



CHAPTER 1

The Songs of Many Grandmothers

Tom Brokaw's 1998 book *The Greatest Generation* told the story of a generation of people in the United States who were raised in the hard times of the Great Depression only to go off to fight the Second World War, essentially saving human civilization from the dark nightmare of fascism, racism, and nationalized hatred. After the war they came home and rebuilt the country. He was right to speak of them as "the greatest generation."

But there was another, just before the greatest one. They were the people who gave birth to and raised “the greatest generation” through the breadlines and in the dust bowl that was the Great Depression. It was from them that “the greatest generation” learned the faith and the values that made them who they became.

This was the world of my grandparents on both sides of my family. They were all the grandchildren of former slaves in Alabama and North Carolina. Like the stories told in Isabel Wilkerson’s *The Warmth of Other Suns*, they, along with many others significantly defined by sharecropping and segregation, migrated from the rural south to the urban north in hope of finding new possibilities of freedom for themselves and their progeny. From their grandparents, who were themselves once in bondage, they learned the spirituals created by fellow slaves. They gleaned stories and sayings whose wisdom had been tried in the fire of this hard life. As they grew up, they learned songs descended from the spirituals, later called gospel. When they weren’t in church sometimes they sang the blues and rocked to jazz, which came into being in their world and time.

Their songs and sayings reflected a deep faith and profound wisdom that taught them

how to shout “glory” while cooking in “sorrow’s kitchen,” as they used to say. In this there was a hidden treasure that saw many of them through, and that is now a spiritual inheritance for those of us who have come after them. That treasure was a sung faith expressing a way of being in relationship with the living God of Jesus that was real, energizing, sustaining, loving, liberating, and life-giving.

In September of 1930 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a brilliant young German theologian, came to America to study at Union Seminary in New York. Today he is rightly seen as one of the greatest theologians of the twentieth century and one of the holy martyrs of the church for his sacrifice in radical obedience to Jesus and his Gospel way. His following the way of Jesus led him to participate in the opposition to the tyranny of Adolf Hitler and his Nazi ideology and state. For that Bonhoeffer was executed on April 9, 1945. But in September of 1930 Bonhoeffer was a student coming to New York’s Union Seminary to study. Alongside his reading and writing he would become friends and spend time with an African American seminarian named Franklin Fisher from Birmingham, Alabama.

Fisher would take his young German friend with him to Abyssinian Baptist Church



in Harlem. There Bonhoeffer encountered an expression of Christianity he had never known. There he encountered the generation of my grandparents. There he heard preaching that lifted souls wearied by work weeks devoid of much to “Mount Pisgah’s lofty heights” to behold, as Moses did, a promised land. He came to know people who strangely commingled joy and laughter while cooking “in sorrow’s kitchen.” There he heard and saw Dr. Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. preach powerfully and witness fervently to a Gospel of Jesus that was at once deeply personal, pervasively communal, and pointedly political. He encountered the evangelical and social Gospel incarnated in the nitty-gritty of life, in lived faith.

But it was the songs—the singing—that captured it all for him. Charles Marsh in his incredible book on Bonhoeffer, *Strange Glory*, observes that while we know how profoundly Bonhoeffer was affected by this experience, the usually reflective and analytical Bonhoeffer “never wrote an account of Sunday mornings at Abyssinian.”¹ Professor Marsh points to one explanation offered by another scholar, Ruth

1. Charles Marsh, *Strange Glory: A Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), 119.



Zellar, who said, “that black worship, particularly in song, was so overwhelming and personal for [Bonhoeffer] that he found it difficult to analyze in writing.”²

He heard singing of spirituals, the sorrow songs and the glory songs, created in Nebuchadnezzar’s fiery furnace of chattel slavery and yet yielding not dross but precious metal, to feed the soul. He heard the songs of gospel, the musical descendants of the spirituals and the blues. He heard them sing songs with words like these:

Sometimes I feel discouraged,
And think my life in vain,
But then the Holy Spirit
Revives my soul again.
There is a balm in Gilead
To make the wounded whole,
There is a balm in Gilead,
To heal the sin sick soul.³

I want Jesus to walk with me,
In my joys and in my sorrow,
I want Jesus to walk with me.⁴

2. *Ibid.*

3. *LEVAS II*, #203.

4. *LEVAS II*, #70.

What a friend we have in Jesus
All our sins and griefs to bear⁵

Precious Lord, take my hand
lead me on, let me stand
I am tired, I am weak I am worn
Through the storm, through the night
Lead me on, through the night
Take my hand, precious Lord
And lead me home ⁶

Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine.
O what a foretaste of glory divine.
Heir of salvation, purchased of God
Born of his Spirit, washed in his
blood.

