

LIVING THE DREAM

By

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The editor, Ewa Unoke, asked me to write a feature article for the e-Journal he produces at Kansas City Kansas Community College. We have collaborated on many projects together since we met because we are of like mind on many issues. One of those issues is human rights and civil rights for all people, both here in America and abroad. How we treat people, those who are like us and those who are different, ideally would follow the Golden Rule, but often times that rule has fallen by the wayside, much like the poor man who fell by the wayside in the Gospel of The Good Samaritan, who was passed by many before being helped by one who saw himself in the "other."

That is what this writing will be about. How to see ourselves in others. For those who are religious, like myself, how to see the face of God in others. I am a Catholic and was baptized at birth. By claiming my faith up front, you will know that my faith has played a major role in my life. It is my Catholic faith that set me on the path that I have never veered away from and that led me to meet all the people God has put in my path to help me do what I am most passionate about, bring people together who would most likely never meet otherwise. These same people are part of the Beloved Community here in Wyandotte County, people who are friends and neighbors and those who are friends and neighbors we haven't met---yet.

The members of our One Human Family are in our own households. They live in our neighborhoods---or they don't. They work where we work---or they don't. They go to the same schools---or they don't. They shop at the same stores---or they don't. They greet each other when out in public---or they don't. They enjoy being around each other---or they don't. They may never even think about it. They may pass up endless opportunities to meet their "brothers and sisters" who don't look like them, think like them, dress like them, eat like them, worship like them, believe like them, or be like them.

That is the whole point of diversity, being different in many ways except for one very important way--- we share a common humanity. We all want what is best for our children---a good well-rounded education, safe schools and neighborhoods, access to good healthcare, good mental and emotional health, enough food to eat and clean water to drink, decent livable housing, and equal opportunities to grow and become productive citizens, who through their chosen profession serve others, and make the world around us a better place. Perhaps I have left something out of this picture.

Freedom to be who we are, even if we are different? Freedom to walk down the street and feel safe? Freedom to not be followed when we enter a store or neighborhood? Freedom from harassment by store management and then arrested by the police when we are simply

sitting at table in Starbucks? Freedom to carry a cell phone in our grandmother's yard and not get shot in the back by law enforcement? The examples are endless. These are just some of the ways that we are not all treated equally and the Golden Rule is cast aside. This is our reality in the year 2018. This is what we have become. A nation who still lives in fear of one another. Despite our nation of laws and free elections and democratic values. One for me and all for none. Unless...

We make a different choice for ourselves. We can choose love over hate. Caring over indifference. Compassion over judgment. Service over doing nothing. Action over complaining. Sharing over greed. Setting goals over giving up. Having an inclusive vision over tunnel vision. Stepping out of our comfort zone over staying insulated from life. These are the choices that determine our ultimate destiny and level of happiness. The joy we give is the joy we receive. The blessings we share are the blessings we get back.

As Ewa Unoke and I believe---"I am nothing without you. You are nothing without me. We need each other to survive." In Nigerian Igbo culture, this is the concept of UBUNTU. It is similar to the Golden Rule. Both concepts work if we put them into practice in our daily lives. Not perfectly, of course, because all of us are flawed human beings. We all have our moments when we fall short of what we profess to believe.

I am a sinner. I am not and never have been a perfect person, a perfect wife, a perfect mother, nor a perfect grandmother. I have made many mistakes in my life that have caused me and those around me to suffer emotional pain that was not intended. I have had severe bouts of depression and anxiety and physical ailments that interfered with my ability to be the person God wants me to be. I still experience regrets for those things I did that God has forgiven me for in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. I still have regrets for those things I did not do that had a negative impact on my children. My Catholic faith has saved me in more ways than one. I just want the reader of this to understand that I am no saint---because some people, friends mostly, seem to think I am---which makes me chuckle.

Sainthood is the goal, but I am definitely a work in progress. I am trying to stay on the narrow path back Home to God. In the meantime I just want to do His Will. I want to serve God by serving others, especially those who are looked down upon because they are different. And finally, that is where my personal life story begins---with a life-changing experience.

When I was six years old, I entered St. Patrick's Catholic School as a first grader. Sister Mary Joan told us as we entered the room to sit wherever we wanted. I looked around the room and my eyes stopped when I saw a Black girl sitting in the back of the class. I made a bee-line to sit in the seat in front of her. It was one of those instinctual decisions kids make without knowing why. I do know that it became my first chance to make a friend with someone who did not look like me. I turned around and told her my name was Karen and asked her for her name. "Emma Ruth Jones, " she said, "Why are you sitting by me?" I was taken aback by her question, not knowing why she was asking it. "Why?" I asked. She said, "My momma told me

that probably nobody would want to sit by me." I was really curious then. "Why?" I asked. "Because I am Black." It shook my brain, what she said. I did not understand why that would matter.

