

SPRING 2025

ODYSSEY SENIOR



ORACLE

MEMORIES AND MOMENTS



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www.odyssey.wisc.edu

Odyssey Senior is an empowering writing enrichment program for Odyssey students and their relatives who are 55 or older. Seniors met on five Tuesday mornings in March and April, with our theme this spring being sensory memories. How do our five senses—sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch—heighten our memories and make our writing vivid for our readers? We read poems and passages ranging from Marge Piercy's ironic "Barbie Doll" to Marcel Proust's account of a remembered smell, from George Ella Lyon's "Where I Am From" to Maya Angelou's "Phenomenal Woman" to James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues." Writing prompts asked for memories of songs and concerts, comments on physical appearance, recollections of scents, and moments of wonder or fear. Some seniors faced health challenges and work conflicts and only completed a few prompts; others were prolific! We hope you enjoy the sampling of their work contained in this Oracle.





EDITH HILLIARD

FOUR-EYED EDIE

Growing up, people always made fun of me wearing glasses. At the age of three, I was adorned with a large black pair of glasses. I would break them in numerous ways. I put them under the green cushions of the couch, and my grandmother or whoever would sit on them. I would leave them in strange places, saying I lost them, like the glove compartment in the car or in my grandmother's apron pocket that she would take to work. The problem was, as I got older, I realized without them, I could not see. In school, the kids called me four-eyed Edie and it truly hurt my feelings. I would try being without them, but that meant I couldn't see.



MY CROWN OF GLORY

One feature I have been proud of is my coarse black thick hair. As a young child I always had two giant long braids with a permanent part down the center of my head. Boys would pull my braids, hold onto them, and gallop down the school hallways like they were riding a pony. I hated it.

In high school the braids disappeared but the thick coarse hair remained. All my friends were getting relaxers, but that was not an option for me. Twice a month was the day-long ordeal of washing my hair, scrubbing it with hard water, Castile soap, then the

rinse, a second wash, rinse, and the third and final wash & rinse. The next step was the comb out and hair dryer, which took at least two hours. Step three was parting and applying the hair grease. We are near the finish line. Now sitting on a kitchen chair with the straightening comb on the stove burner, heating up to a fiery red to press my hair.

Now the thick coarse-looking hair has turned into shimmering long locks of shiny straight hair. The deed is completely done.

As an adult with arthritis in my right hand, I can no longer do my own hair. I go to a beauty salon. I always get the comment, "You have such beautiful hair—is it really yours?" I thank my grandmother now for the care she took with my hair. Not getting the relaxer saved the quality of my hair. Friends and even strangers compliment me on my hair. It makes me feel good, and I have the realization that all that work was truly worth it.



MUSIC MEMORY

New Orleans is the city of intense, superb Jazz everywhere. My mom, her friend June, and I took our first trip there in late November 1991. My mom and June would take what they called the most relaxing 21-hour train ride from Chicago to New Orleans. If I had traveled with them, I would have been in a strait jacket and committed at the end of the trip. I took a 2-1/2-hour Van Galder bus from Madison to Chicago O'Hare airport. I gracefully boarded Delta Airlines for my relaxing 4-hour trip.

Arriving in New Orleans, I took a shuttle to The Embassy Suites Hotel located at 315 Julia St. This was the warehouse district with very little activity after 3 pm. The trolley was a two-block spooky walk at night, and we were

told to be alert and cautious as it was quite desolated. We truly enjoyed riding on the trolley. Once off the trolley you could smell scrumptious, delectable, mouthwatering cuisine at every establishment. We



stopped for a late lunch at an outside restaurant. The maître de said we had to sample crawfish. When it arrived, the corn and potato looked delicious, but the crawfish was served with the entire body and the eyes looking up at you. He gave us a lesson on how to eat them: bite the head and suck out the juice. I couldn't do it.

Off we went strolling the streets with an occasional stop in a gift shop. We had the news that the perfect place to shop was the French Market. The entrance was a large opening like a Wisconsin tobacco barn with all the sides open. There were bargains galore from the hundreds of vendors hawking your attention. Many purchases were made between the three of us.

We were now spending the Christmas holiday in Jackson Park with Aaron Neville, a singer from New Orleans who, along with his brothers, had a band that blended R&B, Funk, and

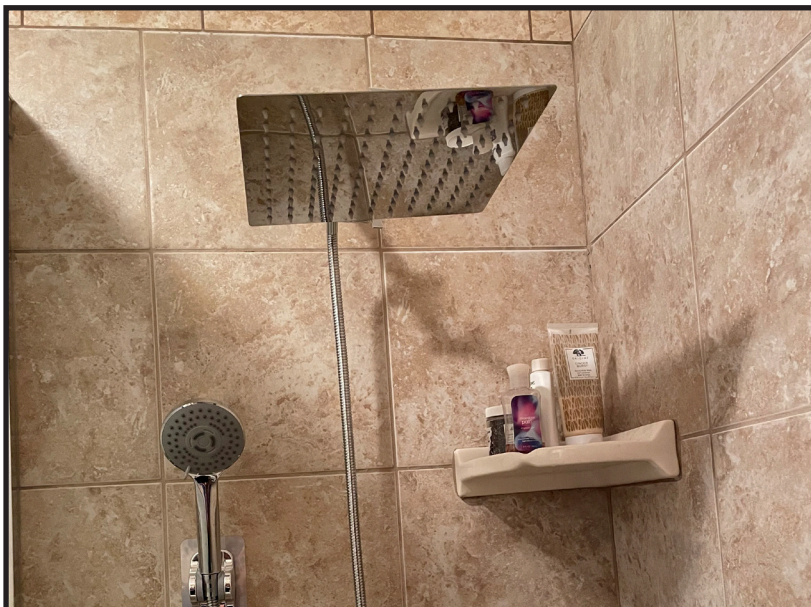


Soul to create a unique sound. There are numerous other New Orleans personalities for an excellent Christmas Concert in the park. Santa is coming down the Mississippi River on a lighted barge. At the end of the concert everyone lights a candle and the entire park sings Silent Night. It gave you a warm, humbling feeling of peace. Then the fireworks started, a beautiful sight to behold over the river.

My Mom and I the next year on Mother's Day returned to New Orleans. We continued this tradition every year until her death in 2019.



An amazing occurrence happened in 2022. My sister, daughters, three adult granddaughters, two goddaughters, and I took the trip to New Orleans. We relived everything my mom and I did, even staying at the same hotel. It was a memory of a lifetime.

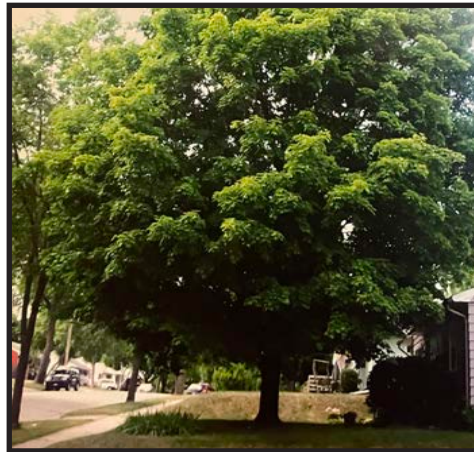


SENSING A MEMORY

My rainforest shower head brings me back to being in the rich, beautiful grounds of Africa. The monkeys swinging in the poplar trees. The sound of the fast-flowing water pouring down on my head. I hear the cooking crew as their feet move over the granite stones to the leafy walkway. I see through the blinds, the hurried movement of the men cleaning the walking trails keeping the area looking like a botanical garden. The beautiful yellow and purple flowers peeking through the blinds bringing the smell of lavender into the room.

WHERE I'M FROM

I am from Madison in the wonderful Badger state of Wisconsin, where we have four seasons. We have Winter with cold blistering winds, icy snow-covered trees, and walkways you slide across. I am from Fall with golden brown leaves, purple, red and multicolored trees as you walk on the ground and it crinkles under your feet. I am from Springtime with the smell of lilac bushes, floral flowers, and a magnitude of aromas filling the air. I am from Summer with the Farmers' Market circling the square with an array of ethnic people pondering the artwork of beautifully placed fruits and vegetables looking like an accomplished painting.





SOCORRO LOPEZ

REFLECTIONS ON APPEARANCE

My grandfather and my grandmother raised hell when they got together. Grandfather came from a wealthy Spanish family, the Gomez family; the family members were fair-skinned, with blue and green eyes. My grandmother was dark as the night with her grandmother being a slave. History repeated itself with my mother and father and all the discrimination

and biases that happen when two people who want to be together have to endure.

Growing up Hispanic in a Hispanic neighborhood, we all shared the same growing pains in an isolated neighborhood in Chicago. I didn't know I was brown-skinned until I went to an all-white college. My roommate always wanted to know about my neighborhood, which was different than her childhood in Alabama. I felt different and I was treated differently by others in the freshman dorm where I lived.



Nowadays, people that meet me either think I don't speak English or slowly say things to me. Hispanics are amazed I speak Spanish. My skin color throws people off. Often, they don't know in which language to talk to me.



TONY CINA

THE SMELL OF LILACS

One reason that I love Spring is the short-lived smell of lilacs. When I was a little farm boy, we lived in an old, worn farmhouse. In the front yard, an overgrown lilac bush grew at the edge of the yard. It was tall enough that we children could walk under it. In the middle of all the branches was a little clearing where small children could stand or sit.

We appropriated it to be used as a fort, a playhouse, or anything else we could imagine.

Of course, we loved that intoxicating smell of the flowers in the spring. The smell of lilacs still brings me back 50 years to being a little boy on the farm whiling away sunny days playing with my little sisters on the farm.





TANYA MONEY

WHERE I'M FROM

I am from Chicago, Illinois, the oldest sister of four brothers.

I've learned that at the time you lived in, 'money' was not at the forefront. Trying times as a kid. All you needed was to do your chores, go to school. A nickel went a long way. Respect, honor, love are tools that are necessary for the journey.

THE POWER OF MUSIC AND SOUND

MC Fadden and white head, ain't no stopping us now. The trials and tribulations of the times, war, tragedy, despair.

My escape song as a little girl dreaming like a top model in New York watching you slave. Maybe Paris, France.

The sound of breath. No breath no life.

My alarm clock when it goes off and I hear it. I've won again.



