Narrative of a Black Woman

Edward Earl Bell
Narrative of a Black Woman:
Succeeding Against the Odds

Born in 1923 and despite growing up poor, Sylvia Lubertha Bell [Edwards] was able to attend an Ivy League university to earn her master’s degree. Today, Black boys and Black girls find it difficult to overcome odds. What was different about Lubertha and why did she succeed?

For additional information on Sylvia Lubertha Bell Edwards login here:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HVXjBl2oU9Q

See *Botox of a Black Woman* the towards the end!
The Introduction

Sylvia Lubertha Bell Edwards is an 88 year old Black Woman (as of this writing) who was born in 1923 in New Bern, North Carolina during turbulent times for Black America. She grew up with two brothers and one sister and lived primarily with her mother and father in a tattered house, which was typical for Blacks during that time. Her father was not a mainstay in the home and moved to Virginia to find work. Growing up “poor” and disenfranchised were commonplace for Blacks during this era (Medlin, 2007). For the Bell family, there was no exception. “Lubertha” was a conscientious child, who delighted in being obedient. Lubertha recounted the following:

My mother loved the Lord; she taught us respect and love for humankind...we didn’t have much money, but we had each other...The times were hard, not only for us, but also for all Blacks...My father could not find work and had to leave home and head to Virginia... I used to resent his leaving...however, I have lived long enough to understand that he could not find work to care for his family, and he had to leave.

The following narrative provides an account of Lubertha’s life. Narrative research is a methodological approach used to tell life stories (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber, 1998). Retelling stories is a practice with a rich literary tradition; sharing an account of one’s life is an attempt to arrive at interpretations and meanings (Polkinghorne, 2007; McQueen and Zimmerman, 2006). The Critical Race Theory is the lens in which Lubertha life will be analyzed. This theory provides an approach to look at how race and racism may shape a worldview or how to make meaning out of an experience that is laden with nuances of discrimination or racism (Howard, 2008). Lubertha’s experiences as a Black woman, born and reared in North Carolina in 1923, offered a glimpse of how life was like for her.

The purpose of this account is to address struggles and successes from Lubertha’s life. A secondary purpose for this narrative is to shed light on how Lubertha was able to overcome poverty and graduate from an Ivy League university, despite living in an age of racism and discrimination. A tertiary purpose for sharing this story is to provide a useful account for others, especially the young to
emulate and to understand the complexities of Lubertha’s life and her drive to achieve despite the odds. Due to the nature of this account and in order to add credibility to this narrative, Lubertha reviewed the transcript to ensure accuracy of the data, which is hallmark for trustworthiness in qualitative research (Shenton, 2004). The questions that guided this qualitative account are:

1) What were Lubertha experiences growing up?
2) How did Lubertha experiences shape her life?
3) What can we learn from Lubertha experiences?

Lubertha’s life presents a compelling story. Rarely do we read accounts of successful Black women who have overcome odds to achieve. Sharing Lubertha’s story refreshes the consciousness of how Black Americans achieved. She stated: “Stony the road we trod, Bitter the chast’ning rod, Felt in the days when hope unborn had died; yet with a steady beat, Have not our weary feet come to the place for which our fathers sighed? We have come over a way that with tears has been watered.”

Based on Lubertha’s journey, I decided to tell her story. This account has been organized in the following manner: In the first section, a recount of Lubertha’s life is shared. The second section outlines Lubertha’s dream and life experiences. Section three provides a discussion, and section four concludes the narrative.

Who is Lubertha

Lubertha’s childhood, as can be expected, was an impoverished one. Lacking the money and respect was the norm for most Blacks during her time. For example, Lubertha remarked that most families were “poor.” Her family did not escape the onslaught of poverty and discrimination that was typical of her time. She vividly recalled a portion her childhood:

I grew up poor, and my mother worked hard for white folks...she took in clothes, washing, ironing and cleaning their houses, sometimes for $.75 per day... sometimes she made $16.00 per month...yet, mother was able to save money...I don’t know how my mother was able to do
that...we didn’t have much. At the age of 16, each child received $100...There was a type of insurance that she had...she would pay this over the years...Mother was cleaning in the yard and suspected that the money had fallen out... Mother accused the white woman of taking her money...We were taught to save money.... We didn’t have much money; we had each other...We ate what we had, nothing fancy, nothing extravagant—but we had love in the home...I was the youngest and my brothers looked after me...My sister adored me...She remarked that I was all she had...They all loved me, but Ed, one of my brothers, was special...He taught me how to tell time, he taught me some much.

For Lubertha, being “poor,” Black and female had its challenges growing up in New Bern, North Carolina. Inadequate housing, rampant discrimination, and a paucity of opportunities faced Blacks during this period (Medlin, 2007). The “instructions and directions” from her mother were tantamount in helping her become the person that she is today. The love of Christ and God’s grace are her daily mantras.

