

Jane Wilburn Sapp

Autobiography

I grew up in downtown Augusta, Georgia. I lived in what they called “the Bottom,” and that name was meant in every sense of the word. The Bottom was populated by working people, poor people, people making it as best they could by whatever means they could. If I could capture the Bottom on film, I would do it in black and white. Color couldn’t capture the essence of that place – I don’t know why. Maybe because that’s the way the world was back then.

Downtown Augusta was primarily black. There was a scattering of whites. They owned stores, Laundromats. They looked at us with such disrespect. If you looked in their eyes, you could see they didn’t see us. We were not individuals, we were one entity to them: those people who don’t have money, those people who owe us money, those people from whom we can’t collect our money. The superintendent of our schools couldn’t even bring himself to call us Negroes, he called us “niggras.” He didn’t see us. He had no sense of our souls, our passions, our potential, our needs. He typified the people in Augusta who held economic and political power.

I refer to growing up in Augusta as being nurtured in the womb of the black community. I had a great sense of safety. There were always people who would look out for me, protect me. Even the people who lived more in the shadows of community – the bootlegger who lived next door, the prostitutes who lived around the corner, the local number-runners – there was still a degree of respect from those people for all of us. I always felt that they too were looking out for us. There was a lot of caring in the Bottom, a willingness to share. We took care of each other.

I always felt like there was a lot of knowledge in my community. It seemed like there were people around who knew how to do many things. I remember when I was in

Africa, I had that same sense. People who had never been to school yet had skills. They could fix things. You need wiring, you could get someone in the neighborhood to come in and do the wiring, do some carpentry work, fix the car, the television, the washing machine, the plumbing. For me it was a neighborhood full of knowledge, full of people who knew how to do things, how to make things happen in their lives.

People helped one another not only because they knew how, but because they wanted to. I felt there was this wonderful sense of being enlightened and engaged. The humor, the wit, the willingness to participate, and the level of collaboration between people seemed to me to be at a high level. That was powerful, and I miss it. It was as engaged as people can be with each other, and as engaged as people can be in life, in the art of living. People were able to endure adverse situations and still live, still be human, still be alive, still find some kind of joy in life.

The intense, blatant, flagrant presence of racism and segregation in the world in which I grew up so disturbed me because people couldn't see – they weren't interested in seeing – the potential that was there among us. I often asked myself, "What would be if so-and-so who can fix things had gotten real technical training? What would happen if these people who think so deeply and so analytically about the world and its issues and government policies had the opportunity to hold political office? I have always hated wasted human potential.

The church was the key institution, the main educational institution, the main cultural institution, and also the main political institution. That's where people gathered. Socials were held at the church. Meetings, social and political, were held at the church. Think of the Civil Rights Movement. The church became that place where you could deposit everything – your hopes, your dreams, your anger, your frustrations. It was the one institution that we owned. We didn't own the schools, we didn't own the banks, we didn't own a store, but we owned that one institution.

Music was a very important part of the church that I attended, a place that was like my second home. The music spoke to the experiences in our lives. When we sang words like, “My soul looks back and wonders how I got over, how I got over, how I got over,” we were posing questions: How did I get over? Why am I still standing here? Why am I still alive? Why am I still sane? Why am I still healthy? How did I get over? How did I stand the test of all the trials that could have destroyed me?

There were other songs. “His eye is on the sparrow.” And then some people would improvise: “His eye, you know, if His eye is on the little ol’ sparrow, then I know He watches over me.” Words like that gave you strength. Or the song, “If I had my way, if I had my way, I would tear this building down. Lord, Lord, I would tear his building down.” Well, yeah. I feel that way too. It was a way to say, “I’m angry. I’d tear this system down if I had my way.”

Our churches were centers for hope and empowerment and learning and manifestations of the talents and resources of our community. And there’s one other thing to say about the black church – the whole spirit of the church was about action. It wasn’t enough to just sing the songs, you had to act on the songs. Everything said had to demonstrate your commitment. When the minister was preaching, he needed to hear folk from the church shouting, “Amen! That’s all right!” If there wasn’t enough participation, the minister said, “Well, if you can’t say anything, if you can’t say amen, then just wave your hands.” You had to show emotion, show that somehow you were willing to act on what it was that you were committed to.

When I joined the church, I couldn’t just walk up and shake the minister’s hand and say, “Yes, I’m ready to join the church.” At least that wasn’t enough for my family, especially my grandmother. She wanted me to have a “sign” or some sort of spiritual revelation that my life had changed. When she was growing up, you had to go “seeking.” You would go out into the woods and stay and pray and meditate and seek and search until

you found your “sign.” And in those days you came before a committee of the church and told them what was revealed to you in a vision, what you were feeling, and you talked to them about how you felt changed, before you were allowed to join the church.

When my grandmother was alive, and I was in the process of joining, I had to find a “sign.” I had to demonstrate to my grandmother that I had truly been changed before she would let me join. That’s what it was about. You could not be the same as you were before. You walked differently, you talked differently, you thought differently.

