



SENIORS, ELDERS, AND GRANDPARENTS DAY

CULTURAL RESOURCES

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I. Historical Background

Throughout the course of history in the African Diaspora, elders have held a central role in the building and preserving of community. We even have evidence of this in the Bible as Jethro, Moses' African father-in-law, extends his support to Moses and equips him for more effective leadership. Moses benefited from the African worldview, as Jethro helped Moses as a leader to recognize his own need for community in leading God's people. As a result, Moses formed a council of elders, similar to those that have strengthened and held together African societies for centuries.

Historically, members of the African American community have cherished seniors, elders, and grandparents as a stabilizing force, mitigating against the burden of oppression, with many African Americans viewing as commonplace the vital role of elders in the African American family system. Yet, however commonplace intergenerational interdependence between elders and others is within African American family systems, the contributions of elders to the well-being of community members is often foreign to and underestimated by mainstream American communities.

On a national level, this disparate understanding of the African American family was first made obvious when the controversial Moynihan Report was released in March 1965. On the one hand, the author, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, assistant secretary of labor to President Johnson, accurately named slavery and discrimination as key elements destructive to the African American family and called for government intervention with efforts to stabilize black families. This was not the controversial element of the report, and many social scientists of all hues had long agreed upon this finding. The controversy arose as a result of the report's negative depiction of the matriarchal family structure commonplace within the African American community and the identification of this structure as an example of the tangible pathology of the deteriorating "Negro Family."¹ With this assertion, Moynihan made a cardinal error equivalent to talking about African American peoples' Mamas, Grandmothers, Aunties, and Big Mamas, and there was backlash.

The backlash to this "unflattering depiction of black family life" consisted of verbal and oppositional literature.² This literature lifted distinct adaptive strengths of the African American family, families that were and remain disproportionately plagued by structural racism, which diminishes employment and educational opportunities and leaves individuals susceptible to unemployment, poverty, and overall societal fragility. These counter narratives described instances of resilient, egalitarian, strong family ties nurtured by an extended kinship network and religious values, which were often preserved by community elders. It is these elders whom God promises to take care of and enlists the wider community in being the hands of the divine in doing so, as the protection of these elders often equals the preservation of the community.



While the role of the caring and protective African American elder is largely gendered and symbolized by mothers, grandmothers, aunties, and other female extended family members, male seniors in the African American community also assume roles seen as critical to the survival of an oppressed people. Uncles, grandfathers, brothers, teachers, ministers, and coaches are increasingly being relied upon to nurture young men whose fathers are absent or too young to care for them independent of guidance from more experienced men. African American men from all walks of life often share about male mentors and role models

who made a difference in their lives in the absence of or supplemental to the care of their biological fathers.



In her study on elderly black women in families and churches, Jane Peterson identified several key roles that matriarchs play, including continuing “the oral tradition of passing on cultural meanings, such as the value of children and self-reliance, to succeeding generations,” instructing others about the importance of human relationships, not becoming too attached to possessions but obtaining an education, which cannot be taken away, building reliable relationships, and the importance of religion. In this study, the grandmother figure especially, a title that can be assigned to any female senior, is highly respected and seen as a “source of love, strength, and stability for the black family. . . a steady, supporting influence, as well as a connecting link between branches of the extended family.”³ While this study focuses on female elders, the males in the community of study were found to assume the same roles just as effectively.



Grandparents especially have historically enhanced parents’ ability to care for their children, providing childcare, financial support, moral and character education, and a

sense of identity; acting as surrogate or co-parents; and operating out of a sense of the history of overcoming and a philosophy of unity that enables the community to endure.

II. The Modern Burdens of Our Elders



Despite the political, social, and economic advances of the African American community since the abolition of slavery and the Civil Rights movement, significant numbers of African American families remain fragile, and the burden on grandparents, seniors, and community elders has increased. In addition to the everyday burdens that oppressed communities endure, new socio-cultural realities are placing a heavier burden on grandparents. The crack epidemic in the 1980s, HIV/AIDS, mass incarceration, and the ever-present issue of unwed teens having children have forced grandparents to take on primary caregiving roles, not just supplementary roles.