FIVE SENSES

Vision – watching my kids grow to be adults and start families, graduate, life challenges

Hearing – a healthy child brought in the world

Smell – a wonderful meal being prepared by the whole family

Taste – chicken pot pie, sweet potatoes, rib-tips, artichokes

Touch – to be able to hug strangers and make a small difference

MEMORIES

I remember as a young lady, I really loved to get the fruit off the trees, green apples. I would skip to the trees. Going to the store for my grandmother I would dream. The smell of chicken in the skillet sound, doing my homework, helping my brother, when the people are coming home from work, block quiet, dreams on the horizon for the financially challenged.

ODYSSEY SENIOR

I want to take the time to thank the Senior Odyssey Program for allowing me to think of myself and the world in a different way. I never really challenged my strength. It's an honor to be in the class. We are the greatest.





SABLE WRIGHT

THE BLACK QUEEN

The aspect of my appearance I will write on is the color of my skin. When I was born, my mother shared a story with me about when I was a baby. I was so black the palms of my hands were blue, and my lips were blue and so were my knees. She took me to the doctor. I didn't have a fever, wasn't throwing up, or anything. The doctor told my mother to calm down, that there wasn't anything to worry about with this child. "She is just black and healthy." I was always teased about my darkness, but God made all beautiful things. I am who I am: a Black Queen.

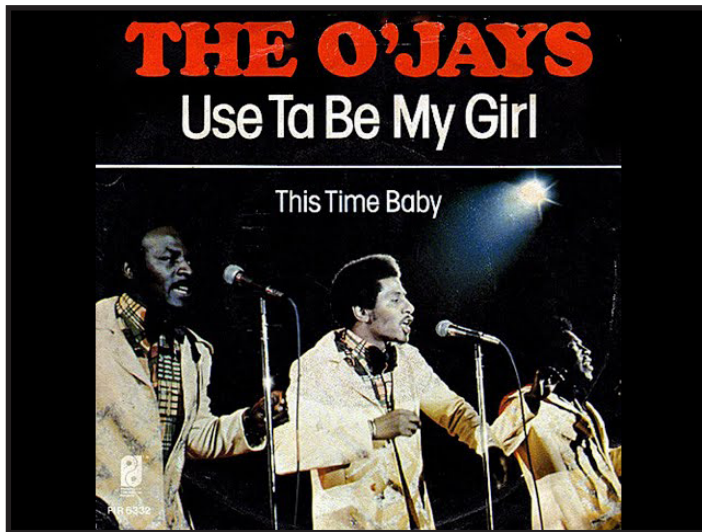
BEING SABLE

When I was in the fifth grade, my classmates would make me feel crappy. They used to make fun of me because I was so dark, and my name didn't make it any better. [Sable means black or dark.] In today's society, it's called bullying. That went on until I was in the seventh grade. I stood up and spoke out about my feeling alone, depressed, and angry from that experience. I decided to make a difference--to let the world know that I am Black, and I am proud of my skin color.



WHERE I'M FROM

Every morning waking up,
I would rise to the smell of Joel Beacon
biscuits, Folger's coffee, eggs, rice, and toast.
I'm from where your chores are done
washing laundry, smelling fresh linen
hanging outside on the clothesline.
Windows sparkling where the sun rays
are really bright and the sky is white.
Open windows, fresh air.
The watermelon smell from fresh cut grass.
Outside picking apples from trees and
the great smell of the fresh baked apple pie
my grandmother bakes.
Swinging and jumping off the swing.
Picking up frogs and lightning bugs.
Playing with family, fun games.
Where am I from? Gary, Indiana.



MUSIC MEMORY

My memory is of a song by the O’Jays called “Use Ta Be My Girl.” This guy in my classroom who was something like a stalker would always play that song every day on our breaks—lunch break, bathroom break, on the school bus going home. Now when I hear that song it brings back school memories. And it makes me laugh at how school crushes could be. Boy, was it fun back then. In his mind, I used to be his girl. Thinking about it now is really funny.

THE SMELL OF BACON

This memory takes me back to my grandparents’ house. Every morning on the weekend, I would be at my grandparents’. My grandmother would get up at 6 AM. She’d be frying the bacon with the rim on it. Smelling bacon all through the house would wake me and my stomach up, along with the smell of Folger’s coffee. I could not wait until she said, “Breakfast is ready!” That bacon, boy it will last all day in my nose. The favorite part of my day was breakfast.





MARY WELLS

THE MAN IN THE MIRROR

In 1968, the Jackson 5 came on the music scene in a huge way when they signed a contract with Motown. At the time, I was nine years old. I recall the buzz around The Jackson 5 was something I had never seen before. In fact, EVERYONE loved the Jackson 5, and they even had their own TV show! I remember people calling to say, "The Jackson 5 are on TV...hurry up...change the channel." I was shocked to see a young African American musical

group who were family, and there was the fact that they lived in the Midwest less than 200 miles away in Gary, Indiana.



Michael Jackson was always my favorite because he was the leader of the group, and it was cool that he and I were six months apart in age. Their music truly broke racial barriers and achieved unprecedented global popularity. Michael decided to go solo after three years.



Fast forward, in 1988, Michael produced seven number one albums including "Bad," which sold over 70 million copies. My favorite song on that particular album is called "Man in the Mirror." The main theme of this song is self-reflection and making a positive change in your personal life, instead of waiting for others to make a change in the world. From the instant I heard this song, I immediately felt a shift in the way I viewed myself and my own responsibility in this huge world.



My life transformed literally because of this one song. I recall vividly how I would play that song over and over again. Something about that song came at a time when I needed it; it was a special moment in time, like a divine intervention. The message was loud and clear. It was that moment in time to look at my life and make some serious changes. Those words had POWER! "I'm gonna make a change for once in my life" "I'm starting with the man in the mirror, I'm asking him to change his ways, and no message could've been any clearer, if you wanna make the world a better place, take a look at yourself and then make a change."

Take a few minutes to google and find the 1988 Grammy awards show that features Michael Jackson and the Andre Crouch choir. I think Michael performed "MAN IN THE MIRROR" that night, like never before. It was everything! Thinking about this performance always sends chills through my soul. I hope you can find it on YouTube and enjoy it.



MY EYES

I will focus on my eye color. The color is hazel and has been something only a few in our family have. I can see from a picture of my great grandma that her eye color was light in color, back in those days of black and white photos. Two of my three sons have that rare family trait. I am thankful for my hazel eyes because sometimes it's a conversation starter.

WHERE I'M FROM

I'm from the Southside in Madison, Wisconsin. For many years, growing up, I lived on the same block as Penn Park. It was the best and biggest park for many kids to have fun and hang out after school and on the weekends.

The summer months were the best. No school coupled with more daylight hours was the perfect combination to have even more fun.

Back in the day, Penn Park was just a huge open space, mainly grass, with lots of bushes. Over the years, we created





several paths through those bushes. We all had scratches from the bushes, but that never deterred us from going back day after day, year after year.

One of the paths took us to the very back edge of the park to a high mountain that we called "ROCK CUT." Paths wound around bushes, up and down the other side of the mountain, across tracks, and then up the twin mountain. One day, a girl in our group slipped down the mountain because her new church shoes didn't have any grip on the bottom. She tumbled down the side of "the mountain" and broke her leg.

Eventually the art cart and other performing arts carts would come and do skits on a regular basis.

60 years ago, Penn Park didn't have any amenities. No shelter. No bathrooms. No playground equipment. No basketball court. No soccer. No Gaga ball. I had to do a google search today to find out WHAT Gaga ball is.



60 years later, Penn Park has several welcome additions. I was compelled to take the short drive to reminisce and take a few photos. I was impressed and surprised to see how the same park has transformed from the open fields and bushes to a beautiful space where the community, both young and old, can enjoy.



BOB AUERBACH

GETTING TO AMERICA

I have so many stories from long ago: persecution as Jews in Nazi Germany, escaping to a temporary haven in England in early 1939, and war beginning in September. But let me write about “getting to America.”

My sister came back to London from a castle in Wales where she had been transferred with her school. I came back from a castle in Shropshire, where my school had moved to, my mother

had moved in with a friend in London where we joined her. My father was interned on the Isle of Man as a potential enemy alien. We finally had received our visas to the US.



We were in Euston Station, a glass-roofed departure location northward. Above the roof we could see the German bombers and British Spitfires as the London Blitz was in full swing. The train was late, finally left the station, but then waited many more hours before its trip to Glasgow, Scotland. We arrived well after the boat was supposed to have left for the US. My father would be on that boat, we were told.

Fortunately, there were many British school children on the train, destined for evacuation to North America, so they had held the boat’s departure and we actually got onto it, joyfully reuniting with my father. We were finally really on the way to America.

The SS Cameronia, filled primarily with school children being sent overseas to save them from the expected invasion of the British Isles, was going to risk it without a convoy to protect it. It sailed northward to escape the U-boats, successfully avoided icebergs, and finally sailed into New York Harbor.

I had been casually playing the shipboard piano in the lounge when a woman approached me and asked me to play “Harbor Lights.” I, of course, did not know it. She said, “I will sing it to you.” She sang, “I saw the harbor lights” It took me awhile, but I played it.



And there was the Statue of Liberty and the skyline of New York City. We had arrived in America.

Later I learned the lyrics – they actually talk about being left behind. And it reminds me of “My Sister and I,” a song with the words “and we think of our friends who had to stay.” I almost always couple those songs when I play them in public or for myself.

Any time I see the Statue of Liberty, I recall the emotions of that arrival day in 1940 and playing “Harbor Lights.” Now I am not only saddened but deeply worried about the

image of the Statue of Liberty, as the current administration demolishes the concept of America being a Beacon of Light. We have to figure out a way of not letting it be extinguished, and time is not on our side.