I translated those lessons as I became more political. When one has become committed, when you have decided to walk the path of justice and freedom, then something inside of you must fundamentally alter the way you see, think, and move in the world. You are not the same after you’ve made that kind of commitment. No one can be, if the commitment is real. That’s what, to me, was the greatest power of the traditional church, the church that nurtured me. You had to show your commitment.

Black churches have changed – not all of them – but we have changed, the society has changed. People have stopped seeing the church, and rightly so, as the only place one can turn to for political information, social gathering, that kind of thing. The church’s role has become more limited to spiritual giving and nurturing. In the process of trying to redefine itself more spiritually, the church has redefined itself more religiously. It’s gotten more denominational, more about the doctrine and the interpretation of the Bible – and who’s right and wrong about it. When I was growing up, spirituality and faith were another source of liberation. That’s what it was about. It was about how to get free. Faith and spirituality were powerful resources for eliminating things that were oppressive.

I met my husband when I was in high school. In the ninth grade, my eyes started to deteriorate and I needed glasses. When I told the teacher that I need to sit closer to the blackboard, she moved me from where I’d been hiding out in the back of the class (because I was very shy) all the way to the very, very front. I moved right in front of Hubert. The

first thing I remember about him was that he made me laugh. I was constantly laughing. The only time I ever got in trouble for disrupting the class was when I was sitting in front of Hubert. He had this running commentary about everything. So it was through his humor that I knew Hubert was a soul mate. I love to laugh. I really love to laugh. If you want to get close to me real quick, make me laugh. Hubert did.

I found I could share things with him. Beneath his wit, it was also clear that Hubert cared deeply about people, and was very sensitive. I liked that a lot about him. He was the kind of person who would never hurt anybody. He was a gentle caretaker of the human spirit.

Hubert told the teacher who ran the debate team that I was really good and should be invited to join. Of course, who knew I was anything because I never spoke up in class. But I guess he gave her quite a recommendation. She insisted that I be on the team, to the point of threatening to dock my history grade if I refused. I was furious with Hubert! It was a long time before I could speak to him with a civil tongue. I was so angry. But then I got to like the debate team.

I was the one who gave the summary at the end, after the rest of the team had made their points. It wasn't until later on that I realized that's a strength of mine, that I am able to hear lots of different points of view and absorb the information for the purposes of a summary. I'm not good at details, though. As soon as someone says, "Tell me specifically," I go into a knot because I don't remember the specifics, but I can remember the essence. I hang onto the essence of a situation, of a story, of an interaction.

So that summary has become me, and the more I think about it, the more I think that that is what the artist does for us, is to give us a summary of an event. The visual artist gives us a visual summary of images. The singer gives us an audio summary of sounds and words. To write a song, you can't say everything. A song has to be a quick, intense glimpse. The poet and the songwriter in me want to grab the essence, let you see the soul

of something.

I remember the first time I did speak up in front of a group. It was in college, during my sophomore year. The war was going on, and all the demonstrations in the South during the Civil Rights Movement, and someone had the idea that class should be suspended four days for a school-wide discussion of these issues. We would have forums, a march, presentations, workshops, that sort of thing.

Well, I went to all of this because I was very interested in what people had to say, and also I had a lot of thoughts and ideas about it, which I was not presenting. I was just listening and having a discussion with myself. Then we had this big forum, the whole school was there. Three or four people presented their ideas on a panel and then it came time for discussion. The kind of racism that I heard coming from that group that day made me so angry that before I knew it, I was on my feet, and commenting point by point on the racism I had witnessed. And I remember that afterward there was this moment of silence, and then big applause. When I got back to my room there were wall-to-wall people inside. I could barely even get to my desk, they all wanted to continue the discussion I had started. And that was where I found my voice.

I was at school to study music, but it was around this subject that I started to struggle. I found that there were differences between the music I had grown up with and the music at the college. Where I came from music was something to be shared. At college, music was competitive: music was performed before a jury and judged by the professors. It was important to pay attention to the written page. There was little improvisation – a challenge for me.

It occurred to me that I should be quite honest with the department. I told them that I didn't want to give up my music the way I knew it, and asked if I could do both: learn music the way they wanted me to, yet keep the music I'd grown up with.

So I developed two voices. One was the voice of the music I learned at college, and

one was the voice of music I'd had all my life. The faculty viewed my talents as something exotic. They would ask me to demonstrate my two voices. They'd trot me out like a dog and pony show, and I would sing both gospel and European. I thought it was unfortunate that they still declared the European tradition better. I thought it was just different from gospel. I wondered why, if I could stretch to have more than one voice, the department couldn't stretch to value more than one musical tradition.

There began my quest for the connection between culture and the empowerment of people. There had to be a way in our institutions and in our society to honor the differences among us. I thought about this particularly when I was working in the college's music library. I would look around at all of these books written on European music – its history, analysis, the development of its form, structure, process, technique. And I thought, suppose we had these kinds of resources on African-American music? The power and dominance of European music didn't lie in the fact that it was better, but in the time and energy and resources devoted to its history, analysis, perpetuation and celebration.