The most current U.S. Census Bureau data indicates that the number of children who live with their grandparents has reached 4.9 million within the past ten years. This is seven percent of all students under 18 years of age! Providing this care brings joy and challenges for grandparents, “Most of these grandparents and other relative caregivers

will tell you they gain great joy from their role. But they also face financial, health, housing, education, and work challenges that often foil their retirement plans.”⁴

This change is so widespread that one of the largest school districts in the nation recently changed its registration policy to allow grandparents and other caregivers to enroll students in school. Not doing so would have prevented a large number of students from attending school. As well, school social work departments and school personnel are increasingly tailoring support services and parent education initiatives to the needs of grandparents who are the primary caregivers of their grandchildren.⁵

Added to these increased burdens is the fact that persons are becoming grandparents at an earlier age. They are no longer necessarily community elders possessing the life experiences and financial resources of grandparents in past generations.⁶ Therefore, they, too, are in need of support from seniors and elders within the community. This trend of younger people becoming grandparents appears among baby boomers in the United States who are becoming grandparents in their late forties compared to 1985 when the average baby boomer became a grandparent in his or her mid-sixties. The age of grandparents dips into the thirties in impoverished communities in the United Kingdom, as well as the United States.⁷

Even so, God’s promise remains: God will care for the elderly. As God’s hands, how will we engage in supporting and equipping a new generation of grandparents, seniors, and elders, who themselves are in need of support? God’s promise does not shrink in the face of modern realities; however, our community’s responsibilities will increase. Today, the role of seniors, grandparents, and elders remains significant and relevant and God’s promise to them remains intact.⁸

III. Personal Testimony—Me and My Grandmother

My mother was widowed when my brother, sister, and I were 6, 3, and 2 years old respectively. After my father died in a car accident, my maternal grandmother, Irene, moved in and lived with us until she passed away seven years ago. Her mental and physical health had been steadily declining for several years prior to her death. When she passed away, I was in my early thirties and in graduate school. On the day that she died, I was traveling back home for the weekend to facilitate a Sunday School teacher training at my home church. When my plane landed, I retrieved a voicemail from my sister saying that Grandma had transitioned while I was in the air. That evening would be the first time in my entire life that my grandmother was not present in our home when I arrived. Hers was a constant presence that held our home together.

I cannot be sure whether this was a formal arrangement between my grandmother and my mother or if it had just evolved. Whatever the case, my grandmother was always there in the home when we came home from school, came in from playing outside, returned from work, or came to visit when we grew up and moved away. She was there at night while my mother worked the graveyard shift. She was there when we got up in the morning and went to school. She was there when we went to church and after we returned from

worship anticipating Sunday dinner. Grandma was always there—watching, protecting, providing, guiding, and standing in the gap for my single mother and deceased father. While her presence was something so commonplace that I never stopped to consider the many ways that it has impacted me, I am keenly aware of a time in my life when her perspective, a perspective that only the elderly have lived long enough to obtain, saved my spirit, and my life.

When I was eleven years old, perhaps driven by the nine-year absence of my father's affection, curiosity, and certainly ignorance about sex, as well as naïveté, I became pregnant. I gave birth to my first child at the age of twelve. At ninety-five pounds, my pregnancy was difficult to detect. It went unnoticed and unannounced until I was well into my fifth month. My grandmother, however, was the first to notice that my body was changing, and she pointed it out to my mother. As the reality set in and word began to spread, shame descended upon me and followed me around like ominous clouds. The stares and whispers became unbearable, the gossip insidious. Confusion and denial clouded my adolescent mind and despite continuing to be a high-functioning student, my upset must have showed because my grandmother began to sidle up next to me and whisper words of encouragement in my ear when others were not around.

She made sure that I understood that while having sex at that point in my life was unwise and outside of God's will, that God's love toward my baby or me would not be compromised by the circumstances of her birth. Grandma took the bite out of the malicious gossip of others. She made it a point to be sure that I knew that I was not the first to have sex prematurely and endure an unplanned pregnancy. It was just that others were buffered from public scrutiny because they chose abortion, adoption (official or unofficial), or shotgun weddings in the wake of their unplanned pregnancy. Grandma also pointed out that there were well-respected, elderly women in our community who gave birth very young, as well. It was just their standing as elders and the passing of time that drew the attention away from this fact. She did not share any of this to build me up by tearing others down, nor did she share any of this with me to justify unwise choices around sex. Grandma was trying to put things into perspective for me so that I could continue to walk tall and persevere. She provided a perspective that often only elders possess, and it worked!

Even while I was on maternity leave from school, I continued to excel academically. My mother and my grandmother incorporated my daughter into our family unit, modeling good parenting for me and providing for her where I could not. I finished middle school, graduated high school, and obtained post-secondary degrees from Harvard and Tufts University. My daughter graduated from Florida International University in May 2012, and to date, has broken the cycle of single parenthood that I started.

