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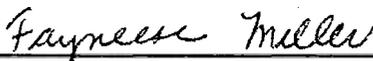
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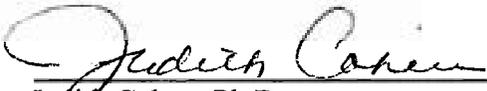
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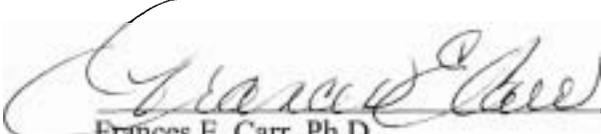
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GIVING RISE TO LEADERSHIP:  
EXPLORING THROUGH CONVERSATION

A Dissertation Presented

by

Laura Barbara Clemmons

to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

The University of Vermont

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Doctor of Education  
Specializing in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

May, 2008

## ABSTRACT

Everyone has conversations. They affect our mind set, challenging our current knowledge and encouraging us to see differently and perhaps respond more broadly. Conversations create change in how we do our work; they impact how we relate to each other, how we may teach each other, how we interact with each other and how we decide to lead others.

To ignore the impact conversations can have on us as individuals is overlooking not only the existence of others, but how others exist. Conversations, and the messages that are within them, play an integral part with how we view ourselves and define our own identity as well as how we place ourselves in our community.

Stories, whether written or oral, carry a significant amount of history and an even more overwhelming piece of power. With the ability to hold an audience captive, they possess a uniqueness to transfer information that can be the cornerstone to creating new policies and programs and can consequently prompt a new leadership that intersects community and individual. Embedded within these stories are those conversations that have the capability to provoke the reader or listener toward new mental and emotional shifts; creating a greater awareness from where one first began.

By use of an autoethnographical approach, I place myself in the position of an informant insider and an analyst outsider (Russell, 1999, p. 14) and lead the reader through the journey of interpreting storytelling as a scholarly practice. Incorporating a journey of self, I integrate a cultural method (Russell, 1999) while guiding the reader through timeless conversations.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I cannot help but reflect back to the beginning of my journey, entering into the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies program at the University of Vermont. My daughter was then just beginning kindergarten and I would encounter her saddened expressions when Thursday's came as we left one another in the early morning times at the bus stop and I greeted her sleeping body at late night.

Six years later, I am completing this walk in my educational journey. Much has shifted and much has changed, but the one constant that has remained was the support and of my family. Never giving me much room to wiggle in self doubt, my parents, Jackson J.W. Clemmons and Lydia Monroe Clemmons, provided unwavering encouragement and love. To my three daughters, with all of their uniqueness and energy, highlighted this journey with creativity. My sisters and brother have mirrored creativity through their personal stories and provided me the important reflection of self determination and accomplishments.

To my committee members, I give tremendous thanks for your understanding, patience, and steadfast support. To Henri, thank you for your help with re-structuring my paper, and to my friends and colleagues – a warm thank you. And of course, to all my culture club members, thank you for the priceless education you provided to me.

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## CHAPTER 1: The Role of Black Racial Identity

### Reflections from a Mirror

My parents were thrilled with the large, long rectangular shaped bathroom on the second floor of our old colonial house. They thought this space just perfect for four girls to share. Although there were moments when we did share this space; holding mini plays in the bathroom, as some of us girls stood inside the tub with the (bathtub) curtain drawn while the other siblings excitedly sat on the long goldenrod colored bench behaving quite well as an audience should be while waiting with anticipation for our production to begin. There was, however, more times than not when this long rectangular bathroom was occupied only by one of us. I reveled in having such a grand, open space available and open only to me, as I am sure my siblings did as well.

I remember being quite young and, having just climbed out of the tub, would stand in front of a mirror that mimicked the shape of our large precious bathroom. What I cannot recall is whether my hair had been washed or if I was taking advantage of being free of clothes as well as having the opportunity to have the feeling of ‘hair’ on my back. This hair, though, was not my own. Not mine at all. It was a towel, wrapped tightly around my head. Whether this towel was pink or green or brown, when I looked into the mirror, I saw beautiful long hair sweeping across my naked back. Thick, no curls. Straight. Soft. Easy to glide my fingers through. I would saunter back and forth from one end of our elongated bathroom to the other end, shaking my head, moving my sweet hair back and forth as it gently stroked my back.

A knock at the door.

My moment of beauty had vanished. I pulled off the towel, pulled my pajamas over my skin, and looked into the mirror. Gone was my beautiful long sweet hair. In its place was the reflection of my tight, short dark afro. More than likely uneven in places from a day's time in front of another long mirror placed downstairs as I, as well as my siblings, had to sit during various periods of the month, while our father plugged in the electric hair trimmer and went round and round our heads, murmuring buzzing noises occupying our ears while cut hair scattered their tiny pieces over my body and left tickling sensations shimmering over my face.

What I did not realize in front of this mirror was the beginning questions and understanding of me; not specifically as a being or a person, but my identity, more specifically (my) racial identity. The mirror reflected back a variety of queries that many times I would naturally feel when outside of my home and in the community. I often found myself mulling through vast and cumbersome thoughts that were projected unto me from classmates, or even strangers in stores; without a word uttered, there was the feeling that they were continuously and silently reaffirming who I was, or thought I was only to find that, in the end, I was not sure myself. As clear as the reflection was in the mirror, so too it seemed were their unsure and sometimes unwelcoming glances, subtle shifts from the limbs of their bodies or, what appeared to be, complete and utter denial of my existence. The mirror provided a stark and honest opinion of what stood before it, and so too did an external community.

### Mirror, Mirror on the Wall

So, what does one do with the straight-forward and one-sided 'identity talk' that can be invisibly generated from either place; mirror or community? If nothing can be

done, then how might this lack of response impact the racial identity of an individual? If there is talk or conversations taking place, then what could these possibly sound like?

I received a call from a parent one day asking if we could meet due to some concerns she had regarding her daughter. An interracial couple, their young seven year-old daughter with thick, curly frizzy hair and dark complexion had been found comparing her image, being reflected from a large dancing studio mirror, to that of her other dance partners. She later commented to her mother about the fact that she was the only one in the class with “dark, dirty skin.” After hearing this story, my intention to having a conversation with the mom was leaning toward exploring this silent and seemingly negative conversation her daughter was having with the one-sided mirror. What evolved instead was the need to have a conversation with the mom about the value and importance of conversations; the importance of having a conversation as it related to racial identity as well as an explorative conversation as to why she was so uncomfortable and seemingly hesitant to fully begin one with her daughter.

I was perplexed at how she questioned herself as to how much she should talk specifically and openly about race to her daughter and soon I found myself becoming minutely frustrated at her ability to dodge the importance of it. Her daughter was, in my opinion, wonderfully approaching her mother with confusion, questions and even sadness about what she looked like as it related to her very white world; seeking answers, asking questions and thus looking for guidance and an understanding of how she ‘fit’ into a world that was not mirroring her (Cooley, 1902). Instead, her mother was wondering about the balance of what to say and how much to say about race and how the world (immediate and otherwise) viewed her daughter. And as she wondered, without perhaps

answering her daughter's perplexed questions, her daughter was, in my opinion, beginning to learn about silence; her questions not going away, only remaining hidden and unasked. This mother's ambiguity toward answering her daughter's questions would only lend themselves to mirror those initial perceptions the daughter had of herself; consisting of hesitation, uncertainty and cautiousness. Tatum (1997) suggests that the early stages of racial identity formation, especially for children of African descent growing up in predominantly white environments, are fraught with an uncertainty and questions. Goffman (1959), in his work on the *looking glass self*, argues that young people constantly look for a reflection of their physical self in the face of significant others.

And so I sat, with puzzlement, and soon realized that there was no mirror in front of me; no reflection of my self being cast back toward me. Instead, what became apparent was that for most of this white parents' life, the world reflected her image and when this did occur, the mirror oftentimes took on a different meaning. It spoke a different language as it conversed to her about race and identity; tales of a privileged position, often accepted, with the ability to move about without fear, hesitation or confusion. The mother's privileged state goes unnoticed (Williams, 1997) and there is no need to reflect on the color of her own skin. Thus, unearthed from this realization, stood a daughter facing an uncharted path toward understanding who she is and what it means to be a black girl and a parents' challenge toward understanding not only how to talk about race, but why it is important.

For myself, I continued to be struck at the mother's view that there was a choice or option to discuss race. The invisible conversations her daughter was having about her

self with the dance studio mirror mimicked mine when I was also young and standing in front of our elongated bathroom mirror. One cannot escape the reflections of mirrors, so we often find ourselves forced to engage in self doubt, questioning our belonging and doubting any beauty our parents said we possessed. Again, however, conversations with mirrors are one-sided. Despite the re-telling of my stories that were similar to those that her daughter lives through, there still remained with this parent a hesitancy, discomfort and questioning on conversing about race.

Her daughter stands as a reminder to those past, current and future realities and truths that many of us have had, at one time or another – wanting to keep quiet, remain hidden and hold in silences of past. I was left thinking about how many one-sided conversations or statements her daughter would encounter (not only from the mirror) about race that would leave her feeling paralyzed and unwelcome and how her mother had the potential to have open, loving and supportive conversations that could combat the negative images and voices that were being projecting from the mirror.

I commented to my sister about how the subject of race became so complicated and confusing; recognizing how privilege can clearly impact what one deems as necessary to discuss, but with us, the *other* group, we have no choice. Race is not a taboo subject, but subject to our survival. We have no ability to decide whether we want to discuss it or not; it is forced on us as well as accepted by us. It is who we are. What was highlighted from my conversations with this parent, as well as from the reflections of my own personal development as a child, is again the importance of breaking the invisible silent conversations that take place in front of mirrors and how this can only aid in a

healthier developmental identity of someone of color (Spencer, Brookins, & Allen, 1985).

Regardless of the invisible and negative comments that can torture our minds as we stand in front of the mirror, these silent conversations do play a part in our racial identity. There is no escaping the mirror; its reflection of an image beats back at us, not leaving any room to imagine anything but what is presented before us. We find ourselves wondering about our nose and its largeness, our lips and their fullness, our hair and its kinkiness. We stand and wonder about ourselves; about who we are and how we fit into a world that can give little to no similar reflection of us at all. Many of the toys we encounter in stores hold little if any resemblance to our facial characteristics, our hair or the color of our skin. Many of the friends who we attend school with do not resemble us – not our teachers, not the storeowners, not the doctors (Spencer, Brookins, & Allen, 1985).

These images of our environment are the beginnings of what Senge (1990) calls an array of mental models which cast, as does the mirror, reflections and thoughts inward as we slowly begin to “unearth and bring forward those internal pictures of my world” (p. 9). I wonder now, as an adult, what I was saying to myself as I stood in front of mirrors. There must have been a fluidity of words, conversations that were taking place, springing from some existing spiritual depth (Bohm, 1998). What were the questions and what were the responses? When self reflecting, I am unable to recall asking my parents about “me” and “us” but I must have wondered if we were the only ones? And where were the others?

## Through the Looking Glass

The mental models we carry from these unfamiliar, or possibly even non-existent exchanges, causes one to have an inability to think effectively (which Senge, 1990, sees as an important piece to developing a mental model), as well as an inability to think “openly about our identity;” piecing together any of the questions and lingering confusion we may have accumulated within our thoughts as we are left unattended with, what feels like, a “monstrous creativity of ignorance and wild imagination” (Williams, 1997, p. 9) that plays out in front of mirrors.

There is little awareness that as our identity is being consumed with confusion and self doubt, we are continually haunted as we become older. We can continue to feel like an outcast, as if we do not belong and then seemingly disappearing. We feel isolated, separate, and almost evaporate into walls and corners of rooms as we linger there, quietly and without detection. This is often our safety. This is often our truth.

Through our journey of self identity and self acceptance (Tatum, 1997), there can be a spiritual awakening, a place of two dimensions. The first dimension casts us into the depths of shadows of monsters where shadows become a negative internal force that molds our identity. They give rise to memories of fear, questions and insecurities (Moxley, 2000). The second dimension simultaneously coats us with a desire and eagerness to seek out some connectedness and sense of community (Moxley, 2000); exploring our identity and involving ourselves with others who also are walking a similar journey (Tatum).

Much of this early and current exploration of self and identity reflect William Cross’ (1991) Racial Identity Stages. His work, I believe, is itself a story not only about

what is happening in front of a mirror and all the conversations that are occurring, but also parallel to a journey through a looking glass; discovering the advancement and paths that exist on the other side of the mirror that (can) lead to recognition, understanding and hopefully an eventual acceptance of self. As in *Alice through the Looking Glass*' (Carroll, 1871) so too does a story exist beneath the surface of reflections (Goffman, 1959).

## CHAPTER 2: Internalizing Blackness

### So, Where Do I Fit In?

My daughter was a bit over three years old when she emerged from her ‘playroom’ with one of her toys. It was this new 21<sup>st</sup> century version of paper dolls. Instead of a paper doll that had been cut out along with a variety of cutout paper clothes with small square pegs on all sides for keeping them in place, her dolls were magnetic. There were two dolls, one of color and one white. The doll of color had dark short, soft wavy hair and the Caucasian doll had short blonde hair. Both dolls had their hands folded behind their backs, so only their upper arms were visible. They came on a large square tablet that was decorated with the scene of a plush and colorful living room. In addition to these two dolls were about five outfits, as well as some accessories that included purses and hats. My daughter called for me as she came running to me through our short hallway. With her she carried this doll set, and once she reached me she let the entire pieces slide from her petite toddler hands onto our coffee table. I began to pick up her pieces, placing them back on the large colorful magnetic room and haphazardly dressing the dolls in as many outfits as I could.

With clear annoyance and a shortness of breath as if she had already explained her flustered behavior and wild searching cry for me she asked “Why do all the dolls’ clothes only have white hands or gloves showing?” I looked at her, clearly dumbfounded, as I was not expecting to answer this question, but instead expecting to answer something about why one dress was prettier than another. So, I clumsily shifted all the dresses out in a row and studied them as she silently looked on, moving her hands over mine and creating new lines and spaces between one outfit and another. She was

right. All the dresses had either hands of whiteness showing or had white gloves on. None had brown hands showing, nor brown or dark gloves. What captured her attention was, in essence, recognizing that a piece of her identity (Tatum, 1997), the color of her skin, had been minimized to almost a state of non-existence.

What became significant in this moment was that (despite her very young age), I had the internal knowledge to know the importance of creating (or, in this instance, re-creating) a positive reflection of herself, thus re-affirming for her a positive sense of self identity (Tatum, 1997). I went and pulled out some crayons and, on our small coffee table, my daughter and I transformed all the hands of whiteness into warm shades of brown.

Where did this awareness come from? Perhaps my own identity developmental stage of *immersion/emersion* (Cross, 1991) attributed me to recognizing the importance of positive identity and therefore placed me in a position of being more race conscious about my daughter's socialization experiences (Tatum, 1997); providing me the knowledge to attend to any of her identity concerns (Cross, 1991). If I did not talk to her about matters of (racial) identity and an acceptance of self then how could I expect her to not only make sense of belonging to a community that did not reflect her, but also challenge and answer back those invisible conversations that would speak to her as she stood in front of mirrors (Tatum).

