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THE UNIQUE FEATURES OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN SPIRITUALITY IN THE CONTEXT OF CHRISTIAN HEALING

Introduction

The phenomenon of Christian spiritual healing as a natural quality of African-American spirituality is the essence of this essay. This spirituality is given prominence in Archie Smith's *Navigating the Deep River: Spirituality in African American Families*. Smith's treatise "is about remaining hopeful."¹ His central metaphor is the well-established imagery in African-American culture of the river (or water). Such insight is evidenced when referring to Africans' survival in the "diaspora," especially North America. Scholars in African-American studies, especially in theology, biblical studies, and history have used this imagery: Cain Hope Felder, *Troubling Biblical Waters*²; Vincent Harding, *There Is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America*³; Howard Thurman's *A Track to the Water's Edge*⁴; and his mystical reflections in *Deep River and the Negro Spiritual Speaks of*

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¹Archie Smith Jr., *Navigating the Deep River: Spirituality in African American Families* (Cleveland, OH: United Church Press, 1997), xvi.

²See Cain Hope Felder, *Troubling Biblical Waters: Race, Class, and Family* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989).

³See Vincent Harding, *There Is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992).

⁴See Howard Thurman, ed. *A Track to the Water's Edge: The Olive Schreiner Reader* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973).

*Life and Death.*⁵

Understanding the struggles of Black folk in America permeates these sources. The emotional depth is apparent: scholarship and passion are held in tension. Smith's intended audience is essentially family therapists who work with Black families to pursue health and wholeness. *Navigating the Deep River* advocates Christian spiritual healing as a resource, enabling Black people to understand this healing as an authentic reflection of African-American spirituality.

What is Christian Spiritual Healing?

Christian spiritual healing is faith in God as revealed by the Holy Spirit in Jesus Christ as the primary catalyst for healing disease—emotional or physical. Prayer and Christ's presence change sickness to wellness. Christian spiritual healing is modeled on the healing ministry of Jesus as a gift of grace: “. . .for he [Jesus] had cured many, so that all who had diseases pressed upon him to touch him.” (Mark 3:10 NRSV) Basically, the practice involves recognition of God's presence in Christ having supremacy over a particular ailment and positively impacting healing on that affliction. In the biblical context, healing faith is bestowed upon those who are called as his followers: “. . .and he [Jesus] sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal.” (Luke 9: 2 NRSV) We can perceive Christian spiritual healing in African-American spirituality as biblical faith, a form of actual practice understood as an “appropriation of spiritual resources.”

Most scholars are hard-pressed to define spiritual healing

⁵See Howard Thurman, *Deep River; and the Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1990).

precisely. This phenomenon of Christian spiritual healing (as opposed to a generic spiritual healing) emulates the biblical context and the model of practice demonstrated in the healing ministry of Jesus and his followers. The distinction is significant in the context of African-American spirituality. To evaluate the experience requires clarity about one's intentions. The most basic aim, of course, is to demonstrate a medical/bodily change that can be measured as is indeed sometimes the case. However, healing can only reasonably be evaluated when the goals/desires of the "healee"⁶ (the person seeking healing) are understood. The desire may be to eliminate fear, revealing a more courageous way to deal with the challenge. This may result in a more dynamic witness of the faith in Christ. For some, the desire may not necessarily be a cure but healing in terms of positively affecting the manner in which the "dis-eased" condition is managed. For others, the desire is complete eradication of sickness.

The phenomenon of Christian spiritual healing manifests itself from a "dis-eased" state to one of health, especially the physical body. It is precisely Christian when Christ is preached and faith in him is acknowledged. John Wilkinson provides a biblical understanding of Christian spiritual healing in *Health and Healing*: "In general. . . healing is carried out in the context of preaching and teaching. . . healing as an activity of Jesus is practiced in illustration of his preaching and teaching rather than as their text and occasion. . . Physical healing was not the primary purpose for which Jesus came

⁶The terms "healee" and "healer" originate with Francis Geddes, a retired United Church of Christ minister and spiritual director with the Lloyd Pastoral Counseling Center, San Francisco Theological Seminary, San Anselmo, CA.

and it is for this reason that preaching and teaching receive the primary emphasis in the gospel records.⁷ Christian spiritual healing, therefore, does not take as its focus the healing of something. Instead, this healing recognizes an opportunity to glorify God by witnessing to Christ. In the pursuit of healing, something more is at stake.

