

Gratitude

Most people are grateful for the things they've been given. While I, too, have been given innumerable concrete and intangible things for which I'm thankful, those aren't the blessings I celebrate most. I'm most grateful for the denial of things I desired. Looking back, I remember times I zealously prayed for my return to the childhood home I shared with my aunt and uncle in Philadelphia. As a head-strong and heart-challenged child, I didn't possess the insight to comprehend the meaning of my mother's words, Be careful what you wish for, you just might get it. I didn't know that while the great Northern Migration offered the opportunity for advancement, it robbed many people of a sense of home, community, and an attachment to the land of their birth.

My mother's refusal to abandon those things guaranteed that I would benefit from them, despite the pain that education carried. Separated from my cosseted Philadelphia world, I was thrust into life's turbulent waters at an early age where I floundered until I learned to swim. A child rises to the level of a teacher's expectations, my mother often said. Her school-teacher friends made sure that I received a superior early education. But I wasn't just educated in my segregated classrooms. I was challenged to be everything I could be and made aware of the racist system that required me to do better and be better than White children—to get half of what they got.

I regularly prayed for my absentee father's return. I didn't know that my older sisters had prayed that same prayer—and had it granted. Our father had twice before reappeared, then quickly disappeared from our home, leaving yet another baby growing in our mother's belly. Mine was a child's desire for a father who would ease our family's burdens, not add to them.

As a teen, I longed for the freedom to go to house parties, football games, and the ice cream shop where my friends hung out on Saturday afternoons. But those things were forbidden to me. My carefully supervised world revolved around school, household chores, church and books. I graduated near the top of my class. Many of my girlfriends who had more lenient mothers found themselves pregnant before high-school graduation or embarking on early, short-lived marriages.

Ever yearning for a father, I begged my careworn, but still beautiful mother to divorce my father and find another husband—one who would take care of us. She never did. As a result, I never had to fight off the unwanted advances of her potential suitors, the way several girlfriends, in later years, told me they had to do.

I thought the constraints and responsibilities of marriage weren't for me. So, after college, I took the civil service exam for a job at the Social Security Administration. I must have failed the test, because I never got a call-back for an interview. I'm grateful for that. A boring desk job may have offered security, benefits and a pension, but I now know it would have crushed my creative spirit.

I'm also grateful that I didn't get my teen-age wish for a husbandless life. I thought that staying single would allow me the freedom to be who I wanted to be, not who society dictated I should be. I didn't know I'd be lonely. In my mid-40s, a man whose skin color didn't match mine wooed me to the altar. He is my ever-faithful gift, the husband I never knew I wanted. For 29 years, he has guarded my spirit and pushed me to soar beyond the confines of my own narrow vision.

In youth, we can neither see the valuable components of the circumstances in which we find ourselves, nor know the power those circumstances hold. I am eternally grateful that God in all his wisdom knew better than I did what it took to make me whole.