

Be Brave! (She Said to Herself)

By Pamela Fordham

After the Tops Massacre in Buffalo, New York on May 14, 2022

I'm scared. There – I said it. Aloud and in print. Those words defy and expose what I spend a significant amount of time trying to disprove. Because, after all, why should I be scared? I live and work in a “safe” community where people have been taught (and in some instances have been admonished) to tolerate me. Yet, here I am again, feeling uncertain about everything that looks so familiar. I'm suddenly shaken to the core by a man wearing a hunter's hat. I hurry my dog along when we walk past the house with a flag hanging from a doorway boasting that the blond haired, orange-faced president will rise again. I cast a sideways glance at someone passing by and wonder what plans are concealed behind the mask that asserts “Make America Great Again.”

I didn't grow up in the area of Buffalo where the shootings took place, but I've spent countless hours in the heart of that community. Getting my hair pressed and curled at Mrs. Bethel's shop on the corner of Jefferson Avenue and East Ferry was one of my first rites of passage into womanhood. I knew I was really “grown” when my mother let me walk to the corner store across the street from Doris' Records to get snacks and a pop. Before the Frank E. Merriweather Library was built, I roamed through the rooms and stacks of books at the North Jefferson Branch Library. I sat in on meetings with my dad as he, the librarians and other community icons planned essay contests for Black History Month. I remember their discussions about who was responsible for what table at the Juneteenth festival, and more than anything, I remember the way they excitedly talked about how to preserve our rich history. 2-3 days of each week of my childhood were filled with activities at Bethel A.M.E. Church which was just a few blocks away. I didn't know “Mother” Pearl Young or Deacon Heyward Patterson (two of the victims on May 14th), but I feel the influence of women and men like them in every aspect of my life: the Sunday School teachers, the deacons and choir directors who let me know “I mattered” long before the world would suggest otherwise. It was in that community that I first learned that I had not been created with a spirit of fear, but with “power, love, and a sound mind.” But I am afraid in a way that has yet to be defined and is simultaneously as old as the most raw emotion. The fear is usually lulled back to its home below the surface when the nightly news shifts its focus to stories like the congressional hearings on UFOs. If I am lucky, the fear will stay put and allow me to look brave and reasonable... until the next time.

On the Monday after the tragedy at Tops on May 14th, a black student in my class said he almost started to run back toward his home when a white van driving too slowly down Main Street pulled up alongside him. He was embarrassed when he realized the van was just stopping for the red light, but I understood. He was right to be scared and to not let down his guard so easily. I didn't want to affirm his fear, so I said the thing that schools so often say: “You're safe.” I added “be brave” for good measure, but I'm not sure he is safe because I'm not sure that I'm safe. I *am* sure

he knows that I know there is nothing we can do about the animosity some people feel about our brown skin, but I hope he will be brave anyway. I hope he realizes that, just like I was, he is surrounded by “Mother Pearls” and “Deacon Pattersons” who don’t only tolerate his presence, but anticipate his “showing up” in this world. I hope they will seek him out as desperately as he is seeking them. I hope they will remind him every day that he is loved, he matters, and he has a right to be here and everywhere.

What is your story?

Write about a time when you decided to be brave. Who were the “Mother Pearls” and “Deacon Pattersons” that helped you face the challenge?