It seemed that my grandmother was sick for a long time by the time she passed away. One day I became curious about just how long she had suffered. I asked my mother when she had become ill. My mother's response surprised me. She said that Grandma had never really been herself since fifteen years prior to her death, when she witnessed the death and burial of my brother, her youngest grandson. My mother went on to declare if

my grandmother was ever going to recover from my brother's death, that recovery was forever thwarted when Grandma buried her own daughter, my mother's youngest sister, less than two years later. Gun violence and drug addiction were the causes of my brother's and my aunt's deaths respectively. Born in 1922, my Grandmother had seen and survived post-slavery trauma and segregation-era racism on her family and community. However, witnessing these forces morph into self-destruction by her family was apparently something that she could not bear.

Convinced that my grandmother deserved the best care available when she was no longer able to care for herself, my mother bent over backwards to ensure that the end of my grandmother's life was characterized by comfort and dignity. My mother's hands became God's hands in honoring God's promise to take care of the elderly.

IV. Poems and Proverbs

For many years, this anonymous poem has been recited at graduation celebrations within the African American community and beyond. An elder, who was denied the privilege of a college education, does back-breaking domestic work to give her son the opportunity that she did not have. As he acquires his education, she reminds him of the humanitarian value of giving back, an expectation of those to whom much is given. Her lack of formal education is apparent, as is the height of her love, the weight of her convictions, the burden of her sacrifice, and depth of her wisdom.



Bring Dat College Home

Anonymous

I's been sending you to college now for six or seven years,
Since the mornin' dat you lef' me I's been sheddin' bitter tears.
But I thought of dat ole sayin' "sunshine comes behin' de storm,"
So my young man, when you finish, you jes bring dat college home.

I's been scrubbin' by the washtub, I's been sweatin' in de fiel,
Many times I had to borry, an I almost had to steal.
But I hold on to my patience, beat dem soap suds into foam,
Waiting for you to bring dat college home.

Folks here say you gwine be nothin', you jes foolin' time away,
But I shake my finger an' tell dem "wait until some future day."
So nex' June when dogwoods blossom and de bees begin to swarm,
I'll be waitin' for to see you when you bring dat college home.

Don't you min' dese folks here talkin', dey ain't half as good as you,
And deys bound to nag at good folks, dat's all dey know how to do.
I's got wood enough for winter, plenty clothes to keep me warm,
So then nex' June you bring dat college home.

I don't mean bring home the buildings or to wreck dem good folks' place,
Bring home Christian education and dat high tone college grace.
You jes grab dem fessor's habits, hole 'em tight thru win' an' storm,
Den when you get your diploma, take 'em all and light for home.

Show dese folks dat you got 'em by the speeches dat you make,
By the spec's dat you'll be wearin' an' de way your coattail shake.
But don't git above de people, settle down, and cease to roam,
Be a light in your own village, be a college right here at home.

Proverbs and Sayings

The elders of a community are the voice of God.

—Nigerian proverb

What the elders see while sitting the young ones standing on their toes won't see.

—African proverb

Some people, no matter how old they get, never lose their beauty—they merely move it from their faces to their hearts.

—Martin Buxbaum

V. Songs

In 1997, Kenneth, "Babyface" Edmonds, Tracey Edmonds, and Robert Teitel released a modern African American classic film, Soul Food, centered on a family that shared dinner at Mother Joe's every Sunday. Raised as a tight-knit family of three girls, these adult women had allowed tension and divisions to arise among them. The family dinner seemed to be the only thing holding them together.

When Mother Joe slips into a coma, the family begins to fall apart. However, Mother Joe charged a grandchild with keeping the family together. After a tenuous attempt, he succeeds and the family pulls together and stays together after Mother Joe's death. Reflecting on Mother Joe's love feeds this songwriter's soul.

A Song for Mama YouTube:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tap90z44WR8&feature=related>

by Boys II Men

You taught me everything
And everything you've given me
I always keep it inside
You're the driving force in my life, yeah

There isn't anything
Or anyone that I can be
And it just wouldn't feel right
If I didn't have you by my side

You were there for me to love and care for me
When skies were grey
Whenever I was down
You were always there to comfort me

And no one else can be what you have been to me
You will always be you always will be the girl
In my life for all times

Chorus:

Mama, mama you know I love you
Oh you know I love you
Mama, mama you're the queen of my heart
Your love is like
Tears from the stars
Mama, I just want you to know
Lovin' you is like food to my soul

Yes it is (5x)

You're always down for me
Have always been around for me even when I was bad
You showed me right from my wrong
Yes you did

And you took up for me
When everyone was downin' me
You always did understand
You gave me strength to go on

There was so many times

Looking back when I was so afraid
And then you come to me
And say to me I can face anything

And no one else can do
What you have done for me
You'll always be
You will always be the girl in my life

Chorus

Never gonna go a day without you
Fills me up just thinking of you
I'll never go a day without my mama

Chorus

Yes you are.⁹

The following two hymns reflect the faith and endurance of elders, grandparents, and seniors. They can lean on the promise that God will take care of them, and they have also lived by faith long enough to know and encourage others that whatever communities or individuals are facing, it too shall pass. They can pass this assurance on with certainty because of their mature faith and past experiences.

