

Appendix Five: Granny and I: Adversaries

My story *Granny and I: Adversaries* (shared below) conveys the mood of these changing times and spoke to my own growing radical consciousness, and of a signal moment in my lived experiences that contributed to the making and makings in the making of me. *Granny and I: Adversaries* is presented as my own reflection of my living in this period of my life. It is my coming of age story as I sought to be an influence in my own transformation and speaks of my distancing of my perspective from that of my grandmother. The perspective that I embodied that emboldened me to challenge my grandmother would shape much of my learning, living and working over a considerable period of my life.

The story *Granny and I Adversaries* was written to share who I am, why I am here, my vision at the time, the nature of my influence – what I wanted to teach, my values in action and to convey I know what you are thinking – in relation to the question – that I am often asked - do I believe in god. It is also a question that I ask myself and after reading the story *Granny and I: Adversaries* people often ask me that same question. So, I am not wholly going off on a tangent here, for I focus on the question of my belief in god on completion of the sharing of the story. Be sure though that *Granny and I: Adversaries* is also written in celebration of my 'becoming', my unique purposeful recognition of my grandmother, our 'to be' new found enhanced relational mutuality and in a form that seeks to represent the nature of my influence as a storyteller (my engaging dialogical praxis). Here is the story.

Granny and I (Adversaries)

"Gentle Jesus, meek and mild, look upon a little child" were the words that greeted me as I came through the front door. I thought to myself oh oh granny is at it again. This, of course, was not the first time I had heard these words, but

granny at prayer always did something to me. However, I could never fully understand, until much later in life, that the experience that I had considered a real challenge to my very existence was contrarily, Granny's motivation, motivating me to exist.

So, when granny was at prayer, I tried to make myself scarce, invisible and on this occasion I sought the sanctuary of the kitchen, after offering her the briefest acknowledgement. A slight raise of the hand, a gentle twinkling of my fingers, my eyes set firmly on the kitchen door and mind beyond this barrier, signalled my presence and disappearance, as I crept past her. My grandmother, it seemed, as if sensing my apprehension was also brief in her acknowledgement. A simple "yes son" was her welcome. I would never be sure though, whether this "sensing" was not just my imagination playing tricks on me or whether granny wholly with and in unity with her Jesus could only offer me scant attention.

When granny was at her prayers, it appeared as if some inner driving force orchestrated her every utterance and action. Prayers for granny had never been simply the mouthing of holy words. It was no passive affair. She was an active advocate of the Lord, a faithful servant in a total experience with him. "Umba bala kum shum sha bala ... Pity my simplicity, suffer me to come to thee", pierced the sedate, and distant stillness of my thoughts. My grandmother once again, as church militant, was about to invade. Her platform had been set, her propaganda had been powerful, her incantations had made her ready to face a most deadly foe, and indeed any foe.

Most deadly foe may seem as an exaggeration, but when one is aged twenty, on the central committee of the Black Workers Movement, one of the vanguard, and of Marxist-Leninist leanings, it really is not so difficult to see your grandmother, in her spiritualism, as the enemy. In fact, it appeared as a much more difficult task to determine who your friends were. When each person with whom you interact has to be analysed and designated, friendship is a luxury not to be afforded. One had to be vigilant, not be side-tracked, focused on revolutionary objectives and be prepared for the ultimate human sacrifice - death - in the interest of the poor and powerless, the masses.

The poor and powerless, who were they? In my mind, a seemingly endless sea of faceless, mindless people, who had to be cajoled and energised into doing something about societal conditions, which had relegated them to just bit players in an epic drama of classical proportions. A starring role awaited them. However, they had to gain an understanding of the part they had to play. The black workers movement were to be the scriptwriters and I one of the chief authors, in preparing the masses to let rip with their talents of destruction and usher in a new chapter in human history, when each person's life would have meaning and being a bit player would be a museum piece, a relic of an unjust society.

Granny with calabash in hand, filled with "holy water", appeared through the door as a symbol of "piety". She was tranquility personified. She seemed at peace in herself, and at one with her Creator, as she always did at times such as these. And she wanted to share herself and her wondrous qualities with me. It would not have been the first time, but of late, my enjoining with my grandmother had led to a great deal of self-searching and self-castigation on my part.