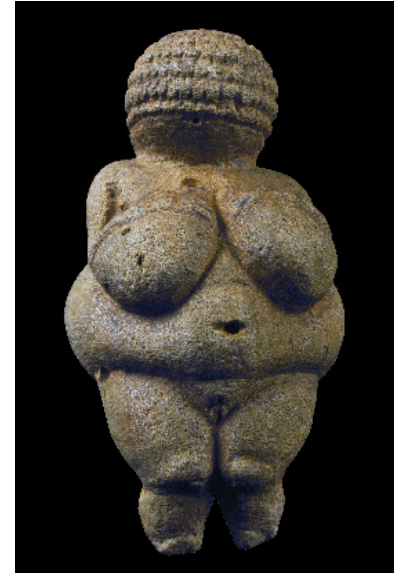


CHRISTINE CINA

THE VENUS OF WILLENDORF

As I view my body now, as a 57-year-old woman, I am proud of how I look, despite being criticized when I was young for being “big boned.” I am proud that my body is strong and has produced seven new human beings. As the midwives would always say, “You are a birth warrior!” I also have scars from my two new titanium hips, but I walk with them proudly and am grateful for them

for allowing me mobility, which had been taken away from me. One of my favorite physicians once referred to me as the Venus of Willendorf.* She apologized as she thought I would be offended. But as a historian of women, I told her I was complimented and would wear my muffin top proudly!



**Note: The Venus of Willendorf is a 30,000-year-old limestone figurine discovered in Austria, depicting a female figure with exaggerated features like large breasts and hips. It's one of the earliest examples of human figurative art and is often interpreted as a symbol of fertility.*



SMELLS OF THE FARM

I think back on my paternal grandparents' farm very fondly. As you would pull up in the driveway, you could hear the gravel flying. I loved to see the beautiful cows as my grandfather was very persnickety about his cows, making sure they were all clean and well taken care of. I thoroughly enjoyed petting their soft muzzles. I loved it when they would lick your fingers with their thick and rough pink tongues. I know it may sound weird, but the smell of cow manure is still very soothing to me as it reminds me of those farm visits.

Once in my grandparents' house, your senses were also heightened with the smell of my grandmother's baking and cooking. Great German food that stuck to your ribs—sausages, sauerkraut, cheese kuchen. Then once we finished eating, we would move to the living room to watch Lawrence Welk. Grandpa would teach us to dance, sing in German, and feed us Brach's candy; the Neapolitans were my favorites! Then my grandfather would go outside to smoke his chewing tobacco, and I would enjoy the stars, the smell of fresh cut hay, and all the lightning bugs.

AN UNFORGETTABLE CONCERT

I have been very fortunate that I have attended many concerts of all different genres; however, my most recent concert will go down as one of my favorites.

My twin and my two younger daughters drove me to Cleveland, Ohio last summer so that I could attend my third Rolling Stones concert. My second oldest daughter surprised me with the ticket, as she knew I loved them and that I had missed them when they played Summerfest. We listened to my daughters' favorite singer, Mason Ramsey, all through Illinois.

We had a grand trip en route to Cleveland, even seeing Robert Plant eating fried chicken at an oasis on the Indiana turnpike! My twin and I then played Led Zeppelin the rest of the way to Cleveland! Once in Cleveland, we dined and went to Mass in Little Italy. We went past the famous Cleveland Clinic and went through a beautiful old city cemetery. The girls loved exploring the city.



The day before the concert, we went down to the stadium to get the lay of the land as I was using the handicapped entrance. We got pictures taken outside of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and felt ready to travel safely to the stadium the next day.

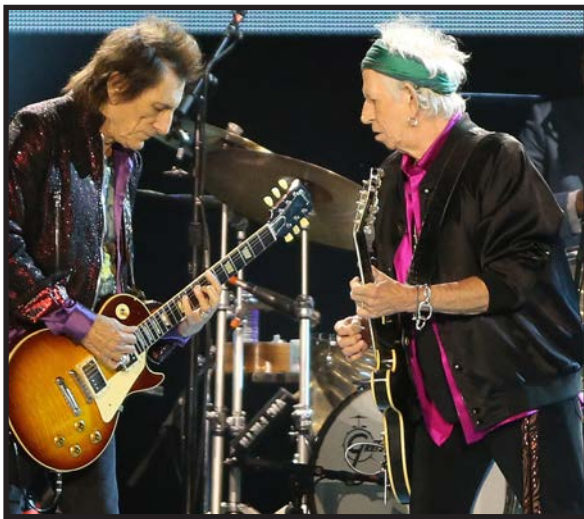
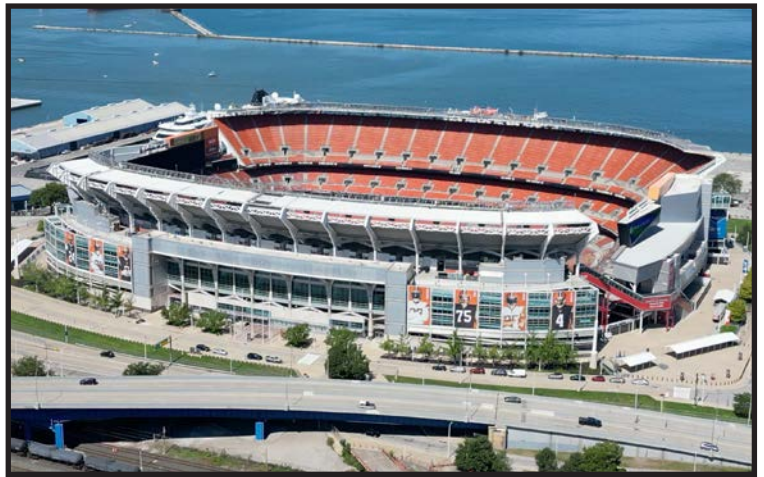
The next day we left early for the concert; however, when we approached the stadium, we found out that the police had blocked off the main access to the handicapped entrance.

We drove around the downtown area for a good while trying to figure out how to access it. We ended up asking a police officer, who said I was one of the many,

many persons trying to gain access to the handicapped entrance! He told us to drive back and approach the frontage road from a different way. Thank goodness he told us the way, as I was ready to go back to Little Italy and drown myself in fettucine and cannoli! My daughters were adamant that I get in. We ended up taking the frontage road so that I could access via the handicapped entrance.

I left my family and got a wheelchair attendant due to my two hip replacements. I hadn't been in a wheelchair in months. The attendant was awesome and got me to the fifth level. He promised that he would be back once the encores were done. I agreed.

Once I got situated, I was so relieved that I was inside the stadium. It was a beautiful evening with the breeze off Lake Erie, and the moon was out on this clear night. I had totally missed the opening band; however, the intro of Start Me Up was a grand way to begin the concert. I had a smile on my face for the duration of the concert! My twin said she would return to get me in an hour; however, the Stones played for almost two and a half hours. It was a grand show with songs that brought me back to my teenage years while listening to their music in a small central Wisconsin town.



When the encores were over, I didn't even wait for the attendant to come and retrieve me. I was on such a cloud nine that I walked down the five flights with all the other fans. I spotted my twin with her flashing lights on, and my children greeted me with hugs. I had done it! They said they could see my bright smile as I approached the car.

I had attended concerts before by myself, and I had seen the Stones before, but this time was different. The songs that I had heard as a teen meant so much more to me now, as I am in my fifties and had survived getting both my hips replaced. Not to mention that I had just witnessed a band whose youngest member is 77 years of age, and they rocked that stadium for two and a half hours.

EARLY SONG MEMORIES

I have been contemplating what were the first songs that I heard as a child, and I would venture to guess that they were songs that my maternal grandmother would sing to us. She sang such songs along with the stories of her childhood and marriage to our grandfather, who died when my mother was five years of age.

The shorter songs were Irish drinking songs. They go something like this:

"There was an old hen and she had a wooden foot, she laid her eggs in a mulberry root. She laid more eggs than any hens on the farm, and another little drink wouldn't do us any harm."

It is interesting that when I looked this song up, it came up as Another Little Drink, with many more verses.





Then there is: "One beer for one, two beers for two, three beers for me and a pint for me, repeat first stanza then a quart for me, repeat first stanza then a gallon for me."

As for the longer songs. They go as follows:

"Two Babes in the Woods"

My dears, do you know how a long time ago Two poor little babes whose names I don' know Were stolen away on a bright summer day And left in the woods, so I've heard people say. (repeat*)

And when it was night, how sad was their plight, The sun it went down and the moon gave no light. They sobbed and they sighed and they bitterly cried, And the poor little things, they lay down and died. (repeat)

And when they were dead, the robins so red Brought strawberry leaves and over them spread, And all the day long, they sang them this song: Poor babes in the woods, poor babes in the woods! And don' you remember the babes in the woods?

My grandma also made my mother's baby quilt with the image of this song. My mother still has it.

She would also sing the following song to us after we had taken our evening baths, and we would sit on her laps in our bathrobes while she brushed through our hair.

VERSE 1

Two little children, a boy an' a girl
Sat by the ole church door
Th little girls feet were as brown as th curl
That fell on th dress that she wore
Th boys coat was faded and hatless his head
A tear shown in each little eye
Why don't you run home to your Mamma, I said
An' this was th maiden's reply

Two lit-tle chil-dren, a boy an' a girl Sat by the ole church
door Th lit-tle girls feet were as brown as th curl That
fell on th dress that she wore Th boys coat was faded and
hat-less his head A tear shone in each lit - tle eye Why
don't you run home to your Mam-ma, I said An' this was th maid-ens re-
ply

a: This note is sung as an E-flat in verse 1.

VERSE 2

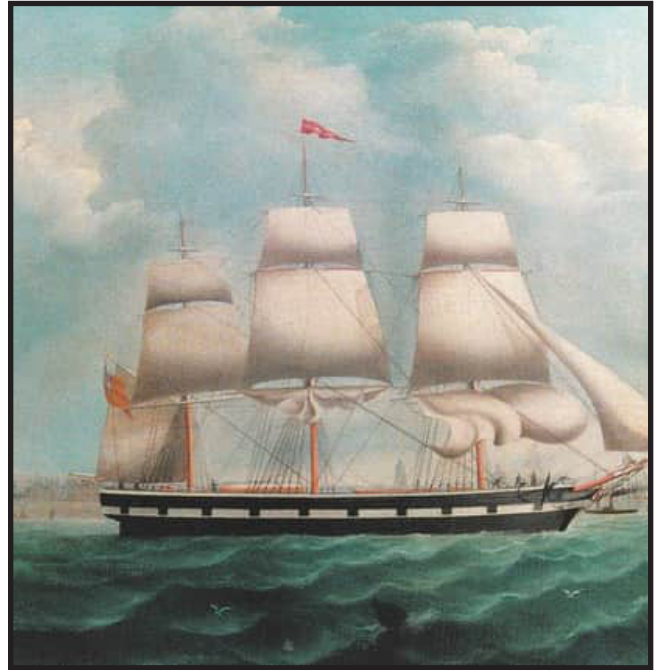
Mamma's in Heaven, they took her away
Left Jim an' I all alone
We came here to stay till th close of th day
For we have no Mamma, no home
We cain't earn our bread, we're too little, she said
Jim five an' I only seven
There's no one to love us since Papa is gone
An' our darling Mamma is in heaven

VERSE 3

Papa was lost out on sea, long ago
 We waited all night, on th shore
 For he was a life saving captain, you know
 But 'e never came back anymore
 Then, Mamma got sick, angels took her away
 They said, to a home fair and bright
 She said, she would come for her darlings sometime
 Perhaps, she is coming tonight

VERSE 4

Perhaps, there's no room up in Heaven, she said
 For two little darlings to keep
 She then placed her hand under Jim's little head
 She kissed him, and both fell asleep
 Th sexton came early to ring th church bell
 He found them under th snow white
 The angels made room for two orphans, to dwell
 In Heaven, with Mother that night



I found these songs online in Folktale databases. My grandmother of course adapted them to her voice and dialect.



