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Notes From The Field

It Is Well With My Soul: A Letter to My Nephew

By Linda Garrett*

The Black Panther Party (BPP or the Party)¹ was created to address the needs of oppressed people in marginalized communities. The organization was ahead of its time and was subjected to intense government repression. Media narratives about the Party would lead people to believe that they were violent thugs who sought to overthrow the government. The negative narrative is so prevalent, that a whole new generation of youth in marginalized communities will miss out on the truth about the work of the Party unless we begin to share the real story.

The following narrative takes the form of a letter to my nephew, Jay. While the idea of the letter comes from *My Dungeon Shook: A Letter to My Nephew*, written by James Baldwin (1963), this letter is different in that it is a vehicle to share the “Recipe for a Revolution” created by the Black Panther Party to a new generation. A generation who may not have heard of the Party, or who see the pictures of Party members and think the stories about them being miscreants who were out to destroy instead of build are true. It tells the story of two regular guys who wanted to make a difference in their community and created a movement that was embraced by marginalized

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¹ For more on the Black Panther Party, see here: <https://nmaahc.si.edu/blog-post/black-panther-party-challenging-police-and-promoting-social-change>

communities worldwide. The hope is that the narrative will inspire appreciation for the past sacrifices made by Party members, encourage further research, and galvanize a new generation.

*The very time I thought I was lost,
My dungeon shook and my chains fell off.*
(Baldwin, 1998, pp. 291-295)

Dear Jay –

As I begin to write this, I wonder where to start. There are so many things I want to tell you. I remember just how excited my sister was when she found out you were on the way. We all were excited. It had been a while since we had a baby in the family. You were so full of life and excitement; your smile lit up every room you entered. You were born with this natural ability to draw people to you. You are definitely an Alpha male. I have watched you charm people with just your smile and infectious laugh.

It has not been lost to me that you being a handsome, 6-foot-tall, African-American man with this ability to garner attention in every venue you enter may not be a good thing. There are those who see you and don't see the young man who loves his Granny and PaPa or see the Mama's boy who likes his Mama to fix his plate at family dinners. They see someone who should be feared because of the color of his skin or someone who must be up to something. After all, how did you afford that car? Certainly your Dad didn't buy it for you (but he did). Who are all those guys you are walking with? They must be a gang of some kind—certainly not your friends from the basketball team or the football team from your college. In this era, when there are those who would have the world believe we are post-racial, racism abounds. It is almost worse than in the Jim Crow era, because then at least people were out in the open with their bigotry, and you could easily identify those who were working against you.

A group of young men of color is always seen as a gang; they are always up to some kind of mischief. They can't just be on their way to an event together to have a good time. No, they must be about to rob somebody or shoot somebody; much like they believe everybody who speaks Spanish must be here illegally. It is a great weight for you to carry. You do not get to be you; you have a constant battle against the opinions and actions of others. Young African-American youth are constantly being asked to prove that they are not – in a gang, a thief, a rapist, a killer. They

are always guilty and have to prove they are innocent. When they are being harassed by the police, if people pass by, they always think, “They must have done something, or the police would not be bothering them. Officer Jim in my neighborhood is a really nice guy.”

In 2020, communities of color are occupied. So, even though you are taught in school that you are free, and that like every other American, you can achieve anything you want provided you are willing to work for it, and that America is a level playing field for everyone; it’s all lies. You are constantly judged by the color of your skin more than the content of your character. When I worked at an office that was near the county welfare office, I overheard many conversations about all my children, my ‘baby-daddies,’ my welfare checks and my EBT card.² I never once heard anyone say, “I bet she has three college degrees,” or even consider the fact that I do not have children or baby daddies or a welfare check or an EBT card. I was just going to work. Not that needing public assistance is bad; the notion that all African Americans are on it is what is problematic.