Lubertha remarked: Education was not stressed in the home...It [education] fit right in with the program.” I was an above average student...I could have been par excellent...I took in information like a sponge...I use to read a lot and mother would walk past me and knock books out of my hand...she wanted me to go outside and play...I was playful and enjoyed the girls and the boys.

Growing up poor and with confidence was an interesting mixture. Being “poor” was the reality of the economic state in which Lubertha lived. However, the self-belief that Lubertha’s mother and family bestowed upon her out-shadowed not having the financial means or the ability to earn. “We had the Lord on our side; my mother believed in the power of prayer ...She was a child of God, and she instilled that in each of us.”

Being born in 1923, poor and black had its complexities. Overcoming the odd appeared impossible; seeing the atrocities and the societal hate during this time were mind-boggling. Not being able to vote, living in despair, seeing discrimination, facing racism led many of us to wonder, “how did we [Blacks] get over...As an adolescent, schooling and church were important. Respecting the teacher and respecting the church were critical facets for many Black Americans during this time.”

Lubertha had other dreams and desires. She was hesitant to dance, for example...”I
enjoyed dancing...however, since mother was very involved in the church, dancing was out of the question.” Lubertha also “took to singing”...“Someone realized that I had a tune in my voice...“I really loved school and the teachers taught you so much. You had to learn; they knew your mother and everybody.” After I graduated from high school in 1940, I was planning to become a nurse. Lubertha recalls a story:

A knock came to the door. The “person” wanted to speak with Sylvia Bell. I assumed the lady wanted to speak with my mother; we had the same name...However, the lady wanted to speak with me regarding a job. I became secretary for a community program at the age of 19, starting off making $9.00 per month and ending with $16.00 per month; that was a lot of money. Mary McLeod Bethune and Eleanor Roosevelt had started a program for Negro youth employment [National Youth Administration] and I was hired to be secretary for three White ladies and Charlotte Rhone, a black social worker. I learned to type and earned money. At this time, I had nothing to do; therefore, the job was helpful... My father had recommended me for this job...I soon realized that he had made a difference in my life.

The economic and social conditions for Black Americans have changed (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2012). Yet, racism and discrimination have not been eradicated; however, overt discrimination has been replaced by subtle nuances of racism and modern-day Jim Crow. Living in Lubertha’s era reflects a poignant period in history. Therefore, the Critical Race Theory is an appropriate theoretical framework for analyzing how race may impact one’s worldview (Howard, 2008). Being a victim of racism and discrimination is an inherent part of not only Lubertha’s life, but may have impacted the lives also of those reading this narrative. Overcoming prejudices as a child, is not an easy feat. “A child sees so much, hears so much, and experiences so much: “a mother and God’s grace can help you overcome so much...I tell people...to not get bitter, but get better,” echoes Lubertha.

Living with a Dream

“Graduating from Winston-Salem Teachers College [now Winston-Salem State University] in 1946 was huge for me. Hard work paid off. My brother, Ed, had kept his promise, and helped send me through college; he told me to wait two years and he would help me—and he did. He would send me money while I was in college, like $16.00 a month. He was in the Army and allotted money to help me. He loved me, well they all did. Well, I graduated summa cum laude,
and my brother Ed graduated from North Carolina College for Negros [now North Carolina Central University]; we both became teachers; he coached sports.

Even after graduating from college, Lubertha remained home and followed the tenets of her mother, a strict disciplinarian. Lubertha reflected on a moment:

“This tall gentle giant of a man wanted to take me to the movie...At age 28, I asked my mother if I could go to the movies with him! Almost pleading with her, Lubertha recalled the following: “mother, this is the last night for the showing, and he has asked me to go...my mother granted permission and I went...We married [Joseph Edwards] in 1952 and stayed together for 49 years and one month; we bore two boys...We stayed with my mother; and built our home in 1964, which I still occupy today.”

For Lubertha and her husband, their home was remarkable for blacks at that time. A brick home atop a modest hill, a cement driveway that extends on to a spiral door entrance, bay-view window, and a two-car garage. My husband loved a Cadillac...we did have other cars, but, he was a Cadillac man” My husband died in 2002.

For blacks, teaching was the primary professional. Lubertha recounted:

“What else could I do...? I did it well... I was offered a principalship, but I stayed with teaching... I coached basketball and taught French. At that time, I stayed home with my mother and siblings.... My first teaching salary was about $100.00 per month...I helped my mother...she was “jobbing” [washing] clothes for white folks and my salary helped out...I taught in Craven County for over 33 years...Teaching not only brought money into the home, but also brought a sense of pride and confidence.”

Learning from her mother, Lubertha saved some of her paltry teaching salary, buying bonds and helping around the house; education was important to her. In 1949, she applied to the University of Pennsylvania to earn her master’s degree in education. “I didn’t want to go to Columbia...everybody was going to Columbia University, and I wanted to be different...so I attended the University of Pennsylvania in 1949 to pursue my master’s degree... After staying with family members became unbearable, and in subsequent summers...I stayed in the dormitory...I had saved enough money to live in the dorms for the rest of the summers.”