This is my story, this is my song,
Praising my Savior all the day long.
This is my story, this is my song,
Praising my Savior all the day long.⁷

Through these songs and the worship of Almighty God that they inspired and were a part of, he beheld the vision of a kingdom not made or controlled by this world or any of its purported powers. He heard of a justice not compromised

5. *LEVAS II*, #109.

6. *LEVAS II*, #106.

7. *LEVAS II*, #184.

by any culture, of the love of Jesus that is a “balm in Gilead,” and of a freedom worth fighting for. Through these songs he felt what Doris Ackers’s gospel song called a “sweet, sweet Spirit,” that clearly was “the Spirit of the Lord.”⁸ The experience of the living God of Jesus that these songs reflected would feed him in a prison cell when, like the Israelites exiled in Babylon or Paul and Silas singing in a Roman jail or Martin King writing “A Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” he would have to sing “the Lord’s song in a strange land.”⁹ There is spiritual power and wisdom in these songs. These songs, reflecting and facilitating an intimate and yet communal experience of God, that so deeply affected Dietrich Bonhoeffer were the songs of my grandmother.

They were not just songs with catchy tunes. They were songs that sang of a way of viewing the world that could make life livable no matter what. They reflected a way of looking at life, a way of engaging life, a way of dealing with whatever life threw at you in faith and hope.

Be not dismayed, what’er betide.
God will take care of you.¹⁰

8. *LEVAS II*, #120.

9. Psalm 137 and Acts 16.

10. *LEVAS II*, #183.



Why should I feel discouraged.
 His eye is on the sparrow,
 And I know he watches me.
 I sing because I'm happy.
 I sing because I'm free
 His eye is on the sparrow,
 And I know he watches me.¹¹

But these were not merely songs of individual piety. These songs sang of a new world. They sang of a liberation and salvation in this life, and in the life with God beyond this life. They were songs that sang of divine justice that could not be twisted or compromised by human sin. These songs sang of Jesus who could steady “the weary traveler.” They reflected a way to “set the captive free.”

Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel,
 So why not every man.¹²

Oh, freedom! Oh, freedom!
 Oh freedom over me!
 An' befo' I'd be a slave
 I'll be buried in my grave
 An' go home to my Lord an' be free.¹³

11. *LEVAS II*, #191.

12. *LEVAS II*, #182.

13. *LEVAS II*, #225.



They are songs of wit and wisdom, saturated with the “weight of glory.” These were the songs of Nellie Strayhorn, my maternal grandmother, from whom I learned them as a child sitting in the kitchen while she cooked, told stories, and hummed or sang. It was her lively, uncompromised, vibrant faith in God that has shaped my deeper level of faith and theological world view. Hers was a faith that really believed that, “He’s got the whole world in his hands.”¹⁴

My sister and I became particularly close to her as children, when our mother—her daughter—Dorothy became sick for a long period of time and eventually died. This woman, then in her late seventies with cane always in hand, grabbed that cane, sang her songs, praised the Lord, told stories of old North Carolina, and helped our father rear some more children, singing all along,

I’m so glad Jesus lifted me.
I’m so glad, Jesus lifted me.
I’m so glad Jesus lifted me
Singing glory, hallelujah,
Jesus lifted me.¹⁵

14. *LEVAS II*, #217.

15. *LEVAS II*, #105.

Not too many years before she died I went to visit her. While I was there, she and her best friend, Mrs. Clara King, decided that they wanted to go to the store, so I drove them. Because of construction work, we had to park across the street. The three of us got out of the car. The two of them, well up in their eighties, with canes in their hands, were on either side of me, holding on to my arms. We were a sight to see. We walked very slowly across the street, longer than the changed light actually allowed, but the traffic saw who we were and cars waited patiently for us to cross. When we finally arrived on the other side of the street, they slowed and stopped. No one said a word, but I could feel the pressure on my arms as they struggled through arthritis and the hardness of life to step up on the curb. When they both succeeded, Aunt Clara said to grandma, “We’ve got a good God, don’t we, Stray.” (Grandma’s married name was Strayhorne, but Aunt Clara always called her “Stray.”) A brief chorus of *amens* ensued and then they started to sing.

Then sings my soul
My Savior God to thee.
How great thou art,
How great thou art.

Then sings my soul,
My Savior God to thee.
How great thou art.
How great thou art.¹⁶

To behold Spirit of the living God in a simple footstep is to know something about life that is worth knowing whether you are of “the greatest generation,” the boomers, GenXers, millenials, or of a generation yet to be born. This may be the spiritual gift of my grandmother and her generation: simply living life with God, following in the way of Jesus, and singing their songs along the way.

16. *LEVAS II*, #60.