America is complex but has the capacity to be great if only the truth was paramount. Too often, a comfortable lie is more palatable to people than an uncomfortable truth. I continue to believe that the keys to changing the world are in the hands of young people. They have this innate ability to believe in and grasp the possible without being weighed down by what others say is impossible. Often, the push back you receive from others is unexpected, especially the force they are willing to exert just to stop you from making any changes to the status quo. Your ability to excel is weighed down by those external people who seek to limit your progress. That is not what I want for you. Sometimes those forces appear to be invisible, but really it is a systemic thing that is constantly working in the background to ensure that things don’t really change too much. The poor need to stay poor. The rich need to stay rich. Those in power need to retain that power. The price for change has to be so high that people are afraid or at least extremely cautious about even suggesting making a change.

There are those roadblocks that come into your path. Those things that will hinder you and limit your progress. Those things that are designed to make you afraid. Be fearless. I know that seems like a simple refrain,

² An EBT card refers to an “Electronic Benefits Transfer” card given to those on public assistance in the United States.

when really, we know that it is a challenge. But even if you are scared, even if you don't know the outcomes—pass or fail—do it anyway.

I am reminded of Bobby Seale and Huey Newton. Do you know who they are? They are the founders of the Black Panther Party. They met in college. Bobby Seale was fresh out the military, and Huey Newton, who was a few years younger than Bobby, possessed an unmatched intellect. It was the mid 1960s, the Civil Rights Movement was raging in the US South, but the Bay Area was a little different. Bobby and Huey were living in Oakland. They wanted to work on issues of racism, police brutality, and other things that were plaguing communities of color. They grew frustrated with the groups who only wanted to talk about the issues, but never actually do anything. They had made a point of talking with people in their community, getting a consensus of what the major issues were, and making sure they knew what the real needs were.

I know you are wondering why I am telling you this, but Bobby and Huey are worth you knowing. The media's narrative about the Black Panther Party paints them as thugs and hoodlums with guns, who wanted to overthrow the government and kill all White³ people. This is not true. I feel like if I don't share this story with you, you won't know the truth. You will see the pictures of brothers with guns and think that that is all there was to the Party. I want you to dig deeper. They loved and served the people and deserve to have their legacy preserved. Also, if I tell you and you tell your friends and so on, the legacy continues.

2 Kings 7:3-4 The Message

³⁻⁴It happened that four lepers were sitting just outside the city gate. They said to one another, "What are we doing sitting here at death's door? If we

³ Editorial note: in adherence with the style guide of the American Psychological Association, the IJHRE capitalizes all racial groups for articles, including Black, White and Indigenous. There has been general consensus for the capitalization of the "B" in "Black" with more debates around the term "White" versus "white." As scholar Eve L. Ewing writes (see [here](#)): "Language and racial categories have some important things in common: They are fluid, they are inherently political, and they are a socially constructed set of shared norms that are constantly in flux as our beliefs and circumstances change." We understand that language and conventions may change, and have decided at this moment in time, to capitalize all racial groups referenced in this special issue.

enter the famine-struck city, we'll die; if we stay, here we'll die. So, let's take our chances in the camp of Aram and throw ourselves on their mercy. If they receive us, we'll live, if they kill us we'll die. We've got nothing to lose."

Much like now, Huey and Bobby found themselves at a crossroads. They could let things continue as they were, or they could take action. If they did nothing, things would stay the same or get worse. If they did something, then there was a chance that things could get better for the oppressed people they wanted to serve. *They didn't have anything to lose.* You know I had to tie it back to the scripture.

The BPP started with the Ten Point Platform. It was composed of all the stuff that Seale and Newton learned from talking to the people in the community and also all the studying they had done on their own. Man, the Ten Point Platform was simple, direct, and amazing. Newton and Seale managed to find a way to list all the community's concerns in a very succinct way. After they finished with the ten points, they chose the Black Panther as their symbol, not because the panther was Black, but because they saw themselves as the Self-Defense Party and the nature of a panther is not to attack but to defend itself if it feels threatened.⁴

I believe that like Huey, you possess a natural leadership ability; you can reach the people and organize and make your community better. You may think that you are too young, but that is not true. Huey was in his early 20s when he founded the BPP. The first person to join the BPP was only 16 years old.⁵

As you look around, you can see that the police still occupy communities of color. People from outside our communities who have different relationships with the police pretend not to understand the plight of oppressed people in our communities. But they have driven through those occupied neighborhoods; they see, they understand, but they want to tell a different story. It is part of the oppressor's plan. I think part of our job is to wake them up, because this plan doesn't only oppress people of color, but it oppresses them as well. They think they are not oppressed, but they

⁴ The Lowndes County Freedom Organization (LCFO), also known as the Black Panther Party, was started by Stokely Carmichael and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee. The LCFO was also known as the Black Panther Party and had the panther as a symbol. Newton and Seale did contact Carmichael to get permission to use the symbol.

