

Healthy Aging

Spring/Summer 2018

A Personal Cultural Reflection

By Yvonne Matthews, Lincoln University Cooperative Extension Associate Administrator and PJCCMHA Coordinator



"To Be Young, Gifted and Black"
Weldon Irvine, Lyricist

To be young, gifted and black
Oh what a lovely precious dream
To be young, gifted and black
Open your heart to what I mean

In the whole world you know
There are a billion boys and girls
Who are young, gifted and black
And that's a fact

You are young, gifted and black
We must begin to tell our young
There's a world waiting for you
Yours is a quest that's just begun

When you're feeling real low
There's a great truth you should know
When you're young, gifted and black
Your soul's intact

Young, gifted and black
How I long to know the truth
There are times when I look back
And I am haunted by youth

Oh but my joy of today
Is that we can all be proud to say
To be young, gifted and black
Is where it's at

I was 16 years old when Nina Simone's "To Be Young, Gifted and Black" touched my intellectual consciousness and 18 when Donny Hathaway covered the song with a gospel embellishment that sang to my soul. They were singing a truth that my parents had imparted, but not until I heard it on the radio did I know it to be true.

Having been raised in a music-filled home with parents who rivaled any ballroom dancers on television, we listened to everything from the tango that originated in Buenos Aires to the Vienna Waltz. We understood the penetrating message of music from an early age. I was blessed as a teenager with messages from artists like James Brown, who sang that I should, "Say it Loud, I'm BLACK and I'm PROUD."

In Simone's song, she reflects on her longing to know the truth. She says that there were times when she looked back and was haunted by her youth. However, today "we can all be proud to say to be young, gifted and Black is where it's at."

Even as a teenager, I understood that I found myself in a place of ancestral privilege. I did not drown in the Middle Passage, nor was I beaten as a slave or lynched as a victim of Jim Crow injustices. I could step in and walk through this world with my dark skin, thick lips, wide nose and wrapped, short, long or wigged Afro and be "Gifted and Black."

With that understanding as the wind at my back, I stood on the foundation my mother had laid—that I should not let others define me. I have continued to hold my head high, with my back straight, and try, even when I did not know if I could. I knew I was "Young, Gifted and Black," and that was a fact. So, I tried anyhow.

Recently, an African-American of lighter complexion wanted to disparage me. The person called me fat, Black and bald-headed. I disregarded the references to my weight and hair length because they are my choices and on a good "fresh line" day, my hair is not just cute but really cute.

I am a living testament to the great strides we, Africans in America, have made. I thank God for who He has made me to be. However, my heart hurts to know that there are still those who did not get the message: you are "Gifted and Black." Sadly, in the twenty-first century, we dare to show the loathsome underbelly of our self-hatred; we still spew, "You are ugly because you are Black." Let's listen to Simone and Hathaway, and let the lyrics speak to us today. ■

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Memories of Aging Elders in My West African Community

By Dr. Jonathan Egilla, Assistant Professor
and Lincoln University Cooperative Research
(LUCR) Principal Investigator

I remember the vibrant life of the elders in my community and the zeal with which they carried out their daily lives. The passage of time had minimal effect on them, mentally or physically. In those days, most men and women lived past their 80th birthdays. Still, they could trek dozens of miles to visit relatives and friends. They could also cultivate the fields daily or paddle their canoes and fish on the river all day. When the day's labor ended, my grandmother, with her extraordinary memory, would educate me. She shared folklore and countless stories and fables that had been passed on to her by our ancestors.

Today, as I grow older, I reflect upon the lifestyle of my elders. I am able to understand that their energy, mental fitness, wisdom and knowledge of plants, wild and domestic animals and traditional medicine sustained them. This helped them live a long, active life, where they aged gracefully.

Elders in my community left me with lessons about a good diet. They also taught me pathways to physical fitness. This kind of information is only now gaining importance in other communities today. I remember how my elders never added sugar to their food or medicine, even if it was available. They never ate raw meat, fish or shrimp, which they would have considered unhealthy. In my community, elders lived without access to hospitals or Western medicine. They had to be self-reliant. The daily routine of drinking tea without sugar before breakfast and bedtime was passed from one generation to another. The tea was not from the tea plant (*Camellia sinensis*). It was medicine brewed from a mixture of leaves, twigs, bark and the roots of several plant species. This practice was a part of their daily health management. It is believed to be the reason that my elders never had long spells of constipation, stom-

achaches or headaches. It was also thought to be able to cure fever. In my childhood, diseases such as diabetes were uncommon. In those days, my elders used plants as if the leaves could talk to reveal their healing powers.

