTS**

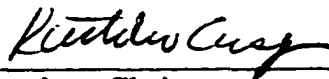
by

Shirley D. Bynum

**A Dissertation Submitted to
the Faculty of The Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy**

**Greensboro
2003**

Approved by



Committee Chair

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**BYNUM, SHIRLEY D., Ph.D. An Awesome Force: Black Spiritual Women as Powerful Resources in the Education of Poor Students. (2003)
Directed by Dr. Kathleen Casey. 149 pp.**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the phenomenon of black spiritual women as ministers and what they can add to the curriculum for poor students, especially poor black students. Spirituality is a missing component of the educational curriculum resulting in a morally and ethically deficient society. Character education has been offered as a solution or quick fix for providing a moral education but curriculum must incorporate the spiritual self and promote social justice for all students on a daily basis.

Narrative research is the methodology that was used in this research and the life stories of five black spiritual women were collected and analyzed. The six elements of research that Casey addresses are used to interpret the life stories. Special attention was given to common patterns and themes throughout the stories and was used in the presentation of the researcher's interpretation.

Chapter I allows an introduction of the project and provides a point of focus for the study. The second chapter is a presentation of materials from selected theorists on the subject of black spiritual women and the schooling of poor students. Chapter III provides insight into the research methodology used by the researcher. Chapter IV presents an analysis of the collected life stories of the black spiritual women emphasizing common themes and patterns. The first section of this chapter presents the stories of all women and the second section and third sections present a detailed life history for two of the narrators. Chapter V provides a summary of the dissertation, implications for practice, and possibilities for future research.

**To a loving mother whose memories I hold near,
with a voice so sweet and a love so dear.
Your belief in me and my dreams
surpassed all that I ever dared, and
I will always treasure the moments we shared.
I honor your memory with the dedication of this dissertation.
Forever, until tomorrow when we can be together again.
Your Daughter**

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of the Graduate School at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Our Children Need More

Gloria Hull (2001) speaks to black people's spirituality and argues, "if acknowledged and consciously used, [it] could be an awesome force" (p. 242). Black women have to rely upon their spirituality to help them cope through all the abuses inflicted upon them during their enslavement and search for meaning in a racist, sexist, and unjust world.

The purpose of this study is to present ways in which spiritual black women can aid and enhance the spiritual, ethical, and political self of poor students. I want to see the awesome force that Hull (2001) speaks of in action. In this study I explore the life stories of black spiritual women who have answered their "calling"; I determine what these women can offer towards a curriculum that incorporates the spiritual well being for all students, especially poor black students.

Why Did I Choose This Study?

In my experience as an educator for twenty-four years, I see too many poor students are sitting in classrooms feeling disconnected, disengaged, and unloved. I believe there is a financial and emotional crisis in poor communities that is destroying children's self-esteem and promoting a society of alienated students who perceive dropping out of school as the most feasible solution. I see the need for a pedagogy of care. Cheryl Sanders (1995) offers, "The crisis of the poor in the United States lies in one

fact. The resources needed to end poverty are readily available, but the will to end poverty is non-existent” (p. 60). I feel it is time to do more.

Each night, I would watch my mother pray. I was able to do this because there were three children sleeping in her bed. I did not understand the intensity of her faith, but knew to whom she was praying because in my community going to church was not a choice.

In this dissertation I describe black mothers as being strong, determined, nurturing, socially aware, loving, caregivers, and the “*mule of the world*, because they have been handed the burdens that everyone else—everyone else—refused to carry” (Walker, 1983, p. 237). Through interpretive community of black mothers, and grandmothers, an interpretive tradition was developed. These mothers were transmitters of tradition, values, and history within the black family, black church, and school. I explore the metaphor of the mother by using works from Casey (1990), Laura Randolph (1998), and Alice Walker (1983).

In my personal experience I have found the black community to provide “black bonds of affection, black networks of support, black ties of empathy and black harmonies of spiritual camaraderie” (West, 1999, p. 108) to provide the tools to battle “black invisibility and namelessness” (p. 108). In this dissertation I have experienced the “dogged determination to survive and subsist, the tenacious will to persevere, persist and maybe even prevail” (West, 1999, p. 101) to be characteristics of a nurturing black community. I grew up in the segregated South, and my feelings of self-worth and love came from the home, the black community, and the black church.

Historically, the black church was the one place African Americans could feel empowered. I used the phrase ‘the black church’ throughout the project to represent “an agency of social control, a source of economic cooperation, an arena for political activity, a sponsor of education, and a refuge in a hostile white world” (Raboteau, 1978, p. ix). The Civil Rights Movement was rooted in the spiritual, economic, and political support of the black church. The black church is a source of refuge, relief, and resource for sustaining the plight of African Americans. The church is where I got my first inkling of a spiritual self. My sense of love and caring for others flourished in the church and it continues to flourish.

Ruby Payne (2000) argues that a spiritual resource, especially with poor people, “is a powerful resource because the individual does not see him/herself as hopeless and useless, but rather as capable and having worth and value” (p. 17). The spiritual black women in this dissertation speak of getting a source of strength from the black church. The black church has many facets that enable people to interpret lives in possible ways to make them feel capable. Cornel West (1999) argues, “The major black cultural response to the temptation of despair has been the black Christian [prophetic religious] tradition” (p. 112). West speaks of the “ritual arts and communal bonds” that a religious tradition offers as relief to despair.

I find it interesting to read a white Jewish philosopher who speaks of the same nurturing and loving spirituality as a black prophetic religious tradition. Lerner’s (2000) spirituality has connections to the Old Testament, which is the Jewish part of the Bible and overlaps the religious tradition through the book of Exodus. Michael Lerner’s

definition of spirituality guides my research. Lerner (2000) describes spirituality as “a lived experience, a set of practices and a consciousness that aligns us with a sense of the sanctity of [God] All Being” (p. 5). Lerner’s definition goes on to describe spirituality as involving:

- a. an experience of love and connection to the world and to others**
- b. a recognition of the ultimate Unity of [God] All Being, and through that, of the preciousness of the Earth and the sanctity of every human being on the planet**
- c. a deep trust that there is enough for all that every human being deserves to share equally in the planet’s abundance and is equally responsible for shaping our future**
- d. a sense that the world is filled with a conscious spiritual energy that transcends the categories and concepts that govern material reality and inclines the world toward freedom, creativity, goodness, connectedness, love, and generosity**

Lerner also speaks of an emancipatory spirituality that parallels the virtues in a black prophetic religious tradition.

Emancipatory Spirituality means cultivating our capacity to see each other as ends, not means to some other end. Every single person on the planet is to be treated as a valuable and deserving of love, respect, and solidarity or as created in the image of God. (Lerner, 2000, p. 168)

Lerner’s emancipatory spirituality correlates with Cornel West’s (1982) prophetic religious tradition. The paradigm of a prophetic religious tradition according to West is the salvation of individual souls before a transcendent God where all people are equal and deserving of salvation.

In this dissertation I use the terms spirituality and religion interchangeably with the understanding that religion is “the various historical attempts to organize a set of doctrines, rituals, and specific behaviors that are supposed to be the ‘right way to live’ and some religions embody spirituality” (Lerner, 2000, p. 6).

After six years of college education, I had an insatiable desire to understand more about human nature and to explore my own spirituality. I recognize that I am a very caring and spiritual person, but I want more. I desire to feel more closeness with God and in return become the kind of person that He would have me to be. I feel I have reached a place in life where I am ready to embrace my spiritual self as a legitimate person with a legitimate role in the lives of young children. I find the religious tradition that turned African American communities into passionate agents for social justice and equality are becoming vitiated.

Jennifer Jue (1993) argues that language “denies our world, our cultural identity, and our relationships in the world” (p. 451). I believe there is a continuity running through the home, community, church, and school in an interpretive tradition. Although African Americans adopted the language of their oppressors, they were able to make it their own. Through the “kinetic orality, passionate physicality, improvisational intellectuality and combative spirituality” (West, 1999, p. 10), African Americans were able to create an oral tradition to provide a meaningful history in a society that not only denied their rights to an education, but right to humanity.

I believe the history of a prophetic religious tradition was passed through generations of African Americans in an interpretive tradition that was empowering and

spoken with a spiritual ethos. Gaetane Jean-Marie (2002) describes an interpretive tradition being the vocabulary, metaphors, and accepted wisdom that are used by people with similar experiences. I find the women in my research to speak a similar language with a pedagogy of care. My black spiritual women are in conversation with each other and they are talking about the same things and using language from people who have used it before, therefore creating an interpretive community. I find my narrators' religious tradition to be the basis of their interpretive tradition and community.

Historically, literacy was illegal for African Americans, but these people who were denied literacy by law developed an oral tradition to overturn their "tragic plight and absurd predicament" (West, 1999, p. 101) of the "gangsterization of everyday life" (p. 115).

What is my Focus?

My focus is on black spiritual women as teachers and leaders. Hull (2001) argues, "Opening up to the contributions and voices of black women may help to change that largely white, largely apolitical image" (p. 6). I believe it is time to move to a higher level of spiritual activism and make a more conscious effort to fulfill a spiritual obligation to all humanity, especially poor black students. Historically, black women teachers have to address poor students because that is whom they meet in their classrooms.

Historically, poor black children were in black schools where a black ethos and pedagogy of care was promoted for all students, but integration changed things. There are some teachers who still have a pedagogy of care, but these teachers are not able to serve all students. What has happened to poor children, especially poor black children in

schools today? The question that guides my research is “What leadership roles can spiritual black women play in the transformation of the educational system?”

Strong black spiritual mothers who dedicated their lives to social justice were instrumental in the Civil Rights Movement although they were relegated to a behind-the-scenes status. In this dissertation I use the works of such authors as Belinda Robnet (1997), Charles Payne (1982), and Gloria Hull (2001) to explore the conceptions of leadership from black spiritual leaders. I find, for the most part, these women held positions as bridge leaders. Robnet (1997) defines bridge leaders as people who “utilized frame bridging, amplification, extension, and transformation to foster ties between the social movement and the community” (p. 19). The Civil Rights Movement depended upon community support and it took people going door to door to solicit support.

The Reasons Why I Use Narratives

Narrative research provides an opportunity for me to listen to spiritual black women who had not been heard before in the public arena. As I began the research process, I collected the names of black spiritual women from friends and co-workers. I made initial phone calls and explained my research project. I informed the women that I would be sending a letter for them to read and if they were still interested to respond back with a date and time when we could meet. For the women whom I had no phone number, I secured their church address and mailed letters to the church. For the most part, these are the women who did not respond to my letter.

I collected life stories from selected spiritual black women preachers from varying denominations. The interview question was framed using a very wide frame for the initial question, which was ‘*Tell me the story of your life.*’

I used Casey’s four elements of narrative research, selectivity, silences, slippages, and intertextuality to analyze the stories.

I used intertextuality to compare the texts to find patterns of interpretations that were alike as well as those that were different. As a black spiritual woman, I felt a part of an interpretive community and tradition with my black spiritual narrators. I had similar values with my narrators on issues with the home, community, church, and school, and shared an interpretive language rooted in a spiritual discourse.

In the next chapter, I present the selected works from theorists who speak to the focus of my study.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Rage And Hope

In this dissertation I present selected scholarly literature to analyze the negative state of affairs African Americans are subjected to and how they are able to deal positively with all the catastrophes through a prophetic religious tradition. I present the role of strong black women as community mothers, teachers, and spiritual leaders who are central to the tradition and the uplift of the black community. I explore Cornel West's conception of a prophetic religious tradition and its influence on African Americans in the struggle against "the overwhelming onslaught of white dehumanization, devaluation, and degradation" (West, 1999, p. 105) through an interpretive tradition, which can manifest inside and outside the institution of the church. I present conceptions of leadership from black spiritual leaders and teachers to explore the influence of a religious tradition with a transformative spirituality in the advocacy for social justice and equality for African Americans, especially poor black children.

Strong Black Mothers

Black mothers were dehumanized and counted as property by their white captors, yet they managed to survive, downtrodden but strong and determined, spirits abused but steadfast. African American women formed what Patricia Collins (1990) refers to as a "culture of resistance." They were able to find comfort and peace within the confines of their African family and form relationships within their families that would allow them to

escape the inhumane treatment of their captors and nurture their creative spirits. African American women were able to reestablish families that had been broken by the cruelties of enslavement. What anthropologists call “fictive kin” is the personal relationships that are formed on religious practices and the African culture exemplified the concepts of kin. The African mothers helped to promote a culture that was bound together by their common struggles and religious practices. They have been called “the glue that cemented the two things Black folks have always cherished above all others: our families and our faith” (Randolph, 1998, p. 30).

It was the strong black women who were able to build a “pedagogy of resistance that was profoundly anti-colonial” (hooks, 1994, p. 2). I give these strong black women the metaphor of *mother*, *community mother*, and *community 'other' mother*. The figure of the mother is central to the tradition. I consider black mothers as being strong, determined, nurturing, socially aware, loving, caregivers, and the “mule of the world, because they have been handed the burdens that everyone else—everyone else—refused to carry” (Walker, 1983, p. 237). The role as mothers and nurtures has been instrumental in the development of a spiritual self in the uplift of a community struggling against “the psychic scars, ontological wounds, and existential bruises” (West, 1999, p. 105) of a racist society.

The Long Hard Way

“Black Theology is an attempt to give meaning, in the form of written language, to that symbol of God that the Black community has experienced for more than 430 years” (Hayes, 2000, p. 617).

I find this passage by Diana Hayes to make reference to the length of time that blacks have relied on their faith in a greater power. For more than 430 years, blacks have had a religious tradition to sustain them in their struggle for liberation and a meaningful existence. The “cold heartedness and mean spiritedness” (West, 1999, p. 115) of the enslavers lead to a world of degradation and turbulence for the enslaved Africans. Although the enslaved were brutalized and counted as property, they sought a way out of the hole of destruction they had been pushed into by adopting the Christianity of the enslavers. One of my women narrators speaks of her experiences of destruction and how she learned to accept the God that her grandmother had introduced to her at an early age.

I was on intensive probation. I had to be in by six at night. I mean, I had to pay a lot of money, and God just . . . He worked it all out. At first I knew about Big Mama’s God. And I laughed at Him. You know, I thought that was the funniest God. Somebody that you cried to and you talked to all that long time. And then I met Him myself. And He showed me just how real He is.

Ironically, this same religion that whites used to justify enslavement and degradation, African Americans were able to transform into a religion that spoke of freedom and transcendence. By turning white Christianity into a black prophetic religion, which spoke of liberation, equality, transcendence, and justice for all of God’s children, African Americans were able to look to a God with transformative powers for freedom and liberation.

James Cone (1997) argues that if the oppressed are to arrange their liberation then spirituality is the answer. I agree that spirituality can be the answer as long as it is of the unselfish, loving, and caring religious tradition that was taught in the black churches,

families, and communities. I promote a [black] prophetic religious tradition like the one Cornel West (1982) describes.

Prophetic Religious Tradition

It was the 'African side' of black religion that helped African-Americans to see beyond the white distortions of the Gospel and to discover its true meaning as God's liberation of the oppressed from bondage. It was the 'Christian' element in black religion that helped African-Americans to re-orient their African past so that it would become useful in the struggle to survive with dignity in a society that they did not make. (Cone, 1986, p. 6)

West (1982) distinguishes and defines a prophetic religious tradition with "two fundamental moral norms of individuality and democracy as the center of Afro-American thought" (p. 16). I feel the prophetic religious tradition that West defines is a source of strength and transcendence but not all black churches adopt this tradition. In the first norm West speaks of an existential and social freedom. The ideology that "every individual regardless of class, country, caste, race, or sex should have the opportunity to fulfill his or her potentialities" (West, 1982, p. 16) is the basis of this norm. Human beings become who they are by the dialectic between existential and social freedom. It is through the understanding of the contradictions of human nature and human imperfection that people fully comprehend the two inseparable notions of freedom. The existential freedom, or the divine gift from God was sought during a time when social freedom was not comprehensible. Social freedom originates from the desire of an egalitarian world and takes more of a community approach, while an existential freedom transcends time and is of an individual and personal salvation.

West (1982) explains existential freedom as the connection to race, which answers questions dealing with issues of death, disease, and despair and social freedom as the connection to the worldly events. Existential freedom, according to West, is the opportunity for salvation of individual souls before a transcendent God where all people are equal and deserving of salvation.

According to West (1982) the second fundamental norm of a prophetic religious tradition is democracy.

The prophetic Christian [religious] norm of democracy reflects the dignity of persons in that it accents potential for human betterment. It recognizes the depravity of persons in that it acknowledges human disabilities. The Christian [religious] dialectic of human nature and human history makes the norm of democracy necessary and possible; yet only the praxis of imperfect human beings renders it desirable and realizable. (p. 19)

Human beings possess good and bad parts, but it is all of these parts that continue to propel them as a group. It is through an understanding of the contradictions of human nature and human imperfection that one can fully comprehend the two inseparable notions of freedom.

Through the dehumanizing beatings and the cruelty of separation from families, the enslaved were able to maintain their belief and faith in a superior Being with powers of transcendence. If God could bring Israel out of slavery and Jesus could rise from the dead, then He could provide a better place for the oppressed. "Liberation [transcendence] is not only a relationship with God but an encounter grounded in the historical struggle to be free" (Cone, 1997, p. 134). It was the struggle for freedom that became the common ground or the connection for the enslaved. Having come from various tribes, with

different cultures and languages, most of the enslaved did not even like each other. They were only united by their inhumane treatment and this made their plight to liberation [social freedom] a difficult path. It is the struggle to reach an existential freedom that strengthened the authority of a black prophetic religion. Africans looked to God to provide a home on the 'other side of Jordan' that would provide solace from the pain and misery of their suffrage on earth.

The "two basic challenges presently confronting Afro-Americans are self-image and self-determination" (West, 1982, p. 22). West describes self-image as an attempt to describe "who and what one is" (p. 22), and self-determination as the effort to "gain significant control over the major institutions that regulate people's lives" (p. 22). It is going to take a prophetic religious tradition that West (1982) promotes to change a history of invisibility and namelessness. African Americans' rich cultural tradition of "kinetic orality, passionate physicality, improvisational intellectuality," (p. 102) would undergo some transformation, but through an oral tradition they were able to claim a place in history.

Black Oral Tradition

Struggling for an identity in a world that has not only silenced but also devalued their experiences as human beings, black women and men have had to develop a language they could use to understand their place in the world and the church. They needed a language to validate their identity and experience in social, political, and educational settings.

African Americans denied the rights to learn to read and write were able to take a white man's religion and through an oral tradition, turn it into one that would answer existential questions. Through the oral tradition, African Americans were able to answer questions dealing with death and despair, and issues of social and political freedom, if not in this land, then in God's home. African Americans use the prophetic religious tradition to guide their actions in this world in hopes of reaching a land free of suffering, struggles, and injustices. A land in which all of God's children can be together on equal footing is the ultimate vision of a prophetic religion.

Martin Luther King's (1968) most prophetic speech speaks of this Promised Land in an oral tradition of storytelling that is reverently spellbinding. King says God has allowed him to go to the mountaintop and look over at the Promised Land where all God's children are judged by the content of their character and not the color of their skin. The desire to reach this land provides African Americans the strength and courage to continue their struggle for humanity.

African Americans had the "dogged determination to survive; the tenacious will to persevere, persist and maybe even prevail [against the] unrelenting assault on black humanity" (West, 1999, p. 101). Denied the rights to a public education, African Americans who had access to an education slipped around and taught others and with a history of music and singing, were able to develop an oral tradition that helped them preserve their history and network paths to freedom. The enslaved used music to express their pain and struggles but also to send codes to each other. The overseer tried to keep them illiterate by not teaching them how to read, so they communicated through their

music. Afraid to sing of liberation in front of the overseers, they found ways to disguise it in music. One song: "Swing low, sweet chariot; coming for to carry me home" is a song in which the enslaved sang about an underground railroad taking them North to freedom. Many of the enslaved would be caught in the fields singing the old spirituals and fellowshipping with God.

I find the black oral tradition and the prophetic religious tradition to be essential parts of the larger black interpretive tradition and add the spiritual, social, and political discourse to theology. It speaks of the rights to be socially accepted because Africans are also God's children. Black religion was a social construction for hope of a just world. God became a loving father to African Americans who looked to Him to deliver them from oppression. They found peace, love, acceptance, equality, and liberation in the prophetic religion, which took place inside and outside the church. In my experiences and in my narrators' stories I find a black prophetic religion to supply the strength and resources for daily survival. One narrator says, "I don't know how people get up in the morning and go to work, and go about their affairs of the day without soliciting the power and the spirit and the guidance of an all wise and an all-loving God."

Black worship is a celebration of freedom. It is a black happening, the time when the people gather together in the name of the One who promised not to leave the little ones alone in trouble. The people shout, moan, and cry as a testimony to the experience of God's liberating presence in their lives. (Cone, 1997, p. 133)

I believe black worship is greater than the institution of the church. Through the kinship, a black oral tradition of stirring stories was being told and inspirational hymns were being sung by community mothers and grandmothers. These stories and songs were

not limited to the institution of the church. They were a spirit of celebration that often occurred outside the church by strong black leaders and teachers with a pedagogy of care.

I acknowledge strong black women and men were struggling for social justice. Regardless of the leadership styles, the black prophetic religious leaders, both women and men, can basically be characterized as being socially aware, deeply rooted in their community, respected and trusted by their community, courageous, empathetic, revered, and committed. To be such a leader in the eminent face of death was very much a reality; if they were caught, they had to have some sense of trust and faith in God. It was a black prophetic religious tradition that fueled this faith, and affirmed their presence and rights as a human being.

To be a serious black leader is to be a race-transcending prophet who critiques the powers that be and who puts forward a vision of fundamental social change for all who suffer from socially induced misery. (West, 1994, p. 70)

Black leaders have looked to religion for sustenance during the Civil Rights Movement. The Civil Rights Movement was rooted in religion. It has been the most important thing in black liberation and Cornel West argues that there is a crisis with black leadership because we are leaving our black religious tradition.

According to Cornel West (1994), “the crisis in black leadership can be remedied only if we candidly confront its existence” (p. 69). West argues that we had a social structure, the “black church” that was a nurturer for many prominent leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr., but in today’s society, we do not even have anyone in grooming to take his place. There is a lack of prophetic tradition in some churches and as a black society,

we must look at what is here right now, and try to figure out what is fundamentally different.

The black church, for the most part, was the place where our black male leaders learned to speak and more than often, it was the first time they had spoken publicly. For Martin Luther King, “the impact of the black church heritage can be seen in his ideas about justice, liberation, love, hope, and suffering” (Cone, 1997, p. xx). King’s leadership was completely devoted to a peaceful and nonviolence movement in his pursuit of liberty and justice for all. Martin Luther King’s commitment to change the conditions of society was grounded in theology. King eventually included other poor children in his advocacy for justice and his last statement against the war in Vietnam gives voice to this inclusion.

This commitment led King to lay his own life in solidarity with the victims of injustice to create a new social order in which the dignity and humanity of all God’s children may be affirmed. The black church opened up for him the possibility of this new order. (Erskine, 2001, p. 15)

Leaders are born and raised in the teachings of the church and are willing to step out on faith and lead the struggle for social freedom and justice. A brief, outside glance at the Civil Rights Movement would give the appearance of a top-down leadership with dominating leaders with articulate personalities.