Dianne Hales' article, "Can Prayer Really Heal?" (based upon one of the largest randomized studies ever conducted on spiritual healing by Mitchell Krucoff of Duke University School of Medicine) describes the effect of prayer on healing:

Nobody knows what really happens in human beings when they pray or when you pray for them in terms of the physiological mechanisms involved. But it's not uncommon to be clueless about mechanisms. We cannot explain why beta-blockers reduce death rates after a heart attack either, but we know that they do. . . . But we can know enough, based on solid research, to say that prayer, much like exercise and diet, has a connection with better health.⁸

Alita Anderson's book, *On the Other Side: African Americans Tell of Healing*, is highly recommended. Ms. Anderson explores the phenomenology of healing and the interconnectedness between the creative and the healing arts. *On the Other Side* is a collection of oral narratives: ". . . [It] presents the stories of a diverse group who all have one thing in common—a profound experience with the power of healing.

⁷John Wilkinson, *Health and Healing: Studies in New Testament Principles and Practice* (Edinburgh: Handset Press, 1980), 39.

⁸Dianne Hales, "Can Prayer Really Heal?" *Parade Magazine*, 23 March 2003, 5.

Each individual's account is woven together with the verses of African-American spirituals that punctuate the story. . . ."⁹

Tools for Spiritual Healing

Smith highlights "three interpretive tools. . . important for understanding families in their relationship to culture, spiritual resources, and themselves: . . . dimension of depth, reflexivity, and sense of agency."¹⁰ Spiritual healing provides dimension of depth, being part of the spiritual legacy of African-American families—especially when the white medical establishment refused to provide proper care for Black families. Spiritual healing accommodates reflexivity because it encourages individuals and families to engage in meditative self-correction, seeing themselves not entirely dependent upon questionable external resources. It is an opportunity to contemplate what more can be done when seemingly nothing more can be done. Finally, spiritual healing confers a sense of agency, providing self-motivation to face insurmountable challenges "with the belief that one can produce an effect or influence an outcome."¹¹

The Community and Social Justice

Smith is acutely aware that African Americans do not live in a cultural vacuum. In keeping with his metaphor, they are but one stream flowing into the American river: the mainstream is the dominant culture, operating historically

⁹Alita Anderson, *On the Other Side: African Americans Tell of Healing* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), [back cover].

¹⁰Smith, *Navigating the Deep River*, xxviii.

¹¹Ibid.

and presently with racism as a reality. This being the case, the first significant characteristic of African-American spirituality is its need to bind the community of Black people together as a shield or buffer to face the onslaught of racism. The mainstream seeks to "divide and conquer" while Black folk continue to struggle to keep the family together. "Mutual care is a practice that counters. . .the collective struggle against race discrimination and other forms of violence. . ." ¹²

Smith gives a roll call of past African-American leaders who used mutual care to combat the evils of the American mainstream. "They struggled for the good of all the people, and not just for themselves. Theirs was a struggle for inclusion and wider justice."¹³ It is the biblically rooted mind-set for social justice that positions spiritual healing in the African-American context, not for a singular/individual body, but for the collective body of people. In the best understanding of Christian spiritual healing, the focus is witness to a definitive power that triumphs over all perceived evils of social injustice. Therefore, if spiritual healing is merely to rid one of sickness, it does not conform within the context of African-American spirituality. Healing is mutual care, shielding one from the broader socio-economic diseases, e.g., the on-going challenge of racism in the United States, which breeds socio-economic injustices.

The Divine Source

The second characteristic of African-American spirituality emphasizes that it is not accomplished by human will based upon the correct mental/emotional attitude. Instead, it

¹²Ibid., 13.