### Entering Into the Light by Embracing Darkness

If we reflect back to our own youthful (and current) encounters with the mirror, perhaps it is our childhood mental models or memories that not only dictate how we assist others with making sense of their world, but also determine how we decide to take

action by means of conversation (Senge, 1990). Freire (1970) says that, “Without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication there can be no true education” (p. 93). We do not *dis-member* or forget truths about relationships we have had between ourselves and the realities that exist in our community (Palmer, 1983). We also remember the necessity of introduction (Hollins & Spencer, 1990); for my self it was how to introduce my daughter into a community as well as how the community may respond to her introduction. It was important for her to understand how she would be entering into a world and how the world would see her; as a Black child and a Black woman. Grounded in *Endarkened Feminist Epistemology* (Dillard, 2000), there existed an opportunity to share travels offered from this external world through my own experiences as a Black woman (Dillard), and walk beside her as long as I could as she journeyed through (her) Blackness.

In order for there to be an offering of companionship during someone’s journey, it is often necessary for us to confront any shadows while at the same time accepting them as a part of ourselves (Goldenberg, 1978); coming to understand that if avoidance is tempted, it could hinder any ability effectively led (Moxley, 2000). Through *Endarkened Feminist Epistemology* (Dillard, 2000), the focus rests on truth and how it is necessary for any teacher, or leader or researcher, to be truly responsible for asking for new ways of looking into reality of others that opens our own lives to view (Dillard).

The knowledge and understanding that has been gathered throughout our childhood has the capability to lead us towards guiding and teaching others, allowing us to enter into a world as it is. The silence that at times beckons us to follow; those moments of hesitation that leak into conversations can only emphasize how we as

individuals continue to work and strive toward accepting and understanding who we are (Griffin, 1960). This silence can also provide us with an understanding of our world, and the loneliness we may feel from it only enhances our understanding of who we are (Palmer, 1983) and who we came to be.

As we continue to question and challenge the silence, we are, without realizing it, slipping into Black feminist thought (Collins, 1987) and becoming a living part of a critical social theory. Our responses and approach to begin conversations can be found embedded in an *Endarkened Feminist* approach (Dillard, 2000); viewpoints that are “personally and culturally defined beliefs” that render the promoter responsible to and for the well-being of “members of a community” (Dillard, p. 672). The silent conversations that oftentimes accompany us during those many years of standing in front of mirrors, with fear and anger that not only forced us to listen (Palmer, 1983) but also provides a window of opportunity for dialogue to come forth.

By integrating early childhood memories with a clearer understanding of our exploration on self identity, we are able to stimulate a new consciousness that seems to utilize a “Black women’s everyday, taken-for-granted knowledge” (Hill-Collins, 1990, p. 32). These seemingly never ending complex conversations that forever dance within our thoughts as we stand in front of mirrors can unexpectedly take on a new formation (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1994). Dressed with rhythm, these new conversations provide an opportunity for us to guide others toward an understanding of developing identity, as well as continually exploring the diverse ways in which we tell our truths (Vaill, 1983).

*Endarkened Feminist Epistemology* fuels the importance for such dialogue and exploration to occur; “There is value in the telling, in invading those silent moments

often unspoken, in order to be understood” (Dillard, 2000, p. 673). From what I could remember, my daughter was unlike me at this early young age in that she began a conversation that challenged her child reality, and from there created new images and new definitions as well. She sought, without knowing, to shatter the silent and one-sided conversations that could easily have taken place in front of a mirror. She had presented me with a toy and wanted to understand why more of what she looked like was not being represented. This may not have been what she actually verbalized, but it was the knowledge and understanding she was seeking. I knew that by sharing with her stories about my own childhood realities, I could, in essence, prepare her for a society that was vast as well as complicated (Dillard, 2000). I began to wonder about how my parents were parented; what conversations they were invited into within their home, what conversations they sought out and what conversations they were privy to within their external community.

From this standpoint, it could be argued that my parents’ reality, being raised in a predominantly minority culture, living as adults in a predominantly white environment, led them to take a protective racial preparation approach in raising their children (Miller, 1988).

### Complexity in Messages

Many meanings that I lifted from stories emphasized strength, courage and loving yourself. The messages were powerful, as if there was some kindred relationship to the words which were being privately uttered to my self.

The stories, or life notes (Bell-Scott, 1994) written, told, or presented as ways to share an idea or convey a message and can also be seen as a way to understand and make

sense of a world situated around us. Gathering stories or research (Griffin, 1960) can only assist us with designing how to begin teaching and encouraging *others* to explore who they are within themselves as well as to the outside world. This spiritual search for understanding encourages us to “look somewhere other than in scientific findings” (Vaill, 1998, p. 179).

Dillard (2000) uses *Endarkened Feminist Epistemology* to explore and explain the world of blackness. She recounts Bell-Scott’s (1994) usage of life notes as “specialized knowledges which theorize a standpoint of and for African American women that situates knowledge and action in the cultural spaces of which they arose” (Dillard, p. 670). Life notes can be used to construct personal narratives, giving meaning to ones’ life and the life of others by constructing “African women’s voices as specialized bodies of knowledge” (Dillard, p. 664). Consequently any individual can self create a knowledge that has the ability to be used to positively impact their relationship with others.

Strong and powerful messages are often not ones that many people of color completely believe or trust, especially during our youth (Yosso, 2005). Instead, we often question ourselves and are therefore left with our courage faltering. Despite the love we receive from family or friends, there is frequently something that seems to get in the way; a psychological depression (West, 1994) or feeling of personal worthlessness that tends to crowd out messages of love and strength and leaves behind a feeling of doubt and confusion. This emotional state is proposed by Cornell West (1994) as a *nihilistic threat* and faced by many Black Americans. This nihilistic threat or lack of self worth is not what I felt nor did I recognize it as such; thus, I define it differently. Instead, this nihilistic threat can be viewed as a (negative) pursuit against spirit (Moxley, 2000);

stripping away any positive sense of self identity into one that is too weak to appreciate our selves and our uniqueness. The nihilistic threat of this period is more of a spiritual warfare of epidemic proportions; a disease of the soul (West, p. 29) created and spread by and within our environments. These dispiriting phenomena (Vaill, 1998, p. 220), messages existing within our communities in forms of confusion and self doubt, serve to diminish or completely remove spirit. From this we are left to ponder how we wage a battle against this sort of warfare; how do we continue to develop and strengthen our spiritual self when dispiriting events continuously surround us (Vaill)?

### Redefining Complex Messages

The use of conversations can lessen if not overcome nihilistic feelings. Through conversations we develop a form of fellowship, a sharing of ideas and a blending of emotions. We stand in the presence of others who are willing to spiritually participate and explore with us; seeking out who we are, what we are doing and what contributions we are making (Vaill, 1998). We expose challenges that exist presently, as well as in the future, as we contribute stories of greatness, of overcoming and of triumph. Stories are similar to leaders as they can “set direction and can determine strategy as they motivate and inspire” (Moxley, 2000, p. 71); telling us where we have been and directing us as to where we hope to go.

Early mental models of identity being built during early childhood and thus, what we learn and come to know as children, can significantly impact how we, later in life, decide to lead and teach; the ability to create “deeply ingrained assumptions, generalizations or images that influence how we come to understand the world and how we decide to take action” (Senge, 1990, p. 8). These *mental models* (Senge, 1990) or

generative themes (Freire, 1970) contribute to how we think about entering into our world, whether this involves stepping into our own (self) identity or into our larger community (Freire).

Through her own self investigation of the modern day ‘paper dolls,’ my daughter began forming her own generative themes; she initiated taking part in creating an environment where she could understand the complexities of her external world (Senge, 1990) and in doing so, disturbed the silent voices that existed from the reflections of mirrors. The confusing messages, or themes of silence (Freire, 1970) that lingered beneath reflections could be released by the shattering of glass or as Dillard (2000) so eloquently says, “giving voice to silenced spaces as an act of resistance” (p. 673); revealing a strong and secure person who had perhaps been hiding behind the looking glass for quite some time (Dillard).

The competing and conflicting messages to which young Black children are exposed at an early age points to racial identity and the connection between race, context, and the significance of presenting themes or mental models. It is essential to seek what Freire (1970) encouraged: “Investigating the meanings of themes so that there is more of a critical awareness of reality” (p. 106). By doing so, we are inviting ourselves into a *learning process* that boldly places us in front of “new problems, ideas, techniques and concepts” (Vaill, 1998, p. 122). This new way of learning provides us with an ability to re-interpret what we thought we had initially understood; relinquishing old ideas and understandings (Vaill, 1998). Thus, as clarity is sought, the capacity to have voice and not to fear or become intimidated with the unnatural and “ominous weight of silence” (Griffin, 1960, p.146) will hopefully diminish.

I recall that many of my childhood conversations around and about race existed as action. I can remember quite vividly visiting another Black family for the holidays. Each family would take turns having the other over for a holiday dinner. Although I can not recall any conversations that specifically spoke to our blackness, I played with others that looked like me. Those times were very important. There were faces, skin color and hair, all imitations not only of myself, but of my parents and my siblings as well; a sense of community was being constructed (Palmer, 1983) and the feelings of loneliness crept away. Unconsciously, my notion of face and identity was being broadened. A looking glass self (Goffman, 1959), although silently portrayed, was presented in a way that addressed my unspoken questions about my physical beauty and served to allow me to engage in the initial process for unlocking my silence “from the inside out” (Moxley, 2000, p. 74) and lift any insecurity to the surface as I began to relearn my reality (Dillard, 2000).

## CHAPTER 3: The Birth of Conversations

### *Awakening*

The lived experiences provided by their extended families and communities have provided African American women with the tools necessary to fashion their own ideas about the meaning of Black womanhood (Collins, 1990). My experiences and the eventual understanding and re-interpretation of the meaning of my childhood which factored into my life as an adult, a woman, and a mother led to my need to affect the dialogue about race and identity and parenting within a racialized context. Partnering in silence is counterproductive to my daughter and other Black children as they go through the process of developing their identities. I believe that what is needed is to turn silence into a useful and powerful weapon, approaching it instead as a powerful opportunity for nurturing knowledge, self reflection and the production of new knowledge (Palmer, 1983).

Private conversations, or the “process of dialogue” (Vaill, 1998, p. 180) in which we allow ourselves to listen to our world and its surroundings with obedience (Palmer, 1983) and generate new ways of seeing and knowing will give rise to free selves (Palmer) that have broken through the way of silence and develop a “process of spiritual growth” (Vaill, p. 95).

### Beginning Conversations

The ability to break down the wall of silence is dependent on conversations that focus on giving or exchanging of ideas (Webster’s New World Dictionary, 1979), sharing opinions, challenging or questioning what is heard. This provides the listener an opportunity to create a new epistemology (Delgado, 1989), discover new realities

(Dillard, 2000), hear new and unexpected truths (Palmer, 1983), create new meanings as well as reinforce a culture (Moxley, 2000). This construction of knowledge challenges how we have initially identified ourselves and encourages self empowerment (Hill-Collins, 1990). As much as conversations can offer, they are not always easy to begin, especially with a subject that is confusing to the one who has to begin starting it. It can be difficult to begin a conversation on a subject that can trigger such an overflow of emotions that we are propelled back into various periods of our lives, blanketing us with such sensations that at times we find ourselves rendered immobile to verbal expression.

Given the power of emotional response, I was often left wondering how I would begin to present a conversation about race to my daughter. Was the notion of having a talk about race, given its complexity, and the emotional responses elicited when race is discussed, getting in the way of me ever beginning to start a conversation on and about race? What I have come to understand is that the knowledge I have and want to impart rises not only from my love for her but my desire to reconstruct or reinterpret my own painful childhood memories (Palmer, 1983). This would allow me to take a proactive parenting approach as I tell a story or share a memory; hopefully making sense or possibly providing an explanation or way for Black children to construct a positive story or make meaning of who they are (Tatum, 1997).

The magnetic doll set reminded me of two important aspects that evolved within minutes of pondering how I begin talking to my daughter about race and identity. One was to talk about the dual identities (Dubois, 1969) and thus, two communities that view and respond to Blacks differently. One community is within our home in which we live – a home which she and I share as mother and daughter and one that extends to include a

generation of grandparents, aunts and uncles. The other community exists outside of the home. It is our external environment and is comprised of our neighborhood, her school and my work. The magnetic doll set represented what much of our community resembled in our town as well. We are Black and everyone else outside of our home is not. It also spoke to me of the importance of the need for my daughter to understand our two communities, our two worlds, our realities. W.E.B. Dubois (1969) describes living in and adjusting to two worlds as a double consciousness (p. 43) or “comprising the consciousness of self and the consciousness of other” (Ross, 2003, p. 14). The other is defined by how the white world views us or sees us as an existence “without hue” (Ross, 2003, p. 14). I define this as invisibility or silenced.

What had been my reality is a reality I would prefer my daughter not share. Although it is important that she become aware of its existence, I also realized that it is equally important that she transcend my early reality, for my early experiences cast me into moments of loneliness and confusion, thereby leaving me ill-prepared as I entered into my external community. My epistemology was being molded by a cultural knowledge compromised (Yosso, 2005) of both painful and joyous memories from childhood to adulthood. My reflections on self and my world have led to the construction of a safe and open community within the home for my daughter and for myself (Palmer, 1983). It is by creating a safe and comfortable home environment that we are able to engage in conversations with seriousness and humor. We are also able to affirm each other’s humanity, specialness and right to exist (Gordon, 1990). Gordon, drawing from theoretician *Sekou Toure*, shares how this knowledge of culture is fundamental in the “shaping and transformation of the community” (p. 96). We had two communities. As

with the magnetic doll set, one was Black and the other was not. The way in which I relate and live in these worlds is defined by how I have come to know it. My world thus continues to be created and transformed through projection (Palmer).

Conversations need to happen. Open dialogue is critical for self-affirmation. Enlightenment and knowledge is important as Hill-Collins (1990) says its “pushing the theme of self-definition because speaking for oneself and crafting one’s own agenda is essential toward empowerment” (p. 36).

### Integration

Stories are powerful. And in time, I have learned conversations with my daughter are informed by my own stories. As one does in a play or story (Webster’s New World Dictionary, 1979), I could safely use conversation to explore the connection between family and external community identity. Through my own narrative accounts of life growing up Black in a predominantly white town and by telling stories and understanding their meanings, it makes it possible for my daughter and me to broaden our view of (our) different communities (Palmer, 1983). It is by telling my story that I have come to understand how best to teach my daughter about race and identity and explore with her our two worlds in a safe and loving manner (Handy, 1998), while still balancing honesty and truth with pain and confusion.

It is important to take all of these qualities and emotions and incorporate them into a semblance of understanding, recognition, and knowledge. I knew that I did not want my daughter to follow in all of my footsteps; to feel the hurtful perplexities that an outer world put unto me without my consent. *Black Feminist Thought* views the relationship between a mother and daughter as pivotal and sees Black women who

empower their daughters by passing on “everyday knowledge essential to the survival as an African American woman (Hill-Collins, 1990, p. 102). This is my role as a mother and a member of two communities.