When I went to graduate school, I was interviewed after my first semester by a world famous musicologist on the faculty. I was delighted to learn from him at the beginning of our meeting that it would be a dialogue between us, rather than a one-sided grilling. So he asked me a question about the music of Mozart, and I responded to it. Then I asked him a question about the music of Ray Charles, and he became annoyed with me. He asked me a second question about European music history, and then I asked him a question about Aretha Franklin, something about the social conditions that gave rise to the music she sang. By the time we got to the third round, he said he didn't want to go on. He told me that African-American music wasn't serious. I said, "Why? Who decided that? How did they decide?"

Our discussion got very heated. I asked him why I needed to know something

about him, while he didn't need to know anything about me. I said we were both here, and we were both making music. He told me that he wanted me to leave, but I said I didn't want to leave until he answered my question. And do you know, he threw a book at me?

Well, the long and short of it was, I finally got a faculty hearing on the issue. With the support of other students who had petitioned and then chosen me as a spokesperson, I addressed the entire graduate and undergraduate faculty of the music department at UNC.

I presented them with a four-year program of African-American music – history, theory, everything. I said that theoretical principles of how chords work and move are as present in African-American music as they are in European music. The purpose of theory is to understand that music has logic, I argued, and then I went to the piano. I played a piece by Schumann, and then I played a gospel song, demonstrating that it was the same progression of chords, and that either piece could be used to teach the theory or logic of music. The result of the hearing was that I ended up on the committee to hire the first black faculty member of the department. Later, in my community work, I would ask, Who are the people who are not here? Are they not here because they don't want to be here, or because they weren't invited?

After college graduation (undergraduate), I had married Hubert and returned to the South. I'd been part of the NAACP work in the Midwest, but I wasn't as much in the thick of things as I wanted to be, so it was good to go to where the movement was really happening. From 1967-1970, I lived in Birmingham and taught at Miles College. It was there that I met Bernice Reagon when she came to sing. I'll never forget that experience. Her voice was so powerful, so moving and clear. When I heard her sing I knew her voice was reaching out for something in me that I'd been struggling with. I talked with Bernice about how music should make a difference in people's lives, how it had to speak to the human condition, and for the first time I felt like someone heard me. I wrote my first political song that summer, working with Bernice. I discovered that I could use the tools

and skills I had to make a contribution to the movement and to work for social change.

I started a singing group and we sang all through the South. It was the time of the black power movement, when the African-American community was rediscovering itself. It was an exciting time to be traveling around, witnessing the rebirth of the knowledge, the history, and the creativity of African-American people. It also gave me the chance to look even closer at the role that music played in all of this.

Bernice Reagon began working for the Smithsonian Institution, and she asked me to go to Gould, Arkansas to interview people there, to get their oral histories. That was a wonderful experience. We carried with us the stories that we heard and reflected on their meanings. I was discovering that in all of our communities, certain knowledge and social constructs exist that are ignored by the larger society, but were actually healthier for our communities than the intentions mainstream institutional structures.

I became excited about folklore. It was a way to include more voices. The movement had a lot of young people, and oral histories were a method of bringing in other voices, especially the voices of our elders.

By the time I arrived at the Highlander Center in New Market, Tennessee, my thinking was expanding. What if poor people in the South, across racial lines, could find a way to talk to each other and strategize together? There were people at Highlander who were working on answers to this question. For the first time in my life, I heard white people from the South who were militant in their criticism of the system that had oppressed blacks and had also served to keep them, as poor people, locked out of opportunity. The difference between poor blacks and poor whites in the South was that the blacks knew they would never get anything, while the whites always believed that the local government had their best interests at heart. But the white people at Highlander felt betrayed by the system. This was a real turning point for me, and I began to wonder about the poor and working people of other racial

groups.

I had hoped that by this time in my life, now having children of my own, that racism and hatred of differences would be over. I had hoped that by this time you could live in a space where you felt that who you were and what you did was not only respected, but reflected in the society at large, embroidered in the fabric of the decision making of society, in its social and political structure. That's what I had hoped to see. And that I would not still be having to talk with my children about the ugliness of racism, and watch them struggle to be heard, respected, honored, and made to feel that they could have voices of leadership, of vision, of community.

There are still so many problems around coexistence(?), and those problems have intensified. Tolerance and acceptance and the ability to share this world together still are notions that must be struggled for; peace, and the legislation for peaceful measures, don't come easily. The world that I envision for the 21st century will place humanity at the top of the agenda. I think that if we have not taken the time to process and discover our own humanity, and the extent of our humanity, then we haven't dealt with what it means to be a human being.

I was raised in a time that demanded great courage to face and dismantle segregation and racism. Today, we face similar problems, with humanity again under assault. This generation must summon courage and vision and remember that human rights must be nourished and protected to thrive.

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