

Good Morning, Grandma.

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Good morning, Grandma,

When I contemplate my vocational expression as an educator, memories of Mama dropping me off at your house early in the morning—so she could go “make a day,” working at the library—flow through my 37-year-old body. I did not realize how much the experiences of working with you in your garden as a four-year-old formed the foundation of my teaching identity until I started applying to assistant professor jobs and had to write a teaching statement. “In 750 words, describe your teaching identity,” was the prompt. Do you remember when I would practice my handwriting later in the day after tending to the garden while *Young and the Restless* played in the background? By the end of the episode, there would be a spread of papers containing multiple drafts of the words or letters I was practicing that day. In like manner, thirty-ish years later my desk was covered with drafts of my teaching statement. This time, incomplete and scratched out sentences covered the pages. Sighing, I formulated two guiding questions I hoped would streamline my thoughts. Though the guiding questions, “Who am I as a teacher” and “What are my values as a teacher” were clear, my half-baked responses signaled a state of confusion. None of my responses felt right. None of them felt true. Out of frustration with myself, I paused and prayed to still my anxious mind. Per usual, your ancestral spirit appeared to comfort and journey with me as I remembered, recovered, reclaimed, and realized my teaching identity.

Remember:

Mama and I would pass by you as she sped down our Georgia red clay road to drop me off at your house. You would throw your hand up to wave, but never took your eyes off the ground you were tilling. Upon hopping out the car, my day of learning began. Grandma, you were my first religious educator, and the garden was our

classroom. You always prepped my little red wagon with the items you needed to use in the garden that day: seeds, fertilizer, tools. I was tasked with fixing your jug of ice water before trekking back up the road on our farm to deliver the wagon of goods. “Hey Missy,” was often the greeting you offered when you called me in to your sacred space. I walked up to you with pride delivering your water with a Kool-Aid smile and a wild hug. One hand embraced me with a tender touch while the other hand steadied the cup to hydrate your sweating body. Complimenting me and extending gratitude through statements like, “Whew, this water is good! Thank you, Missy,” affirmed I had a skill that could make a difference in someone’s life.

We were intentional with our time in the garden because you wanted to get back to the home before the Price is Right came on. Yet, I never felt rushed. We moved in tandem at a pace of your seventy-plus-year-old body, so my little hands could keep up. Back and forth I would run to the wagon to bring the mason jar of seeds you needed for planting. You taught about the different seeds: what they were, how to plant them, how many to use, and where they belonged in the garden. This is knowledge I carry with me today. Seeds were being planted as I was planting seeds. Between digging holes and instructing me on how to plant the seeds, you would quiz me on more conventional lessons a soon-to-be kindergarten girl—whose family could not afford pre-k—needed to know. Counting seeds aloud, reciting the alphabet, singing church hymns, and talking about the ordinary trappings of rural living were ways you prepared me for elementary school. You made learning fun, purposeful, and play-filled. The scent of fresh soil was always accompanied by joy filling the air. The knowledges cultivated in and held gently by the garden were never finite. The possibilities of what I might learn in our sacred space were endless. The garden still teaches me today.

I hold fond memories of neighbors and people from church joining us in the garden. Sometimes they came by to help care for the crops. Other times, they stopped by to talk to you about their lived experiences. Though I was supposed to stay out of grown folks’ business, I listened with curious ears. As people helped us care for the crops, you cared for their souls by listening deeply and responding without judgment. Moments that shine bright are the times in which your southern sass was employed to make a clear point about something going on in the community you did not approve of and would not participate in. “I ain’t going along with that!” You made it evident that you wanted the community to thrive and be well through your practices of care. One way you cared for your beloved community was by inviting any and every one to participate in harvest time. Recognizing your gardens contained more food than our nine-person family could consume, you offered nourishment to anyone who would come. Boisterous sounds of conversation and laughter gave Mr. Rober-son’s tractor a run for its money as the folk communed in God’s divine presence. The garden is a place where everyone belonged.

Recover:

Grandma, what I know to be true about my teaching identity is rooted in the precious memories we share. My first attempts at writing the teaching statement were challenging, because I was trying to recover authentic parts of myself from memories formed in the academic classroom. Don’t get me wrong... Much of my formation as a teacher happened in institutions of higher learning. The privilege to study at some of the top universities in our country created opportunities for me to think critically and creatively about theories and practices of religious education for a sustained amount of time. In academic classrooms, particularly in doctor of philosophy programs, the primary focus is often on what PhD students were studying to attain their degree. More in depth conversations about *who* you will be as a teacher in a classroom of your own are needed. Thankfully, your spirit guided me back to your classroom to recover core values I hold about teaching. The three core values I recovered are *hospitality, community care, and cultivating knowledges*.