### Mother as Teacher, Mother as Leader

As a teacher and a leader, it is important for me to play a role in the development of critical thinking skills that would then lead to a greater space for truth (Palmer, 1983) and to provide the lessons necessary for survival in a challenging external environment by expanding our capabilities, understanding complexity and clarifying our vision (Senge, 1990, p. 340). As difficult as this is, and with limited experience, this multifaceted leadership position that I embraced and, what Smith, Montagno and Kuzmenko (2004) call, a *Transformational Leader*; thrusts me into the role of a model for so many. A transformational leader is a teacher; someone who, as Senge (1990) defines, supports people to “achieve a view of reality; a medium for creating rather than a source of limitation” (p. 353).

Despite the obstacles my daughter might encounter as I did, my desire is for her to see her greatness rather than her limitations which might serve only to derail her. In order for her to see her greatness, there needs to be control over designing the learning process (Senge, 1990, p. 345), a process that cannot occur without dialogue, conversations, and the telling of stories.

Ross (2003) states that “oral narrative has always been an important part of Black culture by narrating the disadvantages women had to overcome” (p. 2). My personal “overcoming” was mirrored with my daughter’s questions and seeking of knowledge about how she ‘fit into’ a world that looked different than us. We learned together

through conversations that there exists a hope that overcomes innocent confusion.

Incorporating a framework modeled on the premises of *Black Feminist Thought*, the ability to affirm, rearticulate, and provide a vehicle for expressing a consciousness is unfolding (Hill-Collins, 1990). The empowerment of African American women, through the sharing of our stories with our daughters, is taking form (Hill-Collins, 1990) as we resist confusion, self doubt and feelings of low self worth.

## CHAPTER 4: Defining Truth

### Releasing Silence

I learned, through personal disclosures as I stood in front of mirrors, that silence creates pain and distress that, at times, consumes the soul as it works to sever the spirit. The decision to avoid swallowing such negativity and feelings of oppression (Tatum, 1997) took form because of my daughter. Our conversations and retelling of my stories led to a place of recognition, discovery and truth for me (Moxley, 2000) – with truth being defined as allowing “true partnerships to emerge” (Moxley, p. 163).

We live in many environments: home, external community and workplace. Our commitment to truth is, as Senge (1990) defines, an agreement to “continually challenge our theories of why things are the way they are; continually broadening our awareness and continually deepening our understanding of the structures underlying current events” (p. 159). This simultaneously encompasses a challenge within spiritual leadership; adapting to the changes without becoming dispirited (Vaill, 1998, p. 220). As a mother, I sought to understand why things are as they are not only to give answers to those many conversations that swam about in my head as I sat before a mirror as a child, but also to understand for the sake of my daughter, how to guide, protect, teach, and lead her into a place of knowing versus my youthful origins of not knowing.

I have learned how with silence comes awakening. Silence provides an opportunity for learning and creates a space that invokes questions where one can listen to their own experiences (Palmer, 1983). Every time the oppression of silence occurs, there exists the simultaneous reaction of unraveling the truth, how we take action (Senge, 1990) and how we are able to “embrace our fears and dependencies (Moxley, 2000, p.

96). As our shadow silently moves with us, so do our fears and insecurities; it becomes critical for us to examine those hidden parts our inner lives and understanding our generative themes (Freire, 1970) which, until now, sit unnamed and drenched in confusion. It is only through an internal investigation of silence is it possible to recognize what ones' "internal warning signals" might be (Senge, p. 159). The ability to recognize these triggers allows us to define them into new meanings (Hill-Collins, 1990) by making decisions about how to act, respond, create and follow through with a plan. This propels us toward a place of reflection and leads us toward discovering or uncovering truths about ourselves (Moxley).

It is with diligence that we have the opportunity to see our present reality more clearly (Senge, 1990) as we transform misguided interpretations that exist silently so understanding occurs and isolation is avoided.

It is important for my daughter, a young girl who is Black, to know that she will be stronger because of her self discovery. She will not be ignored; she will not be made to feel invisible. She will feel strong, secure, confident and comfortable as though she is high on a mountain top, owning that mountain, and feeling triumphant. As she explores her identity, it is important to see her shadows and realize that there is another part of her on the other side (Moxley, 2000).

### The Battle

When children or individuals of color leave home or school, the battle to belong, to be heard, intensifies. People of color often find themselves unarmed, unprepared and unprotected. There are no weapons to defend against or combat the hatred and animosity that is sometimes encountered. People of color find themselves coming into a world that

seems so unforgiving. This *enculturation process* (Hollins & Spencer, 1990) is where African American children's perception and experiences in the world around them are different from those of their white middle-class peers. These experiences must be understood in order to create *tools* that focus on how to manage a dual existence in a "hostile society" (Hollins & Spencer). I remember feeling as if I knew who I was when I left my home in the morning for school, yet feeling confused and bewildered as the day would progress. I asked myself who I was in the eyes of those looking at me? These answers lie in the messages of what our external community reflects back to us (Tatum, 1997, p.18). Many times these messages are negative and unkind expressions that work to mold and harness us into uncomfortable and unsure individuals. For many children of color, it can be difficult to maneuver through the many days at school. They move blindly as they are left with little to no guidance, and wondering how they can survive.

## Personal Reflection

### HUNTING

*There are three people I clearly remember during my elementary school years. Three people who seemed to have the most jokes tossed at them, the most teasing aimed toward them, the most ridiculing thrown about them.*

*Tom. I remember attending kindergarten with him. Looking back at my class picture, we were all rather young and different looking – I am sure, however, that our parents said we were “cute.” And some were cuter than others, prettier than others, better hair than others. Tom seemed more ‘different’ than others. He always wore pants that were short, up above his ankle, and always wore turtlenecks that were white, black, or a dark green. He had a long neck, which was accentuated by the wearing of turtle necks, as well as crooked and discolored teeth. But, being in kindergarten, we all looked different. But different didn’t change for Tom. He maintained that long neck and always wore dark turtle necks and short pants.*

*I remember our language arts class; the upper third floor reserved for the middle school level. There were large picture windows that let in significant amounts of sun. We were always warm in the winter and too warm in the summer. And I remember Tom, always right in front of me, asking questions, telling jokes he thought were so hilarious as the sun beamed strongly through the room. And I remember how I would listen to these unamusing jokes and see his lips forming the words so that they came out as crooked as his teeth – unclear, too much volume and hard to distinguish sometime. And I would watch his mouth, appearing just as disjointed as the rest of the limbs – and see seeds of saliva vaulting out of this crooked space. I can still remember watching them as he spoke*

*to me in our seventh grade class- and can still remember how captivated I was watching these wet seeds leave a dark, dense and unappealing space and fly into the air, turning into dew-lets of rainbows during their travels as we stood in front of the large picture windows that let in too much sun and caused so much warmth. It was an awkward picture; to see rainbows created from the interior of darkness.*

*Susan was also with me throughout my elementary school years. I reflect back on my relationship with her when we were in fifth grade. She had a younger brother and an older sister and lived within walking distance from our house. She had short brown hair, bangs, and was a bit heavier than the rest of us, although not at all significantly. Her parents worked as did most two parent families. They, however, were not doctors, or lawyers, but blue-collar workers. This is not to say that all parents whose children attended the Community School were doctors or lawyers. But with Susan, it was an issue. We made it an issue.*

*The manner in which she spoke or entered into conversations or games was awkward, disjointed and unsmooth. She was loud, but not too loud. She had an edge to her that was brisk, rough, and tough. Always clean, she wore jeans, hiking boots or large old sneakers and sweaters or vests when it was cold, and short sleeved blouses with jeans when it was warm.*

*They were easy targets for us, for me. To taunt, tease, belittle and run away from. We would rhyme distasteful names to their first name, last name, and middle name. My classmates and my behaviors would fluctuate between meanness to falling into allowing them to join into our games or conversations. When the ridicule and unpleasantness started up, I would be right there to listen in. I may not have always said something, but*

*I certainly was a willing participant if I said nothing to stop the others from creating pain.*

*So, who was the third?*

*Laura Clemmons. Dressed nicely. New shoes. Nice new clothes. Spoke well. Both parents were well educated. A doctor and a nurse. African American. One of five Blacks in a school of about 200 – the other two being her siblings. A small afro. Large lips. Large nose. Never knowing that nigger was a 'bad word,' but when said with such intensity, a feeling of hatred was unleashed that it was scary. One of the three to be picked last for gym teams, despite the fact that running came with ease and fluidity.*

*It wasn't always like this. In kindergarten, we were cute. Our parents told us so.*

*I do not remember such hostility, meanness and cruelty during my first year in school, or for the second year for that matter. We were all equal, at least I saw us as such. I developed friendships, good friendships, and enjoyed an environment that opened up new ideas and relationships. But a shift did occur. By second grade, we were growing up. Physically and mentally. Our bodies stretched out, our faces slightly rearranged themselves, and our eyes and minds were exposed to much more. We were not the only ones on the playground. We had to eat lunch with two to three other grades. I'm sure family values and patterns changed. Television was available to more households. News events echoed through family rooms, during family meals. Who is to say what our environment expanded to include? But it certainly couldn't have been all good.*

*For my family, I can't recall any negative influences. We were not allowed to watch television during the school week, and during the weekend, we were busy*

*completing household chores, reading books and writing 'reports' per requests from our parents. As there were five of us – four girls and one boy – we girls spent a considerable amount of time together, playing out in the field, pretending that the milkweeds which were plush with their soft white interiors were fish as we played atop of a wagon and went sailing into our field of sea to catch our latest supper, or kept watch for a horrible sea monster, which we would destroy. Life was good. We were good. I was good. I never thought that I would turn from being a destroyer of monsters swimming in an endless sea of milkweeds and hay to a destroyer of feelings and creator of pain.*

*But I did.*

*I became a destroyer, and I was one being chased down to destroy. I was the hunter and the one being hunted.*

*Being the destroyer brought a sense of relief, of reprieve and invisibility, a sense of survival. For what seemed like hours, I was not one of the three, but one of many against two. It was me being on, what I thought at that moment, the side of safety and distance. On top of the hay wagon, seeking out monsters. Humiliation, distress and pain did not, at that moment, belong to me. These emotions, however, still haunted me as I cringed at the signs of sadness and misery that was being emitted from the others, and their pain and distress became a part of my physical body. Of course, no one knew it. I said nothing. I remained silent, and cursed myself quietly for participating, thus allowing such despair and cruelty toward others.*

*But I would soon enough become number three. There exist so many recollections from the smallest and most subtle to the very obvious actions of distaste directed toward me. These acts spoke in volumes, no one could ignore them. The*

*throwing of spit balls across the room which landed into my hair and stayed for hours, until a friend would let me know that it resided in my tight little kinky curls. The bumping in the hallways. Being chosen last in gym class. Even after the other two. It was pure humiliation. I often would dream at that moment what it would be like to disappear. To blink my eyes or wiggle my nose and vanish. Having two girls running after me madly in the hallways after school, screaming words I never imagined anyone would say or know, throwing pencils, rolled pieces of paper, even rocks or trash. I never said a word. I kept my words invisible also.*

*There were other moments that being hunted wasn't focused on the physical. It happened at times when the upper grade girls in my class would all sit together on the back stairwell during lunch or recess and conversations would take place about boys; who liked whom, who thought who was pretty. Obviously, my silence was louder than I thought, for suddenly one of my friends would say "but Laura, Jason thinks you're pretty." And for a moment there was an emotion of relief as I sat up and straightened my shoulders thinking "see, I'm okay. I'm still cute." To find out that Jason was the not yet five year old brother of one of our classmates. I melted. My moment of pride gave way to shame and embarrassment.*

*By eighth grade, I chose to spend my recess time in the library. It was good to spend time on my own, by myself and not worry about whether uncomfortable situations would arise. Peers, at this period in our school existence, were now more concerned with who was the coolest, who was whose boyfriend, who was or wasn't smoking pot, and who was having sex with whom. It would be untrue to say that there were not some who were modestly enjoying friendships, and not entertaining themselves at all in these*

*conversations. Somewhere at some point during my eighth grade experience, I decided to “go the other way.” Those whom I had sought to join in on destroying I decided to join; to accept being placed into their group, asked to be placed in their groups, and chose partners from this group. I am sure that my friends and classmates were alarmed. Although, perhaps not. I cannot recall. I can only say that once I made that step, I realized that this group provided more of a sense of safety and acceptance than the other. There was no explaining about our “cuteness.” We were. We existed. I did go to some of their homes, but most of my acquaintance with them was during school or in work groups. We were our own diverse, culturally mixed group. We were different. We were a combination of milkweeds, hay, wild flowers and thistles. There was no need to clarify our past, and sometimes present fear of being hunted and mentally destroyed. There were no questions about my past role as destroyer.*

*We existed.*

*We were.*

*I do not, after my middle school years, ever recall destroying anyone again. Hunted and targeted, yes. Destroying, no. Crossing over and disrobing myself from a group where they, and I, positioned ourselves as almost ‘elite’ to a group that was humble, yet quite strong and lasting in the midst of, what seemed like, battles was more appealing and comforting to me. I do not think, even at this age, that I really recognized my self as different. That my being hunted, or sought after was due to my skin color. It probably was there, somewhere in my head, smothered with confusion. I just didn’t understand it, couldn’t comprehend it, and wasn’t at all familiar with it. It’s interesting to think, however, that ruthless teasing of others due to economics or appearance in*

*terms of dress or physical attributes I could understand. Perhaps I thought I did not 'fit' into this category because I did believe it when my parents said I was 'cute,' I did have nice clothes. I had nice teeth. Spoke well. Behaved myself. Was polite. My parents were educated professionals. Wasn't I like them?*

*I existed*

*I was Black.*

## CHAPTER 5: Constructing Through Storytelling

### I Am Not Alone

It is important to recognize the appropriate time to enter into battle. Being a hunter, however, was not the most appropriate response to navigate my way through the hallways, or on the playground or even in the cafeteria and in gym class. Many times, being hunted, is a response used to survive. The hunter's approach leads me to eventually reclaim my "spiritual ground of knowing, teaching and learning" (Palmer, 1983, p. 10). The hunter approach may have provided moments of protection from being hunted. Yet, these very means of claiming our existence can at the same time destroy our spirits. As hunters, not only do we become our own assassins and, in many instances, by pulling the trigger on ourselves as we come to accepting the role of destroyer, we diminish others' spirits at the same time.

When I reflect back on my daughter's early years, I know that her triumph and security had as much to do with the messages conveyed to her as those conveyed to her by her many external communities. These messages, whether from me or the external community's, provide her with the kind of necessary tools to build on her confidence. Other messages, without her supports and the conversations we have shared, could cast her into darkness and silence her spirit.

Over time, the number of daughters I had grew, as the number of sons. While I have not given birth to them all, over the years I have come to know and support them through my various employment situations. Many of these families and children of color have a wide assortment of challenges that result in their seeking support. Yet all of them have one significant experience in common, the social construction of oppression

(Michailakis, 2003) resulting in marginalization. In addition to the many years of meeting a variety of friends and colleagues of color, all having various professions and coming from many different locations within the United States, the sharing of conversations about race remained a constant theme. Often the subject of our conversations was similar to that I have shared with my daughter. The subject always comes back to the need to be strong, courageous, proud and triumphant. On the other hand, I thought there were personal stories only I experienced, only to learn that my friends shared these experiences as well (Palmer, 1983). I was not alone, neither were they; we became “empowered participants as we heard our own stories and the stories of others” (Yosso, 2005, p.75).