I also grew up on the following Bing Crosby lullaby:

VERSE 1

Over in Kilarney,
 Many years ago,
 Me Mither sang a song to me
 In tones so sweet and low.
 Just a simple little ditty,
 In her good ould Irish way,
 And I'd give the world if she could sing
 That song to me this day.

REFRAIN

Too-ra-loo-ra-loo-ral,
 Too-ra-loo-ra-li,
 Too-ra-loo-ra-loo-ral,
 Hush, now don't you cry!
 Too-ra-loo-ra-loo-ral,
 Too-ra-loo-ra-loo-li,
 Too-ra-loo-ra-loo-ral,
 That's an Irish lullaby.

VERSE 2

Oft, in dreams, I wander
To that cot again,
I feel her arms a huggin' me
As when she held me then.
And I hear her voice a hummin'
To me as in the day of yore,
When she used to rock me fast asleep
Outside the cabin door.

REFRAIN

We were very fortunate to have heard such songs and stories from her. We appreciated all the stories and songs she passed down to us. And we have passed them down to my children. My twin and I truly believe that she is one of the main reasons that we became historians. She encouraged storytelling and helped us to appreciate the oral tradition!





BRIAN BENFORD

HAIR

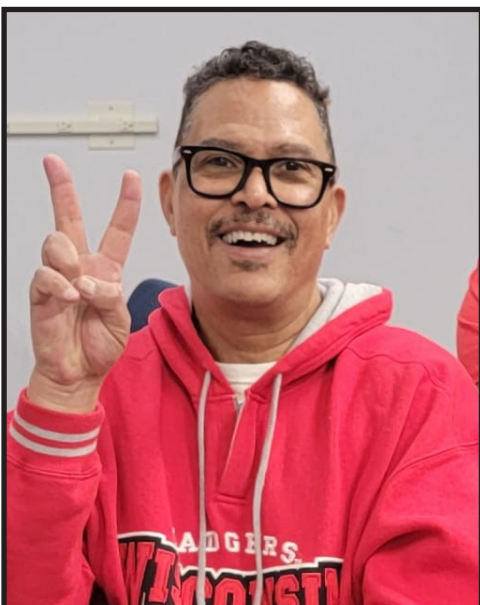
“Boy! You got that ‘good’ hair!” I heard this throughout my life as I felt the hands and fingertips of countless aunts and girl cousins as they insisted that I sit on the ground, between their legs, while they combed, braided, twisted, and lightly greased my “softer than others” curls.

As I aged, this feature along with my varying shades of light skin color often confused folk as they asked, “What are you?” “Where are you from?” The funny thing is – I was always jealous of that thick, sometimes matted, nappy hair that held dreadlocks like a glistening hug.



REFLECTIONS ON BEAUTY

As a 65-year-old man, I am saddened and shamed that men have created beauty standards that have shackled and distressed women since millennia. Having beautiful adult daughters, I have tried throughout their lives to reframe societal beauty standards so that they could embrace both their inner and outer beauty. I was the counterpoint to all of those “beauty” magazines and the media landscapes that bombarded them and all women with horrific, unrealistic, and unhealthy beauty standards. I absolutely hate that as I write for this assignment, the double standards between genders frees me from truly painful personal reflections on beauty or aging.

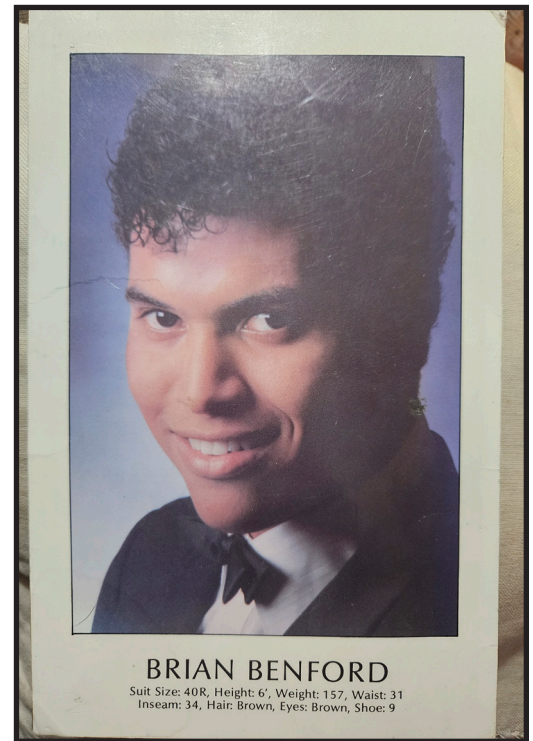


Please do not hate on me—but I love getting older. Believing in reincarnation, I really do not fear death. While I am digging this life, I look forward to whatever is to come once I leave this world. This has allowed me to age gracefully, or at least without consternation.

Sure, I have had my share of physical aches and pains throughout my life, but as a former athlete and thrill seeker since my teens, I have been accustomed to experiencing minor and major physical discomforts. Gone is my six-pack belly only to be replaced by the whole keg. The physicality that I was once known for is long gone, but I still can walk country miles like an old Arkansas mule. I loved when my each of my five children finally could keep up with my fast-walking pace, and now I find myself skipping to keep up with them. Where I once could easily perform backflips, now I am happy to plop back first into bed and bounce back to my feet the next morning. I now delight in dunking donuts rather than basketballs.

When I reflect on my twenties, I briefly served as a model for sportswear and other products, where I often was told by modeling agencies that as I became older and greyer, I could be much more marketable in modeling “high fashion” clothing and accessories as my “look” would become more distinguished. Being a young Black man, I was told that if I really wanted to pursue a career in modeling (I did not), I would have to move to New York, Chicago, Atlanta, or at the very least Minneapolis, to a city that embraced diverse looks.

The bonfire of my vanity smoldered in my twenties as grunge styling became in vogue and the cheap Carhart and Dickies farm clothing that I enjoyed wearing in my youth became the pricey, hip clothing of urban youth and gangsters in my thirties and forties. After I became a father in my late twenties, I quickly shredded any illusions or perceptions of personal handsomeness, as my children were the first to remind me that I could never be “cool” again. Heaven forgives me if I sported biking shorts around my daughters as they would pounce on me as my newly acquired fashion police.



Most poignant was living in Madison, Wisconsin and navigating life with brown skin. I am constantly reminded of my lifelong journey of being a minority with occasional reprieves when I would visit places with larger populations of people of color. Each day, I find myself slowly dying by a death of a thousand cuts or microaggressions because of my skin color. These constant slights, often not consciously realized by the offending party, leave me exhausted and bruised. While I can gleefully adapt to not being concerned about my looks, I can never escape the color of my skin. Despite this, I harken back to the past suggestion that someday I would be distinguished looking. Now when I look in the mirror, I am reminded that my greying hair transcends race, as we all grey except for those that insist on dye jobs and holding back the hands of time.

MUSICAL MAGIC

On Tuesday, April 26, 1983, at the Mesa Arizona Amphitheatre, I saw the best concert of my life. It featured Chick Corea-keyboards, Stanley Clarke-bass, Al Di Meola-guitar, and Lenny White-drums, with guest appearances by Joe Farrell-saxophone, Airtio Moreira-percussion, and Flora Purim-vocals. On that beautiful Arizona spring night 42 years ago, musical magic touched my soul. I can close my eyes and be transported back to the wonderful sounds of this super group named Return to Forever.



At the time, being 23 years old, I was on an eclectic musical journey. My mother was a jazz singer who turned me on to Be-Bop luminaries like Charlie Parker, Dexter Gordon, Sonny Rollins, James Moody, Buddy DeFranco, Fats Navarro, Miles Davis, Dizzy Gillespie, Bud Powell, Barry Harris, Thelonious Monk, Charlie Christian, Kenny Clarke, Max Roach, and Art Blakey. During my elementary school years, I was fattened up on Mo-Town, driven by the Funk Brothers, O'Jays, Kool & The Gang, and the Temptations. In the 1970s, I slipped and discovered Parliament-Funkadelic, Ohio Players, Sly and the Family Stone, and "turn that damn music down" Jimmy Hendrix and Led Zepplin. In the 1980s, my musical tastes of Jazz and Rock were fused together by groups like Weather Report, The Headhunters, and Return to Forever.



When my best brother from another mother, Coco (who was a trumpet player in the traveling United States Air Force Jazz Band), busted, out of breath, into my Tempe Arizona apartment and said that Chick Corea's band was getting back together after a year off and they were playing in the next town over, we knew, despite being broke as Ford Pinto, that we had to go—even if laws were going to be broken, and they were. On the day of the concert, Coco and I went to the venue early in the afternoon to "scope it out" or to see if there was a way that we could sneak in without tickets.



There were a few gates leading into the outdoor amphitheater, and between the gates were eight-foot-tall brick walls. We knew that the walls were exactly eight feet because I, being six feet at the time, could easily touch the top of the wall if I stood slightly on my tip toes. Knowing this, our plan was hatched. We would wait for the crowds to start to form at the gates, and I would sprint to the wall, leap up, and grab the top, and Coco would shimmy up my back, just as he was trained in bootcamp. Now as I type this, I have no regrets that our plan worked to perfection with the only glitch being an elderly (probably a volunteer art patron) usher staffing the closest gate to our breach, yelling "Hey, Stop!" but it was too late—we were in.