The drinking of her "holy water", the receiving of her blessings, and my submission to her will was not in itself unusual. However, where as a child I remember being in awe of my grandmother's ceremonies and being terrified into being good when she was at prayer. Of late, I had become more questioning, particularly as I was armed with a philosophy which depicted religion as the "opium of the masses".

In fact, my questioning of religion had happened much earlier. To associate the church with trickery, skullduggery and conspiracy is no easy thing, especially when one has been brought up as a Catholic. To move from faithful servant to the remonstrator of the church and its members, requires a change in outlook and behaviour, which is ironically, nothing less than a miracle. Education had been the foundation stone on which my opposition to religion had been based. It however was no overnight transformation.

I had long been aware of how a papal act had divided the world. How a priest Las Casas had engendered the enslavement of Africans. I had learned of the gory, sordid and indecent activities of popes (who could not err) and had been aware of the "bible and gun" strategies that had led to advent of colonialism. The real change had come though, when I understood how the masses had been hoodwinked. They were encouraged to concern themselves with heaven and to forget about earth; to reject material riches and be satisfied with spiritual wealth; to accept poverty as a blessing and feel sorry for those wealthy people who lauded themselves as their superiors. And above all, to remember their place in society for the "good lord made us high and lowly, and ordered our estate, the rich man in his castle the poor man at his gate".

Granny could not have had understanding of these things. She was so steeped in religion that her opiateness was not only an exemplar of classical conditioning. It was also an exemplar of operant conditioning. She needed to be demystified. She had to be told the truth. She needed to be made aware of how religion had subverted the rights of the people. Had deflected their energies and their will to fight for what was right. How the masses were being encouraged to do one thing and the church leadership was practising something else. Granny had to know she was wrong.

"Umba bala kum shum sha bala shhhhh, umba bala kum shum sha bala shhhhh ... Come my son".

The challenge had been offered. My grandmother is not an easy person to deny. She stood before me as formidable as ever. This was not because she was tall or strong in a muscular sense, for her physical appearance evidenced her advancing age. Granny was seventy years old and though many people remarked on how well she looked for her age and she did, it was not her physical appearance that made her formidable.

Formidable, how could an old woman beginning to arch, with ancient feet and overlapping toes, the results of breaks mended through the process of nature, bespectacled, of fulsome bosom and even more fulsome bottom, which pressured her knees into high energy activity whenever she had to lift herself into an upright position, present any other image than helplessness? Be sure though that on her face were the imaginary etchings of real character. There were lines on

which the spirits of the ancients were recaptured and in which her Africaness bore the most rich fruits. There were wrinkles that danced across her face in her every movement that recreated patterns reminding me that her history did not commence in the recent past. The camouflage of age though could not hide the beauty so apparent in her cultured features and embellished with her graying and long hair. Her eyes were as I remembered them, soft yet searching, smiling yet stern, cutting. She always wore earrings, but this rarely added a new dimension to her face. They simply blended in. Her nose was truly African, so too her mouth. And it is with that mouth of hers with which I begin the description of my grandmother as a formidable being.

Granny had always been good with words. She was articulate. She had a story for every experience. Had a parable for every message that she would wish to convey and a soothing word to temper every ache. She was a real sage. Her words were intelligent - filled with wisdom. She was a mother of mothers, a counsellor, an advocate, a preacher ... a JUDGE...a JUDGE.

Yes, a judge ... that was it ... it was her being a judge amongst her arraignment of skills that filled me with the most fear. She had known my innermost weaknesses. She knew better than I knew myself. She knew things about me that no one else did. She held secrets that were dear to me. She could judge me. She taught me right from wrong. She encouraged me to lead a good life.

She could judge me.

She had always been my personal assessor. As if this was not enough, I knew she was at one with her Jesus. I had known her no other way. As long as I could ever remember, the lord had been her champion and she his. She conjured and contorted herself into such a oneness with him that she spoke in "tongues". A language, as I understood it, that only the most revered servants of the lord could not only speak, but understand. Granny could speak and understand "tongues". She was an interpreter of lesser beings dabbings with the spiritual world, a rescuer of those who had been entwined in Satan's web and ensconced in a mental stupor.