Historically, Martin Luther King, Jr. has become the icon for the Civil Rights Movement. If asked who the leader of the Civil Rights Movement is, Dr. King would be the name on the top of most lists. King was respected and revered by the black community and with his charismatic personality he became the man out front, but there were many leaders in the background who were as important to the movement as King.

During the Civil Rights Movement, men and women risked their homes, their livelihoods, and their families in the struggle for justice and equality. Regardless of the style, either as top-down, bottom-up, or grass root leaders, men and women relied on a prophetic religious tradition to courageously face the reality of death in return for the opportunity of equal rights.

According to James Cone (1997) “Social context, Scripture, and tradition operate together to enable the people of God to move actively and reflectively with Christ in the struggle of freedom” (p. 105). The African American churches provide physical and financial support for many political, economic, and social issues in the community. The beliefs behind the Civil Rights Movement originated from church teachings that all people were created in God’s image. But for the most part, African American women were relegated to leadership position behind the scenes.

According to Malcolm X, “Behind every strong man stands a strong woman,” and male leaders would not be where they are without the support of women. Malcolm made this statement based on the strong influence of the women in his life. It was his mother, sister, and wife who instilled in him a strong sense of respect and pride for his blackness.

Black women have dedicated their lives to the struggle for social justice and were critical to the success of the Civil Rights Movement although they often were not recognized as leaders. “Activism and resistance was and is a way of life and women were and are central to the success of any movement for freedom” (Robnett, 1997, p. 44). Black women laid their lives on the line and their courage and faith were challenged just like the men.

African American men were great leaders but it was the women who organized voter registration by going door to door and solicited community support, which was vital to the success of the movement. The Civil Rights Movement was a monumental time in history when black male leadership was most conspicuous and they emerged as crusaders of the movement. The movement fails to give proper recognition to the importance of the grass root workers behind the scenes, the women who organized the movement. There were many courageous women behind the scenes, and Belinda Robnett (1997) refers to these women as “the invisible leaders.” These are the leaders who went from door to door, organizing and supporting the fight for justice. I believe that these women should have their stories told because if we fail to tell the whole history of the Civil Rights Movement, we fail to recognize the connection and support from both sexes that was necessary for a successful movement.

There were many African American women who were instrumental in the organization of the movement but one that is most commonly named as the initiator of the movement is Rosa Parks, because she refused to give up her seat on the bus. In actuality, the movement started before Mrs. Parks refused to give up her seat. There were grassroots leaders who worked behind the scene organizing and planning. Ella Baker and Fannie Lou Hammer are two of the women whom I present in this chapter.

Fannie Lou Hamer, who was *sick and tired of being sick and tired*, was shot at, brutally beaten, thrown off her plantation after 18 years, and verbally threatened, but she did not give up her fight for social equality. “Mrs. Hamer began working on welfare and voter registration programs for the Southern Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the

Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)” (Minerva Computer Services, 1997). What sustained Fannie Lou to continue her fight for justice after being beaten nearly to death with a blackjack as she lay with her face on the floor? I profess Hamer’s social activism to have qualities of the interpretive tradition of my black spiritual narrators with the belief in a transcendence God who would “make a way out of no way.”

Black and white women provided the movement with a leadership that was critical in the outreach for community involvement. Belinda Robnett (1997) refers to these women as *bridge leaders*. Most of the formal leadership came from the men in the Black churches and women did not have this access to formal leadership. They “utilized frame bridging, amplification, extension, and transformation to foster ties between the social movement and the community” (p. 19). Another important bridge leader who became a social activist at an early age by challenging unfair school practices is Ella Baker.

Miss Baker was not concerned with personal recognition and chose to work behind the scenes. She knew that the success of a movement depended upon the base upon which it was built. “Miss Ella Baker’s keen understanding of the need to build a movement from the ground up led to her insistence that the SCLC adopt an educational program that would draw the masses to the movement” (Robnett, 1997, p. 9). Ella Baker saw the need to expand the outreach of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and was instrumental in expanding the organization to “create the grassroots network that provided a base for the Civil Rights Movement” (Balfour, 2000, p. 30).

Working behind the scenes organizing community support was what Miss Baker felt was her calling. “I have always thought what is needed is the development of people who are interested not in being leaders as much as in developing leadership in others” (SNCC Conference 2000). Both Fannie Lou Hamer and Ella Baker fought for social action that is constructed in a black prophetic religious tradition. James Cone (1969) argues Black Christian spirituality is based on themes of deliverance and freedom. If we look at the leadership styles of Martin Luther King, Jr., Ella Baker and Fannie Lou we can see diverse perceptions of leadership, but if we look at the teachings in a prophetic religious tradition, we can see the connection and the guiding force behind each of these leaders struggles for social justice.

The enslaved risked brutal beatings to learn to read and write. The strong community mothers provided the foundation for an oral tradition that could be passed from generation to generation, but too many of our poor black children today are alienated and unengaged and failing in their educational pursuits. What has happened to our poor black children? As African Americans, have we forsaken our prophetic religious tradition? We must be reminded that ideologies are learned not just through the family and the church, but they are learned in the school.

I find African American teachers in the segregated system to teach black children with a common purpose, the uplift of the race.

Constructive Leadership

Linda Lambert et al. (1995) speak of leadership as being a reciprocal processes between people and is manifested in relationships. They introduce the significance of a

constructivist leadership in the schooling of children. “Constructivist leadership involves the reciprocal processes that enable participants in an educational community to construct meanings that lead toward a common purpose of schooling” (Lambert et al., 1995, p. 33). If teachers are to engage in the process of making meaning for students, they must first build relationships that will provide the avenue for communication.

Lambert et al. use this quotation by Paulo Freire (1973) to emphasize the importance of a common reciprocity. “Knowledge is not extended from those who consider that they know to those who consider that they do not know. Knowledge is built up in the relations between human beings” (Lambert et al., 1995, p. 34).

This quotation by Freire causes me to reflect on a cliché that remains with me from my educational training. The cliché, “It doesn’t matter how much you know, until students know how much you care” has been a guiding principle in my approach to reaching students. All of the accolades I might have earned do not mean anything to children who are wondering where their next meal is coming from or where they will spend the night. What can make a world of difference is my genuine concern for them as a human being with rights and value.

I am reminded of Carole Williams, an African American principal at Benjamin Franklin Day Elementary School in Seattle, presented in the *Schooling of Homeless Children*, by Sharon Quint (1994). Carole was faced with a challenge of running two schools under one facility, the institution of ‘the haves’ and ‘the have nots.’ Through her unique leadership style of “mandate-bearer of top-down agent of change and creator of bottom-up reform” (p. 128) she was able to meet the needs of the whole child and the

child's family. She had as her cause the welfare of homeless children and the plight of their families, with an understanding that the two were connected and dependent upon each other.

There are African American teachers who have as their vocation the spiritual well being of poor black students. bell hooks (1994) speaks of African American teachers who nurtured the whole child to "ensure that we would fulfill our intellectual destiny and by so doing uplift the race" (p. 2).

Before integration, black schools and black teachers were introducing black children into black understanding and black language.

Although black schools were indeed commonly lacking in facilities and funding, some evidence suggest that the environment of the segregated school had affective traits, institutional policies, and community support that helped black children learn in spite of the neglect their schools received from white school boards. (Walker, 1996, p. 3)

The black schools were lacking in resources but African American teachers became strong community mothers to the students and valued and encouraged them to achieve. Vanessa Siddle Walker (1996) argues how black teachers would go so far as to carry students home with them if they did not have transportation to get to after school functions. I find these teachers took the time to build relationships with students which were critical to the students' well being. Through the oral tradition, black students were given a history they could understand and identity with, but black students without access to the tradition become disillusioned and disengaged.

African American history has become subjugated knowledge so that the dominant society can remain in control. If one does not have a history, what are the chances for a future? White America has chosen not to provide black children with a meaningful history. Without a memory of history, comes a lack of identity. Delores Williams (1993) says, “black school children get no sense of their group’s contributions to the nations’ history and culture and this destroys children’s self-esteem and their ability to imagine themselves as achievers” (p. 135). Vanessa Siddle Walker (1996) notes from her research on schools today that “large numbers of [black] children were invisible academically, often silent or asleep, and visible in areas that did not matter—like in the halls or the cafeteria” (p. xiii).

These findings were a contrast with the engaged and inspired students from the Caswell County Training School (CCTS) in the segregated system. Walker (1996) quotes one of the teachers from the segregated system as saying that they “were interested in not only teaching that arithmetic or spelling or what have you, but we were interested in that whole child” (p. 123). What is happening to the black children in schools today? What happened to the eagerness to learn that James Anderson (1988) so eloquently writes about when addressing the educational values of the enslaved? “Blacks’ motivation for intellectual achievement, which lay deep in the [en] slaved and ex- [en] slaved past, persisted into the twentieth century and into our own present” (Anderson, 1988, p. 283).

Cornel West (1994) argues African Americans are not living as the black religious tradition dictates. Things that are taking place in black society that are morally and spiritually corrupt according to West and African Americans are forsaking a religious

tradition that dictates an outreach ministry to *the least, the loss, and the lame*, and our poor black students are suffering.

Poor Black Students

As a public educator, I am a witness to some of the issues with our youth. I am privy to a first hand look at the alarming rate our black children are acting out and dropping out of school. Poor black students are having difficulty identifying with school and this lack of identity results in low self-esteem and fear of failure. The social glue that holds the community and school together is missing. Claude Steele (1992) notes that students who cannot identify with school *disidentify* with school and become alienated. “American blacks may find it harder to assimilate. For them, the offer for acceptance in return for assimilation carries a primal insult: it asks them to join in something that has made them invisible” (p. 67). So many students choose to *disidentify* with school and develop a non-caring attitude. Shapiro (1995) argues:

When schools become places concerned with the meaning of citizenship and democracy rather than test scores and success, the educational agenda comes to be about matters of self and social awareness and the care for life. (p. 54)

If the educational system reaches this stage of social awareness that Shapiro addresses, the escalating dropout rates for poor students, especially young black men, will decrease. The number of black men in the court system outweighs the number of black men in the universities. The social disconnection from a system that does not value all of its people results in an increase in the number of families receiving Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), and addictions continue to grow among many poor

people. There is limited or absent connection to family, community, and church. The rate of black on black crime is increasing and yet the connection to the church is diminishing.

If a culture of connectedness and empowerment is endorsed, West (1994) says the issues must first be addressed among African Americans. If African Americans are turning away from the church, the one place that sustains the future struggle for social justice, how will this affect the future for African Americans? Just like their African ancestors who used the black religious tradition to sustain them through the cruel and inhumane treatments forced upon them, African Americans today must embrace a religious tradition to find solutions and answers to today's injustices.

West (1994) argues African Americans leadership is in trouble if the leaders forget their prophetic religious tradition.

In Summary

If the African American race fails to prepare leaders for the future, West is certain that the past is certain to be repeated. I feel this may be the crisis that is facing the poor black youth in schools today. Too long African Americans have been subjected to media that often portrays blacks in a negative image, and subjected to a history in which they have no identity. Without a meaningful history, poor blacks are easily rendered invisible. Blacks have been victims of socially induced misery, looked upon as second-class citizens, and for the most part, viewed as a nonhuman being. Cornel West (1999) tells how the major institutions in America attempted to exclude black people from the human family, resulting in *black invisibility and namelessness*. "The existential predicament is

the most relevant because it has to do with what it means to be a person and live a life under the horrifying realities of racist assault” (West, 1999, p. 101).

I find schools of today are not prepared to handle existential questions, especially the question of death. I have the misfortune to be in a school that experienced the death of three students in one school year. The best the system could offer was a moment of silence on the intercom and grief counselors. With the separation of church and state, students who believe in a prophetic religious tradition of transcendence, never heard one word of hope that these students were maybe in a better place. Not one word of any religious tradition was mentioned. Not one prayer was uttered, only a moment of silence. At such a critical time in student’s life, those with a religious foundation are being told by the silences of the teachers and counselors that God has no place in certain avenues of life.

In this chapter, I looked at selected literature on prophetic religious traditions, oral traditions, and black leadership, and the connection to the education of poor students. In the next chapter, I present myself as a researcher and the focus of my research. I introduce narrative research as the guiding theory behind my project.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

In Search of Self

The previous chapter was a presentation of selected literature on black spiritual women and a prophetic religious tradition. I dedicate this chapter to discuss the research methodology that I used in this project. This chapter affords an opportunity for me to present my focus of inquiry and how I, the researcher, as a black spiritual woman, am an active participant in this project. In the first section of this chapter, I discuss my focus of research and follow it with a section on myself as a researcher where I reflect on my search for a spiritual identity by presenting my life history from adolescence through mid-life. I use narrative research as the guiding theory for my project to record and I dedicate the last section of this chapter to present my research protocol and to explicate the elements of narrative research.

The black spiritual women in my research tell wonderful life histories that speak of injustices and struggles, but they do not make much of an issue of racism. There is one woman in my research who speaks of growing up with an understanding that “there was definitely a dividing line between black and white.” She speaks of her activism during the Civil Rights Movement as part of her mission.

I had a role to play and a mission to accomplish. So even though I was intimidated by the whole experience, I felt that I didn't have any choice because I also grew up understanding that my life was not my own to live selfishly, but to give for my people and my community.

Hull, Scott, and Smith (1982) argue, “black women belong in two oppressed racial and sexual” (p. 14) social groups. African American women are not only victims of racism, but they are victimized because of their gender. I have one woman who speaks of being abused in the church because of her gender. When she speaks of her calling to the pastor of the church, she says:

I knew I was embarking on a very difficult road. And it began a path of really suffering. It was interesting that I was called in when a mission, see sometime you are called in to minister but you don't know what your vocation, your mission is. But there was, there was a fight going on in the [regional religious] association. Some of the associations believe in women and some of them didn't.

Basically, the women narrators speak of race as an interpretive tradition and interpretive community in its positive sense throughout their stories. The spiritual black narrators draw upon a common language with similar experiences and values.

Interpretive Tradition

I find the women in my research to speak a common language of love and nurturing which supports the confirmation of their identity as black spiritual women. These women were historically silenced but have developed a spiritual language to claim a place in the world and the church. I discover the women in my research speak a common language of a community nurturer, a spiritual calling, an empty self, a sense of doubt, and social activism.

Interpretive Community

Stanley Fish believes that knowledge is created in the relationship between self and others and he calls this relationship an interpretive community. Fish says, “All that

one thinks and “‘knows’ is an interpretation that is only made possible by the social context in which one lives” (Lang, 2003, para. 13). I am in conversation with other black spiritual women who are talking about similar experiences with a common language and similar experiences.

Myself as a Researcher

Growing up as a black child in the segregated South, I found affirmation in the black school, church, and in my biological and community family. I had strong black women in the home, church, and community molding and shaping my life. I was blessed to live with a mother and grandmother who nurtured and loved me unconditionally. My community was small and close knit, and everyone knew each other by name. It was a community of mothers and they had no reluctance in chastising the children.

My research affords me the opportunity to hear the voices of southern black spiritual women who have answered their calling and determine what the larger society can learn from them. How can a curriculum that incorporates learning for the spiritual self promote social justice? Gloria Hull (2001) says, “Black people’s spirituality—if acknowledged and consciously used—could be an awesome force” (p. 242). Black women have to rely upon the black prophetic religious tradition of their ancestors and use it to help them cope through all the abuses inflicted upon them because of their race and gender. This religious tradition continues to be the guiding force for spiritual black women as they search for meaning in a world riddled with racism, sexism, and injustice. “Opening up to the contributions and voices of black women may help to change that largely white, largely apolitical image” (Hull, 2001, p. 6). From their roles as ‘mammies’

for the oppressors, to the matriarchs of their families and communities, black women's stories have been infused with suffering and injustices, but through it all they have been powerful and instrumental in raising the black race.

"No matter how high they rise, and no matter how diverse and many places they go to build, Black women community workers are the ones who will come home to the community" (Gilkes, 1998, p. 75). I believe the black spiritual woman has the foresight to understand the urgency of fostering a spiritual community.

Historically, African American women used an oral tradition to validate a culture of black identity and experiences. African Americans customized the white man's religion in a manner to reserve some of their African culture. The oral tradition transforms the religion into "spiritual songs, chants, ritual, movements, symbols, needs and energies that are distinctly black and woman" (Wade-Gayles, 1995, p. 220). Before integration, black teachers were teaching the oral traditions to introduce children into black understanding and purpose.

My African American teachers made me feel valued, I felt important and I was somebody, and the color of my skin did not matter. I saw school as an extension of the community and church family because the African American teachers, in the segregated system, treated students as if they were all one big family. My African American teachers knew my parents and for the most part, lived in the same community and went to the same church as I did. The African American teachers in the segregated school not only taught students how to read, write, and to do arithmetic, they instilled a sense of pride in

black students. I had teachers who demanded my very best and refused to let me waste time in class by misbehaving.

bel hooks (1994), in *Teaching to Transgress* recognizes the changes within the teachers that occurred with desegregation. Leaving a school where students were taught by black teachers who were committed to the uplift of the race to a school in which black children “soon learned that obedience, and not a zealous will to learn, was what was expected” (p. 3).

I first felt the pains of invisibility when I entered an integrated system. I can remember sitting in my Physical Science class, as a ninth grader in the first year of integration, and raising my hand to answer a question but not being called on. I had become invisible to the white teacher and my invisibility caused my identity as a human being to diminish. I became disengaged and turned off by school and the whole process of education. Instead of raising my hands to answer the teacher’s questions, I found other ways to get attention and most of them were negative. I had gone from a nurturing environment in the black school to one in which I was not only devalued, but invisible.

As a black spiritual teacher and leader, I have an overwhelming need to reach out to the downtrodden and give them a sense of purpose. There are many occasions in which I have personally funded a first prom, a college application fee, a senior trip, and many others. I am not just a financial source for students, but also a source for students who are experiencing trouble personally and educationally. Many call me ‘mother’ and I contribute my spirituality and love for humanity as the guiding force that attracts students from all walks of life, especially poor black students.

Historically, poor black children were in black schools where a black ethos and pedagogy were promoted for all students, but integration changed things. There are some teachers with a pedagogy of love and caring, but there is not enough of them to serve all the students that are in need. What is happening to poor students, especially poor black children in school today, and what role can spiritual black women play in the transformation of the educational system are the questions that guide my research.

“The crisis of the poor (black) in the United States lies in one fact: The resources needed to end poverty are readily available, but the will to end poverty (injustice) is non-existent” (Sanders, 1995, p. 60). I believe listening to the life stories of black spiritual women who have not been heard before, will afford an opportunity to reduce the “ontological wounds and existential bruises” (West, 1999, p. 102) from the invisibility and dehumanization inflicted by a society consumed with the ills of injustice and inequality.

I have seen teachers devalue and marginalize personal experiences based solely on one’s race or gender. Too many poor students are disenfranchised and unconnected from the educational curriculum. Poor students are being suspended from and dropping out of school at an alarming rate, especially students of color. I believe all students, regardless of their socio-economic status, need a curriculum that validates and confirms their identify, especially poor students of color.

I believe that it is time to move to a higher level of spiritual activism and make a more conscious effort to fulfill my spiritual obligations to make this world a more humane, loving, and just place for all students.

I have been consumed with pleasing others, always putting myself in second seat. So many times, I have wanted to click my heels and wake up in a different place, a place where I am not obligated to anyone; a place with very little responsibility to others. I need a place where I can find solace from the multitude of voices that barrage my sense of self and purpose as a black spiritual woman. Gloria Wade-Gayles (1995) says “taking time to experience ourselves in solitude is one way that we can regain a sense of the divine that can feel the spirit moving in our lives” (p. 343), but I have not been able to find the time I need for myself. My world is a roller coaster with highs and lows that seem to appear without warning or preparation. From one day to the next, I have to be prepared to deal with the emotions of others, forsaking my own.

My sense of place as a doting wife, a giving mother, and an obedient daughter is changing. My children are 32 and 26 year olds; my mother passed away two years ago, yet it seems like yesterday. I have a wonderful husband who has blessed my life for ten years. Although I have a loving and supportive family, my focus is now beginning to center within.

I have reached a stage in life, where my paradigm is shifting. I am beginning to look inside myself and discover what is best for me. At this stage in my life, I am trying to figure out who I am, what my purpose is in life, and what must I do spiritually to have everlasting life. The more things I discover about myself, the more I realize I do not understand, and the more confused and excited I become in my exploration for identity and purpose. To facilitate the presentation of my current worldview and the ideologies

that I bring into the research, I need to present my path from early adolescence through adulthood.

Each of us has an inner child of the past living within us. Those who needed to build no walls have access to that child's creativity and spontaneity. Those who had to leave his crucial core behind can tear down the walls, see what the child needed but didn't have, and begin to provide it now. (Steinem, 1992, pp. 38-39)

I introduce this quotation by Gloria Steinem, a white feminist, who had a childhood with a mother who was punishing and a father who was absent. Steinem's mother was emotionally ill and as a child she was consumed with escaping the realities of her life. Steinem has a project of self-actualization and I feel empathetic for her struggles as I too, struggle to find my sense of self.

I need to revisit my inner child to discover how I reached this point in my life. As a young black child of segregation, I had to build many walls of defense and escape. I built walls to provide a safe haven from the cultural annihilation from a Eurocentric society. These walls provided a fragile and temporary retrieve because ultimately, I had to face the real world and make choices on how I would deconstruct my invisibility. As I reflect back to my years as a teenager, I discover the power associated with the choices I chose to make and those I made by not choosing.

Personally speaking, if I am going to define myself, I would have to start with my teenage years because that is when I first realized that I could make choices, whether right or wrong that would impact the rest of my life. So sit back, relax and take a journey with me through my adolescence.

As I listen to the beautiful music several chairs above me, I realize the flute is the most beautiful instrument in the band. Tom, with his light blond hair, and big blue eyes, is making the instrument come alive with such sweet melody. Our band teacher shows his appreciation by flashing Tom a big smile and nods his head in affirmation. I sit patiently in the fourth chair, below Mary, with the long brown hair, and Susan, with the short blonde hair, waiting my turn to play. Last year, at my previous school, before integration, I was the first chair flute. I had played the flute for five years, since I was in the fourth grade.

It was through my love for music and harmony that I was able to survive integration and remain self-affirmed because growing up as a black child in the 50's was not easy, and securing an adequate education was not the simplest thing in the world. "You can't beat something with nothing. You can't lose old and negative ways of thinking until new and positive ones replace them" (Steinem, 1992, p. 186). Replacing the majority's association of superior with white, and inferior with black would mean changing the dominant ideology. Now how can a poor black girl, living in the South, have any power to change or modify this ideology?

My feelings of self-worth and love came from the home, the black community, and the black church, none of which had the political power to change the racial hierarchical status in a white dominated society. My mother always told me that education was the key to make a better lifestyle. If I wanted to make a decent living, I had to get an education. "Once we are old enough to have an education, the first step toward self-esteem for most of us is not to learn but to unlearn. We need to demystify the forces

that have told us what we should be before we can value what we are” (Steinem, 1992, p. 109). I had to learn that I was not a second-class citizen and not let the “cold heartedness and mean spiritedness” (West, 1999, p. 115) of a racist society damage my self-esteem. Forced to enter through the back door of a restaurant, if I was allowed to enter at all, and having to drink from certain water fountains, strengthened my resolve to get all the education I possibly could.