The lavender-scented night air was filled with songs like The Overture, Caprice, The Phantom, No Mystery, and my favorite, The Romantic Warrior. As Chick led his bandmates in delightful call and responses, punctuated by Flora's ethereal vocals, the musicians' solos left me with goosebumps and tingles for days after the show. I remember the adoring crowd being mostly middle aged; that lent a chilled, deeply appreciative vibe along with picnic baskets filled with wine and sandwiches that were willingly shared with Coco and me. Their generosity could have been sparked because we appeared to be the youngest in the crowd by at least ten years, or maybe it was the rapture on our faces as some of our favorite musical virtuosos tore it up that night, but we left with full bellies and sublime memories that I still hold dear.

EARLY SONG MEMORY

The first song that came to mind is “You’ve Got the Whole World in Your Hands.” This was taught to us by my white kindergarten teachers (nuns) at St. Boniface in Milwaukee. It became an empowering anthem during the Civil Rights movement for us kids.

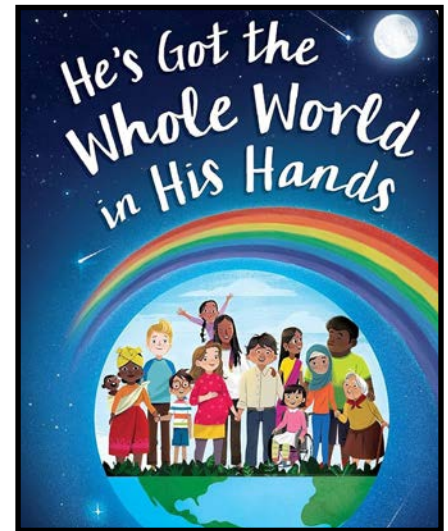
AN EPIPHANY

On May 23rd, 1987, I became a first-time father as my wife at the time, Marysue, pushed Lucas Nathaniel Benford into this world. This event was a sensory and emotional explosion! The mixed smells of blood, embryonic fluid, hospital antiseptic, my two-day old body funk, and a half-eaten tray of cafeteria food pushed aside on a bedrest left me lingering olfactory memories forever etched into my mind. Throbbing overhead lights illuminated the blue sheets that covered my wife’s lower body and reflected off the bald spot on the first doctor’s head, making his trickles of sweat glisten. When the aged nurse with an extreme air of confidence whispered in between the beeping noises of the fetal heart monitor that she needed to speak with me in the hallway outside of the birthing suite, my heart began to pound with anxiety chased with fear. “I don’t want to alarm you, Mr. Benford, but that doctor (who was on-call and we had never met) does not know what he is doing, and I want to call someone else to deliver your baby.” Her words caused me to feel dizzy, weak kneed, and homicidal.

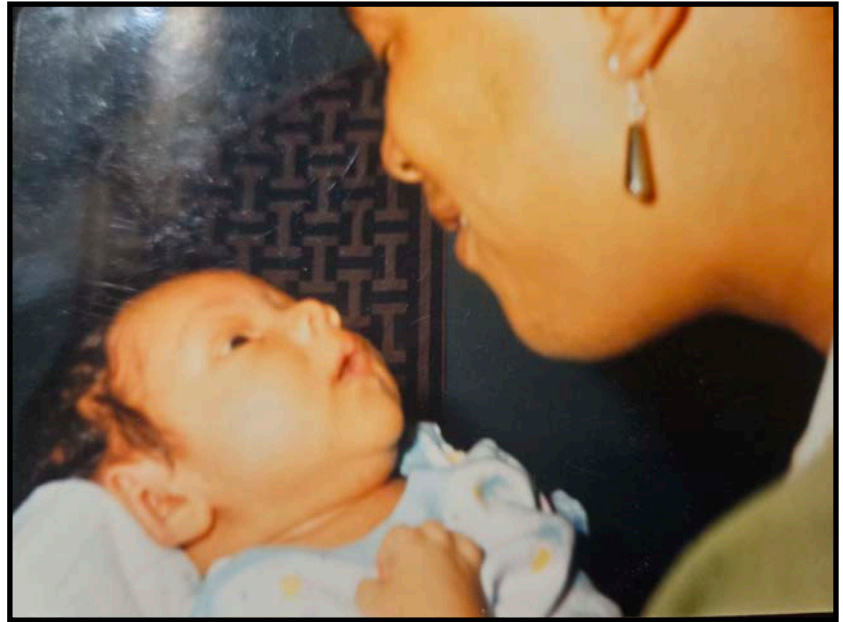
I regret that I cannot remember the nurse’s name, but I can still see her jovial face, with her grey, thick hair pulled back from her laugh-lined, wrinkled face into a massive bun. Standing in the hospital hallway, she went on to say, “He did not need to place probes into the baby’s head, and your wife is getting weaker as this labor is going on longer than it should.” As blood rushed to my head, she explained that he was an intern that “is trying too hard” by inserting the probes that were designed to measure the baby’s brain activity, which was not needed or consented to by us. She then gripped my arm as almost knowing that I had the urge to rush back into the room to yank the doctor by his surgical mask and scrubs and toss him out the window overlooking Prospect Street four stories below.



The nurse went on to say that she had called for the best pediatric doctor the hospital had before she brought me out of the room and that we did not want to alarm Marysue. “Here he is now!” Ambling down the hall towards us was a Burl Ives lookalike, with a plump belly and a wide smile on his face. For a brief few seconds, the nurse and the doctor huddled across the hall from me, and I could hear the nurse whispering my name and other words that I could not make out.



Doctor Burl Ives (I cannot remember his name either) put his big, meaty arm around my shoulders and said, "Well, Mr. Benford, let's go make you a poppa." I instantly felt my fear subside as we walked into the room where Marysue had spent the last 13 hours in labor. The first doctor was fiddling with dials on a monitor and looked up surprised, as did Marysue. Dr. Burl Ives said in a firm voice, "I have this, you can go now." As the first doctor started to stiffen and looked confused, before he could say anything, I yelled, "Get the f**k out of this room" as I assumed my position next to Marysue's bed. Immediately, without a word, Dr "put probes in my baby's head" scurried out of the room.



To reassure Marysue, I grabbed her hand, leaned in close to her ear, and said, "I'll tell you all about it later," but I could still see the confusion laced with exhaustion all over her face. Dr. Ives said, "Marysue, let's have this baby right now, what do you say?"

All within four minutes, a manipulation to turn the baby's shoulders, two raucous prompts to push, through pursed lips, rapid breathing, crowning, then face, then little alienlike body, followed by a high-pitched cry announced that our baby was here. Dr. Ives handed the baby to the nurse, who wiped the blood from the unneeded probes off our now quiet boy's scalp. After I was handed the scissors to cut the umbilical cord, I swaddled our beautiful baby boy in the softest, whitest cotton wrap and handed him to Marysue, who was overcome with the rawest of emotions as we both cried tears of joy. I can still taste the salt from her tears and perspiration as I kissed her forehead, cheeks, and lips with the deepest gratitude and love. Blubbering, I bearhugged both the doctor and nurse at the same time and then collapsed in Marysue's bed, as I had not slept in 48 hours. As tenderly as possible, I held my son against his mother's chest, serving as a prop while I observed him suckle from her breast.

Throughout this experience, I had an earth-shattering epiphany! The males of our species were not the strongest gender. Quite the contrary, in the birth of my son, I witnessed amazing feats of strength, power, determination, and courage by his mother and, by default, every mother.

WHERE I AM FROM

I was nurtured and loved by calloused hard and soft perfumed hands. Spoon fed toxic masculinity and saddled with blistering lies in what it is to be a man.

A child of the woods and inner-city alleys inhabited by dusty and brown, always yearning for my cathedral that was the woods. Recovering Catholic who followed not worshipped Jesus as any role model of a true activist social worker.

Because of my skin color, at an early age, I learned to carry the yoke of racism, accepting that in this life I could never break these invisible shackles and chains.



IVONNE RAMOS

WHOLE BEAUTY

I never felt or thought I was fat until I got older, and people would say, "You have such a beautiful face." These were comments I would hear in my twenties from men in their twenties.. After hearing this comment three separate times from three different men, I talked to my girlfriends and discussed these expectations in our society. So, whenever I would hear this again, I would silently think to myself, And, what about the rest of my body?

Soon after that, I evolved into thinking, What about my mind? Isn't that the most important? Every time I heard this statement it was easy for me to eliminate people, not letting them become a part of my inner circle. I learned to listen to what men would say to me and found that it was a way for me to filter people. After several years of this, I started to develop a sassy attitude and say to myself, and sometimes out loud, "And, so is the rest of me!" I am wholly beautiful.



TELLTALE SMELL

When I hug my long-term friend of six to seven years turned boyfriend, I noticed a unique scent, an acidic scent. As an aromatherapist I enjoy creating custom infusions of health with my clients, and suddenly my nose is transporting me not to healing and wellness but to disease. I send him to the doctors because I know I have smelled this before with my clients with diabetes. Months later we discovered he has stage 4 cancer, and I feel his body speaking to me saying I tried to tell you.

Our bodies tell us a story of wellness or a warning of disease. Over time as people have become focused on the next thing, I have to remind myself to smell and allow myself to strengthen the muscle my ancestors mastered to survive among the wild. Back to the smell of the healing fire where my ancestors planned their next day of hunting, gathering, and survival. Smell the fire and feel the healing of the infrared light.