¹³Ibid.

comes from the biblical understanding of the God proclaimed by Christ and affirmed by scripture as the Divine Source. "That all the people of the earth may know that the Lord is God, and that there is none else." (I Kings 8:60 KJV) Smith states that

[h]ealing, itself, is something that comes from beyond us and is an experience of the human-divine relationship. The Divine Spirit is the bearer of healing. . . .Some people have been culturally designated and trained to mobilize curative resources, such as the shaman, the medical doctor, the priest, or the psychotherapist. Curative and corrective measures also come through other kinds of relationships, such as friendship or the teacher-student relationship. Therapeutic communities (such as the church, synagogue, mosque, or rehabilitation center) exist and provide resources necessary to mobilize therapeutic change.¹⁴

The power to heal comes from the Divine Source itself; the practitioner is only an instrument for the healing purpose. According to African-American spirituality, the one who practices healing is secondary to the One who makes healing possible. In other words, the practitioner of spiritual healing uses a spiritual gift. "Now there are a varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. . .to another the gifts of healing by the one Spirit . ." (I Corinthians 12:4, 9 NRSV). The focus always remains steadfastly on the giver of the gift, i.e., the Divine Source: ". . .the same God who activates all of them [the spiritual gifts] in everyone." (I Corinthians 12: 6 NRSV)

¹⁴Ibid., 9-10.

This does not diminish the responsibilities of the practitioner. Perfect love comes only from God who made perfection known in Jesus. All gifts are intended "[f]or the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ." (Ephesians 4:12 KJV)

The place of practitioners in African-American spirituality needs to be recognized. This requires not only acknowledging the biblical mandate for healing but also to cultivate healing practitioners in the Black Church. Moreover, it entails the reaffirmation of all those with the gift but who may be too timid to accept it. Not only is their biblical mandate in the church, but also there is a critical social need to promote spiritual healing in light of the existential plight of African Americans.

Social Justice to Social Transformation

The third characteristic of African-American spirituality, contends Smith, is concerned with more than an individualistic sense of personal salvation simply for the sake of fairness. Such a view is primarily limited by a capitalistic worldview endemic to the "larger river system" of American society. African-American spirituality opposes a materialistic worldview for the individual and that person's larger community. All peoples, in a spiritually-based understanding of the self and world, are recognized as subject to the Divine Power. Regenerative social justice is enlivened when moving toward social transformation as a necessary goal to redeem the world and humankind. Spiritual-mindedness is crucial for the future development not only of African Americans but also for all Americans and the entire world.

A materialist reading of social change would trivial-

ize or ignore the fact that inner, spiritual transformation is an inseparable part of social transformation. The ongoing struggle for social transformation must touch the spirit and attitudes of individuals as well as humanize the workings of social institutions, [which contribute to]. . . a self-perpetuating cycle of joblessness, teenage pregnancies, out-of-wedlock births, female-headed families, welfare dependency, and serious crime, which leads to frustration, despair, violence, and early death.¹⁵

Smith bases this third characteristic on interdisciplinary research, reflecting the need for African-American spirituality to be viewed as a resource for helping others, especially "the truly disadvantaged" who have been "left behind in the mid-century civil rights struggle."¹⁶ Thus, this thrust embraces social justice as it moves toward social transformation within the socio-economic global environment of the human family. The healing of the individual body enfolds the healing of the body of the world.

The emphasis on social transformation significantly distinguishes Christian spiritual healing in the context of African-American spirituality by its forceful approach to social change. In other words, Black people seek spiritual healing not just for their individual needs but for the corporate need of the larger community, recognizing sickness in its systemic nature. Effective practitioners of Christian spiritual healing do not view this as individualistic self-absorption to seek a miraculous cure: "If healing is not limited to curing, it includes the possibility of cure, and moves beyond it. . . .By

¹⁵Ibid., 24-25.

¹⁶Ibid., 24.

God's Word we are made whole now and for all eternity. That we are a part of something larger than ourselves and far more gracious than we imagine is healing news. . . ."¹⁷ In African-American spirituality, this "something larger than ourselves" is concerned with impacting the currents of the "larger river system." Consequently, spiritual healing in the African-American spiritual context embraces not materialistic/individualistic concepts but "cosmological ideas."¹⁸

Cosmological ideas are intrinsic to African-American spirituality in moving from social justice to social transformation. Melva Costen regards these ideas as "prevailing African cosmological views": "The cosmos, God's divine creation, is understood as a whole unit or body that is alive, sacred, and the foundation of religious values."¹⁹ In African-American spirituality, spiritual healing seeks to reconcile the individual/physical body as well as the "divine creation" or the body of the physical universe to God.

Consistent with this characteristic, Smith interprets the African-American pastoral theologian Romney Mosely's "two ways a Christian might respond to life's contradictions." This positioning of spiritual healing coincides with Smith's characteristics of African-American spirituality: . . . "to approach the contradictions of life and find meaning through acts of self-giving and through solidarity with others, especially the oppressed. This is not an individual act of self-sacrifice. Rather, it is a radical commitment to build up a new kind of community through repeated acts of self-giving. Such

¹⁷Peggy Schultz-Akerson, "What Do We Mean by Healing?" *Lutheran Partners* 11, no. 1 (January/February 1995): 15-16.