The resolve and the stability of Blacks to achieve against the odds were formidable and compelling during Lubertha’s era. Because of marriage, deaths, and children, Lubertha was unable to
complete her master’s Degree in 1952. She lacked one written examination; she had completed all of the coursework. However in 2010, her great-nephew appealed to the university on her behalf, and the Dean and the School of Education agreed that Lubertha had met the requirements for the master’s degree. As a result, she received her master’s degree, which was backdated to reflect her having graduated in 1952, at age 87!

Discussion

Lubertha’s story is riveting. A black woman, born into poverty, rose to achieve many of the American dreams. The Critical Race theory is a lens to see how race can impact a worldview or how race impacts one’s reality (Howard, 2008; Henry, 1995). It is no doubt that race is at the nexus of American life as well as discrimination, especially for Blacks before the antebellum period (Medlin, 2007). However, what is so compelling about Lubertha’s account is that her story may have transcended race. Although born and reared during difficult times amidst poverty, a single mother, discrimination, and a paucity of opportunities, Lubertha achieved: college graduate and educated at an Ivy League. In telling Lubertha’s story, it was important to be objective as possible and to recount her exact words. The role of the researcher is key in not interjecting subjectivity, but rather sharing what was told; more so with this account, since Lubertha is the author’s great-aunt. Lubertha reviewed the account, word-for-word, to ensure its objectivity and truthfulness—and she did set the record straight in some instances.

Given her lived experiences, Lubertha would be at-risk according to today’s definition, with a very slim possibility to achieve. However, she rose! She did not inhabit a deep-seeded hatred or dislike for White America growing up. Perhaps, concentrating on becoming “better rather than bitter” was the panacea for her success. In particular, Lubertha recounted the following about her experiences at the University of Pennsylvania: “I did not experience or feel any racism or discrimination on campus...At first, I was the sole black person in a class
of White men...no problems...I do remember being in the cafeteria studying with my shoes off...they [white guys] kicked my shoes out of the door...I just saw that as a childish prank...I never met my advisor....”

**Conclusion**

While it may be a testament to Lubertha’s upbringing, she refuses to acknowledge any overt discrimination or racism that could have foiled her dreams. While she does admit seeing racial differences, living in poverty, and being relegated to a second-class citizenry, those instances did not thwart her desire to excel: “That’s how things were.” Given the social/cultural complexities in today’s world, with regards to racism, poverty, and discrimination, Blacks continue to face acts of injustices, yet progress has been made in race relations, employment, education, and in economics (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2012). Today, homes are led by single females where economic conditions are dire; the graduation rates are abysmally low for black males, and an alarming achievement gap (Bell, 2010). However, the aforementioned societal predicaments were ordinary during Lubertha’s time. In spite of her lived experiences, she achieved.

One of the most compelling assertions made by Lubertha was the following: “Education was not stressed; it was just a part of the program.” Superficially speaking, this statement appears pedestrian. However, it is profound. If something is part of your life and to be expected [“part of the program”] then, there isn’t a need to stress it! “Therefore, are we stressing too much about education?”

Lubertha recounts the following in her final remarks: Dr. Jeremiah says, “Never surrender—then he quotes: *Ps.42:11*—Why are you cast down, o my soul? And why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall yet praise Him, the help of my countenance and my God.”

*Lubertha passed April 12, 2012 in the State of Georgia—at the age of 88.*
The Botox of a Black Woman

Sylvia Lubertha Bell Edwards, M.S. Ed.

Woman of today have done their part; You filled the spot the Good Book wrought.

Yes, in the beginning, two were made, First man, then woman, to help balance with facade.

You black woman Have climbed the highest heights; Showing the world of your God given rights.

Of course, you smiled, When you could have cried. You climbed pathways steep and rough, Not paying attention to such ignorant stuff. Lions and woes of life may come today. No matter the fray, no matter stray, You got up the ladder to save the day. There were things to resent, yet, you made yourself a conqueror— and yet so well content. In sunlit circles, you took your places, Knowing that you weren’t welcome in those spaces; You chaired success in honored traces, And yet, You ignored those smothered traces, while foes turned kind with helpful faces. You could not have done this by yourself; You held fast not by oneself. On great shoulders, you have mounted, Through turmoil and stifle. You have countered. Proof of a superb life, Proof of your strength; Decades come—decades go Man’s decision and troubled us, so. Black get back Your brains too small, If you’re not too short, they say you too tall. Women like Chisholm heeded not what they thought. She moved up and proved us smart. Let’s go back to the cotton field, that white stuff wasn’t the only yield. We the black woman learned in codes. How we would meet Harriett and get up that road. Black is beautiful, we just didn’t think it ourselves Many Caucasians, rich and poor, lost her gender when they took us over. Black women are beautiful, can’t you see!
References


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