⁵ Bobby Hutton was the first person to join the Party. He was only 16 years old. He had worked with Bobby Seale in a job training program.

are just oppressed in a different way. Have you ever listened to Martin Luther King Jr.'s "March on Ballot Boxes"⁶ speech? In it he outlines how poor White people in these United States have been hoodwinked into thinking that Whiteness in and of itself is worth something. So, even though they may also be oppressed, taken advantage of and impoverished, they believe they are better because at least they are not Black. This blindness to their true situation makes them campaign against their own self-interest.

Please take every chance to tell your own stories. Name your own situations. Don't allow yourself to live down to the labels of others, but to live up to the visions you have for your own life. Don't let media depictions limit you. You can accomplish whatever you choose, just choose. Don't limit yourself by the opinions of others who think that as a man of color, your only option is playing basketball or football or rapping, and never encourage you to step out on your own and build your own empire. There are those that think you have to always work for somebody else, but that is not true; you can do something on your own. Don't even let my over-protective spirit hold you back from spreading your wings to fly and excel.

I may always treat you like a baby, but I know you are a man. I worry about how you will be treated when you are out in the world. Will they know you are the sweet baby who held your great-grandmother's hand and spoke softly in her presence? Will they know you are the loving grandson that stood by your grandfather and hugged his shoulder as he stood by the casket grieving the loss of his older brother? Would they know that you are my sister's only child who snuggles up to her and gets his feet or shoulders rubbed after football practice? Would they recognize in that smile your ability to light up a room? Or would they see a media-created predator who is there to steal, rape and kill? My overprotective side would love to lock you in a lovely penthouse apartment where you could see the sun, smell fresh air, but not go outside and be threatened by the boogey men in the streets. You wouldn't be happy, but you would be safe. I know that isn't realistic. I know you have to go out in the world. I know the world needs

⁶ In the March on Ballot Boxes speech, Dr. King shares a story from the book *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* about the Populist Movement, which sought to bring poor White and Black people together in the South. And how the movement was stopped when it was made illegal for Blacks and Whites to work together as equals. In effect, the Southern aristocracy blocked the growing movement and manufactured a false hatred between the races, just to maintain power and control the people.

you. I wish that the things out there waiting to harm you didn't exist, but they do. I guess it is my charge to equip you to face those things.

You know, you really remind me of Huey Newton; y'all are similar. Like him, you are tall, handsome, people are drawn to you; you have the ability to be comfortable in any situation, absolutely fearless. You possess this ability to be loyal and protective of your friends. One of the things that I observed about you as an athlete, you have this fierce competitive side; not that you alone made all the shots in basketball or all the touchdowns in football. You could rally your teammates to push through and get the win; so even though you had superstar moves, you did not have a superstar attitude. I can totally picture you as a grassroots organizer. I can see you knocking on doors, charming the grannies or chatting with the fellas while walking through the neighborhood; getting them to all rally around an issue, finding out their thoughts and opinions, getting work done to make the community better.

Making the lives of oppressed people better was the goal of the Black Panther Party. The founders, Bobby and Huey, wanted to build an organization that empowered the people in communities to be able to help themselves. The motto of the Black Panther Party was "All Power to the People," regardless of color.⁷ Too often, the BPP has been portrayed as a group only interested in issues that were of interest to the Black community, but really, they saw the work as broader than that; they wanted to help all people who were being oppressed, regardless of color. But that happens when you don't have control of your own narrative or how your story is told.⁸

This coming together of oppressed people was not a positive thing in the eyes of the power structure. Because what will happen if all the oppressed people realize they have power and start to work together? What if they realize that they have more in common than they recognize? They truly have the power to change how things are done; if they all registered and voted in every election, local, state and federal, reminded the politicians who they really work for—change can really take place. You

⁷ At a lecture by Bobby Seale at the University of San Francisco on February 24, 2011, he made this point. They were interested in serving all people regardless of color.