¹⁸Smith, *Navigating the Deep River*, 30.

¹⁹Melva Wilson Costen, *African American Christian Worship* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), 17-18.

acts join with the acts of others. Together they form streams of transformation."²⁰

In this regard, Smith makes a dramatic mention of the pioneering work in African-American pastoral care therapy by Edward and Anne Wimberly who "link counseling strategies to the wider social system."²¹ By so doing, Smith maintains the necessary interdisciplinary approach which African-American practitioners of spiritual healing must use. This practitioner cannot employ a religiously conservative approach for spiritual healing but instead engages the essentials: the Bible as foundational and the Christological faith as central, employing the work of interdisciplinary scholars. As an example, Smith acknowledges Cornel West as "theologian, philosopher, and cultural analyst."²² This interdisciplinary understanding that spiritual healing in the African-American spiritual context is concerned with the physical body of the individual, the community of the individual, and the whole world, intrinsically linking the individual and community.

The Spiritual Refugee

The fourth characteristic of African-American spirituality highlighted by Smith is essential in understanding the symbiotic relationship between African-American spirituality and the practice of spiritual healing—"the spiritual refugee." In referring to this group, the ailment of the individual is inextricably linked to African-American society in particular and American society overall. Thus, spiritual

²⁰Smith, *Navigating the Deep River*, 31-32.

²¹Ibid., 32.

²²Ibid., 25.

refugee is “analogous to those who have been uprooted or have left their spiritual home in search of a new one, generally because they have been persecuted. They seek refuge from persecution in another place and are in need of security, safety and comfort.”²³

Never has this been truer than in the case of African-American gay and lesbian Christians—truer still in the case of African Americans living with HIV/AIDS. Journalist Lori Robinson, in a popular Black magazine targeted to the African-American young adult middle class, reports a tragic situation in “Ignorance Is Not Bliss: Debunking AIDS Myths”:

Still, African-Americans are direly misinformed. . . . As a result of widespread denial, ignorance and other factors, HIV/AIDS rates are higher for African Americans than any other ethnic or racial group. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in 2004, African Americans were about 13 percent of the population, but represented 49 percent of new adult AIDS diagnoses. From 2001 to 2004, Blacks were 51 percent of new HIV diagnoses. Out of all females diagnosed with HIV, 68 percent were Black. In 2002, HIV was the number one cause of death for African-American women ages 25 to 34.²⁴

Robinson goes on to report that the myths surrounding HIV/AIDS have been tremendously difficult to combat. For example, it is a myth that a minority of African Americans

²³Ibid., 36-37.

²⁴Lori S. Robinson, “Ignorance Is Not Bliss: Debunking AIDS Myths.” *Heart and Soul* 5, no. 6 (June/July 2006): 54.

become infected with HIV through homosexual sex. Among African-American men diagnosed with HIV from 2001 to 2004, 51 percent contracted the virus in ways other than sex with men. Heterosexual sex resulted in infection for 78 percent of HIV-positive Black women, and drug injection for another 19 percent.²⁵

The spiritual healing of these spiritual refugees takes into account the oppressive environment of the American mainstream and the schizophrenic milieu of the Black Church. The Black Christian practitioner of spiritual healing heals not just the physical body of the individual but the institutional body of the Black Church, which has contributed to the tragic situation pertaining to AIDS or stood silent in unfortunate fear and/or ignorance. For indeed, Robinson states that Phil Wilson, "founder and executive director of the Los Angeles-based black AIDS Institute, the only HIV/AIDS think tank in the U.S., focused exclusively on African Americans" points out that ". . .the belief that only gay people get AIDS continues to linger because of the stigmatization of sexual diversity. . . .Wilson is calling on Black leaders and organizations to make HIV/AIDS a main priority."²⁶ Naturally, this includes the Black Church.

Smith has ". . .argued that historically, spirituality has been the greatest resource for African Americans in times of trouble. Therefore, therapy cannot be divorced from the spirituality of African Americans. It is a resource to be tapped."²⁷ What is strongly argued here is that spiritual healing cannot be divorced from the essential practice of helping African Americans tap into spirituality as a resource. The neglect of

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Ibid., 54-55.