She was the ultimate judge.

She decided who was on god's side and who was on Satan's side. She decided who was on her side and who was not. She decided who was good and who was evil. She was formidable. She could enjoin me. I had in the past felt like telling my grandmother that I did not believe in god. I believed in scientific socialism and that I would be hypocritical to continue drinking of her "blessed" holy water. Somehow, it only remained a powerful thought. My grandmother always overwhelmed me, made me acquiesce to her more powerful and strident will. This time though I would be ready. This time would be different. I could not continue being untrue to myself. I was committed to a revolutionary cause. I was committed to change." People like my grandmother were" simply in the way.

I had been defiant before. I remembered how in celebration of my victory in the 800 metres at my school sports day, dressed in a dashiki I had given the black power salute, mimicking Tommie Smith and Carlos at the 1968 Olympics. I remembered too, how I had defended myself and friends in court, arguing our

innocence, after being arrested for causing an affray outside Balham Tube Station. Furthermore, I remembered the march in Lewisham protesting against the National Front when the freeing of a fellow protestor being held by the police, led to the demystifying of 'police power'. That defiance would never leave me. I did not get married in a church. I would give my children African names and determined that for them, there would be no christening. They would have to make that choice.

I had to be defiant now in confronting my Grandmother. After all, only the week before I had received a standing ovation on African Liberation Day for delivering a speech which had shown the "unity of struggle" between the freedom fighters in Angola, Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau and that of the poor and oppressed peoples that the Black Workers Movement espoused to represent. I told myself that I too was formidable. My appearance was mature, though tender in age. I dressed sombrely, looked clean and moved with a purpose. A full beard masked my innocent facial feature. However, my pulping eyes decorated with long eyelashes always betrayed my youthfulness. People had always remarked on the character of my hands. That is, its softness and its lack wear. For many of them it was a sure sign that I had not done an ounce of hard work in my life. I always dismissed them with the contempt they deserved. My hard work had nothing to do with hands. It had to do with the mind. Those people would never be able to understand how much hard work is involved in coming to terms with the concept "dialectical materialism" or "negation of the negation". I made no apologies for the softness of my hands. Today, I said to myself, I would make no apologies for telling my grandmother I did not believe in god.

"Umba bala kum shum sha bala shhhhh, umba bala kum shum sha bala shhhhh... Huukum cha bala huukum shhhhh", incanted my grandmother, whilst sprinkling some holy water on me. It was icy cold. I steeled myself. "Waakum smaab waakum yaweh ... Drink some of this holy water son", granny continued.

I, I, I, can-not dr-ink it granny was my tentative reply.

Granny was swift and loud, as if sensing something different in our relationship, the result of my refusal to drink. Her "Yeeh challabee challabee yuukom Yahweh ... Challabee challabee", pierced my ears.

I continued stronger and in defiance stated, yet as quickly as the word could get out of my mouth. "I do not believe in god".

My grandmother seemed to have been knocked out her stride. However, she was reassembling her resources. She had not been ready for my challenge. She retorted at fever pitch, in a seeming frenzy, "huukum huukum juukum, umba bala kum shum sha bala shhhhh, shhhhh yuukom Yahweh.

Granny being ill at ease disconcerted me, but I had to get my point through. Granny I continued, I cannot be hypocritical. I do not believe in god and it makes no sense drinking your holy water".

"Satan ... Devil". Was her immediate retort, and I was wet from head to toe. My grandmother had thrown the whole calabash of holy water over my head. She

was no longer an old woman. She was now wholly spiritual and further incantations came thick and fast.

"Huukum huukum bala, huukum juukum bala, huukum umba bala, kum shum sha bala, kum shum sha bala". My grandmother caught hold of me and spun me fast. I was no match for her. She had regained her ascendancy. She had unleashed her spiritual force to the fullest. I had not expected this and felt that at any moment I would be on fire, with my flesh burning and me being banished to hell.