In contrast, being spatially and culturally disconnected from my roots means that the only sustainable lifestyle I can foresee in my old age would entail being dependent on my primary care provider. I know that my elders lived with a different level of stress. Their stress did not include being awakened by an alarm clock. They did not face a daily life with four, five or



more events scheduled into the calendar, a life in which the calendar for the next year is full. My elders had plenty of time to reflect on the past or plan for the future. They were never rushed and never pushed. Their minds were not cluttered with deadlines. They lived at a time and place where they were close to nature. The extended family was never separated from the nuclear family, and elders were never lonely.

As I look ahead towards my old age, I wonder if the hectic nature of modern life will enable me to effectively maintain good health. Will I live as long as my elders did in their organic world? ■



Reflections In The Mirror

By Dr. Avila Hendricks Nilon, Lincoln University Professor of Education



I remember my elders,
through the poetry of my parents,
through the wise words of my grandparents.

As I age, the mirror doesn't reflect me anymore.
I am fortunate enough to be in good health – I feel young.
Yet, the mirror doesn't reflect my youth.

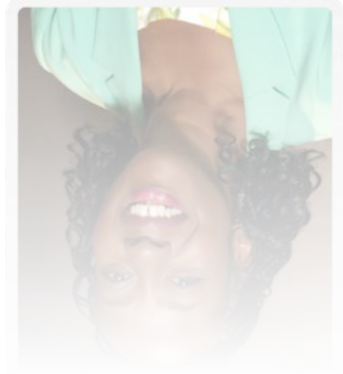
I am saddened to see that the mirror doesn't reflect me anymore.
I don't know this new person, and so I stare,
And wait for me to return. I wait for a sign, and soon it comes.

It comes through the laughter of my daughter.
I smile and remember who I am.
I am the rich legacy, left by my elders.

I stare in the mirror,
and see the sounds of my grandchildren – yet to be born.

Again, I hear the music in my daughter's laughter.
It sounds like poetry, and I say to myself,
"Isn't that the same song my mother used to sing to me?"

The answer comes back when I smile.
It always comes back when I smile,
A smile, full of so many fond memories of my elders,
captured – as me, in the reflection of my mirror. ■





Multicultural Aging: Then and Now, As Remembered by an American of Indian Origin

By Dr. Kamalendu (K. B.) Paul, Lincoln University Cooperative Extension

State Extension Specialist – Small Farms

I grew up in Assam, a forest-covered state in the eastern part of India, in the 1940s and 1950s. My father worked as an engineer for Indian Railways. Railroads were the largest, most extensive and important arteries of transportation and communication in those days. Every three to five years, my father was transferred to a new place. So, we wrapped things up, said goodbye to our classmates and friends in the neighborhood and simply moved on. We lived in government housing, walked to most places, including schools and market places, and played with the other kids with homemade toys and devices. I had eight siblings. By the time I was five years old, two had moved away. So, the six of us lived with our parents in a three-room house. When I was in ninth grade, my father got a big promotion, and he was allocated a large house, with running water and electricity. It was a welcome change.

From a very young age, my mother's mother lived with us. We later learned that she and her husband used to live in a remote village. He supported his young family—a wife and three children—from the few acres of farmland he owned. After a brief illness, my grandfather passed away at a relatively young age. With the help of a marriage broker, my grandmother was able to have her oldest daughter (who would become my mother) married to my father. Arranged marriage was the only way one could find a wife or a husband in those days, which is still the case for the majority of the population. After my father married into that family, he was obliged to help them in every possible way. He found a husband for the other daughter, and he supported the young man while my uncle was still in high school. My aunt and uncle somehow managed their own lives, but they were never well-off enough to take full responsibility for my grandmother. So, she had little choice but to move in with my

family. This kind of arrangement was the norm in those days.

My father retired at 55, the mandatory retirement age for government employees at the time (now 58). He received a small pension, which was not enough for my mother and father to live on. Moreover, he had to move out of government housing. So, my parents had to move in with one of my brothers, where my parents lived until they died. This has become the accepted custom for the majority of the aged population. Sometimes we see ads for “homes for the elderly,” but these have not become popular because of financial and cultural constraints. There are no government-supported safety nets for the vast majority of the Indian population. Therefore, the children have to care for their elderly parents into the foreseeable future. ■





Reflections on Aging

By Cherilyn Williams, Graphic Designer

Lincoln University Cooperative Extension and Research Media Center

When I think back to my childhood, I only have positive memories of the elders in my family and community. I recall elders in my church who sang and worshipped with such enthusiasm that you

couldn't help seeing the faith that had strengthened them throughout the long years of their journeys. I can vividly remember one man in particular, Rotha Williams. Even at over 90 years old, he would often strike out on his own in song, proclaiming "This world is not my home!" Whenever he chose to sing, the service would halt. I remember all of the seniors in the church being active and engaged. They also took a special interest in the youth. These elders didn't mind chastising or correcting you. If you got out of line, they treated you as if you were their grandchild!