I was completely unaware of what had been going on in our country for decades. I had no word to call it then. I just knew that I would never turn my back on someone because they did not look like me. If anything, that was what drew me to her. I told her that I did not understand why her mom said that and asked her if she would like to be my friend. She said yes.

My life changed in that moment of making my first Black friend. When I left the school after sixth grade we lost contact, but I still think of Emma Ruth often. I am grateful to God for asking me at the age of six to do something about the THING with no name I knew. It would become clearer to me as I grew in wisdom and knowledge. I figured it out and now call it by its real name. "RACISM." The thing that still raises its ugly head in America today. The thing that still divides us as people. It seems the thing I hoped and prayed was finally dead with the election of our first Black president, Barack Obama---racism---was just dormant all along.

I had allowed myself to believe that with the death of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (my personal hero) and the Civil Rights victories his leadership had made possible, both before and after his death, our country had changed for the better. Even though I could still see some evidence that racism still existed and had just gone underground. It rose up again for all of us to see with the "Birther Movement," and has now been made painfully obvious with the election of Donald Trump, one of the most outspoken leaders of that movement. The recent onslaught of White Supremacists and the Alt-Right and the KKK and the Neo-Nazi's who spout slogans of hate and threaten acts of aggression are shocking to those of us who have not seen such mass violence since the 50's and 60's in cities like Birmingham, Montgomery, Memphis, and all across the Southern states who believed in segregation of the races in every way possible. Not to mention the spate of individual acts of aggression toward people of color before and after that period of time. There are always ways to make sure that people of color realize that their very lives are at stake when encountering a policeman or officers who won't hesitate to shoot first and ask questions later. People of color risk arrest for crimes they did not commit and incarceration rates are increasing as a way to keep control of people whom some fear are taking control of "*my country!*" Our country?

We have a sordid history of genocide of the Native Americans whose country we took over. Then our history included kidnapping slaves from Africa, separating them from their families and their homelands, brutalizing those who ran away from plantations who used them for free labor. Slave owners/masters raped Black women for breeding purposes, to perpetuate more free slave labor without having to buy them at the slave market. Finally, the Civil War was waged in order to maintain their states' rights to treat slaves as less than human for the purpose of achieving wealth without slave-owners having to actually work in their own fields.

Then after the slaves were finally set free, they had no way to survive without the 40 acres and a mule they were promised, so many former slaves headed north seeking new opportunities. The KKK lynched thousands of Blacks for minor infractions intending to make sure they remembered they were "less than." Jim Crow laws segregated Blacks from whites on busses, in restaurants, in movie theaters, and at water fountains all across America.

I remember those times from what I saw on the news and even right here in Kansas City, Kansas. I was sheltered from a lot of it by my parents, but I knew about it because I had made friends where I worked who talked about their experiences, especially a young man named Ellis Robinson, who later grew up to become a pastor and NAACP leader. In 1963, I heard the words of Dr. King that spoke so eloquently about the very things I had believed since I was six years old. I was mesmerized by the Dream he spoke about. In 1968, I heard friends cheer joyously when Dr. King was murdered. It was like a knife in my heart. I wanted to die the day he was taken away from us, a country that needed him so badly. I vowed at age seventeen on April 4th, 1968, to keep his Dream alive in any way I could, for the rest of my life. Dr. King was a good Christian who loved God and all of us so much he was willing to give up his life, if necessary, for the cause of peace and justice.

"I just want to do God's Will. Like anyone I would like to live. Longevity has its place. But it really doesn't matter with me now. I have been to the Mountaintop. And I have seen the Promised Land! I may not get there with you. But someday we will get to the Promised Land! Mine eyes have seen the Glory of the Coming of the Lord!"

Dr. King said those words the night before his life was taken and God took him HOME. I intend to live out my promise to God, at age six--- and to my brother Martin, at age seventeen--until I die. I am willing to give up my life, if necessary, in order for America to wake up and realize that we need each other to survive. In order for that to happen, we must take necessary steps to get there. Some steps may be easy; some of them may be hard; some of them may be painful; some of them may be surprising; and some may seem impossible.

Like a shy girl from Kansas who grew up and found her voice around age 13 when I heard "I Have a Dream Today!" That step was easy.

Like a young teen who was thrown into a deep sense of loss when her role model, Martin, whom she had never even met, was taken from her and all of America. That step was hard.