⁸ Party members were required to take part in political education classes with a long-required reading list. They also had to participate in training and fulfill other requirements before they could carry guns.

know, you can take the lessons learned by the work of the Party and implement it today and it would slide right in; it's still very relevant.

I often think about how many times people perceived you as guilty or criminal, just because you are Black. They did not see you as the only child of my sister, whose presence in this world made her eyes twinkle. They did not see you as a great grandson, nephew, or cousin. They didn't see you as a young man who would help an old lady take her groceries to her car or carry them up the stairs for her. They looked at you and saw you as a threat, someone to fear; they locked their doors and clutched their wallets. They did not see a person who has never had to worry about what he would eat or where he would sleep. Much like members of the BPP were profiled as criminals who were plotting to overthrow the U.S. government, even though there was no proof of such activity.

The BPP really were a band of men and women that varied by age and came from different economic and educational backgrounds who wanted to work together to make things better for those who were struggling under a system that did not value them. They wanted to be a part of a movement that was making things better for people who were most often silenced and ignored. They were keenly aware of what the laws of the day were, and of what rights they had, and the power of building a political network. I think it was the thought of this political network that made them so scary to those in power. And while the BPP was careful to follow the law, those in power had no trouble breaking the law just to ensure that the status quo was not changed. They were labeled by J. Edgar Hoover, Director of the FBI, as the "greatest threat to the internal security of the United States."⁹ They were a threat, not because they had guns, but because they had books. They were seeking to let the average everyday person know that they had rights and what those rights were; they made education a central part of their mission.

The Ten Point Program and Platform was something created by Bobby Seale and Huey Newton. As a document, on the surface it would appear simple; but if you really read it, in it is a document that simply and

⁹ The work of the FBI and their COINTELPRO operation is well documented in the COINTELPRO papers that were released to the public and analyzed in the book, *War on The Panthers* (1980) by Huey Newton.

succinctly addresses the issues of most concern to members of communities of color. The 10 Point Platform was:

1. We want freedom. We want power to determine the destiny of our Black Community.
2. We want full employment for our people.
3. We want an end to the robbery by the Capitalists of our Black Community.
4. We want decent housing, fit for the shelter of human beings.
5. We want education for our people that exposes the true nature of this decadent American society. We want education that teaches the true history and our role in the present-day society.
6. We want all Black men to be exempt from military service.
7. We want an immediate end to Police Brutality and Murder of Black people.
8. We want freedom for all Black men held in federal, state, county and city prisons and jails.
9. We want all Black people when brought to trial to be tried by a jury of their peer group or people from Black communities, as defined by the Constitution of the United States.
10. We want land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice and peace. And as a major political objective, a United Nations supervised plebiscite to be held throughout the Black colony in which only Black colonial subjects will be allowed to participate, for the purpose of determining the will of Black people as to their national destiny.

I know the first question you have: “What is a plebiscite?” A plebiscite is the direct vote of the qualified voters of an electorate on an important public question. In this case, the call was for all Black people to be able to come together and decide on their national destiny.

I don’t want you to think that the BPP was a perfect organization. They had their challenges. They were young, and the work they were trying to complete was challenging—add to that, the U.S. government was working constantly to disrupt and destroy the work and infiltrate the organization. There are not many who can explain what the weight of the U.S. government coming down on you feels like, but the members of the BPP can. This constant harassment served as a barrier to the Party being able to develop a way to fully “on board” its ranks and ensure that all the activities of the chapters were in line with the vision of the Party.

Recipe for a Revolution

One of the greatest things the founders of the BPP left for generations after to follow is a “Recipe for a Revolution.” First, expand your idea of what a revolution is. It is not always a forcible overthrow of the government or social order; it doesn’t always require violence. But a revolution can be “activity or movement designed to effect fundamental changes in the socioeconomic situation.”

It’s important that you know this isn’t an exact recipe; this is like if Granny was making biscuits. She does not measure the flour and the shortening exactly; her experience in baking allows her to eyeball the amounts. Like that, this recipe gives you the necessary steps, but how long is spent on each step may vary.