When we are all together, it is as if we are hearing the story for the first time because we spend so much time talking about, reflecting on, reviewing, and contemplating the meaning and effect our experiences have had on us over the days, months, or years. We suggest that, when we come together, we are creating points of view that protect our selves (Yosso, 2005) so that we can better understand and make sense of our communities. We construct truth in the form of community cultural wealth, which is developed by gaining a greater comprehension of truth, “knowledge, skills and abilities” (Yosso, p. 77) and an opportunity to heal and overcome otherness (Delgado, 1989). We strive to make sense of the concrete – what we see and hear and educate ourselves with tangible realities while spiritually feeding ourselves as we speak of an invisible world whose reality is uncertain and unclear (Palmer, 1983).

As we converse, share, and learn about and from each other, we uncover what we did not see. We construct a spiritual pursuit to what truth means within our everyday

lives (Dillard, 2000) as we lessen the level of “fear and worries, anger and jealousies, failures and guilt” (Fry, 2003, p. 713).

### Shared Understandings

Conversations are enlightening because as one hears, one never feels alone (Delgado, 1989). I came to learn that the spoken truths of others allowed me to learn more about myself (Palmer, 1983). There exists no role as an outcast. No one is ever silenced. The unveiling of pain, discovery, and anguish that many of us have felt as we share conversations guides us in the eventual promotion as masters over (our) pain (Yosso, 2005). We have created our own *aspirational capital*, seeking hope in the midst of structured inequalities (Yosso). By developing strength within ourselves as well as encouraging strength within Black communities – in our homes with our families, in work places with our colleagues, or in universities with our classmates – we can and shall continually strive to know more.

In this way we master our personal thoughts and emotions. This personal mastery works to continually clarify and deepen our personal vision and develop patience, which eventually leads to becoming the spiritual foundation of a community (Senge, 1990).

Our *linguistic capital* (Yosso, 2005), the use of narratives and telling stories, as well as our spiritual understanding of our lives and our communities, is embedded in an *Endarkened Feminist* approach (Dillard, 2000). Language has shown itself to be historically influential within the mental and spiritual lives of African Americans and has thus provided a way for this population to structure an understanding of their reality (Delgado, 1989). Shared stories create relationships but also “shared understandings and meanings” (Delgado, p. 2412) and also provides a method by which we have an

opportunity to maneuver through systems not created for communities of color (Yosso). It is through conversations that we are able to create a dialogue and together discover insights that might not be achievable individually (Senge, 1990).

The cohesiveness of thought and action results from conversations that demonstrate the strength of those viewed as marginalized, or as the *out group*. The out group is defined by the perceptions of the majority and who often has its voice silenced (Delgado, 1989). Dialogue, conversation, and sharing of stories are all part of gatherings which I love because as stories are told, our blackness is heightened. We become stronger, more knowledgeable and less insecure about who we are as African Americans (Laurence-Lightfoot, 1994). These spontaneous conversations that happen at gatherings arise from the experiences of shared pain. The existence of loneliness begins to crumble as the person closely situated near you becomes your mirror and they tell stories with feelings of pain and confusion that are similar to my own (Goldenberg, 1978). And, suddenly, something happens. The inability to understand or make sense of previous years' confusing and complicated messages begins to breakdown as the ability to hear stories shatter earlier lessons of silence, lack of voice and "overcoming otherness" (Delgado, p. 2638).

### Spirited Conversations

Conversations become lively, attention is gained and an audience is held captive as words come alive (White, 1984). Voices sing out in high and low pitches as we engage in spirited dialogue. Words are stretched out, bellies rumble with laughter, and our eyes become wet with tears as we walk in companionship and feast on life affirming (White) stories of pain, joy, humor, and stupidity. These conversations sometimes begin

with ease in any location and at any time and, yet, there exists the awareness that these conversations must take place in other locales, with other people as they illustrate the importance of a community's honesty and affirmation (White). The passing of stories can aid in "shattering complacency and challenge the status quo" (Delgado, 1989, p. 2414) while disassembling the mindset of the dominant group (Delgado) who do not understand the suffering many marginalized groups often endure on a daily basis, nor recognize the importance of conversations on race.

To begin this process it is essential to understand why it is important to have conversations on race and why it is imperative to *all* of our survival. What do stories do? Delgado (1989) proposes that stories invite one to listen, to participate and then opens the doors for challenging ones assumptions; stories provide a rare opportunity to see the world through others' eyes and expose one's self to new environments (Delgado). It is my opinion that as these conversations unfold, we have the opportunity to become stronger and increase our knowledge. As we engage in conversations, shifting roles between the teller and the listener of a story, we "overcome ethnocentrism and the unthinking conviction that our way of seeing the world is the only one" (Delgado, p. 2439). We share meanings (Bohm, 1998) so we can change the different conversations within our communities and, thereby, become more aware we become of our own ignorance (Senge, 1990) as we establish a community of truth (Palmer, 1989).

## **CHAPTER 6: Accepting the Importance of Community**

### **Becoming Part of a Story**

It is not too often that I come across an article, passage or book in which the author bears her soul as it relates to naïve thinking and exposes for all to see her own self discovery on race and power. Despite the muffled “no kiddings” and “of course!” that tumble through my mind as I read such passages, because their self disclosures seem so obvious and recognizable, I feel superior to others who are not part of the inner circle and, therefore, do not understand the process we undergo or share in our secrets or discoveries. The stories that are shared speak to me; include me, even though the author has never met me. I see myself in one or more of their characters whose voice is heard in the stories told. I feel as though I am the one who is spoken of, talked about, and who scurries past without notice or pause. I am the one who is looked through on a busy cross section of a street. I am the one who is stood next to in a busy store without notice. I am the one read about in the latest news story on increased crimes, or mentioned in an article about inequitable distributions as it relates to health care and services, teen pregnancy, education and socioeconomic standing. I represent all of these multiple facets of our society and, once upon a time, none of this information mattered to them. Somewhere along the line, however, a change in my thinking occurred. An open space (Moxley, 2000) emerged; an opportunity for me to re-create and re-define my own experiences into new meanings.

### **Accepting the Importance of Culture**

Leigh Ann Steer (1999) begins discussing her own self disclosure and about how being white was something she never used to think about or needed to think about. I can

imagine that she spent her days of work and evenings of relaxation and entertainment moving about streets, spending time with friends, eating out at restaurants all the while never needing to take a moment and reflect on how her color might be impacting her daily movements, where she would choose to eat, shop, who she would spend time with, how she would communicate and if she felt she had the freedom to communicate openly and without hesitation, doubt and fear.

Her discovery of race began when she, as a white female graphic artist, noticed how three of her black clients responded to her in ways that suggested they had to prove their self worth to her. She was surprised that they felt this way since their professional careers were highly impressive, unaware that their epistemology had played a significant role in how they defined their ethnic self (Palmer, 1983).

Coupled with the need to complete an assignment that focused on the visual preferences of African American women and wanting to understand this phenomenon of perceived lower self worth among the women relative to herself and white women, Ms. Steer turned to a Black friend of hers for guidance and information. Her decision to seek out support and knowledge not only formed a new and even unexpected partnership, but also created a new learning process (Senge, 1990) where the “spirit of dialogue is present” (Bohm, 1998, p. 2) and truth is exposed (Palmer, 1983). What was this truth? For her, I imagine, it was unearthing what she was unfamiliar with and unknowledgeable about. For her, it was uncovering or de-mystifying information about a group of people whom she perhaps never thought more deeply about other than how they would respond to her advertisement campaign.

## Cultivating a Process

During her quest for knowledge, Ms. Steer began to define the process of leadership as one where leadership actively happens (Senge, 1990) or as guiding action. Ms. Steer's friend's response to a *guided leadership* role (Garner, 2002) was to have a party or a gathering of an *outgroup* (Delgado, 1989); to gather her Black friends who might share stories and be, in essence, Ms. Steer's teachers. An *open space* (Moxley, 2000) again emerged; one where all participants were invited to actively participate in the role of a leader and where the evolution of community was cultivated from this open space existence (Moxley). As the social event began to unfold, whether Steer considered herself a leader or not, she was cast into a position of *transformation* (Smith, Montagno, & Kuzmenko, 2004); she became a self-proclaimed artistic designer who began sculpting a space that gave way for improvisational thoughts, ideas, and new ways to explore how one culture impacts and is impacted by another. Steer and her friends oversaw the construction of a larger creation whereby they nurtured the growth of a process.

They became teachers. Both women worked towards creating a space to explore truth (Palmer, 1983). This process included a time and the opportunity to place themselves amongst the presence of others, engage in thinking (Senge, 1990) and be allowed to learn from and listen to other women's stories. Steer facilitated a cultural learning process to happen (Senge). It was as if she was tending a garden. She created the space to share, to develop, to learn, to know and to understand (Moxley, 2000).

Steer upset her comfort zone by becoming the minority within her own space. She became the student, in a relatively large group. By "jumping in before she knew how to swim," she began to "discover pieces to her self through introspection" (Handy, 1998,

p. 80). She became the student, learner, seeker and listener of stories. She was no longer in a dominant position of power. She was not the executive in an art design industry. She practiced humility through listening and hearing others' voices (Palmer, 1983). She was a risk-taker. She was in unfamiliar territory, but by putting herself in this space, her expectation and desire was to open her *self* to learning something new (Bohm, 1998).

### Discoveries

It was at this gathering that Steer began to re-search her *self* as she listened to others' viewpoints (Palmer, 1983). There, in a sea of shades of blackness stood Steer's pale complexion and white life which forced her to view her world through a different lens (Delgado, 1989) as well as from a position of displacement (Palmer). I can only imagine that she experienced a moment of silence, although briefly, much as the lone Black person feels sitting in a room of 20, 30 or even 100 white people. Her discomfort, however, was tempered by her desire to know, learn the truth, so that she might heighten her understanding of race, identity and power. She did not flee and seek out a safer, more comforting place or shut off her ability to hear. Instead, she stood there, bearing the painful discomfort as she recognized the possibility that this could only metamorphosize into something greater and more powerful. Again, is this risky? It is for her. It is often risky, or perhaps uncomfortable, to journey down a path that is unknown, or even avoided. Yet, when venturing occurs, there is an opportunity to discover newness. Although she had a choice. To feel silence or discomfort is often not a choice for Blacks.

## Acceptance

A brief hesitation of thought can lead one to pause without any further procession of reflection. This would be because once they discover something new, they might be expected to act on what they have learned to question their personal views, ideals and beliefs. It is, therefore, often much easier to continue with what we know and have come to understand as truth rather than having to unexpectedly change from our familiar course.

Steer was able to better appreciate how to connect with a group of people with whom she was unfamiliar and, at the same time, discover traits within herself she never knew existed. She experienced a paradigm shift with rippling effects for her professional work, professional relationships, and interpersonal interactions with friends. There exists such an enormity of possibilities of how we see, or think we see truth within our environments that this becomes a justification for hesitation.

I suspect that Ms. Steer's new reality impacted more than her professional work, but seeped into larger, more complex parts of her life. Steer did not accept hesitation. She did not leave for the evening and return to her professional duties in the morning unaware and unaffected by her new truth. She became aware of a new truth that existed for those who are considered part of the out group. Steer became a gardener of new information – she encouraged new growth (Mosley, 2000). Needless to say, this new growth led to a new truth not only for herself, but for others as well. A *university*, or place of learning, was created and emphasized the important balance between “real life and the growing knowledge of life” (Dubois, 1969, p. 117). This new knowledge not only forced her to disclose (just as the Black women disclosed their feelings) her status in

a larger, white dominated society but also compelled her to investigate what this meant to others and could mean to herself. Her cultivation of this *garden* presented opportunities of exploration within her self as well as with others. She had created a process that encouraged dialogue or a free-flowing meaning among participants that lead to insight that weren't initially known on an individual level (Moxley, 2000), but become more apparent and clear when engaged with a larger group. She encouraged and supported the sharing of stories.

### New Beginnings

Stories, or the cultivation of dialogue, can invite uneasiness and even disagreement (Moxley, 2000). By using Steer's experience as an example, we were able to see how stories were presented as a style of dialogue manifested that challenged familial daily encounters. Steer came to more fully understand how community shapes current knowledge and interactions.

Steer's attendees did not shy away from engaging in a dialogical process – a process with which they were quite familiar. The group of Black women, as members of a marginalized group, was well aware of the role external forces play within society and how society shapes one's world view and affects the need to hesitate (Goldenberg, 1978). External forces affect marginalized groups view and the interpretation of their daily encounters and interactions (Palmer, 1983). The personal stories that were shared during Steer's gathering created a community that was uplifted and cultivated by the rich dialogue that took place (Moxley, 2000).

## Two Truths

In American culture, Blacks are made aware of their color and facial characteristics and often cast aside or ignored because of these physical traits. Oftentimes Blacks are made to think as though they do not belong, are not good enough and are not valued, despite all of our education, knowledge and ability to sound and speak “the correct way.” Blacks still never seem to ‘fit in’ with the larger, greater population no matter how hard we try. Coupled within these feelings of not belonging and not being welcome are emotions of self doubt and confusion. How many of us see ourselves and what we come to believe about ourselves has been entrenched in us by the countless messages we have received throughout our lives. Perception is the mother of skill. Once we have listened often enough to these stories, we become quite skillful at believing them (Vanzant, 1995).

It is during these times when many people of color seek out refuge, locations or places with family or friends who hold similar cultural characteristics. We seek out such sanctuaries to heal and call forth an understanding of the perplexities we face and work at smothering the pain and confusion as we look for harbors of safety. In these places, we are stronger and our despair lessens. We form a fellowship where we can challenge solitude and disappointment, realizing that if these conditions continue, it will result in the collapse of the spirit of our community (Vaill, 1998). We remember our purpose or are reminded that we do have a purpose despite all the negative messages we may encounter on a daily basis. If we did not do this, if we instead chose to accept blindly without any questioning, our thoughts, emotions and beliefs would evolve into confusion

and unacceptability; our *self*, or our spirit, would vanish and we would instead march to the negative tunes of what we have been told we are (Vanzant, 1995).

People of color have been taught to be well aware of the need to be compliant within a sometimes hostile, complex white world, all the while attempting to continue to become better than what is expected. People of color learn the importance of code switching (White, 1984) and have become experts on knowing what is thought, seen, or heard is not always the truth. People of color understand the importance of gathering a variety of information, decode it and respond to the information (Moxley, 2000). In essence, we have double consciousness (Dubois, 1969) or, dual citizenship (Hollins & Spencer, 1990).

People of color inhabit the ‘underworld,’ a place that is not easily accessible to the larger, dominant population. We are bi-lingual and as such, we learn to *speak differently*. We are masters at hearing what is being said and ‘reading between the lines’ so as to understand the real intent and meaning (Palmer, 1983). We possess information that is useful and necessary for survival in today’s diverse world.

Hostility, violence, discrimination and hate are commonplace in the life of people of color, yet we have learned to live within and build new communities. We have created new and fluid ways to respond to an ever changing environment, and have learned to scrutinize various situations with cautiousness, while entering into unsettled waters with an abundance of grace and poise. As people of color, we are “born with a veil, and gifted with second sight” (Dubois, 1969, p. 43) and know that to succeed, we must pay attention and listen to the fleeting words coming off the lips of those who speak as if in whispers.