Like a young woman who met the love of her life when he showed up across the alley from where she lived and won her over with a smile. He was a hoodlum her parents couldn't stand the thought of her marrying, but she did. That step was easy, too.

Like a young woman who bore seven children and who she felt she needed to put the Dream on hold in order to raise them, so she did. She felt some guilt about breaking a promise

to God. That's when the anxiety took over for a while. After a period of several years, God saved her from that burden. That step was hard.

Like a woman who did her best to raise her children to know right from wrong and found out that in some ways she had failed them. That step was painful.

Like the woman who went back to college as an adult and began a career as an addiction counselor at Bethany Hospital and found out that she couldn't save all the addicts and alcoholics and had to settle for some. That step was painful too.

Like the woman whose place of employment closed and she had to find another way to try to help others. So she got involved with the Intercultural Advisory Board at KCKCC and the KCK NAACP. That step was fulfilling and easy.

Like the woman who could never say no to a challenge that was totally in her wheelhouse, who decided to say yes when asked to run for a seat on the Board of Trustees at KCKCC and winning, quite unexpectedly. That was a surprising step.

Like the Trustee who had an idea about resurrecting a community-wide multicultural celebration that had languished in limbo for many years and was blessed to work with a former professor and mentor named Melanie Scott, who was Director of the Intercultural Center at the college in 2005, to revive that ethnic festival despite some pretty substantial odds---like some people saying "You can't do this." But we did--- and it was called "The Human Family Reunion." (It was an outgrowth of an idea created by Ed Chasteen many years before at William Jewell College in Liberty, Missouri and who was also the founder of HateBusters.) The Human Family Reunion was also a way to bring Dr. Martin Luther King's Dream to the people of the community that KCKCC served. That seemed like an impossible step. Melanie and I took it together. The power of one strong-headed woman can be amazing. The Power of TWO strong-headed women working together can turn a Dream into a Reality.

Since that time, the name of the event was changed to The WYCO Ethnic Festival/Human Family Reunion. Several years ago, we became WYCO Festival Inc., a 501(c)(3) organization. A board was formed and has grown to nine members who serve as the Planning Committee for the Festival. KCKCC continues to support our efforts by allowing us to use their facility--the Field House---as well as Building and Grounds who set up and take down the event, and College Security to make sure the event is safe. They supply the sound system and any electrical needs for the day. Our budget relies on donations to help pay stipends to the festival entertainment each year. It is a labor of love and commitment by many.

Dr. Curtis V. Smith, our Treasurer, organizes the entertainment program and secures the food vendors. He has the biggest responsibility as Operations Director. As President, I act as Marketing Director and photographer and videographer at the event. Since 2011 our team has given out two Legends of Diversity awards each year to members of the community who contribute to the cause we all share---celebrating our ethnic/cultural diversity in as many ways as we can.

Other Board members use their skills to make our event a success. Clarence Small, Vice-President, has been our Emcee every year but one---he is a blessing! Barbara Clark-Evans, the current Director of the College Intercultural Center, helps out as needed, as well as printing out our programs and managing the Children's Activity Corner. Dr. Hira Nair provides delicious food from India. Marquis Harris sits at the Intercultural Center table as their Coordinator, and Shai Perry sits at the KCKCC Art Gallery Table---she also helps with marketing on our WEF FB page. Bill Yeazel sets up the stage for the performances. Dr. Ewa Unoke, Professor of Political Science at KCKCC heads four tables in one, because he represents Nigeria, the Students for Global Peace, the Ralph Bunche Society and the Henry Louis Center at the College. He is also the editor of the e-Journal, for which he requested me to write this piece.

During the fourth year of my service to the Board I began to experience a physical pain throughout my body that made it difficult for me to serve out my term, but I powered through it, clutching a heating pad to my ribs to try to ease the pain enough for me to sit through board meetings and other multicultural events at the college that I had always attended before. Because of what was happening to me---let's just call it fibromyalgia---I decided not to run for a second term. I felt like I was dying. There were days when I was ready to die, because the pain was like torture. I tried to avoid being around friends and family and having them see me in such pain and feel their pitying glances and helplessness as they tried to make me feel better. I was in the throes of a deep depression and became anxious as well. I could not sit for long periods. I would get up and pace the room like a caged animal. I missed out on family functions because I was in too much pain to attend. I suffered for three years before my dear doctor tried a med that was around for 50 years as the solution to my problem. A monthly med that cost \$4 actually worked.