God Will Take Care of You

by Civilla D. Martin

Be not dismayed whate'er betide,
God will take care of you;
Beneath His wings of love abide,
God will take care of you.

Refrain:

God will take care of you,
Through every day, o'er all the way;
He will take care of you,
God will take care of you.

Through days of toil when heart doth fail,
God will take care of you;
When dangers fierce your path assail,
God will take care of you.

All you may need He will provide,
God will take care of you;

Nothing you ask will be denied,
God will take care of you.

No matter what may be the test,
God will take care of you;
Lean, weary one, upon His breast,
God will take care of you.¹⁰

I'm So Glad Trouble Don't Last Always

Traditional Negro Spiritual

Refrain:

I'm so glad
Troubles don't last always
I'm so glad
Troubles don't last always
I'm so glad
Troubles don't last always
O my Lord! O my Lord!
What shall I do?

Christ told the blind man
To go to pool and bathe
Christ told the blind man
To go to pool and bathe
Christ told the blind man
To go to pool and bathe
O my Lord! O my Lord!
What shall I do?

Christ told Nicodemus
He must be born again
Christ told Nicodemus
He must be born again
Christ told Nicodemus
He must be born again
O my Lord! O my Lord!
What shall I do?

I'm so glad
my soul's got a resting place.
I'm so glad
my soul's got a resting place.
I'm so glad
my soul's got a resting place.

Trouble don't last always.
I'm so glad.
Trouble don't last always.
I'm so glad.
Trouble don't last always.
Oh, my Lord. Oh, my Lord.
What shall I do?

I'm so glad
I got my 'ligion in time.
I'm so glad
I got my 'ligion in time.
I'm so glad
I got my 'ligion in time.
Oh, my Lord. Oh, my Lord.
What shall I do?¹¹

VI. Creating a Memorable Learning Moment

Do an Oral History Project

Instructions

Have young people utilize technology to capture the wisdom of their elders concerning important issues and share their creation with the congregation and community. A team of young people (ages 18–25) will interview an elder about challenging circumstances and record their answers. There should be several young people on the team who are technologically savvy. They will edit the video and include pictures, music, Scripture, and captions. Share the video during church, on the church's website and/or Facebook page, and at an elders, seniors, and grandparents celebration.

Background

The lives of elders can be used as sacred texts through which God is still speaking. This generation has many of the same challenges that elders have faced and overcome in faith. This activity provides young people the opportunity to glean from the experiences of elders to assist in grappling with the challenges of daily life.

Team Members and Equipment Needed

Video recording device (high quality small video camera, costing less than \$100), interview questions, seniors to interview, camera person(s), interviewer(s), video editor(s), and website or other platform to share final video.

Sample Interview Questions

Background Questions:

- What is your name?

- When and where were you born?
- Where do you live?
- What is your family like?
- What is or was your profession?
- When did you join this church and in what ministries have you been and/or are involved?

Questions about a Life Challenge:

- Describe a time when you grappled with _____. (Fill in the blank with one specific issue about which individuals in the church are seeking answers. For example: unemployment, divorce, racism, teen pregnancy, etc.)
- What was the most difficult part of this experience for you?
- What approach did you use to handle this situation?
- What Scriptures, prayers, biblical teachings, or advice from other believers was particularly helpful to you?
- How was the situation resolved?
- If you could do it over again, would you do anything differently?
- What did you learn?
- What did this situation reveal to you about God?
- What would you tell a young person who is currently grappling with this situation?

Other Bits of Wisdom:

- Is there anything else that you would like to share with young people about this situation or life in general?

VII. Audio Visual Aids

- In “I Wish You Were Here,” singer Jamie Fox pays a heartfelt tribute in song to his Grandmother who raised him. YouTube:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7QpjYrpZwcQ&feature=related>
- Athlete Chris Paul pays tribute to his Grandfather, a source a strength, love, and support to his mother, father, and Chris. VIDEO:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fxwyE5m44x4>
- In “Five Women,” spoken word artist Talaam Acey celebrates five generations of elders who equipped him to become the parent he is today. video:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fPR9J8Xg-IY>

Notes

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11. "I'm So Glad Trouble Don't Last Always." Traditional Negro Spiritual.