## Cultivating One Truth

Our existence is divided between this underworld and venturing out, involving ourselves in an environment that can at times be tough to maneuver through and enter into (Yosso, 2005). This is done out of the need to survive. In spite of our lesser position in the hierarchy of power, there is the recognition that the world should not be owned and overseen by a select few who view themselves as the majority, but by a community of persons who are aware of the importance of reclaiming the relationship between a community and an individual (Dillard, 2000).

Co-existing is necessary because, in the end, we all exist in a society and a world that is constructed by a variety of unique communities. What has happened, however, is that a construction of unique and complex communities has become lost, fumbled and confused; creating separation, misunderstanding and hate. The answer, or an appropriate response to this condition, should perhaps be mimicked in Steer's approach to understanding; having the will to garden and cultivate a community which leads to healthy growth and discovery along the way. It will be important to recognize how each one of us adds a creative blend to the larger plot where some of us may not grow as strong as the other, but we all realize our capacity and ability to provide and enhance an area in which we are all a part of (Palmer, 1983). If the determination exists to view ourselves as members of one community, then awareness develops into a community united (Palmer).

Fundamental to developing awareness as a united community is recognizing that the existence of oppression is a constant shadow. This shadow perpetuates the inability for many marginalized individuals and communities to know what initial steps are

necessary to grow, and what additional steps are needed in order to create, build, maintain and support a healthy community. If oppression is to be defined as a condition of being, a state in which one walks in the path of feeling defenseless, unprotected and expendable (Goldenberg, 1978) then individuals and communities must be aware of or taught the necessary tools to survive or to co-exist. Many people of color feel alienated (Miller, 1988). This results from numerous and continual encounters with oppression, and has created a feeling of hopelessness (Miller) a lack of desire and a realization of *becoming* (Goldenberg). Why is oppression still allowed to define individuals and communities? How can our current state of being, of how we see ourselves and how others respond to us, continue to perpetuate oppression (Goldenberg)? For some, their birth is their end. Oppression represents future existence and abilities as devalued, obsolete (Goldenberg) or a mistake. Those who are marginalized begin to believe the negative statements and images that they see or hear on a daily and continual basis. They come to accept negative perceptions as truth. These internalized negative beliefs, instead of being fantasy or a dream, are perceived as living within the walls of neighbors, or the rooms of parents and families (Goldenberg).

#### Oppression Confronts Acceptance

Oppression's strength is its ability to mystify and create obscurity for the seeker (Goldenberg, 1978). It acts as an invisible poison; having the capacity to enhance one negative, or questioning thought into a series of *habitual patterns* that are reinforced and played over again and again until it evolves into questioning one's self concept, self ability, opportunities and dreams (Vanzant, 1995).

So the question or dilemma to ponder is how does one go about interrupting the onslaught of oppression and its power to interfere with dreams or imaging possibilities that exist outside an individual's scope of being? Perhaps a preliminary step would be to recognize the importance of a sense of self, and how to go about reconstructing it from a wider negative societal image into one that is positive, incorporating strength and ability; discovering (or, for many, uncovering) one's racial, sexual and ethnic history and recapturing the fundamental beginnings of one's (group) heritage (Goldenberg, 1978). Understanding and recognizing heritage and what is attainable as well as believing that the ability to choose does exist; to maximize not only the quantity but quality of selections from which to select, and realizing that dilemma's do not always (have to) exist (Harris, 1990).

To acquire this knowledge and understanding arrives not purely from studying books, and attending schools, but also from knowledge learned from others. From the time my daughter was young, I have wanted her to understand, recognize and become aware of her history and her future through the stories she heard and the conversations we had. My history reflects journeys alongside others. It is because of this history that I am able to broaden my daughter's awareness of her world and my world. I passed on my history and experience through conversations, communicating hints, suggestions, life skills and other pieces of words and phrases that could not be placed into any category, but is information I need and want her to hold unto herself.

Ironically, many of the stories I have shared with my daughter are not carefree and whimsical (much of what you would hope to share with a young child). Instead, the stories I share are combination of fun, fairy-tale events mixed in with the difficult

challenges I, as well as others from our race, have encountered, struggled with and still struggle with. My viewpoints and defined understanding of why things are the way they are grew not from my own experiences, but came from a lifetime of familiar and unfamiliar voices which only intensified in importance as the stories were created not by one, but by a larger, collective group (Bohm,1998). I hold on to the belief that difficulties in life are educational, and that we (can) only grow and expand our knowledge as we pass through and try to overcome obstacles that appear before us (Vanzant, 1995).

## CHAPTER 7: Learning to Live Together

### Conversations

What is the importance of conversations? I never really knew until one of my professors (who loved the history of words) shared the Latin derivative of word *conversation*. He said it means “to learn to live together.” A natural extension to this meaning, therefore, is that in order to live together, an initial foundation built on trusting one another or at least, the willingness to trust is essential to harmony. Conversation is one way in which harmony is attained. An objective of communicating or creating dialogue is to suspend ones own opinions as you listen to everyone else’s, reflect, listen, wait and see what it all means (Bohm, 1998). The expectation that this happens readily and with ease is probably unrealistic. Trust begins slowly and, as conversations are shared, any initial and possibly superficial exchange can slowly, over time, lead to more exposure and shared stories that are intimate, where trust, or its initial foundation, must exist or be created (Bohm). Trust is an important societal value which is why it is essential within the context of conversation.

The role of a storyteller is often described as a leader. The storyteller takes the reader on a journey to discovery. The goal of the story is to provoke a discussion, encourage the reader to analyze the information put forth and consider the many points of view that have been put forth to generate new knowledge or information. It is through stories that notions become apparent about how to shape the view of a community and a larger world, and how they play an integral part with shaping and influencing our surroundings.

Stories place us in the position of being a garden, and our cultivation is spurn through the newness and discovery of exposing us to new truths rooted within words. An arising consciousness (or truth) emerges from sharing stories which leads to new understandings and clarity (Bohm, 1998).

Stories can take one by surprise and perhaps even provoke confusion and frustration on the listener's part as they hear something completely unexpected (Palmer, 1983). However, those who decide to listen for the unexpected will perhaps be more willing to explore the possible messages (Bohm, 1998). For many, this investigation of messages can evolve into developing an exploration of *self*, which is most often complicated and challenging due to the fact that for much of our existence, we tend to live part of our lives being what others wanted and expected us to be (Moxley, 2000) rather than what we want to be for ourselves.

### The Journey

I certainly have not been on my own journey alone, but have had incredibly educated, skilled and cultured teachers who led me through the very vigorous pathways of self discovery. These teachers provided an understanding and an awareness of a culture that I was not too familiar with, or should I say, knew existed in some remote corner of my spirit, yet was not sure how to get at it, uncover it, explore and relish in it as fully as I could. Unknowingly, my own journeys could have been viewed as a spiritual quest, where I sought to understand my purpose and my own potential (Fry, 2003). I interacted and kept company with a group of people who were committed to change for the better good and found myself establishing relationships within a culture that strongly influenced me to mobilize and strive for a common vision. This community steadfastly

worked to overcome obstacles and separation from a larger, more dominant society and they did this by incorporating a spiritual leadership. Their response and their involvement with me created a type of *learning organization* (Senge, 1990), recognizing that through support and education, we all become more committed and productive, thus aiding in a positive transformation of community (Fry, 2003).

I was initiated into a community that understood and appreciated what I needed to know as it related to social justice, community involvement and participation. It is through the efforts of a community organized around learning structure that motivates me to lead (Fry, 2003).

Vibrant conversations, that unique ability to carry vast images and explanations, help define our world. These explanations are represented in the captured voices of the many individuals with whom I have intermingled during my journeys. The collective thoughts and expressions from these people (Bohm, 1998) have become influential in my chosen path. This chapter presents an exploration of culture, ideas, shared stories, and personal journeys that serve as the basis of the creation of my thoughts, ideas and perceptions of the community and society. Alone, one's interpretations of the world are limited, and perhaps scarce. Collective experiences or interpersonal interactions, however, affect how we define and respond to our environment. Much of our environment or community is driven by *shared meanings*, a combination of ideas and thoughts which have aided in creating the society that we know (Bohm). If those many people that we came into contact with had limited their desires to share, challenge and expose their own personal journeys, one can imagine a world that would have been egocentric, hollow and individualistic.

## A Union of Souls

The beginning of my self discovery about my culture, personal, and social identity came about because of a pure desire to be with and learn from others. I had a need to be with others who had some points of commonality with me. Early on, it was with other children who lived close by, or the long and playful hours I spent with my siblings. In essence, sharing common experiences created a sort of club rising up unconsciously and without any specific planning.

My sisters and I, along with three girls whose parents owned a nursery close by, would spend many countless afternoons playing outside roaming and discovering the many nooks and crannies of a neighboring unoccupied cottage owned by my parents. We called ourselves the “Raving Raiders” and even came up with rhythmical lyrics that described our favorite pastime of picking wild berries. The lyrics went like this – “the Raving Raiders are here! Are here! We’ve come to take your fruit!” We laughed, giggled and thoroughly enjoyed our time bathing in the splendor of late summer days, running through lawns without shoes, and nesting our toes in long cuddling grasses. Our joy came from being with others who had excitement, curiosity and imagination. This was our club. We shared an undefined commonality. We had a connection. We were free spirited creatures. Our desire to be together without initially seeking each other out may have been due to the fact that we were neighbors – living only minutes apart and all close in age. We could easily come together to walk down the still very pleasant nursery lane, or bike safely from one home to another without parents’ fear of crossing the busy streets and, for a few minutes, not in eye sight. We created a club, an association of sorts, without knowingly soliciting it. We were a union of souls that come together because of

our sense of commonality. Our childhood club happened spontaneously at first, without much foresight and planning. Once we recognized our alliance – a peaceful, free flowing and free spirited existence that embraced our small child like bodies – we delved into our new partnership with eagerness and daily anticipation. Without realizing it, we had created our own community. A community that was based on shared beliefs and values. We shared a concern about each other, bonded with one another and developed a community of caring relationships (Palmer, 1983).

Within time, we grew and matured, and so did my wish to be with others who looked like me as well. It is not too often you find yourself right in front of some new idea or situation, are introduced to it and receive a firm shake of hello and nice to meet you. Instead, these ideas or situations tend to circulate around you, and you are never quite sure just how to get to the formal introduction. This is how the evolution of my own racial identity began to slowly unfold, as well as how I began to define myself within a larger community.

Racial identity is never stagnant; it is fluid and ever changing. There is always room to explore, recreate and recognize how and when it impacts our everyday lives and encounters, whether negatively or positively. My emerging racial identity development gave me the lens through which I could experience, create, and understand new and different opportunities (Delgado, 1989). The impact of being with other children whose skin color seemed similar to mine became an important part of how I experienced my world as well as lived in it. There was less loneliness, and a bit less apprehensiveness with sharing information in larger groups if, across the table, sat someone reflecting my

complexion. I did not feel as if I was taking such significant risks when, on occasion, the opportunity arose to discuss, share or participate in conversations that related to race

Even if the other person of color remained silent throughout the discussion, I felt brave enough to continue debating, arguing or explaining a situation, an event, an article or a passage in a book that was specific or related to race or oppression.

### Division

Someone once shared a story with me about bananas and people of color. When bananas start off in a bunch, they are happy, relaxed, comfortable, resilient and strong in numbers. However, in order to be shipped, these large, strong and durable bunches must be pulled apart into smaller groups (of bananas). Now, they feel a bit less strong, and their comfort levels and happiness decrease slightly as they continue on. Eventually arriving at the new destination, they are once again separated; this time into even smaller bunches. When they are taken away from the larger group, placed again into even smaller sized bunches, they have become further removed from their original state of being; thereby, leading to less feeling of community, more uncertainty, and greater unfamiliarity. The banana experience, to some extent, serves as a snapshot into the experience of a child of color who is connected to a community that is defined as family, begins to move away and into a larger, more racially different community, then back into a racialized community unlike that of family. For example, on Christmas or Easter, at churches across towns, I could expect to see a very small number of colored faces during these holiday seasons. Because of the intricate planning of my parents and those of other children, we were able to enjoy the company of others who resembled us during the holidays.

## **CHAPTER 8: Culture Club**

### Finding Comfort

I never realized that being of color had such a strong association or coupling to being members of a club and, as we participated in such family events, we were in fact initiators of a club. I cannot say that, as I got older, I delved into these associations freely, nor as happily and willingly as I did when I was younger, spending time with the Raving Raiders' club. I do, however, recall the calm sensation coupled with electric energy when I met, or spent time with other children and families of color and the unspoken comfort and sense of common knowledge coupled with an easy familiarity that existed in between the ooh's and ahh's of flavorful sentences that lingered on our lips or continued through our second helping of the traditional Thanksgiving meal. During all the holiday get-togethers, I seemed to savor the taste of companionship much more than the meal itself. Dining with other children and parents of color became the ultimate dessert – seeping with sweetness and always wanting more. Solace and comfort came by seeing or being around other faces of color; the appreciation and recognition of being involved in this very special club was empowering.

A Club. A union. An association. A collection of souls that have merged together because of some common idea or belief. Clubs come in many sizes, have many nuances and include both those with whom one is familiar as well as unfamiliar. After my college days, I learned how these unfamiliar people walk along beside me (Fry, 2003) and how they and I, unknowingly, become participants of a club that served to ground us all. I may not have known any of them, they were strangers to me yet we looked into each others eyes, nodded, smiled at each other, and found some common bonds. There

was a connection. Unfamiliar as we were, we shared similar stories, journeys, and uncertainties.

These unfamiliar acquaintances continue throughout my life. I find them more prevalent in areas that have a limited number of colorful faces. When in areas where I am one of many, the nodding or smiling may not be so obvious, but the subtle mannerisms that demonstrate a connectedness swim effortlessly about; the whimsical flow of words that show me, without any initial verification except through sight, that there are others close at hand. The deep throated laughter, the long strung out vowels that sound like short tempo-ed songs gave me recognition that I was not alone. I have come to love that sound. It has become a familiar friend among many faces that are unfamiliar. I know I am not alone and can be understood without giving any verbal explanation.

