

Family Teaches, Family Empowers

By Cyanne Jones

Research Question: How can a grandmother's fondness for Japanese culture, a culture that is not her own, slowly change others and my stereotypes/perceptions of traditional African-American culture, through her dinner-time teaching to me, with the use of her Japanese teaspoon collection and Japanese meal-time bell?

Hypothesis: The empowering teachings about changing stereotypes held against Black Americans, from a Grandmother to her Granddaughter, helped empower and cultivate Black identity in me as a young Black woman. As a result, it develops me, a prideful Black woman, and leaves a powerful legacy for a Grandma's future generations to then also learn from.

Artifact #1:



The Teaspoon Collection is located in Atlanta, GA. The picture was taken on March 12th, 2024 by LaQuanda Wallace (Auntie Quan). The various spoons, differing in color, shape, size, use, and charm, indicated my Grandmother's dedication to getting closer to not just Japanese culture but also others as well, but she favored Japanese collections. These spoons were all collected on different dates and in different areas due to her various amounts of travel while being in the Army.

Artifact #2:



Japanese mealtime bell located in Atlanta, GA. The picture was taken on March 12th, 2024 by LaQuanda Wallace (Auntie Quan). This bell with beautiful illustrations of Japan's country and cultural values on it was always used by my Grandmother to indicate that any type of meal was ready. My Grandmother acquired this bell on her first Amry tour in Japan in the mid-20th century. The bell was acquired the moment my Grandma knew that she wanted to change the ugliness and dirtiness of generalizations of our culture.

Story:

Action: Teaching

Sentiment: Remembering

Just as if it were yesterday I can remember my first dinner time lesson taught by Grandma Wallace. The Atlanta air was crisp, the weather was chilly but not too much so that you got uncomfortable, and the wind's deep bellow could be heard throughout every tree in every neighborhood. Atlanta, known as a vibrant city, also has its subtle parts. Similarly, Grandma Wallace was known throughout Atlanta and some other parts of the world, but also was a very quiet and humble woman.

On my sixth evening of living with her during my winter break, she called to me from the kitchen. "Cy-baby! Cy-baby!" I, having already experienced six straight days of her amazing cooking compared to the bland and soulless food I had to eat in California, knew this was a good sign. As I was walking over I heard a small but distinct chime. "Ding. Ding. Ding." I tried to remember if I had ever heard the chime while being in Atlanta, but came to the conclusion that it was probably a "White people thing" because Grandma's house sure has a lot of "White people thing" appearances. Walking through the enticing smells of the food Grandma Wallace was preparing in the kitchen put me in a trance because suddenly I was in the kitchen having no recollection of how I got there.

Grandma Wallace welcomed me with open arms and kissed my forehead. From that moment on, my life changed. Grandma Wallace started with, "Cy-baby, you know all of the pretty decorations I have in this house? The things you and your friends call, 'White people things?'" I replied with a subtle chuckle and a "Yes Grandma Wallace." Grandma Wallace then sat me down and told me about all of her pretty decorations. From that came her Japanese

meal-time bell and her teaspoon collection. That day, Grandma started out with a question. “Has anyone ever been mean to you, just because you were black?” The sad truth was, even at eight years old, that has indeed happened to me. I paused, took a breath, and replied with a solemn, “Yes, and I didn’t even do anything to deserve it.” Grandma then said, “This is why I must start teaching you that you are beautiful, capable, and deserve just as much as anyone else.” While serving me delicious food I finally learned for the first time why she was doing all of this.