You had a knack for offering hospitality to each person, who graced our land with their presence

and showed themselves friendly. The expectation for neighbors to enter into the garden with a spirit of love and kindness, accompanied by a dedicated attentiveness to the crops and soil in hand was set. You practiced radical hospitality with our white neighbors in a town where racial lines were historically thick and not to be crossed. Social norms did not determine rules of engagement in your classroom. Instead, you countered the divisive nature of racism, sexism, and ageism by fostering a space where difference is acknowledged and celebrated. The boundaries of your hospitality were expansive. Your hospitality wrapped itself around anyone who dared to experience the tenacious spirit of a no nonsense, compassionate, Black woman. Hospitality was the foundation for community care in your classroom.

Community care was most evident during harvest time, my favorite time of the year! The spirit of “whosoever will, let them come and harvest the garden” filled the air. Tending to the garden during the growing season was not a requirement for people to come and partake in the harvest. Neighbors from miles away, church members, and my Auntie’s friends would arrive with garden tools and grocery bags in their hands. People came ready to collaboratively reap what you and I had sewn.

As I close my eyes, I can see bodies moving in a cadence that matched their range of ability. Whatever each person could do was enough. You affirmed whatever they offered as a contribution to the collective reaping. Collective reaping fostered joy and facilitated genuine human connection, which was in part the soul care the community needed.

You never forgot the importance of nourishing the physical body with good food. Auntie was tasked to take us around in her van to share the goodness of the harvest with homebound friends. You used our portion of the harvest to create meals seasoned to taste like home. Sharing food and creating meals were practices of community care that expressed the purpose of your classroom. Your garden is a place where needs were met and lessons were learned.

Even though teaching was not your profession, I believe it was a core component of your vocation. You cultivated knowledges with the pedagogical tools indigenous to you and your kin. These tools were refined over generations as they were passed down. In your garden I experienced your ways of drawing out self-knowledge and demonstrating knowledges of care. Your lessons never felt like lectures, even when you were teaching me something new. Conversation was the primary approach toward cultivating knowledges within anyone who set foot inside your classroom.

By your spirit delicately guiding me through the process of recovery, I was able to identify these three values. Our process of recovery was not linear; however, it did involve the steps of connecting to my ancestor, allowing her to guide me to memories that held experiences from which I could glean lessons about teaching, and reflecting upon those lessons to see how they shaped my teaching identity. Thank you, Grandma, for the journey thus far.

Reclaim:

While recovering values I hold about teaching and some of the practices indigenous to my maternal bloodline, aspects of my identity that I must reclaim surfaced. Taking this journey with you, Grandma, helped me realize I created distance between certain expressions of my authentic self and my professional persona. In particular, the tone of my authentic voice had gone flat. Laden with the pressure to assume a stoic academic voice when writing and a professional tone devoid of my sweet Southern accent when speaking, I suppressed my mother tongue. Remembering and recovering our conversations and the talks you shared with other folks reminded me of your voice. Truth sang as you spoke. You spoke with certitude, compassion, and

honesty. There is something about the way you would say “ain’t” that compels me to reclaim “ain’t” for myself. “Ain’t” articulates a level of agency that is often looked down upon in the academy and professional world. “Ain’t” sets necessary boundaries that guard my joy, foster flourishing, and prioritize my wellness. Knowing the difference between what I will and what I “ain’t gonna do” for professional advancement is vital. Knowing who I will stand in solidarity with and why I ain’t backing down from the perpetuation of social injustice is an intentional positionality. Knowing how I will advocate for and support students and how I ain’t deprioritizing teaching clarifies my approaches to being a teacher-scholar. Reclaiming my “ain’t” invites me to reclaim more characteristics of my authentic self that may have been suppressed by the academic process. As a result, my teaching identity comes alive!

Realize:

After remembering experiences, recovering values, and reclaiming authentic characteristics of self that shape my teaching identity, I must explore the habits of mind and practices needed to realize this identity. How do I hold together the lessons I learned through the pursuit of higher education with the lessons you taught me in your garden? How do I explain my pedagogical practices that are rooted in creative instincts to students curious about how I teach my classes? Of course, I get to this step of our journey and have more questions. One thing that holds true now as it did when I was four-years-old, you always listened to and validated my questions. You were present with me, encouraging me to seek answers for myself and assuring it is okay to not have all the answers.

I trust that your spirit will continue to guide me as I realize my teaching identity in my flesh and bones over time. I trust that what I write in my teaching state will sing true. I believe the tools you’ve passed down will help me tend my own gardens and will be malleable to the refining needed to till today’s soil. Thank you, Grandma, for being a peaceful presence on this journey. Though my pen will soon stop writing this letter, the lessons you taught me will continue to teach as I realize my teaching identity. This journey never ends. Love you deep!

Until next time,

“Missy”

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About the Author

Gina A. S. Robinson, PhD is a native of Burke County, Ga. She holds bachelor’s and master’s degrees from Emory and Yale University, as well as her PhD from Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary in Christian Education. She currently works at the Wabash Center as an Associate Director. Her research interests intersect faith, race, culture, and emerging adult development.