I remember an experience my younger sister and I had at the only drugstore in my hometown. My sister and I had gone to the store to buy some ice cream. We loved their ice cream, and this was always a special treat for my sister and me. I remember the clerk always wiping down the counter when we were waited on. As a young child, I did not think anything except maybe how clean the clerk was. As I became older and wiser, I began to understand the “nearsighted, unblinking, focused gaze” (Williams, 1997, p. 20) of the clerk had put my sister and I in a box without even taking the time to learn anything about us. The clerk thought we were dirty and saw my sister and I as a race with “some sort of genetic leprosy or a biological train wreck” (Williams, 1997, p. 9). My sister and I were victims of institutional racism, which put us back in the box, behind the walls and labeled as unequal and undeserving.

Gloria Steinem (1992) argues “By definition, there is no one way, or even one exactly replicable way, of relearning who we are. There is something more important: your way” (p. 153). If my way of being is deemed unworthy of existing, how can my sense of self and purpose be validated?

I was the first-born child to a sixteen-year-old, single mother. My early years were happy ones because there was plenty of love from my mother and grandmother. Growing up I never felt any more special than any of my other siblings. It was not until I became a young adult, that I would hear things like; Grandma liked you better, and you know you are Mama's favorite. I chalked it up to my being the oldest and having the most responsibility. It was not until later in life that I realized the truth behind these accusations.

My mother was trying to finish school and raise a daughter. She was the valedictorian of her class, but the school's administration would not give it to her because she was an unwed mother. Mother always told me how smart she was and how she hated that she had not been able to go to college. But back in her day, she said that an unwed mother had no place in school and college was out of the question. She had to finish school and get a job to support her new family. It was not until I became a teenager that I realized just how poor we were financially.

I was in middle school when I became interested in pretty clothes. My mother could not afford to buy me new clothes because she was now a struggling single parent to five. But what she could give me was unconditional love and the inspiration to succeed where she had stumbled. My mother, with all of her intelligence, was working in the school cafeteria because she could not afford to go to school with five children to feed. Each night, I would watch her pray. I was able to do this because there were three of us sleeping in her bed. I did not understand the intensity of her faith, but knew to whom she was praying because she had us in church every Sunday. Church is were my sense of love

and caring for others flourished. My mother instilled a prophetic religious tradition that gave me the desire to live a moral and ethical life on earth in preparation for a better home in heaven. It is the belief in transcendence that guides my spiritual steps.

Of course, everything is a journey, and nothing is a destination. But it seems to be true that, once we are past the early stages of absorbing parental love, some core of self-esteem is a vital preface to allowing ourselves to feel loved by others. (Steinem, 1992, p. 276)

I had a teacher with whom I was able to make a connection. The warmth and love she had for her students were expressed through a nurturing and approachable relationship with students. It was my high school business teacher that I credit for my pursuit of a career in education.

My high school business teacher took a special interest in me and I give her credit for my interest in Business Education. She saw my potential and would not accept anything but my best. There was one occasion when I was typing by sight and I kept looking at the keys and she made me cover the keys. At first, I was very angry with her, but after I realized I could type without looking at the keys, I understood what she had been trying to do. Steinem (1992) explains how “confidence is contagious, so is lack of confidence,” and Mrs. [name of teacher] was insightful to recognize my abilities when I could not. Mrs. [name of teacher’s] class was the only class in which I felt all students were treated equally and her confidence in my ability rubbed off on me and I began to believe in my skills and abilities. In Mrs. [name of teacher] class all students were treated the same but it was not this way in my other classes.

My ninth grade class was the first class under mandated integration and this is where I fully understood what racism was really about. I came face to face with racism on a daily basis. The black students were treated as “abstractions and objects rather than individuals and persons” (West, 1999, p. 103), and my invisibility in the classrooms was pronounced. If I raised my hand in class, I would be the last one called on. No matter how hard I tried, my work never seemed to be as good as my white classmates.

Before integration, I was aware that there were certain water fountains and restaurants in town that we could not use, but I did not understand the full extent of what it really meant. I really did not have any dealings with white children at all, since my family lived in an all black, rural community. With mandated desegregation, I felt like I was not only losing my school, but also my identity. I did not know anything about white students except the times they would pass us in their buses as we walked home from school and call us names out of the windows. Now, we would be riding the same bus and sharing the same classroom and cafeteria, but it would belong to the white students because the black school had been closed and black students were bused across town.

I remember being somewhat militant my first year in high school, but it was only a shield with which I used to protect myself. I once again chose to put up walls of defense. I did not want anyone to discover my sentimental and sensitive nature for fear of being more open to abuse.

Choosing is so important. Some things are unavoidable but there are a lot of things I can do – options, alternative pathways. There is a tug-of-war between necessity (freedom not limitless) and possibility, between the fixed or conditioned and striking out or searching for things. (Greene, 2000)

I soon found myself searching for a more inclusive love. I discovered my love for all people extends past my heritage. I began to tear down the walls of defense. As bell hooks (1994) argues, I was able to transgress and step outside the box. It was not long before I made friends from both races. It was through these times of turbulence that I realized I had a different outlook than my friends. I could look at people and see their color and accept and love them for who they were. I had an innate sense of harmony and peace and enjoyed being around all people. It was through my love for mankind that I wanted to further my education and become a teacher. I wanted to share the love I received in school with others.

My senior year in high school was one of excitement. I had been nominated to be on the homecoming court. I knew I could not be the queen because to have a black queen was unheard of in 1970 at my high school. Black and white students were not even allowed to have a prom together. The whites would have a private prom in some hotel, and the black students were told there would not be a prom. But I always found out because word always got back to school. The white students would say that it was a party thrown by some parents, but I knew that it was a prom.

I had been accepted at North Carolina Central University with a full scholarship. But life was repeating itself. "One of the great paradoxes of human development is that we are required to make crucial choices before we have the knowledge, judgment, and self understanding to choose wisely" (Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, & McKee, 1978, p. 102). I made a choice without fully understanding the consequences. Just like my mother, I got pregnant before graduation. I remember to this day, the moment that I

got the courage to tell my mother. It was one of the hardest things I ever had to do, because my mother had invested so much hope and trust in me. My mother looked to me to do what she had not been able to do. Yet, I had fallen in her same footsteps. I can still hear her say, "I knew you were not going to be anything," after I told her of the pregnancy. To this day, it still brings tears to my eyes because I know the pain I had caused. It was at that precise moment, when I told her I would show her, that my determination to succeed became insurmountable.

Teen pregnancy can be detrimental, but with the right circumstances it can be encouraging. I saw my pregnancy at the time to be a mistake that had damaged my chances at a career. But I had demeaned the love and support of a strong grandmother. My grandmother took over the childcare for my daughter while I was in school.

We modify our relationships with family and other components of the childhood world, we begin forming an adult identity, and we begin taking our place as adults in the adult world. From a childhood-centered perspective, one can say that development is now largely completed and the child has gained the maturity to be an adult. (Levinson et al., 1996, p. 19)

With the birth of my daughter, I took a big leap from childhood to adulthood. I had to forego my plans to leave home and attend school in Durham, and remain at home where I could raise my daughter. I was assuming an identity of an adult, forced to leave my childhood behind and assume adult parental responsibilities. Raising a daughter and going to school were not easy tasks because I also had to work part time. Nevertheless, it was the love and support that I received from my family that enabled me to continue my education. My mother was busy working, but my grandmother became the major

childcare provider for my daughter. During this period of time, I began to discover my strengths and re-examine my spirituality. It took a lot of prayer and faith, but in June of 1973 I graduated from a community college with an Associate of Arts Degree in Business Education.

In August of 1973, I enrolled in the Business Education Program in a university. I chose the university because I had been told about the great business program it offered. It did not matter to me that I would be attending a majority white school in the 70's. Because I was not concerned about color, I saw the opportunities. I was inspired by the prospect of being able to finish my education and provide a good lifestyle for my daughter.

My first day on campus was uneasy for me, especially after my mother left me in my new room all alone. I was away from home, living in a big city, in a large building with strangers. This was a significant move for a young black girl who grew up in a small country town with only one traffic light. I arrived in the room before my roommate and I anxiously waited her arrival. When the door opened and my roommate stepped in, I was so elated, that the color of her skin was not an issue. Eagerly, I informed her how happy I was that she had finally arrived. Never once did it bother me that she was white.

During my tenure at the university I spent most of my weekends back home working part time. Without the support and love from my family, I would never have been able to finish school. Although they did not have the finances to send me to school, they instilled in me a sense of pride that fostered my inspiration to succeed through all hardships. Somewhere along the way, my concern for the integration of my personal and

professional self became very obvious. My spiritual self was becoming very strong and my concerns for human development, across cultural boundaries was emerging at a rapid pace. Through all of the hardships I continued discovering my role in society. In May of 1995, I graduated from the university with a Bachelor's Degree in Business Education. I was sitting on top of the world. I had accomplished something that no one in my family had ever done. I was a college graduate. The pride I felt and the joy my mother had was worth the entire struggle. Now I was ready to go out and save the world by educating our youth and demonstrating to them through life and philosophy, what a caring world could produce. Along my path of salvation, I fell in love and married a military man on September 12, 1995, only four months after graduation. We spent the next two years in Germany where my son was born.

The culture in Germany was different, yet I was able to understand the social construction of their society on a theoretical level. I saw significant patterns in the Germans' values and educational discourse, and they were similar to my own. They too, held education in high esteem as the foundation of livelihood. After our tour of duty was over, I returned to my old high school and became a resource teacher for the disadvantaged/handicapped students. My old business teachers were still working in the same positions and I could not find a job teaching business. This meant I had to go back to school and get certified in Vocational Disadvantaged/Handicapped Services. It was during my early years of teaching that I became aware of students' needs, and how these needs were more than just an educational nature. "Students are not empty vessels to be

filled but centers of energy in search of meaning. Empower the child to search for meaning” (Greene, 2000).

I remember one student in particular, and I will call him Willie because he was classified as a “Willie M” student with severe behavioral problems. Willie was a terror for his teachers, but Willie and I had a great relationship and had no problems getting along. I was able to look pass his disabilities and see his spirit and earnestly love him for who he was. My only problem with Willie was trying to figure out a polite way to refuse the gifts he often lavished upon me. Just like Willie, all the students need unconditional love, guidance, and positive relationships with teachers. These needs were of a diverse nature and crossed cultural boundaries. Regardless of the color of their skin or economic background, all students have similar needs. And it was a good feeling being able to meet some of their needs. Life was good!

Love is not about power. Romance is a means to the end of self-completion, but love is an end in itself. Or, as Margaret Anderson put it, ‘in real love, you want the other person’s good. In romantic love you want the other person.’ If we love someone, we want them to continue being the essence of themselves. If so, then we can’t own, absorb, or change them. (Steinem, 1992, p. 276)

I found my marriage becoming one of control. My identity had become so immersed in my husband’s that I no longer felt as if I existed without him. I was losing my sense of self and the romance had long since evaporated. I had little opportunity to nourish my spirituality because my husband did not like to go to church and I needed the institution of church to nourish my spiritual growth. My marriage was on a downward spiral heading for destruction.

In August 1986, I became a single mother with two children to raise. My husband and I got a divorce and he took everything except the kitchen sink. I came home from work one day completely unaware that my world had been turned upside down and found my home was now depleted of furniture. It was such an ugly divorce that I knew I needed a change in atmosphere, so I packed up, and moved my family. I ended up in a city employed with the local schools. I had moved away from a community where I always had my support to a place where I was unknown by anyone. I had to struggle in the beginning, but God has a way of looking out for his own. So, starting over was a good thing for me because I had the fortune to meet people with diverse dimensions and philosophies, which enhanced my interests in multicultural studies.

In 1992, I was given an opportunity to enroll in a graduate program in Liberal Studies through a cohort between my school and the university. The administration at both schools saw the value of such a program and formed a partnership. They selected twenty teachers to participate in this program and I was fortunate enough to be selected. It was during this program that my sense of self began to flourish. I took courses that I never would have selected in my undergraduate program. The very first course we had was “The Making of the Atomic Bomb.” I thought they were trying to test me to see if I would quit because it was one of the hardest courses I have ever taken, but I survived. The professor helped me to realize that no matter who you are, if the determination and will power is sufficient, you can make it. I developed an inner strength that fueled my determination to succeed and discovered that I was not inferior intellectually, culturally, or socially, but as smart and valuable as the next person.

This class influenced my perspective of students and people in general who are struggling and made me more patient and supportive. In the process, I discovered some strengths that I did not know I had and learned how to value them. I used to feel intimidated around my peers and had very little to say. I discovered things about heritage and culture that I never knew. It was in one class called “The American Dream” that I received my voice and realized that I had something to offer. I learned that we all have a place in society with a similar focus, which is to live the American Dream. “Those who betray the Dream in their 20’s will have to deal later with the consequences. Those who build a life structure around the Dream in early adulthood have a better chance for personal fulfillment” (Levinson et al., 1978, p. 92). I thought the breakup of my marriage was the end of the world. Little did I know that it forced me on a journey to discovering and fulfilling my dream.

Think of the joy of self-discovery: solving a problem, making a bookcase, inventing a dance step, losing oneself in a sport, cooking for friends, writing a poem—all by reaching within for a vision and then making it real. As for who we will be, the answer is: We don’t know; we are on the edge of history. But we do know that growth comes from saying yes to the unknown. (Steinem, 1992, p. 267)

I was in uncharted territory reaching for a vision that would be fulfilling and satisfying to both my children and me. The opportunity to redefine my dream and just dream with a larger scope was unfolding. My search for spiritual meaning was expanding.

I have tried from time to time in my life to take a look at myself. One time I took a month off to go to a lonely place, to be by myself to contemplate the earlier years of my life . . . This weekend has made me realize that I have been going

about it wrong because in the previous times I have tried to be by myself and contemplate my life in a rationale way—to push away the emotions and push away the painful and the jubilant side of life in terms of the pure facts and the rationalizations. But I now find after this weekend that what I really have to do is not to have to understand my life but to take it up in my arms and embrace it and I don't know if I am ready to do that but it certainly is worth trying. (Sohmer, 1984)

This passage by Steve Sohmer speaks to my desire to embrace life, but at this stage in my life, there is a voidness that was haunting and disturbing and would not allow me to embrace my life as it was. After six years of college education, I wanted to know more. I had an insatiable desire to understand more about human nature and to explore my own spirituality. I knew that I was a very caring and spiritual person, but I wanted and needed more. I wanted to feel more closeness with God and in return become the type of person that he would have me to be. I felt that I had reached that place in life where I was ready to embrace my spiritual self as a legitimate person with a legitimate role in the lives of young children. I felt an overwhelming desire to reach out to the downtrodden and brighten their day, and I was very concerned about human welfare and the condition that our world faces.

I find a lack of understanding towards human differences and cultural diversity in society. Non-majority students are dropping out of school at an alarming rate because they are not receiving what they need inside the educational institution. If I am to save the children and in return provide for my own future, I must learn ways to reach all students.

My theory is, if you can call it a theory, every work of art, every piece of writing creates its own aesthetic theory. You have to learn it from inside. You have to try to understand a piece of work and understand its own laws that are generated

within itself which means you can't use to any degree any textbook or cookbook. Every work of art generates its own way, the way it should be, organic if you like, and you try to discover what qualities should be emphasized and what qualities should be de-emphasized. (Chappell, 1991)

I had to discover myself from the inside out and I found a very distinctive person with a special gift of unconditional love and concern for all mankind. My love for peace and harmony manifested in the fourth grade when I played my first musical note on the flute and it continues to flourish in all its aesthetic beauty as a special work of art.

My sense of place is defined by my desire to be there for those in need, to have a kind and gentle word for the downtrodden, and be a contributing factor in promoting equality and justice for all. The most powerful concept that operates in my world today is my love for all mankind and my desire to be my brother's keeper, so that one day, when I meet my heavenly father, he can say well done, my good and faithful servant, and I will be able to come face to face with my mother again. These are the driving forces behind all I do, who I am, and all I hope to be.

I am a black spiritual woman trying to understand her sense of self, and interviewing other black spiritual women it will be natural for me to identify with these women and try to make sense of my own spirituality through their experiences. I hold my interviewees with utmost respect and admiration and maintaining a distance between self and subject was not easy. There was an enormous respect and awe that I had for each woman I interviewed. Peshkin (1988) argues that it is through an understanding of one's subjectivity that one can monitor and stay attuned to the places when self and subject intertwine. It is my hope that by naming my subjectivity, I am more conscious of an

intertwining between self and subject. “If researchers are informed about the qualities that have emerged during their research, they can at least disclose to their readers where self and subject became joined” (Peshkin, 1988, p. 299). As a researcher, recognizing the place in research where self and subject become joined is crucial to the representation and interpretation of the study. Understanding my subjectivity is critical to my ability to listen to stories and not my perception of the stories. I begin the research understanding my sense of place in the interpretive community of my narrators.

I find it is critical to have an understanding of self so I will not produce a project that is an autobiographical presentation.

In the next section, I explain the research protocol that I use in the project, paying special attention to the metaphor of ‘story’ and the elements of narrative research.

Research Protocol

I began the research process by collecting the names of spiritual women from friends and co-workers. I made initial phone calls to the women that I could find a number for in the phone book. I explained what I was doing and that I would be sending a letter for them to read and respond back with a date and time when we could meet. For the women for whom I had no phone number, I secured their church address and mailed letters to the church. For the most part, these are the women who did not respond to my letter. My feelings of uneasiness, excitement, and awe escalated as I made preparation to meet with these awesome women to hear their life stories.

“The story metaphor emphasizes that we create order, construct texts in particular contexts” (Riessman, 1993, p. 1). I collected life stories from selected black spiritual

women from varying backgrounds. I taped these life stories in a non-threatening environment and transcribed the tapes verbatim. My interview question was framed using a very wide frame for the initial question, which was *Tell me the story of your life*. “Story telling, to put the argument simply, is what we do with our research materials and what informants do with us. The story metaphor emphasizes that we create order, construct texts in particular contexts” (Riessman, 1993, p. 1). Each of the life stories are highly constructed texts in which there are contexts. Knowing that people think and speak in patterned ways and there are multiple and competing interpretations and perceptions that are all driven by language, makes me more sensitive to my subjectivity because language is social and it carries different values for different people.

“Human Agency and imagination determine what gets included and excluded in narrativization” (Riessman, 1993, p. 2). Being able to recognize my human agency in my analysis helped me interpret each woman’s story. Each story is “highly constructed text structured around a cultural framework of meaning and shaped by particular patterns of inclusion, omission and disparity” (Casey, 1995-1996, p. 234). I had to interpret the stories with an awareness of silences, slippages, and selectivity. “The principal value of narrative is that its information comes complete with evaluations, explanations, and theories and with selectivities, silences, and slippage that are intrinsic to its representations of reality” (Popular Memory Group, cited in Casey, 1995-1996, p. 234).

Elements of Narrative Research

I found my narrators to use *selectivity* when telling their stories. There were times during the interview that I really wanted my narrators to divulge more information about

particular topics around which I felt they skirted. One woman was speaking about getting into serious trouble overseas and I was sitting on the edge of my chair waiting for details, but her focus, like the other women, was not to focus on the negative but on the power of God in changing their lives.

I started getting in trouble. Have you ever heard the term *persona non grata*? It's a Latin term, and it means 'person not welcome.' And that's what the Spanish government declared me, that I was not welcome in the country of Spain. I mean, I got in so much legal trouble that, um, I was facing a bad conduct discharge from the military, and then I was facing 20 years in a Spanish prison. I had never been in so much trouble. Never in my life! But God was with me then. He brought me out of there.

I realize that by using narratives for my research my narrators could choose what they felt was most important to tell and I knew that they would ultimately be silent about some things. As the researcher, I was conscious of these silences.

I put my stories in chronological order so I could analyze them for *silences* and *slippages*. I was looking for pieces of the stories that the women did not address. I understood that there might be some memories that were so painful that the narrators would not want to share them with me.

One narrator chooses to divulge details of her experiences up North when she becomes emerged in a social culture of smokers and drinkers.

I was just a country girl and uh after we got married we went [up North] and that's when . . . It was a real difficult marriage, because we loved each other but he was jealous and just a whole lot of stuff. I never got really socialized with drinking and smoking and things that . . . and people not going to church. So I was like a country girl and in a world that I did not know and I began to get emerged in the culture, the social culture and I had some experiences.

I was pleasantly surprised when my narrators let down their walls and shared some very private and painful memories. I had some women tell me that they were thankful for the opportunity to share their stories because it gave them an opportunity to think about things they thought were buried. I know that my narrators shared some private moments, but in my analysis, I also discover that a few of the narrators were more guarded than others.

I analyzed the stories for *slippages*, when the pieces do not match internal or between the stories. I put the life stories in chronological order by age and analyzed them by looking for missing periods of time. In my analysis of two of the narrators' stories, I find periods of their life that were not given sufficient emphasis by the narrators. I know that there are some memories that are too painful to share.

I used *intertextuality* to compare the texts to find common patterns and themes between the life stories of my narrators. I looked for things that were alike so I could see how they are different. The women in my research all belong to an interpretive community as black spiritual women and Casey states, "In the process of articulating a common political discourse, individual isolation is overcome, and identity is created in community" (1995-1996, p. 222). I found all my women to speak of an identity that was grounded in a black prophetic religious tradition passed to them by a loving mother or grandmother. I used the vocabulary, metaphors, concepts and patterns across texts to analyze the life stories. I discovered powerful metaphors that my women use throughout their life stories. I found metaphors of a community mother, outreach ministry, and prophetic tradition to surface repeatedly throughout the narratives. My narrators'

vocabulary included such words as wilderness, pre-destiny, faith, trust, relationships, and wonderful teachers.

I found the themes of a *nurturing community*, a *calling*, *empty self*, *doubt*, and *social activism* to emerge across texts. I used these themes to aid in my presentation of the life stories of my narrators.

In this chapter I presented myself as the researcher and elements of narrative research. The next chapter is an introduction to the spiritual women in my research. The first section of Chapter IV presents all of the narrators and the next second and third section present a detailed analysis of two women.

CHAPTER IV

ANALYSIS OF NARRATIVES

His Unfolding Plan

In this chapter, I introduce the black spiritual women of my research. In the first section I present themes and patterns that emerge from all the women's narratives. In the second and third sections, I present a detailed analysis of the life stories of Robin and Annie. I make connections between these women's life stories and theorizing of the scholars I used in Chapter II.

I have given my narrators fictitious names and categorized them by the characteristics of their stories. One woman who is struggling for social justice and I estimate her age to be in the fifties, I call her Annie and give her the classification of *social activism minister*. Annie is the co-founder and one of the assistant ministers in a community non-denominational church with a racially diverse membership. Annie grew up during segregation with a supportive and loving family who was very active in the Civil Rights Movement. She becomes an activist at an early age as a young leader in high school and continues through adulthood to struggle for social justice.