The Recipe: preparation, connection, love the people, validation, serve the people, validation, and evolve. I know what you are thinking: “Why is validation listed twice?” It is there twice because it is important to validate whether or not the work is on track and is really serving the people.

The first step is Preparation because if you want to lead, you must first prepare yourself. Take the time to educate yourself about the issues facing your community, learn about the systems that are currently in place and how they work. Before you advocate for dismantling something, be sure you know how it really works.

The next step is Connection. The Party founders took time before the BPP was started to talk to the people in their community. To find out what the people thought the needs were and what they thought they needed. They got to know the people. They built relationships. The people felt they knew them and that they knew what they were about. Seems simple, but often organizations skip this part and come into communities and want to tell them what they ‘really’ need.

The next step is probably the most important - Love the People. Of course, I will direct you to the Bible’s definition of love – Love (Agape) is patient and kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. Love never ends (1 Corinthians 13:4-8). Love the people means *all* of the people. How can you serve them if you do not love them? The sacrifices made by BPP members were many; it was

made possible because they loved the people and wanted to make changes that would make their lives better. You have to love the people you serve.¹⁰

The next step was Validation. After Newton and Seale finished creating the Ten Point Program and Platform of the Black Panther Party, they typed it up and made copies. Then, they took the platform to the people to ensure that it was on track with what the people saw as their needs. They shared it; they talked about it, and the community let them know that they were on track. The validation piece is important because you have to make sure that what you think the people want is indeed what they want. The Ten Point Platform of the Black Panther Party articulated perfectly what the people felt they needed. Sure, there are lots of different things the people needed, but each of those needs could fall under the umbrella of one of the platform points.

The next step is to Serve the People. Their idea to serve was a way to equip the community with the necessary tools to obtain the power to change their lives. Oppression and occupation of communities of color was routine; the people in those communities were under constant attack and control. One of the goals of the BPP was to educate the people to prepare them for revolution and equip them with the skills to obtain power. Their love of the people led to their service of the people. This love of the people is not a romantic love, but a desire to serve the people in such a way as to make their lives better.

The next step is Validation. The second round of validation is needed to ensure that the work that is being done is actually serving the people as intended. It is an opportunity to ensure that the work is doing what it is intended to do. Don't skip this step! It will ensure that the work stays on track.

The last step is To Evolve. Be ready for change. The Party had a process of constant evaluation that was their way of ensuring that their mission continued to represent the people they were serving. Don't be afraid to veer from the original plan if the needs of the people are dictating the change. Change is a part of the process. Change keeps you relevant to the people.

¹⁰ The Community Survival programs are documented on this website of the BPP Research Project, part of the Martin Luther King Jr. Papers based at Stanford University. Its goal is to provide a source of information for those interested in researching the BPP. <https://web.stanford.edu/group/blackpanthers/programs.shtml>

While I do not believe that the 1966 version of the Party would work today in its entirety, I do believe their “recipe” could be used to build a new movement to address the current needs of oppressed communities in this country. The Party did not outline this “recipe” prior to starting their work; however, this is what they did and what makes their work still relevant today. You know I would be remiss if I failed to recommend books to read: *Seize the Time* by Bobby Seale and *Revolutionary Suicide* by Huey Newton. Read both, start your preparation, read the recipe.¹¹

The Black Panther Party was an all-volunteer organization. People did not join the Party to get rich, but to serve the people. Sure, there were those who sought the Party out because the sight of Black men with guns, standing up to those in power, was attractive. But the majority joined because they wanted to make their communities better. They wanted to be a part of a solution to those issues that faced oppressed communities. They felt a responsibility to the children that would come after them to make sure they did not have to face the same issues as generations before.

Can you imagine if the Party had been allowed to carry out their plans without interference? If they were around to be positive role models in the community? If they were able to build the programs they planned to serve the people and those programs had been allowed to thrive? If the people had truly been empowered by their work, instead being fed misinformation by the FBI and the police.¹² The FBI declared war on the Panthers; they did all they could think of to discredit and destroy the work the Party was doing.