"Huukum umba bala, yeeh challabee challabee yuukmm Yahweh".

My grandmother's incantations appeared now more rhythmical, the connections with her source now firm. That tried and tested source of hers that I knew only too well. And as she continued to spin me, my memory was flooded with thoughts which reminded me of the full force of that source. I remembered how at beside, as a child, I prayed to the lord for good things for others and they got good things. I remembered how I prayed for gifts and I got them. I remembered how in the confessional box I asked for forgiveness of my every sin and was cleansed. I remembered how when I wanted to pass my exams, so that, I could attend teaching college, I knelt in church and prayed long and earnestly for success and I was duly rewarded. I knew the strength of my grandmother's source. It had been my source too. Now though, it was no longer so. My source now came from a knowledge of science. It exemplified modernity. It dispensed with the old, it had dispensed with god.

My conviction was that man could change his circumstance. There was no need to depend on some superior being or to wait for the expurgation of the living, in order to find peace. In order to find true justice, one did not have to wait on experiences in some fantasy world, in the far and beyond.

Man could do this on earth, if only he could rid himself of his obeisance to a god. Rid himself of those who had connived a parasitical existence at the expense of other persons. Man could exalt himself.

Granny with all her spiritualness, with all her incantations could not remove these thoughts from my head. I had faced her full force, I had been shaken. However, I had not fallen.

I would never know what impact I made on my grandmother. I felt though, that that day she realised I was formidable too ... that I had been a real challenge. She seemed to realise also that I too stood for the "good" and though I could not believe in her god, maybe I would need more time.

Her future smiles would communicate, to me, that she could afford me that time.

On my part I realised just how much Jesus meant for granny. It was her lifeblood. Jesus was in her every vein. I realised that day, more than any other day, that really granny without Jesus would not be granny at all. That granny without her Jesus would most probably have died long before the time that she did fly away.

The following day things appeared as they always were. Yet, they would not be as they were before. Granny and I would become lighter in our relationship, in my mind more real. However, many years later, in a most silent moment, filled

with thought, I realised that Granny and I, in our relationship had been freed that day to be who we are with each other, and appreciate each other in a new way. I also believed that if I had succumbed to granny that day, I may have died long ago.

To have one's beliefs made senseless and impotent is to render the belief holder inconsequential. To be of no consequence is to have not lived.

In sharing my story with wider CARPP community Jack Whitehead would share in emails the following:

12/12/02

Hi Ian - just in the lunch break with CARPP7, setting up my web-access to show the group some of the action research resources they can access from the other homepages section of my website. We are missing you, but do understand how important it is for you to take care of yourself. Many thanks for your story - I'm looking forward to sharing it with the group and with responding.

Love Jack.

13/12/02

Dear Ian - That's another powerful story from you on Granny and I. It came through at just the right time yesterday for me to draw attention to the way in which your story 'explained' your resistance and response to the experience of feeling that spiritual values and ways of seeing were being imposed on you. I'm looking forward to sharing the story with Jason and Keith on Tuesday. I know that the Doctor has insisted you take better care of yourself and I'm just wondering if there is anything that I might be able to do through our e-mail contact or through the phone that you would find helpful as you take your enquiry forward - do remember that anything you are experiencing and feeling that you are learning from can come into your enquiry.

Love Jack.

I really appreciated these comments from Jack, and his inspiration and care have been consistent qualities over the duration of my studies. However, I draw attention in the second email to his note 'I know that the Doctor has insisted you take better care of yourself ... do remember that anything you are experiencing and feeling that you are learning from can come into your enquiry'. I would take note of this council and seek to take better care of myself and advance my studies through enquiry into my condition. In the following Weave, I know Jack – I can hear Jack, I evidence how I

inquired into in my 'stuckness' in my learning, living and working which was a strong feature in the conditions that stimulated my ill-health, whilst in Sankofa One of the co-creators in the Sankofa Learning Centre on reading Granny and I: Adversaries would share:

Very powerful..... I felt such a fluidity and an urgency in this piece. On a level, I also felt a deep rage coming from you.

You have a very poetic, creative style of writing. The reader just wants to read on and on. I would have wanted to meet your Granny. It sounds as though she had a very profound impact on your life.

I'd like to read more about you and your experience with your Granny. How did she help to make you the person you are today?

What were your fears about your Granny's judgements?

What aspects of you could she judge that you would find difficult/painful and why?

Where are you now in terms of your belief systems about God?

I also appreciated these comments and was responsive the questions posed about my relationship with my granny. How did she help to make me the person I am, I share in the eulogy of her passing below. What were the fears about my granny's judgments was simply the 'power over' me that was her all-consuming authority. 'Power Over' involves an either/or relationship of domination/subordination. Ultimately, it is based on socially sanctioned threats of violence and intimidation, it requires constant vigilance to maintain, and it invites active and passive resistance. What aspect of me could she judge that I would find difficult/painful and why? The difficulty and pain that I felt was in relation to my perceived powerlessness in thinking that I had no influence on how I would be judged by my granny.

Where am I now in terms of my belief systems about God? Interestingly, many people have asked me this question after reading the story of Granny and I. Indeed, it is a question that I also have asked myself.

In terms of my own living narrative growing-up in Trinidad and Tobago until the age of ten I can appreciate a multi-religious influence. According to Census (2000), 26% of the population was Roman Catholic, 24.6% Protestant (including 7.8% Anglican, 6.8% Pentecostal, 4% Seventh-day Adventist, 3.3% Presbyterian or Congregational, 1.8% Baptist, and 0.9% Methodist), 22.5% Hindu, and 5.8% Muslim. A small number of individuals subscribed to traditional Caribbean religions with African roots, such as the Spiritual Baptists (sometimes called Shouter Baptists), 5.4 percent; and the Orisha, 0.1 percent. The smaller groups were Jehovah's Witnesses (1.6 percent), atheists (1.9 percent), or those listed as "other," which included numerous small Christian groups as well as Baha'is, Rastafarians, Buddhists, and Jews (10.7 percent), or undeclared (1.4 percent).

In *Weave Four* I informed on the loss of power in my Catholic influence, and now with my over 40 years of experience in the UK means church attendance is usually for births, marriages and deaths without prejudice to any denomination.

In the Caribbean on occasions I do attend church. However, my church attendance is a social affair (spiritual yes, yet non-religious) and I would attend with family and friends as something communal you do on a Sunday and make most of the opportunity to engage with people (some known and not known). Often visitors attendance at church would be announced from the pulpit as a welcome. In this way news carried to the wider community with the reference, 'You know who was in

church today'.

In my over 5 years of experience in Jamaica I attended church regularly, for some of the reasons above, but more so because that was the way of life of my extended family and the way for the majority of adults and children in the SOS Children's Village, whilst I was employed as the Director. My attendance would not be influenced by denomination, as I have grown to appreciate that one's spirituality is self-defined. Just as I appreciate and self-define my own spirituality, in that, it represents an inspiring quality that challenges me to live a good life and to act to live in life affirming ways, I can value how others self-define their spirituality.

Therefore, in answer to the question do I believe in God, what I say is this. I know there is a power greater than I am, possibly greater than all of us as a congregation, but my use of the word god does not help me to explain that power because it is so compromised by denomination. I know the power to be multi-sourced and I can see value in diverse faiths.

Hence, when I remark that I know the nature of those who embrace the diverse range of faith and worship, I am interested in how people are with me and others in their purposeful recognition, mutuality and dialogue. I am interested in stories that communicate the values in peoples' hearts, minds and action that values intimacy, celebrate human flourishing and a sustaining and sustainable universe. That is the way it is with me. That is how I try to understand what is going on around me. When I am at my best there is nothing I would do that would displease any god. Indeed at my best all that I do must include god for I would

be living in a blessed way. Later, I will inform on my embrace of The Paut Neteru and its initiation system proffering a path towards a Divine Self, as exemplified in the Tree of Life. However, this is not a religious journey. I say it is my own spiritual alignment with the African Voice and what is important for me in this embrace, is that it proffers a guide for purposeful living. It is with this thought that I return to the history of resistance displayed by the African Community and note some significant events in the 1970 and 1980s increasing protests.