August 1, 2020

“The voice that called my name was so cold and hard, I shuddered.” So began the one-woman monologue that I wrote and performed on “my life as a slave girl” for my high school’s theater production, many years ago. For as long as I can remember, I have lived in the shadow of that slave girl, a symbol of my ancestors, a people that endured the atrocities of the transatlantic slave trade that brought more than 12 million enslaved Africans to America, the Caribbean, and South and Central America.

I grew up in a mountain village on the Caribbean Island of St. Kitts, in a two-room wooden structure--that, for the first 6 or so years of my life, had no plumbing, no electricity, and no accessible roads--a stone’s throw from the nearby sugar plantation estate that dominated the lives of enslaved Africans in that corner of the island. My parents pulled me and my siblings into the middle class. My mother, a school teacher at the one-room school house in my village and my father, a career police officer, who had the audacity as a young man barely out of his teens to respond to a posting for police recruits.

That slave girl’s shadow has never left me. I lived with her as she was torn from everything she knew, from the familiar rhythm of her home on the African continent to her brutal capture and the long, cruel transatlantic voyage to the Caribbean shores. It is said that sharks often followed the slave boats as they left the Continent knowing them to be a source of food, knowing they could feast on the human cargo that was thrown overboard. My ancestral slave girl died to the life she knew, survived the Passage, and was born into a horrific, living nightmare. I felt the crushing agony of her pain and despair.

Sugar was king and it brought wealth and prosperity to the colonial powers. St. Kitts, known as “the mother colony of the West Indies,” was the first English colony in the Caribbean, established in 1623. With the abundance of rich soil and its thriving sugar cane plantations, the island boasted economic success. Many times, the British and French fought over its possession. And, for 200 years that ancestral slave girl birthed countless generations that toiled the cane fields and worked the plantations, enriching the coffers of the colonial empires, creating for them enormous wealth.

But despair did not lead to the destruction of her spirit. Into my parents’ ears she whispered words of wisdom and breathed into them resilience tools, learned from the generation before and which they passed on. From my father, the words “never say can’t” and from my mother “never be afraid to dream.” Years later as I mistily looked into the innocent brown eyes of my own offspring, her ancestral line born on American soil, I asked for her help. I asked her to protect and shield them from the microinsults and microassaults that might harm their vulnerable, developing psyches and make them feel “less than.” I asked that she protect them from the microinvalidations that would seek to demean and negate the people from whom they came – her people. She understood. However, she had an ask of her own. She asked that I, in turn, seek to protect others and where possible work to break barriers and provide access to opportunities. I understood.

In the British colonies, slaves were granted freedom on August 1, 1834. On this anniversary of remembrance, that slave girl still walks with me. I still feel the echoes of her past, feel the strength of her enduring spirit and I find comfort in the shelter of her shadow. Indeed, I can hear the majesty of her voice in Maya Angelou’s “Still I Rise”. Today, I acknowledge her courage, her grace, her dignity and join with her descendants across the diaspora in offering this tribute.