

## **Knowledge Is An Armor**

It was a beautiful sunshiny day in August of 2014. We packed the trunk of the car with our luggage, lunch, and plenty of water. Glenda, Shay, Remy (Shay's poodle), and I with Amanda (Glenda's Assistant), were happy to be on our way to Virginia. We had a lot of conversations; one of the longest was about collecting information on a cure for cancer. On her laptop, Shay found a lot of products, and we purchased a few. The long ride was pleasant.

Our reason for the trip to Virginia was to visit my brother George who was released from the hospital two days earlier. His illness was a surprise because for 75 years, he was always a picture of health. He was a calm, kind man, and a biblical scholar who thoroughly understood the Bible and was skilled at explaining the scriptures. He never judged others if their beliefs were different from his. He raised a family of 4 children with over 5 grandchildren. Until his illness, he enjoyed playing basketball and baseball.

In 1977, after the Blackout and looting in Brooklyn, the owners of the small furniture store where George worked as a salesman, sold their store to him. His furniture store thrived, especially after he took college courses in Business and Accounting. His business earned half a million dollars a year prior to his expansion to a larger store.

Our plan was to see George the day we arrived, but we reached Virginia much later than we expected because the traffic was very heavy. So, we decided to go to see him the next day. He was so sick, but he tried hard to hold his head up high. It was very difficult for me to witness him in this condition. My mind kept slipping back to our childhood. While sitting there, I could see him sliding across the floor on one leg, like James Brown, to the beat of "I Feel Good," with a smile and assurance that said, "I could dance like him. Can't I?" He would pose with confidence before shooting the basketball. When playing baseball, he took awhile to carefully look around at the positions of the players before hitting the ball. It was fascinating to watch him, in the kitchen, chopping onions and celery with the speed of a chef, while explaining how he learned the skill on his first restaurant job as a teenager. We spent a lot of time talking with George about everything but his illness, and finally, we left so he could sleep and recoup.

Prior to our trip, Glenda who always believes when we travel, we should take the time to visit historical sites, insisted that while we were in Virginia, we visit Hampton University Museum (1868). This museum, located at a historically Black College & University (HBCU), is the largest and oldest African American museum in the United States and Virginia. The museum was formally the library, located in a beautiful old building. It stores 10,000 pieces of African American fine art. It is the first Institutional collection of African American Artists, and the South's largest collection of African American, ethnic, Native American, Asian, and pacific art, and artifacts. The museum represents cultures and people around the world.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century gallery is located on the second floor. One of the first people to donate art from the continent of Africa to the museum was an interesting man, William Sheppard (1865-1927). Sheppard was an African American Presbyterian minister who spoke out about the atrocities against the Africans. He traveled to Africa to start a mission and spent 20 years there

when the Europeans were trying to take over the continent. During his travels in Africa, he collected African artifacts and donated them to his alma mater, Hampton Institute where he studied under the tutelage of Booker T. Washington, who also had a collection of Native Hawaiian and Native American works of art.

Viewing the museum was an amazing journey. Some of the artists' works on display were: Hale Woodruff (1900-1980), a painter, print, and mural artist known for the Amistad Mutiny Murals; Frank Joseph Dillion (1866-1954), a still life, cityscape, landscape, and stain glass designer; Elizabeth Catlett (1915-2012) a sculptor and graphic artist; Robert Savon Pious (1908-1983), a commercial art, portrait painter and poster design artist, specifically known for his sporting scenes during the 30s and 40s; William H. Johnson (1901-1970), a landscape and portrait painter/poet, who was educated in New York during the Harlem Renaissance; Henry Ossawa Tanner (1859-1937), the first African American painter to gain international acclaim, was known for religious paintings and best-known for the painting, "The Banjo Lesson."

There is a section of paintings and photographs of Native Americans on display. An interesting book that caught my attention was the *Cherokee Dance and Drama* (The Civilization of the American Indian series). It discusses how dance serves as a means to secure health, social welfare, and their crops.

After our tour of the museum which we needed several more days to experience, we decided to visit the Emancipation Oak. The tree is 98 feet in (30m) diameter with branches extending upward and laterally. According to the National Geographic Society, it is one of the ten greatest trees in the world. The beautiful huge tree stands at the entrance of the Hampton campus and existed before we were born. It will most likely live long after we are no longer here. The tree represents a time when historical changes were taking place. Our visit to Virginia was historically significant, because one hundred and fifty years after the Emancipation, President Barack Obama, a Black man, was President of the United States.

During the Civil War (1861-1865), many slaves who escaped were freed behind union lines. In Virginia, Fort Monroe gave refuge to slaves who escaped. They were considered contraband who were provided asylum and classified as freedman. They didn't have access to schools, so the shaded tree served as the first classroom for them to receive an education. Mary S. Kelsey Peake, a free black woman, secretly taught the slaves and free blacks to read and write when teaching was prohibited by law, especially after the Nat Turner Rebellion (1831). In 1863, the first reading of President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation was under the Oak tree. The Proclamation changed the laws that prevented African Americans from obtaining an education. The tree, which is now considered a historical landmark, is nicknamed the Emancipation Oak.