Grandma Wallace wanted to bring the artifacts to her own family to skew the stereotypes of African American homes as being dirty, ugly, weed-smelling, etc. to being elegant, peaceful, and beautiful. Auntie Quan in our oral history interview described it as, “What she strove to do was to teach us (Black Americans) about our people, our culture, etc., and all of that kind of shaped everyone who took part in it to be a better person.” Furthermore, with specific detail, Auntie Quan shared, “As you mentioned, in her house she had so many beautifully decorated teaspoons and a fancy mealtime bell all from Japan. And the reason for that was because she had served her country in Japan and had a bond with their people and their culture and most importantly that other cultures respected their culture and the beauty of it. So after she had been around it for so long she wanted to bring it back for her family because she had seen how impactful it was to their culture. It was just beautiful to see her and she wanted to share all of that goodness, joy, and beauty with her own family and on a larger scale, her black culture and community as a whole. The thing is, your Grandma Wallace saw a problem with the way other cultures skewed the view of her culture and additionally saw that nothing was being done about it that was educational and mostly peaceful. She had been around war too long, what was bringing it home going to do you know? So she brought back all those artifacts you call them, to make her own home beautiful to then enhance others' viewing of her culture and use those artifacts to teach, inform, and change stereotypes held against her and people like us.” At the moment, when first being taught by my Grandma, I didn’t understand the full complexity of it, but after interviewing my Auntie about it, it all made sense.

Lastly, when thinking about the impact that my Grandma’s frequent and varying teachings had on me, also had the same effect on my Aunt. When asking my Aunt, “Before Grandma’s educational dinners did you notice the stereotypes that were set against you as an African-American?” Auntie Quan responded with this, “Of course, we experience racism. It’s unfortunately guaranteed.” and “I don’t think I realized how damaging that was to my self-esteem, to hear how others thought about me and my culture and race until I had those frequent dinnertime lessons with my mom. Overall the purpose and execution of her dinner-time teachings were both well done and made. I persevere through life better with the help of her teachings and I hope you feel the same way, as well as any others who had an opportunity to experience it.” Likewise, I feel the same way with another addition. I feel empowered to continue her legacy to other African American children so that they can know their worth in this cruel world. The teachings by my Grandma have shaped me into a girl who is confident in her own skin despite being totally different from everyone else. I am eternally grateful that my Grandma took the time to teach me about the beauty of our culture and how to keep it alive.

We all love you, Grandma Wallace, and what you did for me, our family, and our community has stayed with us and will for generations and generations.

Reflection:

Being able to reflect on my Grandmother's impact was very empowering for me. I realized that I wouldn't be half of the woman I am today without my Grandmother's frequent teachings. I am so glad I didn't take them for granted. Additionally, I am overjoyed that I was able to connect with my Aunt over my Grandma (her mom) and reminisce on my Grandmother's pleasant presence in not only our lives but anyone who ever crossed paths with Grandma Wallace.

The Asian American experiential experience informs my research question about food and human interaction because I am also using the human interaction of teaching/learning from my grandmother (someone with experience) just like I was learning from the waitress (someone with experience). Although my research question wasn't being taught how to eat food in a culturally appropriate way, I was being taught about another culture and how that culture is one to look up to and respect while eating our own traditional (African American) food.

The Latin American experiential experience informs my research question about food and human interaction for this semester. After all, my research is all about how food can impact teaching or be a space that holds teaching and information and how that information marinated better because there was food along with the important information. Just like I was taught by my other grandma about the importance of my black culture and how to proceed in a life where other races may shame me for it, the grandma I worked with yesterday taught me an excellent method to stop my hand from spicy suffering. It is truly an incredible experience to cook a great meal or share a great meal while also receiving a lot of important knowledge from loved ones. From the pleasant smells to speaking in my first language; everything about this space and report made me comfortable and happy.

In the African American experiential experience, I learned about my mom's story with grits and how then she taught me how to make grits at a young age because she has had so much practice with them felt almost like a family tradition that was passed on to me and hopefully I can pass onto my children as well. The human interaction of teaching relates to my research question for this semester because although I wasn't taught how to cook certain meals by my grandma, she taught me about stereotypes and how to break them while cooking great meals for me. Additionally, because of the dining environment that we are in while being taught and interacting, aids in an easier and smoother conversation and teaching.

Links:

[Oral History](#)

[5W/1H](#)

Cover Photograph:

