

The Poetic Mission

Art II: Reviewing a Life, a Calling

by

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Among these senior words, this questioning and quieting narrative, art, and all its imperfections, contributed wonderfully to the defining history of my life. As a doer in this world, as a committed poet, political and cultural activist, educator, publisher, public intellectual, businessman, husband, father, cultural father, word-organizer, editor, institution builder, protector of children and pro-street-fighter, I have swum in an ocean not of my making. After over sixty-seven years of an imperfected backstroke, I realize the many countless times I have been close to drowning, only to emerge stronger in part due to the thousands of special and not so special people I have encountered in this life, in this struggle.

I am here because of poetry. Poetry from all cultures in its multitudes of forms, laced with abundance—word-play, rhymes and unrhymes, metered, unmetered and off-metered, lines and stanzas defined and undefined, packed with knowledge, information, laughter and occasional wisdom. I am here because of a patched-quilt of voices that directed my younger life and searching for all kinds of answers. Although I was surrounded by adults who could not manage their own lives, it was poetry and music that stopped me in my negative and ill directed tracks. Poetry and music slowly demanded that I change paths, contemplate the dangers before me with a limited understanding of the cultural forces that I was born into. These cultural forces were created to trap young people like myself, positioning in us a *can't* do philosophy that many carried into adulthood and for too many late eldership.

For me, reading and rereading and eventually studying the works of Wright, Hughes, Toomer, M. Walker, Brooks, Tolson, McKay, S. Brown, Bontemps, Hayden, DuBois, Robeson, A. Locke, F.M. Davis, Cullen, Frazier, Woodson, Garvey, B.T. Washington, Davis and Dee, Dunbar, Douglass, Malcolm, H.W. Fuller, Baraka, Karenga and countless others in and outside of my culture confirmed in me that any people who control and define their own cultural and political imperatives and as a result of such intellectual influences should be about the healthy replication of themselves and the world they walk in. Implanting in me the recognition that without art in abundance there is little abundance.

During the absence of love and grits, during the years of bottomless lies, legal betrayals and enormous deaths, without the maintenance and nurturing of early spirits that art mandates, my life would have continued to evolve around reactions to: the alphabet of hourly timecards, fast walking urban street double-eyed locating identity in wearing labeled clothes, multicolored fingernails and pants below the crack of one's ass. Without wonder words, involved music, inviting visuals and flying feet children will drink sports, rapper's realities, mall hopping consumption, twenty-four hour cable surfing, all representing debilitating and limited information or knowledge needed to grow a superior intellect. Art activates the mind, drives the spirit and gives a unique definition to the participant and the receiver.

Yet, what continues to energize these overworked bones are children of all cultures who have—for the most part—not been captured by the many demons, daggers and multiple predators that populate this earth. And the absolute necessity to listen to young people, their laughter, tears and loud silences continues to renew me.

But, quiet as it's kept, preceding all else, coming back to the stimulating juice that has fueled this life has been liberating language as poetry and ideas. Equal to poetry has been music and visual art all slapping sanity, Black perspective, a hunger for the unknown and a thousand questions into this yellowblack boy, teenager, young man, mature drinker of knowledge, and elder confirming and affirming that art works.

To call oneself a poet or artist like that of the Black preacher, primary family doctor, veterinarian, farmer, or teacher of any branch of knowledge and to function at the highest order honoring one's choice is truly a *calling*. We are, indeed defined by our yesterdays, our here and now and tomorrows. To claim this calling finally acknowledges and accepts the little appreciated fact that we—the poets, musicians, fiction writers, visual artists, playwrights, wood and stone carvers, photographers, quilt makers, idea people, artists of all disciplines; the real lovers of civilization and the exceptional children that are formed by it—that we are here to stay. We have come to *change the conversation*.

Especially and lovingly in this era of the first Black president, which I, as many of my generation clearly thought impossible, it is time to acknowledge that artists and their art and the demand on progressive thinking/acting that all good art requires played a pivotal and decisive role in making possible the moving of the first African American family into the white house. And, representing the best commentary from the choicest and least of us we continue to influence and inspire our country's wholistic journey towards the inclusive ideas of liberation. And, yes, for most artists there is no retirement.



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