Robin is a young woman in her forties and I characterize her life story as one of *redemption minister*. She experiences many traumas in early childhood from the death of her mother and grandmother to the sadness and bitterness she feels with her next of kin, her aunt. Robin literally finds herself on the streets, hooked on drugs, and having to sell her body to survive. She sinks to the bottom of the Hole where she has to rely on the

grace and mercy of God to redeem her. Robin is a traveling evangelist, preaching of her rise from the 'brink of death' to the downtrodden.

One woman I call Cherie. I analyze the events in her story and estimate her age to be somewhere in her late forties. I call Cherie *professional minister* because her emphasis is on her career as a professor and author. Cherie is a college professor teaching in a School of Theology at a northern university, and she pastors a church. Cherie speaks to her calling as something that "just felt right" at an early age and all she had to do was just live accordingly.

The next woman in my research I give the name of Lilly and the characterization of *pre-destiny minister*. Lilly is a middle-aged woman who says she spent a part of her life running from God. She tries changing jobs and changing her appearance, but she says her fate was predestined. Lilly is answering God's call and has completed seminary. She conducts an outreach ministry for women at her church. She says she does not have her own church, but she believes "if that is what God has for her, it will come to pass."

I give the name of Lynn to the last woman in my research, and estimate her age to be somewhere in her fifties. Lynn has many experiences during her struggle to answer God's calling, and I characterize her story as one of *religious wilderness minister*. I use the term religious wilderness as "a symbolic term to represent a near-destruction situation in which God gives personal direction to the believer and thereby helps her make a way out of what she thought was no way" (Williams, 1993, p. 108).

Lynn speaks of many occasions when she would visit the woods because it was the one place she could find solace and answers. Lynn is the co-pastor of a Baptist church

in North Carolina, and she has an outreach ministry for “street people.” Lynn says, “I minister to people who no one else wants to be associated with.” I find Lynn’s and Robin’s story to reflect the Biblical story of Hagar and her experiences in the wilderness.

I believe God speaks to my narrators as he spoke to Hagar. “Most of Hagar’s situation is congruent with many African-American women’s predicament of poverty, sexual and economic exploitation, surrogacy, domestic violence, homeless, rape . . . **and meetings with God [emphasis added]**” (Williams, 1993, p. 5). I find my narrators speak of numerous occasions when God speaks to them. Annie speaks of a stirring in her spirit as God begins to call her to ministry while Robin has a connection with the Spirit during her last visit to jail. As the experiences of my women change, so do their language, faith, and trust. The closer my narrators get to the Spirit of God, the stronger their language becomes and such phrases as “I have to be obedient” and “He worked it out” are more pronounced.

In the process of my research project, I began to hear recurrent allusions to my women’s religious upbringing(s). The narrators speak freely about their spirituality and of a mother and/or grandmother who taught them as young children, “to nourish the spirit within, invoke it, receive it, and yield to its power” (Casey, 1993. p. 29). Each of the women talk very candidly about how God speaks to them through readings, scriptures, music, and other signs. Lilly says she asked God to confirm His call to her and she was riding in her car and “turned onto a radio station I never listen to and what was the man preaching about, women preachers.” She says, “Never in my life had I heard a sermon

about women preachers.” Lilly said, “God was sending her a message through the radio, but I was still resisting because it was such a different walk of life.”

Annie, Cherie, Lynn, and Lilly are taught about God at a young age by strong black women. Robin has a positive relationship with a spiritual grandmother for five years. The spiritual training her grandmother provides before her death continues to reside in Robin. I ascertain from the collective stories of my narrators a spiritual identity, which is grounded in a praying family, and reinforced by supportive and loving teachers. I find some contradictions in the nurturing my narrators received in school. Annie and Lynn were schooled in a segregated system, and have wonderful memories of loving and supportive black teachers. Robin, Lilly, and Cherie, who were educated in an integrated system, failed to mention teachers in their narratives.

I recognize the divergence of the paths my women travel, but they end up on a common ground, which advocates freedom, justice, and transcendence. I find their advocacy for social justice to be ingrained through an oral language entrenched in a prophetic religious tradition, and passed to them through the stories of their mothers and grandmothers. Annie is a social activist, fighting for social justice in a community in which “black bonds of affection, black networks of support, black ties of empathy . . . provide the grounds for the fragile existential weaponry with which to combat black invisibility and namelessness” (West, 1999, p. 108). Lynn is struggling to survive in a community consumed with sexual discrimination against women preachers, and Lilly is running from the voice of God. Cherie remains grounded and connected with her religious upbringings while Robin has to undergo a wilderness experience in which she

looks “life’s abyss in the face” (West, 1999, p. 103) and come close to the brink of despair. The paths my women travel in their journey are laden with pain and suffering but God makes a way for them and now they are reaching back to help the downtrodden.

I found several patterns and themes that appear repeatedly as I analyzed my narratives and I use the themes, *a nurturing community*, *a calling*, *the empty self*, *doubt*, and *social activism* in the next section to aid in my presentation of the life stories. I discover all of the narrators speak highly of a community of love and support as children and throughout their adulthood.

Nurturing Community

In spiritual solidarity, black women have the potential to be a community of faith that acts collectively to transform our world. When we heal the woundedness inside us, when we attend to the inner love seeking, love-starved child, we make ourselves ready to enter more fully into community. We can experience the totality of life because we have become fully life affirming. (Wade-Gayles, 1995, p. 346)

I find this quotation from Gloria Wade-Gayles recapitulates the community spirit that my narrators speak of in their life stories. The narrators speak of a nurturing community that provides the love and support to promote the fullness of their humanity. I find all of the women speak of the encouragement, sensitivity, and love they receive from their church and community. The women boastfully speak of a community that nurtures their intellect as a “practice of freedom.”

I recall bell hooks (1994) speaking about the joy of education being “the practice of freedom, for it allows students to assume responsibility for their choices” (p. 19).

hooks speaks about her black teachers and how they worked with African American students to help fulfill their intellectual destiny and uplift the race.

To fulfill that mission, my teachers made sure they ‘knew’ us. They knew our parents, our economic status, where we worshipped, what our homes were like, and how we were treated in the family. I went to school at a historical moment where I was being taught by the same teachers who had taught my mother, her sisters, and brothers. (hooks, 1994, p. 3)

I have committed to memory the wonderful black teachers I had in the segregated school system and find that bell hooks’ experience with her teachers resonates with my experience. I had teachers who had taught my mother, my father, and my aunts, and never missed an opportunity to let me know that they knew my family. I was fortunate to see these same teachers in my church, although at the time, I did not think it was so great. It was as if I could not get away from them. If I had not been an ideal student during the week, I would spend the whole morning in church wondering if they were going to tell my mother. At the time, I just did not know how good I had it, but my experiences in an integrated system brought home the benefits of having community teachers who had a pedagogy of caring; who nurtured the whole child, and took a special interest in African American children that extended beyond the institution of the school.

African American students have a family legacy and culture that molded and influenced their ways of being. Lynn says it was her grandmother who was a real inspiration in her life. “I remember going to the traditional church, but I remember her teachings and to this day she is a real inspiration in all our lives in terms of our upbringings and spirituality.”

I grew up with a single parent mom and we were blessed, but economically wise, I guess people would say that we were very poor. We lived with our grandmother for, during the early part of my childhood as far as I can remember and uh, my grandmother was a real inspiration in my life. She was what I call the prophetess of her day. When we grew up, in the early part of our childhood life, I remember going to the traditional church, but I remember her teachings to this day.

Lynn says her mother was a single parent but she was a “beautiful, strong, and courageous black woman” and she learned a lot from her.

I will never forget the times when I would stand in the road and watch her out of sight walking ten or fifteen miles one way to work in a white woman’s kitchen to feed us and then to bring us back home scrapings from their table and hand me down clothes. My mother basically had some drinking problems and they just . . . and I was able to see her change and uh start to church and really live for the Lord. And so, we started going to church and we would follow our grandmother to revivals through the woods and uh those were very impressionable times. You know, they are the spiritual steps that guided and impacted my life.

I find many similarities between Lynn and Robin’s childhoods. They both had mothers who had “drinking problems” and praying grandmothers who provided the “spiritual steps” for their religious upbringings. Lynn’s grandmother was known as a prophetess, and she had members of her church that were like godparents to her. “They really took up the time with the youth at the church because a lot of us didn’t know anything about sex or anything. I probably would have ended up pregnant.” Lynn feels that the church was her life as a teenager.

Robin also had a grandmother who kept her in church as a child, and she attributes her relationships with the Spirit to her grandmother “because she planted the seed. She introduced me to the true and living God. She made me know that God was real.”

I remember, early, being around . . . being in a place where there was a lot of um, there was a lot of activity, there was a lot of emotion, um, there was a lot of, um there wasn't anything formalized about it. But it was real. I always remember that these people, they were real. Their relationship with God was real, and um, that was just the way I grew up.

Robin refers to a nurturing community as those who bring food to the family in mourning when a family member dies. Robin benefits from an outreach ministry in her adult life as she finds herself hungry and down and out with nowhere to go. Robin says, "He sent real Christians. He sent people that would just love me in spite of myself." It was the unselfish love of these Christians that makes a positive influence on Robin and helps her turn her life around.

I was defenseless, you know, I didn't have, I didn't have any of what it takes to, to kill somebody. I carried weapons, now I carried a knife with me out all times, but I didn't have what it took to use it. You know, I thought, um, this is harmless, he's just going to rape you and you'll be okay. But I didn't understand, you know, why somebody would turn around and afterwards would stab me, and um, so I just started really going down in the streets. And I did get to a place, um, where I didn't have anywhere else to stay.

Robin did not have much to say about a nurturing community as a child, but Lilly speaks highly of a community in which she uses the metaphor "a hedge of protection." Lilly says she was "protected from evil because her parents and neighbors could see the enemy before they were able to get to her."

We live in a house that had a fence around the back yard and mother would always say, 'stay inside the fence' and which also meant something very special. It's a good thing and not such a good thing depending on what you were doing. But, it also meant that for anything or anyone to come inside the fence they had to pass the watchful eye. And as I have grown in my walk I have come to realize that is the way God is. He says, "stay inside my hedge of protection and but if

anything comes in, I have seen it already. So don't worry, I have already filtered it.

Lilly sees her community as part of God's unfolding plan. She speaks of a community with a vested interest in her welfare as a child and because of this community investment; she felt "a sense of protection as a child."

There was more of a sense of community cause we would walk to school, which was about two blocks from home. And in the sense of community that also meant that everybody on the street if you cut up in the streets, everybody who saw you from point A to point B had permission, just an unspoken permission to come to correct you.

Personally speaking, I remember as a child, thinking my community talked too much and should mind their business. It was as if my mother had eyes all up and down the streets of my neighborhood. I grew up with a lot of boys and found myself acting just like one of them. I could climb a tree and ride a bike as well as any boy in my community and some of the elders in the community, frowned upon this. If I was up in a tree with the boys, the elders would chastise me and before I could get home, my mother would know about it, and I would be chastised again. I see this as being similar to the "unspoken permission to correct you" that Lilly speaks about.

And then take you home so your mother could further correct you. And then they called that love. But, I said it felt a little bit different. So there is more of a sense of I belong, I live in this community and everyone who sees me has an investment in who I am to become.

Cherie says her parents' investment of a private education "enabled me to get an orientation to the kind of academic life that I would eventually become accustomed to."

Unlike my other women, Cherie speaks very little about a nurturing community as a child. She does speak of the academic encouragement she receives in seminary.

Once I got into seminary, I had a least one person encouraging me, 'well you know you should go on and do doctoral studies because you have the ability to do that.' And I said, 'Well, I'll think about it.' It wasn't until my senior year that I even began to think about doing that and I applied and I got accepted and I just go on from there.

There were people in Annie's community who had no children of their own, yet their "historical role as agents of social transformation" (Gilkes, 1998, p. 54) was highlighted during the Civil Rights Movement and continued throughout their life. Annie's sense of community was very strong because she grew up in an extended family that was very helpful on her family's farm.

I grew up in an extended family around lots of cousins and aunts and uncles and nephews and living on the farm we did lots of things together, like work and gathering the harvest and it was also a wonderful community spirit because families came together within the community and helped one another at the time when it was harvest time and hog killing time and whenever anyone died or was in trouble, the community was there.

Annie says, "So I just feel like I grew up in a village where people cared about me who kept their eyes on me and their hands on me when it was necessary and helped to shape and mold my life." As I reflect on this quotation by Annie, I am able to see some similarities in Annie and Lilly's community. The unspoken right to reach out and chastise other people's children in the community is prevalent in Annie and Lilly's community. The old African proverb, "It takes a village to raise a child" is referenced in this remark by Annie.

Annie understands that the nurturing community she experiences as a child is not as common for today's children, and she "wanted to restore a spirit of community, within that community where these children come from." Annie establishes a community of support for teachers who are experiencing heavy burdens and need someone to talk to. She says, "God's spirit and power has guided, led, and allowed her to share that spirituality with other teachers who come to my room early in the morning to pray and late in the afternoon and during the day when the burdens of life were so heavy they couldn't endure." Annie and the teachers would "steal away to the bathroom and pray and try to find some peace."

I believe the devil is busy and although my narrators have a strong spiritual calling, doubt shows its ugly head. From my private experiences, I have discovered that the moment you decide to give your life to God and live right, the devil becomes busy. It seems that everything goes wrong and your trials and tribulations become overwhelming, but I am learning as long as you keep your faith and trust in God's hand, He will see you through. I find my women narrators speak of having an unrelenting faith and trust in God, but question His calling.

The Calling

Lilly speaks of her calling as something that was predestined from birth. She says that "even her adoption, as a small child was part of God's plan for her."

Both my brother and I were adopted and as a child I was taught that it was a very special thing to be chosen so I have always grown up knowing I was adopted and feeling very comfortable about that. I grew up in a family, my mother was the middle of five children and her gift was church music. She was the church

musician for fifty-two years. So needless to say, every time the church doors opened, I was there.

As a young child, I too was in church every Sunday and it is where my sense of love and caring for others flourished. “The majority of our great grandmothers knew, even without ‘knowing’ it, the reality of their spirituality, even if they didn’t recognize it beyond what happened in the singing at church” (Walker, 1983, pp. 237-238), they knew the importance of the institution of church. Regrettably, I see today’s children being allowed to sleep in on Sunday mornings. The black prophetic religious tradition is given a second seat to the ills and wills of a culture absorbed in materialist. Mothers are now sleeping in, and allowing their children to do the same, but Lilly’s mother understood the importance of a spiritual foundation.

When we were small mother always took us to church in a bassinette or a carrier or something near the organ or near the piano. So there is a sense of which, I didn’t know it at the time but I guess it was part of God’s plan knowing he always has things already predestined and it is up to us to figure out where He is and to walk in what He has planned for us.

Lilly goes on to speak about how she thought she wanted to work in research but “in the midst of that some things you do you are trained to do and some things you are called to do.” She says it took her a while to recognize the difference but there was definitely a difference and God had to show her the way.

When I talk with Cherie, she speaks of her calling in a somewhat different manner than the other women. She says, “She has sensed from an early age that God wanted her

involved in ministry.” She was not sure of the extent but she did not wrestle or run from her destiny.

I was not a person who you know, who wrestled or ran away from it or anything. I didn't have that experience because I was very clear from the beginning. I was young; I mean it wasn't like I had to do all these other things. The most important thing I had to do was to hear the voice of God and try to live that out.

Cherie speaks of her calling as just something she knew she was supposed to be doing but sometimes she did not understand what to do. Her story on calling stresses her academic and professional growth.

I was in College when I had a call to ministry although I did not really have any direction to further my theological education. I was in a religion major and didn't go to seminary at that time. So, I spent a brief period of time in a graduate program in Mathematics. I was very sure that I wasn't to go to seminary right away. You know, some people, you are called to minister, you go to seminary.

Unlike all of my other narrators, Cherie was very clear of her calling from the beginning, as if she had an extra sense. Gloria Hull talks about this extrasensory ability. She notes that “some people are born and, as they grow, they learn that they are spiritual. They know they are. No one's told them, no one's put a hand on them” (Hull, 2001, p. 152). Cherie has this “extrasensory ability” and she spends her life listening to the “voice of God” and trying to live her life accordingly.

Cherie speaks about the opportunities she has to travel and preach the ministry.

I spend my time doing ministry and teaching and writing and mothering and being a wife and trying to keep my head above water. That's what my life is like and I travel quite a bit and I have an opportunity to go all over the United States and

occasionally over seas to lecture and to preach and to minister to people. So, all of that I suppose is a fulfillment of my calling and I'm on my journey.

Cherie may have sensed her calling at an early age, but Annie's came a little later in life; yet, she knew that God was using her and felt a strong call on her life. "God is my source, I believe him, I trust him. He's going to make the way. He has called me to do this work and he's going to make the way."

Everything God has led me to do; he's led me by his Spirit. And, uh I am now at a point where I am trying to discern; I feel a prompting in my spirit to do something else. I don't know what that is but I know in time God will reveal that to me. And so I try not to live my spiritual life separate and apart from the rest of my life but that I want to have a holistic view of my life and my being. I want to live and move and have my being in him because I know without that I am not going to succeed in whatever I do.

Annie leaves her job after many years as an educator because she feels a strong call on her life, and she resigns without any idea of what she is going to do. She says, "she just had to trust God."

Lynn shares how her husband felt about her call to minister. "My call to minister made him choose between his mom and his dad and whether he was going to be with them or with his wife." During this time, women were not recognized as ministers in the Baptist Church and her husband's family had a hard time supporting her in this vocation.

African American churches typically get their doctrines from white Baptist and other denominations. These doctrines come with racial, sexual, and class oppressions and Delores Williams speaks of African American women and the depression they receive from some denominational churches.

Too long have black women in the churches taken a back seat and not pushed ahead for female leadership to be visible in the major and financially benefiting roles in the churches. Many black women in the African-American denominational churches have been duped to believe that first black people must expend all of their effort getting rid of racial oppression.

They have been told that later the community can work on the oppression of women. Black women like Sojourner Truth have warned black women that 'if the men get their rights and women don't, things will be no better for black women than they were during slavery.' Said another way: sexism affords as much bondage as racism. (Williams, 1993, p. 219)

The oppression of sexism consumes Lynn's struggle to become a minister, and some points they see to be insurmountable. But Lynn is obedient and steps out on faith without her in-laws' support. "And so that happens though, as I look at the call to ministry, God will leave something in place. It may not be the church, it may not be the community, in my case it was not the church or the community, but God left my family intact."

I was embarking on a very difficult road, and it began a path of really suffering. There was a fight going on in the [regional religious] association. See the Baptist Church is like, you know, they have a state convention and they have associations. Some of the associations believe in women and some of them didn't. I mean there was a fight going on in the [regional religious] association, in that area, about women. God called me into that setting.

I find God to be a loving and forgiving God, and Gloria Wade-Gayles (1995) says, "Staying in touch with the wisdom within us doesn't mean that we won't suffer or struggle. As long as we live, there will be challenges in our lives. We are forever growing through something. That's life" (p. 336), and I feel if Lynn's church was not left intact, I believe God knows best. Although it might be beyond my realm of understanding, I have

faith in an omnipresent God to do what is best in all situations and He provides Lynn with a supportive family.

I had a good husband; he came around and went against his father in all of this. He went against his whole family. He grew up. My call to minister made him choose between his mom and his dad and whether he was going to be with them or with his wife. And so that happens though, as I look at the call to ministry, God will leave something in place.

Robin spends many years struggling and running from God and in the process she loses her self-esteem, her dignity, and her children. I hear her speak of many occasions when she almost loses her life but as Lynn says, “God will leave something in place.” For Robin, He left the teachings of her grandmother, which she experiences at an early age, but runs from them until she could run no more. Robin says it was in 1999 when “the Lord called me into the ministry.” I would argue and say, “God had been calling her all her life but she was too busy running away.”

I find the sense of a calling to be a strong and awesome connection with the spirit of God. Yet, my narrators speak of a sense of loneliness, emptiness, and low self-esteem in spite of being brought up in a nurturing community. As the narrators search for a spiritual self and a spiritual identity, a feeling of emptiness haunts them.

The Empty Self

Taking time to experience ourselves in solitude is one way that we can regain a sense of the divine that can feel the spirit moving in our lives. Solitude is essential to the spiritual for it is there that we can not only commune with divine spirits but also listen to our inner voice. One way to transform the lonely feeling that overwhelms some of us is to enter that lonely place and find there a stillness that enables us to hear the soul speak. (Wade-Gayles, 1995, p. 343)

I hear all of the narrators speak about a sense of loneliness, emptiness, and low self-esteem at one time or another in their life with the exception of Cherie. Cherie does express a concern in the lack of spiritual nurturing students receives in college. She says, "I have always been interested in seeing how you connect, how a university or college can nurture the spiritual life of a student." I find Cherie's interest in spiritual nurturing for college students to hint at some emptiness she may have felt when she was in college.

In her search for a spiritual self, Lynn and her husband leave their home and move up North. But she says, "I never felt at place, I was out of place in [the North] because it was very engaging, a social life that was causing a lot of drinking problems." Lynn begins to get "emerged in the social culture" but the God she knew as a child remains in her and she could not find satisfaction for her feelings of emptiness in a bottle.

Inwardly, I stayed connected, even when I stopped going to church up there. I felt this loneliness, this void ness, nothing could, no experience could satisfy. So I finally I was compelled by God to come back to [the South], never knowing that this was the beginning of a call to ministry.

Lynn speaks of coming back South and going to seminary and how she felt she was pleasing God, but she began to die inside. "That voidness started coming back again. I began to die in the classroom. I had this longing to start this church." Nothing she did or no experience she had could satisfy her. Lynn would often go sit in the woods where she could feel the power of being with God's creation. It was here that she could feel God's spirit. As I hear Lynn speaking about her religious wilderness experience, I find myself making a mental comparison between her story and the Biblical story of Hagar. God gave Hagar answers in the wilderness.

In the vertical encounter between black women and God in the wilderness experience, transformation of consciousness and epistemological process come together in the new great faith-consciousness this meeting bestows upon black women. This faith-consciousness guides black women's way of being and acting in the wide, wide world. (Williams, 1993, p. 159)

Lynn says:

I was always real fascinated by going into the woods and feeling this power of being with God' creation. I didn't understand it fully, but I could feel the spirit as I would go sit in the woods most times, a lot of times when I wanted just to get away because it was so many of us.

Lynn seeks solace and answers to the emptiness she feels in the wilderness, but another woman, Lilly, does not visit the woods in a literal sense, but she goes through many changes to try and fill the emptiness that she feels and this is what she shares:

There is a difference between having a job and doing the work. I have learned that and I was just doing the job. I'm glad I have the skills and training to do that but I was restless. So, I went from dark brown hair to very bright orange hair. First time I looked in the mirror I was like, who is that. But there was a sense of restlessness.

Personally, I have experienced a spiritual restlessness that leaves me feeling the need for a closer relationship with God. I credit my educational pursuits as part of this restlessness because I have an insatiable desire to learn more in hopes that I will find myself in the process. I believe when God calls you to do his work, and you do not understand or accept the calling, the feeling of emptiness and restlessness will become your companion. Lilly thought if she ran enough it would go away, but she soon finds out this was not the case.

