

Dr. Zelma Inez Turner Howard

1919 - 2011

Last year, while I was rifling through my mother's old papers and photos, I happened upon her 6th grade report card. There were so many A's on it that it looked as if someone had used it to practice printing that particular letter. As there were no laudatory expressions of amazement scribbled in, I'm left to conclude that this feat was something the teacher had come to expect from little Zelma. I remember how, for me, report card time was so often an uncomfortable time. For the same reason that it was so unpleasant for me, I suppose it was the worst of times for my mother. The best of times would have been my grandmother Inez's festive occasions of looking at daughter Zelma's "A" emporiums. As excellent a student as she was, she was as great a teacher. She taught me over and over, as it turns out that she also taught so many of my middle and high school teachers as well. She was my teacher, one of the roles of parenthood--another area where she excelled.

"Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right." It is written in Ephesian sixth chapter, verses 2-3: 2 "Honor your father and mother"—which is the first commandment with a promise— 3 that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth."

I saw my mother take care of her father, her mother, her aunt and then her older sister. In this way she did honor them, and she has enjoyed a long life on the earth. It's strange how now ninety-two years seems so short-lived somehow. It was back in the late nineteen-eighties that for the very first time, health issues had us concerned with losing her. She was in her later sixties, and had she left us then, it would have been comparatively soon. However, God still had something important for her to do.

Christmas of 1998...

The metro-Detroit based Howard family drove down to spend Christmas at Cubie and Zelma's. It was a pretty routine trip until we reached Nashville, where an ice storm descended upon the earth. As ominous as that sounds, by the time our ten-hour trek on icy I-40W and I-55S ended at Grenada exit, we felt as if we were driving through scenes right out of Jurassic Park. The power was out everywhere, and it seemed we'd so often just narrowly miss huge heavily rime-laden tree limbs that had fallen about and almost fully covered the narrow dark trail. We finally made it home to the folks and found the power was out there also. My father met us at the door, wielded his huge dry-cell powered lantern. The kerosene filled hurricane lamps were aglow about. For everyday of our Mississippi Christmas but one, we would all spend the days huddled around the toasty hearth in the living room: cooking, eating, talking, and joking. ...being blessed. On the night before we were to leave for Detroit, the lights and power kicked on, and we all went our usual separate ways.

A few weeks later, I called my mother from Michigan to touch base. She picked up the phone, but she was slow to answer.

"He's gone," she said.

"He's dead?" I asked shock-numbed. She clarified, explaining to me that my father had suffered a massive stroke and that he'd been rushed into hospital—meaning by "He's gone," that his mind seemed gone. Marginally relieved, I remember thinking, *C'mon English teacher; choose your words with more care*. My father had been such the strong patriarch; now he needed someone to care for him, and my mother fell back into her much practiced role of care-provider. ...only then, at nearly 81. It was by establishing that structure for giving my father such meticulous loving care, she created the means by which she was to be cared for herself. I am so grateful to the caregivers and friends of my mother who were there for her to the very end.

My mother was a bit chagrined that she had me so relatively late in life. All in all, it has been a wonderful long life—as promised. And I been immensely privileged to have spent the last fifty-three years of them with her. I will catch up with her later.

...in the never-rending never-ending.