

When the Bough Breaks....

by Annette Anderson Engler ©

Written in 2010

There I stood by the washing machine, just about to drop another load in the bin when a deep longing suffocated my heart followed by a ringing phone. It was my mother calling to tell me that my father had just died. Her hysterical aching voice seemed to anesthetize my grief; I simply could not hear the slamming door of loss which seemed to shut my father out from my life forever. It was then that I was diagnosed with symptoms of an incurable historical loss that comes with never having known the life and death of a war-traumatized father.

My mother would proudly say: Your father was a war hero, he was a marine and now that he has died, he can be buried with the honor of having fought for his country. However, these words only caused me to realize that I too, have become a product of his war experiences. In fact, my father, the soldier, belonged to a world of which I had no knowledge. I began to ask myself, how has his war experiences shaped my life? What trauma has he transmitted to me as a child and how can I now grieve that lost part of myself that I will never know? How might my childhood have been different, had he never been a war soldier? More importantly, who was he before his traumatic experiences and what secret fears of shame and humiliation has he transmitted to me and my siblings?

Shame was an integral part of my father's identity. He was an African American WWII soldier, labeled "negro" on his military records. He, as a segregated soldier was taught to be ashamed of the color of his skin, his heritage and place of birth: rural Mississippi. If he dared to stand up for his right for human dignity, he might have been subject to violent acts of humiliation. Quite naturally, for fear of reprisal, he learned to tolerate racial discrimination and vulgar slurs. My father lived his life and suffered his death without weeping for the lost identity denied him. He had never given himself permission to grieve for the shame he endured as an African American soldier nor the humiliation he tolerated as a result of that socially acceptable shame.

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My father left four surviving daughters. We do not speak of his shame nor our own of having been raised by father who feared his shameful identity. As maturing woman, and only after having researched my father's war experiences, have I discovered the cultural displacement of shame associated with unresolved grief. The bough of my childhood cradle of shameful acceptance has broken and shattered, giving me "voice" to deal with historical bellowing grief.