## Reflection

### An Unfamiliar Journey

*When I was then a college student in Cambridge, Massachusetts, I located a site for a required internship, working in a classroom for autistic children. It sounded wonderful. I was thrilled. When I called for directions, my excitement quickly melted into a bit of concern, apprehension and worry. The interest of the work still lay strong. However, the location of the site was my angst. I created a safe community within the area of Boston by always traveling to where it was familiar. Taking the same routes that I knew, so there was no guessing, no un-expectancies, no sudden shifts to figure out and de-construct. I followed paths that friends had shown me. Nothing unfamiliar. The route to this school was off my familiar path. It meant that I would need to leave the familiar and comforting ride of the red-line and the rickety sway of the green line and surface up above to seek out a bus. It wasn't only the bus that gave rise to my apprehension. It was taking a bus to an area or path that would lead me to unfamiliarity and uncertainty; a place and space unrecognizable to me. At the end of my wandering worries, I accepted the internship despite my misgivings and faint layerings of fear and left out early from my safe, warm comfortable dorm room to venture toward an unfamiliar place that loomed huge and overwhelming in my mind. The long, rocking movements of the "T" were always enjoyable to me. It provided me many moments of solitaire despite being overcrowded with elbows, legs arms and faces. I took time to gaze into many barren faces of strangers who clutched at newspapers and coffee mugs, or pocketbooks and bags. I found that I always seemed to pay more attention to their shoes. As beautifully put together and dressed, many of them were faces spectacularly made up,*

*clothes chic and pressed, it was their shoes that always seemed to tell other stories. There may have been a little worn spot on the toes, with spats of dirt, or scuffed on the sides and shoelaces untied or unraveling on one, and knotted heavily on the other; heels slender and high, or thick and petite, bruised with small cuts and rips along the side. Perhaps these travelers presumed that because they were so perfectly molded up top, no one would pay attention to what they were walking in.*

*On an early fall day, I became one of the many passengers who ventured out into anonymity from familiarity. As a student, I entered into the subway well aware of my shoes more than any other part of my attire. At that point it didn't matter how well together I tried to appear; taking additional time to primp my hair the right way, choose clothes that said "I'm mature and capable" while also making a statement that simultaneously said "I'm young and have a desire to learn from others." Suddenly my shoes, I felt, were quite noticeable; very gently worn at the sides, with only small splatters of dirt from the streets. My shoes matched my own vulnerable analysis of myself; laces twice knotted – at least these were secure. I wasn't feeling as such. I tended to walk with a constant awareness of my color. Even in Cambridge, as diverse as it was, there still existed moments where I felt uncomfortable in my skin; as if I were always being watched, therefore needing to pay closer attention to areas and things I imagined others' tending not to. I felt as if I could somehow deflect those stares and glances if I was 'fit and made up' from top to bottom. At my stop, I disembarked from the subway and ventured onto my next round of transportation, the city bus. This was so new to me. Again, I generally stayed close to familiar pathways and familiar modes of transportation. Taking a city bus was transporting me further from familiarity. I had*

*been working diligently at learning this task on a daily basis since my days of youth. Before this morning's journey, I viewed myself as impinging on 'pro' status; that is, I felt more a champion of being one piece of a complex puzzle that had successfully anchored itself onto another piece, and eventually and thankfully fitting into what made a larger picture that had meaning. I had meaning. I fit in. Only now, as I traveled up ground to the bus, I found myself beginning to feel like an amateur all over again. The bus was crowded with the familiar diversity that the city streets in Cambridge carried, so my uneasiness gently subsided to being alert for my transition onto the next bus. With what felt like an easy move from one city bus stop to another, I walked off and up to another stop proudly and triumphantly, waiting for my bus number and excited and anxious about my possible internship. With a flurry of people scrambling toward the upcoming bus, I comfortably found a seat and sat, watching with earnest for my next stop.*

*The bus slowly swerved around corner and corner and I realized that shifts were occurring. Gone was the diversity that had once occupied the space around me. I found myself looking at my shoes. I was aware of scuff marks, loose laces, spots of dirt that seemed to have taken over larger areas of what once was a clean surface. Like a reflection in a mirror, I anxiously became aware of every inch of my complexion; was my nose too large? Was my hair still in place? Tied back, had any tufts escaped from my hair pins? Did I look nice? I felt a tremendous sense of anguish. Any earlier feelings of pride and triumph dissolved into darting glances by my own eyes around and about the interior of the bus. I felt so uncomfortable, out of place and even unwelcomed, despite the fact that there were not any passengers who seemed to be paying any attention to me. If one was, it was only by quick glances, short smiles or blank stares that bore right*

*through my being and into some other distant place. I wish I could have gone to that distant place, wherever it was. Instead, I felt captive to dissecting every part of my self to where I was sure I would discover every small, infinite fault I perceived had existed. The bus stopped.*

*I stepped off and watched as other passengers also began their movements toward their destinations. Mine, according to my directions, was only a short 10 minute walk up the street. As I walked, my excitement for the internship quickly shifted to annoyance, frustration and “no way in hell am I going to take that ride again!” My discomfort level was too high. I could not shake the feeling of being on-stage, for everyone to see, laugh at, make fun of as I tried my hardest to blend in despite the fact that no one had even looked much at me while I was on the bus and even as I walked to the school. Instead, I encountered smiles. Nods of hello. Easy walking strangers passing me by as I remained uptight, unsure and confused. There was no diversity here. At least not the diversity I was accustomed to as I moved in and about Cambridge’s sprawling streets. I looked at my shoes and cast downward glances at those who passed by me. Most shoes were worn, scuffed, and splashed with a foggy dusting of brown. I couldn’t remember the first time I was in a place where, despite feeling so uncomfortable and not “fitting in,” I did. Not only were my shoes as theirs were; gently worn and covered with this same colored wrapping. I also realized that I was as they were. Black.*

## Cultural Collision

My internship visit was a success. Not only did I accept it, but extended it for an additional semester and had hopes of returning that summer. I enjoyed my long rides and transitions from subways to buses to walking, as did I enjoy the transition from being in a diverse city to one that, for the majority of the time, mirrored a reflection of my self. This was the first time I had ever been in a neighborhood that predominantly looked just like me. I had never experienced it, and thus had initially felt even more out of place and out of touch. All my years of growing up in a community that never looked like me and all the years of craving to be within one, I was suddenly immersed in one and was surprised to find that I still felt as if I did not fit in. This cruel trickery somehow embedded itself into my spirit, leaving self doubt and confusion. I learned to question my own existence and asked myself how would I ever, if I could ever, 'fit in' to a place, any place. Year after year this message was embedded into my being. This destructible, yet paramount scripture I learned was that it was me (Freire, 1970). I was the problem. However, after this early college experience, after my travels to a city full of mirrors, that early message was shattered. I was at peace here among the mirrored reflections of my self. Nods. Smiles. Hellos. I was relaxed. Comfortable. I had found my 'club.' My culture club and, after a difficult initiation, one I created and put myself through. I was in. I looked forward to it those two days a week, and missed it the other five. When my internship was over, and summer winds returned me home, I found myself eager to enter into a culture club again.

My consciousness was awakening to a world that I had not been aware of for a multitude of years during my childhood, adolescence, and even early adulthood. Life in

Boston had given me a taste of what was out there, but my living in South Central was the real bite, a true flavor of living in a city consumed with blackness. Within our daily experiences, we come into contact with wonderful teachers. We need them. And, I needed them. Still young and immature with city ways, unfamiliar to the rhythms and beats of moving through and about the vastness of the communities, there existed mannerisms and movements, thoughts and experiences that separated the experienced from the inexperienced. There existed a language separate and apart from the majority population. Many times it was as if I had been taken back in time to when I attended my first day of school; trying to figure out the location of classes, which floor? Turn right or left? Where to sit in a stunningly large cafeteria? In these instances, confusion, bewilderment, and being overwhelmed are the dominant feelings. All the while, trying to walk smart and look like I know what I am doing... trying to be cool.

When I moved into my grandmother's neighborhood, the younger people there did not believe I was cool. My acting abilities left something to be desired. Our neighbor, who I remember playing with when we were very young and visiting my grandparents, grew up being considered one of the most successful in his group of friends. He was *the one* when it came to moving drugs in and out of the area. He was also my translator and interpreter. He helped me unravel the mystifying sentences that met me as I pulled my car up from work into our driveway, or while sweeping tree fallen berries from the sidewalk. He translated city slang into a language I understood. He also acted as a liaison between his friends and myself; letting me know that many young people in the area thought I was "stuck up," or "too good for them;" "listen to how she talks, man!" I would hear. He smoothly explained that I came from Vermont, up north.

No, not up north on Vermont Avenue, but “way up where that damn snow flies, man! She’s cool. She’s cool.”

I never had any problem entering into my home with my grandmother. My car was always safe, uninterrupted and intact. Until, that is, the night he was hauled off to jail for a couple days for beating up his girlfriend. The night he was arrested, all silence ceased. I awoke the next morning to see glass shimmering on the driveway from a hole on the passenger-side window of my car. That day, I went and bought an alarm. Youthful ignorance left me thinking and believing that I would be welcomed, accepted and approached with respect in my new neighborhood because day after day I encountered numerous mirrored reflections of my self.

How foolish I was then, and continued to be even later, to dismiss other characteristics that lay so close to the surface and impact how we, as people of color, could still be judged, incorrectly interpreted and even, at times, unjustly accused. I certainly was similar in color, but not with gender, nor socioeconomics. Many of the young men and young women in that neighborhood witnessed a young black woman with her own transportation, a voice and language that when, for example, a telephone call was made, the assumption was made that I was as white as the receiver to the call was. I had the ability, money, and knowledge to travel from one side of a large country to another. Our reflections did mirror each other. However, like the broken car glass that lay on the cement driveway of my grandmother’s home, shattered with hundreds of pieces of all shapes and sizes strewn throughout grass, cement and within the burgundy colored seats of my car, so too were our mirrored reflections of each other. We may have been made from the same substance, but when cast apart from each other (and sometimes

with violent means); we had little resemblance and forgot much about any initial similarity.

### Culture Club Members

#### *Michelle*

*Michelle* was one of the teachers I worked with at an alternative school in Hawthorne. Another teacher had said that we lived only six blocks from each other. So after a few conversations about teaching a diverse student of color population, students who were not able to succeed in the regular public schools due to extreme behavioral issues, we decided to get together for dinner. I remember later when we were the best of friends, she described our first dinner and conversation as “very white;” if she had said this to me promptly after our time together, I would not have understood what she meant. I had no translator or interpreter to figure that out. However, when she did speak this to me at a later time, I understood.

She reeled in my attention by being honest, genuine, and telling me like it was. She used conversations to dramatically present the true vitality found within the expressions of Black language, and how life, not hopelessness, existed on every word that was swept off from our lips (White, 1984). The roaring of laughter, the uncensored language, the rhythmic dancing of words – she was able to capture every word she uttered and give it a life of its own.

Michelle and my first time hanging out together was at her home, only blocks away from where I lived with my grandmother. We sat, with such correct posture, delicately eating salad and reviewing our day at work, conversing on what I thought of teaching at the school. All safe. All expected. No surprises. There existed some

unexplainable language that blacks share with one another. For me, it was almost indescribable, yet noticeable. I feel it in my spirit, a tension that co-exists with excitement, arising from not being sure how I will be ‘accepted’ or viewed by a fellow person of color. A sense of doubt coupled with an anticipation that rises from an eagerness to be included. To belong. To be a part of some thing. To be a part of a club.

Michele soon became another translator, teacher and interpreter. She and I became fast friends, and I would enjoy spending time with her and her two sons as we laughed, free spirited, at the world around us. Her conversations were always clear. There would never be any misinterpretations when she spoke. She said what she needed to say. She was to the point, frank to everyone and to her sons about lessons they needed to know about growing up as young men of color. Her conversations on sex could have been x-rated. She never held back. And, as she spoke, it was always with gentleness – although wrapped with something other than soft pastel colored tissue paper. Instead, it came to me or her sons packaged in cellophane; you knew exactly what you were going to get and the message would hang on to you regardless of how hard you tried to shake it off or get away from it; tough, yet protective, durable yet smooth.

She was a phenomenal teacher and quickly rose to an administrative position. She was an excellent mother and raised her two sons with knowledge they would need to survive as young African American men. She held nothing back. She grew up in South Central realizing and learning the hard way what one needs to do to live, to endure, to have as many choices as you could beyond raising children as a young mother or father with little money and living in poor conditions. She knew what she did not want for her sons; she knew she desired more for them than many others would ever have or could

ever dream of. She spoke truth. She spoke clearly. Her conversations were their daily breath and daily bread. It was for their survival.

### *Henri*

There were many others who became part of a shared culture club. *Henri* is now my husband. He started out as my supervisor at a homeless shelter up in Hollywood. I had never dated anyone of color; had never really dated at all for that matter. Friends were aplenty, but I never spent time or energy attempting to develop deeper relationships with these friends. Henri was born and raised in Compton. One of 10 children, his father died in the Vietnam War when he was quite young. He began his adulthood at 12; lived out of the home and stayed in the company of other men who enjoyed a chaos I could never have imagined anyone doing. The worst ‘thing’ I did when I was young was climb up a ladder to the top of our small town fire station with a friend from school. *Henri*, on the other hand, was full of adventurous stories from his youth. It is because of his experiences, retold through conversations, that he is able to have incredible connections with youth of today.

When he told his family that he was dating a young woman from Vermont, the immediate belief was that I was white, a “snow bunny.” They were pleased to find that I was not as they thought. The initiation into his family was difficult for me at first. I was not sure how to step into a family that had so many different characters. I became involved in a variety of conversations, all again with whimsical voices coming in and out of corners and rooms. I always seemed to sit back and wait for an introduction, a script that prompted me as to when to step in and talk, when to laugh and how to move about and express words that seemed uncomfortable and muddled within my mouth.

Eventually, I learned that no one was going to give me permission to speak, nor was there going to be any cue that would alert me to step in, join the conversation, sharing stories and ideas. I would look to Henri for guidance, support, a translation of some sort. But he was someplace else, embedded in his own joyous conversations with his brothers or sisters; roaring laughter, hands slapping together, the Temptations playing loudly in the background, then James Brown. Henri would often try and teach me the singers of these rich songs. I did not need to be taught, however, for I had learned the songs of the culture while living in California. I was quite capable of ‘name that tune,’ and quite pleased with myself for being correct most of the time.

As the years have passed, however, I found myself completely at a loss as to who sings what and who is who. I sit back in awe and envy as I watch Henri gently settle in with one of his family members, or friends and talk about music, rhythms. His roars of laughter ring through the room.

When Henri and I left California and moved back to my home town in Vermont, it was quite an adjustment for him. The land, the layout, the people were all strikingly different. I would find him quite often questioning the responses of cashiers when we left service lines; he was insistent and absolute about their manner and responses toward us being less than friendly, rude, asking for more information than was needed and was not expected from the previous customer who was white. I would look at him bewildered and excuse their behavior as recuperating from, or still in the midst of a bad day. He would look at me frustrated, as if I came from some other place. I did. I was born and raised in Vermont. I never grew up hearing about or having conversations about any ‘challenging behaviors’ that could happen from people who were white. Instead, I tended

to believe that there was something wrong with me. I grew up wondering whether or not I had done something completely wrong, or had not done something exactly right. Henri, on the other hand, grew up in Compton. Originally, Compton was primarily a white city. But as more and more Blacks moved in, white flight seized the city. Compton then became the largest city lived in by Blacks. He tells me about conversations his mother would continuously share with him and his siblings about “them;” in Compton. His mother talked about the large white building built high on an elevated hill. It was the court house and the city jail. Wherever you went, regardless of where you stood, the building was always visible. His mother, he says, would always ask them why they thought that the largest, whitest, most glorious and majestic building in Compton was not only sitting high enough to see everything surrounding it, but for all below to see it? Because, she said, it’s to “remind all of you that the great white father is watching all of you niggers.”

Henri says that he always grew up knowing and understanding the injustices that plagued many blacks and how his mom would say “the white man would be more than happy to lock you up and make you a statistic.”