In a little over a month I was back to my old self. Serving the community again. Attending functions again. I got my life back. Praise God! (The one good thing that I was able to accomplish during my three year hiatus from humanity was that I finally read the Bible cover to cover for the first time in my life. It gave me a brief respite from the pain.) And as a side note, my healing came within a month of the timing of the death of my mother who suffered for years with Alzheimer's. I could barely make it through her funeral, but I know she understood why. I credit her prayers from Heaven for my recovery. There is no greater love she could have shown me than to intervene on my behalf with My Father in Heaven.

Since then I have learned why it was necessary for me to feel better. God soon asked us to take on the responsibility of raising four of our grandchildren. Their parents were homeless. Their mom suffered from clinical depression for most of her life. Their dad, our youngest son, had suffered for years with alcoholism and drug addiction, with the added whammy of mental illness---anxiety and bi-polar disorder that made it impossible for him to keep a job. There was some domestic abuse happening and after one unsuccessful attempt to try to step in and help,

their mom left their children with us for a few days with no communication, allowing the judge to give us custody for abandonment reasons. That was over four years ago.

Three of our grandchildren are still living with us, waiting for one of their parents to be able to get custody again. The oldest (age 16), was given permission to go live with his biological dad in September of last year. We still see him every Sunday, because he attends Mass with us and then spends time with us and his siblings.

When we received custody of the four grandchildren we arranged for them to receive the counseling they needed for PTSD. We also arranged for them to receive their education in Catholic schools and receive the Sacraments of Baptism, Reconciliation, Holy Communion and the oldest two, Confirmation. They were given some structure and rules they never had before. All seem to be thriving---physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. They have a grasp on a better future for themselves, as long as they don't fall into the trap of making bad choices, like their parents have done. There is no guarantee that any of them will escape the mental illnesses that plague some family members on both sides. Thankfully, for now they are doing well, and we have been blessed with the ability to step in and help out for as long as we are needed.

God asked us to do things that were unexpected as we planned our future after our own children left home to go out on their own---some prepared and some less prepared. The added responsibility has not kept me personally from doing what I enjoy doing in the community. The WYCO Ethnic Festival is still going strong after 13 years.

The mural that our friend Alexander Austin painted on the side of our garage over four years ago is a daily reminder that peacemaking is no small task. It is a lifetime commitment. Jesus gave His life for us. He is depicted first on the mural. His Mother, Mary, who said "Yes" to God's call to become the mother of His only begotten Son, Jesus, is depicted next to Him. Gandhi is next, who showed the world that peaceful protest works. Next to him is Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the Christian preacher who answered God's call to minister to all people. He followed both Jesus Christ's and Gandhi's example of teaching non-violence when he became a Civil Rights leader. His "Dream" would influence the hearts and minds of those who were prepared to march for peace, justice, equal pay, and equal access to opportunities afforded only white Americans at the time---like the opportunity to vote. Mother Teresa is depicted next. She showed us by her example how to care for the poor and sick who had no one else to care for them. And finally, "Madiba," Nelson Mandela, who by his efforts and willingness to be imprisoned for a cause that he believed in, was instrumental in abolishing "Apartheid" in South Africa. All these Peacemakers played a part in my life from childhood to adulthood by being role models for how to treat others.

Jesus, the Son of God, will always be first in my life. He saved me from the punishment due for the sins I have committed. He is my personal Savior and I owe Him my "Blessed" life. He has shown me that I must forgive to be forgiven. He loves me no matter what I have done or

neglected to do. His compassion is limitless. He understands my every thought and knows me like a brother, because He is my brother. His Father is my Father. His Holy Spirit is my guide to Eternal Life in Heaven.

I believe that we are all brothers and sisters created in the hues of colors that make us all look like the image and likeness of Jesus' Father---our Father too. Can you imagine what God must look like? And Heaven! How beautiful it must be? That is why we are here on earth, brothers and sisters. To help each other find our way HOME. A place where there is no war. No need for guns. No greed. No need for money. No hate. Just Love.

GOD IS LOVE! God loves all His Children. We are His One Human Family---all related to one another by the Grace of God. Something to think about.

Finally, I want to share some wise words I heard in a movie recently. It was called "The Same Kind Of Different As Me". The man whose life was changed for the better when someone treated him with love and compassion spoke at his friend's funeral and said, "You never know whose face God will be watching you through." So be kind to everyone. You never know the face that might show you God's Plan for you until He shows it to you. I love you, Emma Ruth Jones, wherever you are.



THE PEACEMAKER MURAL

By Alexander Austin

7910 Longwood in Kansas City, Kansas Commissioned Art to Inspire the Beloved Community to Live and Work for Peace



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