

On Whose Shoulders I Stand

By Deborah J. Walker, Ph.D., VISIONS consultant

I am an African-American, a woman, a born and bred Southerner, and a Christian. I'm college educated and a heterosexual baby boomer. I am middle class, temporarily able-bodied, and a citizen of the world. Each identity shapes how I show up in the world. The first four formed the core foundation for my worldview and my purpose in the world.

I grew up in segregated Birmingham, Alabama, in the 1960s. My memories of dogs and fire hoses, dynamite bombings, and senseless killings shaped my view of the world and my role in it. I too was shaped by the courage of my childhood friends marching in the streets and going to jail and by the fearless determination of the village of adults who tried to create a sense of normality in the face of unabridged hate. I was supported by a faith-filled family who believed that ultimately God was in charge. Against this backdrop, my strongly held fears and my growing rage lived side-by-side.

On September 15, 1963, fear and rage erupted into a powerful passion to fight injustice at any cost. As I sat in my own Sunday school class in my church a block away, Cynthia Wesley, Denise McNair, Carol Robertson, and Addie Mae Collins died in the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. As I ran towards the church, my mother's voice rang in my ears. She was saying, "Come back, come back!" But, it was too late...there was no turning back. The insanity of racial prejudice and discrimination had to stop and I had to play a larger role in ending them. As I continued towards the church, I heard the voices of my ancestors and the spirit I call God loudly said, "Go forth, we will protect you."

A friend recently asked me who were my guardian angels growing up, who influenced my worldview. In addition to family and community, three persons come to mind. My pastor during my teen years and deliverer of the benediction at President Obama's 2008 inauguration, Rev. Dr. Joseph E. Lowery who at 90 stills inspires me to hear the Social Gospel and continue to engage in social justice and human rights issues. Two others were high school teachers, Cleopatra Goree and Katherine Robinson who believed that education was a key to freedom and inspired me to achieve educationally, become a life long learner, and a citizen of the world. Each spoke "truth to power", had an indomitable spirit of compassion, and was a fierce warrior for creating a just and equitable world.

Their acts of courage fortified my young and growing belief that I could stand tall, fight injustice and at the same time be compassionate. Their vision of the world helped change and expand my relationship to the world. Their faith allowed me to consider in new ways the generosity of the whites my mother worked for; the humanness of white merchants in my community who worked to compensate for the injustices, and the voices of white religious leaders who put their own lives at risk by admonishing their congregants to take up the fight against racism and other "isms". I came to know that in systems of oppression, we all are caught up in a web of mutuality.

Over the years, my personal and professional lives merged into a seamless system of beliefs that required me to challenge oppression based on race, gender, class, age, sexual

orientation, religion, immigration status, physical/mental ability and other differences. In this spirit, I have used my cultural identities, worldview, and skills to create safe spaces for helping others honor their identities and worldviews, build alliances across racial and other differences, and work together to create a just and inclusive world.

As I approach 30 years in this work, I sometimes want to take a permanent break. I still feel mad, sad, and scared about the insidiousness of the inequities. When I experience these thoughts and feelings, I invoke some of my s/heros--my mother Alice Arneater Ott Horne, Fannie Lou Hammer, Coretta Scott King, and Michelle Obama. Their lives remind me that staying the course is the rent I pay for living on this earth. In the grand scheme, I pay a small price.