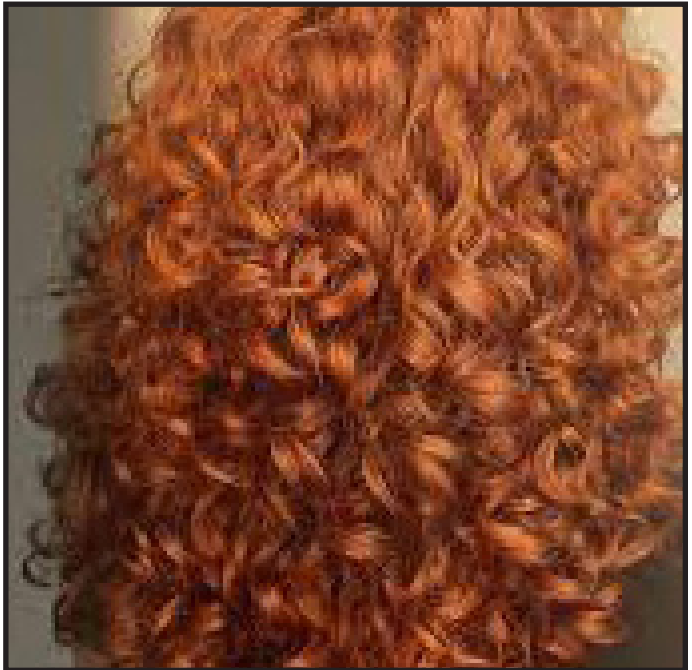


WHITE NARCISSISM

In our family photo album, I saw a picture of a girl sitting in the grass on a clear bright sunny day. She has curly, red hair. My mother tells me it's me when I asked. She lets me know that when I was younger, I had red hair and my hair color changed. She said nothing more or nothing less about it. She stated this in a very neutral, just matter-of-fact tone.

I grew up thinking maybe other people transformed in various ways unknown to myself. As a child I would see people and think maybe they were red heads at one point and turned into brunettes. Later in biology class, I learned the way genes value dominant and recessive genes for hair, color of eyes, etc.

I learned that brunette, dark hair, dark eyes were dominant biological genes. I always found this very fascinating. Why would the recessive gene produce so much desire to dominate the dominant gene? I've come to the conclusion that it is all a matter of science. And unfortunately, the science that is within the darkness of the soul of the white supremacist may be a strong hunger, an angry recessive gene that is in fear for its non-existence. This angry recessive gene does not see the connection to all life. This angry recessive gene does not see that it is stronger blended together than staying a "gene" recessive, vulnerable to diseases gene.



This recessive gene has usually not taken a lot of classes. If it has taken biology class, it may not have been taught the same biological facts that I have been taught in my high school classes. Because this recessive gene is creating our curriculum in the way we educate ourselves, it functions from the core of fear. It uses this fear to ignite and continue. It entered, hateful energy that it defines as white legacy.

The only white legacy I see is one of oppression. The irony in all of it is that the white supremacist in its fear of curly hair, tan skin, dark skin, Asian eyes, and anything different from its own pale white skin is really the virus of each human being and its quality of life, including their own family and themselves.

White suppression is inflexible, seeing things only in one way, not inclusive of all human beings. They drive the cars that are built by people from all around the world. If we were to dissect the car, we would see how many parts come from all around the world to create this one vehicle.

They gain nourishments from the fruits and vegetables picked by workers from Mexico and other Central and Latin American countries. They fertilize their soil with Canadian land. Canadians are politically liberal and generally inclusive people.

Oh yes, back to the assignment. I digress. I am the kind of person of color they fear the most. According to 23 and me, I am African, Asian, Middle Eastern, southern European, northern American, northern & native American. For some reason, this is very scary for those who want only one white European view.



What makes me different with all these mixes and blends inside my DNA? My ability to know that each and every one of my ancestors were resilient and dominant genes fighting for the right to have a space to call their own. Fighting for the right of inclusion. The pure gene is the oppressive gene because it is in fear. That fear has turned into a psychological expression of narcissism. These narcissists have their leaders and feed each other this poisonous Kool-Aid. They try to create simple rules to be able to detect us.

Excuse me, but curly hair is also for the white Irish American. Every person of color with curly hair shares this with an Irish gene. They tried to tell me that my brown eyes were a sign that I didn't deserve to see the world, read and write books. However, they realized that they have brown eyes within the white race. This goes on and on. Just pick any part of the body that they try to point out as different.



It is the narcissist way. Do not fall into the trap of the sick one, the narcissist, the one that is willing to do anything to you in order to get what they want no matter how much it hurts you. Remember that you are beautiful inside and out. You have the control of your beauty.

And what are narcissists? They usually are the true criminals of our society. Some people may be born with narcissism and try to help themselves, but others will never know. They will live their whole life because they were born into a lineage of narcissism and were taught that that is their way. Poisonous breeding, poisonous souls.



PAM BRACEY

OWNING A MOLE

I have, rather, own a mole on my face. I claim it because it's mine. No one else has one in this same space. I love seeing it "all the time." Kids would look at me and say, "What is that?" and would try to touch it. I said, "It's a mole," but they didn't understand that. I always wanted to

joke with them and say, "It's a booger," but I would laugh about that thought. When I gave that mole its title as a mole, the interest in it left.



BODY SCAN

Well, working from the face down. When I think about my mole and the attention it got from young children, I now do a body scan in my mind about other parts of my body. People have always said I was a big girl, but I didn't see it. Growing up I could do mostly all the things other children my age could do—running, jumping, hopping, skipping. I've seen bigger people struggle with life tasks and I didn't struggle, so I never let people say things to me about me that I myself did not believe. I always had the thinking that who I saw myself as I was. And I always thought the best in myself. I was never cocky about it, it was just my truth to me.



I don't retain negative talk very well, and I most of the time have "good thinking" of others. Feeling special to yourself is a gift and a life changer. You have to know your worth for yourself, then add tax. No way can we all walk around this world looking and being the same weight, height, skin tone, hair length, nails, eye color, attitude. Even among my friends and family, I felt there was no one else like me, whoever I was or claimed to be. That has really helped me in my life, through the years.

Even in those terrible teenage years with boys, and girls being hateful and cliques of people who tried to exclude you, I didn't mind being alone. In the end it all worked out. I had friends that I appreciated and found joy in being with. I used to lie in bed and put my legs up on the wall. I used to say, "I have some nice legs." Later I had

boyfriends that liked my legs, too (haha). They loved my smile, my skin, the modest way I dressed, my attitude, my calmness. My goal was to be positive and to have people in my life treat me like I treated them, how I respected who they are/were as individuals. I believe that helped filter people from my life.

As I grow old and am falling to pieces and the grey shows up in my hair and I'm limping, people stare. I learned early not to care; no one but me is changing my underwear.

Later, in the middle of the night my thoughts wondered about how I tried to wear makeup in middle school and my mother said "no." One day I wore it and forgot to take it off before going home. To this day I don't wear makeup and never learned how to wear it.

I also used to bite my nails, and I had one person who used to focus and talk about it. But I didn't dwell on it, just was aware. I have nails now but it's my choice.



MUSIC MEMORIES

When I think of what music did for my soul in my childhood and as I aged, Al Green was never a "Love and Happiness" thing, and "ABC" from the Jackson 5 did not reflect my school time. When King's song told me that "We Shall Overcome," I felt it because my life was changing, my parents divorced, and I wanted to believe that I could, too, Overcome Someday. Don't ask my neighbor, but Marvin Gaye spoke of "Sexual Healing," and in my innocence I was trying to figure out "What was going on." And man, I always wanted to take that "Midnight Train to Georgia."

As I was growing older, "Let It Be" kept me out of a lot of trouble. My eyes widened when Shirley Murdock called and wanted to talk "Woman to Woman" about her man. In high school I saw sharing partners was a thing but not real enough for me. "Rockin' Robin" was not a "tweet diddle le deet"; "Que Sera, Sera" and "Mary Jane" confused me. Sly Stone wanted it to be a "Familiar Affair." Ohio Players was on "Fire," "Love was a Rollercoaster," and "Heaven must be like this." Teddy wanted us to "Turn off the lights," but there was a repercussion in things happening in the dark that soon came to the light. My friends were getting pregnant in high school.

In the end Aretha sang "Chain of Fools." Why did "Fools Fall in Love" with Frankie Lymon? Why did she used to be "My Girl" by the O'Jays? Finally, I was introduced to Angela Bofill by two men who loved each other. The music was awesome. I still wasn't into music for love; it just made my mind feel so much at peace. That lasted a long time. Then finally a man who made my heart pit-ter-pat-ter, he made my heart scream, he introduced me to Luther Vandross. It was "Never Too Much." He was a "Superstar." Until you come back to me. First time love music. It's because "Neither one of us wants to say goodbye."



LOU RAWLS

When I was eleven heading to twelve, I loved playing Lou Rawls while I was washing dishes at night, not a CD or cassette but his album. I don't know the exact title of the songs, but he would sing about Tobacco Road and when he was 17, 21, etc. I sang it like it was my experience.

NIGHTS IN WASHINGTON D.C.

I grew up in Washington, DC. I knew of nowhere else, no other type of people, places, or things. No traveling beyond my grandparents' house or my neighborhood. That's where my friends and family were. I knew no strangers. Often, I would go to my friends' house close to mine;

I don't remember them coming to my house. We had alleys between houses almost like small streets. They were very dark at night, with very little light and lots of dogs barking.

As long as the dogs were behind the gates and barking, I had no fear, but I really should have had fear because dogs were not the only things lurking and barking in the night where in some spots along the way your only light was the moon. People were disappearing, being killed and robbed in alleys. I didn't have that fear in me that I needed as a child. Naïve to life, I was protected by family and neighbors.

One night when I was walking home, the dogs were extra loud in their barking. My friend had older brothers, but no one walked me home through the alley the quick way instead of walking around the block. First fear, but my father was a police officer,



and I knew my neighbors. It was dark and the dogs were barking, but I stayed focused on the destination... home. In the dark with dogs barking for a reason, feeling it was not only me, who else could it be? I walked faster, looking at nothing most times but darkness. I was so naïve. I saw the lights of the street, and I saw my house with the lights on. I cringe as I write this because I didn't know better. I made it home. I was safe. I would do it again, probably many more times. And that I can't believe. But that's another story.





REMEMBERING SCENTS

I have two memories.

Going to my grandparents' house on a Saturday early enough that my grandmother was still cleaning. She always finished off making up her bed with lilac spray. That was the best smell of clean that I experienced in my younger days because most people who did that Saturday morning cleaning used pine sol. Also, from my grandmother's kitchen window and if we were playing outside, we could smell her lilac bushes outside. Still today when I smell lilac I think of my grandma.

The other smell is my father's smoked cigars, pipes, and cigarettes. He looked so happy when he stuffed his pipe. I would watch him go through the process of pulling the bag of tobacco out, stuffing his pipe and lighting it, and having it hang from his mouth and smell that wonderful fragrance. Same with his cigars and cigarettes—thick smoke and the nice fragrance. Usually, he was in a good mood when he did this smoking. He had it all set up in the living room on the table, the pipes (about six) in a wooden carousel with a jar in the middle with the tobacco in it.