I wish I could tell you that things have changed. That the world you would grow up in is very different from the one that propelled Huey and Bobby to even start the Black Panther Party. But I cannot tell you that because I will not lie to you. There is this predominant lie that permeates the American narrative—one that says if you work hard, pull yourself up by your bootstraps, take responsibility for your own actions, that everything

¹¹ Another good resource on the BPP is *Living for the City: Migration, Education and the Rise of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California* by Donna Murch (2010), University of North Carolina Press.

¹² The FBI would routinely feed misinformation to community members about what the Party was doing, including telling parents that the free breakfast program was going to poison their children, etc. For more information, see: <http://radicalteacher.library.pitt.edu/ojs/index.php/radicalteacher/article/view/80>

will be OK, that you will be successful. This is not true. The Party wanted to take responsibility for their own communities and show the people their true power in this society. They were met with labels of invaders and criminals. They were met at every turn with forces that wanted to crush their movement.

The Party worked in their own communities, served the people in their own communities, passed out groceries, served breakfast to children, helped seniors to their appointments, helped families visit relatives in prison, opened medical clinics, gave away clothes and shoes, registered people to vote, had educational programs, and this was just the tip of the iceberg.¹³ How could this good work be seen as sinister by those outside of the communities the Party served? It is because they were Black. Racism has a longer history in the United States than the American flag. I would do you a disservice to tell you anything any different.

Everyday there will be somebody that will judge you by the color of your skin. It is a great responsibility that you will have to endure, that was also endured by your parents, your grandparents and their parents before them. I don't tell you this to discourage you but to let you know that in spite of this, the family was able to thrive. In spite of this, your great-great grandfather was able to become a school teacher after having being born a slave. This history makes you strong, you have to know that even with the odds against them, you come from a family that is filled with people who were able to overcome. Everywhere you turn, you will see people who attended college, you will see doctors, lawyers, nurses, and military personnel. You also know that one of the wealthiest people in the family did not attend college but instead had his own janitorial business. You can see people who can model for you how there is more than one way to be happy and successful, even if you were to choose not to finish college. Hard work is coded in your DNA.

Racism is the main reason that when the Panthers were targeted, the general public was not outraged.¹⁴ It is not the only reason they were targeted; a key reason why they were viewed as dangerous is because they

¹³ See *The Black Panther Party Service to the People Programs* by David Hilliard (2008).

¹⁴ See *War on the Panthers* by Huey Newton. The FBI under the direction of J. Edgar Hoover identified the Party as a threat and did all it could to shut down its operations. The FBI was particularly brutal on groups composed mainly of Black people, as noted in FBI documents.

questioned how power was distributed and demanded power for oppressed people. And when the government stomped all over the rights of Party members, those who should have been speaking up on their behalf, were silent because they too felt that Black men with guns were too dangerous.¹⁵ Local law enforcement, with the blessing and aid of the FBI, did all it could to eradicate the Black Panther Party.¹⁶ By the middle of the 1970s, they were able to neutralize large numbers of activist-focused Black men and women and remove them from communities. This chasm was soon filled with the growth of neighborhood gangs. With the powerful role models that the men and women of the Black Panther Party and other Black community groups virtually eradicated, and the influx of drugs into communities of color, gangs began to grow and become more violent. The positive voices in communities of color were being drowned out by the destruction of drugs and the violence of gangs.

I know you; you are wondering why I am writing this long letter to tell you about the Black Panther Party. After all, they started in the 60s but you were born in the 90s. Well, there is an old saying that if you don't know your history, you are destined to repeat it or even better, the African proverb: "Until lions have their historians, tales of the hunt shall always glorify the hunter." It is time the lion had a voice in the discussion. I want you to know about a group of young men and women, who were your age and who set out against insurmountable odds to work to make life better for those in oppressed communities. Young people who worked hard and risked their lives and thought it was their duty to serve. Who despite evidence to the contrary believed that things could get better and that they could make a difference. I wanted to tell you about people who not only talked about it but work toward it. I wanted you to know that they had allies of every race and from every walk of life who worked with them and supported their vision.