I figured it would go away. Lose a little weight, change jobs, and move away. Change the hair color of your hair, none of that satisfied me. In different kinds of relationships, no that's not going to work either. So, it took me a while, took me a long time. I'm one of those slow learners; to finally get restless enough to figure out ok maybe you are not doing this right. You are not sending out the proper invitations . . . I knew that there was something that was not really there.

Lilly realizes that God is missing from her life. She feels she has been running ahead of God. "He was going one way and she was all over the place." Lilly expresses a desire to be able to stand still and listen to and trust the voice of God.

I can surely stand in what I call, ankle deep water and say, "Oh, dear God is good," but once it starts coming up to here, that's when we really don't have much of a trust in Him. And how much He can trust us not to just run away and try to do our own thing. So part of my life story is this growing relationship and love for God.

I believe that until Lilly learns to stand still, stop running ahead of God, and put her trust in Him, she will continue to feel this emptiness and restlessness that causes her to change appearances and jobs. Robin, like Lilly, spends most of her life running ahead of God.

Robin had been raised with a grandmother, who had a personal relationship with God, but she says "she was not ready for a relationship with God; she just wasn't ready to be saved. I wasn't ready to give up this other life, so I went through a lot."

I had this little get over mentality and I didn't . . . I wasn't ready to do what was right. There were times when I prayed, especially when I was in trouble. I prayed. But a lot of times, I didn't have, I wouldn't say I didn't have time for God. I didn't, I just wasn't ready to be saved.

Robin says, "There was something missing" from her life and she starts to look for ways to escape.

I started looking for an escape, you know. Son anyway, I was drinking, smoking, um cigarettes. I started messing with marijuana, and um, whatever I did, I just . . . you know, I just maxed out. I got hooked instantly, and I got out of control quickly.

I have met many people like Robin who know right from wrong, but become so wrapped up in the body or the flesh that they doubt the strength of their "spiritual self" and feel that God has no use for a sinner like them.

I asked the Lord to give me one more chance. I told Him, Lord, how sorry I was for the way that I had lived. And how I had destroyed my life, and how reckless I had been. I told Him that I was sorry I had sinned against Him and I had done all this evil. I had just . . . destroyed what He had given me, this gift of life, and I just made a mess of everything. And I just asked Him, for just one more chance.

Robin does believe that God has any use for a sinner like her, but He hears her prayers and He answers them.

For the most part, I find my women narrators speak favorably of their lives as young children, growing up in a community of love and respect for each other. But it was not enough to deter the feeling of loneliness and low self-esteem. Both Annie and Robin experience some feelings of low self-esteem during childhood.

Annie and Robin speak about feeling different from their friends. Gloria Hull discusses in her book, *The New Spirituality of African American Women*, how other women also feel this sense of being different. "Looking back over their childhoods, black woman after black woman who grew up to be fine and feisty told tales of how they had

been quiet, different, and odd; loners who were 'left' and isolated" (Hull, 2001, p. 152). I believe God has a master plan for all of us and sometimes it is hard for us to understand what we are experiencing, and I learned as a child it is not our place to question Him.

I recall Cheryl Sanders' *Ministry at the Margins* (1997) speaking to a lack of self-esteem and how "The Golden rule offers us a way out of the trap of low self-esteem by encouraging us to begin by thinking of who God is and how God responds to our needs, answers our prayers and treats us better than even the most loving mother or father" (p. 38). The Golden Rule to which Sanders refers comes from the Book of Matthew 7:12 "In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets" (cited in Sanders, 1997, p. 35). Sanders (1997) argues, if we follow the Golden Rule "it will guide us toward a grateful response to the goodness of God. When we ask, God answers. When we seek, God reveals. When we knock, God opens" (p. 36). I find Robin did not heed the Golden Rule. She did not remember that she is created in the image of God and that image is good.

I didn't grow up with the latest styles, I didn't fit in the 'in' crowd, back in school, you know, I was just this little . . . the only thing I did have going for me was people liked me, because I could sing. But I couldn't sing for 8 hours a day! So, otherwise I was just this little skinny, skinny girl with big pop-eyes and, you know, there was nothing attractive about me, I didn't feel attractive about myself, and, um, I was just, you know, this awkward kid! I was tall and lanky and I was just this awkward kid.

I believe Robin carries this feeling of not belonging, or not being accepted, of feeling empty, through out most of her life and because of this, she makes choices to find

happiness and acceptance that are not in her best judgment. Robin strays from the Golden Rule and the prophetic religious tradition that governed her grandmother's life.

Annie never forsakes her religious training, but nevertheless, she still experiences some feelings of difference. Annie feels that she has been different from other kids all her life.

So, I knew there was something different about me but I wasn't sure what it was. And many times it made me feel sad and lonely because I wanted to be like all the other kids. I wanted to be like all the other girls who seemed to be so into boys and hairdos and clothes and you know, going to the parties and stuff, but I never really liked doing that.

Annie does not let her feelings of indifference lead her down a path of destruction. She obeys the Golden Rule and looks to God for answers to her questions. I find my narrators to have a steadfast faith and trust in God, but question and doubt His calling.

Doubt

When we take time to listen inwardly and take our difficulties to the altar within the Holy Spirit always reveals the lesson we must learn and how we can use the challenge at hand as an opportunity to grow and develop a more trusting relationship with God. (Wade-Gayles, 1995, pp. 336-337)

I am learning how to listen to the word of God so that I can live a life that is pleasing in His eyes. I realize I may not understand everything in my journey, but I am depending on my faith to sustain any doubt that might infiltrate my desire to dedicate my life to God. All of my narrators tell me they believe and trust in God, but there are times

in their lives when the ugly eye of doubt surfaces. Michael Lerner (2000) in *Spirit*

***Matters* speaks to the damage of negative criticism by people who profess to be spiritual:**

One of the most powerful ways to undermine our faith in the possibility of healing and transformation is to be part of a community that claims to be spiritually centered but is filled with people who frequently criticize each other in hurtful ways or who share negative stories about each other. (pp. 293-294)

Lynn runs face-to-face with this type of negativity when she confesses her call to ministry. Living in a small Baptist Community, Lynn suffers much criticism and verbal abuse. At one point her siblings did resort to physical abuse so she could have access to her home church for her initial sermon. This caused a great deal of doubt for Lynn but she continues to trust in God.

When a person is called into ministry, they go back to their home church to do their initial sermon. I knew it was about to the point that my sister hit somebody in a church conference meeting and my brother was standing outside with a gun. It was a deacon's house and uh, that's just how it was.

The pastor in Lynn's home church did not want her to preach her initial sermon in the pulpit because the church did not endorse women preachers. Lynn said, the "[regional religious] association felt that women had places in the church, but the pulpit was not one of them." Lynn's family had to resort to violence for Lynn to gain access to the church, but she persisted and says, "God made my enemies my footstool."

It was so intense going up to [name of church] to get my ordination that I had two body guards. The usher wouldn't let me in the door. They were about six feet and they ushered me in after getting by the usher. When the moderator preaches for your ordination, you are faced towards the pulpit. And we heard all this noise up in the balcony, my enemy was up there shouting and praising God. You know, so

I mean God made my enemies my footstool. They had a conversion experience because of seeing the glory and the power of God manifest.

Lynn experiences the turmoil she feels as a victim of a sexist ideology that does not believe in letting a woman in the pulpit. Delores Williams in *Sisters in the Wilderness* (1993) says, “Black women, themselves, must realize that black men may disagree with and fight white men over racism, but far too many black men and white men (preachers included) are thoroughly bonded in their affirmation of the subordination of women” (p. 214). After a year of fighting the system, Lynn was going to preach her initial sermon in her home church. Lynn names her doubt when she walks into the home of an old revered man who is well respected in the community and he said, “Here come that preacher. And it was so astonishing to me because I halfway knew that I was in denial and couldn’t figure out how he knew that. So I just dropped down on the couch and that really troubled me.”

Lilly faces her doubt when she gets tired of feeling empty and asks the Lord what He wants her to do.

Lord, ‘what is it that you would have me to do?’ I never thought about asking that before, so I know that He was saying, ‘it is time for us to talk about it.’ And when I did He said, ‘preach the word.’ And I said, ‘OK’ and I looked again and I said, ‘WHAT?’ He said, ‘preach the word’ and I am like, ‘oh no, are you serious,’ and He didn’t say anything, and I said, ‘ok God, if this is what you would have me to do then I need for you to confirm this for me.’

Lilly says she receives several confirmations from God, but keeps asking for more. She just cannot believe that God wants her to preach and she continues to look for more answers and make excuses to herself why she cannot preach. She says she has to use a

“dictionary to understand some of the terms in the Bible,” so how can she possibly preach? “I don’t know when it was I finally got a settled peace about it. Ok, this is what you need to do, so I made an appointment to talk with my minister.” With the support of her pastor, Lilly did her initial sermon in February of 1995.

Annie did not have near the turmoil that Lilly has but nevertheless, doubt does creep into her path and this is what she has to say:

I began to feel a real tug or stirring in my spirit toward ministry. And I did not really have any models in my life of women in ministry that I felt resonated with me. So I resisted that whole thing, I was like, no way Lord, there is no way you could want me to go into ministry. What will I do, you know I am not a preacher. I am not an evangelist. I don’t heal people. You know, what am I going to do?

Annie, Lilly, and Lynn express an uneasiness at not having any women ministers as role models but this does not keep them from answering God’s call and becoming spiritual agents for social justice.

Social Activism

What will determine our destiny is the degree to which we strive to bring forth the essence of spirit. At the spiritual level, a woman is the divine expression of love. She is co-creator with God, capable of bringing forth new life. A spiritual woman is a healer, teacher, and nurturer of life, because it I her ability to love that will soothe all who come into contact with her. (Wade-Gayles, 1995, p. 334)

Lynn’s social activism begins when she attends her husband’s church and begins to work with the youth of the church. Lynn says there were children “in spiritual poverty in the community,” and she pulls them from the street to the church. “I pulled them back, the whole youth department together. I took them to [amusement park] and it just upset

that whole little town that all this miraculous stuff was going on. And I was really pleasing God.”

Lynn was spending time with the youth of the church, taking them to amusement parks, and teaching them about the Bible. This was something that had not previously been done in her church and some people were surprised to see a woman doing such phenomenal work with the youth of the church, because women did not have leadership positions in the church at this time.

I find my narrators make tremendous strides in reaching out to the downtrodden and making a spiritual connection to their lives. Michael Lerner has this to say about spiritual connections: “It is easier to love humanity in the abstract than real live human beings in all their complexities. But only the latter brings about real spiritual connection to the Unity of All Being” (Lerner, 2000, p. 289), and all of my narrators are reaching out to the poor, the mean-spirited, and the downtrodden.

Lynn goes on to eventually build a ministry for the downtrodden. “Because of my work with the homeless population, everywhere I would stop I was known as pastor to the homeless. So I became known as pastor of the street with its following of people that nobody else wanted.” She has established a strong recovery ministry called. Lynn says her goal is to “create a ministry and witness and bring people to God through ministry.”

Most of [recovery ministry] are men that are out there and their lives are strong and they have found a sense of meaning. They’ve found a place where they can come and worship and be accepted. And uh, so I had to find a place for this flock. It was like being called to the one, not the ninety-nine. It was just like God was calling me to just the one. And I’ve never seen anything like it, I’ve seen them come in wheel chairs, and it is a high-populated recovery community.

Robin is an evangelist, a preacher without a church, traveling all over the globe to tell people about the goodness of God and how He “would take somebody like me and use me.” Robin says she “does not try to shelter myself from people who drink, or use drugs,” because she does not want to ever forget where “He brought me from.”

Cherie does a lot of outreach ministry at her church, to the homeless street people. She speaks to the attitude people should have when they are ministering to the poor.

Sometimes people come with this attitude. Uh, you know, well I have money, I have this and these poor little people we are going to help them. And it’s not the best attitude because when you are ministering to people you should have, should bring some sense of mutuality to ministry.

Cherie feels that everyone, regardless of their station in life, has something to offer and it must be recognized.

Whatever you have to offer, that other person has something [emphasis added] to offer. And if they don’t have anything, at least their humanity you recognize it, that they are not just the objects of your good intentions but they are people. So we have to try and help people understand that.

Cherie focuses her ministry on reaching the people at the margin, but Lilly’s social activism takes a different twist.

Lilly meets the first Saturday of each month with a ministry to women from all ages and stations in life to fellowship and prayer. “It is such a rich experience for me and I hope I am sharing something with them that they can use. It is just great to come together.”

I gain so much from each one of them because each one of them exalts the Lord in different ways and in different amounts of time and different places. In homes, or working outside the homes, different educational settings, or business settings. It is such a rich experience for me and I hope I am sharing something with them that they can use. It is just great to come together.

At an early age, Annie “learns to understand that social issues are close to God’s heart and that it is the people of God who should speak out against injustice and unrighteousness in any form.”

And so our church [childhood church] kind of took a leadership role in speaking out against segregation in the schools and the inability to be able to eat at certain restaurants and having to drink at the colored water fountains and so forth. So my entire family was very much involved with the demonstrations and the picketing and went to jail several times.

Even after Annie marries and moves to Massachusetts, she joins a “very old historical black church in Massachusetts that also was very involved in social issues.” She laughs about how she just could not seem to get away from this kind of atmosphere. Annie says that her current church “is truly rooted and grounded in outreach ministry to the poor, homeless, very much involved in the social issues, state, local, and national.”

The women narrators tell life stories that are full of caring and love for others and struggles as they follow God’s calling. This is not an easy process for some of the women, but a necessary one in order to fulfill God’s plan for them. I recall a spiritual hymn that says, “What God has for me it is for me,” and the paths my women travel is all part of His unfolding plan.

The Story of Two

In the next two sections of this chapter, I present a more detail analysis of the life stories of Robin and Annie. I choose Annie and Robin because their life stories are fascinatingly comparable, yet unmistakably divergent, yet they end up on a common ground with an outreach ministry to the poor and downtrodden that has been instilled in them through an oral language rooted in a prophetic religious tradition.

As I ponder Annie and Robin's ministry to the poor, I am led to the Holy Bible and the Book of Luke.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; He hat sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised. (*Holy Bible, King James Version, 1970, Luke 4:18*)

This scripture from the Book of Luke characterizes the outreach ministry of Robin and Annie. Both women are led by the Spirit of God to be social activists with a "humble servanthood and compassionate shepherding of God's flock" (Sanders, 1997, p. 60).

Robin and Annie are taught about God at a young age and have relationships with strong black women in their childhood. Annie's identity is grounded in a praying family, supportive and loving teachers, and Robin's religious grandmother influences her identity. I am overwhelmed by the contradictions in the nurturing these women receive in school. Annie spends her schooling in a segregated system, with the exception of her senior year, and has wonderful memories of loving and supportive teachers. Robin is educated in an integrated system, and never mentions her teachers throughout the entire interview.

Annie and Robin's paths to adulthood are divergent and complex. Robin's community is the opposite of Annie's community. Annie is fighting for social justice while being supported and loved in the community while Robin is struggling for her life in a community wrecked with inhumanity and degradation. Annie remains grounded and connected with her religious upbringings but Robin renews her religion after she looks "life's abyss in the face" (West, 1999, p. 103) and comes close to the brink of despair.

Section 2

I Lived Like a Dog: Robin's Story

In this section of the chapter, I present the life story of the woman I give the name Robin and the label *redemption minister*.

The life story of Robin is one that is rooted in despair. Like the story of Hagar, she has a wilderness experience that is all encompassing, but God sees her through. "The African-American community has taken Hagar's story unto itself. Hagar has 'spoken' to generation after generation of black women because her story has been validated as true by suffering black people" (Williams, 1993, p. 33).

Set on a path of destruction, God gives Robin "personal direction to the believer and thereby helps her make a way out of what she thought was no way" (Williams, 1993, p. 108). "Staying in touch with the wisdoms within us doesn't mean that we won't suffer or struggle" (Wade-Gayles, 1995, p. 336).

Robin's journey began when her "mother drank herself to death" at the age of 30, forcing a five-year-old Robin and three older sisters to leave their home in New York and travel South to live with their grandmother, their next of kin.

I Did Not Know Who God Was

I believe Robin is thankful to have a praying grandmother to bind the family together in the face of turmoil and grief. Robin and her sisters had been raised with a religion that she terms the “holiness and apostolic way.” It was her grandmother, who she lovingly calls “Big Mama” that was able to “provide meaningful answers to problematic questions” (hooks, 1994, p. 112) because she knew where to look for the answers. Big Mama believed that God was the source of her strength and He would provide the answers she needed.

We came here to live with my grandmother, and we called her “Big Mama.” And, uh, she was different. She was different from anything I had ever known in New York, and she was a sanctified woman. She was, um, you know, she was brought up in the old holiness, apostolic way, which meant the God that she knew was real. She had a real relationship with Him; she talked to Him. Often. And, you know, whenever she had a problem she went to Him.

Robin and her sisters did not “know God like that.” They were raised in a Catholic church “it was very ritualistic – we just didn’t know God like that. And so, Big Mama, she introduced us to her God.” Big Mama’s religion was grounded in a prophetic tradition with “harmonies of spiritual camaraderie” (West, 1999, p. 108), voicing the struggle for an existential and social identity. The black prophetic religious tradition “along with the rich musical tradition it spawned, generated a sense of movement, motion and momentum that keeps despair at bay”(West, 1999, p. 113). Big Mama could not sing but she had a tambourine that rang out and a prayer that rocked the walls.

So uh, I remember, after my mother’s funeral and everything, and after things kind of settled down, she knelt us down beside the bed to pray, and she prayed

and she prayed, and she prayed. And we had never experienced anybody praying like that. We just . . . we were used to the ‘Hail Marys’ and you know, and my grandmother prayed and prayed, and tears streamed down her face, and we started . . . we got tickled. We started laughing, and well, we were giggling at first, and then we started just laughing, and me, I just, I was just completely taken by all of this, so I just really rolled on the floor, I mean, I kicked my feet, I laughed and my grandmother kept right on praying. She never once stopped to deal with me.

But when she did stop praying, Robin was taught a lesson that would last her a lifetime. I am sure that the thrashing Robin received would be grounds for child abuse today. Personally, I can vividly recall some of the whippings I received as a wayward child, and know for a fact that my mother would have been locked up if the laws had been the way they are now. But, I am able to look back today and say, “Thank you God for a mother who had enough tough love to correct my errant actions as a child.”

But honey, when she got through she put something on me, she whipped me, because my sisters, they pointed to me. And, uh, she whipped me in such a way that, even then, I didn’t know who God was, but I knew he was somebody important, and I knew that when Big Mama was talking to Him, there would be no foolishness. So she never had to teach me that one again.

Robin never saw her grandmother do much of anything out of the house except go to church on Sunday, prayer meetings on Wednesday, and the grocery store, leading a very basic life. Her grandmother separated from “her husband for our sake, because he was just so mean.” Her health started declining after the separation. Even when her grandmother got sick, she would send them to church with her friends, but “whatever church we went to, there was nothing like Big Mama’s church.”

My grandmother died when I was 10, and um, then I went to live with an aunt, my mother's sister. We lived with her, and you know things, things were different because a lot of things were modern now.

My grandmother . . . we burned wood, and coal, and we had an old pot-bellied stove, and um, we burned kerosene. That's all we had, that's how we heated our house, and in the wintertime we only slept in two rooms of the house, because it was cold; we had an old wringer washing machine, and we only washed every so often because it was cold, and when you ran all that water the water got everywhere.

Robin went from a wringer washing machine to an electric washer, oil heat, and new clothes when she moved in with her aunt, but "there was something, there was just something missing. Although her aunt tried to be fair to her and her sisters, she still treated them different from her own children. This intensified the pain of the loss of her mother at five and her grandmother at ten. "I was hurt from my mother dying, and I had a lot of bitterness in me."

When I lived with my aunt, my aunt kept us in church, and we went to a very large Baptist church, a very prominent Baptist church, and um, she sang on the choir, and I was on the junior choir, I was brought up in Sunday School, but they were not real Christians, you know, they were Christians, but like uh, Sunday Christians.

I believe there are a lot of Sunday Christians in the African American community as the shift from a prophetic religious tradition to a secular middle classness becomes more prevalent. The more material possessions one has, and the closer they get to a middle class status, the greater the tendency to forget where they came from and the ultimate source of their fortune.

We didn't live like animals during the week, but they drank, and they partied, and they had, they didn't do this every weekend, but they joined the Masons, and the Eastern Stars? So there were a lot of parties that they did go to, and every time they had a party, there was always liquor, and there was beer in the house, and they smoked cigarettes, and so, you know, like I said, they were Sunday Christians.

For a long time Robin did not know what it was, but "There was just something missing. I saw this woman of God who went by the book, and then I saw another person who professed to be a Christian, and actually did a lot of good things, but they weren't Christian things." Robin recognizes that she could have gone either way, but her grandmother had introduced her to a shield of protection at an early age that brought her through the wilderness experience.

I Kind of Got Out There

Hagar was cast into the wilderness and forced to survive on her own. Through all of her trials and tribulations, she stayed obedient to God. The wilderness experience "is a symbolic term used to represent a near-destruction situation in which God gives personal direction" (Williams, 1993, p. 108). The wisdom may be in African American people, but we must know when to stop and listen and when to go and obey. Robin had to be transformed before she could accept the wisdom that was in her. As Robin's wilderness experience consumed her life, she was moved from the prophetic religious traditions followed by her grandmother to the colonized religion of her aunt. West (1999) argues, "The rich African traditions—including the kinetic orality, passionate physicality, improvisational intellectuality and combative spirituality—would undergo creative transformation" (p. 102) and Robin personifies such transformations.

The story of “Hagar has ‘spoken’ to generation after generation of black women because her story has been validated as true by suffering black people. Hagar, like many black women, goes into the wide world to make a living for herself and her child, with only God by her side” (Williams, 1993, p. 33). Robin reached a breaking point at age 15. “I just couldn’t take her anymore,” so she left her aunt’s house to go and live with her sister. Unlike Hagar, Robin did not have a child, but she was leaving the home she knew, to make a life of her own.

I started living with my sister because I left my aunt’s house when I was 15, and I was living with my sister Pat. Both Pat, and my aunt’s daughter were the same age, they both got pregnant, they both . . . there was a lot of illicit sex going on, you know? My aunt would be at work and all these things were going on, but still she was doing her thing, and you know, how can you tell your daughters not to do these things when they see you doing them, so it just kind of trickled on down to me.

As a child, I can remember being told, “a child has a place and they need to stay in it and not get in grown folks’ business.” This became an unwritten rule in my home. It did not concern us what the adults were doing because they were the adults and we were the children. I understood exactly what it meant when my mother told me “not to question her but to do as I was told.” Mimicking the actions of the adult members of my family was not something I even considered because my mother believed that “if you spare the rod, you will spoil the child.” Robin had lost a grandmother who loved her dearly, and she was living with an aunt who she felt did not care about her. So she begins to look for love and acceptance elsewhere.

I kind of got out there, though, and I think, I started drinking, and I started just experimenting with wine, and stuff like that, but I think what was really happening was I was a sad person. I had a lot of sadness that I had never dealt with. And so, um, you know, losing my mother, losing my grandmother, being with an aunt that didn't really want me, and so I started looking for an escape.