WHERE I AM FROM

I am from a Big City

With Busy Streets.

I am from being outside in the world but close enough to be seen.

I am from games shared and having a key to embrace roller skating.

I am from a father who cared but a mother who loved me.

I am from Saturdays with cousins and aunts and uncles, siblings and friends who shared love and laughter.

I am from a paternal grandmother who showed me anger.

I am from maternal grandparents who showed me love.

I am from being the only girl so I didn't have to share clothes.

I am from many life experiences that kept me here today.

I am from enough saved treasures and fond memories to share.



ROSLYN PHILLIPS

REFLECTIONS ON APPEARANCE

I'm starting with my childhood. I always with my siblings was the "butt of all jokes" example. When it was time for school shopping, my sister and brother would quickly find their outfits, but I, on the other hand, had to shop at Lane Bryant! My sister would make jokes about my appearance. I was short, on the healthy side. I developed an inferior attitude. I was ashamed of my looks. I would wear big t-shirts and loose-fitting dresses, baggy pants. Why? I was hiding my big boobs, big legs. I felt like a freak as I grew up; all my female grammar school and high school classmates hadn't matured. I eventually grew into that body, accepted my looks.

As I age now, it frightens me on how we age. Legs get wrinkled, we lose teeth, and get saggy boobs and butt. But, thanks to my sister and I look in the mirror and I praise God! I'm all 100% a natural woman of 69.

Wow! I'll be 70 in Aug. 2025. I have sagging of my skin, bone loss and muscle loss, and it is no longer firm under my butt. My eyes are darker, and my bust requires me to wear a bra sometimes to bed. My sight requires eyeglasses. But, overall, I still feel beautiful inside, and my heart shines on the outside. I accept aging. I tell my daughter, "Be proud in your skin. Never let outer appearance rule! Be proud, be gracious."

I'm so comfortable in my aging. God has blessed me. Younger individuals are always complimenting my age! Not believing my age, I get asked over and over again. "My God! What's your secret?" I reply, "Take care of your health, mental stability, go to the doctor regularly, take your meds, and watch your diet and exercise. Drink plenty of water daily, and get plenty of sunshine. Enjoy your family. And most importantly, love yourself and others and always keep God in your life."



CAR DANCING WITH MICHAEL JACKSON

As I am driving to my Odyssey Senior class, I have my radio on 107.3 AM, a mixture of various music genres. As Michael Jackson's "Smooth Criminal" comes on, I actually crank up the volume, and my body goes into car dancing mode. I bob my head and shake my upper body to the awesome song. I go back, way back, to August 1971 or 1972; I was a serious MJ fan. My bedroom wall was filled with him and his brothers. Every month, I purchased "Right On" magazine, and the opportunity of a lifetime happened. My first live concert: yes, it was the "Jackson Five." Then he went on his own, and the music he made words couldn't say. My body swayed, head bobbing, finger snapping sounds. I remember the videos, yes, I knew every step, all his dance routines.

The ride here with the sound of MJ brought back the best memory of sound. I got to see him in Chicago. Yes, I paid a pretty penny for the MJ concert, but I danced like a queen. My kids and my first husband laughed at me. Hence, I was the happiest woman in the world.



CECILE BROWN

KNOCK-KNEES

Growing up I never felt different from my friends or four sisters until I became a teenager. I wanted to model because I was tall and thin, but only I was (am) 'knock-kneed'. I didn't pay much attention to it until I went for a modeling interview. The man who looked us over said to me, as I was walking down the runway. "You're extremely knock-kneed". Right then and

there I lost my confidence and began to slow my walk. I felt deflated. However, they loved my smile, height, weight, and just about everything else about me.

When I got home, I told my mother what happened and burst out crying. I told her from now on I only wanted to wear pants because no one would be able to see how knock-kneed I really was. She said it didn't make sense because whether I had on a dress, skirt, shorts, or pants, I am (was) still knock-kneed. So she said don't concentrate on that one "flaw" (as they felt it was) and just continue to learn how to walk the runway and do my best. I remember asking my mother if there was some way the doctors could shave the bones on the inside of my knees so that they would not stick out so much!! (ha, ha).



I still think about my knock-knees, which actually didn't really hold me back when I was modeling because they taught me how to walk and stand so that it didn't quite appear that I was knock-kneed. I did very well.

It was hurtful when I was teased even from my own siblings. I would hear things like:

- Knock-kneed Nanny
- Crossed-eyed knees
- How my knees were fighting each other to see which leg would go first (I'm going first, no I'm going first), then laughter
- Don't your knees hurt rubbing against each other?
- How my knees talked to each other complaining about my walk
- When I would get up from my seat, it's a wonder how I didn't fall

However, I do sometimes feel people are watching me walk and whispering, 'she's knock-kneed'!

I know it is my imagination because no one says anything. I was the one who always mentioned if they noticed that I was knock-kneed. I was told to stop mentioning it because no one even looked until I mentioned it. If I think about it too much when I get ready to walk, I would probably lose my confidence.

In closing, I remember the saying, "sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me." This is absolutely untrue!! Name calling does stay longer with you. You can always heal from broken bones. But when you normally think about being teased about anything, it takes a long time to get over what you are told are your 'imperfections,' which makes you unsure of yourself and less confident of your abilities. Be very careful how you talk to and what you say to growing children and young adults. It creates problems with their self-esteem.



MOLES ON MY FACE

I have lots of moles on my face and neck. When I was growing up, I didn't! My mother's face was very 'moley.' Every year more and more moles would just appear on her face as she got older. I never thought that my oldest sister and I would look the same way. I remember I thought I had a few freckles here and there. However, my mother said that they were not freckles, just harmless moles. Well, I didn't think much about it because they were not prominent at that time. The only comments were most about my 'freckles.'

As my sister and I grew older, more and more moles started to appear on our face and neck. By the time I was in my mid-40s, I started to see more of them. By the time I was in my 50s, they seemed to double and connect to each other. Suddenly it seemed that it would never stop. I would get many comments from people and children. I have had lots of incidents where a child would ask, 'what happened to your face?' My own young nieces and nephews would stare at my face and inquire as to what happened to 'it' (my face). I would just tell them they were moles. I remember being in the grocery store when a small child in its mother's arms actually reached over to touch my face! I didn't get angry but the mother did and scolded the child. I told her it was ok, that the child was just curious. My feelings only get hurt when adults comment and



whisper about them and try to tell me that I should check them out because they could be cancerous. They go on and on about it. Some moles are cancerous. But mine are not, I would say. I watch them very carefully for any changes that seem abnormal.



I have been to dermatologists and have had many biopsies to ensure that they were not cancerous. I was concerned with the amount of them and the size that seems to have grown and doubled up in one area of my face. If I try to remove them, not only would it be painful and would leave scars but the insurance company would consider the removal as cosmetic and would not pay for that unless they were cancerous and I absolutely needed the surgery. I have grown to accept my moles because there's really nothing I can do about it. So, I don't really try to get them removed anymore. I just try to 'work' with them; I try to use more make-up in that area. However, I do really, really wish that I didn't have them or had less of them.



THE POWER OF MUSIC AND SOUND

I have so many songs that are attached or etched into my memory. But the one song that is very special to me and I absolutely love is 'A Hallelujah Christmas' by Cloverton. The words were rewritten by this group, who changed it from the original version, 'Hallelujah,' words and music by Leonard Cohen. The Cloverton version gives you the sense that you are almost taking the step-by-step journey and witnessing the joyous occasion of the birth of Jesus Christ!

The first time I heard the original 'Hallelujah' by Cohen was on The Voice, sung by one of the contestants. I was mesmerized by the music and the singer. I wanted to learn the song. So, while searching for the contestant's version on Youtube, I found the Christmas version by Cloverton and decided that I would learn the song; sing and play it as well. I bought the original sheet music by Cohen, used the words by Cloverton, and then made the song my own. I constantly played this song on my tablet over and over again through my headphones. I watched him play as he moved his fingers across the keyboard, until I could envision myself playing the piano and singing. I practiced for six months! I performed it at my church during our Sunday School Christmas Program in 2019. It is difficult to play piano and sing if you are not a 'professional' piano player, which I am not (I do read music, then learn to play by ear). This song laid heavily on my heart and moved me as to make me weep. So, I was determined to express the song my way.



‘A Hallelujah Christmas’ is the story about the coming birth of Jesus Christ:

- I’ve heard about this baby boy who came to earth to give us joy and I just want to sing this song to you. It goes like this the fourth, the fifth, the minor falls and the major lift, with every breath I’m singing Hallelujah
- A couple came to Bethlehem expecting child they searched the inn to find a place for you were coming soon. There was no room for them to stay, so in a manger filled with hay, God’s only son was born Oh Hallelujah
- The shepherds left their flocks by night to see this baby wrapped in light. A host of Angels led them all to You. It was just like the Angels said, you’ll find Him in a manger bed, Emanuel my Savior Hallelujah
- A star shone bright up in the east, to Bethlehem the wisemen three, came many miles and journey longed for you. And to the place at which you were, the frankincense and golden mir, they came to you and cried out Hallelujah
- I know You came to rescue me, this baby boy will grow to be, a man who’d one die for me and you. My sins will drive the nails in you, that rugged cross was my cross too, still every breath you drew was Hallelujah
- Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah

After that, I learned to sing and play another song that was very special to me, the ‘Easter Hallelujah’ version rewritten by Kelly Mooney. This version tells the story of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. I used the same technique.

I performed her version and words at our Easter Sunday School Program at church in 2023. I was originally going to sing for Easter 2020 but due to the Pandemic, church closed. So I videotaped while I played for my family on Zoom. The verses are very long so I won’t write them all:

- A crown of thorns placed on His head, He knew that He would soon be dead...
- He hung His head and prepared to die, then lifted His head up to the sky...
- The soldier who had used his sword to pierce the body of our Lord...
- Took from His head the thorny crown and wrapped Him in a linen gown...
- Three days went by and again they came to move the stone, to bless the slain...
- But as they went to move the stone, they saw that they were not alone for Jesus Christ has risen...
- Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Oh Hallelujah



ONE MOMENT IN MY LIFE THAT I WILL NEVER FORGET

I lived in New York City (NYC) for 15 years. While I was there, the most awful, fateful moment happened on Tuesday, Sept 11, 2001 around 9 am when two airplanes intentionally attacked the World Trade Center (WTC). I was off from work that day and decided to sleep in. I had no idea what had transpired until I turned on the television. I still couldn't comprehend what was going on. All I saw was smoke and fire. I had visited the WTC many times when relatives and friends visited me. To live so near and to be present at such an awful, devastating tragedy and witnessing the chaos after the destruction was frightening and overwhelming.