I can always rely on Henri to paint a different picture of what it is I believe I am seeing. I admire his ability to question, to unpack multiple layers of what he saw or heard when I heard only one piece, saw only one thing. He is able to think quickly on his feet, while cleverly negotiating and being keenly aware of the underlying messages not spoken. I would initially stumble and fall, feeling uncoordinated and clumsy. I was like a new driver just learning the knack of maneuvering down roads with a variety of twists and unexpected turns. I began to model his attitudes or behavior, to traits that seemed to

come so naturally to him. Eventually, I found that I too could hear two different conversations going on at once while others in the room seemed only to be able to hear. I began to “think Black.” I began to question, to filter through any and all information or happenings given to me. I could no longer just assume that I was hearing what I thought I heard, or accept what I was being told. I engaged in the process of translation. I began to shift between one language to another, one definition to another, one culture to another (Derrida, On-Line). No longer was I confused by unexpected twists, shifts and turns. I was becoming a seasoned driver.

### *Barbara*

There have been many other members of this unique club that have assisted me, held me by the hand and led me down unfamiliar roads. They have been my ‘back seat’ drivers, aiding me as I worked to avoid complete destruction and tangled possibilities. Barbara Stewart was one of my backseat drivers whom I always felt was beside, behind, and in front of me as if she were right there on all sides of me. Barbara was considered a ‘grandmother’ to many children in the Old North End of Burlington. She epitomized what is considered a spiritual leader, or someone who walks in front when you need to follow, behind you when you need encouragement, and beside you when you need a friend (Fry, 2003).

I first came to know Barbara during a meeting I was asked to attend for a young child in a local elementary school in the Old North End. Barbara was viewed as an advocate for many families and was often asked to attend a meeting to support and advocate for the needs of their child. She was the *community other mother*. She worked on behalf of the community. She uplifted its members to where they could seek to

become self-reliant and independent (Hill-Collins, 1987). I was not expected at that first meeting. This was evident from the responses I received when I walked in. Despite my late arrival and visible disruption, Barbara continued with the meeting. She had a gift for reprimanding a child while simultaneously challenging the school for their lack of cultural awareness, unfair treatment and uneducated responses. No one would, or even dared, disagree with her.

She was firm and fast with her language and explanations and, to me as an observer, clearly pronounced what, to the administrators and behaviorists, was a clear cut and dry case of inappropriate and unacceptable behavior on the child's part. At the completion of the meeting, Barbara pulled me into a corner, told me that I was okay, and stated that she noticed I had a good aura about me. From that moment on, her community became my community. She provided me with the keys that opened doors into an array of information. This shared information provided me with the ability to move a bit gentler and more effectively while working in the community.

In turn, I was able to support Barbara's position as a leader. She utilized my knowledge of working in the majority world. I attended meetings with her and served to clarify and translate information for which she had neither experience nor definition. She would laugh at my silent laugh and tease me about how white and country I was. But, she liked and trusted me. And I trusted and highly respected her. Her passing has left a significant hole in the community. Barbara embodied a movement that sought to highlight the wealth of the Old North End community within the context of the larger community.

## CHAPTER 9: Explorations of Leadership

### Community Members as Leaders

Still, within the community of the Old North End are many individuals who remain members of my club. All hold diverse characteristics. They all reside in a community that has been marginalized by the majority due primarily to race and socioeconomics. But, despite the valleys that separate how I was brought up and how they live and survive is the certainty that their intelligence and wit is much higher and greater than many. They possess an ability to translate information into a language that can be understood and can interpret situations and scenarios that many within the more dominant culture are unaccustomed or unfamiliar with.

Despite the existence of countless references (Fairholm, 1996; Greenleaf, Vaill, & Spears, 1998; Smith, Montagno, & Kuzmenko, 2004;), an exact name for the type of leadership that characterizes the Barbaras of the world, they are people who are willing to create change and guide others toward a (hopefully) more meaningful place of being. None of the more familiar leadership styles seem to encompass the rich and complex characteristics that are demonstrated and shared by those in the community that has come to surround and include me.

One style of leadership, the '*industrial model*;' (Moxley, 2002 as cited by Drath, 1998), seems to more closely resemble the approach that Barbara and others exhibited. The Industrial model places emphasis on what an individual is able to provide. The Industrial model leaders' ability to lead is due to their ability to provide a compelling vision. This vision is set forth with a clear direction and strategy in mind, all the while motivating and inspiring their followers. This inspiration develops into a construction of

*reciprocity of relationships*; relationships that are shared by many ordinary people instead of the expression of any single ordinary person (Moxley, 2000). With this, I pause and reflect on the many incredible club members, none of whom would want to call themselves leaders.

Although many had characteristics and qualities similar, for example to that of a servant *leader* (Greenleaf et al., 1998), they also held something more vast and deep. They did not lead for the purpose of being able to claim the title ‘leader,’ nor were they thinking of themselves as leaders in the first place. They responded to community and individual needs. They guided, nurtured, educated and supported not only me but many other community members out of a deep concern, respect, love and care for the person and the community in which we all worked. They led me through an intellectual discourse and dialogue (Fry, 2003) that led to a place of understanding. The discourse through dialogue provided me with the ability to (in some instances) survive, to connect to other people and, what seemed like, an entire world. These leaders partnered with me, placed me in equal footing to their steps, and worked together with me to understand and disconnect confusing and complex situations (Moxley, 2000). They felt that discovering a truth or a greater understanding (of a situation) that results from mistakes would certainly benefit me as them. My discovery was their discovery and my gain was theirs as well (Bohm, 1998). They did not put themselves in the center; they instead worked collectively toward a common goal (Moxley).

Working together collectively is demonstrative of a *partnership as leadership* model (Moxley, 2000). This leadership style arrives from the belief that there is a shared sense of purpose and a united pledge to a larger mission. The partnership model view

should not be described as a way of empowering another or others. Empowerment implies that power is equivalent to currency that is owned, then shared or given to another person, (Moxley). Within my place of existence, there could have been two or three club members all there at the same time, passing a baton from one to the next; exercising turn taking at who would give me the information needed to move through my day with as little misgivings as possible. All were quite aware and recognized that as we moved forward, giving birth to new ideas, realizations would surface and could possibly invoke some pain (Moxley). To cushion the pain, the leaders within my club would shift their positions by standing beside me, in front of me, and even behind me as they nudged, prodded and pushed me along (Fry, 2003). They never asked nor requested any amount of recognition for themselves, and sometimes not even thinking a “thank you” was necessary, as they would scoff, give a nod of their head and say ‘come on girl’ like I was being ridiculous and slowing everyone down.

So, how would you define this type of leader? As teachers? Bright stars who practiced humility and were therefore able to give much of their attention to me, or one of ‘the others’? The leaders within my club led with hope and faith. They had a vision of where they needed to go and how they were going to get there. They realized the challenges, hardships and suffering that lay ahead but were willing to continue to attain their goals (Fry, 2003). Their strength and humility gave me the space and ability to have voice (Palmer, 1983)

The *partnership model* (Moxley, 2000) is also guided by the principle of individuals needing each other because one person cannot lead on their own. So how would one describe a person who leads without seeing themselves as leading? It was

humility (Palmer, 1983) that gave them the ease of listening to a greater community's description of truth and the ability to respond to conflicts and confusion that existed therein. Perhaps it was faith (Fry, 2003) that enabled them to uncover and discover the overwhelming emotions that existed on the side streets, in the alleys and behind neighborhood doors and as such, provided these leaders with an ability to speak a community's truth and the assurance and certainty that things hoped for would come to pass (Fry, 2003).

Humility and faith (Palmer, 1983), when tension exists between these two, we are able to know when to listen and to speak (Palmer). Many of the community leaders that I have come to know do not seek titles. Instead, they are satisfied in playing a sustaining and supporting role in the development of another's ability to move what needs to move forward. Their encouragement of others is a form of leadership based on recognizing and celebrating the accomplishments of the individual and those with whom the individual interacts (Fry, 2003). To them, leadership and spirit go hand in hand (Fry). Whether it was someone who was trying to just 'get through the day' safely, or someone who was encouraging parents to become more involved in their child's education, there were countless women and men guiding me and so many others. They did this for survival, as well as their own. To them, a *spiritual survival* was dependent on the of service to others, grounded in humility and based in the ability to see one's self as one of many and still view one's neighbor as an equal partner (Fry). This component of shared and spiritual leadership is predicated on a belief that one's accomplishments must be shared with those who were behind, across the street screaming directions, where to go, what is needed – slow down, speed up or just stop, shut up and do nothing. Thus, a path was

created that enabled me to move through my internal worries, fears and perceived failures toward a sustained foundation of loyalty, commitment and concern for the well-being of a community and its members (Fry).

### Shared Vision

It appears that in our current society, the word *leader* has become an ‘in word’ that is frequently used. Many want to claim this title for the expected glory, respect and power. There are those, however, who are leaders for whom speaking and carrying out tasks that benefit the community is so natural, so human and basic that we are reminded of what it really means to be a good neighbor or friend. Our world and society has become so righteous and seeks to claim, own and glorify power so intensely that leader and leadership now is close to riding on the shoulders of elite, when instead it originated from a place of community and of neighbor; those ‘long ago’ times when we would all naturally think about taking care of each other. I have seen this phenomena existing in communities that have witnessed the purity of neighborliness disintegrate and now are working to seek out those characteristics due to the recognition of survival. This natural occurrence of what is right, and of how people should be supporting each other comes from uncovering characteristics that stem from a long ago time that was thought to be extinct, but is being resurrected.

Perhaps leadership is naturally embedded in our spirit; a way of incorporating values that focus on the greater good versus the one who is greater. The culture club members who led me were able to do so from an almost mystical pull that existed outside of self (Fairholm, 1996). This pull provided guidance and understanding of my personal and social identities and how these identities came to exist in and connect to

communities. In other words, racialized and self identity became more fully developed. Perhaps what transpired is that there was more connection to an identity that had been left somewhere unattended and was viewed more as a stranger than as a companion or friend. My own racial identity underwent a transformation which in turn influenced my self development, political awareness, cultural perspectives, and reconnected me to my beginnings, my family (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1994).

### The Initiation

Found within the hearts and souls of my culture club members are leaders who guide tirelessly and with passion. They did so for the sake of survival and because of an instinctual or natural concern for the welfare of another and less for reasons of desire to be in a position of power-perceived or otherwise. I was quite fortunate to have been initiated as a member into this club. Their acceptance stemmed deep commitment to the community and a desire to prepare those who would follow them. They did so because they cared. They understood. They encouraged (Fry, 2003). Many of the club members encouraged and insisted that I be in front; they identified opportunities that spoke to my abilities and allowed me to break down barriers and overcome certain obstacles that were within my sphere of knowledge and experience. This was partly due to the cultural capital that I carried; having grown up in a predominantly white world. My language, dress and ability to step into and feel more at ease in the dominant population to code switch was recognized and utilized by many within my club. They, with good humor, laughed at my quiet laugh, joked at my flat accent and un-condescendingly smiled at my sincere ignorance of a world that would automatically label me as Black/African American despite my ignorance of what it means to be Black, what it signifies, and how

being Black affects my interactions with others who are also Black, as well as those who are not. To the white world, I was considered ‘the other;’ I never realized how much of the other I also was to those who mirrored the image of myself.

## CHAPTER 10: Storytelling as a Scholarly Practice

### Spirited Conversations

I had had many interactions with those whom I share a membership. There are others with whom I share a membership, but our connection is indirect because I have only heard about or read their stories that speak to their arduous struggle against the many obstacles of oppression and injustice which often appear without warning, or loudly, with fireworks and bold, descriptive banners which scream inequities, separation and exclusion. Despite the variety of complexities found in society, and the challenge of finding one's way and feeling secure, there exists the desire, willingness, and strength to engage in battles that vitalize spirit and mind. Many of my club members were, and continue to be, leaders. Many grandly accepted or titled themselves as 'leader,' and just as many weaved mother, student, and friend into the role of leadership without claiming the title itself.

Throughout this search for identity and self-actualization, what came to light was the interconnectedness that exists between all of the self proclaimed leaders and those who choose to lead silently. The telling of stories serves to educate and, through sharing, confront the challenges associated with oppression and give rise to hope – a hope that leads to greater understanding, appreciation, and change. Storytelling leads to the accomplishment of a variety of objectives. Storytelling, historically, is one means by which a culture is preserved. For it is often through storytelling that a marginalized and oppressed people became educated about its history and are then able to invite the larger community into a conversation about oppression – how it impacts and creates the position of other. It is also through storytelling that club members are able to

demonstrate their sense of unity and recognition to each other and those who are the other or members of the out-group.

It is not unusual for challenging positions to lead us through many uncharted valleys (Vanzant, 1995). It is in uncharted valleys where an educational process that exists that is unlike, and not part of, a typical idea of a classroom. A veiled knowledge and teaching of the uncharted valleys takes place in communities, homes, on streets and on the corners of neighborhoods. Storytelling is not one's typical scholarly practice. It takes the place of lectures, with friends and grandmothers disguised as professors. The knowledge brought forth from their storytelling gives birth to a celebration of our spiritual heritage (Palmer, 1983).

Scholarly practice, typically void of the presence of storytelling, can fail in its ability to convey the love and compassion that storytelling is able to provide (Palmer, 1983). Storytelling provides a knowledge that is sewn together with compassion, responsibility and transformation as it leads the listener toward involvement and accountability (Palmer).

### All Grown Up

My culture club members stood as leaders as they constructed an educational setting where obedience to truth was put into practice (Palmer, 1983). This obedience was defined as a way to listen with a discerning ear and respond faithfully to the implications of what was being heard. Accountability was necessary before entering into a partnership, joining in membership, or raising the consciousness of others as it relates to one's history, society and one's self (Palmer). The stories that were shared with me not only paved the path toward membership in this community, but also served to hone my

leadership abilities (Moxley, 2000) and simultaneously awaken my spiritual development. As the club members nurtured my self development and awareness, they willingly stepped into the background so I can use my strengths to learn how to lead with knowledge, compassion, spirit, and heart (Moxley).

Spiritual development exists not only in quiet moments or in solitude, but also grows and matures through our participation with others (Moxley, 2000). Our spiritual self can be directly intertwined with how we lead within our various positions, as well as how we are situated in our community. This involves teaching those who are in the role as student the principles that encourage self governance and self direction (Fairholm, 1996). Teaching my young daughter began with an introduction to the various themes of life that she would encounter, while at the same time providing her with a clear message about how to navigate through the challenges and opportunities that will affect her self discovery, search for meaning, and personal and social identities. As teacher, mother and even leader, it is necessary for me to re-invent a classroom atmosphere that will heighten my daughter's awareness as well as provoke questions. Without realizing how I approached the situation with my daughter, I can reflect back now and recognize that a partnership with her was created, grounded in deep respect and love (Moxley).

Our relationships with others are cultivated through conversations, dialogue and the fluidity and natural occurrence of storytelling. Whether individual or group in nature, stories permit us to convey our individual and community values. As if we were painting a picture of our culture (Moxley, 2000), stories provide a way to explain our history, our present and our future. Storytelling is a blending together of narratives that derive from individual experiences with those in the community, work experiences, and through work

interactions. Remembering and telling stories allow one to stay in touch with the many truths about themselves as well as truths about the community (Moxley). Stories are deconstructed and reconstructed in ways that bring together detached parts of truth (found individually, or in a community) and make them again whole (Palmer, 1983).