As I sit here, writing this letter to you, I imagine what communities of color would be like had the Panther vision been allowed to flourish. If they had been able to get community control of the police, if they were able to improve educational opportunities in oppressed communities, if they

¹⁶ See *War on the Panthers* by Huey Newton. The FBI under the direction of J. Edgar Hoover identified the Party as a threat and did all it could to shut down its operations. The FBI was particularly brutal on groups composed mainly of Black people, as noted in FBI documents.

were able to stop the exploitation of poor people by systems that failed to protect them, if they were to change the visions of themselves as inferior that people in oppression often held. How different would things be? How would things have been different by the time you were born?

I imagine that things would have been better. I imagine that the schools would have been better, the job prospects would have been better, I imagine that the Party would have made it known in oppressed communities that there are more ways to prosper besides basketball, football, or being a rap star. I imagine that if they were able to continue, their work would have had a positive effect on 'him.' I imagine 'him' at a BPP tutoring camp as an elementary school child or being mentored by a Panther as a high school youth. Either way, 'he' would have been changed. 'He' would have known that there are other ways to prosper besides robbery, besides the dream of a rap career. See, 'he' would have known that 'he' was indeed responsible for his neighbor. 'He' would have had visions of 'his' own life that did not include taking the life of another. See, on that fateful September afternoon, 'he' would have been busy uplifting the community, so 'he' would not have been available to take you away from us.

“It Is Well with My Soul”

Losing someone you love is hard. I will not sugar coat it. I remember a lot of things about September 14. I was sick at work. I had to leave my desk and go outside and get some air. I subscribed to Amazon Prime and watched Kevin Hart's "Seriously Funny." And... I got the worst phone call of my life.

In the days after that phone call, I did not sleep much. I had to leave my house and go home to my parents. My family spent lots of hours together. We talked but nobody said it. I prayed constantly. I knew that I would not survive without serious help. And to those who don't know, the Holy Ghost is a source of serious help.

One night, I had a dream about you, Jay. You were wearing a white robe; you had your signature haircut, that familiar twinkle in your eye, and you were singing, "It Is Well with My Soul." As I watched you, you were saying: "*It is well, it is well, with my soul.*" You sang the chorus a few times. I woke up when you finished singing, and all I could think was "Jay don't know that song," but the Bible teaches us that the Lord will teach us a new song.

I watched a lot of Hallmark channel and TV Land in the aftermath. And so many mornings, I awoke to the “Golden Girls” (the TV would be on all night). So, one morning after I had the dream, an episode of the “Golden Girls” was on, and somebody was quoting the “It is Well with My Soul” lyrics. I noticed but did not think much of it. Then, after that it was an episode of “Parenthood,” and the music track they played was “It Is Well with My Soul.” After that, I stopped believing it was a coincidence.

So, on the evening of the “Quiet Hour” service, I am sitting in the chapel of the mortuary feeling especially lost. Still in shock and disbelief. I am sitting in the row behind my brother. There are quite a few people there. The basketball team from your college is there. All these strong guys, trying their best to hold it together, while they sat, quietly.

The chapel had instrumental music playing, an assortment of hymns. I sat there, not really knowing how I was going to survive. My mind was racing. Just then, “It Is Well with My Soul” began to play. When it clicked in my mind, all of a sudden, I began to cry uncontrollably. You know, in the old Negro Spirituals, there is one that mentions “weeping and a wailing.” I was wailing. I remember reaching for my brother, who never moved. My eyes were slammed shut, and people were patting me on the back saying, “Just let it out.” It seemed like I cried for hours. I was just catching my breath and I could hear you, Jay, in my ear laughing at me, and you said, “Man, Lin, you scared off the whole basketball team!” and you kept laughing. I peeled my eyes open, and sure enough, the rows where the basketball team had been sitting were now empty. I almost burst out laughing. Can you imagine if I had started to laugh? Oh boy.

In that moment, I knew the Lord had been trying to let me know something. Jay, you are alright. It is well with your soul. In that moment, which is the lowest I have ever felt in my life, to be able to even think about laughing. It lets me know that the “Holy Ghost” is really a comforter—just like the Bible says.

I know that I don’t have to worry about you anymore. I know that you are well. I know that it is left to me to work to make the world I imagine a reality.

Love you,
Auntie Linda

Recommended for Further Study

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