

Pastor's Column

Flying With Pa-Pa's Wings

Rev. Michael Ratajczak
michaelr@stmoside.org
760-758-4100 x100

My Pastor's Column today is an article written by our Parishioner, May Akabogu-Collins, which appeared in *The Washington Post* on Father's Day, June 21, 2009.

(If any other Parishioners have published material that they would like to share with the Parish, please pass it on to me for my consideration so that it may become a "Pastor's Column.")

His name was Chukwuneke. Formally he was Dr. G.C. Akabogu. Many called him Professor; I called him Pa-Pa.

His father died six months before he was born; his mother, two weeks after.

An uncle took him in but at the first chance gave him up to the missionaries in Nigeria. They baptized him, renamed him George and shipped him off to seminary. When he saw my mother, he abandoned the priesthood.

My father was handsome, although short. He had curly, jet-black hair—bushy eyebrows, big brown eyes and narrow nose in a dark face. A lemon for an Adam's apple.

In a culture that prefers sons, he had seven daughters. Growing up, he said to us: Take it like a man. Back in Nigeria, when I was a high school senior, Pa-Pa summoned me to his study. Sitting behind his wooden desk surrounded by bookshelves filled with dusty Latin classics and Greek literature, Pa-Pa had Time in one hand and Newsweek in the other. Vivaldi's "Gloria" was playing. Jimmy Carter was coming into office in America.

"See?" he began in his courtly manner. "Half his Cabinet are barristers; the other half? Economists." I stared at his Cambridge diploma on the wall. Since my sisters were either in law or medical school, he continued, "You must major in economics."

"It's a man's world, Chum," Pa-Pa repeated all throughout my senior year. A woman's educational background would shape her future, he said. "A degree in economics—the golden degree—would ensure your independence," he concluded, rising from his chair.

I had wanted to major in journalism.

Four years later, after my bachelor's in economics, Pa-Pa insisted I earn a doctorate and become a university economics professor. We were sitting at the dining table. It was the height of the oil boom; free universal education was the national policy in Nigeria.

"In a few years," Pa-Pa predicted, "a B.A. will be common." I gazed at the framed picture of my dad with John Paul II, taken on a trip he led to the Vatican. "Moreover, you don't want to end up in a nine-to-five-till-you're-65-job, now, do you, Chum?" he asked in a tone of blatant disapproval. "No, sir," I replied. He smiled, revealing pearly teeth. "Good."

I'd wanted to be a writer.

Pa-Pa was unlike any other African father I knew. Growing up, Saturday was my Armageddon. The Unabridged Oxford English Dictionary stood on a stand, and as early as kindergarten, we had to learn 10 new words a week and write a folktale every Saturday

using those words. By junior high, I'd inhaled countless classics. All through high school, my father held me captive conjugating Latin verbs. During senior year, we spent uncountable hours together translating the Iliad. Times like that, I wished for one of those illiterate African fathers. Often during my college years, Pa-Pa provided an outline for my research paper. Moments like that, I was proud of my dad.

All those hours studying Latin taught me a lot about English and fostered in me a facility with French and Spanish. Years later, I would transform those hours into a new life.

Like most African fathers, Pa-Pa used proverbs to instruct. My first semester away in college, I blew my allowance. I asked for more; he declined. Go to the ant, Chum, he responded, discover its ways and be wise. I learned fiscal responsibility. While working on my doctorate at the University of Southern California, I hinted that I'd fallen in love: Until you finish chewing what you have in your mouth, he wrote, you ought not to bite off more. I learned focus.

After grad school, I brought home a male friend. Pa-Pa took one look and declared him "an addled-brain—someone to avoid." But I was a big girl now. I didn't have to listen to Pa-Pa anymore. Five years later, my husband disappeared. Saddled with three kids, I rang Pa-Pa. He sold a piece of land, sent me a check with a note: "If you bungle raising those children, nothing else will have mattered." Eager to regain his approval, I secured a tenure-track position as an economics professor. I enjoyed teaching, but the thought of grinding out obscure scholarly studies—necessary for tenure—numbed me. I'd. Rather. Be. Writing. Interesting. Journalistic. Essays. I finally spoke up. Pa-Pa replied, "It's entirely your choice now, Chum . . ."

Huh? "Follow your deepest conscience. I left the priesthood when I realized the authentic thing to do was to marry your mother . . . Carpe diem!"

Yes, sir!

I last saw my father six months before he died. Eighty-five years old, he'd come to America for medical treatment. I escorted him home to Nigeria.

Heavily sedated, hunched over in his plane seat, he suddenly whispered, "Be attentive to your children . . . okay, Chum?" Tears knocked; I blinked and stared off across the skies. I saw Pa-Pa holding court under our mango tree, reciting Shakespeare under the moonlight. I can still see him, there, conducting an imaginary orchestra playing Vivaldi's "Spring."

In today's world of absentee fathers, my father took me beneath his wings. In a world where the pathology of dishonesty by priests is an old story, my father chose the path of honesty. In a culture where women are a second choice, Pa-Pa gave his girls choices. I owe him to live honestly.