The scene was very chaotic. I lived near the WTC and down the street from St. Vincent's Hospital, located between 11th & 12th streets and 6th & 7th Avenues, where a flurry of activity was going on. St Vincent's was one of the closest medical trauma centers and considered the best (The Pope was once taken there when he became ill while visiting NYC). As I attempted to walk my dog Fluffy that morning, I found that my street and the area surrounding the hospital were inundated with doctors, nurses, ambulances, police officers, and other medical and emergency vehicles and personnel as well as people watching the smoke rise from what was left of the WTC from the first explosion. They were taking photos and poised with binoculars while waiting for the other tower, which had just been hit, to implode. The second tower finally imploded right before my eyes! I could not believe what I had just witnessed. There was lots of smoke and fire, and debris was flying everywhere.

The smell was something that you had possibly never smelled before and wouldn't want to ever smell again. It lingered for a very long time; months and even years. The smell was indescribable but smelled something like acid, rubber burning, crude oil, thick smoke, and phosphate all mixed in together. Wherever you went, that awful smell was there, all over NYC. It made you feel dizzy and out-of-bounds. There were lots of times I didn't want to eat or drink anything because the food seemed to taste like 'that smell' and the liquids tasted like metal. It was awful. The smell lingered with me even after I relocated to Madison later that month.

One of the chaotic scenes was parents trying to find and comfort their children from the near-by school located on 11th street and 6th Avenue (I lived on 12th street and 6th Avenue). The children were shaken and crying, not understanding the devastation that had just occurred. While the frantic parents searched for their children, arriving in limos and other vehicles to claim them, it created such a disturbance to traffic and backedup lanes for blocks.

The streets were crowded with people walking around confused, disoriented and in total disbelief just as I was. Police presence was strong and security was tight. You had to show ID that you lived in the neighborhood. The train system was stalled for hours. People were stuck on the trains and on the platforms waiting for their train to go to work. To see so many people crowded together in one place at one time when it wasn't any type of parade, concert, street fair or any other (pleasurable) event, was unbelievable and disheartening.



People started buying candles and placing them all around St Vincent's and all along the streets and avenues near the WTC and the surrounding areas. Prayers and vigils were started and clergymen were basically walking the streets praying, crying and trying to comfort those who lost friends and loved ones. They themselves were trying to maintain their own composure and emotions.

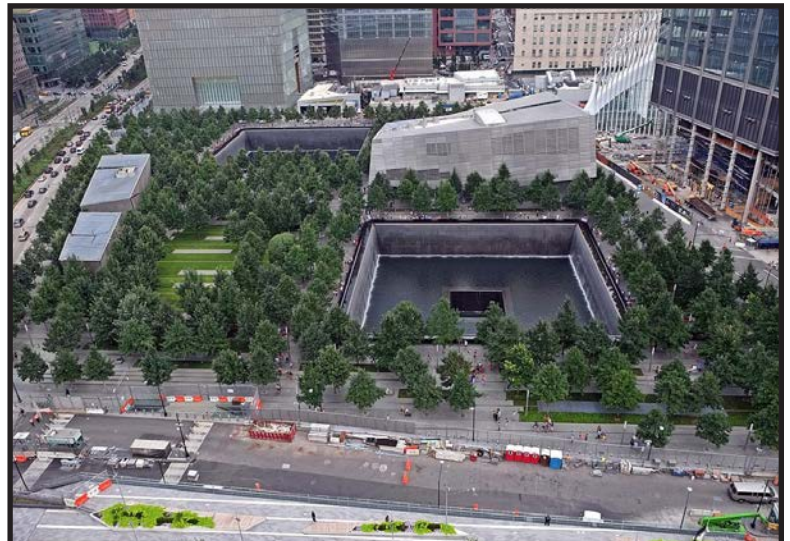
I couldn't contact my family, nor could they contact me for three days because the cell phone towers were out and the pay phones

were not working. I finally was able to contact my family who were relieved to finally hear from me once the airways were cleared to make/receive calls.

What am I going to do now I asked myself? I had spent 15 years in New York! I had no choice really but to keep on moving, to keep on living. So, I decided to make a new start and relocated to Madison, WI where most of my family resided. By the end of September, I was starting my life over so-to-speak.

I did not and could not visit NYC nor my former neighborhood again for almost five years after this tragic event. When I did finally visit, I still could not visit the Freedom Towers at ground zero. I intend to go the next time I visit NYC. It was such and still is a horrible memory for me.

I realized that you can't prepare for some things like 9/11, but you can learn to cope and prepare yourself for most things, such as, having a strong will and being able to keep going and keep thriving so you could continue to live every aspect of your life and continue on your journey.



I will forever be thankful, grateful and feel just plain lucky that I did not live or work downtown in Little Italy, Chinatown, Soho (South of Houston Street), the NYC County Court buildings, and the New York Stock Exchange where people lost their homes and their lives, and businesses were destroyed. This event would be etched in people's memory forever!



BEA CHATMAN

MUSIC MEMORY

My mother, Mary Lee Martin, who was a member of the Mt. Zion Baptist Church choir, was invited to sing at the Crusade for Christ event at the Dane County Colosseum on September 17-24, 1972 in Madison, WI. I also attended with my mother. One of the songs the choir sang was “Leaning on the Everlasting Arms.” Also, the choir sings this song quite often in church on Sundays, and my mother

would sing this song a lot at home.

This event was amazing, wonderful, unbelievable—seeing my mother singing at this event with a packed and diverse audience. When people from all walks of life and all different faiths come together and sing together, it is so beautiful and rewarding to see and hear. I will never forget this event.



SENSING A MEMORY

My memory goes back to my mother’s yard when she had so many flowers, fruit trees, vegetables. Flowers—tulips, lilacs. Fruit trees—peaches, pears, apples, plums. Vegetables—greens, green beans, cabbage, carrots, pears. Oh, how wonderful it was at that time of my life (Fresh, beautiful surroundings).



TYRONE HUDSON

BEING CALLED FAT

Fourteen years ago, I was 386 pounds. Some of my family and friends used to call me fat and out of shape because they didn’t know why or what happened to me. I had gotten sicker due to my diabetes, so they put me on insulin because my pancreas was not producing enough sugar for me to have normal blood sugar. I was shooting

60 units of insulin three times a day until I started to get control of my blood sugar. But since then, I have lost weight and gotten my blood sugar under control. I am feeling great today and have lost a total of 71 pounds.





CHRIS WAGNER

TRAIN SOUNDS

A few years ago, I was living in a neighborhood that a train ran through sometime around 11 pm every night. Some neighbors had a meeting with the RR officials asking that the train not blow its whistle when it went through at this late hour as it disturbed their sleep, made their days poor, and woke up their kids. I, however, found the clickety-clack of the wheels on the track and blowing of the whistle to be like a lullaby. When I heard the sound, I felt myself transported to my growing up years in Illinois, where the sounds of trains carrying grain and barges on the Illinois Rim penetrated the night and gave me a sense that all was well in the world and I could sleep safely and securely. I think the neighbors won that battle, but I didn't participate in it.

In my current residence, if I go to bed early enough, I can hear a freight train passing on the tracks. The sound is still a perfect lullaby to me.



THE SOUND OF LOVE AND GRIEF

One Valentine's Day, my husband, John, gave me a greeting card that allowed the sender to record a message. When I opened the card, there was a recording of John saying, "I love you, Chris!" It was a wonderful gift, but I had no idea how important it was until Valentine's Day the next year. My husband had died three weeks before Valentine's Day that year, and I was still experiencing that first deep grief, the kind that makes your whole body bend over in pain, as if to protect your breaking heart, that makes you gasp for breath as you choke back a sob and knocks you to your knees.



I had gone to work and managed to "fake my way" through another day, pretending to be there when I was really in another realm. At lunch, I had run over to Walgreen's and bought myself Valentine's socks, because I thought it was something my husband would have gotten me. After work, I rushed home and frantically searched my home for reminders of his gifts from past Valentine's Days, the stuffed bear with a red heart, the little knickknack knight in shining armor holding a rose. The, I remembered the card! I dug through my box of old cards until I found it. I opened it

with trepidation and behold! I heard his voice say, "I love you, Chris!" I opened it again and again that night.

For the next several years, I always got that card out and listened to it on Valentine's Day. There was something so reassuring about hearing his kind voice with that very intimate message for me! Then, one year, I opened the card, and heard something that sounded like a fading recording in slow motion. I closed it and opened it again, but this time, there was nothing. I tried to figure out something to do to make it play again, but nothing worked. The next thing I knew, I was back in that excruciating pain of those early days of loss, thinking, "I can't let this happen. I have to pull myself out of this. I can't go through that again."



And somehow I did. I quieted myself and remembered the great joy that his voice had given me throughout our lives together and how this card with this simple recording had sustained me through the early years of loss. I felt a deep gratitude for my husband and for that simple gift. And I knew that this was enough.



DEMETRA BRAXTON

"I'LL TAKE YOU THERE" BY THE STAPLE SINGERS

This is one of my favorite songs, and I will always hold it close to my heart.

I was brought up in a large family and there was always some type of function and/or event going on. My mother has five kids, and her other three sisters all have three or more kids, so I have a lot of cousins. I love, love, love my Auntie Teala. Our house, as well as my Dad's house, usually

had music playing. I'm so so grateful to have been introduced to all types of music/genres (jazz, R&B, gospel, pop, other-native, metal, rap, etc.).

My Auntie was known as the life of the party! There wasn't a family function where she wasn't dancing and singing. So not only was "I'll Take You There" my favorite song, it was hers as well. Auntie would stand next to the record player so she could play Staple Singers over and over again! So, if you didn't want to hear it, then you best not ever attend. My Auntie passed away in 2016, and I miss her so very much.

