

## The Circle Will Remain Unbroken

Sankofa in practice by Deitrah J. Taylor

I am a public historian and dramaturg. I am called to hold the memories of my ancestors as well as the collective. I was four when my maternal Great Grandmother Rebecca Shipman died. She was 101. She had rheumatoid arthritis and was could no longer walk at the end of her life. At that point she prayed aloud constantly the prayer of the Thief on the Cross (Luke 23:42-43). Remember me Lord, Remember me. I clearly remember witnessing her act of faith which I have since discovered had a dual meaning for me and perhaps our family. Grandma-Great, as I called her, wanted Christ to remember her so that she would dwell in Heaven forever but I felt because I was such a small girl and one of the youngest people who could possibly have memories of her and carry her legacy forward, she was asking me to remember her, our whole family to remember her. Grandma-Great's parents were enslaved and later became landowners. I have traced our family to the Geechee coast of Georgia to 1870 using census records. It is safe to say I have strong Geechee roots. The street my mother grew up on bears the name Rebecca Street and it is intersected by Shipman Avenue.

A few years ago my mother a type one diabetic (Steel Magnolias) had a stroke and I became a caregiver at age 30. My mother was an English teacher and loved to talk but the stroke made telling stories difficult. I needed to remember. I decided to use my history degrees in service of my family so that I could follow the instructions of my grandma-great, remember. At this time death took several members of my family and my maternal cousins decided to make happy memories by arranging cousins trips. These trips uplifted my mother as well as I carried hugs, kisses, stories and pictures back home to her. After having consistent gatherings in 2019 we decided to expand our circle in 2020. Meanwhile I took a DNA test and continued to gather family documents including some stories my mother wrote about our family.

No one knew how COVID 19 would affect our circle because we did not know how long it would last. It was isolating for my mother, father and myself. No one could come to visit. My adjunct teaching position became virtual and my dramaturgy income ceased. There were no events to anticipate. Daily life settled into a solitary routine. As an introvert, I was shocked at the sadness I felt because I could not be around family and friends. Most deflating of all was the cessation of the cousins' trips. Some of our cousins fell ill with COVID and were able to recover. Others succumbed to other illnesses and our Earthbound family circle was broken. Mourning was solitary and distant.

Through the summer months, I had a quarantine birthday, protested the murder of George Floyd from my vehicle and assisted a recent college graduate with dramaturgy for a new play they hoped to produce. I also created an at home exhibit for the African American Association of Museums, and prepared to go back to in person teaching in September. I was afraid of catching COVID 19 and bringing it home to my parents especially because I am asthmatic. My mother's former colleagues (black retired teachers) blessed me with a face shield, hand sanitizer and spray to disinfect my belongings. I took showers upon entering our home from the classroom environment to prevent the spread. I phone banked for the 2020 election and voted absentee. Being a descendant of enslaved people, I had to find a safe way to vote in Georgia. I was able to walk my absentee ballot to the box. I did not go anywhere aside from work so I was still isolated and lonely. Voting and phone banking was the most social interaction I had during 2020. The state of Georgia elected two historic U.S. Senators and supported a

Democrat for President of the United States and a Black and Asian woman Vice President. I witnessed this history and will remember.

Several months later, the vaccine became available to medically fragile people, those over 65 and caregivers. This described all three people living in our household. Dad and I were wary of the vaccine that had been developed during a presidential administration hostile to Black life and people of color in general. What gave us a positive view of the vaccine was the lack of mask wearing, and social distancing by the public at large and the risk factor for either of us to infect my mother. Dad and I took turns calling the health department to schedule an appointment for the COVID vaccine. We were not successful. Mass vaccination sites opened in Georgia and all three of us were able to get a vaccine appointment. My mother now on hospice care at home is now safely vaccinated. We had no symptoms with the first shot. The second shot affected each of us differently. I experienced fatigue for a week. My Dad a day, and my mother slept for the better part of two days. We are all so very relieved that we were protected from the spread of COVID 19. During this process, my cousins were also getting vaccinated and we decided to have our first trip in April. I also reunited with one of my theatre friends the first week in April and we departed each other's company to join our families in coastal areas of the African Diaspora: Haiti for her, the Geechee Georgia coast for me. It was a joyous time indeed. The circle was becoming unbroken.

My cousins and I met at our ancestral home and I took my place as a she griot remembering Rebecca Shipman and sharing my research about ancestors, I did not have a chance to meet. Sharing information discovered from DNA results and beginning the process of bringing in newly discovered cousins in the circle. We travelled to South Carolina to the McCleod Plantation and remembered the collective ancestry of the Diaspora. The littlest cousins putting their fingers on the fingerprints left behind by enslaved children who made bricks. The act of remembering. We ate at a Black owned business and watched the Gullah/Geechee basket makers in the market. We then headed back to our ancestral home. We reunited with furry friends in the care of cousins. In the next two days we gathered, laughed and told many stories. We made plans for another trip to expand our circle. We remember. As a public historian and dramaturg, I have continued to grow professionally but nothing has compared to answering my Grandma-Great's call. There is a reason the Sankofa bird makes a circle when it turns into itself, a reason the ring shout is in a circle: circles are powerful and they move people forward. I believe if the ancestors know anything of our Earthly life from their vantage point in Heaven, they smile when they see us do the work of unbreaking the circle and expanding the circle. They as ancestral spirits are part of the circle as well. When we remember them, and love one another our circle will never break, but grow strong. My role as a griot is to see that the history passes forward and the circle remains unbroken. I will always remember.