I reflect back to the video, *Exclusions and Awakenings: The Life of Maxine Greene* (Greene, 2000) when she spoke on the importance of making wise choices. "Choosing is so important. Some things are unavoidable but there are a lot of things I can do—options, alternative pathways." As I reflect back to my years as a teenager, I discover the power associated with the choices I chose to make and those I made by not choosing. Sometimes the choices we make are not always in our best interest, but they are vital components of the learning process.

I believe we are all created in God's image, which is good, but we are sometimes driven to make bad choices that cause us to inflict harm upon others and ourselves. I struggle to try and understand the motive for the "bad" choices, and whether or not they are made on a conscious or an unconscious level. Are the choices to dehumanize and harm others made without knowledge of the consequences and ramifications for self and others? Are they made consciously without any regard for humanity of others? The path that Robin chose would lead her down a spiral road of self-destruction and despair.

So anyway, I was drinking, I started smoking cigarettes, I started messing with marijuana, and whatever I did, I just . . . you know, I just maxed out. I got hooked instantly, and I got out of control quickly. So, I mean, I did graduate from high school, but it was by the skin of my teeth.

A year after graduating from high school, Robin came back and worked in her high school's dining hall for a year. "I didn't like it because I knew I was smart, but I knew I had kind of just gotten out there. I was in the partying mode and spent a lot of time in clubs." Robin went places and did things that she was not old enough to do and "a part of that was because I was trying to find myself, where I fit in. I was just like a sponge, absorbing everything that people introduced me to."

I feel that Robins' lack of identity and acceptance during adolescence played an important role in the path she chose into an adult world of promiscuity, substance abuse, and depravity.

I didn't grow up with the latest styles, I didn't fit in the 'in' crowd, back in school, you know, I was just this little . . . the only thing I did have going for me was people liked me, because I could sing. But I couldn't sing for 8 hours a day! So, otherwise I was just this little skinny, skinny girl with big pop-eyes and, you know, there was nothing attractive about me, I didn't feel attractive about myself, and, um, I was just, you know, this awkward kid! I was tall and lanky and I was just this awkward kid.

I wonder if Robin had felt acceptance at school and at home with her aunt would she have chosen the path she did?

I Was Acquitted of All Charges

Robin found herself straying more and more from the prophetic religious tradition that her grandmother had steadfastly made efforts to instill in her. She was forgetting "Big Mama's God" and the power He had to provide all the answers she was seeking.

I knew I had kind of just gotten out of that. Gotten out there, and I was like in that partying mode, so I spent a lot of time in clubs and stuff, and really I went places that I wasn't old enough to go, and did things that I wasn't old enough to do, and

part of that was because I was trying to find myself, you know? I was trying to find where I fit in, and I was just like a sponge, I was just absorbing everything, everything that people introduced me to. So, about a year later I joined the Navy.

Not wanting to be stationed overseas, Robin did everything she could to get out of going overseas, but was not successful. “So I went over there, and I got in with this element, so to speak, because I met people from everywhere. But you know, I met people that . . . tried to meet people sort of like me, who wanted to party and stuff like that, and boy, did I meet them.”

I got in so much legal trouble that I was facing a bad-conduct discharge from the military, and then I was facing 20 years in a Spanish prison. And, you know, I had never been in so much trouble, never in my life. But God was with me then. I didn't know it then, but God was with me the military was prepared to discharge me on the spot, as soon as the Spanish Nationals gave the verdict on my case, and it was like everybody was shocked when they declared me acquitted of all charges.

The judge's ruling was the opposite of what was expected for the charges that had been rendered, but the Bible speaks of a God who can raise the dead, heal the sick, and give sight to the blind (Matt. 9-10, *Holy Bible, King James Version*). I believe it was the spirit of God that touched the judge's heart and rendered the acquitted verdict.

I was shocked. But they were really shocked, they were like “How did this happen?” I mean, they had my discharge papers right there, they were ready to sign them! And I didn't get discharged because the Spanish Nationals acquitted me of all charges. I just thanked God that he didn't allow me to go to prison. Now, I was guilty of what was I was charged with! But it was the grace and mercy of God that brought me out of there. He brought me out of there, and I finished my time in the Navy, and then I came back to the United States.

Robin may have strayed but she never forgot her religious upbringing and her praying grandmother. "There were times when I was in trouble, I prayed but I just wasn't ready to be saved. I wasn't ready to give up this other life." West (1999) argues the "major black cultural response to the temptation of despair has been the black [prophetic religious] Christian tradition" (p. 112), but the "gangsterization of everyday life" (West, 1999, p. 115) had forced Robin on a trail of despair and desolation. "I went through a lot, and I had a son, my first child while I was overseas." She was in a "broken relationship with that guy, he wanted me to get out of the Navy and come back to Florida, but I wasn't willing to do that." Robin did her last year of service in the United States and did not reenlist.

I Learned a Lot of Survivor Tactics

Decisions that are made irrationally and impulsively can negatively alter and control one's life. Robin made a choice to take the child she had given birth to overseas, and move to California to make a living for the two of them.

So I ended up raising a kid by myself, and somehow, after I got out of the Navy, I went to live in California. Now, I was selling marijuana, I was using cocaine, just recreationally, but still I liked it. I liked the way it made me feel. I felt whenever I used cocaine, I had this feeling of, uh, like I was just really groovy, you know, I don't know of no other word except 'groovy', that's, that's how I felt, like I was really with it. And, at other times I didn't feel that way. Now I'm starting to feel groovy, you know, I'm starting to feel like I fit in and I'm finding a crowd. It's just the wrong crowd, but I'm finding one that I fit into.

Robin's stay in California was one of degradation and turbulence. "There were a lot of drugs out there," and the partying was ongoing. Robin and her girlfriend "kind of lived off the system but eventually got evicted."

Life can be a vicious circle and Robin once again found herself back home in Winston Salem but her inability to find employment with RJ Reynolds sent her to Florida (the home of her baby's father) to try her luck, but she began a downward spiral that would send her to the threshold of death. "I got so hooked on drugs that I wasn't able to stop."

There were no jobs in Florida. Women did work that men did. Women did cement finishing and stuff like that, and I worked. I did that for a while, but it was starting to break me down physically, and you know, I just turned to drugs. I got involved with a guy, he was a real slickster, and he introduced me to a lot of things, a lot of people, and a lot of another element, and you know, so instead of progressing successfully, I progressed in negative things. And you know, I learned a lot of bad habits.

Robin finds herself immersed in a community that is in crisis. There may have been several roads Robin took to reach this community but there is only one road out, through the grace and mercy of God. But Robin is not ready to travel this road, so she learns how to survive.

I learned a lot of survivor tactics, how to make it on the street, and, I started going to jail in Florida. Started getting arrested; actually, I became a small-time prostitute. I just started like working clubs and bars, stuff like that. But I got tired of that because I never really liked to drink. I felt like if I was going to take care of business, I couldn't get drunk, so you know, I needed to make sure I'd get my money, so, I quit, I quit working these clubs, because you had to stay in there too long, you had to drink with too many guys just to come out with 20 or 30 bucks.

She soon meets someone that is going to teach her "how to make some real money."

Although the grass might look greener on the other side, the insects, parasites, and killer weeds are still present, and Robin finds herself on the street prostituting. She is able to

rationalize her actions by comparing it to going out on a date for a nice dinner and ending up in bed. “My first night out there, that’s how I was able to rationalize.”

My first night out on the streets, I made \$250 in one whop, you know, I pick-pocketed somebody, and you know, hey, I said, ‘hey, this is not bad!’ You know, I didn’t have to go back on the street no more that night! But I had a crack habit. No matter what I did, I never amounted to anything because you know, all my money went to the crack house, so I lived like a dog. I smelled at times, I wasn’t clean at times, and somehow I always managed to find like a rock to crawl under. Always managed to keep a little place to stay.

Why Would You Stab Me?

Just when she thought she hit rock bottom, the ground has a way of reaching up to smack her in the face. Robin was spiraling further into a hole of iniquity with little hope of finding a way out.

I started getting raped out in the street. I started getting beat out in the streets. And it got um, pretty rowdy, it got really bad. I got raped, um, several times, and I remember one time . . . I got robbed out there several times, I got beat several times, but I remember one time . . . My thing was, um, even with getting raped, I kind of learned how to survive. At least I thought I did. I thought if you cooperate with a rapist, your chances of living are better. You know, you don’t try to fight him because that’s going to anger him.

Robin’s cooperation did not save her from the cruelties of a vicious beating and this is what she has to say about cooperating on the streets:

So, I always cooperated. I always did what he asked me to do. And then, I didn’t understand, you know, if I cooperated and I let a guy rape me, you know, why would you turn around and beat me, you know? Why would you stab me? Why would you do stuff like that when I did what you asked me to do? I guess I just didn’t understand that part of it. I just started really going down in the streets. And I did get to a place, where I didn’t have anywhere else to stay.

She felt she had learned how to survive on the streets by cooperating, but soon found out that it was not enough, and she barely managed to survive. Robin finds herself in an environment where “cheap sexual thrills and cowardly patriarchal violence” (West, 1999, p. 115) permeate every aspect of her existence.

Going from the frying pan to fire is more than just a cliché for Robin, it became her reality. She moved in with an abusive man, and his “cold heartedness and mean spiritedness” (West, 1999, p. 115) almost led to her death. “I lived with him for um, about two years and I’ll tell you the truth, that guy like to killed me.” White men as well as black men have exploited black women through physical abuse and sexual exploitation, and Robin was a victim of both. Robin’s friend knew how she made money, but being a junkie, he enjoyed using the money, but “it was like there was another part of him that couldn’t handle that mentally,” and the beatings became regular as he hallucinated on drugs. The bus tickets her sister would send her to come home did little to alleviate the fear of him pulling her off the bus and beating her. It was the long arm of the law that helped her leave this situation. After a stint in jail for prostitution, the judge released her in her sister’s care.

I would communicate with my sister, and she would always tell me to come home. She would send me a ticket at the bus station, but this guy had me so scared of him that he told me if I ever tried to leave him, that he would meet the bus in the next city, and he would pull me off the bus and beat me all the way back to Daytona.

The threat was real to Robin and she did not have the courage to leave on her own free will. She did not have the “resilience and resistance against the paralysis of madness and

the stillness of death” (West, 1999, p. 103) that was threatened by her roommate. So she had to rely upon the court system to come to her aid.

So finally, I got away from him through the court system. I went to jail for prostitution and a judge was considering really giving me some time, and I just told him the truth. I was living with a guy I didn't love, he was very abusive, and if I didn't do what I did, then, you know, I just wouldn't be able to make it.

Robin found the courage to stand before the judge and tell the truth about the depth to which she had sunk. I can imagine that this took as much courage as it did for Sojourner Truth to stand before a women's right convention in 1851 and demand her womanhood by asking, “Ain't I a Woman?”

So this judge, he um, released me from jail. He said, ‘I'm going to put you on a bus and send you home.’ And he told me not to come back to Florida for a year. He sent the biggest, blackest cop he could find to look after me. He stayed there with me while I packed my things.

In 1988, I left Florida and “I brought my 3-month old baby, my other son, I had left him in Florida with his grandparents,” and I came home to live with my sister, “but I still wasn't through.”

Robin's sister enrolled her in a rehabilitation program and “I enrolled in a business college and for the first time in a long time, things were looking better. And I messed around, and I got pregnant.”

I remember all too well the time I messed around and got pregnant and thought it was the end of my life. I had just been awarded a college scholarship to the school of my choice but had to put my plans on hold. I think the hardest part for me was having to

break the news to my mother. But I thank God for an understanding family that did not throw me out in the streets, but nurtured and loved my child and me.

Robin says:

So you know, now I gotta move out of my sister's house, I don't know . . . have anywhere to stay, and it was just bad. I just didn't see any . . . I didn't see any future. And I, I started using drugs. I never really stopped. But for the time I was with my sister, I kind of kept it under wraps, but now I just went all the way back out there. And the one thing that I never wanted my family to see was me, prostituting.

African American women have fought for freedom and liberation against a bondage that forced them into subservitude where their bodies were used for breeding and monetary gains against their will. I find it ironic that African American women have had to struggle for the right to be the guardian of their own bodies, but Robin has to use her body for carnal pleasure in order to survive.

I imagine they knew I got money from guys, but they never saw it, but once I moved out of that house, that just became . . . it was just . . . that was the way I did things then. So, eventually they started hearing the talk about me and stuff like that, and I just . . . I just went all the way out there.

Robin moved to a neighborhood she referred to as "the Hole. It was one way in and one way out, and it was awful, but I had to move there because it was \$115 a month, what else could I afford? The streets were lined with liquor houses and dope houses." I imagine that some of the impoverished neighborhoods the black poor students live in today mirror the one that Robin could afford.

The Police Had My Baby

When it looks as if nothing else could possibly go wrong, she was in for the ride of her life. Robin's descent into despair was escalating and she becomes powerless to the crippling drugs and says, "I just jumped right in there."

I got involved with the people, I started you know, hustling and making money and doing things, as I said I wasn't progressing, you know, because I was using it all on crack. And, um, I took my baby somewhere . . . my baby, and I left him with a guy. He gave me some money to go buy some drugs, and when I came back, I didn't come right back. When I came back, the police had my baby.

When I think back to the story of Hagar and how she went into the wilderness to make a life for her child, and the significance of motherhood to African Americans, I can sense Robin's pain at losing a baby because of her own recklessness. To have a child torn from a mother and sold into bondage is devastating, and to lose a child because of the choices one makes, is demoralizing.

So I ended up going to prison for that, because I didn't call them right away and tell them, you know, 'that's my baby.' As a matter of fact, at that point I didn't know what to do. So, you know, I just got high for as long as it could last. I just felt like if I just stayed high . . . something inside of me just kept believing . . . if . . . if . . . it was like a bad dream, and if I would just wake up and my baby would be in the bed beside me. And it just didn't happen.

So for nine days, my face was all on the cover of the news, and, you know, reporters were looking for me, and the um, investigators were looking for me, and everybody was just telling me 'they're looking for you, they're looking for you' and I was right in my house, I just, I just kept telling them, 'she's not here.' And that got pretty bad, so eventually somebody called on me and turned me in. And that's how I went to prison, the first time.

Sentenced to 12 to 18 months for child abuse, Robin served four months in jail where she gained weight and “started to look good again.” “As the great Frederick Douglass once said, ‘in order to measure the heights to which we have risen we must first measure the depths to which we were dragged’” (Logan, 1995, p. 150). Robin says she “never really had a relationship with God,” so the miracle she was seeking was not yet hers.

It is said that if a child is raised with a religious foundation, she may stray from it, but she will return. Robin took the long road back.

I went to church. Whenever I got in trouble, I always went back to God. And I never really had a relationship with him, but I did know how to pray because my grandmother was a praying woman. I knew that I could pray and God would help me. So when I . . . I’d call on the Lord, and um, you know, He let me out of prison, but I remember a chaplain in Rocky Mount, I told him I was going to need a miracle to get off drugs, and that man told me that there would be no more miracles, that the signs and wonders and miracles . . . and he showed it to me in Scripture that it would be cut off. But for some reason I knew he had misquoted that scripture, I knew he just wasn’t, that wasn’t true, because it was going to take a miracle for me to get off those drugs. I had to have a miracle!

God will answer prayers and send a miracle when we are ready to receive it. I have found the waiting to be the hardest part of my religious experience. But I am growing in my ability to trust and wait on God for an answer. I remember a song my mother used to sing, “He’s an on Time God.” He might not come when you want Him, but He is always on time.

I got out of prison, and went right back to the same thing. Now, you know, my kids have been taken from me, and I don’t have anything to live for now. I don’t have anywhere to stay. No family members wanted anything to do with . . . so I’m really out there, and I went through a series of different men, different guys, and stuff like that, and then you know, I learned how to work the streets here. I was being raped, but now if a guy tried to fight me, my first instinct was to try to get

away from him. But if he wouldn't let me get away from him I was going to do whatever I had to do to make him let me go. And so I started using the knife, you know?

Where Were the Christians?

I believe that God has a way of sending us an angel when we are at our wits end and Robin's pain was debilitating. Laura Randolph (1995) asks, "Where does such amazing strength and commitment come from" (p. 89)? From where does the unrelenting spirit to reach out to the downtrodden and make such unselfish sacrifices come? I believe the women Robin met were able to make these sacrifices because of a creative spirit that was grounded in a prophetic black religious tradition, which led these strong black community mothers to see themselves as being responsible for lifting the race.

While I was out there I met this lady. I met a lot of good people. I met, um, a lot of Christians, well, I won't say a lot. I met maybe three or four Christians who God put in my path. And they continually, boy, I tell you, they just loved the 'hell' right out of me. But church, the church as we know it . . . wasn't out there, and I said, you know, I would like to ask God, 'where were the Christians?' When I was out there on those streets and was all messed up, where were the Christians, Lord? But God sent . . . He sent . . . He sent real Christians. He sent people that would just love me in spite of myself.

God placed many angels in Robin's path, who recognized the humanity in all God's children, and one of His angels would feed the homeless out of the basement of her church.

One lady, she opened up the basement of a church and she started feeding the homeless. So we all went there every day, and ate. And we didn't just go for the food, we went there because this woman had enough love for all of us. She had what I call East Winston's finest junkies, pedophiles, rapists, faggots, she had all of us down there, lesbians . . . she had everything that . . . prostitutes, whatever

there was, she had us down there in that basement with her. And as wild and rowdy a group as we were, we had so much respect for her.

They knew she was a Christian because of the goodness she radiated and they respected her for this. It was the creative spirit that allowed her to provide the love, nurture, and support they need and it is this goodness that chased after Robin and eventually caught her.

'Cause we respected the God in her! We knew that that woman she had to be of God, to be down in that basement with all of us! And I remember, she made such an impact on me, she . . . by now, after going to prison maybe three or four times, she started, um . . . I was living in a crack house, I didn't have anywhere else to stay and she started coming to find me! And she would come at these moments when, you know, when all hell was breaking loose, I was getting ready to fight somebody, I was getting ready to stab somebody, and here comes Sister Deb, you know? And I'm like, Oh, Lord!

Robin tells of many instances when Sister Deb would pull her from the brink of disaster. One occasion when she was too drunk to make a sound decision, "I was drunk as a fish." Sis Deb said "Jan, don't go down that street, you don't know what's waiting on you down there," so Robin "went to the church with her and she put me in a room in the basement of that church and let me sleep that drunk off." Robin slept off the alcohol, but when she woke up, she remembered telling Sister Deb, "Don't let me miss the food."

So, when I woke up, it was 3 o'clock in the evening. She kept the church open for a drunk like me. And you know, I said, "This woman's has to have God!" And I jumped up, I was like, "Oh, I didn't miss the food!" And she had put up two plates of food for me. You know, and she called this friend of hers, and she had this woman come and laid hands on me and they prayed for me. So I knew that she was real.

There was another instance when Sister Deb had kept Robin's tax check while she was in jail. "I had every intention of when I got out I was going to buy some meat to help the church with the feeding. Well, I didn't do that. I spent all the money on crack." Sister Deb had the spirit that allowed her to look pass Robin's faults and see her as a child of God. It was only a couple of days later that Robin shoes started disintegrating.

I said, "Sister Deb, I need some shoes." And you know, she could have said, "Jan, you just had six hundred dollars. What did you do with that money?" No, 'cause she didn't. She didn't even mention it! She took the shoes off of her feet and put them on my feet. And that, that was real to me, you know?

There were other women who God used as angels for Robin. One provided a home for Robin after she was released from jail and the other would visit the jail on Wednesdays to teach Bible study and she would bring "little cups of lotion, little Dixie cups of lotion, hair grease, um, conditioner and shampoo." Some times it is the little things one do that touches the heart and leaves unforgettable memories.

There was Something Different This Time

I believe that God will never give us more than we can handle and when we have reached our limit; He will step in and lift our burden. Robin had reached the bottom of despair and saw no humanly way out, but Delores Williams (1993) speaks of a wilderness-experience as a near-destruction situation in which God gives personal direction to the believer and thereby helps her make a way out of what she thought was no way.

*When I, a poor, lost sinner
Before the Lord did fall,*

*And in the name of Jesus
For pardon loud did call
He heard my supplication
And soon the weak was strong
For Jesus took my burden
And left me with a song*
(poem by Bertha Mae Lillenas, cited in Smith, 1951, p. 432)

Robin's last trip to jail was the end of her life, as she knew it, and the beginning of a spiritual self. After this last trip to jail, Robin no longer had the desire or taste for drugs or alcohol. She had asked God to save her, and He removed the desire from her heart.

The last time that I went to jail was in January of 1994. And I went for the same thing, prostitution. But there was something different this time, because when I went this time, this was an act of God. If I hadn't gone to jail when I did, I would have died on the streets.

Robin's "body started rejecting" the drugs and it "started shutting down." Her kidneys were in bad shape and she was malnourished, dehydrated, and on the brink of death, but it seems that God had a master plan.

While I was in jail . . . it was in jail there that I got saved. You know, while I was there in jail, I would always say I wasn't guilty. "I didn't proposition that officer." That was just, my thing was to never confess. So, you know, unless they catch you red-handed, never confess. And so, you know, I always stuck to my thing. So. The officers asked me to come and work in the laundry room for them, for a while, and I didn't really want to work that day, but you know, this officer was persistent. So I finally got up and I just went on and worked. I was indigent, nobody ever sent me money or stuff like that, or came to visit me, so she said "I'll let you have a free phone call if you come and work for me."

I believe God will put an angel in the most unusual places, and Robin's angels were the officers who saved her life by asking her to work in the laundry room.

So while I was in that laundry room, I was listening to the Christian station, and the first song that came on that radio was a song that was, uh, I think it was by the . . . Dallas Mass Choir. And it said, uh, "I'm sorry, forgive me, clean me up and give me another chance." And that song broke me. I just broke down, and I just started crying. And I just, you know, I was just crying because . . . I knew I was dying! And I knew I was going to hell! (interviewee begins to cry) And I knew that I needed to be saved! (continued crying) And I knew I just needed one more chance! (continued crying) So I asked the Lord to give me one more chance. I told Him, Lord, how sorry I was. For the way that I had lived. And how I had destroyed my life, and how reckless I had been. And I asked Him to please give me one more chance. I just didn't want to die and go to hell.

Patricia Williams (1991) says, "a part of ourselves is beyond the control of pure physical will and resides in the sanctuary of those around us" (p. 73). Robin had fallen to the pit of no return and she needed God's mercy to lift her as her future rested in the judge's verdict.

And so I just started pouring out my heart to God, and I walked over to that radio, and I just told God how sorry I was (continued weeping). I told Him that I was sorry I had sinned against Him. And I had done all this evil, and I had just . . . I had just destroyed what He had given me, this gift of life, and I just made a mess of everything. And I just asked Him, for just one more chance. And I was sincere. I had never really gotten real with God. Except on times when I wanted Him to get me out of trouble, but this time I wasn't asking God to get me out of trouble, this time I was asking God to save my life. (continued crying)

And so I told God that if He would save me, that I would serve Him for the rest of my life. And I told Him that I would never use drugs again, and alcohol, and whatnot, and I would never be a prostitute again, and I would never, you know, do the things that I had done before. And, um, a sense of peace came over me. Once I poured out my heart to God, it was like all of that was gone now. But I'm still in jail.

God answered Robin's prayers, and now it was time for her to trust and obey.