Stories, historically, have been a way to preserve the past and understand the future for marginalized communities and groups. Through the use of stories as constructive classrooms, marginalized and oppressed groups have developed methods that provide answers and information to its students. For example, slaves used songs and stories to inform others about their pain, oppression, and hope for the future. Mexican Americans used ballads and stories that passed from generation to the next generation and Native Americans also used both the written and oral tradition to survive, to educate, and to continue its legacy (Delgado, 1989). Oppressed groups appreciate the power of storytelling. It is a form of survival as well as liberation. It preserves the history of a people, the importance and place of the current generation, as well as their own individual importance and results in the storytelling growing spiritually and the listener gaining wisdom epistemologically (Delgado). Storytelling provides an opportunity to familiarize one's self with his or her own historic oppression, to heal through a process of group solidarity and gives one permission to rise above the position of *otherness* (Delgado) while constructing a reality that becomes more multifaceted due to the shifts and changes of ideas, understanding and beliefs that arise from the sharing of stories (Delgado).

The quest for knowledge and the desire to explore tend not to vanish or lose itself in silence. Like music, they can travel under and within the tiniest crevices, leaving

gleaming trails of curiosity while it teases one to follow, mischievously leading us through many of our own life stages. From our present all grown up stance into one of an adolescent's 'yeah, whatever' postures, to the reincarnation of an almost infant-like being as we struggle with clumsiness, we continuously try to adapt to new surroundings with eagerness, willingness and a determination to discover more. We, in the end, remain child-like; with an infinite number of possibilities that only underscore how humanity leads to opportunities (Brauman, 2003). Physical bodies may become less agile, more tentative and less vibrant as we traverse life's journeys, yet our minds and our desire to learn and understand never diminishes. Leadership and the capacity to create movement and change naturally co-exist through the act of conversations.

My culture club, the leaders within the club, and the communities in which I live or have lived and work have given rise to my greater understanding and awareness of my abilities and shortcomings. I have been nurtured and supported as I continue to grow, learn and realize who I am, how I connect to others, and what it means to lead. Some quietly lead while others seek attention for this leading. The leaders within the culture club sought to guide, to educate. Those who chose to listen and learn earned their trust because they demonstrated a need to pass on knowledge and a passion for the community. The "followers" needed to exhibit a thirst for knowledge and the will to survive through stories and good work. It was through storytelling that the culture club leaders held me close, exposed themselves, shared their secrets and educated me about our collective past with a glimpse toward the future. This process allowed me to rid myself of my ethnocentrism and narrow lens approach to the world (Delgado, 1989). I erased any hesitancy I might have initially had to speak up for the truth. The stories of

my culture club members made me aware that I was not alone; I had many beside, behind and in front of me (Delgado).

### Accepting Responsibility

What is now my responsibility? What responsibility do I have to discover the many truths? How best do I share my new knowledge? How do I pass on the torch? Who carries it after me? I have many questions. Questions, however, are what a leader uses to think through and plan how to proceed. Do we not have a responsibility to prod our consciousness, to challenge our sense of values and beliefs in order to determine our present and future impact? How do we avoid becoming the manipulator? How do we use stories as truth to either maintain or acquire new knowledge (Palmer, 1983)? How do we remain, if at all possible, as detached spectators of a world *out there* (Palmer)? Perhaps we should all respond to one another as if we were in a large classroom and we were all students, leaving the classroom for the last time, taking with us nuggets of information that propels us to seek out the answer to ‘so...what,’ yet still leaves us brimming with curiosity, wanting to find out and search for what’s next. Our educational journey would be facilitated by the learner’s, or the storyteller’s truth (Palmer). We would come to realize that the most priceless education afforded to us at this time is what we have been continually neglecting – the reality of our present moment and what is happening in the larger classroom or community of which we are a daily part of (Palmer). Our best method of research, and one that will result in the most outcomes is to practice the discipline of displacement by walking in the shoes of *others* (Palmer), leaving us with a need to search for more, to know and understand more; not accepting what is subjectively (or even objectively) presented but instead challenge, question and dream of

what other possible realities exist, advancing our desire for further exploration through stories as research.

Research requires action. One cannot simply ask, ponder and then expect a response or a conclusion without there being some motion. I speak not only to the motion of mind (which assists in guiding the next step) but the motion that is embedded in *action*, where a thought or idea is carried out and explored openly and more visually and its metamorphosis rises from the existence of an introvert to that of an extrovert. Research, through stories, encourages the reader to suspend judgment, listen for a message or hypothesis and then begin to investigate or measure its truth (Delgado, 1989). While doing so, the storyteller begins to construct a common culture of shared understandings or meanings (Delgado). Groups and communities that hold the position of *other* will push the listener toward action. As an external stimulus, storytelling encourages exploration and a desire to know more. It leaves the listener with more questions than they had in the beginning and rethinking the answers they thought initially correct when they began the learning journey. If storytelling is to be viewed as of educational value, it must become more ingrained and interwoven within the fabric of nature. Education, as currently constructed, is Eurocentric and gives authority to dominant groups to create the stories that reinforce how they define themselves with out-groups, or *others*. Education is the means by which shared realities allow groups to maintain positions of power and viewed their perceived superiority as natural (Delgado). Then again, stories are told from a human perspective which include pain and sorrow and we have been educated or trained to avoid discomfort, to strive for intelligence and shy away from spirituality (Vanzant, 1995). Listening to stories told by *others* would force

dominant groups to see how the world looks from the lens of the *other*. In this regard, intellectual apartheid is avoided as one becomes more open to hearing new voices for the first time, thereby, asking how they had overlooked these voices all along (Delgado).

Many times, instead of finding myself in front of the class as the teacher, flustered due to my rising amount of excitement and anticipation, I find myself serving as the student. Taking on the role as student is situated in a need to better understand what it feels like to walk in a student's shoe. By occupying the role of student (Palmer, 1983), I have come to understand what it feels like to be morally dissected and to listen to explanations (as I believe, obviously correct and unflawed) and perceptions about power, class or race in America. Granted, the reception that a teacher gets is not always welcoming, but in its own confusing and rough-edged way, it invites others to listen. Undeniably, there are times when many of us would choose to leave a situation in which we are not heard, with apparent annoyance.

The ability to see areas for self improvement or self reflection is impeded; the remotest possibility for growth becomes tainted and obscured with egocentrism coupled with a shadow of arrogance. It is at these times that our own superiority can be so inflated that it overshadows opportunities for learning, for knowledge creation, for self growth and discovery. It is easy to become complacent and believe that all has been mastered. Once we have ascended to the position of teacher, it becomes difficult to see one's self as student again, even when the choice to seek additional education is one's own. To become the teacher (Palmer, 1983) is to believe that a milestone has been passed. If my entire culture club members adhered to this egocentric approach, I would not be where I am, know what I know, nor perhaps would they know what they know

because our mutual interaction has changed us all. We have many more lens and more stories that can be used to frame our new realities, new perceptions about the world, and raised self awareness.

## CHAPTER 11: Conclusion

### Rebirth

What does one do when he or she realizes that their silence is a form of oppression? What do we do when we realize that we are, or have been supporting oppression or racism in the past and now want to overcome this behavior? What does one do to move to a more humanistic, supportive, and educated position as we try to free our thoughts and behaviors from an unhelpful position to one that encompasses growth, understanding and recognition? Could the answer be found in the desire to lead, invisibly – not guided by the limelight, recognition, and glorification that come with possessing a title? Leading is humanistic and often arises without grandeur, bells or whistles. Quiet leadership is more difficult and challenging, more perplexing and complex than is public or glorified leadership. Leaders who lead in the background seem to maintain their role as educator, guide and teacher out of a love and a compassion for change. There may not be any loud applause or screams to continue pressing forward, no fanfare and signs waving from the grips of outstretched arms proclaiming love and adoration. These leaders, these culture club members, lead humanely.

Leadership is complex. It is multifaceted and, thereby difficult to be viewed as one ‘type’ or style. We find ourselves mulling over all the vast operational possibilities that exist, and more often than not, paste together sentences and descriptions from one style of leadership to another. When complete, instead of a compilation of words creating a description, what we have is a visual image of the many people who have provided guidance and support through one’s life journey. What we have are leaders acted, responded, supported and guided with love, compassion, and criticism that could at

times be piercing. While at the same time, quietly hoping for individual growth and maturity and encouraging learning with wisdom they possessed, hoping it would be used to help others. Is this an act of human kindness or, more precisely, acting humanely?

Humane leadership can prompt us to think more about a person's moral character rather than a style. To be *humane* is to be compassionate, gentle and charitable; similar characteristics that you seek in a friend or lover and hope that your children develop and your spouse or partner possess. Being humane is not, or should not be a mystical entity that is read about in fairy tales, described in books and dreamt of during afternoon siestas. We hope to encounter it on a daily basis with most people with whom we interact. And, when we do not, we recall an encounter with someone who was less than 'humane or less than kind, supportive or caring. The latter group of people, unfortunately, can drastically alter a day which began as happy, filled with calming thoughts that instead becomes stressful, filled with confusion, resulting in feelings of imbalance and frustration. As our daily procession continues, we surprisingly find ourselves mirroring this distasteful image that we initially fought against and tried to avoid. Perhaps this is why many of the people I identified as leaders worked so diligently at supporting me, their desire to keep alive what seems to be an endangered human characteristic – humane-ness. They attentively worked at nurturing such behaviors and personal attributes in others so that we in turn would do the same for someone else.

My personal desire to mirror such qualities rises not out of a desire to reflect a spotlight upon myself, but out of a desire to serve, to act with kindness and compassion, a yearning to impart wisdom, knowledge and understanding to my daughter and so many

others. This is imperative for my continued growth and racial awareness, and that of others that I teach or simply share stories.

Undoubtedly, a small egotistical piece of one's self surfaces as we seek to share knowledge and create new stories. Those with whom we share are like captive audiences, often eager to listen, looking upon us with anticipation and, perhaps awe. When we encounter skepticism and doubt, this only increases our longing to conquer such mild aloofness. Perhaps we, in these humane leadership roles, do crave a sense of the spotlight; very subtle yet just as real as if we ourselves were standing up on a large stage with multiple beams of light being cast upon us. The applause we receive and selfishly give to ourselves when we succeed makes for a phenomenal finale as we unravel our own lush red carpet for others to follow and step upon, leading them to the greatest of all premiers – knowledge.

We acquire an abundance of information in our daily life journey. We respectfully acknowledge the presence of some of this information. With other information, we swiftly continue past and pay no heed to it and still with other; we hesitantly and unwillingly give perhaps slight recognition. Then, there is some information that can cause such a commotion in our thoughts that a dizzying emotional response erupts. This prompts a momentary suspension of what is currently transpiring around us so that all that we are able to do is to render ourselves captive to its overwhelming ability to (cause us to) reflect.

This sudden and oftentimes unexpected reflection are the beginning stages of acquiring knowledge or information that can produce a shift in beliefs, perceptions of places or people or something new that has never been considered nor recognized as a

reality. It is this knowledge, or pieces of information that permeate our surroundings, which create shifts in how we view ourselves and our worlds. It is also this information that can transform itself *into* action; something that takes on a shape and infiltrates our being. It infects how we react, respond, think, do, believe, love, hate or ignore. Once we have become infected, our choices about what we do, say, study or become involved in begins to materialize and take shape. Our commitments and desires become less shy and more extroverted as we look to how we can take this new knowledge and create what we see and hope it is to become a catalyst for positive change. When walking down a red carpet, or even a quiet country nursery road, we know and believe that we are going to end up somewhere at least different from where we began. This is how knowledge presents itself. As if on a stage, it appears in all its grandeur; whether received with boos and dismal cries, or wild cheers and rhythmic applause, an impact on each individual in that room has been made.

Perhaps, as we move throughout our daily journeys, introduced and accompanied by many incredible leaders, their leadership existence is not too unfamiliar nor too distant from how knowledge presents itself; a longing to leave an impact, to make a difference, to create a new thought and awareness as to how we view and interrelate with our community and world. If any of us begin walking down a quiet nursery road, not paying any attention to what we are passing, unsure of even where we are going; unconscious of our surroundings and the stories that anxiously wait to be read aloud, or to the whispers of voices lingering close to our ear; I believe that our lives would have been, and would continue to be rather lifeless. Not only this, but our ability to share any information and ideas, ways and possibilities of moving things forward, providing (positive) input and

creating change would have been nothing less than limited to non-existence. Our ability to be a leader in various roles would have had little to no impact if we walked passed all that was presented before us, without noticing or giving recognition to anything or any of the various ideas. Our ability and desire to create a positive change would be limited if it wasn't for the desire to involve ourselves with knowledge.

So, in the end, what does all of this mean? Perhaps it is our realization that the road we travel eventually does come to an end as we know it, and we recognize that our continuation into this unknown is something we try and grasp hold of, seeking some way to peek around the corner, getting a rapid glimpse of what all will be like when we get there. But, while we meander through the valleys and decide which way to turn at a cross road, we do know that we want to make sure we have learned as much as we could have, enjoyed as much as we might have, and left something behind that reminds others that we were here. Knowledge persists. It is our way of leaving a stamp permanently placed upon the thoughts, hearts and minds of others. We are able to keep our journey moving upward or onward.

On a personal note, with my children, Ora, Sira, and Legend, my hope is that I have shared with them information that will guide them as they walk along the twisty road of life. I feel as if their existence, together as sisters, is both purposeful and directed. The meaning of their names speak to how they epitomize my newly, firmly established, racialized identity. It is because of my journey and who has emerged from the walk along twisty roads that my children will come to understand and appreciate their connection to each other and the various places and roles they will hold within the world, as they and their mirror images – other children of African descent.

## A Long Lasting Story of a Journey Filled with Light

The meaning of my daughters' names speak to what they have brought me, what they themselves will find amongst each other and amongst the world, and what people of color continue to move through and establish daily. Every day we are entering into a new learning process (Vaill, 1998) because our identity is fluid and forever emerging. This newness leads to discovering relationships with others (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1998), as well as how and *if* we lead others to discovering new truths.

Our looking glass self (Goffman, 1959) is oftentimes determined by the conversations we take part in, as well as conversations we overhear; our self emerges through communication (Cooley, 1902). Our development, identity, and collection of knowledge are dependent on interactions with our communities, and the information that we have taken from such interactions. New definitions of classroom, student, and teacher are readily available in those reflections of community and community members.

The ability to lead, and how one leads, rises from our human interactions, and these interactions are birthed between our conversations with one another. Embedded in our conversations are stories that strongly impact how we share information, pass on information and gather information to create truth; a knowledge that guides and determines how we lead as parents, teachers, students, workers, individual members of a society, as well as members of a community. For people of color, we have historically used our stories to convey messages of hope and endurance, as well as how to overcome pain, inequities and injustice. Many of these conversations have taken place in our constructed classrooms – in the community and in homes – as well as silent conversations that occur in front of mirrors. I began my exploration of self silently, in front of a long,

rectangle mirror and continue with this exploration. My journey continues, as do others' as well.

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