

My Mama and the Invention of Herself

by Catherine Meeks, Ph.D.

True the Black woman did the housework, the drudgery; true, she reared the children, often alone, but she did all of that while occupying a place in the job market, a place her mate could not get or which his pride would not let him accept. And she had nothing to fall back on: not maleness, not whiteness, not ladyhood, not anything. And out of the profound desolation of her reality she may very well have invented herself.

—Toni Morrison

One hundred and one years ago, my mother, Malissa Alberta Jackson Meeks was born in a small Arkansas town. It was 1912 and there were not many people around, including her parents, who were imagining how life might progress for this baby girl. But the course that her life followed makes it clear that she came to the world with her own dreaming system which became activated early and carried her throughout her journey of inventing the life that made sense to her.

Educational opportunities were scarce in the early 1900s for women of any race and this was especially true for young black girls. So my mother and her sister, my Aunt Cecil who is still living and is 104, were sent to a little town about fifty miles from their home to the Dallas County Training School to continue their education. The quest for education never left Mama and though it took her more than eighteen years to finish college she stayed with it and graduated in 1964, the same year that I graduated from high school.

Perhaps this fact, more than any other, taught me so much about my mother and demonstrated a way to be in the world. Tenacity is the best word that can be used to describe the way that she approached every aspect of life. Though many times she lived a style of life that went far beyond tenacity, because her life repeatedly depicted the ability to get to the end of the rope and to tie a knot in it instead of letting go. Her basic motto was, “tomorrow is another day and we will see what it brings.” This attitude of tenacious hope helped her to spend eighteen years pursuing her college degree; it helped her to face multiple hardships during her life and to keep exhibiting an interest in others and a spirit of kindness.

In the past decades of reflecting on my mother and the expression of archetypal energy that I can see that she engaged, I believe that the virgin goddesses are most representative of her journey. Artemis, Hestia and Athena seemed to represent dominant archetypal energy systems in terms of the way that my mother went about living in the world.

Mama certainly sought knowledge all of her life because she was interested in the life of the mind though she would not have spoken about her thirst for it in that way. She was not merely seeking to become credentialed by getting her degree. Though having a degree meant that she would make better wages as a teacher, she was interested in learning. She was always seeking to know about



Malissa Alberta Jackson Meeks

things and how to make things work better. Had she lived in a different era she would have been a scientist or a physician because she was so fascinated with all of the information that she could gather about folk medicine and healing in general.

Though her opportunities for education were limited she took advantage of as many as possible regardless of the challenges. She would work in the field with my sharecropping father during the day and then pack my brother, two sisters and me in the car and drive to a nearby town to college extension courses at the end of the day. I was charged with babysitting while she was in the class. Along with this she took correspondence courses which were available through the mail. Again this work was completed after long hours of teaching and working in the field alongside my father and all of us. She taught school, took care of her four children, helped with the farm work, went to school herself and took care of her home.

Also there was a good bit of Hestia energy in my mother's life though she had little time to pay to aesthetics. But in spite of that she made beautiful embroidered dresser scarves, tablecloths and doilies for the house. She was less excited about cleaning the house than she was about it having something beautiful in it. She was clearly the main caretaker in our house and when she put her intention toward making everything ready for a special day or visitors, the house was almost unrecognizable.

The bed coverings that she had made, the pillowcases and other things to decorate were so delightful to us and in most cases a surprise because we tended to forget that we had seen them before.

Whenever she had a chance to beautify the yard, she planted verbena and zinnias, which had been her mother's favorite

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flowers. Though there was not much time for planting flowers in the yard because so much work was required for the garden and the cotton field.

Perhaps the huntress and protector, Artemis, ruled the most powerfully in Mama's life. She was always looking out for us and trying to get the resources that were needed to help make our lives better. The most vivid memory that I have about this is related to the meals that she prepared for us. There were so many times when it was no evidence of anything in our kitchen that would make a great meal and Mama would manage to create a banquet by the end of the day. This was especially true on Sundays. She would spend the better part of the day in the kitchen and by the end of the day there would be several pots of vegetables, dumplings, chicken which she had taken from own chicken yard and butchered, and always some kind of wonderful dessert. She invented desserts along with many other dishes. She is the only person that I know who made cantaloupe cobbles, potato pies from white potatoes and squash pie with sugar and in a crust. The most amazing one was what she called a butter roll. This was made from pastry filled with sugar, butter and spices with enough milk poured over it to make a syrup. It was one of our favorites. These were all her inventions which resulted from not having all of the ingredients that she needed to make a more traditional dessert.

She used the sacks from the flour, cornmeal and food for the pigs to make our clothes. My brother's shirts and dresses for my sisters and me were made from them and she enhanced these printed sacks with lace, ruffles, tucks and buttons. She made sure that we had all of the clothes that we needed though she sewed them herself. There was not money to purchase fabric so she recycled the sacks. The largest sacks were often sewn together to make sheets for the bed.

Of course this inventiveness was a mere continuation of what had gone on in her life for many years. Earlier in her life and during the depression she had traveled around the countryside teaching residents how to make bed mattresses. Many people were sleeping on straw or simply on the floor and the county extension service sought out folks to help show people how to make mattresses. Mama made the mattresses that we slept on as well and that is all that I knew until I went to college in 1964.

During the time that she taught school in a one room schoolhouse with grades one through eight in the room and a crib for me, she helped her students build a small lunchroom onto their building so they could prepare food. Since there was no money from the school district for this project she had to hunt for the resources and she managed to find them as always because it needed to be done and she had set her mind to it.

Alice Walker talks about the mamas who were like "head-ragged generals" going over unbelievable territories and overcoming insurmountable obstacles to get the books and other resources that their children needed in order to be educated and to have a chance at a decent life. The protector and huntress archetype which is depicted by Artemis characterizes them just as it does Mama. She did not always know everything that she needed to know. There had been some major deficits in her own educational life. But she was always ready to hunt for whatever would make life better for her own children and the children in her classroom.

In the late 1960s she left Arkansas to become a teacher in the Bakersfield, California school system after becoming the victim of the racist fueled firing of African American teachers in response to desegregation of Arkansas schools. Mama along

with several other teachers sued the district and won their lawsuit, but decided that they did not want any further part of that system. She was recruited by Bakersfield. This was not the best experience for her because she was not as prepared as she needed to be for the cultural changes and the ways in which education was approached. But she held on and managed to retire in the late 1970s. This was a continuation of her huntress spirit, which led her to seek something better for herself and to stay with a less than desirable situation because she believed that she could make the best of it. And she did.

It has taken me a long time to get to this place where I can reflect upon Mama with a sense of great appreciation and gratitude. This time has come because I have finally become able to let her be who she was instead of a collection of my projections. As I speak to her now in my mind and heart I can let her know how much I appreciate the person that she was and all of the ways that she has helped me to become the person that I am. She was always fascinated by my ability to speak and write. She was a writer too, though hers was done through writing long letters to friends and family. She had a Sunday afternoon ritual of letter writing which I will never forget. She enjoyed hearing tapes of my speeches and I wish that I had been a little more generous in sharing my spoken words. But I am glad that I did have a chance to share some of my speeches and she seemed to thoroughly enjoy having them.

In 1987 following the completion of my Ph.D. she sat holding my dissertation in her hands and said to me, "You had to know a lot of words to do this didn't you?" It was hard for her to imagine writing that many pages. But she had written so many more pages than that and though she may not have known some of the words that I knew, she had created living words by the way that she taught her own children and so many others to embrace life with hope, faith and an undying commitment to invention.



Lena Moorer (Catherine's sister), Catherine Meeks, Malissa Meeks