I Just Want to Change My Plea

Trust is hard when life has been so full of disappointments, disillusion, pains, and fears, but God's presence was with her. I believe if God could bring Israel out of slavery and Jesus could rise from the dead, then He could liberate Robin.

I was in the holding cell by myself. And I had this little court-appointed attorney, and I was saved, but I still didn't know how to trust God. So, um, you know, he said "How do you want to plead?" and I told him guilty, I mean, not guilty. So, he said "Are you sure?" and I said "I'm positive". And all of a sudden I heard a voice that said "Jan, trust me." And I, you know, I looked around! And I knew it was the Lord, and I said "Lord?" I said, "I can't tell the truth! Because if I do, I'm going to go to prison!" And He didn't say "you won't go to prison," He didn't say, um, "I'm going to take care of this," He just said it again, He said "Jan, trust me."

It was an awesome sound, inspiring and frightful.

So I got scared. And I knocked on the door, and I asked the sheriff to go in the courtroom and find my attorney. And he did, and when he came back, I told him that I wanted to change my plea. And he said, 'I thought you would,' he said, 'I knew you were lying.' He said, 'the arresting officer was in court and he had it on tape the conversation where you propositioned him, and he was prepared to play the tape.'

I said well, 'I don't care about any of that. I just want to change my plea.' So, you know, it was like, 'now my life's in your hands, God. I don't know what's going to happen, but if I gotta go to prison, I'll just go to prison. I mean, I've been there before.'

He Worked it All Out

"I get in the courtroom, and then the Lord just took over the courtroom." Robin walked in court with everything going against her but walked out with probation and

fines. "I was on intensive probation. I had to be in by six at night and um, I mean, I had to pay a lot of money, and God just, He worked it all out."

Robin finally met "Big Mama's God." Robin says, "At first, I knew about Big Mama's God and I laughed at Him. I thought that was the funniest God. Somebody that you cried to and you talked to all that long time. And then I met Him myself. And He showed me just how real He is."

Through God's grace and mercy, Robin met all requirements and was released from probation. God has continued to bless Robin's life. "The Lord just took care of me. Met every one of my needs. After He saw that He could trust me, He began to open doors for me."

I started working little jobs trying to, you know, make ends meet. And the Lord just, He just took care of me. (Narrator begins to cry; continues crying through following dialogue.) He took care of me! I didn't have anything. I didn't have any place to live. I didn't have any furniture. I didn't know how I was going to make it. The Lord just took care of me. Met every one of my needs. He would bless me with one job, and then I worked that job for a while, and then the Lord would elevate me to another job. He led me in so many ways.

My first call that I got, the Lord had somebody call me one morning, and say, 'Can you drive,' and I said 'Yeah', and she said, 'God told me to give you my car.' And so that's how I got the very first car that I got. And God just continued little by little, opening doors for me. After He saw that He could trust me, He began to open doors for me.

Robin lives in a society that fails to acknowledge that "ordinary, flawed, everyday sorts of human beings frequently manage to make extraordinary contributions" (Payne, 1982, p. 43) and deserve a history that is empowering and affirming. The

daughter of the lady she was living with was mean to her and accused her of not really being a Christian.

She accused me of just using her mom, and she just kept saying, “She’s just going to go back out there like all the rest of them.” And she was just so really, so against me. And, um, that’s when I really learned how to pray. I mean, every day I had to call on God!

Robin had no where else to go except back to the streets but she knew “if I went back on the streets, that I would die. So I went through whatever I had to go through so that I could just stay alive.”

I worked several different jobs, and they all would seem to be dead-end jobs, ‘cause, you know, receptionists only make a certain amount of money, so I got tired of that after a while, and I knew I was smart. I knew that I could do, um what I saw other people doing. I knew that I could head a department. I knew that I could do those things, but I had no, um I guess I didn’t have any education, any formal education.

It was Truly a Leap of Faith

In 1998 Robin quit her job and 25 years after her last classroom experience, she enrolled in college as a full-time student. “It was truly a leap of faith. I knew that in order to do this, this was something that I needed to do full-time. And everything else got to be part-time. Everything else except my relationship with God.”

“Ask and He will listen, trust and he will deliver” and this is what Robin learned to do. “It was a desire of my heart, and He said ‘if you want that, that’s a good thing.’ He said, ‘I’ll give it to you.’ So, He let me come to college, and that in itself has been a miracle.” Robin does not explain how she was financially able to take this leap of faith.

She expresses her ability to be financially able to attend college in a religious language.

Robin says, "God worked it out and allowed me to go to college full time."

God is a good and loving God to bring a person from the brink of disaster to the Dean's List their first semester in college. After all she had been through, and all is said and done, she is called into the ministry.

I made the Dean's List my first semester in college, um, since then I've made the Dean's List several other times. In 1999, um, the Lord called me into the ministry, so I became a preacher. And I said, "Boy, if Big Mama could see this." I just attribute all of this to my grandmother, because she planted the seed.

I believe if a child is raised with a religious tradition, they might stray, but they will return and Robin's grandmother introduced her to God at an early age.

She introduced me to the true and living God. She made me know that God was real. Not just some distant being, way away like a fairy tale. She made . . . she brought Him home, honey. She made Him real.

I just attribute all of this to my grandmother, because she planted the seed. She introduced me to the true and living God. She made me know that God was real.

I am Truly, Truly a New Creature

*Perfect Submission, all is at rest,
I in my Savior am happy and blest;
Watching and waiting, looking above,
Filled with His goodness, lost in His love.
(Smith, 1951, p. 311)*

Robin got married in 2000 and feels that "it is an experience, because you know, you get set in your ways, and you say, 'No, I want my stuff up in here (laughter) or I keep

it over here.' But, I've been learning how to loosen up a little bit. It's ok if you put it over here (laughter)."

It is interesting that she did not spend much time talking about her husband. But I hold the recentness of her marriage responsible, rather than selectivity or silences for the infinitesimal part of her life history that is dedicated to her husband. After all, this was her opportunity to share her life story and her husband had only been a part of it for two years.

Through all of her trials and tribulations, Robin's greatest regret is that "I lost custody of my children," but she continues to trust in God. "My oldest son is 23, we have a good relationship. And my other two are, I think, thirteen and fourteen and they know me and I know them, but they don't live here. I do get to see them maybe once a year." Robin's older sister adopted her children and she will not give them back. "She said the adoption is final and she can't give them back." Robin chooses not to argue with her sister because she is trusting in the Lord to answer her prayers.

He told me one time that I had never let go of the kids. He said, 'and until you do, I won't give them back.' So I released them to Him. So that's the only way that I can even talk about this now, because I'm okay with it, because they're in His hands." He said, 'I will give them back to you.' So, I'm just trusting Him on this thing.

Robin is an ordained evangelist, traveling all over the globe. As an ordained evangelist, she has the legal authority as a traveling preacher to carry the gospel to the people. "I have been everywhere, just telling people about what God has done for me,

and the goodness of the Lord.” Robin says, “God has been faithful in everything,” and she is going to continue to put her trust in God.

You know, I messed up so bad. And I think about the Scripture from Second Corinthians 5 and 17. It says, “If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature. Old things are passed away. Behold, all things become new.” And I said, if ever, you know, if I didn’t believe none of the rest of the Bible, and I just believed that one verse, it’s true. Because I am truly, truly a new creature. Nothing, absolutely nothing about me is the same.

So I don’t know what I’m going to do after college. I don’t know what God, what role God has for me, but I do know one thing . . . that He does have a plan for me, and that’s, um, that’s what I want to do. Whatever God has . . . the plan of God for me . . . I don’t want to um, make my own plans any more.

I owe my life to God. He has done so much for me, and there’s so much yet, more to come, I just don’t know what’s on the next page, you know? But this is a good book, honey, and I’m just determined to keep reading it! (laughs)

In this section of the chapter I presented a detailed analysis of Robin’s life history and the next section of this chapter is dedicated to the life history of Annie.

Section 3

What God Has Placed on My Heart: Annie’s Story

This section is dedicated to the presentation of Annie, the social activist. I use powerful quotations throughout the presentation and ground the life stories with work of theorist.

Motherlove, By sheer force of will, it transforms lives. It is the emotional elixir that raises our children, saves our children, and sustains our children; the mystical compound that safeguard, sometimes even spawns their dreams. (Randolph, 1995, p. 87)

A Praying Family and Supportive Community

I find this quotation in *Ebony Magazine* echoes the love and support that Annie experienced in her family and community. Annie was the oldest of seven children born in a small town in rural North Carolina. She grew up in a very religious family, which dedicated time for family prayer and devotion on a daily basis. This is what she has to say about her family:

I grew up in the country, out on the farm and in a very religious family, a family that went to church every Sunday and had family devotions everyday; often times during the week at night before we would go to bed and then on the weekends, always before we would eat our food, especially on Sunday morning. We would gather around the kitchen table and just kind of have a prayer meeting.

Annie grew up during an era when segregation was prevalent but the love and support she received from her family and community were instrumental in her growth as a loving and caring person. Annie understood that “there was definitely a dividing line between black and white.” She explained how she grew up in a “village where people cared about me who kept their eyes on me and their hands on me when it was necessary and helped to shape and mold my life.” This ideology of reaching back to pick up the other grew out of an African worldview that was derived from the struggles of an enslaved people for justice, liberation, and a sense of purpose in a world immersed with racism, injustice, and inequality.

“The African worldview suggests that *I am because we are and because we are, I am*. In so emphasizing, this view makes no real distinction between the self and others. They are in a sense one and the same” (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 69). Ladson-Billings

(1994) argues, “one’s self-identity is therefore always a *people* identity, or what could be called an *extended self*” (p. 69). Annie speaks of her “extended self.”

I grew up in an extended family around lots of cousins and aunts and uncles and nephews and living on the farm we did lots of things together, like work and gathering the harvest and it was also a wonderful community spirit because families came together within the community and helped one another at the time when it was harvest time and hog killing time and whenever anyone died or was in trouble, the community was there.

I found this part of her story to resonate with the idea of ‘fictive kinship’ that is so prevalent among African Americans. I was privileged to be raised in a community of ‘other’ mothers who took ownership of my well-being. My mother had to work full time to raise five children, but there was a community of ‘other’ mothers who were not my biological mother, but had my best interest at heart. They diligently provided a watchful eye for my safety. There were times when I could not understand how my mother knew what I had done on my way to the store, because she was nowhere around, but before I made it back home she knew everything I had done between home and the store. It was the omnipresent eyes of a community of ‘other’ mothers grounded in the connectedness of a collective kindred spirit who understood that in order for their family to survive, the black community had to survive.

Lisa Delpit (1995) speaks of ‘fictive kinship’ and how African Americans “learned to feel like one family whether we knew each other or not, to take responsibility for caring for one another, and to take great pride in the accomplishments of our race” (p. 93). During segregation, there was this overwhelming sense of connectedness among African Americans and their communities. Annie said she was “thankful to God that He

put me in the family that He put me in because I grew up in a family of people who believed in reaching out to others and seeing themselves as people who needed to be in community and to be supportive of other people in the community.” Annie speaks of a grandfather “who was hard working, lived off the land and taught her how to respect God and how to stay in tune with that.” She spoke of brothers and sisters who love and support each other.

I Was Welcomed by Wonderful Teachers

There were wonderful teachers in Annie’s life who had a positive influence on her life. As she talked about these teachers, I found myself reflecting on the teachers in the segregated Caswell County Training School. The students from Caswell County “recall teachers who were *just like a mother*” (Walker, 1996, p. 134). Walker (1996) describes the Caswell County Training School in her book *Their Highest Potential: An African American School Community in the Segregated South* as having “affective traits, institutional policies, and community support that helped black children in spite of the neglect their schools received from white school boards” (p. 3). Segregation has been associated with a history of inferiority, substandard, and neglect but these generalizations fail to recognize the good traditions that come out of the segregated schools. The lack of curriculum materials and appropriate facilities did not deter the “dogged determination to survive, the tenacious will to persevere, persist and maybe even prevail” (West, 1999, p. 101) of the teachers, principals, and parents in the segregated schools.

I was fortunate to attend a segregated school in the South for my first eight years of education and experienced the same support, commitment, and affirmation that bel

hooks (1994) describes as the pedagogical practices of African American teachers engaged in a “pedagogy of resistance that was profoundly anticolonial” (p. 2). My teachers in the segregated school not only nurtured my self-esteem, but also provided an alternative to the dominant hegemony of superiority by demonstrating their belief in our abilities to learn and achieve. These African American teachers taught with zeal and passion for the revivification of the black race and community of which they were a part. Teaching “was a worthy occupation and equivalent to a religious calling” (Walker, 1996, p. 150).

Annie explains her fortune at growing up understanding and valuing diversity and the support she received from her teachers.

I just felt very fortunate that I grew up learning to respect the value of all human life and to understand that God was the giver of that life and it was to be treated with respect and dignity and to be valued. So my, I guess around the 6th grade I think, we moved from Bertie County, Windsor to _____, North Carolina. My mother remarried and I started to go to a public school, which was pretty intimidating after coming out of a two-room schoolhouse, (laughs).

I understand that the separation of church and state comes out of a political philosophy to protect the religious or non-religious rights of individuals, but the church and state are the core of education in the black segregated schools. There is total harmony among the different dimensions of church, state, school, and home, but all dimensions are respected and immersed in epistemologies of black teachers who were part of a prophetic religious tradition. I recount many times as a child going to the gymnasium of the black high school to hear a gospel group perform. The school, community, and all operated in harmony. Ladson-Billings (1994) argues, “education is not an apolitical enterprise” (p.

134), and teachers must be instrumental in helping students “see beyond the decimation caused by federal, state, state, and county neglect to the real strength of their community” (p. 73). Annie had teachers who taught her to identify and use the gifts that God had given her.

But again, I was welcomed by wonderful teachers who taught me many wonderful things. I’ve always been surrounded by people that loved and respected me and uh, appreciated my gifts; and God has always made room for my gifts. I’ve have been able to use the talents and the gifts that he’s given me and he’s put me in the presence of many wonderful people who have taught me so many wonderful lessons. I can say that all these people were and are people who are inspired and guided by the spirit and the power of God.

Students from the segregated Caswell County School “recount teachers and principals who would not let them go wrong. They describe teachers who were well-trained, dedicated, and demanding and who took a personal interest in them” (Walker, 1996, p. 3). I remember my high school teachers and recollect that there was one teacher who nurtured and cared for her students and took the extra time to build relationships with them. It was because of this teacher that I chose the field of education as my profession. I wanted to give to others what she had unselfishly given to me.

Annie’s high school memories included teachers who took a holistic approach to education and nurtured the well being of the whole child.

Until my senior year in high school, I attended an all black school. My first school experience was a little country school in Bertie called _____, a two-room schoolhouse that I loved dearly. I have the fondest memories of those experiences. I had wonderful teachers who taught me not just facts and figures but culture and poise and, uh, just everything. We just had a totally complete well-rounded education. So they dealt with everything from manners to how you sit with your legs crossed at the ankles, your back erect, and the whole bit, had very high

expectations for us; taught us how to behave as young women and the whole bit, how to walk and everything. It was just a wonderful experience.

My Life Was Not My Own

African Americans have struggled to hold on to their dreams of equality and justice, and the Civil Rights Movement has been instrumental in the struggle for social justice. The movement was a community effort with leadership from strong black women like Fannie Lou Hamer and Ella Baker, but “ordinary, flawed, every-day sorts of human beings frequently manage to make extraordinary contributions, especially given the special challenges and opportunities that a mass movement creates” (Payne, 1982, p. 43). The Civil Rights Movement had participants from all walks of life, religious affiliations, and socio-economic status.

The Civil Rights Movement was in full swing when Annie entered high school and she was active in the Southern Leadership Conference for the youth. Churches were instrumental in the Civil Rights Movement and Annie speaks of the involvement of her church and her understanding of social issues.

We went to Green Memorial Disciple Church and that was the center for the movement, for the Civil Rights Movement. And we had I guess I would say, even though there was supposed to be Civil rights rallies, they really were worship services where we talked about God’s will for man and what the word of God had to do with the circumstances of his people at that time.

So, I learned to understand that social issues were close to God’s heart and that we as the people of God were to speak out against injustice and unrighteousness in any form. So our church kind of took a leadership role in speaking out against segregation in the schools and the inability to be able to eat at certain restaurants and having to drink at the colored water fountains and so forth. So my entire family was very much involved with the demonstrations and the picketing and went to jail several times.

“The tragic plight and absurd predicament” (West, 1999, p. 93) of African-Americans during the Civil Rights Movement reared its ugly head during the last year of Annie’s high school education. It takes a special understanding of self and purpose to accept the responsibility that Annie and her best friend had been subjected to their senior year in high school.

My last year of high school, when I was a senior, my best friend and I were selected along with about nine other young people from E. J. Hayes High School to go to the all white school, which at that time the court had not approved desegregation, so we went forcibly. And my senior year, my best friend and I were the only two seniors and it was quite a traumatic experience.

But Annie knew that her life was not hers to live selfishly.

I was the only black in all of my classes and was treated with a lot of verbal abuse, rejection, name calling, isolation, uh but thank God for the leaders in my community who taught me my purpose for being, that I was called for such a time as that time and that I had a role to play and a mission to accomplish. So even though I was intimidated by the whole experience, I felt that I didn’t have any choice because I also grew up understanding that my life was not my own to live selfishly, but to give for my people and my community.

God had given Annie special gifts and talents that her teachers and community leaders had recognized and acknowledged.

Once it was decided that my friend and I had the kind of character and the grades and so forth that would facilitate the movement then it was just a matter of my mother agreeing to allow me to do that which she reluctantly did. But she too had a great respect for the leaders in the community and when they said this is what we need to do she agreed with it.

I remember my high school experience as being a special time in my life where relationships were formed and lifetime memories were made. There were some good memories but there are also some that I had rather not experienced. The invisibility that I experienced as a high school student overshadowed the goodness of the few who took the time to care and get to know me as a human being.

Annie has some memories of her high school graduation that are simultaneously exhilarating and disturbing.

I did finish [name] High School and I remember on the night of our graduation as I walked across the stage to get my diploma, I heard the word nigger. And, uh, but I felt so, I guess relieved that this was finally going to be over that I said nothing is going to interfere with me, (laughs) you know feeling the joy the jubilation that I'd been waiting for.

I find this part of Annie's story to resonate with the struggles black children experienced with the "massive white resistance to school desegregation" (Cecelski, 1994, p. 11) in Little Rock, Arkansas. The "nearsighted, unblinking, focused gazed" (Williams, 1997, p. 20) of white racist patriarchal officials on the dismantling of segregated schools promoted the inhumane treatment of African American students. It was this same nearsightedness that resulted in the egging of Annie's family car, just like the children in Little Rock, because of her remarkable character she had been chosen to be one of the first to participate in integration.

So, I did graduate and I remember when we came out of the auditorium to get in our car. My father had just brought a brand new beautiful new Dodge and it was just saturated with rotten eggs. There were just rotten eggs all over the car and we rode home in a stench that was almost . . . it took our breath away. But thank God

for a spiritual minded family. We prayed for the people who did it and said, well it didn't stop us from doing what we had to do (laughs), that's all part of it.

I Felt Strange and Different

Black "invisibility and namelessness" (West, 1999, p. 101) is so prevalent that many African Americans are forced to wear a mask. Personally, I have become proficient at knowing when and where to mask my identity. I have learned to recognize situations in which my blackness is frowned upon. It was in my integrated high school that I learned the painful sentiments of being different. The pain I felt was strictly because of the color of my skin, but Annie speaks to a sense of feeling different from other students of color. It is not until later in life that she understands the significance and degree of these feelings.

I have to say I felt strange and different in many ways all my life. I never did really fit in with the in crowd. I have always been weird and different (laughs). I didn't like to party and uh, didn't like to hang out. I've always had a real heart uh, toward the elderly and uh, toward children. So, I knew there was something different about me but I wasn't sure what it was.

Although Annie could not name the source of her uneasiness, this is what she has to say about the way it made her feel:

And many times it made me feel sad and lonely because I wanted to be like all the other kids. I wanted to be like all the other girls who seemed to be so into boys and hairdos and clothes and you know, going to the parties and stuff, but I never really liked doing that. I just felt so out of place when I was in situations like that, you know.

Annie uses the word 'real' to describe how she feels towards the elderly. This word occurs many times throughout both life stories. It is connected with a prophetic religious tradition and appears in such spiritual hymns as *Yes, God is Real* and *I've Found Real Joy*.

It was a Time of Turmoil

Annie said, "I have always tried to live my life out of a sense of direction and purpose by God." Her family built a relationship with "priests and nuns from Massachusetts who came down to participate with us in our quest for freedom and demonstrated with us and many of them stayed at our home." Nuns and priests were governed by a doctrine that advocated against moral and social ills and unfair treatment of the poor. Catholicism's religious doctrine and political agenda are connected to a struggle for social justice and their participation in the Civil Rights Movement was an effort to continue their struggle for justice.

The nuns and priests extended an invitation for Annie after high school to "come to Massachusetts and they would send me to school," but Annie had other plans. Her childhood sweetheart from [the South] who had also been a "youth leader in the Civil Rights Movement" had been in Massachusetts two years before her arrival.

So I did go to Massachusetts, however, I didn't go to school right away. I met my husband, who I knew from [the South] because we were kind of childhood sweethearts. . . . I met him when I was fourteen, we were both youth leaders in the Civil rights Movement and so we kind of grew together and he had already gone off to Massachusetts and I think I came two years later.

So we reunited and we got married when I was eighteen, much to my mother's dismay (laughs) and uh, the following year we had a child, a son and uh, then

after that I was involved with a church, an Episcopal church in Massachusetts that was very active in the community with social conditions and so forth.

Annie worked for an agency in Boston that helped “redevelop and rebuild communities.”

Even in Boston, she found herself working for “community development, community organizing, and training for the unemployed. If God has a plan for us, restlessness and uneasiness will interrogate our tranquility and send us on different missions.”

After joining an Episcopal church, Annie experienced an uneasiness that led her to an older historical black church.

After we were married, I joined and attended St. Annie’s Episcopal church for two years but it wasn’t true to my heritage and my culture so I joined Twelfth Baptist Church a black, very old historical black church in Massachusetts that also was very involved in social issues (laughs). Can’t seem to get away from that kind of atmosphere.

In this church Annie served in several capacities. She was “very active in the whole educational issue and served on some advisory councils and served on the desegregation committee.” Schools were still in turmoil and because of this, Annie spent a lot of time volunteering in school.

It was such a time of turmoil within the school I spent a lot of my time at the school with my children, with my son, at that time he was the only one that was born. And so I worked very, very hard in the school, volunteering every free moment that I could find.

It was due to all the time she spent volunteering in school that led the principal to persuade her to pursue a degree in education.

I remember the principal there said to me one day that “you are so good with children; you really need to go to school and get your degree in education.” And I thought about that and I thought, “Well, gee, you know I really do love that.” And so I talked it over with my husband and I did, I went back to school, when my son was six and enrolled in Wheelock College, which was an all women’s school for early childhood education. And uh, got my degree in 1977 and got a job teaching in Boston, third grade and really enjoyed that.