My family showed me examples of aging well. All of my grandparents lived to be 76 or older, while still living actively. My grandfather James was strong and healthy well into his 90s. He religiously rode a stationary bicycle every day until a couple of years before he died at the age of 96. He maintained a healthy diet that included eating bran cereal each morning and drinking a glass of red wine most evenings. Both of my grandfathers were entrepreneurs. James had a laundry business in the garage, which my grandmother ran. He also worked in real estate. My dad's father was a minister and a carpenter, who always had a quick and sarcastic sense of humor. Both of my grandmothers were strong women. Grandmother Ruby had high standards, especially as far as young ladies were concerned. She cared deeply for her family and traveled by train to visit us well into her last years. Our entire family, with many generations and branches, would gather at her home in Detroit for Thanksgiving. Grandmother Ruby was a consummate planner. Year after year,

she would bake cakes and pies ahead of time and freeze them. In this way, despite the fact that she was over 80, cooking huge holiday meals did not overwhelm her. Grandmother Marguerite was also a great cook and grew produce in a huge garden. She harvested everything from watermelon to corn, potatoes and many types of greens. Well into her 80s, she worked her garden even in the heat of the summer.

My parents have taught me a lot about aging. And I continue to learn from them as they both approach 80 as active seniors. My parents were teachers who each taught for over 45 years. The best illustration of my mother's long career is the story of a little boy in her second grade class whose mother and father had also been in her second grade class.

Each of my parents have had health challenges, but they have met them by educating themselves on the best treatments and prevention. Following a stroke, my father began a new adventure of teaching himself Spanish to help his recovery. He is now fluent and never misses an opportunity to make new friends in stores and restaurants, where he converses in Spanish with them.

Because of the examples that I had growing up, I hope to be healthy and active in the future. My generation has the advantage that we have learned so much from our elders. We can also hope to increase our longevity by taking full advantage of the advances in research and medicine. My generation has unlimited access to health information because of the internet. If we are smart, we will embrace the current focus on living a healthy lifestyle. From my wonderful examples of my elders and family members, I have learned that the key to aging gracefully is to stay active and busy doing things that you love. ■



Guadalupe Centers, Inc. Transport Food to Those In Need

Linda Guerra-Lara, Senior Center Administrator
Guadalupe Centers, Inc.

Guadalupe Centers, Inc. recently received a grant for a new, state-of-the-art, self-contained, customized food transport vehicle. It is known as the “Hot Shot” and is used to transport home-delivered meals. The Hot Shot has two compartments, each with an oven and refrigerator. Home-delivered meals are available to those who qualify. Recipients must be at least 60 years old. Or, they can be from 18 to 59 years old if they are disabled and have a state-issued award letter. A Physician Request Form must be filed and signed by a current doctor. Applications are processed by the Mid-America Regional

Council (MARC) Department of Aging Services. Home assessments are conducted by staff from Guadalupe Centers, Inc. Client eligibility is either temporary or permanent, depending on the client’s health needs.

Through support from the Health Care Foundation of Greater Kansas City, Guadalupe Centers, Inc. is able to deliver nutritious meals to an added number of older adults. The program also provides seniors with helpful information on nutrition, health and community resources. Guadalupe Centers, Inc. is committed to being a resource that supports an older person’s ability to age at home. Guadalupe Centers, Inc. will continue to enhance program services that meet the evolving needs of a diverse aging population, with a focus on Latino communities. ■





Heart Health: Questions to Ask Your Doctor

Source: National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, National Institutes of Health

1. What is my risk for heart disease?
2. What is my blood pressure? What does it mean for me, and what do I need to do about it?
3. What are my cholesterol numbers? (These include total cholesterol, LDL or “bad” cholesterol, HDL or “good” cholesterol, and triglycerides.) What do they mean for me, and what do I need to do about them?
4. What is my body mass index “(BMI)” and waist measurement? Do they indicate that I need to lose weight for my health?
5. What is my blood sugar level, and does it mean I’m at risk for diabetes?
6. What other screening tests for heart disease do I need? How often should I return for checkups for my heart health?
7. What can you do to help me quit smoking?
8. How much physical activity do I need to help protect my heart?
9. What is a heart-healthy eating plan for me? Should I see a registered dietitian or qualified nutritionist to learn more about healthy eating?
10. How can I tell if I’m having a heart attack? ■





Healthy

NEWSLETTER

Aging

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