First, I stared in awe at the size of the tree, then I read the statement on the stand in front of the tree which explains its history. I realized that this living breathing entity has a story. The large heavy limbs reach as high as the weight would allow. Then, some of the branches, curve downward as if they were too heavy to hold themselves up. The branches bend like an old man, yet, the tree is fully alive. The same branches curve again, attempting to rise from the ground again and again in the form of a ripple, like the body of a crawling caterpillar. Some branches had surrendered to the ground for periods of time, growing outward endlessly reaching for light but

covered by the base of the fully developed form. Many of these branches look like arms reaching out for light, so they continue to rise again, refusing to give up, fighting to survive, to save themselves from dying on the ground. They are too heavy to climb but so high.

I walked up to the trunk of the tree. It is so wide, a circle of people would have to hold hands to surround it. I embraced it, closed my eyes, and felt the strong energy that vibrated through me. I pictured the free slaves gathered under the shaded tree listening to the Emancipation Proclamation. I tried to experience the joy that they must have felt, but for some reason, it was not joy that I felt, no matter how hard I tried. It was sadness that crept within my soul thinking that here, under this tree my ancestors had gathered and were not accepted as humans. This space, those times, on this land, here in America, a proclamation had to be read to acknowledge them and give them some semblance of hope.

What a beautiful tree. As I walked away, I was happy that I had the opportunity to lay eyes on one of the wonders of the world. I left with photographs taken from all angles that can be shared with the next generation and for me to look at them over and over again and not have to rely upon memory.

Before leaving the campus, I looked back at the buildings. I felt proud to know this history about my ancestors because it helps me appreciate their sacrifices. In a recent Documentary on PBS titled, “Reconstruction” produced by Historian Henry Louis Gates, a scholar, asserted “History is an Armor.” What a statement. Our knowledge of history shields us from deception.

The dominant culture has written American history, and it has been tainted with mistruths. There are some who still want to promote the false narrative and eradicate the voices and perspectives of all Americans. I was fascinated when I began to learn the history of other Americans including the Chinese. I grew up during World War II, and my brothers served in the Army and Navy. I did not know until later in life the history of Japanese Americans during the war. When I was a young mother, my children and I watched movies about cowboys and “Indians.” At the time, we were being fed a false narrative through films and history books. It is to our detriment if we are not willing to learn the viewpoints of others. There are those who are threatening to ban, from the classroom, books written by many great storytellers such as James Baldwin, Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, and Toni Morrison. They want to prevent their children from learning the ugly truths about slavery, Jim Crow, Redlining, and racist practices within the judicial system. They claim the stories make their children uncomfortable. Should the Germans ban their children from learning the vile history of Hitler and the Nazis because it may make their children feel uncomfortable?

In 2022, the Governor of Florida supports a plan to stop teaching an advanced African American history course in its high school curriculum. He claims that the course has little significant educational value and exposes youth to intersectionality, Activism, Black Feminist Literary Theory and Black Queer Studies. While there are some courses and books which should be limited to specific grade levels, high school students who will be exposed to varying theories in college including Critical Race Theory, will be prepared if they are enrolled in an advanced college preparatory course. Not studying or preparing for courses which will be taught in college places the young Floridians at a disadvantage. They should learn their history and the stories of

others who perceive life differently. So many times, our personal histories are never known and valuable stories from which all can benefit are never told. That was my experience with my brother.

We made the trip back to Virginia several times. The last trip was to attend George's funeral. His grandson who, also lives in Virginia, revealed a piece of George's personal history I did not know. He said, "It was the wisdom and skills of my grandfather who taught me why I am now the CEO of a fortune five hundred company. He brought me into his store and mentored me." I was shocked. The role my brother played in the formation of his grandson's successful career was not known to me or my family until those last words about him were spoken. The stories and the histories of our individual and communal families are invaluable. They inspire. They encourage and make us realize the magnificent journey we have traveled. We can find these stories in books, magazines, newspapers, libraries, and museums. Our history is American history, and all Americans are at an intellectual disadvantage when they are denied the perspectives of other Americans. Limiting knowledge enslaves. It chains one and prevents him or her from becoming a critical thinker. It serves the colonizer, the dominant culture, and the entity which wants to control other minds.

Critical thinking is essential for intellectual growth, and all perspectives are important. That is not to say we will agree with all lifestyles or belief systems; however, we should try to understand others and accept them as human beings. They too are entitled to what we wanted for our ancestors who sat under the Emancipation Tree: Civil and Human Rights.

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