I find myself questioning the reason Annie would want to return south to a place where she had personally experienced an “unrelenting assault on black humanity” (West, 1999, p. 101). But I think back to the struggles African Americans had to make in the deep South and realize the strength of the bond to a land that is soaked with the blood of a culture that had been denied human rights and privileges.

And then during that process we had a daughter to be born and when she turned four we started thinking about what we wanted for them in terms of education. And so then we decided that we didn’t want them to be in the middle of this tumultuous situation with the schools, traumatized you know, because our school district would have been South Boston and that was the notorious area where all of the fighting, and police escorts with the buses and I just said, “we can’t do this to our children.” Our experience has been too wonderful and too much fun to put them through this so we decided that we would move back to the South.

I Couldn’t Shake This Feeling

Personally, my faith has sustained me through many obstacles that have appeared overpowering and impossible. I believe if one’s faith is sufficient and they have the “tenacious will to persevere, persist, and maybe even prevail” (West, 1999, p. 101) and they are willing to step out on faith, God will make a way. He will open doors that appear closed, and raise windows that were assumed locked.

Annie and her husband stepped out on faith when they left their jobs and moved back South.

We decided that we would take our chances. We didn't have a job. We didn't have a place to live. We prayed about it and we said we feel God is leading us to Greensboro, so we are going to go. So one day we packed up and we just came here to kind of look around and we stayed a week and God opened doors for us and we were able to find a beautiful home to live in, in the Rolling Rose area. And we were, my husband was able to get a job. I started substituting teaching and after three months I was given a job as a full time teacher in the _____ County Schools system. I worked for the _____ County Schools system until last year.

Annie says, "my teaching was my ministry and I wanted to do it as unto God. I wanted him to be pleased and I know that you can't love God and don't love people. So, I prayed much to ask God's guidance and help for my life." But Annie was uncertain about the call on her life.

Resisting the Call

Casey (1993) notes how the life stories of the women in her research were pervaded by an existential disposition with a religious [spiritual] perspective. I have found these same qualities to be prevalent in the life stories of my women. They speak of an existence that is rooted and grounded in a spiritual discourse originating from a calling from God, which for the most part they did not understand, could not accept, and resisted.

Annie first felt her calling when she was a classroom teacher.

While I was working as a teacher, uh I felt a real strong call on my life. It seems like everybody always told me all their problems and always came to me when they needed advice on things and (laughs) you know and uh, I've always enjoyed kind of listening to people, talking to people. I began to feel a real tug or stirring in my spirit uh, toward ministry.

There were no role models of women preachers in Annie's life, so she continues to resist.

I did not really have any models in my life of women in ministry that I felt resonated with me. So, I resisted that whole thing, I was like, no way Lord, there is no way you could be wanting me to go into ministry. What will I do, you know I am not a preacher. I am not an evangelist. I don't heal people. You know, what am I going to do? And uh, I just kept (pause) couldn't shake this feeling. And so I just felt, I kept reading and studying. I felt like I just got to know more, I got to know more.

In Touch With the Spirit

God moves in mysterious ways but His spirit is ever present and will speak to us in the most unusual places. Annie was sitting in a seminary class when she felt the spirit tugging at her well-being.

I decided that I would go to seminary because that's kind of where God, I just felt myself being just guided right along the path here, you know. And then I find myself sitting in the class at Divinity School and uh, studying and just, oh, just felt so at peace with it, you know.

Before Annie went to seminary she had been a member of a church where she met many wonderful people and served as director of the Christian Education Committee. It was in this church where she felt "God calling me to something else." Annie and a few others "began a Bible study and out of that grew [name of church] Church, [name of pastor], Pastor." "No doubt, question about it, this church is truly rooted and grounded in uh, outreach ministry to the poor, homeless, very much involved in the social issues, uh, state, local, national (laughs)."

A sense of restlessness and uneasiness returned to haunt Annie as she began to question her traditional religious training. She felt her training "did not always correlate

with the kind of work and things that we were doing.” After prayer for direction and purpose Annie persisted in her studies and graduated from seminary in 1997.

After finishing seminary two years later, after much prayer and meditation, I felt the call to the ministry. And uh, two years ago, December 10th, I was ordained. And uh, know that God is not finished with me yet, has much that he needs to do with me and in me and through me and for me. And I am looking forward to that.

Annie felt a strong tug on her life towards a different ministry.

There is nothing that I love more than touching the lives of children. But one of the things that I discovered doing my teaching was that in order to teach children effectively you have to have wonderful parent involvement and that’s not always present. Parents are not always at the table. And I just felt that as education became more and more challenging and more responsibility put on teachers uh, I felt that I was called to do some work to help organize parents to understand the importance and the seriousness of educating their children and the role that they need to play.

I find Annie’s principal has a philosophy that is grounded in a materialistic existence. She is concerned with Annie’s ability to pay the rent, keep the lights on, and pay her health insurance. But Anne’s philosophy is grounded in a religious tradition, which answers to a greater Force, one that she believes will supply all her needs if she trusts Him and obeys.

And so much to my principal’s dismay, I announced to her last April that I was leaving the classroom and she wanted to know, “well what are you going to do?” and I said, “I don’t know.” And so she began to scurry about and say, “Well, you know, what do you want to do.” I said, “Well, I know I am called to work with parents. I don’t know what form it is going to come in but I know that is what God has put on my heart.”

Annie’s principal challenged her, and this is what she says:

And she challenged me and said, “you know, you mean to tell me you are going to quit your job, and you don’t have another job lined up, you know and you are going to give up your benefits?” And I said, “That’s what the Lord requires of me” and she wanted to rally some people to get some money and I said, “no, I can’t do that, uh nope, I can’t do that because that is not what God has placed on my heart.” So I have to be still and I have to wait.

Annie’s principal could not accept the fact that Annie was leaving her job and stepping out on faith. She “just really could not believe that I was going to do that.” The principal had been holding on to her resignation papers, hoping she would change her mind. “I gave her the papers in April and she didn’t turn them in because she thought I was going to change my mind. At the end of the school year, she finally said, ‘Annie I need to talk with you today so come up here.’ And I went and we sat and she said ‘I have to turn these papers in today and I just don’t want to do that because you still don’t have a job.’” The principal did not have the same intense faith as Annie who knew “God is my source, I believe Him, I trust Him . . . and I have to be obedient.”

*When we walk with the Lord
In the Light of His Word
What a glory He sheds on our way!
While we do His goodwill, He abides with us still,
And with all who will trust and obey
(poem by ??? Towner, cited in Smith, 1951, p. 402)*

Annie stepped out on faith and put her trust and obedience in God.

So I worked during the summer, I just kind of took my time praying, and meditating, and fasting and seeking god. And the Lord led me to write a grant and uh I wrote a grant outlining what I Wanted to do with parents; that I wanted to restore a spirit of community, uh within that community where these children come from.

And the children that I work with were a part; they were in [name] Public Housing. And uh, I felt that all children need to have an environment that's embracing and safe, that's healthy; that's caring and loving and I want to create that kind of environment for these children because many of them don't have that.

He Led Me By His Spirit

Annie believed poor parents truly care about their children although it might not be as apparent as the wealthier parents. Annie notes that poor students are "oppressed, suppressed, depressed, and have a hard life." Poor parents "trust the school to do what's right by their children while they struggle and try to survive."

I didn't take a judgmental attitude towards them but I always let them know that I value their opinion and that I felt that they had a major role to play in the educational process of their children, and that together we were going to bring to pass. My slogan is, we shall meet, if you don't come to see me, I'm coming to see you. I will knock on your door, you know.

Annie developed a relationship and made a connection with the parents of poor children.

She acknowledges her success in the classroom was because of her connection to students and parents.

I've always been actively involved in the community with the children and not just going there when they're misbehaving, but you know I've always made it a point of going to the funerals and sending little special cards home when the new baby is born in the family and taking something by, or you know, just going to the games of the children and stopping by sometimes to say your child just was so good in school today, I just wanted you to know. You know that, you are doing something right with this child, just had a wonderful day. You know, so uh, just having the presence of the community develop a relationship with the elders in the community and the parents and letting them know that, you know, I feel very much connected to them.

Annie feels that the connection she made with parents and students “to a great degree was the success of my teaching experience.” She does not believe that she “could have stayed in the classroom and taught, my total teaching years, I taught 23 years, without the power and the presence and the spirit of God. Everything God has led me to do, he’s led me by His spirit.”

I feel that I had uh tremendous success and it was because of His spirit and His power that guided me and lead me and allowed me to share that spirituality with other teachers who came to my room early in the morning to pray and late in the afternoon and during the day when the burdens of life were so heavy they couldn’t endure, we would steal away to the bathroom and pray and try to find some peace.

Annie declares:

I am now at a point where I am trying to discern I feel a prompting in my spirit to do something else. I don’t know what that is uh but I know in time God will reveal that to me.

I have had many trials and tribulations and tests, you know, but uh through it all I have learned to trust Him more and uh, you know, it’s been a good life for me. I’ve had a wonderful like. And you know, “it does not yet appear what we shall be” but I am looking forward to the journey, you know, whatever life is going to bring.

In this section of the chapter I presented a detailed analysis of the life history of Annie.

Annie and Robin speak of identity in a religious community as being their proverbial ‘Rock of Salvation,’ their source of strength, and their introduction to a prophetic religious tradition that prevails through a tumultuous childhood and an adulthood ridden with uncertainty and indecision.

The next chapter is reserved for the conclusion. I present a summary of the dissertation, the principal implications of study and suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

My Concluding Thoughts

bell hooks (1994) speaks of the black women “teachers who worked with and for us to ensure that we would fulfill our intellectual destiny and by so doing uplift the race” (p. 2). I find black women to have a creative spirit that allows them to provide the love, nurture, and support that black children need by building positive and caring relationships with students. The creative spirit that my women have comes from their connection to a prophetic religious tradition. Reflecting on the black spiritual women of my research and the roads they traveled, it is clear that their faith and trust in a spiritual relationship was the compelling force that brought them to their present stations as spiritual leaders.

I find the themes of a *supportive home and black mother, nurturing community, black church, spirituality, oral tradition, teachers and leaders* to emerge throughout this dissertation. I present summaries of these themes here.

Supportive Home and Black Mothers: Sources of Strength

Children, I come back today
To tell you a story of the long dark way
That I had to climb, that I had to know
In order that the race might live and grow
(Hughes, 1959, p. 288)

The black mother has a strong creative spirit that supported and protected her, her family, and community through life’s oppressions. “This creative spirit that the black

woman has inherited, and that pops out in wild and unlikely places to this day” (Walker, (1983, pp. 238-239) is strengthened by her steadfast faith and spirituality. The ‘long dark way’ that Langston Hughes speaks of has been the *right of passage* for most black mothers. Black mothers, strong, determined, nurturing, socially aware, loving, caregivers, and “the *mule of the world*, because we have been handed the burdens that everyone else—everyone else—refused to carry” (Walker, 1983, p. 237). African mothers were dehumanized and counted as property by their white captors, yet they managed to survive, downtrodden but strong and determined, spirits abused but steadfast. The black women formed what Patricia Collins (1990) refers to as a “culture of resistance.” African mothers were able to find comfort and peace within the confines of their African family. They formed relationships within their families that would allow them to escape the inhumane treatment they received outside the home, and reestablished families that had been broken by the cruelties of enslavement.

The African American mothers helped to promote a culture that was bound together by their common struggles and religious practices. They have been called the “glue that cemented the two things Black folks have always cherished above all others: our families and our faith” (Randolph, 1998, p. 30). Black women have risked life and limb in a struggle for a meaningful existence.

Nurturing Community: I Am Because We Are

Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994) speaks of an African philosophy that suggests, “*I am because we are and because we are, I am*” (p. 69). This worldview advocates a connection between self and others. African American women have lived their lives

governed by the values in this African philosophy. Black women, with a creative spirit of a prophetic religious tradition, have the foresight to understand the urgency of fostering a spiritual community in which we become our brothers' and sisters' keepers. Black women understand that "one's self-identity is therefore always a people identity, or what could be called an . . . extended self," (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 69) and together we stand but divided we all fall. The survival of the black family is dependent upon the survival of the black community.

Like the Biblical story of Hagar, African American women had to struggle against racism and sexism. White men and women and black men inflicted these abuses. From their roles as 'mammies' for the oppressors, to the matriarchs of their families, black women's stories have been infused with suffering and injustices, but through it all they have been powerful and instrumental in raising the black community.

The Black Church: A Prophetic Religious Tradition

A prophetic religious tradition has provided African Americans with answers to questions on black existence and black crisis. Existential questions that focus on the here, the now, and roles in the future such as: 'What is the truth?', 'Who is the I?', and 'What is the quality of the I?' are answered through faith in a prophetic religion with transcendent powers. African Americans found peace, acceptance, equality, and answers in a prophetic religion and it became the foundation of their strength to resist the chains of bondage and struggle for freedom and justice, if not in this world, then in God's home.

The religious tradition that sustained the spiritual black woman, the source that protected her and the black community, is a missing component in the educational

environment. The spiritual black women in my research tell life histories that are full of power, caring, and love for others. The narrators have a powerful message that could benefit society. The women speak about the struggle to give up careers and put their faith in the power of God's calling. One woman speaks of the decision she and her husband made to give up their jobs and move south.

We decided that we would take our chances. We didn't have a job. We didn't have a place to live. We prayed about it and we said we feel God is leading us [south], so we are going to go. So one day we packed up and we just came here to kind of look around and we stayed a week and God opened doors for us and we were able to find a beautiful home to live in and were able to get a job.

Oral Tradition: A Language of Their Own

Delores Williams (1993) argues, "The greatest truth of black women's survival and quality of life struggle is that they have worked without hesitation and with all the energy they could muster" (p. 239). Black women had to struggle for an existence in a world that not only devalued, but also silenced them. Through an oral tradition, black women developed a language to validate their experiences, give them a place in church and the right to a meaningful history. Black men and women transformed the white man's language into one of black vernacular, which was expressed through an oral tradition, and allowed for personal power in a system of white patriarchal control.

Teachers: The Crisis of Poor Students

A culture of connectedness and empowerment for poor students must be promoted. For 430 years, African Americans have relied upon and been sustained by a prophetic black religious tradition. Looking at the crisis of poor students today, a return

to power of a religious tradition is critical as poor students are struggling for justice in a classroom that is rendering them invisible.

Neglecting to recognize students' individuality is a means of negating the importance and value of personal experiences. Poor children, especially poor black children, are being denied personal experiences in the educational environment. There is a desperate need for teachers who have a "concern for care and connectedness" (Casey, 1990, p. 301). Teachers must be willing to recognize differences and respect and value students for who they are and understand that all children want to be loved.

Leaders: Leading With a Spiritual Focus

Historically, the black prophetic religious tradition has been the agent for social activism. Three of the largest areas of socialization for the black community have been family, school, and church. Most of the civil rights leaders came out of the prophetic religious tradition and strategies for the movement were actually planned in a church.

During the Civil Rights Movement, social activists risked their homes, their livelihoods, and their families. Most of the outspoken leaders were independent ministers who had little fear of losing their jobs in the struggle for justice and equality. The greatest risk of movement was the eminent fear of losing a life, but strong leaders from all walks of life emerged within the movement.

Regardless of the leadership styles, the black prophetic religious leaders, both women and men, can basically be characterized as being socially aware, deeply rooted in community, respected and trusted, and courageous. Women laid their lives on the line and their courage and faith were challenged as strong as the men. But black women were

victims of sexism and for the most part, they were relegated to supportive positions as bridge leaders.

Most of the formal leadership came from the men in the church, and women did not have access to formal leadership. They “utilized frame bridging, amplification, extension, and transformation to foster ties between the social movement and the community” (Robnett, 1997, p. 19).

Black and white women provided the movement with a leadership that was critical in the outreach for community involvement. Black women understood the importance of education in the success of community growth and dedicated their lives to the uplift of the race, by reaching back to pull up the children.

One of the women in my research speaks to power of a God who brought her from the brink of disaster to her current role as a religious leader.

I have been everywhere, just telling people about what God has done for me, and the goodness of the Lord. You know, I’ve just . . . I preach the Gospel, and I said, ‘Whoever would have thought that God would take somebody like me and use me. Whoever would have thought that?’ That little girl who was just laughing her head off on the side of the bed that day, that He would one day use me. That He would choose me. But I certainly do appreciate Him.

“In the final analysis, the message is clear: they trusted the end to God, every important event in the stories of Hagar and black women turns on this trust” (Williams, 1993, p. 239). Black women leadership has grown out of a prophetic religious tradition with a compelling trust and faith in the transformative powers of God.

Implications for Practice

The problems in the current educational system is that the focus is mainly on educating the 'mind' based on the dominant hegemony of one group, the elitist, those with power to make decision for others. I feel it is time to consider the implications from the theorists. I categorize the presentation of the theorists beginning with those who speak to all poor students, to those who speak only to poor black students, to those who speak to teachers, and those who speak to all. I feel this approach can heal injustices for all students.

Ruby Payne (2001)

I find a lack of understanding towards human differences and cultural diversity in schools today. Poor students are being disconnected from and dropping out of school at an alarming rate because they are not receiving what they need inside the educational institution. Ruby Payne argues that poverty negatively affects students' academic performance and "the primary motivation for their success will be in their relationships" (p. 146). If educators are to save the children and in return provide for the future, teachers must learn how to reach all students. How can a society learn to live together without love and respect for each other? Ruby Payne offers these key points:

- 1. An individual brings with him/her the hidden rules of the class in which he/she was raised. Even though the income of the individual may rise significantly, many of the patterns of thought, social interaction, cognitive strategies, etc., remain with the individual.**
- 2. Schools and businesses operate from middle-class norms and use the hidden rules of middle class. These norms and hidden rules are not directly taught in schools or in businesses.**

3. For our students to be successful, we must understand their hidden rules and teach them the rules that will make them successful at school and at work.
4. We can neither excuse students nor scold them for not knowing; as educators we must teach them and provide support, insistence, and expectations. (Payne, 2001, p. 11)

Payne has an understanding of the values of poor children and strategies to overcome the obstacles.

Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994)

Ladson-Billings promotes the concept of “culturally relevant teaching.” She wants teachers to remember the strong culture of African American children when they are working with them and keep them in mind. Ladson-Billings says teachers should be aware that “they are teaching children who are heirs to a great tradition of art, music, dance, science, invention, oratory, and so on” (p. 139). To help students dream become a reality, Ladson-Billings offers these suggestions:

1. Recruit teacher candidates who have expressed an interest and a desire to work with African American students.
2. Provide educational experiences that help teachers understand the central role of culture.
3. Provide teacher candidates with opportunities with opportunities to critique the system in ways that will help them choose a role as either agent of change or defender of the status quo.
4. Conduct student teaching over a longer period of time and in a more controlled environment.
5. Honor and respect the students’ home culture. (Ladson-Billings, 1994, pp. 131-138)

Sharon Quint (1994)

Quint presents the story of Carole Williams, an African American principal in Seattle as the creator of change in the school. Williams' philosophy is that in order to meet the needs of the whole child, the parents' needs must also be met. She promotes the welfare of homeless children and their families because she understands the two are connected. She has developed a program that meets the needs of homeless children inside and outside the institution of the school.

George Noblit (1993)

Noblit speaks about power and how it should be used to confirm, not disconfirm others in his ethic of caring theory. "Power used in the moral service of others and a caring relation power does not render the other into an object but rather maintains and promotes the other as subject. Power is used to confirm and not disconfirm, the other" (Noblit, 1993, p. 36). Power does not belong to an individual, but to the group, only as long as they are together.

Kathleen Casey (1990 and 1993)

Casey (1990) speaks of "teachers' concerns for care and connectedness" and challenges the lack of nurture in a public discourse. Casey's (1993) study focuses on the notion of motherhood, nurture, authority, and dependence in education. The black women in Casey's study speak of a language of social activism. The lives of her narrators are "grounded in particular social relationships, and their transformative activities" (Casey, 1993, p. 158). Casey argues, "The politically progressive educator can 'never forget to remain in contact' with those in subordinate social positions, for it is here that she finds

the source of the problems” (p. 161). Casey places emphasis on relationships and says, “The relationship between the teacher and the student is *active and reciprocal*” (p. 162).

Michael Lerner (2000)

If the goal of education is to ensure your competitive advantage in the marketplace, you will educate in the way that we current educate. The consequences: huge amounts of unhappiness, a population that has few of the skills that would make it possible for them to access the richness of a spiritual life, and a society that thinks being rational means being selfish, materialistic, and cynical. (Lerner, 2000, pp. 233-234)

Lerner argues, “The world is continually being recreated by each one of us, and we must never minimize the amount of power we have. But neither should we forget that we are just one part of a vast picture” (p. 279). Lerner advocates an emancipatory spirituality that allows for the education of others “with love and compassion.” Lerner argues, “Only through fully experiencing our own emotions can we free our fears enough to be truly conscious of the needs of others” (p. 170).

Svi Shapiro (1995)

Shapiro suggests, “When schools become places concerned with the meaning of citizenship an democracy rather than test scores and success, the educational agenda comes to be about matters of self and social awareness and the care for life” (p. 54). I feel if the educational system reaches this stage of social awareness, the dropout rates for poor students will decrease and the disconnection that is so prevalent in society will diminish.

After all is said and done, so what? In the next section, I summarize the importance and power of relationships that the theorists advocate.

The Power of Relationships

I feel education should create an environment for students to grow, mature, and blossom both internally and externally; one that creates change through empowering. The more students are involved in a connected curriculum, the more meaning, direction, and personal empowerment they will have over their own lives. I believe the more educators that walk in the spirit of a religious tradition with a discourse of love, humility, trust, and horizontal relationships, the closer the path to a humanizing curriculum becomes.

It saddens me to see policy makers offering a band-aid for such a gaping wound, with the sacrificial offer of a character education program that emphasizes morality once month with the ‘word of the month.’ I believe the problem is much bigger and it must begin with the people who have the most influence on students, the teachers.

I am not advocating that every teacher must have the religious tradition that African Americans have used in their struggle for survival. What I am promoting is the “power of intense connectedness [relationships] that is informed by truths, armed with tools of resistance, and moved by faith in justice, and struggles without end” (Collins, 1998, p. 200). I recognize the strength of a prophetic religious tradition and find it to meet all the criteria of which Collins speaks. I saw it move in the life histories of my narrators as they moved from the brink of disaster in their personal lives to an outreach ministry to the downtrodden.

I saw them reach from the dark abyss of sin relying on a trust and faith in a transformative power. I was privy to the importance of the relationships they had with teachers, family members, and the spirit of God in guiding and directing their lives. If the

power of supportive, loving, and unselfish relationships brought the enslaved out of bondage, brought my narrators from the paths of destruction, then surely it is worth investigating as a means of saving the future, God's children.

It is my hope that the life stories from my spiritual black narrators will contribute to move education towards a connected curriculum with teachers who value the significance of caring relationships.

Black people's spirituality—if acknowledged and consciously used—could be an awesome force. “Even functioning as it has in a less-than-ideal manner under crippling circumstances, it has been a potent vehicle for good . . . [but] we must progress beyond these hip and humanizing externals into an even more spiritualized political consciousness” (Hull, 2001, p. 242).

It is time to recognize and give voice to poor students' struggles for meaning and understanding, recognizing limitations and inequities, but promoting relationships that will lead to a critical consciousness to nurture and love, against all odds.

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