

REFLECTIONS OF DR. GENNA RAE MCNEIL, NOW A PROFESSOR OF HISTORY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA, FROM THE JOURNAL OF THE ASSOCIATION FOR THE STUDY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN LIFE AND HISTORY, DATED SUMMER 2011

‘INTREPID AND CHARISMATIC, CONFIDENT THAT HER WORK WAS RIGHTEOUS AND IMPORTANT FOR THE RACE, NANNIE HELEN BURROUGHS WAS AN IMPRESSIVE CHRISTIAN WOMAN, BAPTIST LEADER, AND EDUCATOR. AT HER TRAINING SCHOOL THAT STOOD HIGH UP ON A HILL IN WASHINGTON, DC. SHE HAD SOME ROOMS EQUIPPED ESPECIALLY FOR LITTLE GIRLS AND AS I SAT IN ONE OF THE SMALL CHAIRS (SO THAT MY FEET COULD TOUCH THE FLOOR), I WAS MESMERIZED AND EXCITED. MY FATHER, REVEREND DR. JESSE JAI MCNEIL, MET WITH NANNIE BURROUGHS RELATIVELY OFTEN, FLYING IN FROM DETROIT TO DISCUSS THE NATIONAL BAPTIST CONVENTION, USA, INC., THE TRAINING SCHOOL, AND THE SUNDAY SCHOOL PUBLISHING BOARD IN NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE. ON THIS SPECIAL TRIP, THE CHILDREN OF THE FAMILY WOULD FINALLY MEET THE FAMOUS NANNIE HELEN BURROUGHS. FATHER HAD ALREADY PREPARED HIS CHILDREN AND SO I REMEMBER THAT MY OLDER BROTHER (WHO WAS PROBABLY ALMOST READY FOR THE FIRST GRADE) AND I LISTENED TO MISS BURROUGHS WITH GREAT ANTICIPATION. WHEN SHE SPOKE, SHE ENGAGINGLY COMMANDED ATTENTION WITH STRAIGHTFORWARD TALK AND PHRASES OR PRINCIPLES VIRTUALLY IMPOSSIBLE TO FORGET. EXPERIENCES WITH HER AS A CHILD LEFT ME REMEMBERING SEVERAL THINGS, IN NO PARTICULAR ORDER.

SHE ONCE HAD AN OPPORTUNITY TO BE FREDERICK DOUGLASS’S SECRETARY. SHE WAS THE FORCE BEHIND THE FOUNDING OF “WOMAN’S DAY” IN THE NATIONAL BAPTIST CONVENTION AND

AFFILIATED CHURCHES, AND SHE ALWAYS INSISTED THAT ALL CHURCH WOMEN---POOR OR WEALTHY, GRADE-SCHOOL EDUCATED OR COLLEGE GRADUATES---HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO BE LEADERS ON WOMAN'S DAY. MY MOTHER, PEARL WALKER MCNEIL, WHO WAS AN ACTIVE CHURCH WOMAN IN BAPTIST CIRCLES, THE LUCY THURMAN YWCA IN DETROIT, AND UNITED CHURCH WOMEN, TOLD ME THAT NANNIE BURROUGHS SELECTED WHITE DRESSES FOR WOMAN'S DAY BECAUSE SOMEONE WHO EVEN WORKED IN DOMESTIC SERVICE HAD A WHITE DRESS. NANNIE HELEN BURROUGHS TOLERATED NO EXCUSES AND DID NOT BELIEVE BLACK PEOPLE SHOULD MAKE ANY. "GOD HELPS THOSE WHO HELPS THEMSELVES" AND ANYONE AROUND NANNIE HELEN BURROUGHS HAD TO SHOW INITIATIVE AS WELL AS INTELLIGENCE, DISCIPLINE, HARD WORK, AND WILLINGNESS TO PRACTICE UNTIL SHE OR HE GOT IT RIGHT. SHE WAS "OLD SCHOOL"; THERE WAS ONE STANDARD, NOTHING LESS THAN YOUR BEST. SHE BELIEVED IN OUR RACE---NEGROES WITH A CAPITAL "N"---OUR STRENGTH, OUR STAMINA, OUR ABILITY TO HELP OURSELVES, OUR INTELLECT, OUR CAPACITY TO SPEAK FOR OURSELVES, OUR CAPACITY TO FIGHT FOR OUR FREEDOM, AND OUR FAITH. SHE WAS INSPIRING, EVEN TO A CHILD.

WHEN I LEARNED THAT DR. BETTYE COLLIER-THOMAS HAD ENTITLED HER BOOK USING THE WORDS OF NANNIE HELEN BURROUGHS, WHEN SHE DECLARED IN 1958 THAT THE NEGRO MUST HAVE "JESUS JOBS AND JUSTICE" I FELT I KNEW IN A PERSONAL WAY SOMETHING OF WHAT BOTH WERE SAYING. ...THAT THE MAJORITY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN DID NOT LIVE AN EITHER/OR EXISTENCE---EITHER RELIGIOUS FAITH AND CHURCH SERVICE OR SOCIAL ACTIVISM, POLITICS, AND MEMBERSHIP IN SECULAR ORGANIZATIONS...AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN HAVE LIVED AT THE INTERSECTION OF FAITH,

FAMILY, FRIENDSHIPS, CHARITY, SERVICE, PRAGMATISM, POLITICAL ACTION, ABOUNDING HOPE, AND THE FREEDOM STRUGGLE.