²⁷Smith, *Navigating the Deep River*, 34.

spiritual healing, for whatever reason, can no longer be tolerated, maligned, or casually considered, especially in the empirical understanding of the Black spiritual refugee: many have been ejected from the Black Church because of patriarchal power conflicts and others because of “sexual and/or spiritual abuse.”²⁸

The many others include Black children in the foster-care system, Black ex-convicts, and the cosmopolitan African American who, given the nature of African-American spirituality, remain intrinsically spiritually-minded but reject uninformed Bible reading or conservative theological interpretation of Jesus’ ministry. In Christian spiritual healing, the early Black Church understands “all God’s chillin’ got shoes”; and thus, no person no matter the disease, economic class or lifestyle is to be shunned, discriminated against, and worse of all mistreated. “Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow-citizens with the saints, and of the household of God. . .” (Ephesians 2:19 KJV)

African-American spirituality is unbiblical and contrary to authentic Christian spiritual healing if it discriminates under any guise—social, political, economic, or religious.

So Jesus called them and said to them, ‘you know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognized as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.’

²⁸Ibid., 38.

(Mark 10: 42-45 NRSV)

The many include the spiritual refugee. African-American spiritual refugees seek and are in need of spiritual healing, particularly if they have been unwelcome. The African-American spiritual refugee ought not to be ignored: "The deep river of African American spirituality in which they have been immersed will remain wherever they go."²⁹

Advocating Spiritual Healing in the Black Church

Christian spiritual healing in the context of African-American spirituality, gleaned from *Navigating the Deep River*, upon which Smith advocates his dominant theme: ". . . that historical memory, the legacy of the slave's religion, and the present-day struggles of African Americans form a continuous stream of spiritual experiences and are resources to be tapped and augmented."³⁰ Among these resources, the resurgence of spiritual healing has its rightful place. This advocacy can be an important aspect in African-American spiritual resources because "A central theme in African American spirituality is agape love. It is the radical idea that God sides with the oppressed and works for their freedom; and there is nothing that can separate the believer from the love of God."³¹

Practitioners of spiritual healing in the Black Church are needed to actualize African-American spirituality, providing a healing consciousness, fostering hope, and contributing to physical well-being. Those burdened by sickness may be

²⁹Ibid., 41.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Ibid. 92.

oppressed and often desire spiritual healing in addition to therapeutic counseling. Christian spiritual healing is a practice in the spiritual resources of the African-American Church. Especially, it is conducive to African-American spirituality as manifested in *Navigating the Deep River*.

Both African-American spirituality and Christian spiritual healing share a cardinal principle: "One infinite God. . . unifies [all humankind] and nations; constitutes [the family of humankind]; ends wars; fulfills the Scripture, 'Love thy neighbor as thyself'; annihilates pagan and Christian idolatry—whatever is wrong in social, civil, criminal, political, and religious codes; equalizes the sexes; annuls the curse on [humankind], and leaves nothing that can sin, suffer, be punished or destroyed."³² Authentic Christian spiritual healing asserts that the image of all human creatures can only be as God: whole, complete, harmonious, and fully reconciled to God through Christ. African-American spirituality promotes all humankind in the image of a loving God; and in that image, healing from sin as well as disease is possible.

Two Advantages of African-American Spirituality for Therapy and Black Church Leadership

African-American spirituality advocates competencies in therapeutic work by marriage and family therapists. Two advantages are selected that seem to be the most helpful for Black-church leaders as well as therapists—both advocating the practice of spiritual healing.

Number 1: In African-American spirituality, a cadre of

³²Mary Baker Eddy, *Science and Health with Key to the Scripture* (Boston: The First Church of Christ Scientist, 1875), 340.

healers has emerged who facilitate different forms of healing. The need for healing stemmed from institutional racism and its attitudinal effect of Nihilism, especially in postmodern African-American life. A shared commitment for the person in distress melds the roles into a force for a noble cause. Ancient healers such as witch doctors, medicine men and women, faith healers, or shamans critically intervened in the social context to provide hope and offer strategies of transformation. They shared a common belief that the Spirit of the Divine Other reality permeated everyday life, and sought to meld spiritual and material resources in their solution to an existential crisis.³³ In the era of postmodernism, some of the functions may be rightfully out-of-place. A variety of roles to help those who are in need of healing, however, yields an indispensable cadre of leadership—the therapist and the practitioner of spiritual healing.

