

Power to the People

By Pam Fordham

The first time I heard the word *AMANDLA* was in the Fellowship Hall at Bethel A.M.E. Church. My mom, along with a group of her forty-something year old friends, was yelling the word as she threw out her fist to the congregation. I watched from the side of the stage, confused and slightly humiliated. This group of church ladies that I knew as Sunday School teachers, and members of the choir and Missionary Society were all hyped up about something that was going on in South Africa. My mother had written a play for her church group, and she was playing the role of Winnie Mandela. I thought my mom and the other women were a little crazy, and I am sure I shared that feeling with my friends to temper the embarrassment that would follow any criticism. I do not recall knowing anything about the political content or context of the play, but I do remember women dressed in colorful patterns, exuding strength through their animated eyes, clenched hands and rhythmic speeches. I didn't know the meaning of the word, *AMANDLA*, but when I heard the group of women and then the entire congregation shift into the call and response repetition of the word, I knew something cool and dynamic was happening. The cry of *AMANDLA*, punctuated by "amens" and "yes lawds" was changing the room. Each time the word was chanted by the church ladies, the congregation replied, AWETHU! I didn't find out until nearly thirty years later that *AMANDLA* meant "power," and the response, AWETHU, meant "to the people," but the instruction of that word took root in my life that day.

My interpretation of *AMANDLA* came into fruition during the last years of my mom's life. By then, Alzheimer's had stolen her voice, her posture and her dynamic presence. Alzheimer's had blocked her access to memories that allowed her to communicate about even the most basic things. She had advocated for me my entire life, so because I remembered who she *had been*, *AMANDLA* required that I advocate for her.

Tom, the director of the residence where my mom was living at the time, was a numbers guy – and he was good at it. His vision of life at the residence was very likely shaped by figures and spreadsheets documenting how many residents were occupying how many rooms, how much insurance companies were covering, and how best to market the facility for future residents which translated into more figures and more spreadsheets, and more numbers that he was good at counting.

When I appeared in his office with my mom, he knew there was a problem. It was 2:00 PM and mom was still in her pajamas. Her black sneakers were on the wrong feet, her hair was uncombed, and her cast down eyes revealed the darkening black and blue swirls on the left side of her face – the evidence of an injury from a fall she had had a few days before. I think he had grown accustomed to not really *seeing* the residents, so it probably was not her appearance that made him nervous. It was mine. I had left work early to check on her, and he knew that I was beyond pissed as I stood there with mom, who was disheveled and confused, at my side. The tension in his office negated any attempt at cordial greeting, so we got right to it.

Me: Tom, what's going on?

Tom: What's the problem?

Me: (motioning to my mom's head to toe appearance) Well, for starters, it's 2:00 PM and my mom is still in her pajamas!

Tom: But she's OK, right?

Me: Look at her!

There was very little substance to any of the conversation that followed. He looked at her, but he could not see beyond the image of the body that occupied room 24 B. She was not bleeding or making any sounds that indicated she was in imminent danger, so in his mind, everything was fine.

I moved my mom away from that facility about a week later.

The year after she passed, I saw the movie, *Long Walk to Freedom*, documenting the life of Nelson Mandela. As I watched the film, my skin tingled remembering how Mom and her friends tried to spread the news of an injustice. Our humanity demanded that it be addressed, and the church ladies in Buffalo, New York wanted to do their part. One of the most poignant parts of the film occurred when Mandela was sentenced to life in prison on Robben Island. Even after being told that he would never again be free, hold his children, or touch a woman, he still demanded AMANDLA, but this time it came in the form of a simple request for long pants. As much as the movie celebrated the principles and love that Mandela tried to uphold, it also illuminated the depth of power's effect on both the great and small.

Since Mom's passing, I have talked to many people who have had to make the difficult decisions related to providing care for an aging loved one. The intricacies of the process can sometimes be more devastating than the decision itself. At the time that I made the decision to move my mom to a different residence, I did not know if that move would worsen her condition or improve it. I did, however, know she was dying, and I could not let her live that way in the time that she had left. And, when she did pass a few months later the woman she had been – the woman who had thrust her fist in the air proclaiming AMANDLA to her church congregation – was long gone. But the hairs on her head were in place, her clothes were clean, and her shoes were on the right feet.

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