At crucial times, people in stress do not need unnecessary conflict among help providers. The recognition of a faith healer, along with a therapist and a medical doctor, can be a bridge. Smith asserts that in the case of a social-service agency “[m]uch of what they do bridges the role of teacher, family therapist, and social worker.”³⁴ The ministry of a practitioner of spiritual healing can strengthen the bridge and thus be a useful tool for the church and the therapeutic community service providers. The Black Church need not be ashamed of its legacy which lifts up God when all hope is gone or its faith conviction that “Jesus is a rock in a weary land”—especially when that “weary land” is an incurable disease. Therefore, a reaffirmation of the spiritual gift of heal-

³³Smith, *Navigating the Deep River*, 102.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 104.

ing, the ministry of the spiritual healer and the hope they engender can be a bridge among the therapist, and the Black pastor, or religious professional.

Number 2: "Secular" professional health providers (social workers, marriage and family therapists, clinical psychologists, addiction specialists, physicians, and pastoral counselors) ask a fundamental question in working with Black families. The issue cuts across disciplinary lines, pinpointing central realities in understanding African-American spirituality: "In this light, what do today's caregiver need to know about tapping into the spiritual resources of African Americans and other families?"³⁵

If the caregiver lacks an understanding of the Black religious experience, an answer to the question from a person knowledgeable about spiritual healing could stimulate awareness about non-material values that many Black people esteem. A provider could appreciate a simple "prayer request" for healing, and the "secular" health provider can recognize faith as a spiritual tool for healing. The answer enables us to relate more meaningfully to an African-American suffering with sickness. The veracity embodied in this answer is independent of the religious background of the helping professional. "While spirituality is not an explicit part of their [therapists'] work, it is implicit in their manner of working with people. Theology and spirituality are not part of their professional training. . .but still arise in their work with families."³⁶

Conclusion

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Ibid.

Smith concludes *Navigating the Deep River* with the admission that “the whole journey to the sea cannot be seen. What we see is limited by past experiences, our present standpoint, and the anticipated future. And the relationship between what we can see and know is never settled. Therefore faith and trust, courage and risk taking are required for this journey.”³⁷ When a person is battling a life-threatening illness, time stands still in the moment of pain. At such times, Black persons find comfort in knowing that through it all “God is still good all the time and all the time God is good.” This affirmation rings true with a feeling of “faith and trust” even if not theologically clear. Black spirituality is so woven in the soul of Black folk that it runs like an unconscious stream of water flowing in a desert of fear.

We can understand the metaphor of the river as the river of faith, a current of water called spiritual healing, offering a stream of courage in the midst of demoralizing health risks. In the indefatigable religion of Black folk there are many streams which flow to God. For indeed theirs is “[a] religious belief system that emphasizes spiritual values such as agape love, scripture reading and meditation, private and public prayers, song, and nurturing relationships [which] would appear trivial in a secular society that is driven by greed and selfishness, and that measures human worth in monetary terms.”³⁸

This is not true for African Americans. They, in their soul, are stirred by the profound belief in God, and the river flowing to God will send a current of water to lift them up. Spiritual healing is as much apart of the legacy of hope for African Americans as the choir singing “Amazing Grace,

³⁷Ibid., 140.

³⁸Ibid., 125.

How Sweet the Sound. . . ." Now is the time to present spiritual healing as a stream flowing in the river toward God. Therefore, let us offer this practice once again to the Black Church—one of many rich religious resources and biblically-based spiritual values empowering Black folk in America throughout the century.

Smile Forced Upon You

I want to remember
The dimple in your left cheek
Dancing with your laughter
And the way your lips
Curl upward in surprise

The sun kissing the freckles
On your nose, your hair
Unruly and untamed

I want to recall you
In the photo from
Summer '94
Sand in your short,
Complaining of mosquitoes
Laughing all the same

Not your face caked
With your own blood
Twisted in agony
Surprised to be dying

I want to remember
The you I knew
In family albums
At reunions
Sitting on the edge
Of your seat, telling stories

Not the you in this casket
A smile forced upon you

Smile Forward Upon You

How Sweet the Sound—
 that hearing as a means
 Therefore let us
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